

Druidic Syncretism and the Four Branches

Archaeologists have sometimes described the black waters of the lower Thames as the ‘British Ganges’, alluding to the ritual depositions lavished upon it by its Iron Age and Late Bronze Age devotees. This is by no means the only comparison that might be made with the religious landscape of Hindu India. With its ‘ten thousand gods’, its elaborate calendrical systems; its sacred animals and food taboos and its adherence to the doctrine of reincarnation, the Brahmanic system offers a number of parallels with what we can ascertain about native British religious traditions from the combined testimony of the archaeological and literary evidence. Had the religious life of Iron Age Britain continued to develop in comparable isolation, we might expect something analogous to modern Hinduism to have evolved as the centuries progressed – a possibility that is enhanced by the shared Indo-European background (although the influence of local pre-Indo-European substrates in both cases should not be underestimated).

One feature of the Hindu system that we can see beginning to emerge in the Gallo-Brittonic world was a marked tendency towards *syncretism* and public ritual, offsetting the tendency towards localism and diversity that otherwise characterised this essentially parochial religious culture. It was evidently under the auspices of an increasingly centralised druidic priesthood that certain pan-tribal cults were spread throughout the Celtic-speaking world in the Late Iron Age: notably those of *Lugus* (c.f. p. 498), *Belenus* (c.f. p. 273), *Cernunnos* (c.f. p. 36 n. 63), *Epona* (c.f. p. 192) and the *Matres* (c.f. p. 218, 502). The druids, it has been tentatively proposed by Anne Ross, seem to have been engaged in a project to superimpose these pan-Celtic ‘meta-deities’ on to the mosaic of local, tribal deities. On the basis of what we can observe, in both the monumental record of the Ancient Celtic world and in the medieval literatures of Wales and Ireland, it will be proposed that this syncretism involved the identification and promotion of certain key *types*, within which a myriad of local figures could be absorbed. First, however, we must sum up the state of our knowledge, such as it, about the cultural, organisational and pedagogic aspects of this Late Iron Age druidic priesthood.

Beneath the numerous layers of romantic speculation,¹¹⁰⁶ there are but a handful of verifiable facts we can ascertain about the druids and their religious system. But, from the accounts of classical witnesses, properly contextualised with archaeological and anthropological data and in hand with the evidence of the relevant vernacular literature, it is possible to reconstruct *in general terms* at least what might have been the role of the druid in Late Iron Age society, as well as the approximate character of his system of ritual and belief. We might begin with Anne Ross’s (broadly accurate) observation that the druids of the Late Iron Age West ‘do not seem to have differed so very basically from the shamans of the Finno-Ugric peoples, or the priest/lawyers of Baal’.¹¹⁰⁷ To this short list of druidic correlates, we might add the priestly Brahmin caste of India: whose system of thought, though undoubtedly more evolved and sophisticated than that of the druids of Late Iron Age Britain, may well have shared the same basic forms if not the same specific cultural-historical roots.

Like the Brahmins, the druids seem to have been drawn from the elite of Celtic society. Caesar notes that they were recruited from the sons of the warrior-aristocracy, and that these druidic novices were subjected to a training programme which could last as long as twenty years. Like the ‘bush schools’ of sub-Saharan Africa or the guru tutelages of contemporary Hindu India, this process of induction into the sacred mysteries was typically conducted in ‘caves and remote valleys’ and other wilderness places. The learning process was entirely by rote, with ‘large amounts of poetry’ (*magnum numerum versum*) being committed to memory. This much is corroborated by the evidence from Ireland, where as late as the seventeenth century, itinerant poets and jurists trained pupils in tribal history and traditional *brehon* law in a programme of oral tuition lasting up to twelve years.¹¹⁰⁸

So what would have been taught in these druidic bush schools? And how would this knowledge relate to the function of the druid in his wider social context? We might assume that, alongside the traditional mytho-historic lore that would have filled a significant portion of these *numerum versum*, there was also a practical element to this learning, probably relating in part to the use of herbal remedies and other folk-medicinal techniques, a feature of traditional priestcraft throughout the ancient world. This may have extended into a generalised body of lore relating to the natural world and other universals which Strabo and others had mentioned as an aspect of druidic learning. Echoes of this might be found in the traditional gnomic verse and other forms of native wisdom poetry found in the early vernacular literatures.¹¹⁰⁹ Then there would have been more advanced, esoteric knowledge which probably included what Mircea Eliade referred to as *techniques of ecstasy* – most likely involving the use of psychoactive infusions and/or hypnogogic processes to induce what clinical observers might describe as ‘altered states of consciousness’. Such techniques would have enabled the druid to stimulate in themselves and other persons a range of magical experiences: from the prophetic vision of the poet (c.f. the *awenyddion* p. 97 ff) to the lycanthropic frenzy of the berserk warrior (c.f. pp. 111 etc.).¹¹¹⁰

Classical, vernacular and archaeological sources would seem to agree that *calendrical* knowledge also formed a significant aspect of the druidic repertoire.¹¹⁰¹ This would have meant a knowledge of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ days – times which were auspicious or otherwise for performance of specified activities.¹¹¹² We might assume that this knowledge defined the ritual calendar, i.e. dictated which observances or sacrifices must be performed at any given time. Indeed, it is likely that the druidic calendar would have been responsible for regulating not only the ceremonial life of the community but also communal activities of a social and agricultural nature (seed-planting, feast-days, the movement of cattle to and from open pasture etc.). In this way, the druids might be seen as the organising force of the Celtic world – on a tribal and possibly a regional level.

Calendrical reckonings require a certain level of computational expertise, particularly where operations such as the coordination of the solar and lunar cycles is involved, but this would not have been beyond the capabilities of the druidic mathematician. As Professor Piggott points out ‘elaborate computations do not necessarily involve apparatus or even writing figures. Among Tamil calendar makers of South India in the last century the calculation of eclipses was done by arranging shells or pebbles on the ground in such a way as to recall to the mind of the operator the necessary algorithm,

1106 These have been exhaustively examined by archaeologist Stuart Piggott (*The Druids* Thames & Hudson, London: 1975)

1107 Ross (1992) p. 80

1108 Piggott (1975) p. 108

or steps in the process.¹¹¹³ There are records of one man in 1825 who was able to predict a lunar eclipse within four minutes of its true time using such a method. It is not inconceivable that druidic aspirants were taught similar operations – perhaps even as a legacy of the megalithic system – which allowed them to predict such astronomical events with a comparable degree of accuracy. It may have been this intellectual background which allowed the early Irish monks to engage with such confidence in complex Christian calendrical problems, such as the notorious paschal calculi.¹¹¹⁴

Moving further into the realms of speculation – but with comparative anthropology as our reliable guide – we might envisage calendrical systems such as that represented Coligny tablet (n. 1101) as being correlated with the recital and celebration of key events in the mythical/tribal-historic record. Comparisons might be made with the elaborate ritual calendars and matyologies of the medieval Christian Church, in which a multitude of local saints' days and other hagiographical legends were drawn into a common ceremonial/magico-religious schema. Comparable systems are found within the Judaic, Muslim and Hindu traditions, as well as the ritual calendars of the Aztec and other Meso-American civilisations. Once codified within a calendrical scheme, the tradition as a whole would have come to represent an elaborate and compelling superstructure: in which every month, every day, perhaps even every hour was charged with magico-mythical significance. The 'ten thousand gods' would have been drawn into a grand ritual cycle, bringing a symbolic unity to the fragmented tribal world of the Iron Age West. It was through syncretic projects of this kind that the druids offered the kind of pan-tribal coherence that made them a counter-weight, if not an outright cultural rival, to the hegemonistic ambitions of Imperial Rome.¹¹¹⁵

It is proposed here that the Four Branches embodies one of the latest and most complete surviving records of a tribal-mythological synthesis of this kind. Clearly, its calendrical significance has receded (the mention of 'May Eve' in the First Branch being one of the last remaining references of this kind); but the etymology of the name of this tradition – the Mabinogi – suggests a significant connection

1109 A representative selection of such texts from Early Medieval Wales can be found in K. H. Jackson (ed.) *Early Welsh Gnostic Poems* (1935)

1110 Several techniques of this kind are recalled the medieval literature. Most obviously, we have the Welsh para-epileptic visions of the awenyddion, described above. From the Early Irish corpus we have the ritual of the vision-inducing 'bull-feast' recounted in *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel* (c. 700-800 AD); and the mantic technique of imbas forosna described in Cormac's glossary – to name but two of the more obvious examples. A more distant echo of such practices might be found in some of methods for imparting 'second sight' described in Robert Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth* (written in Scotland in 1690, based on the folk-traditions of the local Gaelic population).

1111 Classical authorities ascribe to the druids knowledge of the movement of the stars and heavenly bodies, and an ability to 'foretell certain events by Pythagorean reckoning and calculations'. Caesar and Pliny variously refer to a lunar druidic calendar – which is backed up by the evidence of the Coligny calendar, from the early first century AD. This document, inscribed on a bronze tablet found in France in 1897, has been subject to a number of interpretations. It seems to chart an alternating series of 30 and 29-day months, with names like EQVOS 'horse(-month), ELEMBIV- (?'earth-life') or GIAMON '(?beginning of) winter'. Thirty-day months are labelled MAT 'good' (i.e. lucky), while the twenty-nine day months were labelled with the rubric ANM- (thought to be an abbreviation of anmat 'unlucky'). The months are subdivided into 14-day halves (corresponding perhaps with a waxing or waning of the moon), and arranged in a five-year cycle, with intercalary months of thirty days at the beginning and the middle of this series. Some have detected traces of the 19-year Metonic system, used throughout the ancient world (and in Early Christian Ireland) to reconcile the lunar and the solar cycles.

1112 The Irish druid Cathbad is represented in the medieval tradition as knowing the auspicious hour for conceiving or giving birth to a king, or the fate of a warrior that takes up arms on a particular day.

with pagan seasonal ritual, as we considered on pp. 214 above. Furthermore, an analysis of the traditional content itself is strongly suggestive of an attempt to draw a myriad of local cult-legends into a common narrative schema. That this narrative system was also a conscious reflection of contemporary events is all the more interesting when we bear in mind the druidic preoccupation with the doctrines of transmigration, prophesy and cyclic recurrence. When, towards the end of the twelfth century, the author of the *Mabinogi* declaimed his work before a native court audience somewhere in the cantref of Arfon, he was offering an analysis of the present and future destiny of this Brythonic community. But in order to do so, he made use of modes of thought and patterns of expression that have their roots in a much older cultural world: one which would soon disappear almost without trace. It is this rare echo of this essentially pre-Christian declamatory tradition in a medieval literary context that makes the Four Branches such a fascinating and valuable document, as we will conclude on the pages below. For now we need to complete our survey of magico-religious landscape of pre-Christian Britain, and Wales in particular – the ground from which we might assume this native system of thought must have originally sprung.

1113 Piggott (1975) p.117

1114 Columbanus, a Irish ecclesiastic, in a letter to the Vatican from the late sixth century, felt qualified to take issue with the standard papal line on the method of calculating the date of Easter, insisting that his people had traditional expertise in the area.

1115 Piggott (1975, pp. 120-121) while questioning the notion that the druidic orders represented a concerted 'nationalistic' anti-Roman resistance, has pointed out that the trans-regional mobility of the druidic orders does seem to have 'run counter to the static agricultural and urban pattern of a Roman province, and in the Druids, embodying myth and ritual, poetry and law, the essentially un-Roman Celtic tradition was concentrated.' Comparisons are made with the itinerant Irish learned class of brehon jurists, poets and storytellers – who were targeted by the English in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as bearers of an 'indigenous and incompatible culture'.