# Appendix
# THE MAGICO-RELIGIOUS LIFE OF THE LATE IRON AGE

## A Diverse Landscape

'Celtic paganism' is not a term that can be meaningfully applied to the magico-religious life of Britain in the Late Iron Age. Such a description gives a misleading impression of uniformity: in terms of the ethnic character of the populations involved, as well as their various forms of religious expression. As our analysis of the tribal-historic tradition should have made clear, Iron Age Britain was nothing if not diverse. Tacitus's observation of physical differences between the inhabitants of South Wales, Scotland and Southern England reflect the complex demographic history of the island.[1104] While we can talk of a 'Celtic' population, we can only do so in the limited, linguistic sense. The inhabitants of Late Iron Age Britain could be broadly classified as Celtic-language speakers, but even within the Gallo-Brittonic sub-group that seem to have made up the majority population of Southern Britain there is evidence of a number of localised dialectical forms.

The ritual landscape of Iron Age Britain echoes this diversity. The archaeological surveys of the pre-Christian Gallo-Brittonic world, such as Anne Ross's consummate *Pagan Celtic Britain*[1105], emphasise the variegated nature of religious expression across the island during the Late Iron Age and Romano-British periods. This is due in no small part to the decentralised nature of the rustic, tribal societies involved. It is probable that many if not most of the gods worshipped in the Late Iron Age were domestic, ancestral figures: specific, by definition, to a particular family, kindred or clan grouping. We may recall the elliptical Irish oath quoted in Chapter Two: t*ongu do dia toinges mo tuath* 'I swear by the gods by which my people swear…' The magical names of such gods were, by implication, not publicly disclosed. Religion in this form appears to have been an essentially private contract between the kindred and its ancestral dead. By their very nature, such gods leave little trace on the archaeological record and our knowledge of their cults is largely inferential.

Distinctive features on the local landscape: springs, rivers, woodland groves, mountaintops, burial mounds and caves also seem to have attracted religious veneration in pre-Christian Britain. Even today it is not unknown, particularly in Ireland, for certain trees to be decorated with ribbons, coins to be thrown into wells, or mountains to be ascended barefoot on saints' days. These are direct echoes of religious behaviours that were almost certainly practiced in these islands during the pagan Iron Age. Along with the cult of the ancestors, the veneration of these natural phenomena appears to have been the most fundamental, deep-rooted and widespread expression of magico-religious life in prehistoric Britain. They reflect an archaic spiritual horizon which is inherently remote from our modern understanding, and again frustrating elusive in terms of historical evidence. Later on in this appendix, however, we venture some observations on what the medieval sources – and the Mabinogi

1104 AG pp. 61-62 "Who the first inhabitants of Britain were, whether natives or immigrants, is open to question… But their physical characteristics vary and the variation is suggestive. The reddish hair and large limbs of the Caledonians proclaim a German origin; the swarthy faces of the Silures the tendency of their hair to curl and the fact that Spain lies opposite, all lead one to believe that Spaniards crossed in ancient times and occupied that part of the country. The peoples nearest to the Gauls likewise resemble them…it seems likely that Gauls settled in the island lying so close to their shores."

1105 Ross (1992)

in particular – might have to tell us about this throng of ancestral spirits and animistic *genii* – referred to here by the Gaulish collective term *andedion*, the 'underworld gods'.

It was under the influence of Mediterranean iconographic traditions that Gallo-Brittonic peoples first began to sculpt distinct images of the objects of their worship. These late Iron Age/Roman-Celtic carvings and inscriptions have tended to inform a large part of what is written about 'Celtic Paganism' in its concrete, visual aspect. But it is worth noting that the use of carved images of this kind represents a fundamental break with indigenous magico-religious traditions – perhaps the most significant of its kind since the Late Bronze Age threshold. Anne Ross may not be overstating the case when she suggests that 'Celtic cults emerge representationally from behind a screen of artistic and ethical standards which were at once alien and incomprehensible to the Celts'. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify certain themes within this iconography which in turn are alien to classical artistic canons and might therefore be said to be suggestive of a genuinely indigenous contribution. Anne Ross identified a number of these themes – including that of the Horned God, the Ram-Headed Serpent or the tête coupée (or the Living Head, as we described it in Chapter 3, pp. 324-331). Such motifs, or 'cults' as Ross describes them, afford an invaluable insight into what might be described as the spiritual imagination of the Late Iron Age.

It was around the same time, again under the influence of Graeco-Roman culture, that Celtic devotees first began to leave written inscriptions disclosing the names of some of their gods. It is from these epigraphic sources – sometimes found in identifiable temple contexts, sometimes in isolated votive inscriptions – that we further enhance our understanding of the magico-religious systems of the Gallo-Brittonic world in the Late Iron Age. Again, it is a picture of multifarious diversity that emerges from this evidence. The names of some four hundred individual deities are known from extant Celtic inscriptions from Britain and Europe, mainly from the period of Roman occupation. Most of these theonyms occur only once, or within restricted geographical parameters. It is clear that most of these gods were local/tutelary cult-figures, specific to a particular region or tribal grouping. Although there were a small but significant number of pan-tribal 'meta-deities', about which we will have more to say below, it is clear that religion in Iron Age Britain had retained its essentially parochial character, with a strong emphasis on kin-based ancestor worship. The representation of goddess-figures with strongly local or territorial associations (a theme which was frequently echoed in the medieval literature) might likewise be seen as a continuation of the earlier animistic traditions.