

Andedion – The Underworld Gods

The Chamalières inscription, which we quoted in full in Chapter 5 (p. 500), begins with the following words *Andedion uediiumi*... There have been a number of suggested translations of this opening formula,¹¹¹⁶ but the most satisfactory interpretation seems to be to take *uediiumi* as a verbal form (in the first person), related to the Modern Welsh *gweddio* meaning ‘to pray’ or ‘invoke’. Thus, the inscriber would appear to have been calling on an entity or entities known as *andedion*, which is usually translated as ‘The Under-World God(s)’ or ‘The Infernal One(s)’. What might we say about these sinister-sounding beings, whom the inscriber would seem to be invoking as part of a wider magical operation (also involving, interestingly enough, a deity by the name of *Maponos Arvenatis*)? A clue might be found in the *Lebor Gabála*, in which the supernatural demography of the Tuatha Dé Danann is described in the following terms:

*Dée in t-aes dano ocus andée in t-aes trebtha...*¹¹¹⁸

This is usually rendered as ‘Gods (*dée*) were their men of crafts, and non-gods (*andée*) their husbandmen’. However, *andée* would appear to be cognate with the Gaulish *andedion*, so it would perhaps be more accurate to understand the *andée* as a category of supernatural beings in their own right, rather than simply ‘non-gods’ as the word is sometimes translated. The etymology of *andedion/andée* is usually understood to combine the elements Clt. *dio(n)* (*Ir. dé*) ‘god(s)’ with the suffix *ande-/an-*, as encountered earlier in the Welsh name for the Indigenous Underworld, Annwfn. It is more than likely there was some kind of a connection between these ‘Under-Gods’ and the Underworld of Annwfn. The lowly, agrarian position of the *andée* in the Tuatha Dé Danann is fully consistent with the tribal-historic relation between the Children of Dôn and the Indigenous Underworld, as described on pp. 460 ff. above. We might also recall the mysterious gesture of ritual frenzy known as *Diaspad Uwch Annwfn* ‘the Scream over Annwfn’: evidently employed by disinherited persons making the transition from the status of proprietor to that of an indentured *taeog* bondsman (pp. 57). It seems reasonable to identify the Gaulish *andedion* and their Irish counterparts with the ‘demons of Annwfn’ (*dieuyl annwuyfn*) referred to in the eleventh-century Culhwch ac Olwen, where they are described as being confined within the person of Gwyn ap Nudd ‘lest this world be destroyed’ (re: pp. 166). While representing the benign forces of growth and fertility, these shadowy earth spirits were also clearly a source of superstitious fear, even into the Central Middle Ages.

1116 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’.

1117 The text of the inscription, as can be seen on p.500, takes the form of a concatenated block of text in which word-breaks are not meaningfully represented. Thus the extent of these words, let alone their meaning, is still very much open to interpretation.

1118 LG IV §56

While there is no comparable epigraphic evidence from the insular world, these medieval references make it more than likely that a cult of underworld gods similar to the *andedion* of Ancient Gaul would have been acknowledged in Iron Age Britain. It is tempting to link these chthonic spirits with the mysterious ‘ritual shafts’ or ‘offering pits’ found throughout Britain and the Celtic world from the Late Bronze Age onwards.¹¹¹⁹ Within these pits – which were probably regarded as entrances to the underworld – are found a variety of funerary and votive depositions: including human bones, animal carcasses, grain and other foodstuffs, pottery, iron currency bars, coins and other metalwork items. Such votive depositions might be compared with similar caches found in springs, wells and other bodies of water – which were evidently also regarded as supernatural gateways. The simplest explanations for these depositions would be that they expressed a magico-religious apprehension of some kind of a quid-pro-quo relationship with the chthonic underworld. As archaeologist Barry Cunliffe has suggested, in relation to the apparent functional overlap between grain-pits and ritual shafts in the Early Iron Age:

*Depositions in pits are best explained by supposing that they were designed to propitiate the gods. It is tempting to go further to suggest that the act of propitiation was linked to the storage of seed corn, the ‘gift’ being in recognition of the fertility of the stored grain, as a thank offering for the harvests, or in anticipation that the harvest would be good. This raises the possibility that the practice of pit storage was part of that belief system ... by placing vital seeds in the ground they were consigned to the protection of the deities of the earth, who, having completed their task, had then to be propitiated.*¹¹²⁰

This particular type of ritual shaft (based on disused storage pits) is often to be found on or close by to areas of settlements: emphasising the strangely ‘undifferentiated’ nature of the Early and Middle Iron Age. The micro-geography of these sites would tend to suggest that food production, craftwork and religious ritual were closely enmeshed: all taking place in the same spaces in which people ate, drank and slept. An extreme manifestation of this tendency can be seen in the means of disposing of the dead. Human remains are often found in what would appear to be midden pits or depositions of domestic debris: but even here it not impossible that what we might classify as waste or rubbish might have held sacred significance in the Early Iron Age. Sometimes these corpses appear to have been dismembered after death – hinting at cultural practices thoroughly alien to our own. Strangest of all is the case of the infant burials, where the baby had died during or shortly after birth. These tiny corpses were inhumed in purpose-dug holes on the site of the settlement itself – a practice that would continue in southern Britain well into the Roman period.¹¹²¹

We might assume this strange intersection between the chthonic and the domestic – about which we know little and understand less – reflected a spiritual outlook that was widespread throughout Britain in the Early and Middle Iron Age, and which might have persisted in some quarters into the Roman era and beyond. It is tempting to relate it to the private, familial religion hinted at by the laconic Irish *tongu* formula quoted on pp. 187 above. It would seem that these

1119 Comparisons might also be made with the ‘potlatch’ ceremonies of the Northwest Coast of Canada – in which local chieftains publicly dispose of wealth (in the form of copper bullion, pottery or small gifts). The function of these ceremonies seems to be part social (the enhancement of status through this act of conspicuous consumption), part ceremonial (propitiating the underworld gods) and part economic (regulating the supply of valuable commodities) (Cunliffe 1994, p.259).

1120 Cunliffe (1993) pp.197-198

1121 *ibid.* p.195

ancestral deities only became relegated to the status of anonymous *andedion* with the arrival of more differentiated, pan-tribal deities introduced by the druidic priesthood in the Late Iron Age.¹¹²² But even then, it would appear that they retained a certain power of the minds of men, the eerie quality of which is powerfully suggested by fearful medieval references to the ‘spirits of Annwfn’, as well as the opening formula of the Chamalières inscription.

The lingering unease associated with these unpropitiated spirits of the earth is a pervasive (though concealed) presence within the Mabinogi. In the First Branch, the alarming disappearance of livestock or even new-born children is implicitly linked to the monstrous depredations of the chthonic underworld. In the Third Branch, the Enchantment of Dyfed and the theft of the corn both convey the sinister undertone of a vengeful Earth reclaiming its own, even if the ‘rational’ explanation is of a slightly different order. In the Fourth Branch this tension between the worlds of man and nature is laid bare and finally reconciled in the epiphany of Lleu.

The one name in the Four Branches we might directly link with the cult of the *andedion* is the generic figure of the *Pen Annwfn*, whose range of associations we considered in Chapter 2 (pp. 164-167). In the Mabinogi, it is the Demetian king Pwyll who inherits this mantle, but there is every reason to assume that the chthonic deity it represents had been in existence long before this time. In the eleventh-century poem on p. 54 of the Book of Taliesin, *Pen Annwfn* appears, significantly, as the guardian of a sovereignty-token in the form of a magic cauldron that nurtures only the brave. As we have seen, there were other Celtic figures – the Irish Ind Dagda, for example, or the Gaulish Succellos – who seem to represent a primitive ‘Cauldron God’ of a similar type. We might tentatively associate such figures with the cult of the *andedion*. Gwyn ap Nudd, as we have seen, also seems to hold a particular authority over the spirits of Annwfn. Like Arawn in the First Branch he was sometimes described as *Brehnin Annwfn*. Also like Arawn, he was sometimes represented as a hunter: roaming abroad with a pack of red-and-white faery dogs; sometimes even being encountered on the borders of the world of men.

The First Branch begins with an encounter of this kind, which leads the Demetian king Pwyll to form an alliance with the king of Annwfn. The suggestion – implied in numerous ways, and supported by traditional superstitions – seems to have been that this was a dangerous and possibly even foolish move on the part of the Demetian king. Much of what subsequently unfolds, in the last Branch in particular, is a direct consequence of this dubious involvement with the Indigenous Underworld. But it would appear that the spirits of Annwfn were not a force that could be simply dismissed or ignored. Instead, a complex narrative had to be constructed in which, through a series of symbolic ritual manoeuvres, their power was drawn out, confronted and finally neutralised. Much of the underlying purpose of the Four Branches seems to relate to a psychological – or magical – process of this kind.

1122 R.A.S. Macalister (Lebor Gabála Éirenn Vol. IV p294) compares the distinction between the *dée* and the *andée* with the distinction between the *di consentes* on one hand (the Roman state-gods invoked at grand public ceremonies by persons of importance) and the *numina* on the other: local or domestic spirits which were ‘of prehistoric origin, and received the cult and homage of the lower orders of society’.