

THE GREATNESS AND DECLINE OF THE CELTS

CHAPTER III

THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY (*continued*)

THE RELIGION OF THE CELTS AND THE DRUIDIC PRIESTHOOD

I

THE DRUIDIC PRIESTHOOD A PAN-CELTIC INSTITUTION

RELIGION is yet another element of social organization. Celtic religion in particular has the appearance of being such, for its most interesting and striking aspect was the constitution of the priesthood of the Druids, the organization of a religious society which made the whole series of Celtic peoples into one cohesive people.

First of all, this priesthood is a pan-Celtic institution, cementing Celtic society. There were Druids in Ireland. The modern Welsh Druids are only an archæological revival, but there were Druids in Britain, of whose power Cæsar gives evidence. [Cæs., vi, 13. Cf. d'Arbois, CCXLVIII, i, and Dottin, CCCXXIII, p. 38.] Gaul, too, had them. If we hear nothing of Druids in the Celtic settlements in Spain, Italy, the Danube valley, and Galatia, that seems to be no reason for denying that they existed among those branches of the race. If, moreover, it is true that the Latin word *vates* is borrowed from Celtic, the Gauls of Italy had among them persons described as *vates*, who were like the Druids, and organized like them.

Cæsar tells us that Druidism first started in Britain, and that the Druids of Gaul used to go to Britain to visit famous schools and sanctuaries. British Druidism had an equally high reputation in Ireland, and the Irish Druids went to Britain to complete their education. Does this mean that Druidism was unknown to the Celts as a whole and took shape among the Britons of Britain? [Desjardins, in CCCCLXXIV, ii, p. 519, notes the absence of references to the Druids in Aquitania, Narbonensis, and the country near the Rhine.] We

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have no ground for saying that.

Some students, starting from this idea that Druidism had its origin in the west of the Celtic countries, have said that it was not Celtic at all. [Rhys, CCCCLI, fourth ed., 1908, p. 9. Cf. id., CCLXXXII, p. 216. A similar theory is maintained by Pokorny, "Der Ursprung des Druidenthums," in C, 38, 1 (Vortrag), translated in CXXIX, 1910, pp. 589 ff.] They have tried to attach it to the peoples which the Celts found established in the west of Europe, the builders of the megalithic monuments. But an analytical, comparative study of the institution shows that it is an essential part of the organization of the Celtic societies. History, moreover, shows clearly enough that it was an element of resistance to the Romans in Gaul and Britain and to Christianity in Ireland, and that it was attacked as such by persecution in Gaul, by the campaigns of the Roman generals against the sanctuaries in Britain, and by a kind of degradation in Ireland. [Tac., *Ann.*, xiv, 30, account of the expedition of Suetonius Paulinus against Anglesey. But Fustel, CCCCLV, p. 103, denies that the Druids were persecuted in Gaul. D'Arbois has proved the contrary, CCXLVIII (Droit), i, pp. 172 ff.] [vi, 13 - 14.] It was an element of resistance because it was an element of cohesion. The travels and meetings of the Druids cemented the union of the Celtic peoples and encouraged that sense of kinship which might have given birth to unity.

II

THE CHARACTER AND WORKING OF THE DRUIDIC PRIESTHOOD

The Druids are known to us by long passages in the Greek and Latin historians and polygraphers - Cæsar, [vi, 13-14.] Diodoros, [vii, 31.] Strabo, [iv, 197.] Ammianus Marcellinus [xv, 9, 8 (following Timagenes).] - who all owe their information to Poseidonios and Timagenes. These writers enumerated the functions and powers of the Druids.

For Ireland, a great number of epic texts speak of the Druids. There are also many legal texts regarding the functions and powers of the *fili* (the poets and men of letters), who formed a corporation parallel and to some extent rival to that of the Druids and were spared by Christianity, whereas it wrought havoc with the Druids. [See a discussion of the question in Joyce, CCCXXXIV, i, 222.] But the two bodies lived side by side and were complementary to each other, and in earlier times had been associated in their organizations and privileges. The literature and laws of Ireland were not written down until after the introduction of Christianity, and the work was done by *fili*, who therefore appear in a more favourable light than the Druids. But if we

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boldly fill in the gaps in our knowledge of the Druids from what we know about the *fili*, we get a picture of the Druids of Ireland which corresponds at every point to that of the Druids of Gaul. So we obtain a check on the accuracy of both portraits and a strong presumption that we are dealing with a common institution dating from the most distant past of the two peoples. The Latin variants of the name take one back to a declension identical with that of the Irish name of the Druids (*druí, druad*). The ancients connected this name with that of the oak, [A. W. Bird, "A Note on Druidism," in XIX, 1922, p. 152, 4. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 155.] regarding the Druids as dryads, priests of the oak. In Wales, the late name of the Druids, *derwydd*, is a restoration based on the name of the oak, *derw*. But now, following Thurneysen and d'Arbois, Celticists prefer to connect *druí* with *sui* "wise", on the ground that these words are composed of a qualifying element, *su* "well" or *dru* "strong," and a verb-root, *uid* "know," which also comes into priestly names in Germanic, Slavonic, and the Baltic languages. So the Druids would be the very wise men, soothsayers. [MacBain, p. 141. Cf. Pedersen, i, 175; d'Arbois, CCC, p. 1.]

However that may be, it is certain that in Gaul the Druids were connected with the oak, plucking the mistletoe and eating the acorns to acquire their prophetic powers. In Ireland, the walnut and rowan are their trees, and certain nuts reveal the future. The Irish Druids have wands cut from their favourite tree, with the aid of which they exercise their powers, or silver branches representing the boughs of a sacred tree or of a Tree of Life in the next world. They are attached to these trees as totemic clans are to their totems. [Luc., *Phars.*, i, 53; Tac., *Ann.*, xiv, 30; Pliny, xvi, xliii, 249.]

There are certain priests, called *gutuatri*, attached to a sanctuary. [Loth, in CXL, xxviii, 118 Cf. Holder, i, col. 2046; d'Arbois, CCXCIX, p. 32.] But these may very well have been Druids, for Ausonius, in speaking of one of them, says that he was of a Druid family - *stirpe Druidarum satus*. The Druids formed a large clergy, which could have many special functions. [Livy, xxiii, 24.]

In most Indo-European peoples functions were divided between the king and specialists. In Rome the *rex* and the *flamen* had each his own duties. The Irish King had his Druid, who probably received his powers from him in delegation. [See Joyce, *op. cit.*, i, p. 238.] M. Jullian has, I think wrongly, described the Druids of Gaul as priest-kings and the Assembly of Druids as a convention of kings of the *pagi*. [Cf. Jullian, CCCLXVII, ii; Cæs., vi, 16, 5; iv, 4, 4.]

In Gaul the Druids took part in sacrifices, public and private; they ordered the ceremony and perhaps acted as sacrificers or ministers, at least in certain

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exceptional cases, where human beings were sacrificed, or white bulls at the plucking of the mistletoe. [Cæs., vi, 16; Strabo, iv, 4, 5; Diod., v, 31, 4; 32, 6; Poseid., in *F.H.G.*, i, 261. Cf. d'Arbois, CCXLVIII, i, p. 151; Frazer, CCCXXXII, p. 234.]

But their chief religious function was divination. The Druids were diviners, seers. Cicero in his *De Divinatione* introduces Diviciacus (although he was, rather, a statesman), on the ground of his augural science, served by his knowledge of man. [Cic., *De Div.*, i, 41, 90; Cæs., vi, 13; Tac., *Hist.*, iv, 54; cf. Dion. Chrys., *Or.*, 49; Mela, iii, 19.] Some of the human sacrifices in Gaul and those sacrifices in Ireland in which the sacrificing was done by Druids were of a mantic character. The Irish texts show us the Druids at work, prophesying, interpreting omens, using the divining-wheel. The Druids are men of science, but they are also men of God, enjoying direct intercourse with the deities and able to speak in their name. They can also influence fate by making those who consult them observe positive rules or ritual taboos (the *geasa* which figure so largely in the Irish epics) or by determining the days to be chosen or avoided for an action which is contemplated. [Diod., v, xxxi, 4; Strabo, iv, 198. Cf. Joyce, *op. cit.*, i, p. 229; d'Arbois, CCCI, p. 99; Windisch, CCXCV, pp. 69 - 70; Czarnowski, CCCCXIII, p. 95; *Tain*, i, 10, 70.]

Between these religious functions and magic the distinction is vague. The Druids of Gaul certainly slipped into magic, and those of Ireland always practised it, with methods which are very obscurely described. [Pliny, xvi, 249; xxiv, 62 - 3; xvi, 95; xxix, 12 and 52; Joyce, *op. cit.*, i, pp. 245, 227, 247. Cf. *Silva Gadelica*, ii, pp. 85, 516.]

The Druids also had judicial powers, for Cæsar tells us that they had to give judgment on almost all suits, public and private. In private law they dealt with matters of murder and inheritance and disputes about property. In international law (which is probably what Cæsar means by public suits) they acted as arbiters in disputes between political groups. In Ireland the same judicial powers, those of the Brehons, were exercised by *fili*, and we may fairly suppose that these took them over from the Druids. We find the Brehons at their work in the law-books which they compiled. They are jurisconsults, arbiters, and advocates rather than judges. They give consultations, based on precedents interpreted in the light of equity. They act as arbiters in matters of private law; for instance, they lay down compensation to settle suits arising from injuries which call for private vengeance. In the evolution of Celtic law, the public powers of the state eventually exceeded those of the Druids and the Brehons. The king and the assembly give judgment; the Brehon proposes the sentence, gives an opinion. But the Druids and Brehons seem, both in Gaul and in Ireland, to have been able to pronounce some kind of ban against those who did not accept their decision, and to this the *fili* added a magical

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enforcement. [Cæs., vi, 13; Diod., v, 31; Strabo, iv, 4, 4; *Senchus Mor*, CCXLVII, i, pp. 22, 80, 86. Cf. O. Curry, CCCCXXXII, ii, p. 20; d'Arbois, CCXLVIII (Droit), i, pp. 271, 279, 294, 315; id., CCC, *Druides*, p. 103; Maine, CCCLII, i, pp. 4, 21, 25; id., CCCLIII, pp. 51 ff.; CCXLVII, i, pp. 788, 250.]

The Druids also had privileges and an authority of a political nature. Cæsar tells us that they were exempt from military service and taxation. We find Druids, such as Diviciacus and Cathbad, the Druid of King Conchobar, fighting; but they do so of their free will and not by obligation.

In Ireland, moreover, the *fili* had a sort of permanent safe-conduct pass, even during the intestine wars which ravaged the country; and this gave them an inter-tribal function. Every king in Ireland, great or small, had a Druid who was his political adviser. Cæsar gives evidence of the authority and social position of the Druids, whom he places in the same rank as the equites. Many sprang from royal or aristocratic families. In the order of precedence observed at Tara, the *fili*, who took the place of the Druids, appear in the same ranks as the nobles. [Cæs., vi, 14; d'Arbois, CCCCXLVIII, i, pp. 126, 342. Cf. *Book of Leinster*, p. 29; *Tain*, i, 47, 23; *ibid.*, 93; Dion. Chrys., *Or.*, 49; Joyce, *op. cit.*, i, p. 287.]

I have said above that the Druids acted as teachers of the young. Cæsar shows that they sometimes raised their pupils to power. Education was one of their essential functions and perhaps it was the only one of a constitutional kind in the organization of the Celtic society. The Druids lingered on in Gaul as the teachers of higher schools; in Ireland the *fili*, who succeeded them as educators, founded schools which, handed over to Christianity, survived all through the Middle Ages. So the Druids and their successors were a permanent element of civilization in Celtic societies. [Cæs., vi, 14, 2 - 3; Mela, iii, 18; Tac., *Ann.*, iii, 43; *Tain*; L. na *hUidhre*, p. 61, 1, 21, 23; *ib.*, 64, 2, 10, 13; K. Meyer, in CXL, xi, pp. 442 - 453. Cf. d'Arbois, CCC, *Druides*, p. 115; CCXLVIII (Droit), i, p. 339; CCXLVII, ii, pp. 150 - 5; Czarnowski, CCCCXXIII, pp. 291, 294.] But before they taught classical learning, they diffused ideas which must be defined.

Their teaching was purely oral, both in Ireland down to Christian times and in Gaul, and seems to have consisted in the setting forth of a tradition, recorded in innumerable poems which were learned by heart. These doubtless included epico-historical accounts of the origin of the race, as a specimen of which we may take the *Leabhar Gabhála*; perhaps some cosmological digressions, such as are found in the *Senchus Mor*; certainly travels into the next world, like the literature of the *Imrama* (Voyages). [Diod., iv, 56. See above, ch. vi.] And in all this a doctrine was expounded. The ancient writers, who on the whole were fairly well informed by good observers, have given us an idea of this doctrine in a few brief words which are full of sense. They placed the Druids among the mystic philosophers associated

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with the ancient Greek philosophers who evolved the doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

The Druids had a complete doctrine of that immortality, with a moral system, general view of the world, mythology, ritual, and funerary practice to match. [Cæs., vi, 14, 5 - 6; 16; Strabo, iv, 4, 4; Amm. Marc., xv, 9, 8; Diog. Laert., *Prooem.*, 5; Diod., vi, 27, 6; Luc., i, 450; Mela, iii, 19; iii, 2, 19; Val. Max., ii, 6, 10.] They taught that death is only a changing of place and that life goes on with its forms and its goods in another world, the world of the dead, which rules the dead and gives up living men. It is a world of life, forming a reservoir of available souls. A constant, floating capital of souls is distributed between the two counterpart worlds, and exchanges take place between them, life for life and soul for soul. But, what is more, this stock of souls is apparently not confined to the human species; souls pass from one species to another. The Druids seem to have held a belief in metempsychosis, traces of which are found in the myths and stories. [Czarnowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 156 ff. Cf. Windisch, CCXCV, i, p. 117; Nutt, in CCLXXIV, ii, p. 96.] With some notions of physics and astronomy, applied in the construction of calendars, some knowledge of plants and their properties (which was passed on to the physicians), and a few magical prescriptions, this stock of philosophical ideas seems to have formed the bulk of the wisdom of the Druids, which contributed in no small degree to the spiritual education of the Celts. [Pomp. Mela, ii, 2; Strabo, iv, 197; 4, 4; CCXLVII, i, p. 22; Pliny, xvi, p. 250; Cæs, vi, 18; Windisch, *op. cit.*, i, p. 215; d'Arbois, CCXLVIII, i, p. 141. Cf. Maine, CCCLII, p. 34; Joyce, *op. cit.*, i, 230.]

The Druids formed an order in Celtic society, but that order was a brotherhood (*sodaliciis adstricti consortiis*), a society of individuals collectively exercising a social function. Their organization cut across the divisions of tribes and states; the Druids of Ireland were one single body, those of Britain turned their eyes to the sanctuary of Mona (Anglesey), and those of Gaul turned to the shrine among the Carnutes. [Joyce, *op. cit.*, i, p. 223; O. Curry, CCCCXXXII, ii, 182; Jullian, *R.E.A.*, 1919, p. 109.] All these groups communicated with one another. The Druidical colleges obtained new members by training and co-option, but there were also Druid families. There must have been initiations, a preparation, and stages, of which we find traces among the *fili*. There seem to have been Druidesses in Gaul and Ireland, but we cannot be sure whether they really belonged to the college of Druids, or merely got the name by analogy, on account of their gifts in magic. In any case, the Druids formed a widespread college, the members of which, distributed about the political framework of the nation, performed the most varied functions. The college asserted its unity in its sanctuaries, its schools, and its assemblies, like the assembly of the country of the Carnutes, held in Gaul, which was at once a council and a guild-congress of the

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Druids.

By the side of the Druids, the ancient authors, following Poseidonios and Timagenes, mention the bards, who were popular poets with less refined methods, and the *vates*, who were seer-poets. [Cæs., vi, 13; Amm. Marc., xv, 9; ii, 8; Stokes, *Tripartite Life*, pp. 235, 326. Cf. Dottin, CCCXXII, p. 54; Czarnowski, op. cit., pp. 287, 278; d'Arbois, CCXLVIII, i, p. 234.] In Ireland we hear of bards and singers (*cainte*), *fili*, and Druids. The *fili* and their Welsh equivalents are much the same as the *vates* of Gaul. Several corporations were lumped together under this title. [Diod., v, 31; Strabo, iv, 4, 4; Cæs., vi, 13; Amm. Marc., xv, 98; Ath., iv, 37; vi, 49; Luc., i, 44, 7; Joyce, op. cit., i, pp. 223, 230; Czarnowski, op. cit., pp. 227, 278; d'Arbois, CCXLVIII, i, p. 196.] They were at first subordinate to the Druids, but eclipsed them when Christianity came in.

III

THE DRUIDS AND OTHER INDO-EUROPEAN BROTHERHOODS

This account of the college of Druids naturally brings to mind the similar colleges of the ancient world, and first of all those of the Romans [d'Arbois, CCC, p. 9; Schrader, "Aryan Religion," in CCCXXXVI, ii, p. 43.] - Flamens, Augurs, Vestals, Arval Brothers, Luperci. But the Roman priesthood had a larger number of brotherhoods, with fewer members in each. Moreover, the ancients were struck by the resemblance of the doctrine of the Druids to that of the Pythagorean *syssitai* which had developed among the Dorians of Southern Italy. [Pliny, xxx, 5; Clem., *Strom.*, i, 15, in *F.H.G.* (following Alexander Polyhistor, a historian of the first century), iii, 233; Amm. Marc., xv, 9, 8; Val. Max., vi, 6, 10. Cf. Delatte, "Études sur la littérature pythagoricienne," in *Bibl. de l'Éc. des Htes. Études*, 1915, p. 217.] It is highly probable that the Dorians, before moving down into Greece and then over to Italy, had been quite near the Celts in Central Europe. What is more, the country extending from the Middle Danube to the Ægean, from which the Dorians came, had been a nursery of institutions like the Pythagorean communities. It was there that Orphicism, which the ancients likened to Pythagoreanism, came into being. [Diod., iii, 65, 6. Cf. d'Arbois, CCCI, i, p. 296.] Orphicism comprised the worship of the Getic god or hero Zalmoxis, a brotherhood of priests, a doctrine of immortality, a myth of the descent into the underworld, and, like the ritual of the Druids, human sacrifice. [Hdt., iv, 94; Strabo, vii, 35. Cf. Dottin, CCCXXII, p. 58.] In Thrace, among the Satrae, there was a brotherhood of priests called Bessi, who ran an oracle of Dionysos, a Thracian god. [Hdt., vii, iii; Strabo, vii, 3, 3; Dion Cass., 51, 25; 54, 34; Apollod., jii, 5, 1 - 2; Macrob., i, 18, 11; *F.H.G.*, iii, 641,

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20. Cf. d'Arbois, CCCI, i, pp. 292 - 6; Farnell, v, p. 102.] Here we have one same family of cults, in which the societies in which they were observed were merely onlookers and the active part was played by brotherhoods of initiates.

Moreover, in the east of the Indo-European region we find societies of priests very like the Druids in the credit which they enjoy and the area over which they are spread - the Iranian Magi and the Brahmins of India. The Druids seem to differ from the latter only in that they do not form a closed caste. We have previously seen the analogies in religious vocabulary between the two most widely separated branches of the Indo-European family, the Italo-Celts and the Indo-Iranians. [See above, pt. iii, ch. i; Vendryès, in XCIII, xx, 6, 265.] This series of similarities proves that Druidism was an Indo-European institution, and that its origins went back to the most distant past of the Indo-European societies. But we can go back yet further.

Sir James Frazer and M. Jullian after him have supposed that Druidism was derived from the kind of sacrifice described in the *Golden Bough*, the sacrifice of god-priest-kings like the Priest of Nemi whom Sir James makes the central example in his great work. [Frazer, CCCXXXII, pp. 82, 129, 218, 225-6; Jullian, in CXXXIV.] Really, Druidism is something quite different. In the various types of priestly society which we have been considering, the collective exercise of spiritual functions is essential to the nature of the institution. We must, therefore, go back to a type of collective body, not to one of individuals. The god-priest-kings are individuals.

But the forms of these collective bodies, these brotherhoods, which we have been surveying are as different from one another as the societies in which they appear. Some are mere colleges, others are colleges of initiates, others are societies on a basis of kinship (castes or priestly families).

Now, comparison with non-Indo-European phenomena will give us the key to these institutions, showing us collective bodies which are just like those of the Druids and Brahmins and have a perfectly clear place in the evolution of totemism. These are the so-called secret societies of British Columbia and Melanesia, which are really brotherhoods. [Hutton Webster, *Primitive Secret Societies*; Boas, *Social Organization and Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl* (for North American practices). Cf. Frazer, op. cit., iii, pp. 449, 459, 490. For interpretation, see Durkheim, in XIII, iii, p. 336; Davy, CCCXVI, pp. 201, 328; CCCLX, English, p. 102.] These brotherhoods are constituted alongside of totemic clans, and are copied from them. Each secret society has originated in a revelation which is represented in myths similar to those of Zalmoxis or Pythagoras. They are recruited by co-option, and members, belonging to successive generations, qualify themselves by initiations. Their activity centres on the periods of feasts in which the members of the brotherhood are the actors. Thus they assume functions which fall to them by

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escheat in communities where totemism is breaking up. It is brotherhoods of this kind that lie at the source of Brahminism and Druidism.

The influence of the Druids was always meeting opposition, in Gaul from the jealousy of the *equites*, which partly explains the rapid decline of Druidism, and in Ireland from the hostility of certain kings. Thus, some of the texts tell us of the incredulity of Cormac mac Airt. The elevation of the *fili* at the expense of the Druids was doubtless favoured by such opposition. It was only through the intervention of St. Columba at the Assembly of Druim Ceata in 574 that the *fili* themselves were allowed to maintain some of their prerogatives, which they had inherited from Druidism. [Joyce, op. cit, i, p. 456.]

IV

WHAT CELTIC RELIGION OWED TO DRUIDISM

One thing strikes us at the very first in the religion of the Celts, and that is the supreme importance of agrarian rites, which, with their myths, play the chief part in religious life. Fruitfulness, fertility, and life have always been the chief concern of these orgiastic brotherhoods, and they have always stretched out their hand, over the head of the state religion, to the herdsman and the husbandman. Secondly, we see a metaphysical and moral system developed in religion. Interest in the soul, its origin and destiny, the world of souls and the dead, and the myth of the Beyond stand in the forefront of representations, as agrarian rites stand in the forefront of ritual.

V

THE UNITY OF THE CELTIC RELIGIONS

The existence of a pan-Celtic priesthood, dating from the origin of the race, must have ensured a certain unity for the religions of the various Celtic peoples. It is true that such unity is far from obvious. The reason is that the various Celtic religions are not known to us from documents of the same kind, and the different branches of the Celts did not develop equally and at one time everywhere. In

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Cæsar's time Gaul was ahead of Ireland. Moreover, for Gaul, about which our evidence comes from the Greek geographers, we know a good deal about ritual, but nothing at all of mythology, whereas for Ireland, where our sources are epic and lyric poems collected after the Celtic religion was dead, we have a body of tales and legends and know nothing definite about ritual. As for Welsh literature, it is a miracle that it contains any traces of British religion at all, for it was created in a Christian country, first Romanized and then colonized by Irishmen.

In spite of these difficulties, we find signs of a deep-lying identity. The Brythonic Celts of Gaul, Britain, and the Danube, being of the same family and united by a thousand different bonds, had the same gods, or gods of the same name, and they were many. But the Goidels and Brythons of the island and the Continent shared them too. They may not have been so many, but they were important gods. There was Lugh, the great sun-god, who gave Lugdunum its name and was represented in Spain by the Lugoves. [Loth, *Le Dieu Lug, la Terre Mère et les Lugoves*, in CXXXIX, ii, 1914, pp. 205 - 210. Cf. XL, xii, p. 52.] There was Taranis, the god of lightning, [Luc, *Phars.*, i, 444. See MacCulloch, CCCXIV, pp. 20 - 48.] represented in Ireland by a little-known hero, Tornà. Esus, a Gallic god, appears in the Irish name Eogan (= Esugenos). Goibniu, the smith-god of the Goidels, had a Brythonic counterpart whose name appears in that of Gobannitio, the uncle of Vercingetorix. Corresponding to the name of the Gallic and British god Camulos we have that of the Irish hero Cumhal, father of Finn. For the Goidelic goddess Brigid there was a Brythonic Brigantia. [Caes, vi, 17; Cormac, 23; Holder, CCVII, s.v.; d'Arbois, CCXLVIII, ii, p. 273.] It is better not to look for homonyms of the Irish deities among the characters of the Welsh Mabinogion, since the Welsh may have borrowed from Irish tradition. Manawyddan is the same as the sea-god Manannán. All these facts taken together enable one to picture an ancient stock of common cults and myths, preserved better in one place than another.

VI

STAGES OF THE CELTIC RELIGIONS

Attempts have often been made to distinguish in the Celtic religions the elements of Aryan origin and those belonging to the earlier inhabitants of Ireland. Mr. Cook holds that the Aryan gods were the gods of the sky, light, the sun, the stormy sky (like Taranis) or the sunny sky (like Lugh), and that the worship of the

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oak and mistletoe were likewise Aryan. [A. B. Cook, in LXIV, xvii, p. 30. Cf. id. *Zeus: a study in ancient religion*, London, 3 vol., 1914 - 1925; Rhys, in CCCLXXXII.] The non-Aryan gods, he believes, were the dark gods (and, more especially, goddesses) and those of vegetation. That would explain why the gods of the underworld and those of light are engaged in furious strife in the mythology of Ireland and Wales. But such theories fail to observe that these mythological conflicts are imposed on the gods by the dramatic parts which they play in the seasonal festivals. These cults are not the memory of historical wars, but the mythological version of a ritual. One might say that the conflicts of the gods are syntheses of various functions which are anti-thetic or successive. The racial ingredients of the Celtic peoples were fused together at an early date, and the differences presented by the lists of gods drawn up for the various parts of Ireland have told us nothing so far. It must, too, be remembered that the study of these local pantheons is still in its infancy.

Certainly the Celts owed much to their predecessors. They made use of the megalithic monuments. The great tumuli or funerary chambers of New Grange in Ireland (Brugh-na-Boyne) were regarded as the dwelling-place of gods and revered as sanctuaries. The twelve stones which formed the satellites of the Irish idol Cromm Crúaich were the pillars of a cromlech. In Britain, and doubtless in Gaul, the Celts likewise took over the megalithic monuments, but we do not know what they really borrowed from the predecessors of their civilizations. [Squire, CCCCLIX, p. 38; cf. K. Meyer, CCLXXIV, app. B. to *The Voyage of Bran*.]

The most interesting trace of the old stock is, as we have seen, Druidism itself. Can one go still further back, to totemism? The Gauls had beast-gods, such as the horse of Neuvy-en-Sullias, Rudiobos, the mule of Nuits, [Loth, *Le Dieu gaulois Rudiobos, Rudianos*, in CXXXIX, p. 195, 2, 210.] and Segomo, the ram-headed serpent represented on monuments at Mavilly, Paris, and Rheims; anthropomorphic gods with some touch of a beast-god, such as Cernunnos with his antlers and March (Mark) of the Britons with his horse's ears [Squire, op. cit., p. 327.]; and sacred animals attached to certain gods, like the horse of Epona, [Espérandieu, CCCXXV. Cf., for Epona, H. Hubert, in XV, xxxii, 1922, pp. 291 - 2; id. *Le Mythe d'Epona* in CLXXXIV, 1925, pp. 187 - 191, repr. in CCXLIV.] the dog of the hammer-god, [Id., in CXXXIX, 1915.] the bear of the goddess Artio, [Reinach, CCCLXXI-II.] and the boar of Diana Arduinna. [Kruger, *Diana Arduinna*, in LXXXI, i, 1917, p. 4.] But a beast-god is not necessarily a totem. Often the animals portrayed on the monuments represent the popular elements of the myths, and though these may be derived from totemism we cannot say by what road. In Irish literature there are several heroes with animal affinities, including the most famous of all, Cuchulainn, the Dog of

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Culann, who was forbidden to eat dog, and Oisín, whose mother was changed into a doe and who was himself a fawn. We find traces of animal emblems of clans, food-taboos. But in any case these are only survivals of a long-superseded past. In the course of the evolution which took place, heroes took shape, civilizers or founders of social groups, some of whom may have once been totems while others may have been provided with totemic emblems. One thing is certain - in Celtic societies, in the place of the totem of the clan we find the hero of the clan, of the tribe, of the nation.

VII

POLITICO-DOMESTIC ORGANIZATION AND HERO-WORSHIP

This worship of hero-gods corresponds very closely to the extremely loose organization of political and family life in Ireland. We know that Gaul at the time of the Roman conquest was moving towards a different state of things, but in Ireland society was far less centralized, and religion was of the same character. The great seasonal feasts of agricultural life marked a momentary concentration. [See Hubert, CCCXLIII, and *Le Culte des héros et ses conditions sociales*, introd. to Czarnowski, CCCCXXIII, *Rev. de l'hist. des religions*, lxx, pp. 1 - 20, and lxxi, pp. 195 - 247.]

Not only does Irish mythology take the form of a history in which several generations of invaders [See Squire, op. cit.; d'Arbois, CCXLVIII and CCC. Cf. above, ch. iv.] (the chief being the Fomorians [Squire, op. cit., pp. 48 ff.] and the Tuatha Dé Danann) [Ibid., pp. 70, 140, etc.; cf. d'Arbois, CCXLVIII, ii, p. 155.] disappear one after the other, but these Fomorians and Tuatha Dé Danann are always represented as men who have lived on earth and retired into death. Now, these spirits include the gods, and indeed the great gods - Ler, [Ibid., p. 136.] Nuadu, [D'Arbois, ii, p. 155. Cf. Rhys, CCLXXXI, p. 122.] Manannan, [Squire, op. cit., pp. 60 - 1.] Dagda, [Ibid., pp. 54, 78.] Brigid, [D'Arbois, op. cit., ii, p. 373.] and Ogma [Squire, op. cit., p. 122.] among the Tuatha Dé Danann and others among the Fomorians, [Ibid., p. 140.] Lugh belonging to both sides. They dwell in tombs, which are actual megalithic tombs. [Ibid.] So the gods are superhuman beings, not super-natural, and this is true of them all, especially the local gods attached to a district or a natural feature; they are bound to it by their tomb, by the memory of their death. The Celts liked this funereal aspect of their gods; their pantheon might be described as a cemetery. [Joyce, CCCCXXXIV.]

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These gods and their myths were subjected to a general process of rejuvenation which placed their date later and later and brought them closer to existing human communities. This rejuvenation of myths is very characteristic. A famous Irish story tells how the god Mider, one of the Tuatha Dé Danann, dwelling in the tomb of Bri Leith, tried to recover his wife Etain from the King of Ireland, Eochaid Airem, who is contemporaneous with Cæsar in the *Annals*. The name Etain is found again in the south of Ulster. [Squire, *op. cit.*, p. 332.] The god Nuadu is brought into recent times by the legend which makes him a grandfather of Finn. [K. Meyer, CCCXXIV, ii. Cf. E. McNeill, *Duanaire Finn*, vol. vii of CCLXV, introd., pp. xliii ff.] Gods produce sons and grandsons; Cuchulainn is descended from Lugh [Windisch, *op. cit.*] and Mongan from Manannan. Others are reincarnated; according to one tradition Mongan was reincarnated in Finn. The mythico-heroic literature of Ireland is full of gods returning to human life and men visiting the world of gods and the dead, and both are merged in the form of heroes.

The gods appear in the genealogies. The whole race claims descent from the great god Bile, father of Mile, the ancestor of the latest conquerors, who was a kind of god of the dead. [Squire, *op. cit.*, pp. 121 - 2, 153.] Similarly the Gauls, according to Cæsar, claimed descent from Dispater. [Rhys, CCLXXXII, pp. 90 - 1; cf. Caes, vi, 17, 18.] The forts, the rallying-places of tribes and families, were built on heights which were tombs. The residence of the Kings of Leinster stood on the tumulus of Slanga the Fir Bolg. [Joyce, *op. cit.*]

The religion of Ireland was that of the politico-domestic groups of which society was composed. These centred on their ancestors, who were heroes and gods; their cults were ancestor-worships and their feasts were commemorations. The type of the hero absorbs the whole of mythology, and is succeeded by that of the saint. M. Czarnowski has demonstrated that the immense popularity of St. Patrick, who is a national hero in Ireland, completed the evolution of the ancient religion of the nation.

VIII

FESTIVALS

The Irish tribes normally lived in a dispersed manner, and the sanctuaries were also fair-grounds, without anything implying permanent worship. The

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population met at the political and religious centre of the tribes, which was the place where the tombs of its ancestors stood, and it did this on feast-days. [Ibid., ii, pp. 389, 447 - 9.]

There were four chief feasts. Samhain [D'Arbois, op. cit. (Droit), i, p. 317.] (1st November) marked the end of summer (*samos*) and probably the beginning of the year. Six months later, on the 1st May, at the beginning of summer (*cèt-saman*), came Beltane, the feast of the fire (*tein*) of Bel or Bile. [Ibid., p. 297; cf. Henderson, CCC-CXXXIII, p. 187.] Between these two, at intervals of three months, there were the feasts of Lugnassad, [Joyce, op. cit., ii, p. 441; Rhys, VIII.] the marriage of Lugh, which is the best described of all, on the 1st August, and Oimelc or Imbolc, on the 1st February, which survived in the feast of St. Brigid. Samhain was held chiefly at Tara, [Joyce, ii, p. 436.] Beltane at Uisnech, [D'Arbois, op. cit. (Droit), i, 302. Cf. Loth, " L'Omphalos chez les Celtes," in CXXXIV, 1915, p. 192.] and Lugnassad at Tailtiu (these three towns were in the central kingdom of Meath). But Lugnassad was also celebrated at Emain Macha in Ulster and at Carman in Leinster. [Rhys, CCLXXXII, p. 414; Loth, in *R.A.*, ii, 1914, p. 216; *Metrical Dindsenchas*, iii, 57; Joyce, op. cit., ii, p. 439; Rhys, VIII, pp. 17, 27, 55, 57.] These four festivals divided the year into four seasons of three months or eighty-five days, which seem to have been subdivided by other feasts each into two periods of forty-five days. There is no record of these other feasts save in those of certain great Irish saints, which sometimes fall on the same dates - St. Finnian's in December and, above all, St. Patrick's on the 15th, 16th, and 17th March.

These feasts stood in the very forefront of the life and thoughts of the Irish. We are always coming upon them in their tradition, which is very historical, and in their epic literature. Moreover, all legend or mythology revolves round the dates of festivals and a large number of the myths are festival-myths. These feasts were fairs, political or judicial assemblies, and also an occasion for amusement and games, some of which, such as the races, were of religious origin (the horse-races at Tailtiu and Emain Macha, the races of women at Carman). Above all, they were religious assemblies.

They were conducted in an atmosphere of myth and legend. The day of Beltane commemorated the landing of the first invaders of Ireland, the sons of Partholon; the first fire, that of Uisnech, was lit by their latest successors. Later on, about the middle of the sixth century, in the plain of Uisnech, King Diarmait mac Cearbhail laid siege to the house of one Flann, who drowned himself in a vat while his house was burning; the feast was a commemoration and expiation of his death. [D'Arbois, op. cit. (Droit), pp. 299 ff. Cf. Joyce, op. cit.] At Lugnassad the wives of Lugh or his

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foster-mother Tailtiu died. Carman the sorceress, who came from Greece like the Fomorians, the people of the other world, also perished on this day, a captive of the Goidels, and in Conchobar's time the goddess Macha, who had beaten the King's horses at the races, died in giving birth to two children. [Loth, in CXXXIX, ii, 1914, pp. 217, 220; Rhys, VIII, pp. 19, 55; CCLXXXII, p. 414.] At Samhain the great battle of the gods was fought at Moytura, between the Fomorians and the Tuatha Dé Danann. On this day, too, King Muirchertach mac Erca, having broken the prohibitions laid on him by a fairy whom he had married, was attacked by the ghosts and while the fairy set fire to his palace drowned himself in a barrel like Flann. [Rhys, CCLXXXII, p. 396. Cf. d'Arbois, op. cit. (Droit), i, p. 317; at the end of the feast these temporary sanctuaries were doubtless set on fire. This rite is recalled in the stories of Flann and Muirchertach.] Cuchulainn himself died on the first day of autumn. The times of the feasts were times when spirits were let loose and wonders were expected and normally happened.

In Wales the year was divided in the same way as in Ireland, at the Calends of May and of November. It was the same in Gaul; in the Coligny Calendar we can distinguish the two great seasons Samonos and Giamonos. [Rhys, VIII.] The great solitary sanctuaries in the mountains, those of the Donon and the Puy-de-Dôme, show that similar festivals were held in Gaul at one period in its history. For a long time there were no permanent shrines in Gaul.

IX

HOW RELIGION DEVELOPED

Gaul had already advanced a long way, starting from the common Celtic stock.

Doubtless it already had temples, and many of them. In any case, Roman civilization covered it with religious buildings. [De Vesly, CCCCLXXXIX; Wheeler, "A Romano-Celtic Temple near Harlow, and a note on the type," in XVI, 1928, p. 301.] But the native character of the Gallic temple is proved by the fact that among these temples of the Roman period some are of such a peculiar type that they can be explained only by the assumption of a Gallic inheritance. The Temple of Vesona at Périgueux and that of Janus at Autun have nothing in common with classical architecture. They have been compared to the little square *fana* surrounded by a peristyle which have been found in the Rhine valley and Normandy. We must picture two-storied buildings, with a

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roofed peristyle below (that is, the side-aisles) and a central roofed portion (or nave) rising above it.

Ancient writers who treat of the religion of the Celts always begin by giving the names of their gods. Lucan mentions a triad of Gallic gods, Teutates, Esus, and Taranis. [*Phars.*, i, 444.] We know that the literatures of Ireland and Wales give the gods and heroes in threes. Cæsar gives us a valuable piece of information when he enumerates the gods of Gaul not under their Celtic names but under Roman names, Mercury, Apollo, Mars, Jupiter, and Minerva, to whom we must add Dispater, whom he mentions elsewhere. These are the very gods whom we find represented in the archæology of Roman Gaul by monuments of every sort, inscriptions, bronze statuettes, sculptures in stone. It appears to me that Cæsar set the seal on a process of identification which had already taken place to some extent in the mind of the Gauls. Moreover, the names of the Gallic gods survived in the form of epithets attached to their Latin names, [Toutain, in *Rev. hist. des. relig.*, lxxiv, 1916, p. 373.] Mercurius Cissonius, Mars Camulus, Mars Caturix, etc. In any case, after the conquest there was a kind of classification of the deities in types, which were furnished by the Roman pantheon. Sometimes there has been doubt about the label; one same god may have become Mercury, Mars, and Dispater in turn. Also, the gods became vulgarized. Who would recognize the noble Lugh, the victor of Moytura, in the little Mercury with the heavy purse, or the god of the dead, the brewer of mystic beer, in the hammer-god, the genial, homely patron of the coopers, married to a peaceable, colourless Fortuna? [H. Hubert, "Une Nouvelle Figure de dieu au maillet," in CXXXIX, 1915, i, pp. 26 - 39.] These are commonplace, harmless figures, like modern village saints. In Gaul the hero was supplanted by the household genius, who assumed a classical appearance for which Rome supplied the type and the means of reproduction. The breaking-up of the politico-domestic groups and the formation of territorial groups in their place did away with the reason for the existence of the god-hero.

X

RITUAL

The Celtic religions were sacrificial religions, of the ritual of which we

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unfortunately know very little. There were blood-sacrifices and others, which were offerings of first-fruits. The ancient authors speak of human sacrifices among the Gauls, and massacres of prisoners which had a sacrificial character. [CXXXIV, 1913, p. 432; *R.P.*, 1908, p. 343; d'Arbois, i, 154; Joyce, *op. cit.*, i, 239. Cf. Eriu, ii, 86; iii, 155.] In Ireland there are very few allusions to human sacrifice; one might mention the sacrifice of newborn infants to the idol Cromm Crúaich. [Squire, CCCCLIX, p. 38.] The ritual of Celtic sacrifice allowed the substitute-victim, as we see in the story of the goddess Becuma. She was married to a king of Ireland, and her ill-luck brought sterility upon the country. Expiation had to be made by the sacrifice of the young son of a virgin, but the sacrifice of a cow was accepted instead, and was effective. [Czarnowski, CCCXXIII, p. 123.] There is reason for believing that the blood-sacrifices for which the Celts have been blamed were not so very bloody; the victim was a divine victim, who died transcendently. When one reads the long series of deaths of heroes commemorated by the festivals, one cannot help thinking that these legends are derived from myths of divine sacrifices renewed in the form of human, animal, and vegetable victims. The stories of houses burnt down and heroes burnt in their houses on feast-days belong to the same order of facts. These sacrifices at feasts, which appear also in other forms, such as games and races in which the victor perishes and is the victim, were agrarian sacrifices, the sole object of which was to maintain the life of nature and to secure the fertility of the land.

Sacrifice was the foremost thing in Celtic religion. But the power of the formula, the spell, even a mere poem uttered by a man of power, a Druid or *file*, grew as time went on. The wizard plays a particularly large part in the religions of the Celts of the British Isles. Among the Britons, Merlin and Taliesin are famous heroes. With them, religious power becomes magic.

XI

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE GODS

Very few purely Celtic portraits of gods survive. A few bronzes, some coins, and the Gundestrup cauldron in the Copenhagen Museum give us some divine types - the horned god, the god with the wheel, the god with the hammer, the three-headed god, the ram-headed serpent, the matron Epona, etc.

On the other hand, there are a good many sculptures of the Gallo-Roman

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period representing the same gods and some others, which have been identified with varying success.

XII

MYTHOLOGY

The Celts had a rich and colourful mythology, much better preserved among the Gaels and Welsh than in Gaul.

It has come down to us in the form of epics built up out of materials which were the common stock of the professional reciters, local traditions of a more special interest which in Ireland make up the literature of the *Dinnshenchas*, [Gwynn, CCLXI.] and the allusions made in the Welsh triads, which enumerate and classify gods or heroes. Almost all these elements are incorporated in cycles - the mythological cycle, the Cycle of Ulster, and the Cycle of Finn or the heroes of Leinster in Ireland and the mythological and Arthurian cycles in Wales. In these various cycles the story of divine families is unfolded - Fomorians and Tuatha Dé Danann in Ireland and the families of Pwyll, Don, and Beli in Wales. Many of these traditions relate the origin of the great festivals, and the number of variants shows that they were still living. A whole series of myths of origin are connected with holy places and feasts. [See below, ch. v.]

One large group consists of stories of a voyage to the country of the blest or the dead. A hero - Bran, son of Febal, or Cuchulainn, or Connla, or Oisín - is drawn by a mysterious beauty. He puts out on a magic boat, often made of bronze. He meets Manannán, god of the sea and the dead, either on the way or on his arrival in a wonderful country, where he is welcomed with open arms. After staying there a while, he grows weary and wants to return. In the end he does so, only to die. [See, in particular, the admirable *Voyage of Bran*, CCLXXIV, edited and translated by Kuno Meyer, with commentaries by Nutt.] This type of story reappears in the Christian stories of the voyages of Maeldune [D'Arbois and Loth, in CCXLVIII, vol. v, "L'Épopée celtique en Irlande," i, pp. 449 - 500.] and St. Brendan [Ibid., Cf. Schirmer, CCLXXXVI, pp. 17 - 26.] to marvellous islands.

A second type of story describes the descent of heroes underground; for example, Conn goes into a *sidh* or mound at Tara and visits the god Lugh, in the *Champion's Prophecy*. [Squire, op. cit., p. 201. Cf. O. Curry, CCLXXVIII, app. cxxviii.] A similar adventure at Cruachain is related in a prologue to the Táin entitled the *Journey of*

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Nera to the Other World. [Thurneysen, CCLXXXIX, pp. 311 - 17.]

A third series of stories is preserved in St. Patrick's accounts of Purgatory. [*De Felice*, CCCXXVII.] The hero goes down into a cave, which is a holy place, he falls asleep, and the pains of Purgatory are revealed to him. An initiation-myth probably underlies these legends.

Lastly, a fourth series tells of attacks on the other world, forays with the object of capturing wonderful things like the inexhaustible cauldron which Cuchulainn took twice. A similar cauldron is captured by Pwyll and Arthur in the Welsh legends [For Pwyll, see Loth, CCLXX, i, pp. 81 - 117. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 307, and for the magic cauldron, Squire, *op. cit.*, p. 273. I am of opinion that these legends may contain the Celtic prototype of the stories of the quest of the Grail.]; Pwyll at the same time brings back the art of pig-breeding, and another family of gods, that of Gwyn fights him for his herd. Here we have myths of civilizing heroes who are at the same time agrarian gods and kings of the dead.

All these stories form part of a larger cycle which might be called that of myths of death, in which the very origin of the race is connected with the world of the dead by a perpetual process of exchanges between that world and the world of the living.

All this Celtic mythology is a heroic mythology. The Celts made their gods into heroes and the typical ancestors of their clans and families. In the lives of these heroes they represented the state of their people and the essence of their religious traditions. Whatever certain modern scholars who have applied their analytical methods to the Arthurian cycle may think, [Particularly Bruce, Faral, and Wilmotte, in the works quoted. Cf. below, p. 266.] that cycle has its roots in the same circumstances and tradition as the other heroic cycles of the Celtic world. Arthur has the same adventures and his companions perform the same feats and carry out the same quests as Finn and his Fianna and the other Celtic heroes. So through the heroes the tradition of the Celtic gods has been kept alive and handed down.