Aspects of Celtic Spirituality: From Paganism to Early Christianity in Western Britain

Lauren Adshead, 2210084

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
University of Wales, Trinity Saint David

2024

PRIFYSGOL CYMRU
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
UNIVERSITY OF WALES
Trinity Saint David

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

Declaration Form

1. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Name..…….Lauren Adshead……...

Date ……16 September 2024……...

2. This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of …….....

Name… ……Lauren Adshead……

Date ……16 September 2024……..……...

3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references.

A bibliography is appended.

Name……: Lauren Adshead…….…….

Date: ……16 September 2024……..…….

4. I hereby give consent for my dissertation, if accepted, to be available for photocopying, inter- library loan, and for deposit in the University's digital repository

Name……Lauren Adshead …….

Date……16 September 2024…….……..

Supervisor's Declaration.

I am satisfied that this work is the result of the student's own efforts.

Signed: ……...

Date: ……..

Contents

Abstract…….4

Introduction……5

Chapter One: Pre-Roman Beliefs……...9

Chapter Two: Roman Influences on Beliefs……..22

Chapter Three: The Introduction of Christianity……31

Chapter Four: Some Irish Comparisons…….42

Conclusion……..51

Bibliography……55

Abstract

The Ancient Celts were a polytheistic society and believed in multiple gods. Many of these gods may have only been locally acknowledged whilst others can be found universally throughout the Celtic peoples. The veneration of these Celtic deities were linked to particular locations such as springs and sources of life. It is likely that much of the religion of the ancient Celts was passed on orally and as a result of this, much of what we know can be found in the writings of the Greeks and Romans. Unlike their Classical counterparts, the Greeks and Romans, there was no universal pantheon of Celtic gods and as a result many of the writings about the Celtic gods may have been linked to their classical counterparts. The invasion of the Romans into Britain eventually led to the introduction of Christianity. Even with the introduction of Christianity, pagan traditions also continued. By the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire, Christianity seems to have become well founded within most of Britain and it was thought to have reached Ireland by the sixth century. One way Christianity was spread was through the veneration of the Saints and in some areas, these Saints influenced the construction of places of worship. Rather than an institutionally recognised structure within the Church, it is likely that there were regional differences among the 'Celtic countries'. This dissertation aims to trace the development of religion throughout the Celtic nations of Britain, from their pagan beginnings, through the influence of the Roman invasion and the subsequent withdrawal of the Romans from Britain following the fall of the Roman Empire. This dissertation will look at the characteristics of the pagan religion and how this began to change with the introduction of the Christianity, as well as how Christianity began to spread through factors such as the veneration of the Saints.

Introduction

The term 'Celt' developed from the Greek (Keltoi and Galatae) and Roman (Celtae and Galli) writings about the barbarian tribes of continental Europe, whilst the idea that the people of Iron Age Britain and Ireland could belong to the Celtic peoples only came into widespread use during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The linguistic classification which grouped the people of Britain into the 'Celtic' fold became the general ethnic label for all of the peoples of Britain, Ireland and the continent who were thought to have spoken the Celtic tongue in both pre-Roman and later times.[1] Although the Celts may have much in common regarding social structure, religion and material culture, there was also much variation between the various Celtic tribes of Europe.[2] The Celts who invaded the British Isles during the last five centuries BCE, came in waves of mutually hostile groups of different dialects. It is likely the Ancient Celts and their beliefs displaced the earlier Indigenous Stonehenge peoples beliefs and their Gods. However, it is possible that the Celts appropriated some of their earlier customs.[3]

Before Caesar's raid of 55 BC and 54 BC, Britain was a land of mystery to the classical writers. The descendants of the Gaels (Goidels) can still be found in Ireland and Scotland, whilst relatives of the Gaels, the Cymri, and the Brythons- including the Belgae- are the source for the people in Wales and Cornwall (and Brittany in France).[4] Prior to the Roman invasion of Britain, contact between Britain and continental Europe was largely due to trade with the Mediterranean world through the trade of items such as coral. British society during Caesar's raids was thought to be similar to that of Gaul, with tribal units and a dominant warrior aristocracy.[5] Caesar's interest in Britain likely

[1] Simon James, *Exploring the World of the Celts,* (Thames & Hudson, London, 2016), p8
[2] Simon James, *Exploring the World of the Celts,* p9
[3] Christoper R. Fee with David A. Leeming, *Gods, Heroes & Kings, The Battle for Mythic Britain,* p4
[4] Fee and Leeming, *Gods, Heroes & Kings,* p4
[5] Simon James, *Exploring the World of the Celts,* (Thames & Hudson, London, 2016), p48

came from the hopes of plunder as well as the hope of 'upstaging' his political rival Pompey by venturing across the sea beyond the known world. He was aware of the cross-channel trade between the Veneti, whose powerful control of the Channel allowed them to exact tolls, as well as their well-standing relationship between this tribe and that of those in southern Britain.[6] Caesar became aware of the close relationship between the tribes of south-east Britain and north-east Gaul due to the cross-channel movements caused by his hostile activities in Gaul. According to Diviciacus, the Bellovaci fled to Britain after Caesar's advancement into Gaul.[7]

The Iron Age Period in Britain saw many changes to its native peoples lives with a wide range of possible causes for these changes. One of which being the movement of people between Gaul and Britain and the establishment of trading posts between the tribes of these areas. This then allowed for a development in trade, especially in fine metalwork.[8] The British tribes were an active participant within the wider Celtic world and absorbed continental ideas and practices such as the La Tene art style, but also 'exported' their own ideas and goods within the wider Celtic world, with the most famous being Druidism. Ireland differed to Britain in that the archaeological evidence is sparse, and they seem to have imported few datable Classical goods and minted no coins.[9]

The Early Celts were a largely polytheistic culture with a wide variety deities and spiritual beliefs. Nature was a big part of all aspects of society and influenced things such as the location of veneration as well as the types of activities involved in spiritual beliefs. An example of the importance of nature within the lives of the Celts is the role water plays in the many aspects of life. Water was used as a place of ritual deposition

---

[6] Graham Webster, 'The Celtic Britons Under Rome,' in *The Celtic World,* pp625-626
[7] *ibid*
[8] Graham Webster, 'The Celtic Britons Under Rome,' in *The Celtic World,* p623
[9] Simon James, *Exploring the World of the Celts,* p49

for items believed to have been sacrificed to please the gods such as personal items or weapons. As well as this, it was linked to healing properties, a belief which survived through to the introduction of Christianity.

The Romans brought with them a number of changes within society to a differing extent throughout the different regions of Britain. However, one area of society which saw a big change amongst all of the British tribes was how the deities were represented and worshipped and the religious practices of the native British tribes. A result of these changes was an increased amount of epigraphical sources of the gods and goddesses which survived. Despite the changes the Romans brought with them, the people of Britain still retained a polytheistic religion and retained their connections with the natural world which was common to their Celtic predecessors. It was not until the introduction of Christianity within the Roman empire, the subsequent end to the persecution of Christians and its introduction as the religion of the empire that major changes began to come about in regard to the religion of Western Britain. The early days of Christian Britain saw a mix of both the polytheistic religions of the past as well as a shift towards the monotheistic religion of Christianity. The early religion of Christianity still retained some elements of its pagan past and characteristics of pagan beliefs can still be found within sources such as the Lives of the Saints and the vernacular literature such as The Mabinogion.

In many ways the lifestyle of the Celtic peoples of Ireland and Wales were similar with both each other and the rest of the continental tribes of Europe. Both Ireland and Wales saw a shift from polytheistic, natural beliefs to the monotheistic religion of Christianity, but this occurred at different times and to different extents. In Ireland as well as Wales, the role of animals continued to play an important role and can be found in their traditional stories such as The Mabinogi or the Ulster Cycle. Following their conversion

to Christianity, saints played a big role in veneration and the writings of their Lives demonstrate some of the beliefs of this time. Even with their conversion, both Irish and Welsh saints' Lives bears some motifs from the pagan past but to different levels.

1. Pre-Roman Beliefs

The Celts were part of a polytheistic society and worshipped a number of gods and goddesses, although it is likely that many of the iterations of these deities overlapped depending on the geographical location of the tribe. Some deities were widespread and common between tribes whilst others may have been locally venerated and only occurred in inscriptions in small numbers. One example of a widely venerated deity is that of Taranis, a native thunder-god who appears in inscriptions in Britain, Gaul, Germany as well as the former Yugoslavia. Like many other religions of the time, the Celtic religion focused on that of natural features such as mountains and forests and the animals that inhabit them. Divine powers were associated with the fertility of humans, livestock, and crops alongside spirits of watery places and celestial powers.[10] The frequency and distribution of images and god-names allows us to distinguish between the deities venerated throughout the Celtic world and those that are popular in either restricted regions or linked to a specific locality. The cults of certain deities transcended the tribal boundaries and were followed everywhere. These cults included those of the Mother-goddess, the sky-god, and the horse-goddess Epona who was invoked by devotees who lived as far apart as Britain, Rome, and Bulgaria.[11] Even those deities whose cults were limited to one region bore some resemblances to those of different regions suggesting shared practices amongst different Celtic tribes, whether they were based close to each other or not.

The evidence of spiritual beliefs implies a varied and rich religious tradition related to the essential animism which appeared to have been a principle of Celtic religion. There was a belief that every part of the natural world was capable of doing harm and so they

[10] Miranda Green, *The World of the Druids,* (Thames & Hudson, London, 2005), pp24-25
[11] Miranda Green, *The World of the Druids,* pp25-27

had to be controlled, and their power harnessed by the means of sacrifice, divination, and other propitiatory rituals. Sacred places for these rituals could take the form of shrines but also natural foci such as lakes, springs, or trees.[12] The most popular of these deities- the celestial gods and the mother-goddesses- were linked to their respective functions as providers of light, heat, and fertility whilst many divinities- such as Epona, Arduinna, Cernunnos- had a close affinity with animals. Many of the horned and antlered gods took on the partial personae of bulls or stags.[13] The emphasis on the importance of nature in regard to the Celtic deities and information that has come to us from other sources imply the importance in natural spaces in which the veneration of these deities would have taken place.

Wherever they were able to grow, trees were an important part of the landscape and were providers of shelter, materials, and fuel alongside being able to express the character of a place. The tree of life is a symbol present within every human culture and symbolizes the Great Mother, a nurturer of growth who carries and sustains life. In some Celtic lore, the first woman was believed to be a rowan tree and the first man, an alder.[14] Groves were a common feature of Celtic cult sites, likely due to their association with the phrase nemeton, which is commonly attributed as being a 'sacred grove', although it is possible it has other meanings such as a small shrine or chapel.[15] Greek writers, such as Lucan in his Pharsala, wrote of Gaulish druids who lived in deep groves and worshipped their gods without the use of temples. Groves, like temples, were likely to have been set up or dedicated to specific deities.[16] The sanctity of trees seemed to have been based in some respects on their height, their longevity, and the fact their roots

---

[12] Miranda J. Green, '*The Gods and the Supernatural,'* in The Celtic World, (Routledge, London, 1995), p465
[13] Green, '*The Gods and the Supernatural,'* pp465-466
[14] Nigel Pennick, *Celtic Sacred Landscapes,* (Thames & Hudson, London, 2000), pp21-23
[15] Jane Webster, '*Sanctuaries and Sacred Places,'* in The Celtic World, pp448-449
[16] Pennick, *Celtic Sacred Landscapes,* p25

penetrated deep underground forming a link between the sky, earth and the underworld- all considered to be powerful and important parts of nature's spirits. As well as this, the cycle of the seasons could be reflected through its 'death' in the winter and its 'rebirth' in the spring with it new growth of leaves.[17]

Alongside the importance of trees and groves, natural waters- springs, streams, rivers, etc.- played an important part in Celtic spirituality and was believed to be ensouled with spirits which were to be acknowledged and nurtured. Water from a holy well was thought to come directly from waters that exist beneath the earth in the realm of Annwn.[18] The importance of holy waters and wells continued to be an important part of Celtic Spirituality even after the adoption of Roman and early Christian practices and elements of the sacredness of holy waters can be found in the traditional Welsh tales of the Mabinogion as well as some of the Lives of the Saints. An example of which is that of Winefride, whose Lives tell of how a spring appeared at the site in which she was killed and subsequently resurrected. As well as this, one of the sites of her veneration includes a healing well in Holyhead, a common theme amongst the Welsh saints.

As well as the natural landscape of the Celtic world, animals also played an important role within Celtic religion. Ritual behaviour involving the deliberate killing of animals was widespread amongst Celtic society and the evidence of which can be found in sanctuaries, graves, and habitation sites. Animals were considered important in Celtic society as they played a key role as food, in hunting and in warfare and so were of equal importance in both life and death.[19] The sacrifice of both humans and animals featured heavily in many of these festivals, although animal sacrifices were much more common.

---

[17] Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth, (*Routledge, London, 1998), pp2-3
[18] Pennick, *Celtic Sacred Landscapes,* p63
[19] Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth,* p92

Sacrifices were part of the most important rituals and usually involved dedicating the head and feet to the gods and feastings on the meat. Some Celtic festivals must have contained feasting whilst in others, the sacrifices were more situational. For example, the belief that a herd struck by disease could be saved by the ritual sacrifice of one or more of their number.[20] As well as the sacrifice of living beings, the Celts also sacrificed of a multitude of objects such as swords. For the Celts, a sacrifice involved the permanent removal of the usefulness of an object in everyday life in order to allow it to pass into the Otherworld. Metalwork was bent or broken or cast into inaccessible places, such as rivers, and animals were killed. They believed the life force of a sacrifice could only be released into the supernatural world after its links with the natural world were severed.[21]

Both nature and the role of animals feature heavily within the Celtic festivals of Britain. Although it is possible there were smaller, regional religious celebrations, there were four main festivals in the Celtic year, all of which could be linked to important agricultural and seasonal cues. Samhain or Samain fell during the end of October and marked the coming of winter and the Celtic New Year. It was thought to be a fraught time of year in which the gods moved freely in the world of mankind and played tricks on unsuspecting people. It was also a time of year where men could enter the Otherworld and was a dangerous time of year in which the power of the druids was thought to be required to control the hostility of the Otherworld beings.[22]

Imbolc or Oimelc was a fertility festival which took place at the beginning of February. Beltain or Beltene was a pasturing or sowing festival which took place in May.

---

[20] Fee and Leeming, *Gods, Heroes & Kings,* p66
[21] Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth,* p94
[22] Anne Ross, 'Ritual and the Druids,' in *The Celtic World,* pp434-435

Lughnasadh or Lughnasa was a harvest festival which usually took place in August and lasted a month.[23]

Imbolc was thought to be linked to the word 'purification' and was sacred to the threefold goddess Brigid, who was popular with poets, smiths and medical practitioners and was equated to Minerva by Caesar. Brigid was a mother goddess who presided over the important purification feast of Imbolc.[24] The importance of Brigid survived into later years, and she came to be regarded as Christian saint in later years with a widespread cult across Europe whilst still retaining her pagan origins.

The Celtic calendar festivals were all essentially fire-festivals, with the druids being widely concerned with fire-magic as a result of this. According to Strabo, the druids believed the earth was indestructible, although 'both fire and water will at some time or other prevail'. There was a similar belief among the druids that souls are likewise immortal. Fire and water were the two most revered and employed elements by the druids in the completion of their sacred rites.[25]

Alongside their role in sacrifices, animals feature heavily in the symbolism of many of the Celtic deities as well as in the lore associated with them. The animals associated with these deities and how they are depicted can show the values important to the Celtic peoples, especially within their veneration of the gods and goddesses. Epona is an example of one such Celtic deities whose animal symbol was important to her depiction and lore. The name Epona itself is related to a Celtic word for horse and she is usually depicted as being astride a mare or between two ponies or horses. She was found across a far-reaching part of the Celtic lands and was worshipped by a range of people within

[23] Fee and Leeming, *Gods, Heroes & Kings,* pp64-65
[24] Ross, 'Ritual and the Druids,' pp435-436
[25] Ross, ' Ritual and the Druids,' p437

the Romano-Celtic society.[26] The presence of Epona's horse is an important part of creating her cohesive identity and of giving different aspects for different groups of people to worship. For example, to soldiers it is possible she was seen as a protectress of the cavalryman and his mount, whilst to civilians she was a mother-goddess who could have represented fertility.[27] Rhiannon, whose presence is found in two branches of the Mabinogion, was widely believed to have been one variant of the goddess Epona- largely due to the presence of horses and other magical animals associated with her. Animals were considered an essential part of all aspects of Celtic life and their manifestation of animalistic features of the deities or their presence as the companions of deities demonstrates this.

Birds are another animal who played an important role within the veneration of their associated deities and were often depicted alongside them, often as servants or messengers of the gods. Within the Celtic world, ravens were associated with several types of deities dependent on the area of the Celtic world these deities came from. Among many cultures, birds were considered to have supernatural powers, largely due to their power of flight and ability to leave the bounds of earth. Within the Celtic world, ravens were associated with death and destruction, perhaps due to their black plumage, carrion habits, and their cruelty to other birds. Ravens were also associated with oracles, largely due to their distinctive 'voices' and ability to mimic human speech.[28] The role of birds within the Celtic world continues into the later years with their continuing presence and differing roles in the different branches of the Mabinogion. One such example is the different roles different birds play within the Second Branch. The first instance in birds displaying magical properties is when Branwen faces punishment

[26] Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth,* p204
[27] Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth,* p205
[28] Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth,* p211

because of the insult received by Matholwch during his visit to Wales in the earlier years. During Branwen's punishment, she trains a starling to speak in order for it to carry word of her treatment to her brother, Bendigeidfran.[29] Another example of magical birds are the birds of Rhiannon, also present within the Second Branch. These birds sing to the survivors at the feast of Harlech following their return from the war in Ireland. The survivors hear the birds as clear as if they were there with them although they are far out to sea[30] which implies magical qualities of some sort to them and possible otherworldly origins due to their association with Rhiannon.

Much of what we know of the pre-Roman warrior society of the Celts comes to us through second-hand means due to a lack of literacy amongst the widespread Celtic society. One of which being writings from the Classical authors. Many classical commentators wrote about the Celts between the first century BC into the first few centuries AD and a topic of great fascination was that of the druids. They are discussed by a number of writers, some of them being Caesar, Strabo, and Pliny, all to different extents. Initially Caesar wrote of the druids during his account of the Gallic wars which was primarily an account of the military campaigns. Although by book VI, he had also begun to record detailed observations on the customs and religious practices he encountered.[31] The tone in the writings of the druids varied greatly between their time of recording. Initially writings by classical commentators such as Caesar showed the druids as being high ranking members of society and showed fascination with their practices. These commentaries then take on a darker note and portray the druids within a darker tone following the Roman invasion of Britain. These records by the classical

[29] *The Mabinogion,* translated by Sioned Davies, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp27-28
[30] *The Mabinogion,* translated by Sioned Davies, pp32-33
[31] Miranda Green, *The World of the Druids,* p10

commentators are a good source of information about the druids and their role within Celtic society and religious practices.

Following their first contacts between the Romans and the ancient Celts, druids are presented as being 'Noble Savages', profound thinkers, intellectuals, and philosophers, scholars, teachers, and custodians of the oral culture. Caesar, Strabo and Diodorus all project a positive picture of the druids within an official capacity of judges, teachers, and presiders over ritual matters, including that of sacrifice. During the first century AD, writers such as Lucan and Pliny began to associate the Druids with secret hidden places and more disapproving descriptions of what they believed to be savage rites.[32] Druidism was thought to have originated from the British Isles with the belief that there was a school where the nobility could send their sons to train in the art of druidism, a feat which could take up to twenty years in some cases. During their training, aspiring young druids would learn oral teachings and lore from their elders and would be expected to learn how to facilitate the sacred practices of the community. We have no first-hand accounts from these druids of the time as it was against their beliefs to record any of their sacred information in writing.[33] A lack of first-hand accounts mean we must be wary of these sources as many accounts were written by the Classical authors who may have been writing with a biased view of the druids or were presenting them negatively in order to justify their destruction during the Roman invasions. Nonetheless, these sources are helpful in trying to paint a picture of the everyday lives of the Celtic peoples.

[32] Miranda Green, *The World of the Druids,* p14
[33] Mackenzie Pritchard, '*Celtic, Roman and Everything in between: The Evolution of the Sacred in Romano-Celtic Wales,'* (MA Thesis, University of Waterloo, 2021), pp9-10

The Druids were commonly associated with natural symbols which was thought to be a foundation of Celtic religions and a subject of great fascination. Many nature motifs can be found within in Celtic art which demonstrates its importance with the wider Celtic society. Pliny the Elder, associated the druids with oak trees as well as the importance of mistletoe- both as a healing agent and a fertility aid.[34] Like many other religions of the time, the Celtic religion focused on that of natural features such as mountains and forests and the animals that inhabit them. Divine powers were associated with the fertility of humans, livestock, and crops alongside spirits of watery places and celestial powers.[35] Writers such as Pliny associated the druids with natural aspects such as herb lore. Various plants were collected by the druids because of their belief in their curative properties, one of the most potent being mistletoe which had grown on an oak tree. Later writings by authors such as Tacitus wrote of the druids as being barbarians with 'wild, screaming supporters' who confronted the Roman Army in Anglesey in AD59 and justified their destruction with the accusation of practices of human sacrifice.[36] The theme of human sacrifice was common within writings by many classical authors and although the true extent of the barbarity within the sacrifices was an exaggeration, human sacrifice was undoubtedly a part of ritual life within British and Gaulish Celtic society. Although Classical writers referred to human sacrifices in multiple instances, they do not mention to Celtic animal sacrifices in a great deal. It is possible this was commonplace within their own Mediterranean world. When the practice of animal sacrifice is mentioned, it is usually within the context of augury and divination- both of

[34] Miranda Green, *The World of the Druids,* p19
[35] Miranda Green, *The World of the Druids,* p24
[36] Barry Cunliffe, *Britain Begins,* (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp342-343

which were magical devices for the foretelling of the future by observing the actions of animals and birds in both life and the throes of death.[37]

Many of the Celts thought of the human soul as being one part of a whole person, with the others being the body and the spirit. They saw the death of a person as being a transitional period in which the body and soul of the deceased became immaterial and shapeless whilst being transported to the Otherworld. The soul was believed to have resided in the head and was the power source for the human spirit and body to function.[38] Like much of what we know of the Ancient Celts, our evidence for the role of the head cult comes to us largely from the comments of classical writers as well as archaeological evidence and literature. The classical writers tell of how the heads of enemies were taken, impaled on spears, or fastened on the saddles of horses to be returned home in triumph. They were later impaled on stakes in the homes of their Celtic chiefs or placed within their temples. In many cases, their owners refused to part with these head even for their weight in gold.[39] This was a belief which was common to other societies such as the Romans and can be seen emulated in the form of offerings of their heads to the underworld deities and in elaborate death masks.[40] The importance of the role of the head is an idea which survives in later years within the stories of the Mabinogion such as during the Second Branch when Bendigeidfran ordered his head to be cut off and buried in London facing France following a wound by a poisoned spear, as a form of protection.[41] This demonstrates the importance of the head to the early Celts, often as a form of protection or as a sign of wealth.

---

[37] Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth,* p94
[38] Pritchard, *Celtic, Roman, and Everything in Between,* p20
[39] Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain,* (Cardinal ed, Sphere Books, 1974), pp9
[40] Pritchard, *Celtic, Roman, and Everything in Between,* p20
[41] Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion,* pp32-33

Even before the arrival of the Romans there was a shift in the types of burial practices throughout Iron Age Wales. The late Bronze Age and early Iron Age saw the adoption of burial rites which left little to no visible archaeological traces. There was a shift from formal cemeteries to the deposition of the dead within settlement sites, in wet places and in association with metalwork or hoards. Alongside a shift in location of burial sites, a range of seemingly ritual activities began to be introduced. Burials were placed in disused storage pits and enclosed ditches- locations which imply a desire to incorporate and/or utilise the dead in some way within the everyday life of the settlement.[42] Although the dominant rite seems to have been inhumation burials, there is also evidence of cremation rites in pre-Conquest Britain. The widespread practice of crouched inhumation with the placement of the head to the north, was not a readily attested practice abroad and is believed to have been an Indigenous tradition. Another significant feature of these mortuary practices was the deposition of partial and fragmented skeletal material. It was not until contact with the Continent, that a more intrusive material culture of cremation rites was introduced and influenced these Indigenous burial customs. Hillforts show evidence of being a focus for burials and show a range of mortuary practices depending on the different sites.[43]

Votive offerings in rivers and lakes may suggest a link between watery places and a focus for mortuary activity especially when considering the idea of interconnection between ritual and mortuary activity. However, human remains have rarely been found in these contexts, with the exception of a small number of bog bodies and a few isolated skulls. Although this could have been due to the generally acidic water conditions. Unurned cremation is also present throughout the Iron Age and is harder to detect

[42] Karen Pollock, *The Evolution and Role of Burial Practice in Roman Wales,* Bangor University, 2005, pp26-27
[43] Pollock, *The Evolution and Role of Burial Practice,* pp30-34

archaeologically.[44] The limited evidence available for Welsh examples of burial practices shows a complex nature and system of mortuary practices which were in place during the Iron Age. Like other areas of Iron Age Britain, burials during the late Iron Age became more visible and of a more formal nature. Grave goods during this time largely consisted of small personal items, although the discovery of several high-status objects implied that some burials were that of the local elite.[45] The limited burial evidence we have can be used to give some indication of the spiritual beliefs at the time. The positioning of the body and especially the head during crouched inhumation burials shows the link between the body and the spiritual in the beliefs of the Celtic tribes. This is further reinforced by the presence of this idea in the tales of the Mabinogion, where following his death and subsequent beheading, Bran instructs his men to bury his head positioned in a certain direction as a form of protection.

Much of what we know about the Pagan beliefs of the early Celts of Britain comes to us through largely secondary sources such as the writings of classical authors of the Mediterranean world and from what we can infer from grave goods. The traditional stories of the 'Celtic' countries such as Wales and Ireland can also give us some ideas as to the beliefs of the early Celts. However, both sources of information on the ancient Celts must also take into consideration a possible bias, whether conscious or not, by their authors which may have led to some inaccuracies in how their beliefs were portrayed. Classical sources would have been written from an outsiders perspective and to some extent would have been influenced by the 'otherness' in beliefs different from their authors and in some cases may have been portrayed in the context of the authors beliefs as this may have been the only way they would have been understood. On the

[44] Pollock, *The Evolution and Role of Burial Practice,* p46
[45] Pollock, *The Evolution and Role of Burial Practice,* pp47-48

other hand, the traditional stories such as the Mabinogion were medieval sources and were written down following a move from oral tradition to the written tradition. The time difference between the pagan beliefs of the ancient Celtic people and their written iterations of 'traditional stories' may have led to an amalgamation of ancients beliefs and more contemporary ones within these stories.

Although many of the sources about the early Celts raises some questions as to whether they are completely accurate pictures of the spiritual beliefs of the pagan celts, it is clear that they believed nature played a defining role in all aspects of their life, and especially in their spiritual beliefs. Many of the deities venerated by the ancient celts bore naturalistic characteristics and nature played a big role within their ritual and festivals. Natural spaces were used as the setting place for rituals and festivals important to the Celts as well as part of their funerary practices. For example, water was seen as an important feature of veneration and was used to deposit items as offerings to deities amongst other things. Many aspects of Celtic society survived in some form with the introduction of Roman beliefs and a new Romano-Celtic society began to emerge.

2. Roman Influences on Belief

The conquest of Wales by the Romans meant that Roman religion began to be introduced into spaces where the native beliefs had previously been known. In Wales, this would have largely came from the soldiers and official who would have been based in the forts. The Roman army would have had a clear religious identity and followed its own common calendar of religious festivals. They would also have worshipped a range of strongly Roman deities in a classical Roman way. It is likely native farmers would have also continued their own worship of traditional nameless spirits, in similar ways to their ancestors.[46] Despite this, to some degree, the Celtic religion would have borne some resemblance to that of the Romans. Both societies worshipped a multitude of gods and goddesses and during the early days of the Roman Empire, like the Celts, their religion was also animistic in nature. In both Celtic and Roman society, both religion and politics shared a close link. The Romans also made sacrifices to the Gods, but unlike the Celts, they likely only sacrificed animals and heavily frowned upon the sacrifice of humans. This coupled with the Roman Empire's tolerance for other religions meant that the Roman invasion of Britain initially brought very few changes to the Celtic religion.

For much of the time of the Roman rule in Britain, sacrifices were performed at all levels of life, from the highest offices to individual households. The Romans believed these sacrifices were among traditions that would allow for the continued peace, prosperity, and social harmony by preserving the good relationships with the gods. Although the worship of Roman gods was not demanded by the Romans, those with Roman citizenship were still expected to adopt some aspects of the cults of the city of

[46] Barry J. Lewis, 'Roman Beginnings, c.AD 1- AD400', in *A History of Christianity in Wales,* Barry j. Lewis, Madeline Gray, David Ceri Jones, D. Densil Morgan, (University of Wales Press, 2022), p8

Rome.[47] The Romans shared an agricultural and pastoral heritage with their Celtic counterparts, but the Romans literacy means that we know more about their calendar. At the heart of the calendar are the rustic and family festivals which would have corresponded to the seasonal Celtic festivals, like those of Imbolc, Beltane, etc.[48]

One part of the Celtic religion which faced major changes was the druids and their role within religion. In Celtic tribal society, there was an emphasis on the place of the individual and of a feeling of belonging to a powerfully interknit family. The inevitable destruction of this way of life following the adoption of Roman characteristics must have had serious effects on most individuals. In many cases, there was no extreme difference between the British Celts and the Roman newcomers. Despite this, there were strong anti-Roman elements- mainly in tribes which had suffered when encountering the Roman army. For example, the Durotriges and southern Dobunni tribes still nursed grievances which were kept alive by the druids, who saw their only hope of survival by forcing the Romans to give up Britain.[49] This belief could be considered a contributing factor to the Roman belief that the druids were a political threat and consequently to the Romans persecution of the druids in the later years of their occupation of Britain.

During the early years of the Roman presence within Britain, the Druids were spoke of positively by the classical commentators. Caesar wrote of the Druids as belonging to some of the highest ranks within society. The Druids were associated with religious ceremonies often thought to have taken place within secret groves but were also involved with a number of politico-religious functions.[50] It is likely that there were both organized and private prayers. The Druids would have carried out the prayer rituals for

---

[47] Barry J. Lewis, 'Roman Beginnings, c.AD 1- AD400', pp7-9
[48] Martin Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain,* (BT Batsford ltd, London, 1984), pp27-29
[49] Webster, 'The Celtic Britons under Rome,' p632
[50] Green, *The World of the Druids,* pp14-31

the whole tribe or on important occasions whilst it is possible lesser priests would have lead smaller communities in prayer, and the head of households would have led private family prayers.[51] This was an aspect that was likely shared with the Roman religion. The political threat the Druids imposed was a likely explanation for the changing attitudes towards them throughout the Roman occupation. The existence of the Druids and their role in religion was largely self-imposed and challenged the Roman concept of authority where ideas of the political executive power and religion were exercised through the offices of the Roman Republic and later, the person of the emperor. It is likely that had the Druids integrated the role of emperor worship into their activities, there would have been no serious problem, and the power of the druids would have been redirected to serve imperial interests in other ways.[52]

It is likely that a major contributing factor to the eradication of the Druids was due to the political threat they posed to the emperor rather than for any religious conflict or differences in beliefs between the Romans and the Celtic. The belief that the Druids played some part in the unrest leading to the Boudiccan revolt was used as a justification for their destruction by the Roman generals and gives weight to the idea that the destruction of the Druids was due to political reasons rather than a case of religious intolerance. The Roman attitude to religion was largely one of tolerance and it is likely that if the druids were more willing to adapt to the Roman structure of worship and their belief in emperor worship, they would have been more likely to have survived as a religious group.

---

[51] Green, *The World of the Druids,* p32
[52] Guy De la Bedoyere, *Gods with Thunderbolts, Religion in Roman Britain,* (Tempus Publishing ltd 2002), p46

In many cases, the Celtic gods began to be equated to those the Romans believed to be their counterparts and would have been depicting as sharing qualities. Whereas the ancient Celts very rarely left inscriptions or sculptural evidence of their gods, the Roman influence and merging of their gods with the Celts, led to a change in the materials used and thus an increase in the sculptural or epigraphic tradition. The ancient celts more than likely used materials such as wood to create depictions of their gods, a material which would be more likely to degrade than that of the stone used by the Romans.

One example of the process of Romanization of the gods and goddesses of Pagan Britain, is that of Sulis. Sulis is a name with Celtic origins, and it is unlikely that the importance of the hot springs at Bath solely came from Roman influence.[53] Although sparse, evidence from Barry Cunliffe's excavations of the site in the late 1970s, show traces of pre-Roman offerings such as Iron Age coins- although these could have belonged to early Roman offerings. Sulis's identity began to be hybridized and conflated with the Roman goddess Minerva during the enclosure of the Sanctury into a permanent building.[54] Roman influence also brought with it a change in the way some worshippers communicated with their deities. Roman Britain saw the introduction of 'curse tablets'- lead or pewter tablets which were inscribed with messages in cursive script by wronged suppliants, rolled up and then cast into the reservoir as pleas to Sulis for vengeance. These tablets were one of the most numerous types of portable offering at Sulis' spring and were a well-known Graeco-Roman tradition. As well as these curse-tablets, items of personal adornment were also deposited into the water.[55] This could

[53] Martin Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain,* p43
[54] Miranda Aldhouse-Green, 'Gallo-British Deities and their Shrines,' in *A Companion to Roman Britain,* edited by Malcolm Todd, (Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp199-201
[55] Aldhouse-Green, 'Gallo British Deities and their Shrines,' pp204-205

demonstrate how the religious practices began to merge with the influence of a changing population whilst also keeping elements of the original practices. The deposition of personal items was widely attested tradition in many parts of Europe as well as Britain, but the introduction of curse-tablets as deposited items was a Graeco-Roman tradition.

Another part of the Celtic religion which faced changes to a lesser extent was that of the sacred spaces used for worship. Roman influence brought with it a change in the types of spaces used for worship. Initially, the Celts worshipped in natural spaces such as springs and groves in which had veneration had taken place within for generations. Roman influence brought the change from open, natural spaces to worship within enclosed buildings. Some obscure and remote woodland glades and springs were converted into places which today would have been considered as resorts or health farms.[56] The process of Romanization brought with a development in the types of shrines and the sacred spots associated with veneration. One such example is that of Canterbury. By the end of the first century, Canterbury had a classical theatre which was later elaborated to a grander scale. The theatre was an important part of classical religious complexes, coming from a tradition dating back to the ancient Greeks.[57]

The merge between the Celtic and Roman religion brought with the emergence of the 'Romano-Celtic' temple, a building which was well-known in the north-western provinces during the Roman period. The usual form of these of the temples were a central square cella with a concentric square ambulatory, a concept similar to that of the classical temple in the sense that the gatherings and ritual took place outside in the precinct, whilst the temple formed a backdrop to the activity around the outdoor altar.

[56] De la Bedoyere, *Gods with Thunderbolts,* p69
[57] De La Bedoyere, *Gods with Thunderbolts,* p81

Only secret ceremonies and the cult statues were housed within.[58] The archaeology of the second century shows a significant elaboration of some of the conspicuous urban temples and shrines. One things that was altered in the temples was the presence of a pair of shrines which flanked the entrance to the temples. Bath is a well-known example of this. It initially was a largely classically styled building but was substantially altered during the second century, resulting in the typical hybrid Romano-Celtic form of temples.[59] Similar to the regional differences in cults and epigraphic depictions, it is very likely that the structure of temples also faced regional differences to some extent. Temple building within Roman society was largely due to public bodies rather than by religious groups or the government. There is evidence for this, in Tacitus's writings of encouragement by officials such as Agricola to build temples as a way to express gratitude for commercial fortune or for the privilege of status.[60]

The treatment of sacred sites by the Roman generally followed a conservative approach and involved offering shelter to foreign gods whether with the erection of a temple to replace an earlier structure or through enhancing a holy place where no building existed prior.[61] The temple to Sulis Minerva in Bath demonstrates how the structure of temples and worships changes throughout the Romano-Celtic and brought with it a merging of the beliefs between the two peoples. It was one of the most important religious sites in Roman Britain and was constructed during the Flavian period. The temple itself was part of a wider complex and provided a physical link between the sacred spring and thermal baths. The temple and the baths were in a central position and so it is likely that these were focal structures to the temples. The podium temple was surrounded by a

[58] De La Bedoyere, *Gods with Thunderbolts,* p85
[59] De La Bedoyere, *Gods with Thunderbolts,* p93
[60] De La Bedoyere, *Gods with Thunderbolts,* p91
[61] Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain,* p37

precinct which incorporated the natural thermal spring and was increasingly monumentalized with porticos. There is evidence of a second precinct as well as the remains of two other baths associated with thermal springs, although these have not been fully excavated.[62]

Upon entering the precinct, they would have seen the sacred spring and reservoir, which lay on a second axis and comprised of the windows of the baths, the spring itself and the altar. The monumental altar would have former the pivotal point in the layout of the shrine where the dominant axes intersected, and later alterations would have further emphasized this importance.[63] Alongside the changes in the temple layout, Roman engineers likely embellished the Mediterranean-type temple with iconographical images linked to water such as tritons and a male Medusa mask conflated with a water-god. The Medusa mask was associated with Minerva and was worn on her breast plate.

Minerva and Sulis were equated with one-another, and their names were used both together and interchangeably.[64]

Burial practices also changed throughout the Roman period. The type of burial practices used can give some insight into the beliefs regarding the Otherworld and peoples relationship with death and their gods. Burials could vary depending on location but much of the Celtic peoples employed cremation burials, and those inhumation burials usually included the presence of grave goods such as drinking instruments. Examples of Romano-British burial practices are most commonly found in towns and forts, with the best sources coming from sites with a military phase, which provided details relating to origins, age at death and their occupation, although both urban cemeteries and rural sites

[62] Louise Revell, 'Religion and Ritual in the Western Provinces' *Greece & Rome,* Oct. 2007, Second Series, Vol. 54, No. 2, (Oct 2007), pp215-217
[63] Revell, 'Religion and Ritual,' p218
[64] Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain,* p43

provided some information but was much more limited. Excepting certain circumstances, such as the death of an infant, Roman law required burials took place outside areas of human settlement. As a result, cemeteries found in Roman towns usually belonged to an earlier phase in the towns development which later became covered by expansion.[65] Pagan burials usually included grave goods and represent the merging of Roman and Celtic tradition. For the most part, these grave goods were directly connected to their beliefs in the afterlife. Inhumation burials of a similar period without the presence of grave goods are largely considered to belong to the Christian tradition.[66]

Prior to the arrival of the Romans, the native people of Wales were not a literate society, and the introduction of literacy with the Roman also brought with it a change in how graves were marked. During Roman times, stone epitaphs were mainly confined to commemorating the dead of the Roman elite and the families of Roman soldiers and officials who lived in the major city centres, such as Caerleon. From the fifth century, sub-Roman inscriptions begin to appear widely through British-held lands, but few were set up in churchyards. Instead, most were found in older burial grounds near Roman tombs of earlier years as well as on or near older prehistoric sites. Personal names on these stones are a mix of Roman and British with inscription in the typical faulty Latin of the time, as well as some inscriptions in the Irish language, Ogham.[67] Many of the inscribed memorial stones found between the fifth and seventh centuries have Latin or Irish names rather than Welsh names and features Latin inscriptions. It was not until the

[65] Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain,* pp96-97
[66] Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain,* p98
[67] Barry J. Lewis, 'The Age of Conversion', pp24-25

seventh century when this began to change, and inscriptions found on stone sculptures began to bear Welsh names as a majority.[68]

Although the basic principles of life stayed the same, Roman influences also brought many changes to society for the Celtic tribes. Society remained as a polytheistic society but many of the original Celtic deities began to be amalgamated with those of the Roman deities and as a result changed in some way. An example of this is Sulis who was merged with the Roman goddess Minerva, and although depositions to the goddess remained prevalent, there was the introduction of the Roman tradition of curse-tablets- a new phenomenon to the previously non-literate culture of the Celts. They also brought with them a change in the spaces used for worship which became more enclosed compared to the previous open, natural spaces. The Romans brought with them many changes but at its foundation, society remained pagan and retained much of what could be considered to be its original Celtic foundations. It was not until Christianity became more widespread that we begin to see a major change in the spiritual nature and beliefs of the inhabitants of Western Britain.

[68] Nancy Edwards, 'Early Medieval Wales: material evidence and identity', *Studia Celtica,* 51, 2017, pp3-4

3. The Introduction of Christianity

The collapse of the Roman Empire and its subsequent withdrawal from Britain left an opportunity for the continued growth of Christianity. This brought with it major changes in the religion of Western Britain. Christianity did not reach Britain until during the Roman rule and initially Christians in Roman Britain were at risk of facing persecution. During its early phase in Britain, Christianity was considered to be 'superstitio' and as a result, those who practiced Christianity often ran the risk of persecution and martyrdom for their beliefs. The crucifixion of Christ brought Christianity to Rome in AD33, but it was unlikely that Britain saw any Christians for many decades following this due to its place on the outskirts of the Roman Empire.[69]

Christians were mainly found in the cities during their early presence in Britain. Christians denied the existence of all gods except their own, a belief which would have caused severe social obstacles. Obstacles which, coupled with the fact that Christian beliefs led to many committed followers refusing to take part in rituals honouring the gods, contributed to Christianity becoming an illegal and persecuted religion. These factors may have also led to some people being unable to hold public office or perform civic duties, roles which would have also entailed a sacrifice to the gods.[70] The persecution of Christians was not constant and there were periods of calm, tacit toleration. Despite this, there were still periods of local and sporadic outbreaks of trouble, with several waves of general persecution led by emperors such as Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian. The persecutions would come to an end following the Edict of

[69] Barry J. Lewis, 'Roman Beginnings, c.AD1-c.A 400' in *A History of Christianity in Wales,* Lewis et al, (University of Wales Press, 2022), p12
[70] Lewis, 'Roman Beginnings,' p13

Milan, which made Christianity legal and officially encouraged as a religion of the Roman Empire.[71]

In the decades following Christianity's growth in Wales, there is very little direct evidence, except for the existence of the martyr cult which probably existed at Caerleon.[72] As well as growth in popularity of Christianity, there was a continued following of the pagan religion of the past, and in many areas there was a merging of Christian and pagan beliefs. An example of this can be found in evidence for a fourth century cult focused on a healing spring at Llys Awel which contained finds of both pagan and Christian iconography. Finds included three votive dog figurines, a statue of the gold Mercury, as well as a Roman belt buckle and plate, from above the spring near its hillfort, decorated with Christian iconography. This may have indicated syncretic beliefs or may have simply been an attempt at converting the landscape through the deposition of a powerful Christian symbol.[73] Whether it was true that there was a merging of beliefs of British pagans and Christians during this period or not, there are characteristics of the early Christian religion and its associated religion, which bears some parallels to the pagan beliefs of the past.

Like it pagan predecessors, there is little textual evidence for early Christianity in Roman Britain, and much of what can be found comes from written sources outside of Britain who would have solely been writing on topics which would have interested them. During its early years, Christianity in Britain had no official leader and no geographical centre. It consisted of largely small communities, scattered across the empire, and overseen by bishops. This meant that many early Christians would have

[71] Lewis, 'Roman Beginnings,' p14
[72] Lewis, 'Roman Beginnings,' p16
[73] Nancy Edwards, *Life in Early Medieval Wales,* Oxford University Press, 2022, pp290-292

worshipped at home or in those of their fellow 'believers'. These early 'house-churches' can be difficult to identify, except in cases where there was the presence of decorations bearing overtly Christian motifs. Purpose built churches could also be difficult to identify in a similar manner as the also initially looked like other public buildings.[74] This was strikingly different from earlier Roman worship which would have took place in purpose-built temples which could be clearly identified, and in many cases would have involved public worship. Even their Celtic predecessors, who also left little trace of their spaces of worship, was thought to have engaged in public worship. However, the likelihood that the privacy and minimal traces of early Christian worship is due to its position as a persecuted and illegal religion. As the romans turned away from pagan worship and public sacrifice, the persecution of Christians died down. During the time of reduced persecutions, the Christian church had an opportunity to grow in wealth and influence and developed an emerging idea of Christian leadership.[75] In its earliest form, the structure and organisation of the Church was similar to that of the Roman state. Provinces were under bishops, who were initially seen as 'local spiritual chairmen'. Bishops may have served towns and congregations, and similar to other parts of the Roman Empire, the church may have been organised into territorial dioceses.[76]

Much of what we know of early Christian practices comes from Gildas' writings in the sixth century, in which he presents a well-established, wealthy British church which already bore some signs of being corrupted. At the same time, he looked back to a past reverence of natural features such as mountains, hills and rivers as being divine.[77] In his *De Excidio,* Gildas wrote of the church as containing three principal orders of the

[74] Lewis, 'Roman Beginnings,' pp16-18
[75] Lewis, 'Roman beginnings,' pp17-18
[76] Mark Redknapp, 'Early Christianity and its Monuments', p137
[77] Edwards, *Life in Early Medieval Wales,* pp290-291

clergy: bishops (episcopi), priests (prebyterii), and deacons (diacones).[78] This three-fold structure in the order of religious men could perhaps bear some resemblance to the religious orders of Celtic ancestors who also used a three-fold structure of druids, bards and ovates.

The emerging cult of saints within Christian practices played a big part in the emerging Christian beliefs in many parts of Britain. Initially, these cults involved martyrdom, such as is the case of Julius and Aaron, but from the later sixth century this began to change. These cults then began to develop around local saints who had not been martyred for their beliefs. Unlike the saints of Gaul, those widely attested in Britain were perceived as founders of churches and monasteries. They became the spiritual patrons and guardians of these places and their communities. In many cases, they functioned heavily as mediators between the communities and God.[79] In many ways this could perhaps be compared to the role of druids who, in their role of performing sacrifices and other rituals, could have been considered as mediators between the ancient Celts and their gods.

Despite their role as mediators of the heavenly and earthly spheres, it was the presence of bodily remains which helped to proliferate their cults. These bodily remains were believed to offer protection to the foundation where they lay and became the focus of veneration and prayers.[80] The idea of bodily remains providing protection shows some resemblance to beliefs surrounding the head cult of the ancient celts. The early celts believed the head was an important part of the body which contained a person's soul and in many cases, the ancient Celtic peoples would have took their victims heads as

[78] Edwards, *Life in Early Medieval Wales,* p299
[79] Edwards, *Life in Early Medieval Wales,* p350
[80] Edwards, *Life in Early Medieval Wales,* p351

trophies. This idea is also prevalent in the tales of the Mabinogion, a group of Welsh vernacular tales, which were widely believed to display traditional beliefs and stories.

Another aspect of the cult of the saints and their associated Lives was the role of natural features- something which played an important role in the beliefs of Celtic ancestors. One such natural feature was the role of rivers and water, features which are found in multiple saints lives and their associated miracles, as well as places of veneration for their cults. An example of one such cult is that of Winefride or Gwenfrewi. Winefride was the only child of a soldier and landowner, Tyfid, who dedicated herself to religion from an early age. Beuno was given land upon which to set up a church and began to instruct Winefride on religious matters. During the initial episode of the vitae, Winefride is confronted by Caradog who wishes to marry her and as such she must protect her virginity. During an attempt to escape and remain a virgin, Winefride is beheaded by Caradog.[81]

Winefride is resurrected by Beuno, who reattaches her head and prays to God to perform a healing miracle. Following her resurrection a spring was said to have burst forth from the ground where her head landed. This spring and the moss surrounding it was said to have healing abilities. Stories of healing miracles are present throughout her vitae and continued to occur even post-mortem. One such examples of these post-mortem miracles include the healing of an epileptic, who was said to have never suffered again following being thrown into the well.[82] Alongside its healing powers, the vitae also tells of how water is used to perform other miracles. Winefride is instructed to make a 'chasuble' every year for Beuno, that 'could neither be made wet by rain, nor

[81] *Vita Sancte Wenefrede (Anonymous; Claudius),* ed by David Callander, (25.1. 23), online at www.welshsaints.ac.uk/theedition/, Translation, §7-§12
[82] *Vita Sancte Wenefrede,* §32

could its material be moved by wind'. This chasuble was then placed above a rock in the stream where Beuno prayed and would be carried through the sea to Beuno.[83] The control of the elements, particularly the sea and rain, is a typical feature of the Lives of the Welsh saints and it is possible that its importance has some origins in the pre-Christian water cults typical of the past.[84] Another example of the role of water and other natural features in miracles can be found in the Life of St Deiniol. Deiniol returns from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem with a phial of water from the River Jordan, which had been hallowed by Christ's baptism to his home near Pembroke. Invoking the name of Christ, he drives his staff into the ground and pours the phial of water from the Holy Land, from which a tree grows from his staff and a spring of 'the sweetest water' flows which is able to cure illnesses.[85]

The role natural features play within the saints lives as well as their role in the actual miracles themselves may be a way to acknowledge their pagan past as well as legitimise Christianity as a religion by drawing connections between nature and God, in a way similar to that of the previous pagan deities of the Iron Age.

Characteristics of Winefride's personality could also perhaps bear some resemblance to those of prominent female characters within the Mabinogion. Like that of many female characters within these tales, Winefride, rather than being passive in the attempts of Caradog to defile her, is able to trick him in order to escape and attempt to find refuge in Beuno's church. As well as this, Winefride decides to pursue a life devoted to God and does not change her mind despite attempts of persuasion from Caradog and the initial

---

[83] *Vita Sancte Wenefrede,* §15-§17

[84] Madeline Gray, "Saints on the edge: reconfiguring sanctity in the Welsh march", *Rewriting Holiness: Reconfiguring Vitae, Re-signifying Cults,* London: Boydell and Brewer for Kings College London Medieval Studies, 2017, p97

[85] *Vita Sancti Danielis (Penarth 225),* ed by David Callander (19. 9. 23) online at https://saints.wales/theedition/ , Translation, §9

reluctance shown by her father. This assertiveness in regard to her could be compared to that of Rhiannon in the First Branch, who after being promised to a husband she did not want, instead pursued Pwyll. She tricks her originally unwanted suitor in order to ensure her marriage to Pwyll.[86] Both Winefride and Rhiannon use trickery as a way of spurning the advances of unwanted suitors. Given that some believe the stories of the Mabinogion and the vernacular literature displayed traditional Welsh beliefs, the similarities in personality between both Rhiannon and Winefride could be an indicator in how these pagan beliefs survived in some form even if majorly changed. Another possibility could be the use of these similarities to legitimise an emerging Christian religion and to make it more palatable to the converting pagan Celts through veneration of saints bearing characteristic of important figures from the spiritual beliefs of the previous societies.

The role of relics within the saints cults bears some similarities to Roman attitudes, at least in Wales. Evidence suggests there was a conservative attitude to primary relics during the earlier cult of relics. The belief that these relics provided some form of protection to the land they were buried in caused a conservative attitude towards primary relics and can be traced back to before the second half of the eighth century.[87] This conservative attitude was not typical for the whole of Britain, and in Ireland elevation seems to have been prevalent, with examples including Cogitosus' late seventh century reference to the sarcophagi of St Brigid and Abbot Conlaed in the church of Kildare.[88] This conservative attitude did not last and during the later centuries, there began to be a shift in tradition relating to corporeal relics. The eleventh and twelfth centuries also saw a break in tradition in regard to the construction of above

[86] *The Mabinogion,* Translated by Sioned Davies, Oxford University Press, pp11-13
[87] Edwards, *Life in Early Medieval Wales,* p351
[88] *ibid*

ground shrines. Prior to this, the reluctance to disturb the graves of saints meant the usual practice was to build churches over the graves of saints and in many cases, special graves seemed to have influenced the site of later churches in Wales. It is likely that substantial above ground shrines only began to be constructed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.[89] The Cathedral Church at Llandaff is perhaps one of the most well-known examples of this break in tradition. In 1120, following a return from Rheims with a portfolio of freshly issued papal bulls, Bishop Urban acquired the relics of St Dyfrig as well as the teeth of Ælfgar- a recently deceased hermit from Bardsley Island. A Life was written to accompany both of these translations of relics. This meant that Llandaff now possessed relics from both the oldest and the latest saint to have died among the Britons.[90]

Although the presence of corporeal relics was important in the veneration of saints, material and hagiographic evidence shows the importance of more portable secondary relics. These were also seen to have been imbued with the authority and virtue of the saint. There are very few surviving secondary relics which have survived in Wales and its borders, but written evidence shows a similar practice to Ireland, where there are many extant examples of bells and croziers, along with books which were sometimes enshrined and regarded as possessions of the saint.[91] These Irish examples coupled with the vitae of the saints can give insight into the items would have come to be regarded as important secondary relics. Relics were believed to have been imbued with the saints powers and as a result Gods power from whence the saints powers came. Many people would have involved these relics in the veneration of these saints and would have

[89] John Reuben Davies, 'Cathedrals and the Cult of Saints in Eleventh and Twelfth Century Wales', *Cathedrals and Conflict in the Anglo-Norman World,* Paul Dalton, Charles Insley, Louise J. Wilkinson, (Boydell and Brewer, Boydell Press, 2011), p107
[90] John Reuben Davies, 'Cathedrals and the Cult of Saints', pp106-107
[91] Edwards, *Life in Early Medieval Wales,* pp356-358

planned their worship around them. This would have been a common theme throughout the beliefs of their pagan ancestors who would have also saw particular items as being objects of veneration for their chosen deities and would have planned their veneration around the location of these objects. Both corporeal and material relics became an important part of the saints cults as a way of attaching importance and legitimacy to the institutions vying to be seen as the main cultic centres of these particular saints. Despite objects of veneration being important influences on the location of religious activity, one major change between the emerging Christian religion and its pagan predecessors was how these objects were treated. Initially the Celts believed that items related to religious activities would need to be damaged in some way by the Celts as part of their sacrifice in order to remove its usefulness- a common theme within sacrifice. The treatment of saints relics differed, and they were seen as objects which were to be preserved as much as possible and as a focus for these cults.

Until the seventh century, the church had little influence on the conservative nature of the customs associated with the burial of the dead. Despite this increased influence, it is likely some of these 'undeveloped' cemeteries may have continued to be used for some time. There is also some evidence of a continuation of non-Christian burial rites. One such example of this a burial found in Biglis, a Roman farmstead in the Vale of Glamorgan, where an early fourth century corn-dryer set into the south-eastern boundary of the settlement had been reused for the burial of an elderly woman with a bangle on each wrist, lying in a north-south slab-lined grave which had been radiocarbon dated to cal. AD 400-650. This practice was also found in Ireland and can be linked to fertility and the harvest.[92] In Wales, the origins of west-east inhumations, often protected by stone cists or wooden coffins was thought to have begun in

[92] Edwards, *Life in Early Medieval Wales,* p308

Romanized environments before gradually spreading into the countryside, although evidence of the continuation of earlier native practices can also be found. Some burials, suggests a persistence of some pagan beliefs and superstitions, including links with fertility, for some time. These, inhumation cemeteries, many of which never acquired formal churches or chapels, were more than likely, primarily kin and community burial places spanning the post-Roman centuries. It is only once the Church had more control over rituals surrounding burial practices that the process of conversion was thought to be complete.[93]

Inscribed memorial stones began to replace the previous cross-carved grave markers- which were frequently anonymous- and people began to seek prayers for the souls they remembered laid to rest in these inscribed commemorations. Major ecclesiastical sites began to be used as places of burial for the Christian elite including patrons and their families. On these sites, churchmen had the most influence on funerary practices, but smaller, non-monastic sites would have had family and kin play a much greater role in the preparation and internment of the body.[94] Although the practice of inhumation burial with west-east orientated graves is thought to have Roman origins, the use of stone-line cists and wooden coffins to protect the body was considered a central concept to Christian beliefs as it was believed the dead's souls would reunite with their bodies on the Day of Judgement and would need to be protected. Linen shrouds and winding sheets are also more clearly associated with Christian but are more difficult to identify within the archaeological record due to their lack of survival. As a result, the position of the body is usually the only clue for the presence of these materials.[95] This differed from previous burial which largely included the presence of grave goods for use within the

[93] Edwards, *Life in Early Medieval Wales,* p310
[94] Edwards, *Life in Early Medieval Wales,* p364
[95] Edwards, *Life in Early Medieval Wales,* p365

Otherworld after death and in some cases was not concerned with the preservation of the body as it was believed that their souls passed through to other objects unlike the Christian belief of being reunited with their body for judgement.

The early years of Christianity's introductions to Wales brought with it a very limited change to society. Initially Christianity was still seen to be unaccepted as a religion and the subject of numerous persecutions under various Roman emperors. It was not until the Edict of Milan that it began to be seen as an accepted religion and became more widespread throughout Roman Wales. It's early years as a religion was largely that of an outlier but the collapse of the Roman Empire led to it becoming more prominent. Even with its emerging prominence as a religion, many aspects of pagan rituals survived. Early burials still bore evidence of pagan practices such as the burial of grave goods and it was not until later years where the Church showed more evidence of control over burials that these pagan characteristics start to be replaced with more Christianised ones such as the focus on the preservation of bodies. Alongside this we can still see hints of earlier beliefs connected with aspects such the Lives of the saints and their associated miracles. For example, the role of nature and its characteristics is central to many miracles associated with saints such as SS Winefride and Deiniol. However, the veneration of these saints were Christianised with the focus on the veneration of relics and corporeal objects rather than natural aspects.

4. Some Irish Comparisons

In many ways, the Irish Celts experienced life in the same way as their Welsh counterparts and shared many characteristics in aspects of their life, including their ritual practices. Their position as an outlier to the Roman's known world meant that there was a limited presence from the Romans and as such a limited influence from the Roman on the Irish Celts lifestyle. A lack of Roman presence meant that Christianity was introduced mostly through other means such as British slaves brought overseas- although the presence of communities of Irish converts is another possibility. Ireland's distance from the Roman world and its lack of interactions meant that it was largely ignored by the Classical authors and as a result most of our written evidence comes from recordings made by Christian monks. Similar to Wales, the Irish Celts believed in a multitude of deities, many of which featured veneration relating to the natural world. The role of druids were also prominent within Ireland.

Animals are important throughout the Irish myths, much like those in Wales, and in many incidences, also bear some Otherworldly qualities. One example of the animals present throughout these stories are that of birds, especially ones presented as being magical. Magical birds appear in many of the Irish adventure tales (eachtrai) and their voyage tales (immrama) but due to the different goals of each story they are present to differing degrees and their descriptions face different levels of detail. In many cases, the amount of references to magical birds is likely to be due to their enduring and readily understood part of an Irish pagan past rather than any Christian symbolism. This widespread nature of motifs featuring birds would have allowed for the transference of ornithological motifs into a Christian context.[96]

[96] Elaine Eichner, *Magical Birds as a Link Between the Mabinogion and Other Celtic Literature: Facts and Fancies,* (MA Dissertation, 2018, University of Wales Trinity Saint David), pp46-47

The Irish Otherworld is described as having birds whose song has the ability to banish grief and lull the wounded to sleep, whilst 'otherworld' music in general is considered to have the ability to 'hold a hero entranced for as long as a year' as well as evoking sleep. These descriptions are similar to that of the birds of Rhiannon from the Mabinogi. The Irish mythological figures, Li Ban and Fand, both possess special powers in their avian form like those of the birds of Rhiannon, such as the ability to sing as they fly, and their song can sooth men to sleep and heal Cu Chulainn of his sickness.[97] Both mythological birds bear similar abilities and seem to have the same purpose of soothing grief, and their presence is largely due to the wounded. The similarities demonstrate the importance of birds within Celtic beliefs and the common motif of their otherworldly characteristics- largely due to their ability to fly and how it was believed that this allowed them to transcend realms to the otherworld.

The goddess Cliodhna was often portrayed with three brightly coloured birds as her companions who were said to eat apples from an otherworldly tree and sing sweetly enough to heal the sick and put the troubled to sleep. One tale they appear in is the 'Eachtra Thaidg Meic Chein' in which Cliodhna is the ruler of the part of the Otherworld visited by Tadg Mac Cian. During this tale Tadg and his men visit the Otherworld following a battle in which most of their people have been slaughtered or abducted. After their meeting with Cliodhna, her birds travel with them to ensure they know no grief or sorrow after these events. They also are unaware of the passage of time in her realm.[98] These characteristics and stories associated with Cliodhna has led to some considering her to be the Irish counterpart to Rhiannon. Both have tales associated with them which involve the presence of magical birds which appear to soothe men

[97] Eichner, *Magical Birds,* pp51-53
[98] Eichner, *Magical Birds,* p54

following a battle in which most of their fellow men had been slain; and in both cases these men find themselves in a space which could be considered otherworldly, in which they do not notice the passage of time.

Druids largely disappear from mainland Europe and Britain following the fall of the Roman Empire, excepting some mentions in the medieval Welsh myths where they are mentioned in the fourteenth century Book of Taliesin amongst others. This differed in Ireland, where the medieval mythic traditions are full of mentions of the Druids. Medieval Irish prose literature is divided into pagan myths or overtly Christian texts, the former of which they were considered to be heavily associated with prophecy and the ability to divine the will of the gods.[99] Through the druidic bards, the Brahmin-like filid (filidh, fili), their Celtic traditions are reasonably well-preserved until the sixth century when Christianity was becoming the prevalent religion. The monks of the second half of the sixth century were working from full and accurate narratives whilst recording these texts but much of this early material was eventually destroyed and we came to depend on the twelfth century monastic compilations like the Book of Leinster.[100]

Although there are more examples of literary evidence relating to Irish druids, like the Welsh examples, they are written by early medieval Christian monks and so we must be weary of a possible bias towards these religious practices, whether conscious or not, as well as a possibility of misunderstanding of aspects of an ancient religion they had no previous experience. Again, similar to the Welsh literature, the dates of the surviving examples of literatures can cause some questions to the accuracy of the sources and the information they provide, as they were likely copied from other source material and so

[99] Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Sacred Britannia The Gods and Rituals of Roman Britain,* (Thames & Hudson, 2016), pp35-36
[100] Fee and Leeming, *Gods, Heroes & Kings,* pp63-64

may have been interpreted differently by different authors. Nevertheless, there are enough references to druids in seventh and eighth century Irish sources to demonstrate how they were considered a powerful group in Irish society, a position lost with the conversion to Christianity. Both evidence from the earlier continental Celts and the later Irish evidence shows that the druids were the professional order which were more likely to have caused difficulties to Christian missionaries. Their position as the main opponents would have led to them being the main victims of conversion and they would have faced some discriminations they would have not been used to previously. One such example of this is an eighth century law tract which declared the druids were not to have any privileges in the care of the injured, on account of any sacred status they may have claimed.[101] These sources show how the druid were seen as the main threat to any encroaching new religion in both Ireland and Wales. However, the druid in Ireland faced a less violent opposition than those in Wales. This may have been due to the later date in which the druids were opposed and the religion they threatened. Druids in Wales were considered a threat to the incoming Romans, a people who shared some characteristics with the pagan societies they were conquering. In Ireland, however, the druids were a threat to the incoming Christianity, a religion which is largely more merciful than that of the Romans. As a result, rather than the druids facing destruction like that of the Welsh druids, they would have simply lost their authority and eventually would have converted.

These sources about druids can still give us some valuable insight into the spiritual practices of the Irish celts and how similar or different these may have been from other Celtic tribes within the British Isles. Although Christianity did not eradicate the pagan gods completely, its arrival meant that pagan cult and ritual began to be discontinued,

[101] T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland,* Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp190-191

and a number of deities began to be transformed into literary characters. The literary nature of Christianity as a religion allowed for a more widespread distribution of text written in the Roman alphabet.[102]

The introduction of Christianity differed slightly from that of mainland Britain due to the lack of Roman influence over Ireland and as a result the conversion of Ireland to Christianity largely came from Christian missionaries overseas, the most famous of which was the Briton Patrick. Although Palladius is largely credited as being the first Christian missionary sent to Ireland in 431, Patrick became the most well-known from the seventh century onwards with some hymns titling him the 'teacher of the Irish'- a widespread belief, not just one of particular churches who owed allegiance to him.[103] Despite his prominence, there are no Lives composed by others for St Patrick but instead there are personal works by Patrick himself- *the Confessio* and *the Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*. These works share little detail of the deeds of Patrick and any accounts of similar dating show little information outside of what is recorded in his writings. Alongside these works by Patrick, we can also use the introduction of Latin loanwords and their phonological development with the host language of Irish to show the conversion of Ireland.[104]

Similar to Wales, the veneration of saints was widespread throughout Ireland, and like Welsh examples, many of them only survive in compilations from the later centuries e.g. the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. Some Irish saints became so influential that it became a common motif in hagiography to ascribe an Irish birth right to almost any known saint whether they were of Irish descent or not. Irish saints usually belonged to

---

[102] Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals A History of the Gods of Irish Myth,* Princeton University Press, pp5-7
[103] T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland,* Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp182-184
[104] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland,* p186

an older generation and to the remote past. The first saints whose Lives were written were the seventh century Lives of St. Patrick and St. Brigit but the lack of Lives for this time mean we have little definitive biographical information and records of their deeds and miracles.[105] A number of holy men and women lived in the period when hagiography had become established in Ireland but have no vitae, some of which would have been prime candidates for the creation of Lives. One of which was Blathmac, a monk of Iona who refused to disclose the hiding place of St. Columba's shrine-reliquary and was martyred by Vikings in 825. This suggests that there was a lack of interest in the heroes of the contemporary church until at least the twelfth century.[106] This differed from Wales where have many examples of Saint's Lives from this time which detailed much of both the biographical information of the saints and their family line as well as their deeds and miracles. This could perhaps be due to the need to legitimise the emerging Christian religion and draw distinctions away from their pagan past of Wales.

The Conversion to Christianity in Ireland was a big cultural change and brought a different attitude to writing and international language- a change which was much larger than that of Britain. Latin now became more dominant as the language of liturgy and scripture, vastly different to Britain where it had been the dominant cultural force for centuries. This would become the main difference in the conversion of the Irish and the Britons. The gods were not unfamiliar and Roman or Greek equivalents for some of the main Celtic gods had been found much earlier, even if the Irish ones had acquired local associations which would have effected conversion.[107] This was not dissimilar to Britain where the Brigantes were associated with the goddess Brigantia and her male

[105] Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hibernae,* 1991, Clarendon, pp3-9
[106] Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints's Lives,* p10
[107] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland,* p186

counterpart Brigans. A tribe called the Brigantes was also associated with Ireland, possibly Leinster, a province of which St Brigit was later a patron of.[108]

The cult of St. Brigit demonstrates a difference in types of saints venerated by Wales and Ireland. Welsh female saints, such as Winefride, can be considered to share some characteristics to the characters of the traditional Welsh tales- for example, Rhiannon- which to many were seen as characterisations of Celtic goddesses. St Brigit, however, was more overtly linked to the pan-Celtic goddess, Brigit. She is depicted as the archetype of the female religious leader and saint but like the goddess, is the patron of poets, craftsmen, and women in childbirth. As well as this, her feast day falls on the day of the Celtic festival Imbolc, February 1st.[109] In Winefride's Life, her story firmly bears Christian origins- she is born to a Christian landowner and although the importance of nature can be linked in some aspect to previous beliefs, there are few obvious links to their pagan past. In contrast, elements of Brigit's birth story can be linked to pagan beliefs. She is born at sunrise on the threshold of a house (a magical boundary point) and fed the milk of a white red-eared cow (a breed much prized and usually associated with the Otherworld). Despite this, the native pagan aspects of Brigit do not overshadow the Christian aspects found in her life. Her ability to turn water into wine (or ale) can be linked to the miracle at Cana whilst her ability to supply seemingly endless amounts of food can also be linked to Christ.[110] The presence of both pagan and Christian aspects in Brigit's life demonstrates how the beliefs of Christianity were merged with it pagan past in a more visible way than that of Wales, perhaps due to the difference in cultures at the time of its introduction.

---

[108] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland,* pp186-187
[109] Dorothy Ann Bray, 'The Image of St Brigit in the early Irish Church' in *Etudes Celtique,* vol. 24, 1987, pp209-215
[110] Bray, 'The Image of St Brigit', pp210-211

Brigit can also be compared to characters from Irish mythic sagas- namely that of Medb. She is compared to the legendary queen of Connacht, as a secular sister by some. Whilst Brigit is seen as a static representation of religious womanhood and is praised of her wisdom, generosity and spiritual fertility and virginity, Medb is considered to demonstrate these qualities alongside more human passions.[111] Medb is compared in some way to the Irish goddess of sovereignty and so the comparisons between Medb and Brigit can be used to further emphasize Brigit's possible pagan past and relation to the pagan goddess in which she shares a name.

In Irish myth, the kings of Ireland were often joined in a symbolic marriage with this goddess of sovereignty as a way of consolidating their authority. This theme of union with the goddess is a recurring theme within Irish literature and usually include several elements of motifs. Unlike the traditional tales where there is a sexual union between hero and goddess, Brigit disfigures herself to prevent marriage and ensure her union with God-after which she is able to call forth a well and heal herself. In this case, she is the Christian hero who proves her faith and the sovereignty of her God.[112] This again demonstrates the merging of traditional and Christian beliefs which were a result of the introduction of Christianity and led to the creation of new traditions. Brigit can be used as a clear example of how the connection of motifs between the traditional stories and the saints' Lives were used to legitimise and ease the transition of a new religion.

The Irish Celts experienced life in similar ways to their Welsh counterparts during the earlier centuries and it is not until the populations begin to change that we see a change in society and spirituality. Nature and animals played an important role in both Ireland and Wales and parallels can be found in the literature of both places in which magical

[111] Bray, 'The Image of St Brigit', p212
[112] Bray, 'The Image of St Brigit', pp212-213

animals can be found, such as the role of birds with the Mabinogion and the Ulster Cycle. Ireland saw less influence from the Romans and so the shift to Christianity came at different times and in a different manner than that of Wales. A result of this was the presence of the druids surviving to a later period than that of the Welsh druids. References to druids continue even after Christianity is introduced although they lose their power following Irelands conversion. The pagan past could be considered to have a more visible presence within Christian Ireland than that of Wales which may have been due to this lack of Roman influence.

Conclusion

Celtic Spirituality and beliefs underwent many changes throughout a changing population of Western Britain. These new changing populations brought many changes to all aspects of society but most notably to religion and spiritual practices. Despite these new changes some aspects of Celtic spirituality survived in some manner for different reasons.

During its initial prominence, Celtic spiritualty focused on a polytheistic culture with a wide range of deities, many of which were locally venerated, and we have little record of, and the importance of nature within everything they did. Nature and natural elements influenced every part of Celtic life, including where and how the ancient celts worshipped their gods. Many of the ancient celts worshipped their gods in wide, open, natural spaces such as groves, whilst watery spaces such as rivers were used as a location for the ritual deposition of sacrificial items. The importance of nature was to have also influenced the importance of animals and the role they played within Celtic life. The celts relied on animals for survival and they were used for a wide range of things from food sources to transportation. The emphasis on their importance in daily life bled through to aspects of their spirituality and deities were often portrayed as either having animalistic features or animals as companions. The role and association of animals with their deities survived into later traditional literature such as those of the Mabinogion, which emphasises how important animals were to the Celts. Natural elements also played an important role in the festivals of the Celts and many of the main festivals fall during the changing seasons and incorporate natural elements such as fire.

The invasion of the Romans saw a shift in Celtic society and as a consequence their spiritual practices. Although society remained polytheistic, the Romans brought with

them many changes. Many of the Celtic deities were amalgamated with the incoming Roman deities which were seen to be their Roman counterparts and were changed in some way whether it was changes to their characteristics or to how they were venerated. For example, Sulis began to be equated with the Roman goddess Minerva and became known as Sulis-Minerva. This change in name brought with it a change in the ritual objects venerated- the deposition of personal objects to Sulis continued but was also joined by the practice of depositing curse-tablets, a Graeco-Roman tradition. At the same time, the Romans brought with them a change to the spaces used to worship. Gone were the wide open, natural spaces and instead the Romans began to build enclosed temples in which worships and festivals were held.

The biggest change the Romans brought with them was the shift to the authority of the emperor in religion. Prior to this the druids were an important part of Celtic religion and led festivals and rituals, but also had the ability to alienate people through their authority in dictating who could take part in festivals and worship. The druids would have been part of the learned elite and were considered to be of the highest level in Celtic society and so would have been a viable threat to the introduction of the Roman lifestyle. Their importance and conflicting beliefs with the Roman offices led to the druid being eradicated violently in Wales. The druids survive to later dates in Ireland due to a lack Roman presences and references to them can be found until the seventh or eight centuries in Irish sources.

Christianity brought with it a drastic change to any surviving Celtic and the newer Roman- Celtic beliefs. During its early years, Christianity was a largely marginalised religion whose followers were victims to a number of persecution under numerous Roman emperors. The acceptance from the Edict of Milan and the collapse of the Roman Empire gave the opportunity for Christianity to become more widespread.

Despite an emerging prominence, many pagan rituals survived, and it is likely that the population was a mix of pagans and Christians, with outlying villages being likely to have adopted Christian beliefs at a slower rate than towns. Burials and attitudes towards the dead are one example of where pagan beliefs persisted until the later years when churches began to exert more control over burials. Later Christian beliefs focused on the preservation of bodies and saw an increase in the usage of stone-lined cists or wooden coffins and the practice of grave goods becoming less common. The usage of inscribe stones to mark burials became a more widespread practice- examples of these can be found from earlier periods to lesser extents.

The shift to a monotheistic religion brought with it the introduction of saints, who were venerated as being holy people in which God was able to work miracles through. Many of these saints were accompanied by vitae which detailed their lives, how they came to be venerated, and any miracles or deeds associated with them. Similar to the deities of their pagan ancestors, most saints were locally venerated. Hints of the pagan past can also been seen in many of the miracles associated with these saints. The role of nature is one motif which can be drawn back to the past. For example, the role of water as a healing agent can be found in many Lives, SS Winefride and Deiniol amongst them. Although the role of nature is present, veneration is focused on relics and corporeal objects rather than these natural aspects. The links between the pagan past and Christianity can be seen more overtly from Irish examples such as St Brigit. She is believed to be a Christianised form of a pagan goddess of the same name and is often portrayed as sharing many characteristics with her. St Brigit's birth also commonly contains details which can be considered pagan, such as her birth on the threshold of a house at sunrise- commonly considered a magical boundary point. It is likely these pagan features of spirituality were continued even into the Christian religion as a way of

linking the new religion with its pagan past in an attempt to make it more easily accepted by people.

Bibliography

Aldhouse-Green, Miranda, *Sacred Britannia,* (Thames & Hudson, London, 2016)

Bray, Dorothy Ann, 'The Image of St Brigit in the early Irish Church', *Etudes Celtique,* vol. 24, 1987, pp209-215

Charles-Edwards, T.M, *Early Christian Ireland,* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Cunliffe, Barry, *Britain Begins,* (Oxford University Press, 2014)

Dalton, Paul, Insley, Charles, J. Wilkinson, Louise, *Cathedrals and Conflict in the Anglo-Norman World,* (Boydell & Brewer, Boydell Press, 2011)

- Reuben Davies, John, 'Cathedrals and the Cult of Saints in Eleventh and Twelfth Century Wales', pp99-116

De La Bedoyere, Guy, *Gods with Thunderbolts, Religion in Roman Britain,* (Tempus Publishing ltd, 2002)

Edwards, Nancy, 'Early Medieval Wales: material evidence and identity', *Studia Celtica,* 51, 2017, pp65-87

Edwards, Nancy, *Life in Early Medieval Wales,* (Oxford University Press, 2022)

Eichner, Elaine, *Magical Birds as a Link Between the Mabinogion and other Celtic Literature: Facts and Fancies,* (MA Dissertation, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2018)

Green, Miranda, *The Celtic World* (Routeledge, London, 1995)

-Webster, Graham, 'The Celtic Britons under Rome', pp623-635

-J. Green, Miranda, 'The Gods and the Supernatural', pp465-488

-Webster, Jane, ‘Sanctuaries and Sacred Places’, pp445-464

-Ross, Anne, ‘Ritual and the Druids’, pp423-444

-Redknapp, Mark, ‘Early Christianity and its Monuments’, pp737-778

Green, Miranda, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth,* (Routeledge, London, 1998)

Green, Miranda, *The World of the Druids,* (Thames & Hudson, London, 2005)

Gray, Madeline, ‘Saints on the edge: reconfiguring sanctity in the Welsh march’, *Rewriting Holiness: Reconfiguring Vitae, Re-signifying Cults,* (London: Boydell and Brewer for Kings College London Medieval Studies, 2017), pp89-107

Henig, Martin, *Religion in Roman Britain,* (B T Batsford, London, 1984)

James, Simon, *Exploring the World of the Celts,* (Thames & Hudson, 2016)

J. Lewis, Barry et al, *A History of Christianity in Wales,* (University of Wales Press, 2022)

-J. Lewis, Barry, ‘Roman Beginnings, c.AD1-AD400’, pp1-21

J. Lewis, Barry, ‘The Age of Conversion’, pp22-47

R. Fee, Christopher and A. Leeming, David, *Gods, Heroes & Kings The Battle for Mythic Britain,* (Oxford University Press, 2001),

Pennick, Nigel, *Celtic Sacred Lanscapes,* (Thames & Hudson, London, 2000)

Pollock, Karen, *The Evolution and the Role of Burial Practice in Roman Wales,* Bangor University, 2005

Pritchard, Mackenzie, ‘*Celtic, Roman and Everything in between: the Evolution of the Sacred in Romano-Celtic Wales’,* (MA Thesis, University of Waterloo, 2021)

Revell, Louise, ‘Religion and Ritual in the Western Provinces’, *Greece & Rome,* Oct. 2007, Second Series, Vol. 54, No. 2, pp210-228

Ross, Anne, *Pagan Celtic Britain,* (Cardinal ed, Sphere Books, 1974)

Sharpe, Richard, *Medieval Irish Saints’ Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hibernae,* (Clarendon, 1991)

Todd, Malcom, *A Companion to Roman Britain,* (Blackwell Publishing, 2007),

-Aldhouse-Green, Miranda, ‘Callo-British Deities and their Shrines’, pp193-219

The Mabingion, translated by Sioned Davies, (Oxford University Press, 2007)

Vita Sancte Wenefrede (Anonymous; Claudius), ed by David Callander, (25.1. 23), online at www.welshsaints.ac.uk/theedition/, Translation

Vita Sancti Danielis (Penarth 225), ed by David Callander (19. 9. 23) online at https://saints.wales/theedition/ , Translation

Williams, Mark, *Ireland’s Immortals A History of the Gods of Irish Myth,* (Princeton University Press, 2016)