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Traces of Ancient Celtic Religiosity in the Place Names of the British Isles

Religion definitely played an important role in the lives of the ancient Celtic people of the British Isles. Its great significance is well represented by the fact that several toponyms reflecting heathen Celtic beliefs have come down to us both in Britain and in Ireland. Based on data collected from relevant etymological dictionaries (e.g. *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names* by Victor Watts, *A Dictionary of British Place Names* by A. D. Mills), the paper describes names for bodies of water (e.g. *Brent, Dee, Lea, Boyne, Shannon*), (historical) names for settlements (e.g. *Camulodunon, Clackmannan, Armagh*) and names for territories (e.g. *Isle of Man, Éire, Atholl*) relating presumably to the names of Celtic gods, goddesses and mythological figures. The author also discusses place names of Celtic origin referring to oak or yew trees, as several of them must have identified sacred groves of religious importance, described also by classical authors (e.g. *Iona, Mayo, Kildare, Derwent*).

Religion in ancient Celtic people’s lives

The Celts, dominating a vast territory which extended from Ireland to Anatolia by the 3rd century BC, never established a politically unified empire in their history; Celtic people, however, were undoubtedly united by their common language, culture and religion. With agriculture still the basis of their economy, several elements of the religion of the ancient Celts had their roots in the nature worship practised by prehistoric farmers. In Celtic myths, the most important issues were fertility, death and the reasons for natural phenomena. Although Celtic people did not assume the existence of a strict hierarchy among their numerous gods and goddesses, in connection with the above mentioned spheres of thought, they had some important, generally respected deities. One of them was Lugus, the god of light and fertility (who, at the same time, also protected soldiers, bards and magicians). He was equated with Mercury in Gallo-Roman inscriptions. The Celtic gods Esus, Teutatis and Taranis are considered by some scholars to be the triple manifestation of Lugus. Lucan, the first-century Roman poet, claimed that the Celts regularly sacrificed humans in three different ways to these three deities. Human sacrifice became less and less frequent though with the advance of Christianity (Dillon and Chadwick 13–15; Davies 220; Ross 95–96, 98; Eliade 386).

Irish mythology, almost untouched by Roman influence, has preserved, in literary form, many important features of the ancient Celtic religion. Irish myths associated with fertility often emphasize the significant role of Ernmas, the goddess of the land. Her daughter, Mórrígan – one of the war goddesses alongside her sisters, Macha and Badb – also appears, under the name of Anann, as the personification of death in the mythological stories. One of the most important Gaelic deities, Brigit – whose British counterpart was Brigantia ‘the elevated one’ – is said to have been the goddess of elevated physical state (e.g. highlands, flames running high) as well as noble thoughts or deeds (e.g. wisdom, craftsmanship, healing power, military skills) (Dillon and Chadwick 142–144; Ross 97).

Belenus, the Celtic sun god and Belisama’s (see also below) consort, had a strong cult in Cornwall. Ogmios, the Gallic god of eloquence, whose equivalent is Ogma in Irish

mythology, is said to have been responsible for leading the souls of the recently deceased to the other world. Animals such as bulls and horses seem to have also been objects of worship among the British (cf. the Burghead Bull slabs; or the survival of the cult of Epona, the Gallic goddess protecting horses, in the veneration of Rhiannon, a female figure in Welsh mythology). The Celts, apart from the military and administrative role, attributed to their kings a sacral function as well: kings were supposed to mediate between people and the forces of nature. This idea was reflected in Ireland as late as the 12th century in the form of inauguration rites carried out in coronation ceremonies (Dillon and Chadwick 14, 141–142; Ross 99–100, 106; Eliade 386, 388).

In accordance with the importance of nature in their religious beliefs, the Celts revered several geographical objects of their physical surroundings (e.g. rivers, mountains, forests, fields) as (abodes of) local deities. Researchers have already identified nearly 400 names of more or less important Celtic gods and goddesses in continental Europe and in the British Isles with the help of archaeological findings, inscriptions and place names: most names seem to appear once, and even the frequent names can mostly be bound to a given territory. Celtic gods, although gradually endowed with more and more human features in myth, as a result of their original links with natural phenomena and forces, have always retained a touch of impersonality (Dillon and Chadwick 13, 146; Johnston and Abbot “The Celtic Iron Age”; Ross 96–97).

Toponyms reflecting heathen Celtic beliefs in the British Isles

Names of the deities and figures of the ancient Celtic religion, in accordance with the above mentioned facts, have most frequently been preserved in names for bodies of water, for settlements, and for islands and areas. The Druids, the Celtic priests, were reported to practice their mysterious rites in groves of oak, yew and other trees held sacred by them, so today’s several toponyms of Celtic origin emphasizing the presence of this flora in the British Isles might also be associated with ancient Celtic religiosity (see also Bölcskei “Reflections of Gaelic Identity”, “A kelta vallásosság”).

To present the types of toponyms reflecting heathen Celtic beliefs in the British Isles, I have compiled a set of 85 relevant place names from two prestigious contemporary etymological dictionaries (CDEPN, DBPN; see above), in the following distribution with respect to denotata: 42 (former) names for bodies of water, 33 (former) names for settlements, 10 names for islands and areas; including altogether 41 names referring presumably to former sacred places. Regarding references in place names, gods and goddesses named more than once in the observed name forms include Manannán mac Lir, the Irish sea god (5 instances); Camulos, the Celtic war god (5 instances); Sentona, a British divinity (3 instances); Brigantia, the Celtic goddess of elevated physical and mental state (2 instances); Fótla, a tutelary goddess of Ireland (2 instances); Lugus, a pan-Celtic deity (2 instances); Macha, an Irish war goddess (2 instances); and Verbeia, a river goddess (2 instances); the required vegetation is mentioned in 32 place names. I also consulted the relevant literature, which gave me the background of the age, as well as the reasons for divergence of views concerning the origins of the observed names I sometimes encountered in the dictionaries. This paper gives a selection of the collected toponyms: the place names discussed below are considered the most representative ones for the topic.

1 Names for bodies of water

The old Celtic religion set high value on springs, rivers, lakes and bogs: the ancient Celts, as is suggested in many of their myths, strongly believed that the bodies of water – as transitional zones between the realms of the living and the dead – were inhabited by supernatural beings equipped with distinct magical powers. To ensure their benevolence,

expensive pieces of metalwork, often piled up in cauldrons, symbolizing abundance, were regularly deposited into the water by the early Celts as votive offerings both in Europe and in the British Isles. This tradition is also reflected in the story of Excalibur, the magical sword, which, in a version of the legend, is said to have been given to King Arthur by the semi-divine Lady of the Lake and to have been thrown back to her in the water after some hesitation by Sir Bedivere, a knight of the Round Table, at Arthur's death (Matthews 16; Harbinson 161; Raftery 184; Dillon and Chadwick 137; Ross 106; Hunt).¹

It is no wonder that in these circumstances bodies of water themselves were frequently worshipped as sacred features of the landscape by the early Celts. In the British Isles, some river names of British origin explicitly express the sacredness of the water. The river name *Brent* in England, for instance, is regularly interpreted as 'holy river' by most scholars (DEPN 63; CDEPN 83; Cameron 39); others believe that the name – alongside the river name *Braint* in Anglesey – might be related to (the root of) the name of Brigantia, the Celtic goddess of poets, physicians and smiths as well as of fire (CDEPN 83, under *East Brent*; Matthews 16; Ziegler; Eliade 386). The river name *Dee* 'the goddess', 'the holy one' (cf. also *Afon Dyfrdwy* 'the sacred river', today's Welsh name of the river) is suspected by Victor Watts to be an allusive substitution of less specific semantic content for *Aerfen* 'the goddess of war', presumably the original name of the river, as it appeared in early Welsh poetry (CDEPN 182; Cameron 39). Percy H. Reaney quotes Giraldus Cambrensis, the 12th–13th century chronicler, who claimed that the river, constituting a part of the boundary between England and Wales, even in his time was believed to indicate the outcome of the English–Welsh wars by washing away its bank on the losing side (79). Watts also considers the river name *Glen* 'clean, holy or beautiful river', both in Lincolnshire and Northumberland, to be ultimately of British origin, from the root **glano-* 'clean, holy, beautiful' (CDEPN 252).

Other rivers have become known by the name of their Celtic gods or goddesses. The river name *Lea* is said to have a reference to Lugus, the god of light (or, alternatively, that of shadows), either in the sense 'river dedicated to Lugus' or by way of incorporating the Indo-European root **leug-* 'bright, light' (out of which the god's name has also been derived) and meaning 'bright river'. The River *Wharfe* ('the winding river') is considered to have borne a name that was identical with the name Verbeia, the goddess of the river, whose veneration has also been displayed by an inscription on a local Roman altar stone. The river name *Camelar* (today's Cam Brook), preserved in the settlement name *Camerton* ('settlement or estate on the river Camelar'), is suspected to have been derived from the name of Camulos, the Celtic war god. The name of the River *Yarty* might refer to Artio, the Celtic bear goddess. In Roman records, the estuary of the river known today as Ribble was called *Belisama*, which happens to be the name of the warlike Celtic goddess of wisdom and crafts, whom the Romans identified with Minerva. In Celtic mythology, the nymph of the river today called Severn, a name of uncertain origin, is *Sabrina*, by which name, as a result of folk etymology, the river was known by the Romans. However, in Celtic times the god of the flooding Severn was Nodens, who was associated with healing, hunting and the sea, and whose temple to accommodate sick pilgrims stood at Lydney, overlooking the estuary of the stream. The river name *Trent* ('great wanderer', 'great flooder') might incorporate the name of Sentona, a British divinity, who was believed to manifest herself in the frequent tidal waves on the stream (DBPN 86, under *Burley in Wharfedale*, 467; DEPN 291, 413; CDEPN 364–365, 669, 112, 709, 498, 537–538, 627; Reaney 79; Matthews 16, 17; Dillon and Chadwick 140).

Irish mythology explains that the River *Boyne* was created and named after Boann '(she who has) white cow(s)', the goddess of the river, fertility, and wisdom. Likewise, the River *Shannon* 'old goddess' also received its name from its Celtic goddess, Sionna. The supposedly common spring of the two rivers was said in Irish myths to be the source of all knowledge (DBPN 413; Gwynn 27, 35, 287, 293: poems 2 and 3, *Boand I* and *II*, poems 53

and 54, *Sinann I* and *II*; Matthews 141; Dillon and Chadwick 145; G&G 49–50). The healing power of medicinal waters was also attributed by the Celts to a local goddess, whose veneration was later often adopted by the Romans as well, e.g. the spa at Buxton in Derbyshire, rising from two different sources, was known as *Aquae Arnemetiae* ‘waters of Arnemetia’ by the Romans, after Arnemetia, ‘she who dwells in the sacred grove’, the Celtic goddess of the place (Hunt).

2 Names for settlements

Camulodunon (Latin *Camulodunum*) ‘fortress of Camulos’, the former British name of today’s Colchester, may preserve the name of Camulos (see above), whose cult must have been popularized in Britain by the immigrating Belgae. Matthews believes that *Camelot*, the name of Arthur’s castle, appearing first in a 12th-century French version of the saga, might also be connected to the name of the same god, regardless of the fact that the place itself was legendary (DEPN 116; CDEPN 113; Reaney 79; Cameron 36; Matthews 7, 11–12).

Luguvalium, the Romano-British name of present-day Carlisle, according to one explanation, may be in connection with the cult of the previously mentioned Lugus and might mean ‘the wall(ed town) of the god Lugus’. Another possibility is that the place name comes from the Old British personal name **Luguvalos* ‘strong as Lugus’ and means ‘belonging to **Luguvalos*’. Bede recorded that the 8th-century name of the settlement was *Luel*, to which the Old Welsh **cair* ‘city, fort’ had become prefixed by the 9th century in local use. The name *Cair Luel* was transformed into *Carlisle* in the writings of Norman clerks, who failed to understand the components of this toponym (DEPN 88; CDEPN 386; Reaney 79; Cameron 35; Matthews 7–8).

In Ireland, the veneration of Macha, an ancient Irish war goddess, was reflected in such place names as *Armagh* ‘Macha’s height’ (explained alternatively as the ‘height of the plain’), a county town; and *Eamhain Mhacha* ‘Macha’s brooch’, today’s Navan Fort, an ancient monument in County Armagh, whose outlines, as the legend says, were marked with the help of a brooch by the goddess herself to indicate the site for the Kings of Ulster (DBPN: 18, 341, under *Navan*; PDI, under *Ard Mhacha*).

In the Roman period, today’s Bath, because of its natural hot springs, was known as *Aquae Sulis* ‘the waters of Sulis’, after the local Celtic goddess of wisdom, decisions and revenge, who, merged with their own corresponding goddess, was revered by the Romans as Sulis Minerva and to whom a temple was erected in the town (CDEPN 16; Matthews 7, 25; Hunt). The memory of the cultic significance of river mouths might be preserved by the numerous settlement names beginning in *Aber-* ‘confluence’ in the land of the former Picts, e.g. *Aberfeldy* ‘confluence of Peallaidh’, for instance, is said to include the name of a water sprite who allegedly used to visit the place quite often (DBPN 2; Ross 107).

Matthews suspects that behind some personal names of unknown reference one might find the figures of Celtic mythology: if the name *London*, as proposed by Ekwall (DEPN 303) and his followers, has indeed been derived from the British personal name *Londinos* ‘the fierce one’ – says Matthews –, this name did not necessarily refer to a tribal leader, as was believed earlier, but rather to a local minor Celtic god, which would explain why no authentic historical records were kept about a person of that name (6). In the same way, the otherwise unknown *Eburos*, mentioned in connection with the British name *Eborakon* (Latin *Eburacum*), indicating today’s York – which name, at the same time, is also compared to a British word meaning ‘yew’ (see below) –, might have been, according to Celtic beliefs, the god of the local yew grove(s).

3 Names for islands and areas

Myths connect the name (*Isle of*) *Man* to that of Manannán mac Lir, the Irish sea god, but the true etymology of the name for this island has so far remained obscure. It is probable, though, that the name (*Isle of*) *Man* is related to (*Ynys*) *Môn*, the Welsh name for Anglesey (which, for that matter, used to be a favourite place of the Druids until the 1st century, when it was raided by the Romans; cf. Ross 104). These names might rightfully be associated with *Manaw* (*Gododdin*), the post-Roman name for the narrow southern shore of the Firth of Forth, forming part of the contemporary British Kingdom of Gododdin. The name for the area has been survived north of the river in the settlement name *Clackmannan* ‘stone of Manau’² and south of the river in the habitation name *Slamannan* ‘moor of Manau’, the British forms *Manaw* ~ *Manau* being the equivalents of the Gaelic *Manann* (DBPN 315–316, 13, 115, 423; Matthews 135, 138; Dillon and Chadwick 151; Fox).

Matthews builds her explanations of certain Scottish Gaelic place names upon the fact that the Gaels brought with them also their myths³ when some groups moved from Ireland to Britain (145). In Irish mythology, Fótlá, alongside Banba and Ériu, is a tutelary goddess of Ireland. A legend says that the ancient names of the country come from the names of the goddesses; *Éire*, today’s Irish name of the country, meaning presumably ‘abundant land’, may indeed be a derivation from the name of Ériu, the goddess of the land, sovereignty and fertility in myths (DBPN 258, under *Ireland*; G&G 98–99; Ross 76). *Fodhla*, a poetic name for Ireland, also pops up in *Atholl* (< Gaelic *ath Fótlá* ‘new Ireland’), the name of a territory occupied by Gaelic people in medieval times in the Scottish Highlands (DBPN 61, under *Blair Atholl*).

4 Names for sacred places

Ancient Celtic religious lore was propagated by the highly respected members of the learned caste called the Druids, who, usually descending from aristocratic families, acted at the same time as priests, judges (spreading the ideas of community law: the tribe or kinship group could be made responsible for the acts of the individual), scholars (having a deep understanding of natural sciences and philosophy), teachers (passing down their comprehensive knowledge from one generation to the next in the form of oral tradition, because of the ritual prohibition on writing in Celtic culture), magicians (interpreting various natural phenomena as omens, and, by doing so, exerting a subtle but effective and very real influence on important political decisions) and ambassadors (travelling freely among the Celtic kingdoms). Historical records report that they regularly performed their rituals at the confluences of rivers or in sacred groves. In the British Isles, the sheer number of toponyms of Celtic origin referring to oak or yew trees near rivers or in woods might indicate the former importance of such places, e.g. the river names *Derwent* ‘river in the oakwood’, *Darwen* ‘oak river’ and *Dart* ‘oak-tree river’ in England;⁴ or the settlement names *Ballinderreen* ‘townland of the little oak grove’, *Dunderry* ‘fort of the oak grove’ and *Lisnarrick* ‘fort of the oaks’ in Ireland (CDEPN 185, 180, 179; DBPN 31, 163, 299; Matthews 17, 158; Szántó 7; Dillon and Chadwick 10–12, 138; Ross 100–105; Eliade 389–391; Leech 10).

In Devon and Cornwall, where the Celtic population were able to live a relatively undisturbed life long after the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain, place-name derivations from the British word **nemeto-* ‘sacred place’ are also believed to have indicated scenes of Druidic activities, e.g. *Nymet* (*Rowland* and *Tracey*) ‘pagan sacred place, sacred grove’ (held by Roland and the Tracy family, respectively), *Nymet* being originally the old name for the River Yeo flowing nearby; *Nympsfield* ‘open land of Nymed’; *Nemetobala*, the presumable Romano-British name of the holy place at Lydney; (*Bishop’s*, *George* and *King’s*) *Nympton* ‘estate on the River *Nymet*’ (owned by the bishop of Exeter in 1086, with a church dedicated to St George and possessed by the king in 1086, respectively), *Nymet* being the old name for

River Mole; *Lanivet* ‘church-site at Neved’, **Neved* being a relevant early place name⁵ (CDEPN 446, 361; DBPN 350–351, 288; Reaney 87; Dillon and Chadwick 138; Ross 107).

In some cases, tradition has indeed preserved the memory of Druidic activity carried out in the place bearing a relevant name. A legend says that *Iona*, whose name comes from the Old Irish *eo* ‘yew’ and took its present spelling as a result of a misinterpretation of the Latin adjectival form *Ioua (insula)*, had been an important centre of the Druids before St Columba moved to the island in the 6th century. In Ireland, *Mayo* ‘plain of yew trees’, as the early and medieval religious significance of the place suggests, might also bear a name referring to a former sacred grove. *York*, originating from British *Ebórákon* ~ Latin *Eburacum*,⁶ is either a derivative of the personal name *Eburos*, meaning ‘the estate of Eburos’ (see above); or goes back to an expression meaning ‘place abounding in yews’, which might have indicated a grove held sacred by the Druids (DEPN 545; DBPN 257, 322, 517; CDEPN 207; Reaney 24–25; Matthews 6, 158).

It is hardly a coincidence that St Brigit, one of the patron saints of Ireland, according to hagiography, established her monastery at *Kildare* ‘church of the oak tree’, where previously the Celtic goddess Brigit had her own shrine: sites of heathen worship have often later become important Christian centres (DBPN 270; Matthews 158; Dillon and Chadwick 144; Ross 113; PDI, under *Cill Dara*).⁷ The Welsh name *Carreg y Druidion* ‘the Druid’s stone’ also preserves the memory of the Celtic priests (Matthews 128).

Conclusion

As we have seen, the religious zeal so characteristic of the ancient Celts left its mark on the toponymic landscape of the territory they once occupied. For the Celts, the supernatural world formed an integral part of and served as an explanation for the natural world, so components of the latter – bodies of water, forests, mountain tops, burial mounds, and even inhabited places – were populated with transcendent beings with several divine responsibilities in the Celtic imagination. Early Celtic toponyms associated with the deities of the indicated places in the British Isles, however, prove not only that the cults of gods and goddesses of the pan-Celtic pantheon were suppressed by the veneration of local divinities in the islands, but also that, though many British gods and goddesses had their appropriate Gaelic counterparts, even the British and the Gaels worshiped several distinct deities, in accordance with the strong links supposed to connect the beliefs of ancient Celtic religiosity to the actual natural surroundings of the believers.

Notes

¹ Other scholars claim rather that the Celts stored (part of) their booty weapons in the bodies of water to guarantee their inviolability (Ross 47, 66).

² The Stone of Manau, a pre-Christian monument from a glacial rock, can be seen even today in Clackmannan (DBPN 115).

³ Some of these myths originate from the 1st century, but were not recorded before the 5th or 6th centuries, and the surviving manuscripts might have been produced four to five hundred years later, which definitely renders the explanation of the relevant place names difficult (Matthews 142).

⁴ A river called *Derwent* can be found in Derbyshire, on the border between Durham and Northumberland, in Cumbria as well as in North Yorkshire; the River Darwen is in Lancashire; and the river known as *Dart* flows in Devon (CDEPN 185, 180, 179).

⁵ Sometimes, in toponyms of Old English origin, the OE words *hearg* ‘a heathen shrine’ or *wīg*, *wēoh* ‘a heathen temple’ might also have reference to the (former) presence of a building perceived by the late coming English as a Celtic sanctuary, e.g. the remnants of the Iron Age hill-fort at *Harrow Hill* (< OE *hearg* + *hyll* ‘hill’) ‘the heathen temple hill’, considered to be a

place of heathen worship; the likely presence of a temple near *Weedon* (< OE *wīġ*, *wēoh* + *dūn* ‘down, hill, mountain’) (*Bec* and *Lois*) ‘hill with a heathen temple’ (possessed by the abbey of Bec-Hellouin, Normandy and with the well of St Loys or St Lewis, respectively) (CDEPN 282, 658; DEPN 260, under *hyll*, and 153, under *dūn*).

⁶ The British name *Ebórakon* in the 7th-century Old English language, as a result of popular etymology, became *Eoforwīc* ‘boar village’ (see OE *eofor* ‘boar’ and OE *wīc* ‘dwelling, village’), which in the Old Norse language of the 9th and 10th-century Scandinavian immigrants was transformed first into *Iorvík* and later into *Iork*. This form was borrowed back into the English language, and turned into *York* in the 13th century (DEPN 545, 515–516, under *wīc*).

⁷ The goddess and the saint themselves share the same attributes and divine responsibilities: one may suspect the Christianization of a popular pagan cult here (Nicholson; Ross 113).

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