Living Head

We have accounted for the development of the Island Otherworld mythology found in the Second Branch and its possible relation to native, pre-Christian elements. We have also considered the development of the content of the Second Branch in relation to the mystically-inclined bardic school, whose works are to be found in the Book of Taliesin. But there is one other feature of the *Yspydawt Urdaul Benn* 'The Asssembly of the Wonderous Head'– the Otherworld sequence that follows the carnage in Ireland – that requires further explanation. That is the mysterious presence of the severed head of the king itself, in the midst of these proceedings. This head, which continues to live on and converse with its companions long after its removal from the body of Brân, seems associated in some indefinite way with the distortions of time and space that subsequently occur. A quick glance at the archaeological record of the ancient Celtic world confirms that what is being evoked at this juncture is a magico-religious complex of considerable antiquity – what might be described as 'the Cult of the Living Head'. The appearance of the Living Head at the juncture in the Second Branch recalls, with savage immediacy, the magical thinking of the pre-Christian Celtic world.

Head-hunting is a perennial feature of warrior societies, but was known to have been practised with particular enthusiasm by the Iron Age Celts. Strabo, quoting Posidonius (c.135-50 BC), describes this custom in the following terms:

> *…when they are leaving the battle-field they fasten to the necks of their horses the heads of their enemies, and on arriving they nail this spectacle at the entrances to their houses. Posidonius says that he saw this sight in many places, and was at first disgusted by it, but afterwards, becoming used to it, could bear it with equanimity.*[585]

And neither did this practice entirely cease in the post-Roman world, even with the onset of Christianity. Bede's reference to the battle of Maserfield in 642 would suggest that Oswald the Northumbrian king may have suffered this grisly fate at the hands of the British victors.[586] A ninth-century poem from the Powys area describes the melancholy mood of a defeated British warrior, returning from battle carrying his chieftain's head (taken, no doubt, to prevent it falling into enemy hands).[587] Finally, there was the incident in 1064, described at the end of this chapter, in which precisely the opposite seems to have occurred: members of the Welsh ruling caste, evidently having disposed of their erstwhile leader, were reported to have sent his severed head to the English king as a token of their friendship and submission. About this signficant incident we will have more to say below. For the time being, it is sufficient to conclude that the severed head was a potent symbol in the Ancient Celtic world, and evidently continued as such well into the medieval period.

Archaeologist Dr Anne Ross has provided a comprehensive survey of the incidence of the *tête coupée* in the iconography of pre-Christian Celtic Britain.[588] As a magico-religious device, Ross notes, it was evidently not unknown in the British Isles even before the emergence of what we generally think of as Celtic culture, as the carved chalk heads from the Neolithic graves at Folkton Wold would tend to suggest.[589] But it was in the Late Iron Age and Romano-British period that the disembodied head became elevated into the centrepiece of 'an elaborate cult … a distinctive feature of [Celtic] religious expression'.

Before turning to the archaeological, literary and folkloric evidence for the belief system surrounding the Living Head in the Insular Celtic world, we must first consider, in general terms, the power and significance of this curious if somewhat grisly motif. Unpalatable as it may seem, we must try to understand what made this particular image the focus of such intense magico-religious interest in the early Celtic world, and thereby start to comprehend what Ross describes as 'a persistent theme throughout all aspects of Celtic life'.

None of this seems so strange when we consider how the head – or more precisely the *face* – is the natural focus of attention in inter-personal contact; a visual complex which is evidently accorded high significance by the preconscious attention-selection process (a fact not lost on the present-day advertising industry). This might be understood as a legacy from our pre-linguistic primate days, when the face was the primary register of emotion and intent, the reading of which could sometimes mean the difference between life and death. For these evolutionary and socio-biological reasons, the human eye is instinctively and compulsively drawn to representations of the face.

If the head and its unique facial expression exerts such a draw on the human consciousness, then we might assume this effect would only be amplified when the head is present in isolation from the rest of the body. If the facial expression is a discreet psycho-social communicational package, the head might be said to encapsulate a mood, intent or even a presence of its own. It is not hard to see how, to the animistic thinking of pre-industrial man, this 'presence' might have been interpreted as an *indwelling spirit* abiding in the head long after death. It is in this light that we should perhaps understand the behaviour of the Ancient Celtic 'head hunters' alluded to above. When, as Posidonius recalls, these gory trophies of war were conscientiously retrieved from the battlefield, embalmed and arrayed around the home, the warrior of the Keltoi was doing far more than merely creating a display of his military prowess. It was also a magical act. He was, according to his understanding of the world, *asserting control over a semi-autonomous spiritual force.*

The primitive notion that would equate possession of a severed head with the magical control over its indwelling spirit is not unfamiliar elsewhere, either in the annals of comparative anthropology or the wilder case notes of forensic psychiatry. However, this rather macabre strain of

585 *Strabo* IV, IV, 5: Tierney p. 269.
586 HE III, 12
587 Jenny Rowlands, *Early Welsh Poetry – A Study and Edition of the Englynion* pp. 477-478, and pp. 76-84
588 Anne Ross *Pagan Celtic Britain – Studies in Iconography and Tradition* Rev. ed. (London: Constable and Company, 1992) pp. 94-171
589 ibid p.100

magical thinking was formalised and developed in a distinctive way in the Celtic world. Not only were these heads embalmed by Celtic warriors, there are even reports that they were decked in gold, mounted on pillars and honoured with gifts and libations. The *veneration* accorded to these severed heads suggests that something rather more subtle than a crude fantasy of control was being asserted over the memory of the decapitated victim. Indeed, there is much to suggest that it was believed that, if shown reverence and respect and entreated with the appropriate rituals, the head would *even return to life* as a benevolent magical entity, as suggested in this incident from the Medieval Irish account of *Cath Almaine* 'The Battle of Almu'. Dr Anne Ross summarised the episode as follows:

> In this tale the Leinsterman allegedly fought a battle against a hero, Fergal Mac Maíle Dúin, who is slain. Fergal's head is carried off, and is treated honourably. It is washed and braided and combed smooth, and a silken cloth is put upon it. Then seven oxen and seven wethers are cooked and placed in front of the head. It immediately blushes and opens its eyes 'to God' and gives thanks for the honour and reverence shown to it.

'Although,' Ross points out 'this episode is concerned with fully historical characters, and is given a Christian emphasis … it is a very strange incident and one which is suggestive of earlier traditions of actual offerings made to venerated heads.'[590]

Returning to the archaeological record, we find evidence not only of actual human skulls placed on pillars, in temples and other places of worship – but also of stone and metal carvings of the head being accorded equal importance as a focus of magico-religious interest. Ross has described the enormous range of carved stone heads from the Celtic Iron Age and Roman Britain, which testifies to the richness of this system of spiritual representation. Included in this assemblage are double-faced 'Janus' heads, triplicate heads, phalloid heads, horned heads, cat-eared heads, serpent-fringed gorgon heads, solar heads and many other variations on the basic type. Some of these heads exhibit functional as well as conceptual/aesthetic features, which give some suggestion of their place within the ritual setting involved. A number are topped by hollowed-out cavities, suggesting that the head was consecrated (or perhaps 'awakened') by means of a sacred libation poured into this indentation.[591] Others contain holes at their base, suggesting that they would have been placed on poles or displayed at other elevated locations. There is little reason to doubt that these heads were objects of worship or magical attention.

The motif of the head featured widely in all kinds of Celtic iconography – not all of which we would normally associate with the context of formalised worship. Antefixa on pillars, lintels and other architectural features, metal heads incorporated into the pommels of daggers, heads found on pottery and domestic metalwork: all testify to the irrepressible prevalence of this vernacular iconographic expression (the reflexes of which are evident in some of the architectural and craft

traditions of Northern Europe even to this day). When carved on a cooking pot, or the beams of a roof-tree, these expressive faces may have served an *apotropaic* purpose: i.e. off-setting evil or providing magical protection. This might have been particularly the case when a home, a tomb or a religious sanctuary was involved. But where such heads were incorporated into the design of a tool or a weapon, for example, it seems more likely that Celtic blacksmith used the familiar device of a facial representation to animate the object with a spiritual presence, an artistic flourish which might well be related to medieval stories about swords and other weapons being endowed with a will and intelligence of their own.

Alongside this iconographic evidence, we have a distinct and enduring body of lore in the Insular Celtic world which would appear to corroborate these more speculative reconstructions of Iron Age magico-religious belief. This mythology of 'the Living Head' – as it appears in medieval sources (both religious and secular) and in more recent popular-oral traditions, has also been analysed by Ross, who has identified a number of key themes. The most prevalent of these would appear to be the association of the severed head or *tête coupée* with that other object of most distinctively Celtic religious attention: the well or river-spring of water. One motif, not uncommon in the medieval Celtic hagiography, witnesses the decapitation of a saintly or innocent person, and the springing up of a well or a fountain from the place where the head hits the ground. This occurs, for example, at the death of Digiwg daughter of Ynyr in the Life of Saint Beuno. More common, however, is the tradition of severed heads being washed, left beside wells or springs or thrown into them. A name like *Tobar a' Chinn* ('Well of the Head') would then be acquired by the water-feature involved, or it would be endowed with a distinctive property, such as the tendency to run red at certain times of the year.

This tradition of the deposition of severed heads in these bodies of water is as inexplicable within a Christian context as it is prevalent throughout the Celtic world. Here, again, we have corroboration from the archaeological record, such as this discovery at Wookey Hole in the 1940s:

> Fourteen human skulls were recovered from the [underground] pool together with Romano-British pottery of the first or second century of a form descended from Belgic prototypes … The presence of these skulls in the pool, together with some pottery, strongly suggests that they were placed … as votive offerings or some other ritual purpose.[592]

Human heads, along with other votive offerings, are found in a number of Romano-British wells and pits – in a tradition of ritual deposition which stretches as far back as the Late Bronze Age.[593] This raises the interesting possibility that not only were heads worshipped and appropriated as spiritual repositories in their own right, they were sometimes offered as such to higher spiritual forces the worshipper was (presumably) seeking to appease. In the Celtic world, this was often done by placing

590 Ross (1992) pp. 156-157
591 ibid p.117

the severed head on or near the well-spring of the great rivers of the land – whose aquatic energies were often personified in the form of powerful mythical beings such as *Boanda* in medieval Ireland or *Danann/Danu*, the mother of the gods. When heads were deposited in sacred waters in such cases, the head may have remained as a *genus loci*, giving rise to tales of this kind:

Zantippa goes with a pitcher to the Well of Life. She offers to dip her pitcher in, and a head rises in the well. The head speaks:

Gently dip, but not too deep
For fear you make the golden beard to weep
Fair maiden, white and red,
Comb me smooth and stroke my head
And thou shalt have some cockell-bread
Zantippa:

What is this?
Fair maiden, white and red
Comb me smooth and stroke my head
And thou shalt have some cockell-bread
'Cockell' thou callest it boy? Faith, I'll give you cockell-bread

She breaks her pitcher upon the head: then it thunders and lightens. Later, a head surfaces with ears of corn and another head emerges, full of gold[594]

Despite its burlesque treatment in this Elizabethan comedy-drama, all the elements of the Celtic tradition are represented. As Ross points out: 'the heads in the well of life, their powers of speech and their reference to cockell bread with its nuptial significance, and prosperity, both mercenary and agrarian as shown by the bestowal of corn … The combing and the smoothing of hair may be compared with the treatment of the head in the early Irish story *Cath Almaine.*'[595]

Once present in the Celtic imagination, this image of the Living Head could assume some quite phantasmagoric forms. The animistic provenance of this mythical stratum is evident in the following summary of a popular Highland tale, which in other ways provides a good example of the abiding association between wells and severed heads:

592 Ross (1992) pp. 142-143
593 ibid p. 141, c.f. James and pp. 62-73

> The seven heads of men responsible for the murder of two young MacDonalds were being taken in a basket to Inverness from Inverlair House. On the way, the party taking them stopped at Invergarry, and the heads, which had grown restless in the basket, were leaping about and making a grinding noise as they clashed against each other. They were taken out and washed at the spring, which became known as the Well of the Heads, *Tobar na Ceann*, on account of this.[596]

However, there were instances where the lurid image of a dancing, bodiless head might detach itself entirely from its mythological context, and merely constitute an element of morbid fantasy. An example of this is to be found in one episode of the Early Modern Irish poem, *Buile Suibne*, 'The Madness of Sweeny', a hallucinatory narrative of a cursed Ulster king's descent into madness:

> *… God heard Ronan's prayer, for when Suibhne came to the centre of Sliabh Fuaid he stopped still there, and a strange apparition appeared to him at midnight … five bristling, rough-grey heads without body or trunk among them, screaming and leaping this way and that about the road. When he came among them he heard them talking to each other, and this is what they were saying: 'He is a madman,' said the first head; 'a madman of Ulster,' said the second head; 'follow him well,' said the third head; 'may the pursuit be long,' said the fourth head; 'until he reaches the sea,' said the fifth head. They rose forth together towards him. He soared aloft in front of them (passing) from thicket to thicket, and no matter how vast was the glen before him he would not touch it, but would leap from one edge of it to another, and from the summit of one hill to the summit of another.*
>
> *Great in sooth was the terror, the crying and wailing, the screaming and crying aloud, the din and tumult of the heads after him as they were clutching and eagerly pursuing him. Such were the force and swiftness of that pursuit that the heads leaped on his calves, his houghs, his thighs, his shoulders, and the nape of his neck, so that the impact of head against head, and the clashing of all against the sides of trees and the heads of rocks, against the surface and the earth, seemed to him like the rush of a wild torrent from the breast of a high mountain; nor did they cease until he escaped from them into the filmy clouds of the sky …*[597]

The image of the disembodied head which lives and speaks is a darkly compelling one, and has a tendency to coalesce in variety of narrative cultures: including modern day science-fiction dystopian fantasies such as Dennis Potter's 1996 TV drama *Cold Lazarus*, and C. S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*. To the post-industrial imagination, the image of a disembodied, sentient head (or

594 From the 'Old Wives Tale' by George Peele', quoted Ross (1992) p.146
595 Ross (1992) p.146
596 ibid p.147

brain) kept alive by alien technologies, evokes a number of diffuse anxieties relating to some of the more challenging or disturbing aspects of scientific progress. Such an entity, dislocated as it is even from its own physicality, embodies a terrible hubris of science over nature. As such it is characteristically portrayed as brimming with a jealous hatred towards the organic world. So prevalent is this complex of associations, which is latent even in some of the wilder prophesies of a future age of artificial intelligence, that it is difficult for the modern reader not to be feel their influence when confronted with the medieval Celtic image of the Living Head.

But such associations are essentially misleading in the context of the Second Branch. It is clear that the image of the Living Head would have had a quite different resonance to the Medieval Celtic mind. Not least, death and the dead were the constant companions of the pre-modern experience and not the remote and unspeakable strangers that they have become today. The sight of a disembodied head would not have been an uncommon sight in the homelands of their warrior Celtic ancestors, if the account of Posidonius is to be believed (p.325). Not all these heads would have belonged to those who died a violent death, and we might suppose that it would not have been unusual in certain parts of the Celtic world to preserve and revere the memory of one's own predecessors in this way.

In its original magico-religious context, the archetype of the Living Head elicited emotions of wonder or even reverential awe, rather than horror or repugnance. It was a representation of the *divine principal within mankind*, the immutable spiritual essence. As the spring was to the river, so the head was to the body. To be in the presence of the Living Head was to be privy to great and secret things, to partake in the meeting of the worlds. It is within this context, perhaps most of all, that we should attempt to understand the rather peculiar events that conclude the Second Branch of the Mabinogi.

597 J. G. O'Keefe *Buile Suibne 'The Madness of Suibne' being the Adventures of Suibne Geilt, A Middle Irish Romance* (London: Irish Tests Society, 1913)§64