The Cult of the Severed Head, a practice of the Celtic Warrior Class

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Introduction

Before starting a paper on the Celts, an attempt should be made to establish the development of the so named people. In J. X. W. P. Corcoran’s “The Origins of the Celts: The Archaeological Evidence”, the foundations of the Celtic culture are seen with the fusion of two groups, Beaker folk and the Battle-Axe folk, in Central Europe – part or whole of the modern states of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Austria, Switzerland, and the neighboring areas of Southern Germany – at the close of the third millennium B. C. Being both metal using people, they provided the nucleus from which were to grow warrior – aristocratic elements and introduced the use of metal, thus bringing about the end of the simple self-sufficiency of the Neolithic economy and society.(1) Having the need for more natural resources, in grazing lands, in farming areas, and in the need of metal ores, westward expansion was necessary. For example, the rich loess soil in the Danube and Rhine tributaries provided incentive, as did the metal deposits in Northern Europe and the British Isles. The Unetice, Tumulus, and Urnfield cultures, following the initial Beaker – Battle Axe folk fusion, brought Central Europe into the Bronze Age. Whereas, the Urnfield people may justifiably be considered to have been proto-Celtic, their descendants in Central Europe, the people of the Hallstatt culture, were certainly fully Celtic.(2) Finally with the successors of the Hallstatt culture, the La Tene, iron-using peoples were inhabiting Central, Western, and temporarily other parts of Europe. Thus to the Greek and Latin writers of the second half of the first millennium B. C., the Celts were recognizable as a cultural entity occupying Europe.(3)

Within the quickly sketched lineage of the Celts, three classes along with an elected king emerged; 1. warrior and aristocratic elite. 2. men of arts and letters. 3. agricultural workers and craftsmen; or as Caesar reflected in this simple pattern equites, druids, and plebs.(4) In studying the stratified social breakdown, the topic of the paper can now be put into a statement of purpose. Strabo describes the Spirit of the Celts:

“The whole ... is war-mad, and both high spirited for battle although otherwise simple and not uncouth.”(5) With this statement also in mind, the warlike nature of the Celts will be the theme discussed, centering mainly on the Cult of the Severed Head: its relation to the Druids, Warrior class and art styles.
Theme

Archaeological evidence reveals that in the burial, the Celtic warrior was laid on his back across the platform of his chariot, his weapons to hand, and accompanied sometimes by helmet and shield, personal ornaments and those trappings which adorned his chariot and his horses; it was common for him to have been provided with food and wine and fine vessels appropriate to a feast in the after life.(6) From the writings of Polybius and subsequent authors, it may be deduced that the initial purpose of the chariot warrior was to drive furiously towards and along the front of the enemy ranks to instill terror by sight, and by the delivering of missiles, no less than by the tremendous noise that was kept up by shouting, horn blowing, and beating the sides of the wagons drawn up to the flank or in the rear; the warriors descended from their chariots, held in readiness by the charioteer, with casting spear or drawn sword to challenge an opposing champion, the challenge being a set formula of boasts of prowess and possibly lineage incorporated in a war song; in inter-tribal fighting only after this phase of individual contest and perhaps if one side became certain of success would the main body of troops become involved, while confrontations with the Roman army must have involved the whole body of men more directly and led to considerable modifications in battle order.(7) The majority of graves for ordinary foot warriors, presumably freemen, indicate that the heavy sword, one or two spears, and the long Celtic shield normally straight sided with rounded ends or oval, were the most typical armaments, an archaic custom of going into battle naked, carrying only weapons, was thought to be an invocation for magical protection.(8)

"And when someone accepts their challenge to battle, they loudly recite the deeds of valour of their ancestors and proclaim their own valourous quality, at the same time abusing and making little of their opponent and generally attempting to rob him beforehand of his fighting spirit. They cut off the heads of the enemies slain in battle and attach them to the necks of their horses. The blood-stained spoils they hand over to their attendants and carry off as booty, while striking up a paean and singing a song of victory, and they nail up these first fruits upon their houses just as do those who lay low with animals in certain kinds of hunting. They embalm in cedar-oil the heads of the most distinguished enemies and preserve them carefully in a chest, and display them with pride to strangers saying that for this head, one of their ancestors, or his father, or the man himself, refused the offer of a large sum of money. They say that some of them boast that they refused the weight of the head in gold; thus displaying what is only a barbarous kind of magnanimity; for it is not a sign of nobility to refrain from selling the proofs of one’s valour, it is rather true that it is bestial to continue one’s hostility against a slain fellow man."(9)

Diodorus

In trying to ascertain the possibility of any cult worship surrounding the ‘severed head’, the concept of Celtic religion and the practices of the Druids should be noted in relation to warfare and sacrificial killing.

"The Druids usually hold aloof from war, and do not pay war taxes with the rest; they are excused from military service and exempt from all liabilities."
The cardinal doctrine which they seek to teach is that souls do not die, but after death pass from one to another; and their belief, as the fear of death is thereby cast aside, they hold to be the greatest incentive to valour. Besides this they have many discussions as touching the stars and their movement, the size of the universe and the earth, the order of nature, the strength and powers of the immortal gods, and hand down their lore to the young men."(10)
Caesar De Bello Gallico, VI, 14

It is not only in times of peace, but in war also, that these seers have authority, and the incentives of the bards have effect on friends and foes alike. Often when the combatants are ranged face to face, and swords are drawn and spears bustling, these men come between the armies and stay the battle, just as wild beasts are sometimes held spellbound. Thus even among the most savage barbarians anger yields to wisdom, and Mars is shamed before the Muses."
Diodorus Siculus Histories V, 31, 2-5

Although the Druids do not appear to be active in battleground warfare and the taking of human life, they are active in performing human sacrifice. Strabo details types of sacrifice as follows;
1. victim stabbed in the back and omens deduced from death thrones
2. impaling
3. holocaust of human and animal victims alike in a huge wicker work figure(kulasson)
4. shooting to death by arrows. (Note. The St. Sebastian like death by arrows seems to indicate the ritual use of a weapon not in normal use, for archery was not practiced in Celtic warfare, and probably hardly at all: in the vernacular texts of the earliest phase bows and arrows are not mentioned, and the Irish names for these are respectively Norse and Latin loan-words.)

Besides being a part of the warrior cult, the motif of the "severed head" seems to influence decorative art styles. Mention of this made as to inscriptions on coins, yet more direct evidence is seen in the decoration of several temples.

"At two sites, Mouries(Bouches-du-Rhone) and Saint Blasé(Alpes. Maritimes), fragments of earlier stone-built shrines had been incorporated into Gallo-Greek structures of the fourth century B. C.: at the former, stelae and lintel were decorated with stylized figure of horses and riders in a convention that could be earlier than the fifth century, and at the latter was a jamb stone with niches cut in it which, from the evidence of other sites, would have held skulls or severed heads. At Roquepertuse(Bouches-du-Rhone) such a sanctuary stood at the top of a flight of five steps, with lintels supported on pillars with skull-niches and surmounted by a large sculptured bird, and contained life-sized statues of squatting figures – a posture consonant with the Celtic mode of sitting noted by Posidonius and portrayed on other Celtic and Romano – Celtic monuments.

There are again a lintel and pillars with skull niches at Glanum, St. Remy-en-Provence, associated with a cave and a spring, and re-used in the second century B. C. In the oppidum of the Saluvii at Entremont, Provence, was a remarkable sanctuary, its threshold a re-used pillar covered with stylized human
heads, and containing fifteen human skulls of adult men, some cut from dried bodies and some retaining the large iron nails with which they had been fixed to some wooden structure: the place was sacked in 123 B.C. and these, and the remains of a series of large stone sculptures of warriors and other motifs including several heads, must have dated before this time."(13)

“The sanctuaries at the mouth of the Rhone reveal, indeed, besides a classical building technique, a definite cult of the human head. In addition to stone heads, real human heads appear. Some of these seem to have been cut off shortly after death, others have been found scattered in the debris of the road, mingled with the debris of earlier edifices, perhaps destroyed in the course of an earlier occupation. We have in these excavations an early expression of naturalistic art, developed in the La Tene period under a Graeco-Roman influence, but we have also evidence of a developing style of stone-carving, depicting the human frame from the stiff archaic form to the completely naturalistic. At Roquepertuse, in particular, the plastic form grows in naturalism. There is thus a fusion of an alien stone architecture with a nature cult. We are reminded of Strabo’s report from Posidonius who had traveled in Gaul in the second century B.C., that it was the custom of the Gauls to cut off the heads of their enemies and nail them on the door-post of their houses. In the Celto-Iberian oppidum of Puig Castellar near Barcelona, human skulls were found with the nails from which they were hung.”(14)

Lastly, Nora Chadwick sights evidence of the cult of the head in Britain and Ireland; at Stanwick, in Yorkshire, for example a skull had been pierced for suspension, and human heads were displayed over the gate way to the hill fort on Brendon-Hill in Worcestershire; Irish sages and Welsh tales also describe the custom of collecting decapitated heads of the slain as war trophies.

Yet, it would be hazardous to dismiss this custom amongst the Celts as being merely a desire to collect trophies for the accumulation of martial prestige; it is more likely that it originated in cult practices to do with fertility, and with bringing the ghost into servitude.(15) Sighting along with this in conclusion, the work of a past ethnographer, Dr. Rafael Karsten, Professor of Moral Philosophy, University of Finland, expands upon the theme of the soul-stuff existing in the “severed head”.

“When the Dyaks of Borneo gain a victory over their enemies, they are not satisfied with killing them, but also cut off their heads and take them home. Here they dry them in the air and hang them up at the ceilings of their huts. The heads are believed to posses a mysterious power which the victors can use for their own ends. My statement about the supernatural effects ascribed to the head trophy of the Dyaks applies almost word for word with the Jibaros also. Though the many complicated ceremonies with it, the head of the enemy is transformed into a real fetish, an object charged with mysterious power, as we may say, mana. How intimately the fact that the Jibaro Indian, when he has obtained a human head, says that he has ‘taken a soul’ (wakani). The spiritual power is centered particularly in the hair, prepared with great care, but both the name wakani given the fetish and several details at the great victory feast show clearly that this
power is generally personified.” (16)

Conclusions

No direct evidence points toward the connection of the Druids and Cult of the Severed Head. The Druids, the men of arts and letters, were regarded to hold the wisdom of the tribe in oral traditions. Without written texts, accumulated wisdom was taught purely on a memory basis, sometimes recorded to have taken up to twenty years (as recorded by ancient historian, ex. Lucian). Being a focal point in ritual sacrifice and divination, the Druids did not participate actively in warfare, rather they were noted to stand aloof from fighting while their doctrine of the soul’s immortality encouraged recklessness in battle for the attainment of honor and glory. Thus the Cult appears to be a practice of the warrior, questionably: an act of prowess, a trophy to display the spoils of war, or a mystical source of added power. Whatever the motive, art styles in the form of ornamentation and architecture reflect a sudden and keen interest on the use of this motif, and the human head (stone or genuine) begins to become blended into a style of previous animal and later plant dominated characterization. With reference to the more recent notice of head hunting from ethnographical studies, the practice of head collection, as stopped by the Roman civilization of the Celts, still occurred until recently among bellicose people. In trying to understand their motives also, the question still remains as to why?
Quotes

1. The Celts, Nora Chadwick, p. 24
2. The Celts, Nora Chadwick, p. 30
3. The Celts, Nora Chadwick, p. 17
4. Prehistoric Societies, G. Clark and S. Piggott, p. 332
5. The Celts, T. G. E. Powell, p. 74
6. The Celts, Nora Chadwick, p. 132
7. The Celts, T. G. E. Powell, p. 106-107
8. The Celts, T. G. E. Powell, p. 107-108
9. The Celts, ed. J. Raftery, p. 32
10. The Druids, T. D. Kendrick, p. 78
11. The Druids, T. D. Kendrick, p. 83
12. The Druids, S. Piggott, P. 116
13. The Druids, S. Piggott, P. 56-57
14. The Celts, Nora Chadwick, p. 158
15. The Celts, T. G. E. Powell, p. 108
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Piggott, Stuart, *Ancient Europe*, University Press, Edinburgh, 1965

