Aspects of religion in the later Bronze Age and Iron Age c1500BC - AD100

Introduction

It is curious how the Neolithic and early Bronze Age obsession with ritual monuments and tombs for the dead gave way in the middle Bronze Age to a landscape without either; there is not a single monument from the late Bronze Age or Iron Age from anywhere in our region that is classed primarily as 'ritual', and burials of the period are exceptionally rare. This change must be linked with the increasing emphasis on agricultural landscapes from the middle Bronze Age; it appears that the effort previously expended on the construction of monuments and tombs for the dead was now focussed on the development of settlements and field systems for the living. An essentially backward-looking ancestral landscape had given way to a forward-looking agricultural landscape which required investment every year to ensure the following year's harvest.

The importance of agriculture is reflected in what we know of the Celtic calendar and the four great seasonal festivals. (Use of the term ‘Celtic’ is controversial in archaeological circles, but for purposes of this discussion it can be thought of as relating to Iron Age communities, roughly from 800BC through into the Roman period). The main annual festival, marking the start of the new year, was Samhain (in our calendar, the evening/night of 31st October and the day of 1st November). This marked the time when the harvest had been gathered and stock brought down from summer grazing grounds for the winter. All stock not required for breeding purposes was slaughtered, and either consumed during a great feast or preserved for consumption over the winter. It was also the time when spirits emerged from their dwellings in sacred places within the landscape and walked the earth, an echo of which survives as our hallowe’en. Three months after Samhain, on 1st February, was Imbolc. Little is known for sure about this festival, but it was probably linked to the lambing cycle. After another 3 months, on 1st May, was the great festival of Beltane, marking the onset of summer. This seems to have been linked with Belenus, a sun-god popular throughout the Celtic world. The fourth great festival, lasting a month centred on 1st August, was Lughnasa, closely linked with Lugh, another widely revered sun-god. It may seem odd that neither the winter solstice, clearly of such importance in earlier and later times (and now re-branded as Christmas), nor the summer solstice, seem to have been key festivals in the Celtic calendar, but they were probably still celebrated in some way.

The absence of burials and specifically ritual monuments makes it difficult for archaeologists to study the religion of later prehistory, hence Iron Age archaeology has tended to focus on discussions of settlement morphology and agriculture. But there are many clues as to the belief systems of the Iron Age, and there can be no

doubt that Iron Age people lived within what for them was a very spiritual world. There is huge potential for further work in this field within the north-east.

Burials

The archaeological record for the earlier Bronze Age, prior to about 1500BC, is dominated by burial mounds. In extraordinary contrast, burials from the later Bronze Age and Iron Age are almost unknown throughout the north-east; the dead must have been disposed of in a way that leaves no trace in the ground. Presumably they were cremated and their ashes scattered somewhere, possibly in rivers or even perhaps over the field systems which were expanding to cover larger tracts of landscape through the later Bronze Age and into the Iron Age, and which probably had a spiritual dimension in addition to their practical role in food production. The few burials suspected to be of later Bronze Age or Iron Age date vary greatly in form, suggesting they were never part of widespread traditions. Examples include: three late Bronze Age cremations beneath a small cairn near Bolam Lake; two adjacent probable graves of about 1000BC at Little Haystacks, Ingram; a cremation with a late Iron Age bronze pin within a small cairn at Alnham; the curiously partial inhumation of an elderly woman in a cist, probably of the first century BC, at Lanton Quarry, Milfield; a cist at Beadnell on the Northumberland coast containing the partial remains of up to fifteen individuals; two inhumations beneath the floor of a roundhouse at Catcote, Hartlepool; three recently excavated long-cist burials at Faverdale (Darlington) which frustratingly could not be scientifically dated; and half a dozen inhumations in a cave at Bishop Middleham.

Trying to build any sort of general model of Iron Age burial on the basis of such a hotchpotch of examples is clearly impossible. Perhaps methods of disposal of the dead were never uniform across our region, and must also have varied through time. To the north of our region, in Lothian, late Iron Age inhumation cemeteries have been investigated adjacent to settlements at Broxmouth and Dryburn Bridge, so it is possible that similar discoveries could be made in north Northumberland in the environs of our hillforts and other late prehistoric settlements. To the south of our region, in East Yorkshire, a few Iron Age individuals were interred within square barrows, occasionally with chariots (the so-called 'Arras culture chariot burials'), but we have no indication of anything comparable from the north-east. Elsewhere in Yorkshire, late Iron Age burials have been excavated at a few settlement sites, some in pits with associated artefacts such as beads, bracelets or brooches. From our region, however, there really is very little that we can say about burials between about 1500BC and the Roman period.

Metalwork hoards and 'wet places'.

From late Bronze Age times onwards, for reasons we do not understand, people deposited high-status objects in the ground, often in wet places such as bogs and rivers. In many cases, several objects are found in the same place, suggesting that the place of deposition may have been no less important than the objects that were deposited. The objects were often metal; although they may have been deposited along with other things, it is usually only the metal objects that survive for us to study. In the past, much attention has been paid to these objects, but relatively little to the places in the landscape where they were found. In general terms, many hoards, which can include a range of objects such as weapons (e.g. swords, spearheads) and tools

(e.g. axes), are found in wet places that may once have been bogs or pools; many were found during drainage operations. (An echo of the practice of depositing valuable things in wet places survives to the present day in the form of wishing wells). Some were found in the nineteenth century, while others were only found very recently, sometimes through metal detecting. The Belief in the North-East project will include study of the objects but will focus primarily on the places where these hoards were found; are there patterns that can be identified, beyond the general observation regarding wet places? And how do these places relate to other elements of the archaeological landscape? Volunteers will study the objects from each known hoard, and visit the findspots, making a comprehensive photographic record of these places within their landscape context.

Left. Spearheads and other objects from the Eggleston Hoard, Teesdale (found 2019). Image © Portable Antiquities Scheme/Durham County Council.
Right. Objects from the Heathery Burn Hoard, Weardale (found in the nineteenth century). Image © British Museum.

By way of example, a few metalwork finds from different parts of the north-east will be briefly described. From a few kms north of Rothbury, the Whittingham (Thrunton) hoard, consisting of three spearheads and two swords, all of bronze and dating from about 900BC, was found while digging drains through a moss in about 1847. From a little further south, the Wallington hoard was found while draining a swamp in 1879; it includes 28 bronze objects including swords, spearheads and axes. The Heathery Burn hoard, arguably the most extraordinary hoard from northern England, was found in the mid 19th century in a cave above Stanhope, through which a stream flowed. The hoard consists of more than a hundred objects, including two of gold, and dates from about 900BC; most of the objects are now in the British Museum. Not far from Heathery Burn, a hoard of fifteen bronze objects of similar date, now lost, was found near the village of Eastgate, in 1812. From the south of the region, an amazing hoard of 123 bronze objects was found in 1980, during drainage works in a field near the village of Gilmonby in Teesdale; the findspot was close to a spring. Several bronze

swords have been dredged from the Tyne near Newcastle; three more from the Wear at Hylton. A sword with its bronze scabbard was found adjacent to the Skerne at Barmpton. But not all such finds are from rivers or wet places: a hoard of bronze horse fittings, amber beads, a spearhead and pottery, dating from about 900BC, was found by a metal detectorist at High Throston (Hartlepool) in 2002. Three years later in 2005, at the opposite end of our region in a field near Berwick upon Tweed, another metal detectorist found a hoard of similar date that includes six gold lock rings, a razor, bracelets, rings, axes, a bronze ingot (suggesting that some bronze was recycled) and pottery. There are many more bronze objects from possible ritual contexts in addition to the few mentioned here; together they make a fascinating corpus for project volunteers to study in the attempt to try and work out why people effectively ‘threw them away’. Were they ‘gifts to the Gods’ as is often supposed? Or are there other explanations?

The apparent obsession with wet places perhaps sees its ultimate expression in the 'bog bodies', such as the celebrated Lindow Man from Cheshire and several well-known examples from Denmark and Ireland. It seems that these individuals were ritually sacrificed and their bodies left in bogs. The liminal nature of such places, neither land nor water, was presumably a key factor underlying this practice, though we don't know the detail of why such sacrifices were made. No examples are recorded from the north-east, but it would come as no great surprise if some were eventually to be found.

Having noted that many metal objects seem to have ended up being deposited in the ground, for whatever reason, we should briefly consider their origins and in particular the 'magic' of metalworkers. It is possible that some copper could have been mined within our region, in the North Pennines, but the tin necessary for the production of bronze almost certainly came from Cornwall, so it is quite possible that supplies of copper also came from afar. Workable iron ore is plentiful at various places throughout the region, and iron working seems to have taken place locally on many, perhaps most, settlement sites. But regardless of where the mineral resources actually came from, the manufacture of metal objects was a specialist task which we know from numerous ethnographic cases around the world was often bound up with concepts of alchemy or magic, linked to the carefully controlled use of fire. So, it is quite probable that gods or spirits associated with metalworking played a significant role in the belief systems of the Bronze and Iron Ages.

Ritual aspects of settlements and field systems

Traditionally, Iron Age settlements have been interpreted very much in straightforward functional terms, under headings such as 'hillforts and homesteads'. The hillforts of north Northumberland, which vary greatly in size and form, are seen as defensible settlements, while smaller enclosed sites (of which hundreds are known throughout the region, many of them recorded as cropmarks within ploughed fields) are interpreted as farmsteads, often surrounded by field systems. While these sites undoubtedly did function as settlements, it seems inconceivable that they didn't also incorporate a large degree of 'ritual' symbolism within their architecture. It has been suggested, for example, that most roundhouses were constructed with their entrances facing eastwards to face the rising sun (though there are many exceptions to this, including some in the uplands where the direction of the entrance is determined as much by the lie of the land as anything else), and that their internal space may have

been structured in relation to the daily passage of the sun across the sky. It is important to note that not all round buildings need necessarily have been houses; some may have been workshops or byres, while others could conceivably have been temples or shrines though none have yet been confidently identified as such. It is quite possible that some hillforts could have functioned as centres for communal ritual, perhaps including seasonal gatherings linked to annual festivals at particular times of year. The greatest of the Cheviot hillforts, Yeavering Bell, which contains visible remains of about 140 circular buildings, has its main entrance facing due south towards the distinctive profile of Hedgehope; this must have been of ritual significance to the people who lived within, or visited, the hillfort. Such ritual aspects of Iron Age architecture demand much further study, and may help to unlock some of the mysteries of Iron Age cosmology.

The magnificent hillfort crowning Yeavering Bell, on the northern edge of the Cheviots, is usually interpreted in functional terms, as a defended settlement. However, there can be little doubt that its architecture incorporates ritual aspects that can reasonably be regarded as 'religious'. Indeed, it may well have been the focus for ritual gatherings at particular times of year, to which people came from far and wide. Although Yeavering is exceptional in many ways, other Northumberland hillforts probably also combined 'religious' elements with everyday practical concerns. (Aerial image © Airfotos Ltd)

Recent large-scale excavations of Iron Age settlements on the Northumberland lowlands, for example at Pegswood (north of Morpeth), and Blagdon Park, East Brunton and West Brunton (adjacent to the A1 north of Newcastle) have resulted in fascinating discoveries of objects such as querns, cupmarked stones, cattle skulls and pottery that seem to have been ritually deposited in significant places, notably at particular points within roundhouses and in the terminals of enclosure ditches. While it could be argued that finding things in ditch terminals, adjacent to entrance causeways, is no surprise because this is where they were most likely to be thrown away or dropped, as people passed through the entrances, such patterns seem to occur too frequently to be explained this way, and must be a result of some kind of ritual activity. Further examples of apparent ritual deposition have been observed at several other excavated sites (eg Doubstead, Burradon, South Shields, Coxhoe and Thorpe Thewles), occasionally involving presumably valuable objects such as beads or bangles of glass or jet, or bronze brooches. At Street House, Cleveland, a perfectly formed miniature quernstone, just 7cm in diameter, was buried in a ring ditch (presumably of a roundhouse), just south of its entrance causeway; assuming this wasn't made for an Iron Age doll's house it must have been a ritual object of some kind. On higher ground, a portion of a quernstone was found reused within an Iron Age roundhouse at Fawdon Dene at Ingram in the Cheviots, and excavations at Bollihope Common in Weardale have led to suggestions of a ritual dimension, such as the structured layering of floors, within the architecture of roundhouses. While some of these situations could have been the results of purely practical decisions, such as recycling a broken quern for use as a building stone, it might be a useful exercise to re-examine records of all excavated Iron Age settlement sites throughout the region to see whether hints of ritual activity can be recognised elsewhere, and perhaps interpreted with regard to the wider belief systems of Iron Age people.

Iron Age roundhouse under excavation, Ingram, and a reconstructed house at High Rochester, Redesdale. There is increasing recognition amongst archaeologists that while Iron Age communities may not have built temples to their gods, domestic structures like these contained much ‘religious’ symbolism.

Away from settlement sites, beehive querns (of probable pre-Roman date) have occasionally been found in what can only be described at ritual contexts. Several such examples are known from North Yorkshire, and the recent recovery of an example from Cow Green Reservoir, Upper Teesdale (when the water level was very low in summer 2018) fits this pattern. Clearly, people thought it necessary for some reason to make such votive offerings, and the querns, although primarily functional tools for grinding grain and thus essential on every settlement, were also obviously of ritual significance when used in this way. Some speculation has been attempted relating to the possible 'transformative' symbolism of querns, but there is scope for much more

constructive thinking into the ways in which 'everyday' structures and objects may have featured within Iron Age belief systems.

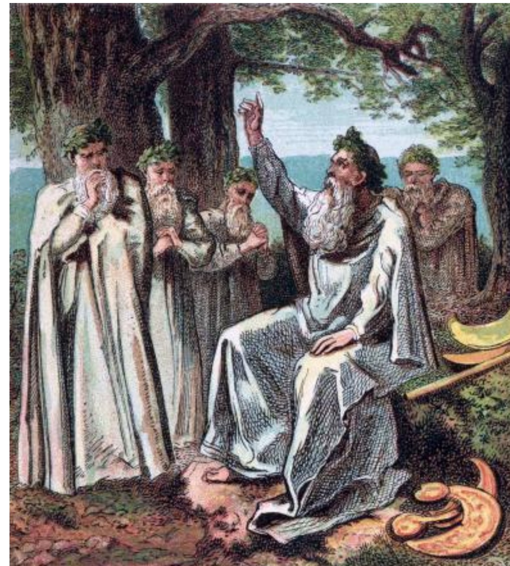
In summer 2018, when the water level in Cow Green reservoir was very low, a pair of quernstones was noted lying in the silt. There was no settlement anywhere nearby. These stones had clearly been placed here for some ritual reason, at a site which at the time would would have overlooked the Upper Tees. Both stones had their smooth faces upward, with the upper stone partly overlain by the lower. A few similar cases of ritually deposited querns are known from comparable locations in Yorkshire, but exactly why they should have been deposited like this is not known.

Documentary sources: Druids and Celtic gods

Finally in this overview of later prehistoric religion, we must mention the literary sources, but with a warning that their interpretation is fraught with difficulty and their relevance to north-east England is very much open to question. They fall into two classes, one of which we may term 'Roman' or 'Classical', the other 'Celtic'. Classical writers, including Julius Caesar in the mid first century BC, tell us little of Iron Age gods or belief systems, but do talk of the Druids. (Iron Age Druids must not be confused with the present-day 'Ancient Order of Druids', which dates back only to the late eighteenth-century). The original Druids seem to have been very powerful within late Iron Age society, acting as politicians and judges as well as priests. They controlled supernatural forces by means of divination, sometimes linked to human sacrifice. Mention is also made of sacred oak trees and mistletoe, and the Druids were apparently as interested in aspects of the natural world as in religion (though they would not have seen a clear divide between the two as we tend to do today).

The Druids are also mentioned within ancient Irish literature as prophets, magicians and royal advisers, sometimes involved in the appointment of kings. The ancient Irish myths (and to a lesser extent those of Wales) are useful in giving a taste of the complexity of Celtic mythology and belief, but they were not written down until medieval times so cannot be regarded as historically authentic. They illustrate the importance of the natural world and tell of the exploits of supernatural beings, some

of which are linked to named Celtic deities known from inscriptions and other sources elsewhere.



Two 19th-century reconstructions of Druids. Did such characters exist in Iron Age north-east England, and were they as powerful as traditionally believed? Quite possibly, but we simply have no way of knowing for sure.
Left: 'An Archdruid in his Judicial Habit', with Irish Bronze Age antiquities and, oddly, a snake in a basket (reproduced from Meyrick and Smith, 1815, The Costume of the Original Inhabitants of the British Isles).
Right: 'Druids of Old England (reproduced form J M Kronheim, 1868, Pictures of English History: From the Earliest Times to the Present Period).

While we have no clear evidence of any gods in the north-east prior to Roman times, it is reasonable to assume that some of the most popular gods of the Celtic Iron Age were known to the people of our region. It is important to realise that there was no great Celtic pantheon, with specific gods allocated particular responsibilities like those of Greece and Rome, but it does seem that a few great gods, or local versions of them, were recognised throughout the Celtic world. One of the best known is Cernunnos, the horned or antlered god, depicted most famously on the great Iron Age silver cauldron from Gundestrup, Denmark, but also recorded in many other places. It may be that other, unnamed representations of horned gods, including a few from our region, could be related to Cernunnos, with the horns representing fertility, linked to cycles of death and regeneration. Taranis was a sky god equated in some places with Jupiter; he is shown in characteristic pose with wheel (representing the sun) and lighting-flash on a pottery mould from Corbridge, but this does not of course demonstrate his presence here in pre-Roman times. Rosmerta, a 'goddess of plenty' usually depicted with a large barrel or tub (perhaps representing a magic cauldron such as those recorded in Celtic mythology) and often equated with Mercury, features in carvings from Corbridge and Newcastle, but again we have pre-Roman evidence and it is perhaps most likely that she was brought here by serving soldiers from the Rhineland, where she was very popular. Epona, the horse goddess, was very popular in Gaul; horses were crucial to the Celtic way of life, notably in warfare, and were commonly depicted on Iron Age coins in southern England. It seems highly likely that

Epona was worshipped here in pre-Roman times, but the only unambiguous evidence we have of her presence is a Roman altar from Carvoran.

Also likely to have had a pre-Roman presence here are the few local Celtic gods recorded in the frontier zone but unknown elsewhere, though it is possible that some of these were 'invented' during Roman times. In this category are Antenociticus, Belatucadros, Cocidius, Coventina and Maponus, all of which are considered in the following article on Roman times. There must also have been many others, destined never to be recorded in Roman times and thus lost to us forever.

Other Celtic gods known from Roman inscriptions in our region, most notably the *Deae Matres,* the *genii cucullati* and the Veteres, were almost certainly brought here by serving soldiers from Celtic regions such as the Rhineland, though it is far from impossible that they, or versions of them, were also known here prior to the conquest. Again, these are considered in the next article.

The antlered god, Cernunnos, pictured on the Gundestrup cauldron from Denmark, thought to date from the 1st or 2nd century BC. We currently have no way of knowing whether he would have been recognised by an Iron Age inhabitant of north-east England, but it is likely that similar deities were worshipped here. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons / National Museum, Copenhagen).

Elsewhere in Celtic Europe, images of what appear to be deities are incorporated into splendid artefacts of bronze and silver, perhaps most notably the Gundestrup cauldron though there also many other examples. But in our region there is nothing, no stone carvings, metal objects or anything else, that can be considered as a representation of a deity throughout the later Bronze Age and pre-Roman Iron Age, despite the numerous excavations that have taken place on sites of this period. Of course, it is possible that images were carved in wood, or produced using other perishable

materials that have not survived, but we might reasonably expect something in stone or metal to have survived if such images were ever made. The logical conclusion is that it was not thought appropriate to manufacture images of the gods; they were simply not needed. The Irish Celtic myths make it clear that gods did exist, at least in the minds of people, and also that they were sometimes regarded as anthropomorphic, though were often capable of shapeshifting and appearing as animals. The story of Brennus, King of the Gauls, scoffing at the very concept of gods in human form when seeing such statues at Delphi in the late third century BC, certainly suggests that anthropomorphic representations of gods were not part of Celtic culture at that time. Perhaps the Celtic gods are best regarded as essentially conceptual, intimately linking the living landscape, the heavens and humanity through sophisticated oral tradition, rather than as 'beings' that could be reproduced in stone to form artificial foci for worship. In many ways, such a 'religion' may appear infinitely more profound and satisfying than the Roman alternative of squabbling anthropomorphic gods and goddesses, or even perhaps than the Christian god, often depicted in anthropomorphic form, his son, and assorted mortal saints. Perhaps the Celtic 'way of being' owed much to the traditions of earlier periods, and abstract Celtic art (sadly absent in our region) almost certainly incorporates what we might term 'religious iconography', even though we can't understand it; in this it may retain faint echoes of the much earlier cup-and-ring art of the Neolithic.

Summary

Caesar observes that the Celts were very religious and we have no reason to doubt this, even though we know little of their actual ritual practices within our region. He notes specifically that a belief in the immortality of the soul was important to Celtic warriors as it negated the fear of death. In general terms, Celtic religion seems to have been focussed on aspects of the natural world, with landscape features such as rivers, waterfalls, mountains and even trees, as well as the sun and other heavenly bodies, having their own spirits or divine forces. The calendar and key festivals, as noted above, were closely linked to the agricultural year. Many gods were associated with particular animals, and many are known from only one place, demonstrating the significance of local sacred places. The Celtic name of Yeavering Bell, '*Gefrin*', means 'hill of the goats', suggesting a link between this place and wild mountain goats; goats seem to have been linked with fertility in both Celtic and Classical tradition. In short, it would seem that Celtic spirituality involved a wide range of gods and spirits, all intimately linked with aspects of the natural world. This was a religion that had its priests and its gods, but did not need temples or cemeteries. Perhaps largely for this reason, while we can speculate about the gods and the ways in which they were worshipped, there is very little that we can say for sure about Iron Age religion in the north-east.

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