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Celtic Death Rituals

Long a puzzle to archaeologists, ancient Celtic burial practices are now being reinterpreted with the help of dog, horse and human body parts found in Britain's Iron Age pit-cemeteries.

by Barry Cunliffe

They cut off the heads of enemies slain in battle and attach them to the necks of their horses. . . . They nail up these first fruits upon their house. . . . They embalm in cedar oil the heads of the most distinguished enemies and preserve them carefully in a chest and display them with pride to strangers.

These words were written about the Celts of Europe by a Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus, in the first century A.D. He was, of course, presenting a grossly oversimplified picture, selecting from his sources those scraps of information which he thought would entertain his readers.

Using classical sources like Diodorus to throw light on contemporary barbarian societies is a practice fraught with difficulties—particularly when we are dealing with lands, like Britain, lying on the very fringes of the Celtic world, far removed from the civilized Mediterranean. But now, at last, excavation is beginning to produce new evidence, often quite startling, of the belief systems of the barbarian Celts.

One of the most intensively studied areas of Iron Age Britain is the central southern part of the country, stretching from Dorset to Sussex and from the south coast northwards along the Cotswold Hills and into Northamptonshire. In regional terms this area constitutes Wessex, the Cotswolds and the South Midlands.

Here, in the 1920s and 1930s, archaeologists began a systematic investigation of Iron Age settlements, con-

centrating on the massive hill-forts which dominate the landscape. Many sites, like the famous Maiden Castle excavated by the noted British archaeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler, were sampled, but for the most part work was small-scale by our modern standards. More recently, a series of large-scale excavations have been



A dog skeleton and the leg of a horse were among the "special burial deposits" found at the Danebury hill-fort. Both animals had important ritual significance in Celtic religion.

mounted. In the upper Thames basin, around Oxford, several peasant settlements have been totally excavated, while in Wessex new excavations have been carried out at hill-forts like South Cadbury in Somerset and Danebury in Hampshire.

For this central southern region, Danebury provides some of the best evidence currently available for looking at Iron Age society. Danebury, where we have been digging now for 19 seasons, is a typical Wessex hill-fort, massively defended with banks and ditches and dominating a large tract of the rolling chalk downs of central Hampshire.

The early seasons of our excavation established the main structural history of the site. The first defenses were put up in the sixth century B.C., and after some modification and strengthening the entire defensive circuit was rebuilt on a more massive basis about 400–350 B.C. Thereafter, the fort was maintained in good defensive order until

about 100 B.C., when the gate was burned down and the site was abandoned. It is tempting to see the end coming in the period of social and economic turmoil which seems to have affected the region at this time, largely as the result of the impact of Roman trading pressures on the south coast.

Throughout the 400 to 500 years of the fort's life, a community lived within the protection of its defenses. There were well-maintained roads and some evidence that separate areas were set aside for specific functions. Houses, for example—

circular structures built of timber—clustered around the perimeter of the enclosed area in the shelter of the rampart; rectangular buildings, probably for storing grain used for food, lined the roads in rows in the southern part of the site. Much of the center was occupied by large storage pits dug deep in the chalk bedrock. These were probably used to store the seed grain for the next year's sowing.

How many people lived in the Danebury fort at any one time it is impossible to say, but using estimated numbers of houses and house sizes we can offer a controlled guess of 200 to 400.

How these people related to people living in farmsteads in the countryside around, it is also difficult to be sure: our preferred model is that the hill-fort residents were an elite who controlled centralized distribution and the exchange of rare raw materials.

By the end of next year's season we will have excavated just over a half of the defended settlement—about six acres—and there the excavation will stop. The philosophy behind the work program has been this: to be able to make new deductions about Iron Age society and economy, we needed a large sample of well-stratified material which could be subjected to statistical treatment. This sample, however, had to be balanced by leaving a large part of the site intact for future archaeologists to test. In the event the “excavate half, preserve half” solution seemed the best. Certainly, in terms of new information the policy has paid off.

Before we can see the new evidence from Danebury in proper perspective it may be helpful to sketch out what was known, before our work began, about death and ritual in the Iron Age of the region. The general view had been that rituals were enacted in the countryside—sometimes in sacred groves or on the banks of springs or lakes—by the Druids about whom Caesar wrote at length in his books on the Gallic Wars. Temples and shrines were thought to be rare.

One great problem for students of Iron Age life was the mode of burial. Occasional skeletons were found on settlement sites, but in the well-studied area of central southern Britain no regular cemeteries were known in the whole of the Early or Middle Iron Age (*i.e.*, ca. 700–100 B.C.). It was almost as though people had lived there in considerable number, but had never died! Now, the work at Danebury has changed all this.

The clues come mainly from the pits, of which there are estimated to have been about 5,000 within the fort. The great majority of them were dug for storage, almost certainly the storage of corn. The average pit was bell- or cone-shaped, 50 centimeters to one meter (19 inches to three feet) in diameter at the top, two to three meters (six to nine feet) deep, and two to three meters in diameter at the bottom.

The principle behind the use of these storage pits was quite simple. The



An aerial view of the massive Danebury hill-fort where some 2,000 “special burial deposits” have been unearthed.

grain, either threshed or in the ear, was tipped in and the pit sealed and made airtight. Fermentation and rotting would begin in the outermost layers of corn that were in contact with the chalk pit-walls. This process would very rapidly use up the oxygen, replacing it with carbon dioxide (CO₂). Finally, a crucial threshold would be reached when the CO₂ level had become sufficiently high to kill off the organisms causing decay. Thereafter, the pit would remain sterile until opened.

Once the pit had ceased to be used, it was allowed to fill with rubbish and with chalk eroded from its sides—but, quite frequently, not before a “special burial deposit” had been placed on the pit's bottom.

These special deposits are of particular interest. One recurring type involved human bodies. These were placed on the pit bottoms, usually tucked against one side in a crouched position. Less frequently, parts of human bodies were found, sometimes with several bones still in articulation.

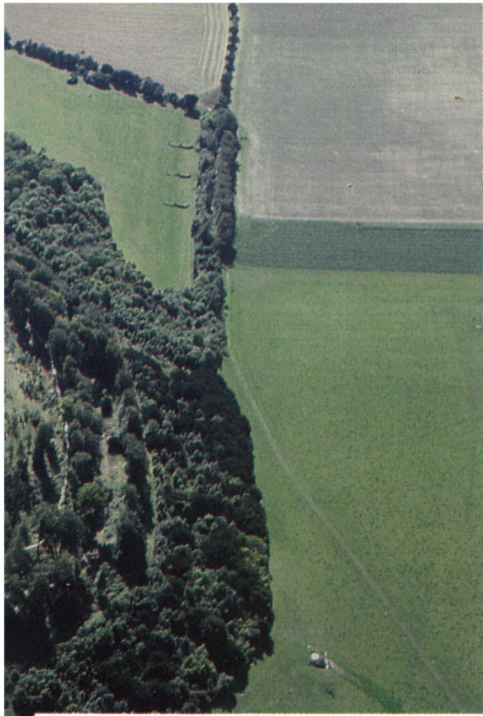
A far rarer type of burial occurred in specially dug bathtub-shaped pits. In one case, three bodies were buried to-

gether; in another, a single corpse was laid supine; after a layer of rubble had been thrown in to cover the body, an articulated human arm, part of a torso and a child's skull were laid above it.

Yet another example entailed the burial of a young man's pelvis, hacked from the body with the heads of the femurs still articulated in position. In addition to these practices, isolated human bones are frequently found scattered about the site, one of the commonest recurring bones being the skull—a vivid reminder of the Celtic love of head-hunting.

What can we make of all this? Clearly, we are seeing the archaeological manifestation of a very complex belief-system involving the disposal of the dead. The simplest explanation of all the evidence, including the absence of any cemeteries, is that the *normal* method of disposal was by excarnation, or exposure of the dead body above ground. The further possibility is that the human remains found in Danebury represent minority rites—burial ceremonies observed for only a selected few—rather than everyday interments.

Excarnation was a widespread practice among primitive societies. The



But what of the complete burials on the bottoms of pits? These must represent a minority ritual. One possibility is that they were the burials of individuals who were socially unclean, and thus excluded from normal burial. Among the Ashanti of West Africa, for example, people who had died “unnatural” deaths—by being struck by lightning, or by snake bite, or during childbirth—were buried in disused pits.

Still another possibility is that the bodies were sacrifices placed in the pit at the moment of its abandonment, and often weighed down with heavy stones (to prevent the spirit from escaping?). We will explore a possible context for this speculation in a moment.

The deliberate burial of partial bodies—human joints—is more difficult to explain. One suggestion is that these joints could represent the remains of cannibalism—perhaps “insult cannibalism” in which the enemy was insulted, as was his lineage, by the eating of parts of his body. In the kind of society prevailing in Iron Age Britain, when raiding and warfare seem to have been endemic, such a procedure would not be surprising; but this is pure speculation and firm evidence, one way or the other, is difficult to find.

Other kinds of ritual behavior may also become apparent in the archaeological evidence when the size of the data base has become sufficient to allow recurring patterns to be recognized. If, for example, ten pits have been excavated and in one of them an articulated horse’s leg has been found on the

bottom, there is little to be said. But if a hundred pits have been excavated and in ten of them we find horse legs, always in the same position, then we can be confident that the recurring pattern reflects deliberate behavior.

This is what happened at Danebury. As the digging progressed and more and more pits were excavated (the number has now reached about 2,000), it became evident that certain types of deposit on the bottoms of pits appeared time and time again. What we were observing were the dim reflections of a complex system of beliefs.

procedure usually consisted of three separate stages: first, the body is exposed, often in or near the house, during the fleeting liminal period in which the spirit is assumed still to inhabit or hover around the corpse; next, the body may have been moved to a resting place, and finally—often after a considerable length of time—parts of it may have been brought back to the house for safekeeping by the family. Some such system would neatly explain the lack of regular burials and the presence of isolated human bone in occupation levels.

The most commonly observed deposits were animal burials. Sometimes there were complete carcasses of sheep, young cows, pigs or dogs. Occasionally, a fire had been lit on the body and sometimes large stones had been placed above it. Horses were also found, occasionally complete or missing just a leg or two. More often, however, the animal was represented only by a leg or by its head. When compared with the normal percentage occurrence of animal bones in domestic deposits, horses and dogs are greatly over-represented in these special pit deposits. It may be relevant that both these animals have enhanced ritual significance in Celtic religion.

This fascinating range of “special” animal burials should be seen in the context of other, rarer deposits on the pit bottoms: these include quernstones (for grinding grain), sets of horse gear, tools and pots—not forgetting, of course, human skeletons.

Although the complete data have not been finely analyzed, a fair estimate would be that about 20 percent of the pits contained some kind of special burial material. There is nothing different about these pits, nor is there any apparent significance in their date or location in the fort. This fact raises an intriguing possibility: could it be that *all* the pits once had special deposits, the majority of which left no recognizable archaeological trace—things such as baskets of fruits or vegetables, blankets, bales of wool, hides, and skins filled with mead or beer. In the aerobic alkaline conditions within the chalk pits, no trace of this perishable organic material would survive. It is a tempting hypothesis.

Clearly, those special deposits that are archaeologically recognizable represent some kind of propitiatory offering. One explanation would be to see the deposits as thank-offerings to the deities both for successful storage of the seed grain, and in anticipation of the grain’s providing a productive harvest. If this was indeed the case, it may be that the pits were used for storage only once.

But it is equally possible to suggest that the propitiatory offering came at the end of a cycle of use, not after only one season. Such an explanation would require the life of every pit to have been terminated with a special deposit.

Still other explanations are possible. It could be that offerings were made only in those pits in use in the period following a bad harvest, so as to ensure that the gods were put in a mood to protect the next crop yield, grown from the seed grain stored in them. In this case, there would be no need to assume there were offerings in all pits.

This example shows how tantalizing inadequate archaeological evidence so often is, but it does throw a completely new light on the behavior of Iron Age communities. Once the pattern of propitiatory burials has been recognized, it can be traced widely throughout central southern Britain. This burial pattern also raises further possibilities. The use of storage pits for storing seed grain was very common in this region in the Iron Age. Yet below-ground storage seems a curious technique when at the same time the community was building large above-ground timber granaries, presumably to hold the grain it consumed.

Why the two techniques of storage, side by side in the same settlement? It might be argued that there was compelling reason to keep seed corn in pits safely hidden from raiders, and that consumption grain could be stored in above-ground granaries because it was marginally more expendable; but this line of reasoning verges on special pleading. A more satisfactory explanation would be to see the seed corn as being stored in pits so as to place it un-

der the protection of the fertility deity of the underworld. To make a propitiatory offering of a lamb, a harness or even a slave in gratitude for the deities' protection would be understandable.

There is much in all this that must of necessity be speculative: the cruel reality is that we will never know. But this uncertainty should not make us shy of trying to explain our data in terms of models inspired by ethnographic observation. Where statistical testing is available, so much the better.

If all these threads are pulled together, a distinctive belief system emerges, exemplified by the Danebury data. Chronologically, this set of beliefs is not clearly manifest in the archaeological record before the seventh century B.C. and it disappears during the first century B.C. Geographically, it occupies a distinct area of central southern Britain which is largely coincident with the distribution of large, developed hill-forts of the Danebury type. The totality of the evidence suggests, therefore, that a cohesive region existed, the disparate communities being bound together by a single complex of religious and social systems. This is the best evidence we are likely to find in the Celtic fringes for defining discrete ethnic entities.

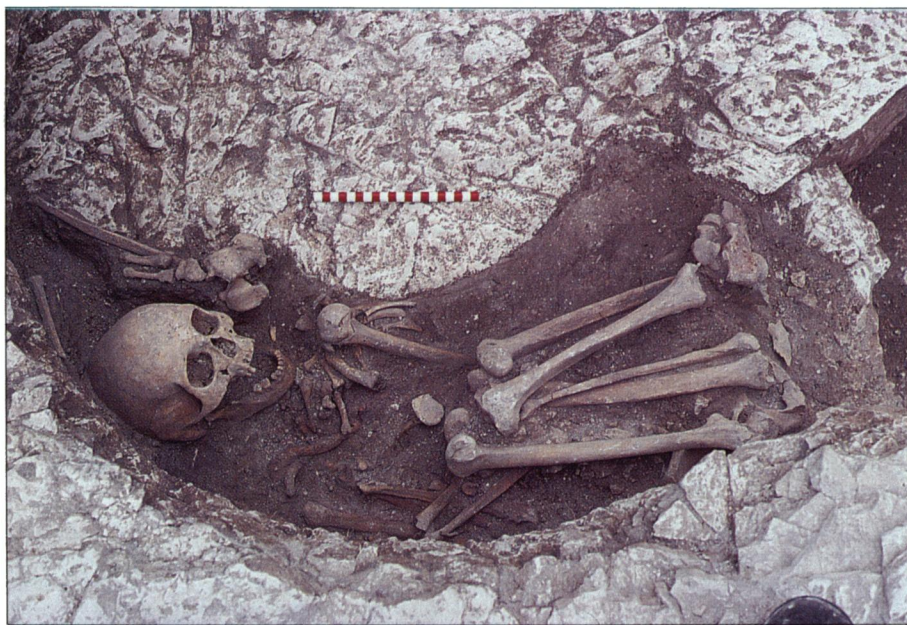
But what of the rest of Britain? Can distinctive belief patterns be recognized in other regions in the Early and Middle Iron Age? There are, in fact,

two zones where the evidence is quite well focused: in the southwest, in particular the peninsula of Devon and Cornwall and southwestern Wales; and the northeast, in the region centered on the Yorkshire Wolds—the rolling chalk countryside north of the river Humber. Both areas seem to have adopted inhumation, (underground burial), as a “normal” mode of interment.

In the southwest, burial rite involved the inhumation of the dead person, accompanied by a few personal possessions, in a small stone-built cist or rock-cut grave arranged in a cemetery that was often of considerable extent. The most famous of these cemeteries was found early this century in the sand dunes of Harlyn Bay on the north Cornish coast. Another was exposed on Stamford Hill, near Plymouth, more than a century ago. Here the elite were accompanied by bracelets, brooches and, more rarely, by finely decorated bronze mirrors. This burial rite is similar to that practiced across the English Channel in Brittany, and is a reminder that these two regions—both of them sea-girt peninsulas—shared a similar culture throughout much of prehistory.

In the northeast, in Yorkshire, the burial rite was entirely different. Here, the dead were buried in a roughly square pit, which was itself often located within a square-ditched enclosure and—in the case of the elite—sometimes accompanied by two-wheeled chariots, together with other fittings. Until quite recently, burials of this kind were only dimly known from ill-recorded 19th-century excavations. But recent systematic work by John Dent on behalf of the Humber-side Archaeological Unit, in the valley of Wetwang Slack, has brought to light an amazing array of new evidence, not only of burials but also of associated Iron Age settlements. This was a time of rapidly growing population, rising in numbers to a point at which the landscape could hardly accommodate it; in consequence, social tension and aggression intensified.

The work of the last 20 years can fairly be said to have revolutionized our ideas on Iron Age death ritual. What emerges most clearly are three very different zones of belief: the southwestern and the northeastern zones, both adopting inhumation as the norm and both sharing much in common with adjacent parts of Europe; and a central



Danebury's pit-cemeteries also contained complete human skeletons, as well as pots, tools and horse gear.

As the digging progressed, it became evident that certain types of deposit on the bottoms of pits appeared time and time again.

southern zone, apparently isolated from Continental influences, with its deeply ingrained tradition of excarnation and propitiation.

This pattern seems to hold good for most of the Early and Middle Iron Age, but some time about 100 B.C. the southeast section of the country developed close links with the communities of northern France. These links probably resulted from a sudden upsurge in trade inspired by rapidly developing Roman interests. It was a time of social and economic upheaval, when much of the old central southern system was crumbling. Hill-forts ceased to be used, storage in pits became extremely rare, and a new form of burial rite—cremation and burial in small cemeteries—seems to have become the norm. Barely 150 years later the Roman invasion introduced a range of new beliefs and burial practices which swamped the indigenous systems.

Celtic religion was clearly a highly complex pattern of interlocking beliefs and rituals. The Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder once wrote a famous description of the white-robed Druids gathering mistletoe as it grew on oak trees. They used golden sickles and cut the plant only when the moon was in the right quarter, in order that the curative power of the mistletoe should not be lost.

Pliny's account is a vivid reminder of how difficult it is for a 20th-century archaeologist to approach the intricacies of ancient Celtic religious practices. But one aspect of Celtic ritual which is fairly well represented in the archaeological evidence is the use of springs, lakes and rivers as locations through which the gods could be reached by means of votive offerings. Many chance discoveries reflect this practice. One of the best known is the collection of Early Iron Age metalwork from the Welsh lake of Llynfawr. Another is the great hoard of weapons and cart fittings from the bog at Llyn Cerrig Bach, on the island of Anglesey.

An even more dramatic discovery was made in 1984 during peat cutting in the bog of Lindow Moss in Cheshire (in the northwest of England). The workmen came upon the

well-preserved body of a man buried in the water-logged and anaerobic (oxygen-free) peat. At first it was thought that the corpse was the victim of a recent murder. But radiocarbon dating suggests that Lindow man died late in the Iron Age.

The discovery occasioned great excitement among archaeologists. Bog bodies had been found in northern Germany and Denmark, but nothing like it had ever come to light in Britain: here at last was a face from the Iron Age. After a whole battery of scientific techniques had been applied to the remains, the salient facts became clear. Lindow man was about 25 when he died. He was quite tall for the time—1.7 meters (five feet, eight inches)—and his well-kept hands showed that he had not been a manual worker.

Just before he died, he had had a meal of porridge or bread. Then came violent death. A sharp blow to the head felled him, a garrotte had been put around his neck, and he had been bled. Only then had the body been consigned to the bog. Who he was and why he died we will never know. But it is tempting to see this burial, like those of northern Europe, as part of some complex ritual. His death may have served a propitiatory need, his resting place in a marsh pool placing him in the realms of the presiding underworld deity. We can only speculate.

What is remarkable about Lindow man is not that he may have been sacrificed to the gods, but simply that the conditions in which he was buried allowed his flesh, skin and hair to be preserved. (The bog's lack of oxygen was inimical to the bacteria and fungi that ordinarily cause decay and decomposition.) There may well have been little difference between the circumstances of his death and burial and those surrounding the bodies placed carefully in the bottoms of the abandoned storage pits at Danebury.

Quite possibly Lindow man is only the first of many such finds to come. It is inevitable that the majority of ritual deposits in bogs, lakes and rivers will come to light accidentally, as the result of industrial activity, rather than through planned and systematic excavation. The evidence will therefore be

patchy and inadequate.

But these "watery" religious locations are not the only places where the Celtic gods were worshipped. Classical writers refer to sacred groves, and their existence is reflected in the occurrences across Europe of the place name *Nemeton*. But sacred groves are hard to recognize convincingly in the archaeological record. However, recent excavations in southern Britain have begun to produce evidence of settlement shrines, usually small rectangular structures built of timbers set in continuous trenches cut into the bedrock. The first of these to be discovered was unearthed during the Second World War when the airport at Heathrow was being enlarged. More recently, similar structures have come to light in the hill-forts at South Cadbury and Danebury, and beneath a later Roman temple on Lancing Down in Sussex.

The existence of these buildings is a reasonable indication of formalized and permanent religious activity at certain sites. It may well be that many of them continued in use as religious locations well into the Roman period, since an increasing number of Roman temples, in Britain and in France, are producing evidence of pre-Roman ritual activity. It was in this way that many of our local Celtic gods—like the water deities, Sulis at Bath and Covantina on Hadrian's Wall, or the hunter god Nodens at Lydney in Gloucestershire—continued to be worshipped by the local population throughout the 400 years or so of the Roman occupation.

Standing back from it all, we can fairly say that the last 20 years have seen something of a minor revolution in our understanding of beliefs and ritual among the British Celts. Previously, rather generalized concepts had attempted to integrate scattered archaeological discoveries with the anecdotal comments offered by Classical writers. Now, however, this outlook is beginning to be replaced by a more systematic approach. What emerges is not wholly unexpected: the Celts were a complex people with a rich and varied culture, and this fact is reflected in their belief systems. Who knows what further insights another 20 years of excavation will yield? □