

Recovering information about ancient Celtic religion

Before the Roman conquest, the peoples of Gaul used writing only very sparingly, and the Britons and the Irish practically not at all. The archaeological remains of ancient religions are extraordinarily difficult to interpret in the absence of written evidence. This means that the vast bulk of our knowledge of Celtic religion actually comes from a time after the Celts had been conquered and subjected to Roman rule. Inscriptions, sculpture and cult buildings and structures of this period are the product of a meeting between two cultures, the Celtic and the classical; they are not simply reflections of what Celtic religion looked like before that meeting took place. Moreover, the great bulk of the written evidence comes from authors who were not Celts themselves. They may not have known much about Celtic religion, they may have misunderstood it, they may have had political agendas of their own which caused them to write about it in particular ways. In other words, our evidence is the product of cultural cross-fertilization.

Traditionally, this has not been seen as an insuperable obstacle. The Greeks and Romans believed in a multitude of gods, and there is abundant evidence that incoming Romans adopted the deities of the territories they conquered. So it has been argued that there were no insuperable religious objections which might hinder our classical authors from passing on reliable information about Celtic religion.

Postcolonial critiques

More recent, postcolonial readings are more sceptical about this. The example of Celtic gods may illustrate some of the problems. The Romans practised *interpretatio*, by which is meant that they identified the native gods that they encountered with deities from their own pantheon. This has been seen as a benign phenomenon, illustrating Roman religious tolerance. Though there is an element of truth in this – the deep intolerance of monotheistic Christianity towards pagan gods was foreign to the classical Greek and Roman world – nevertheless it is open to a more hard-nosed interpretation. *Interpretatio* was an appropriation of the native gods by the conquerors. The willingness of Romans to worship native gods implied in turn that those native gods were willing to serve Rome – like their original worshippers, they had surrendered to the greater power.

It is difficult to know, moreover, who exactly practised *interpretatio*. Most of our sculpture and inscriptions were probably paid for by high-status individuals. Such people would be disproportionately involved in Roman power (and quite likely to come from elsewhere in the empire). There may be evidence that lower-status Britons in particular resisted the Roman equation of their gods with foreign ones and even subverted Roman cultural forms in order to assert their own religious identity. This poses difficulties for how we

use the Roman-period evidence to understand Celtic religion. How were the Celtic gods changed by *interpretatio*?

The druids

Most classical references to Celtic religion revolve around druids. There seems to have been a considerable fascination among Greek and Roman observers with this class of professional wise men. It seems clear that the druids had a body of belief about the natural world and humanity, which classical authors recognized as cognate with their discipline of philosophy. The study of the druids is a particularly fraught one, with much disputation regarding the reliability of the classical accounts and how compatible they are with each other, as well as the degree to which classical authors simply copied each other rather than trying to check facts for themselves. As a result, the functions of the druids within Gaulish society have also been hotly contested. The fullest account is by Julius Caesar, who conquered most of Gaul in the 50s BC. You might expect his testimony to be taken seriously by scholars, given that he spent years in the country, engaged in a great deal of diplomacy with the Gauls, and had an entourage full of high-status Gauls, among them the druid Divitiacus. This has not stopped scholars from trying to argue that most of his information was derived at second-hand from Posidonius and is inaccurate.

Reading

Firstly, here is an article that explores some of these problems. It does not deal with otherworlds as such, but it is worth reading for the methodological argument.

Jane Webster, '*Interpretatio*: Roman Word Power and the Celtic Gods', *Britannia*, 26 (1995), 153–61. On JSTOR.

Next, two accounts of the druids. The first is a popular introduction to one of the major sources, the Greek writer Posidonius. Note that Posidonius's own writings do not survive, and we only know about him through second-hand quotations in other writers.

P. Freeman, *The Philosopher and the Druids* (London, 2006).

The second is a hard-hitting revisionist account, stressing the degree of religious conflict between druidism and the Roman authorities, and the reliability of the testimony of Julius Caesar as undoubtedly our best-qualified eyewitness to the status and activities of the druids.

Jane Webster, 'At the End of the World: Druidic and Other Revitalization Movements in Post-Conquest Gaul and Britain', *Britannia*, 30 (1999), 1–20. On JSTOR.

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