

Assignment 2 – HPCS 4006 – Celtic Religions.

Zen Redgrave - 1903175

Can a pre-Roman deity be reconstructed to identify the nature and function of the deity using archaeological, epigraphic, and iconographic evidence?

Introduction

Within this essay we will look at the evidence as it relates to Belenos, and try to determine if it is possible to determine the nature and function of Belenos within a pre-Roman time period.

The evidence

For the purposes of this essay, we will be considering the evidence relating to the god Belenos.

In his paper titled ‘A Landscape of Resistance? Cults and Sacred landscapes in Western Cisalpine Gaul’, Ralph Haussler notes that Belenos is the most common Celtic theonym found within northern Italy.¹ Haussler also quotes in this paper a dedication made to the god Belenos which reads “Deo Apollini / Beleno / L(ucius) Erax Bardus / ex respon(so) antist(itum) / aedem cum ornam(entis) / d(e) s(uo) d(edit)”². There are several interesting features to this dedication. Firstly, as noted by Haussler, the dedication was made within a temple to Apollo/Belenos. Here we can see the use of Belenos as an epithet to the god Apollo, and so could make the link that Belenos shared characteristics of the god Apollo. It is also noted by Haussler that the dedication itself was within a temple to Apollo Belenos. However, Haussler also notes that in a separate dedication Belenos was referred to singularly “Belano(!) deo”³. Could this then lead us to consider that some people would regard Belenos as a deity in his own right, or that perhaps at the time the dedication was made, different groups of people were conducting different religious practices and that perhaps the group that made the dedication without reference to Apollo had not been influenced by the Roman empire?

¹ Ralph Haussler, ‘A Landscape of Resistance? Cults and Sacred Landscapes in Western Cisalpine Gaul’, *Trans Padum ... Vsque Ad Alpes. Roma tra il Po e le Alpi: dalla romanizzazione alla romanità*, 13-15 (2014), 261-286 (p. 265).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Haussler notes that 27 separate dedications have been found to Belenos within the city of Aquileia in Northern Italy. In ‘Celtic Culture – A historical Encyclopaedia’ Helmut Birkhan notes that there are 51 known inscriptions to Belenos (also sometimes recorded as Belenus or Belinos).⁴ For 27 of these to be found within Aquileia would suggest that Belenos was of great importance to the people of the city. Haussler has also noted within his paper ‘How to identify Celtic Religions’ that there are “only a very few inscriptions from pre-Augustan times”⁵, and that these came from Saint-Chamas, Glanum, and Marseille. However, these on their own do not allow us to re-construct the nature or function of Belenos, we can just make note of the fact that he had a level of importance within these geographical areas. Haussler also notes within ‘A Landscape of Resistance? Cults and Sacred landscapes in Western Cisalpine Gaul’ that Apollo was not associated with Belenos within the area of Southern Gaul, even though this is a neighbouring area to Northern Italy where Aquileia exists, and cites a specific inscription where although both Apollo and Belenos are mentioned, they are deemed to be clearly separate “Diis(!) Augura/libus ite/m Silvano / et [Ap]olli/ni et Mercu/[rio] it(em) / Be[l(eno?) Augu]sto [---]”.⁶ If we accept that we have inscriptions that link Apollo and Belenos, and also inscriptions that show them to be separate, does this provide us with any clear evidence as to the nature and function of Belenos?

If we examine the evidence that Belenos has been linked, as an epithet, to Apollo we could possibly start to understand part of the function of Belenos. Iconography of Apollo in Glanum, an ancient Roman city near Saint-Remy-de-Provence in France, has suggested that he was seen as a god with healing powers.⁷ The Glanum website also notes that the site has a sacred spring that possesses healing properties⁸. The presence of a healing spring at Glanum and also dedications to Belenos being on the site could then suggest a link to Belenos as also having these healing attributes. This could be explored further by looking again at the reference for Belenos by Helmut Birkhan in ‘Celtic Culture – A Historical Encyclopaedia’. Birkhan notes that during the siege of the city in AD 238 by the Roman emperor Maximinus,

⁴ Helmut Birkhan, ‘Belenos/Belinos’, in *Celtic Culture – A historical Encyclopaedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 195.

⁵ Ralph Haussler, ‘How to Identify Celtic Religions in Roman Britain and Gaul’, *FERCAN*, (2006) 13-63 (p. 37).

⁶ Ralph Haussler, ‘A Landscape of Resistance? Cults and Sacred Landscapes in Western Cisalpine Gaul’, *Trans Padum ... Vsque Ad Alpes. Roma tra il Po e le Alpi: dalla romanizzazione alla romanità*, 13-15 (2014), 261-286 (p. 266).

⁷ Ralph Haussler, ‘How to Identify Celtic Religions in Roman Britain and Gaul’, *FERCAN*, (2006) 13-63 (p. 29).

⁸ Centre de Monuments Nationaux, *Glanum Archaeological site* (2018) < <http://www.site-glanum.fr/en/> > [accessed 12 April 2021].

the god Belenos was “seen floating in the air, battling and defending his town”.⁹ Whilst it would be easy to dismiss this as mythological folklore, the existence of such legend could suggest that Belenos was also a protector of people which again could be argued as being allied to healing in a general sense of looking after a group of people or believers.

We have also seen that there are links between Belenos and Apollo, with dedications linking to two names. In ‘The Gods of the Celts and the Indo-Europeans’ Garrett Olmsted notes that other inscriptions were found in Celtiberia to “Apollini Beleno”.¹⁰ This again provides a link between Apollo and Belenos, but as with other inscriptions, does not of itself tell us anything specific about Belenos, other than the link to Apollo. We can however see that Belenos had a wider geographical spread than had otherwise been suggested. This could suggest that Belenos was important as a deity within the Celtic pantheon to have spread as far as the Iberian peninsula from northern Italy, especially if we also consider that La Tène style art did not have any real presence within the Iberian peninsula, even though it did spread widely throughout other Celtic areas.

It is also interesting to look at a chapter by Burillo and Burillo in the book ‘Celtic religions in the Roman period’. The authors have examined the religious beliefs within the Celtiberian region and specifically how these relate to cosmology and the iconography that has been found on items such as vases. As noted above, the La Tène style of art did not spread into this geographical region, and so it has left us with its own unique style to analyse and interpret. Within the chapter, the authors note that one of the biggest problems faced is “when a culture, Celtiberian being one, has left no texts describing their myths and rituals”.¹¹ The unfortunate nature of trying to determine the function of Belenos, as noted by Burillo and Burillo in relation to Celtiberian religion, is that we only have a small number of inscriptions rather than detailed texts from which to form our understandings.

Olmsted also notes that inscriptions to Belenos have been found upon basins, one in Glanum, which as we have already seen is an important site in the context of Belenos, and another at Saint-Chamas in southern France. The dedication on the basin from Saint-Chamas reads as “[E]PORIX IVGILLIACOS DEDE BRATVTE BELINO”, meaning with gratitude to

⁹ Helmut Birkhan, ‘Belenos/Belinos’, in *Celtic Culture – A historical Encyclopaedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 195.

¹⁰ Garrett Olmsted, *The Gods of the Celts and Indo-Europeans*, (Clyncdale Tazewell Virginia, 2019), p. 393.

¹¹ Maria P. Burillo-Cuadrado and Francisco Burillo-Mozota, ‘Looking at Cosmology Through the Lens of Hermeneutics and Semantics’, in *Celtic Religions in the Roman Period*, ed. by Ralph Haussler and Tony King (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2017), pp. 253-271 (p. 254).

Belenos.¹² Again, these archaeological finds raise questions. Could it be that the votive offerings in the form of basins represent cleansing or healing in some way? The inscription mentioning gratitude to Belenos could infer that the dedicant is grateful for help that already has been received, and as such would show that Belenos is an active and powerful deity, or that the dedicant is offering thanks in anticipation of help that may be offered by the deity. We will unfortunately never know the actual truth behind the dedication.

We can now look at the name itself. As we have already seen, Apollo and Belenos have been linked directly through inscriptions. However, Belenos and Apollo have also been linked etymologically with the suggestion that Belenos means “the bright one”,¹³ or “the bright” or “the Brilliant”.¹⁴ Olmsted also notes that Belenos could be interpreted as “the bright”.¹⁵ This again could provide another link to Apollo, although it could not be considered definitive.

Birkhan has also suggested that the name is linked to the herb henbane.¹⁶ This provides another interesting link to Belenos as a healing god. Although very poisonous, henbane has traditionally been used as an analgesic, specifically for helping with stomach pain and muscle cramps.¹⁷ There is also evidence to suggest that henbane was would have been in use in pre-Roman times as well as in Roman times when there is archaeological evidence relating to Belenos. The 1st century Greek physician Dioscorides noted the use of henbane within his book *De Materia Medica* as being used to “procure sleep and allay pains”.¹⁸ Birkhan further makes the suggestion that the votive basin from Saint-Chamas that we have discussed earlier may have been used not just as a votive offering but to receive medicine as well.¹⁹ All of these can provide a circumstantial level of evidence that Belenos was a healing god.

We can also look at the classical writings to try and help us understand Belenos. Julius Caesar wrote in ‘*De Bello Gallico*’ section 6.17 that Mercury was the most revered god within Gaul

¹² Garrett Olmsted, *The Gods of the Celts and Indo-Europeans*, (Clynchdale Tazewell Virginia, 2019), p. 393.

¹³ Helmut Birkhan, ‘Belenos/Belinos’, in *Celtic Culture – A historical Encyclopaedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 195.

¹⁴ Ralph Haussler, ‘How to Identify Celtic Religions in Roman Britain and Gaul’, *FERCAN*, (2006) 13-63 (p. 30).

¹⁵ Garrett Olmsted, *The Gods of the Celts and Indo-Europeans*, (Clynchdale Tazewell Virginia, 2019), p. 393.

¹⁶ Helmut Birkhan, ‘Belenos/Belinos’, in *Celtic Culture – A historical Encyclopaedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 195.

¹⁷ Webmd, *henbane* (2020) <<https://www.webmd.com/vitamins/ai/ingredientmono-82/henbane>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

¹⁸ Botanical.com, *Henbane* <<https://www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/h/henban23.html>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

¹⁹ Helmut Birkhan, ‘Belenos/Belinos’, in *Celtic Culture – A historical Encyclopaedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 19.

and that Apollo, Mars and Jupiter were secondary to Mercury.²⁰ Caesar then also notes that Apollo “averts diseases”.²¹ What we can see from this, is the absence of any reference to non-Roman names for deities i.e. Belenos. As Caesar did travel throughout Gaul during his military campaigns, it is most probable that he would have come across Gaulish names for deities, assuming that they were in use, so we must then question whether or not the names were in use, or if Caesar chose not to use non-Roman names when referring to deities as a way of making his writings more understandable for his Roman audience. However, if we accept a link between Belenos and Apollo, then we could potentially see more evidence for Belenos being a healing deity from Caesars writings.

Making sense of it all

What we have seen thus far in our examination of Belenos is that there are definitive dedications that were made that link Belenos to Apollo. There is also some evidence to suggest that Belenos could have been a healing or protecting god. However, we now need to consider whether any of this physical evidence and suggested links can allow us to determine the function of Belenos in pre-Roman times.

In ‘The Celtic World’ Miranda Green discusses how it is not possible to determine a hierarchy for a Celtic pantheon of gods and goddesses from the evidence that we have in the form of epigraphy and iconography.²² An inference that can be taken from this statement is that it is also not possible to determine the nature and function of a specific deity. Within the same book Jane Webster notes that “descriptive detail rarely accompanies *interpretatio*”.²³

As we have seen, there is archaeological evidence of *interpretatio* i.e. the linking of a Roman name with a Celtic name, in the form of dedications to Apollo Belenos. However, on it’s own, the dedication does not tell us anything about the function of either of these deities. We have also seen separate dedications to Belenos and Apollo where *interpretatio* is not present.

In ‘A Landscape of Resistance? Cults and Sacred landscapes in Western Cisalpine Gaul’, Haussler goes further by stating that

²⁰ Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6.17

²¹ Ibid.

²² Miranda Green, ‘The Gods and the Supernatural’, in ‘*The Celtic World*’, ed. by Miranda Green (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 465-488 (p. 482).

²³ Jane Webster, ‘The Gods and the Supernatural’, in ‘*The Celtic World*’, ed. by Miranda Green (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 445-464 (p. 446).

Unfortunately evidence on the nature of Iron Age deities and cult activities is too inadequate to determine whether certain concepts, like the Matronae, already existed in pre-Roman times²²; Iron Age iconography, sculpture and coinage, do not allow to confirm their existence.²⁴

From this, although Haussler is specifically referring to Matronae i.e. the mother goddess concept, we could conclude that if the evidence is not present for this concept, that it is also not present in sufficient detail to be able to accurately determine the nature and function of a specific deity such as Belenos within a pre-Roman time period.

As noted by Jane Webster “descriptive detail rarely accompanies *interpretatio*”²⁵. Without the descriptive detail to explicitly tell us the function or nature of a deity all of the evidence that we do have ultimately leaves us with, at best, circumstantial evidence and supposition as to the identity, function and nature of Belenos. If we were to compare this to trying a similar exercise of determining the nature and function of the Christian God, we would be able to look at evidence in the form of the Bible to find or determine the descriptive detail to which Webster refers. However, an equivalent of this unfortunately does not exist for pre-Roman deities, and so we can only draw conclusions based on what has thus far been found, even though that is somewhat limited.

A final thought that cannot be ignored is the effect that the researcher themselves has. When making interpretations on the function and nature of deities Burillo and Burillo noted that “The first problem posed when it comes to understanding religion are the religious sentiments, mentality and principles of the researcher”.²⁶ Whilst any researcher would obviously be impartial when reviewing the available evidence, it is a reality that we are all a product of our own unique experiences. As such, when we have a situation where we do not have specific texts to provide us with detail regarding the function and nature of a pre-Roman deity and are needing to draw upon inscriptions and other ancient materials in an attempt to re-construct that deity, it is inevitable that there will be different interpretations made based on how the

²⁴ Ralph Haussler, ‘A Landscape of Resistance? Cults and Sacred Landscapes in Western Cisalpine Gaul’, *Trans Padum ... Vsque Ad Alpes. Roma tra il Po e le Alpi: dalla romanizzazione alla romanità*, 13-15 (2014), 261-286 (p. 276).

²⁵ Jane Webster, ‘The Gods and the Supernatural’, in *The Celtic World*, ed. by Miranda Green (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 445-464 (p. 446).

²⁶ Maria P. Burillo-Cuadrado and Francisco Burillo-Mozota, ‘Looking at Cosmology Through the Lens of Hermeneutics and Semantics’, in *Celtic Religions in the Roman Period*, ed. by Ralph Haussler and Tony King (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2017), pp. 253-271 (p. 254).

individual sees and understands the evidence. Perhaps this is why we have differences of opinion regarding historical matters such as this?

Word Count: 2164

Bibliography

Birkhan, Helmut, 'Belenos/Belinos', in *Celtic Culture – A historical Encyclopaedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 195

Botanical.com, *Henbane* <<https://www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/h/henban23.html>> [accessed 14 April 2021]

Caesar, Julius, *De Bello Gallico*, 6.17

Centre de Monuments Nationaux, *Glanum Archaeological site* (2018) <<http://www.site-glanum.fr/en/>> [accessed 12 April 2021]

Green, Miranda, 'The Gods and the Supernatural', in *'The Celtic World'*, ed. by Miranda Green (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 465-488

Ralph Haussler, 'A Landscape of Resistance? Cults and Sacred Landscapes in Western Cisalpine Gaul', *Trans Padum ... Vsque Ad Alpes. Roma tra il Po e le Alpi: dalla romanizzazione alla romanità*, 13-15 (2014), 261-286

Ralph Haussler, 'How to Identify Celtic Religions in Roman Britain and Gaul', *FERCAN*, (2006) 13-63

Garrett Olmsted, *The Gods of the Celts and Indo-Europeans*, (Clynchdale Tazewell Virginia, 2019)

Webmd, *henbane* (2020) <<https://www.webmd.com/vitamins/ai/ingredientmono-82/henbane>> [accessed 14 April 2021]

Jane Webster, 'The Gods and the Supernatural', in *'The Celtic World'*, ed. by Miranda Green (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 445-464

Wikipedia, *Belenus* (2021) <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belenus>> [accessed 12 April 2021].