The Nature of Gaulish Religion /// Amvith Crédhlói Galáthach

This brief overview of Gaulish religion finds indications that the Gaulish worldview was animistic in nature, without dichotomy between humans and their surrounding world. Phenomena such as thunder and lightning, and entities such as mountains and rivers appear as deities, and seem to have played an important role in people's lives.

Úra apísan'uchel vrío in credhlói Galáthach sin o bú in hapisan'víthu Ghaláthach hanathasach en hamvith, echan dhavíon enther dhoné ach só víthu erís. Bathwía dichenorúé comíu tarthar ach lócheth, ach ganvisúé comíu bríé ach avóné co dhévisúé, ach bathwía í o ré shuvor sí ran lhúithwár en víthé in tóth.

Not much is known with any degree of certainty about Gaulish religion, and such information as has been handed down over the centuries by classical sources is likely to have been observed through a Greco-Roman lens. It is therefore probable that it is infused with classical worldviews and preconceived notions, and presents a distorted image.

Broadly speaking it is possible to discern two distinct stages of attestation of matters pertaining to Gaulish religion. The pre-conquest stage is characterised by a remarkable absence of any anthropomorphic representations of anything identifiable as a deity, and the post-conquest stage displays a clear evolution of a syncretism of Gaulish religion and Roman concepts and expressions of religion. In this latter stage gods and goddesses are anthropomorphised and presented as statues of a human shape, accompanied by various accessories expressing their attributes, in the tradition of the Greek and Roman gods. Similarly, they are often paired with Roman gods or goddesses in male-female pairs, and are regularly endowed with names that combine a native Gaulish appellation with a Roman one.

From the above it could be deduced that prior to the Roman invasion and conquest of Gaul the Gaulish religious perception differed significantly from the Greco-Roman one. Such information as is available has been interpreted (by e.g. Green 2005) as displaying strong signs of an animistic view of the world, in which natural phenomena and features were not merely endowed with a spirit dwelling within them, as for instance in the case of the Greek tree-dryads or the Roman genius loci (protective spirit of a place), but rather were one and the same thing. As such, it is suggested that no distinction would have been made between a phenomenon or a feature and its corresponding god or goddess. In this way Taranis was not the god of thunder and storms, who made thunder and storms happen, he *was* the thunder and storms. Similarly, Sequana, Matrona and Souconna were not goddesses inhabiting the rivers that to this day bear their names, the Seine, Marne and Saône, but they *were* the rivers. In this way the landscape would not just have been alive, but also imbued with a spiritual and sacred quality or presence. Similar worldviews and attitudes to religion are quite common among the peoples of the world, and have been observed, among many others, in e.g. the pagan Slavic

and Baltic people of Central and Eastern Europe, the Saami of Northern Scandinavia, and the indigenous people of Siberia. Further afield they also characterise the original Shinto religion of Japan.

While it is impossible to ever provide conclusive evidence in regards to these suggestions, there are a large number of indications that appear to support this notion of animism. A great many different names of deities are recorded throughout the formerly Gaulish-speaking territories, many of which only occur once or twice, and only in very specific localised areas. This may indicate that these were concepts or entities strongly associated with a confined geographical area, and may only have been known to the people inhabiting this area. Furthermore votive offerings, deposits of material goods as apparent gifts to deities, are highly prevalent in a wide array of bodies of water, such as rivers, springs, lakes and bogs, and have been found buried in the ground. Several names of deities are explicitly derived from the names of animals (e.g. Artio [bear], Epona [horse]) or animal characteristics (e.g. Cernunnos/Carnonos [deer antlers]), while others appear to encompass whole forests or mountain ranges (e.g. Arduinna [Ardennes], Uosegos [Vosges]), or refer to them explicitly (e.g. Bergusia [mountain]) or implicitly (e.g. Nantosuelta [sunny valley]).

In addition to the above, the classical records make mention of worship of trees, specifically oaks, of the ritual harvesting of mistletoe from these, and of the conducting of ceremonies and sacrifices in forested areas, or "groves". Although in recent times the classical testimonies referring to the worship of trees, mistletoe and groves have been severely questioned and doubt has been cast over the veracity and reliability of their reporting, they nevertheless remain a matter of record and cannot summarily be dismissed.

Finally, an insight into pre-conquest Gaulish attitudes towards deities can be gained from the account of the Gaulish raid on the oracle temple of Delphi in the 3rd century BCE. When confronted with statues representing Greek gods, Brennus, the leader of the raiding Gauls, is reported to have laughed at them, in derision of the notion that gods have human form and that their images could be made in wood and stone (from Diodorus Siculus, The Library of History, book 22, 9, 4; see e.g. Bousquet 2018 for a discussion).

On the other hand there is also clear evidence for the presence of references to humanity and human activities in the attested gods and goddesses, without clear and obvious links to phenomenological concepts. As such there is Toutatis (people), Sucellos (good striker), Rosmerta (great provider) and Ogmios (leader), as well as Esus, for which no clear etymology presents itself. However, while it has been suggested that Esus might be derived from IE *eis- "well-being, energy, passion" (see e.g. O'Rahilly 1946) , there is iconographic evidence that links him, at two reprises, with a tree, a bull, and three crane-birds (the latter two of which are collectively referred to as Taruos Trigaranus, "the bull of the three cranes"). A further clear link to a human activity which can beyond a doubt be considered an important one in Gaulish society is the name of the deity Gobannos (Deo Cobanno, Delamarre 2003, p. 182), which translates as "smith". It is a matter of canonical fact that metalwork is an area in

which the Celtic people of antiquity excelled, and the deity Ucuetis is also referenced in a context involving smith-craft.

A very few tantalising clues regarding the Gaulish worldview may be gleaned from the historical record. Triplicity is found in the epigraphic record, in images of triple heads and triple penises, as well as in groups of three deities, and it may be assumed that it carried symbolic meaning. This may be confirmed by the prevalence in Old Irish and Welsh literature of triads, philosophical statements that consist of three concepts or ideas grouped together and presented as a whole. One such statement has been recorded by classical sources as having been received from druids of Gaul: "honour the gods, do no evil, and be brave".

It is furthermore attested that at least some rituals and sacrifices happened communally, that these were officiated and presided over by druids, and that, importantly, people who had committed offences against the community were excluded from these ceremonies, which was considered a great misfortune. It can therefore be concluded that membership of the social group was highly valued. Sacrifices were alleged to have included human sacrifices, and decapitation and preservation of severed heads was widely practised and is abundantly attested. It is suggested that the head was perceived as having special value or status, and archeological discoveries of sanctuaries and shrines displaying large numbers of human skulls appear to support this notion. Perhaps most intriguingly of all, classical sources recorded that druids taught that the human soul or spirit was immortal and, at death, passed from one body to another one. Along with the triad mentioned above this may well represent the only remnant of genuine druidic teaching that has survived the centuries.

Taking into account the fact that phenomenological and natural-feature entities appeared to exist alongside of entities or concepts of human activity and presence, it may be acceptable to suggest that, in the traditional Gaulish religious world view, no distinction was made between people on the one hand and the phenomenological world on the other, and that they coexisted as bilateral functional components of a united universe. In this framework, a notion that a human spirit does not perish at death but transmigrates into another body may be considered as a continuation of the notion of unity between people and the world around them, whereby, upon death, a spirit is not separated from the living world, but takes up another residence somewhere in it. As such, it is reminiscent of other animist cultures, where similar concepts can be found.

It is important to note, in this context, that such an animist worldview did not by any means translate into a reluctance on behalf of the Gaulish people to exploit their environment as they saw fit, and for their specific purposes. Pre-conquest Gaul is well known for having boasted more than 400 active goldmines, which, incidentally, has been suggested constituted a powerful motivation for the conquest in the first place, and farming, land clearing and other environmentally destructive practices do not appear to have been unduly restrained or restricted by this purported animistic view of the world. As such, care must be taken not to conflate the Gaulish attitude towards the natural world with one commensurate with a 21st century conservationist and environmentalist view. Rather, it may be suggested that, because

no difference was perceived between people and the world around them, the people of Gaul blithely and insouciantly made use of such resources as they found available around them. In other words, the fact that a river was considered a deity did not prevent the people who lived near it from taking such fish as they saw fit, cutting down river bank trees for construction or boat building purposes, or dumping rubbish in it. Conversely however, a case can be made for the notion that the ritual deposition of labour-intensively crafted objects of high value and great practical use, such as metal weapons, tools and jewellery, represents a returning of the favour, a paying of a tithe or a dividend, a demonstration of appreciation for items taken from the river. While this is plausible and there is precedent for it in comparable religious practices in other societies (see e.g. MacIntosh 2019), it must remain a matter of speculation.

In closing a selection is provided of Gaulish entities perceived as divine, with translations of their names, and, where appropriate, their existence in the real world and any associations evident from post-invasion epigraphy. There is no concept of rank, importance or hierarchy attached to them: they are given as existing in the world, without further qualification. This selection makes no claim of being exhaustive or authoritative, and merely aims to provide a general impression.

1. People and human activities

Toutatis: people (Tóthath)
Gobannos: smith (Govan)
Ucuetis: sharpener < *okuo-; smith (Uchúeth)
Maponos: son (Mapon)
Matrona: mother (Mathron)
Sucellos: good striker (Suchel) (farming)
Ogmios: leader (Oghwé) (language, story telling)
Lugus: oath-taker (?) (Lúi) (triple penis)
Esus: well-being (?) (Ésu) (cutting trees, bull with three cranes)
Rosmerta: great provider (Roswertha)
Camulos: champion (Camul) (war)
Rigisamus: most kingly (Rísam)

2. Phenomena and abstract qualities

Taranis: thunder, storm (Taran)
Belenos: powerful (Belen)
Belisama: most powerful (Belisáma)
Sirona: star (Siróna)
Glanis: clear, transparent (Glánis) (river, spring)
Grannos: heat (?), beard (?) (Gran)
Loucetius: lightning (Lócheth)
Albiorix: sky-king (Alviúrich)
Biturix: world-king (Bithúrich)

Dumnorix: darkness-king (Dumnrich)

3. Animals

Cernunnos/Carnonos: horn, deer-antler (Cernun, Carnon) (man with antlers)
Epona: horse (Epóna)
Damona: deer (Damóna)
Taruos Trigaranus: bull with three cranes (Táru Tri Garan)
Moritasgus: sea-badger (Morthasc)
Artio: bear (Arthíu)
Andarta: big bear (Anartha)
Cathubodua: battle-crow (Cathuvodhúa)
Matubergini: bear-mountain (Mathuverghin)

4. Physical features

Sequana: flowing (?) < flow, discharge < * seiku- (Sechúan) (river)
Souconna: suckling (?) < suck, drink, suckle < *sowk-n-o (Sóchóna) (river)
Nemetona: sanctuary, sacred forest, wood, enclosure, forest clearing (Nemethóna)
Ritona: ford (Rithóna)
Bergusia: mountain (Berghusía)
Arduinna: height (Ardhwína) (forest and mountain range)
Uosegos: below/under-power (Gwóséi) (mountain range)
Nantosuelta: sunny valley (Nanthusweltha)
Litaui: earth (Lithau)
Brigindona: hill (Brinóna)
Alisanos: cliff, rock (Alísan)
Achaunus: stone (Achaunu
Condatis: confluence (Conath)
Boruo: hot spring, mud (Bóru)
Ialonus Contrebis: clearing with dwellings (Ialon Conthrev)
Lenus: forest, open woodland, grove (Lénu)
Abnoba: water-source (Avnóva) (forest and mountain range)
Entarabus: between-rivers (Entharávu)
Acionna: rapid (Achióna) (river)

As indicated above, this collection is merely a selection from a large number of attested deity names from across the Gaulish-speaking territories. It serves to illustrate the wide range of concepts reflected in the Gaulish theonomy. Among these, a large number of terms relating to water can be observed, whether in the form of river, spring, ford or confluence, as well as terms relating to woods and mountains. It may be deduced from this that those entities played an important role in the lives of the people who named the deities after them.

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