

2000

The Severed Head in Celtic Literature and Beyond

Leah Concannon

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/honors_etd



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

The Severed Head in Celtic Literature and Beyond

Leah Concannon

Senior Honors Thesis
Louisiana State University, 2000

The ancient Celts are commonly known for their strange battle practices, particularly their reported tendency to enter into armed conflicts naked. Even more startling than that practice is their custom of taking human heads as battle trophies. While this practice is certainly not confined to the Celts, their treatment of severed heads is indeed unique. Historians recorded the Celtic veneration of the heads of slain enemies as early as the first century BC and stories of the magical powers of severed heads are prominent in medieval literature. This paper looks at those long standing traditions and explores their use in later medieval and even twentieth century literature, proving that while the actual taking of heads is no longer practiced, the traditions which governed this custom are still very much alive.

Historical documentation of severed heads

In the twenty-third book of his Historia, written in the first century BC, the Greek historian Posidonius gives a detailed account of the Celtic peoples dwelling in southern Gaul at the time. Posidonius deemed the Celts barbaric and savage for the way they handled the heads they had severed. “When returning from battle, [they would] suspend the heads of their defeated enemies on the necks of their horses, in this way bringing them back to be nailed to the front of their doors.”¹ Posidonius tells us that it was only the frequency with which he witnessed this event that eventually enabled him to become accustomed to it. After the Celts had brought the heads home, they would embalm certain ones in cedar oil and keep them in a chest. The heads would be brought out and displayed to strangers, and the owner would boast that he had refused to sell it, even for a generous price.

¹ This is my translation of Posidonius found in Sterckx.

The historian Diodorus of Sicily, also writing in the first century BC, corroborates Posidonius' observations and adds even more detail. He writes that after the enemy heads had been severed from their bodies, the Celts would sing a song of victory. The Celts would then hang these heads on the doors of their houses, a practice Diodorus compares with the custom of hunters, "displaying the heads of wild beasts they have mastered." In addition, they would embalm the heads of their most distinguished enemies.

Some men. . .boast that they have not accepted an equal weight of gold for the head they show, displaying a barbarous sort of greatness of soul; for not to sell that which constitutes a witness and proof of one's valor is a noble thing. (Diodorus of Sicily, Vol III, v)

The owners could not sell the heads because the defeated warrior must be accorded respect when the head is taken. A head may be honorably taken only in fair combat; for another to receive the head simply by buying it would diminish the worth of both the defeated enemy and the triumphant warrior. Other writers have recorded that in addition to the embalming of heads, sometimes the Celts would also spear the heads on their lances and use the ghastly sight to terrorize their remaining enemies.

While the taking of heads in battle is certainly not unique to the Celts, the reverence and respect they show the heads is unique. This veneration can be explained by the fact that the Celts regarded the human head as a symbol of divinity and Otherworld powers. It was also regarded as the most important member of the body, for it was believed to be both the residence of the soul and the center of a man's character and personality traits. It was also thought to house a man's life force. Frederick Suppe explores cultural differences regarding the practice of decapitation between Celtic and non-Celtic peoples in his work on the relations between medieval Welsh and Anglo-

Saxons. For the Welsh, the practice of bringing severed heads away after a battle carried with it a measure of respect and veneration for the slain warrior.

The victor enhanced his honor and reputation, but only if he killed his foes honorably in battle and only if he paid proper respect to their reputations and honor as fellow warriors. To decapitate someone who was not a warrior or to behead a warrior treacherously off the battlefield. . . would demean the perpetrator, insult the victim and his friends and relatives, and sully the whole concept of veneration for the head. . . such an act would diminish rather than enhance the honor of the decapitator. (Suppe 1989, 149)

This is similar to Diodorus' claim that only a head properly taken in battle could serve to increase the victor's honor. While Celtic warriors always knew the names of their beheaded enemies, so they would know how great a victory they had accomplished, the Anglo-Saxons often neither knew nor cared. We can see the apparent disregard for severed heads in the Old English tale "Beowulf." As Beowulf is tracking Grendel's mother, he finds the head of Aeschere, her last victim, lying on the ground. Grendel's mother has not set the head on a stake to act as a warning, nor has she taken it to her den as a trophy; instead she merely discards it. Her action is representative of the indifference with which non-Celtic peoples treat severed heads.

The Anglo-Saxons thought the Welsh custom of decapitating men in battle was barbaric, because they believed that decapitation was a punishment, and was appropriate only for a court to inflict. The Welsh thought that this practice of decapitating prisoners was shameful because it was not in keeping with the proper veneration of the head of the enemy; there is no honor in killing a man who cannot defend himself. This difference in cultural values only served to exacerbate the tension between the medieval Welsh and the neighboring Anglo-Saxons.

Archeological evidence of severed heads

The evidence of archaeology can serve to validate the historical writings.² Many cemeteries have been uncovered in which we find victims buried without their heads. At a cemetery in Bouvrets, in France, one grave contains fourteen skeletons without their heads and another has one body with the severed head placed between the knees. At Uggade in Normandy there are seven graves that contain only heads, without any evidence of a brutal decapitation. The strange nature of these decapitations might be explained by the graves at Mt. Trote in France, where the decapitation seems to have taken place after the flesh had decomposed, thereby enabling an easy removal of the head. At Wookey Hole in Somerset, fourteen human skulls, as well as pottery, were placed at the bottom of an underground pool. The heads all belonged to people between the ages of twenty-five and thirty, and twelve of the fourteen are male. The presence of the two female heads has caused some to question whether or not the heads were taken in battle. Women warriors are well documented in medieval Irish literature, however. For example, in “The Wooing of Emer,” the woman Scathach teaches the great hero Cu Chulainn his feats of arms. It is in fact Scathach who teaches him the *gae bulga*, the one feat from which no one can escape. Medb, the queen of Connacht, begins the great Cattle-Raid of Cooley, the central epic of the Ulster cycle of Irish literature, when she steals the famous Donn of Cooley. It is also Medb, and not her husband Ailill, who arranges for her men to fight Cu Chulainn. The female heads present at the site, therefore, must be considered as possibly belonging to warriors. The presence of the pottery with

² For the following archeological evidence I have relied heavily on the work of Sterckx and Ross.

the heads seems to indicate that they were placed there for ritual purposes (Ross, 107).

This is probably also the case with the heads found at Mt Trote and Uggade.

Sometimes heads were not buried but were instead placed in sanctuaries. At Entremont in France, numerous severed heads are carved in stone throughout the temple, including some engraved on a pillar nearly eight feet high. Throughout the sanctuary more than twenty heads have been found. On many of these it is possible to see the evidence of the holes for the nails that would fix them to the wall. The most famous sanctuary is Roquepertuse, built in the second century BC in the south of France. Its portico is decorated with carvings in stone of horses' heads and a goose. These animals symbolize the Celtic god of war (who had many different local names, but in Roman times was equated with Mars) and indicate that it is a sanctuary for him (Ross, 271). Around the walls, niches were constructed to hold human heads, while heads carved in stone flank them. All the skulls that are still present belonged to men under the age of forty, indicating that they were probably the heads of warriors. The Roman historian Livy described in the first century BC how, in 216 BC, the Celtic tribe of the Boii placed the head of a prized enemy chieftain in a temple, leading Ross to believe that the heads at Roquepertuse are also enemy heads dedicated to the god of war (Ross, 64-66).

The severed heads of defeated enemies were also used as warnings to other adversaries who might wish to attack. At Bredon Hill in Worcester, heads were placed on stakes at the gate in order to frighten the enemy away. At other fortresses, the actual heads were replaced by less ephemeral carvings in stone. The use of heads to physically frighten the enemy was later replaced by the belief in the head's magical ability to keep the enemy at bay. The heads do not need to be physically displayed for the magic to

work, and concealing them now becomes possible. At a fortress in Yorkshire, a skull and a spear were found buried in the ramparts. At Impernal in Quercy, three heads were found in the rampart, one of an infant, one of a child, and the last of an adult, all placed there to ward off attackers. It is unclear, however, why an infant's and a child's heads are included, for clearly they were not trophies taken in battle. Severed heads have even been found inside the walls of houses, presumably for the same protective effect.

The protective powers of heads in medieval literature

The tradition of heads in ramparts carries into the literature of the twelfth century. In Chretien de Troyes' "Erec and Enide" we find this motif in the *Joie de la Cort*—the Joy of the Court—which constitutes the final adventure in the tale. In order to bring Joy back to King Evrain's court, Erec must fight a battle in a garden sealed with black magic. As he approaches the gate to the garden, he is met with a horrible sight,

For there in front of them, impaled
On spikes, was a row of gleaming
Helmets, and under every
Helmet but one was a head.
The last spike, they could see,
Held nothing but a horn. (Chretien, 5784-5789)

The spikes do not frighten Erec, for he does not know what they signify, but the king who accompanies him is well aware of their meaning, warning him that

You ought to feel mortal fear,
If you value your life, for this one
Empty spike, where only
A horn hangs, has been waiting
For a knight. Who? We don't know—
You or someone else.
Be careful, don't let the head
Be yours, as it's meant to be. (Chretien, 5798-5805)

He also tells Erec that should he fail, his head will be placed on the spike and another empty one will be planted, waiting for the next head.

The purpose of the stakes in both history and literature is to alert the warrior that he should flee if he wishes to avoid the same fate. The empty stake, and the heads of all the brave warriors who have gone before him and failed, does not seem to frighten Erec at all, however. The hero in both Celtic and Arthurian tales must, of course, face his adversaries bravely or he would not be a hero, so perhaps this accounts for his nonchalance. It is also much easier to act courageously in literature than in real life.

In Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain, we see this belief in the power of heads to protect a stronghold taken to a new level. Arthur relates to his companions the tale of his defeat of the giant Retho who lived on Mount Arvarius. Retho's custom is to take the beards of all the kings whom he kills and put them together to make a fur cloak. Eventually Retho sends a message to Arthur, demanding that Arthur tear off his beard and send it to him, so that he can put it on his cloak.

Since Arthur was more distinguished than any of the other kings, Retho promised in his honor to sew his beard higher up the cloak than the others. If Arthur would not do this, then Retho challenged him to a duel, saying that whoever proved the stronger should have the fur cloak as a trophy and also the beard of the man he had beaten. Soon after the battle began, Arthur was victorious. He took the giant's beard and the trophy too. (Geoffrey, 216)

Retho's cloak is symbolic of many different motifs. Here the beards seem to symbolize the whole head, just as the head can be understood to represent the whole body, for the cloak is a trophy-piece symbolizing his many victories. Retho highly prizes these beards and apparently even has them placed in some sort of hierarchy, as perhaps he would have if they had been actual heads. The cloak can also be seen as a protective

measure; Retho's body is a stronghold, and the cloak of beards is like the rampart decorated with heads set up to protect it. The cloak would certainly serve to frighten others away, just as severed heads on stakes terrorize enemies before a stronghold. The cloak might also be believed to contain magical abilities to protect the wearer, just as concealed heads were believed to protect the castle from invasion. Another point to consider is that it is a common theme across cultures that the strength of a warrior resides in his hair, as can be seen in the biblical story of Samson. To cut off a warrior's beard, then, is to remove his strength, and it is this strength that Retho accumulates and preserves in his cloak.

Sources of water affected by severed heads

The magical powers of severed heads are not relegated to ramparts, however. Numerous sources of water are named for the heads that were thrown into them. Lakes and wells were believed to react adversely whenever they were desecrated in any way, but the presence of a head intensified this effect and often caused the water to possess magical powers.³ *Loch Cend*, the Lake of the Heads, was given its name after a particularly vicious battle was fought there. The victors threw the heads of nine hundred warriors into the lake, whereupon it turned blood-red in a reaction to the desecration. At a different location, Riach, the victor of a battle, threw the heads of the defeated into a nearby well. Aware that the well now had evil powers because it had been defiled, Riach attempted to build a structure over the well in order to control it. The magic water boiled over anyway, drowning Riach and a thousand other men. The magic powers of another

³ Further discussion can be found in Ross, 108ff.

well located on a hill named *Sliabh Gam*, or Gam's Hill, caused it to be named one of the Wonders of Ireland. Gam was decapitated next to a well on the hill and his head thrown into it. In response, the well thereafter was sweet and pure for half the year and the other half it was salty and bitter. The well's strange reaction may be explained by a simple natural phenomenon; for example the well's source might be a briny marsh, but snowmelt in the spring could cause the water to run clear for the season.

Sometimes these magical reactions to severed heads give the well healing powers. The pagan association of the head with a sacred well was later transferred to the legends of nearby saints. For instance, when St. Winefride of Wales was decapitated, a healing well is reported to have sprung up from the place where his head landed. The legend of St. Melor of Cornwall has a similar theme. St. Melor is murdered and decapitated, and his killer sets out to bring the head to the saint's wicked uncle, who ordered the murder. The assassin becomes weak and faint and cries out for help, whereupon the head instructs him to strike his staff into the ground and a spring will pour forth. "And when he fixed the staff in the earth, it took root and was turned into a most beautiful tree, and brought forth branches and fruit, and from its root an unfailing fountain began to well forth" (Ross, 109). Melor became a saint of healing waters, probably because of this episode. In Welsh tradition the skull was sometimes thought to be the guardian of the well and in contemporary Scottish tradition well-water drunk from the skull of an ancestor was believed to cure epilepsy. Sources of water are traditionally thought of as doorways to the Otherworld. It is perhaps from this double association with magic that tales of magical water are so very widespread throughout the Celtic tradition.

Severed heads as trophies in medieval Irish literature

Irish literature of the Middle Ages abounds with instances of severed heads, particularly those taken as spoils of war.⁴ This particular kind of trophy hunting seems to be a kind of rite of passage for young Celtic warriors. It cannot be so defined in the traditional sense, for it is not just the newly initiated who practice decapitation, but warriors of all ages. Nonetheless, the taking of heads is an important step that must be taken before a youth can be considered a warrior. “The Boyhood Deeds of Cu Chulainn” provides an example of this initiation into the ranks of manhood by a youth’s first decapitation of an enemy. In this tale, Cu Chulainn, at the young age of seven, has taken up arms for the first time. He chooses the day of this action specifically because he has overheard a prophecy: the lad who takes up arms on this day will have everlasting fame in all Ireland because he will best all the other warriors in the land. The only price he must pay for this fame is a short life, but an early death is of little consequence to him if he will live forever in the minds of others.

For his first battle on this day, Cu Chulainn instructs his driver to take him to the stronghold of Nechtan Sceine’s sons, “of whom it is said that the number of Ulstermen now alive exceeds not the number of them fallen by their hands” (Cross and Slover, 147). The ogam on a stone in the clearing warns Cu Chulainn that since he has entered the clearing, it is now taboo for him to leave without challenging an inhabitant of the dwelling to single combat. When Foill mac Nechtain sees Cu Chulainn, however, he deems him unfit for battle, for he is too young. Cu Chulainn takes offense at this, and

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Irish tales come from Cross and Slover’s compilation book, Ancient Irish Tales.

challenges Foill to battle. On the first throw of his ball, Cu Chulainn dashes in Foill's forehead and kills him and then takes his head. Cu Chulainn takes Foill's two brothers' heads as well, before their bodies even hit the ground.

When Cu Chulainn returns to Emain Macha, "his chariot is graced with the bleeding heads of his enemies" (Cross and Slover, 151). Those who see him riding in victory recognize that they must "abate his manly rage (the result of having shed blood)" (Cross and Slover, 151). His fury is so great that they must immerse him in three vats of water—perhaps one for each head?—to cool him off and return him to his natural form. It is significant that his rage after shedding blood is dubbed "manly," despite the fact that he is still a little boy. Clearly, the feat of having defeated three enemies and taken their heads allows him to be welcomed into the ranks of the full-fledged warriors; he is no longer a member of the boy-corps. He suspends the heads on his chariot as proof of his proficiency in combat, so that all may know that he has joined the ranks of the warriors. These three heads are but the first of many to come for the young hero.

Since Cu Chulainn's life is filled with the taking of heads, it is only fitting that his death occurs by decapitation. Cu Chulainn is fated to die young in exchange for his eternal fame, and when the day of his death approaches all the earth bears witness to his coming doom: the land fills with smoke and weapons fall from their racks. After losing his charioteer and one of his horses, Cu Chulainn himself is wounded.

He gathered his bowels to his breast, and went forth to the loch. And there he drank his drink, and washed himself, and came forth to die, calling on his foes to come to meet him. (Cross and Slover, 337)

Many of the enemies who face him that day are kinsmen of men he had slain, and they urge each other on with exhortations such as "It is a shame for you not to take that man's

head in revenge for my father's head which was taken by him" (Cross and Slover, 338).

When the Morrighu, the goddess of battle and death, comes and sits on Cu Chulainn's shoulder, it is a sign that his time to die has arrived.

Then Lugaid arranged Cu Chulainn's hair over his shoulder, and cut off his head. And then fell the sword from Cu Chulainn's hand, and smote off Lugaid's right hand, which fell on the ground. And Cu Chulainn's right hand was cut off in revenge for this. Lugaid and the hosts then marched away, carrying with them Cu Chulainn's head and his right hand, and they came to Tara, and there is the "Sick-bed" of his head and his right hand, and the full cover of his shield and mould. (Cross and Slover, 338)

The action of Cu Chulainn's sword arm can be looked at in two ways. It is possible that the sword simply fell out of his hand because at the moment of his beheading his power to grasp it disappeared. But it seems more consistent with what we know of Cu Chulainn to view this as a last, purposeful act by the hero. As evidenced by his many decisive victories, Cu Chulainn has an excess of life-energy. And while this energy resides in the head, it also courses in the blood, blood that still remains in Cu Chulainn's body. Perhaps then the act is not a mistake but is instead a manifestation of his desire for revenge, even as he dies. It is interesting to note as well that his head and hand do not seem to have been taken away in order to show them off as trophies. There is no evidence that they were nailed on walls or put on stakes or given any other violent treatment, as were so many other heads. Instead his body parts seem to have been treated delicately, for a sick-bed is generally covered with pillows and cushions. This treatment seems to indicate that they were kept as relics, in much the same way relics of saints are kept, such as the incorruptible bodies bedded on silk cushions that are displayed in Catholic churches. Whether Cu Chulainn's hand and head were reported to have had any special powers, such as those of severed heads in wells, is, however, left undisclosed.

Lugaid, Cu Chulainn's killer, also meets his death in this tale. Cu Chulainn and Conall the Victorious, another great Ulster hero, had made a promise to each other: whichever one of them died first, the other would avenge his death before the day was over. As Conall battles Lugaid in an attempt to fulfill this promise, Lugaid comes to the understanding that

“Thou [Conall] wilt not go till thou takest my head with thee, since we took Cu Chulainn's head from him. So take,” said he, “my head in addition to thine own, and add my realm to thy realm, and *my valor to thy valor*. For I prefer that thou shouldst be the best hero in Erin.” (Cross and Slover, 340, italics mine)

Lugaid here summarizes the Celtic belief in the power of a severed head. Conall is able to take Lugaid's realm because when he gains possession of the head it is proof of his mastery. When he says that Conall may add his honor to Conall's own it is representative of the belief that the head, as seat of the soul, carries within it all the attributes of the previous owner and that these attributes can be transferred to the victor. By owning the head, therefore, Conall's valor is increased not only because he has been victorious once again but also because Lugaid's own valor will actually be added to his own.

A story in the Finn cycle parallels that of Lugaid and Conall in “The Death of Cu Chulainn.” During the battle of Mag Tuired, Balor is defeated by his grandson, Lugh.

‘Twas Balor besought Lugh a short time before his beheading: “Set my head on thy own comely head and earn my blessing. The triumph and the terror that the men of Inis Fail found in me, well I wish that henceforth they may be found in my daughter's son.” That blessing nevertheless Lugh Longarm did not earn: he set the head above an eastern wave in a fork of hazel before his face. A poisonous milk drips down out of that tree of strong hardness: through the drip of the bane of no slight stress, the tree splits right in two. (Cited in Coe, 18)

We see in this tale the manifestation of the belief that within the head lies all the characteristics of a person, and that these attributes can be transferred to another. Balor

instructs Lugh to place his head on his own so that the bravery and power that he possessed may be passed down to his grandson. We can also see that Balor's head is aware of the fact that it has been disgraced and that it is able to express its anger by poisoning the tree in which it was placed.

In the "Death of Conchobar" we can see how these heads of enemies are treated after they are taken. Three of the greatest Ulster warriors—Cu Chulainn, Conall, and Loegaire—were arguing about which of them was the best by referring to the number of enemy heads each of them possessed. If a warrior was unable to take the entire head of a slain enemy with him, he would occasionally simply cut out the brain. The brain was then mixed with lime and formed into a hard ball, for in this way the trophy could be transported more easily. Such balls were more convenient, and "whenever they were in contention or at comparison of trophies, these were brought to them, so that they had them in their hands" (Cross and Slover, 343). When Conall displayed the brain of Mesgegra, it was agreed to be the most valuable trophy that any of them had.

Yet it was not only these three warriors who recognized the value of Mesgegra's head. Cet mac Metach, a distinguished Connacht warrior, and therefore enemy of the Ulstermen, stole the brain. It had been foretold that Mesgegra would avenge himself after his death, and Cet wanted to make sure that this prophecy came true. Cet carries the brain with him whenever he goes to battle, hoping to slay an Ulsterman with it. Cet finally gets his chance with Conchobar, the king of Ulster. He throws Mesgegra's head so that it hits Conchobar in the forehead and penetrates his skull. The doctor judges that to remove Mesgegra's brain will kill Conchobar, and so he leaves it in, admonishing Conchobar not to do any strenuous activity for the remainder of his life. He obeys until he learns of

Christ's crucifixion, at which point he declares that he wants the world to know how he would fight for Christ.

Then he rose and made the onslaught, until Mesgegra's brain jumped out of his head, so that Conchobar died forthwith. Hence the Gaels say that Conchobar was the first pagan who went to Heaven in Ireland, for the blood that sprang out of his head was a baptism to him. (Cross and Slover, 346)

This passage might be read as an indication of the end of the tradition of taking heads with the coming of Christianity, for only by expelling the head is Conchobar baptized. This is not the case however, for trophy-taking survived into the Middle Ages when this work was written down, as we see in the medieval Welsh examples presented by Suppe. This blending of pagan and Christian traditions is an indication of how the stories were changed in order to maintain their popularity in Christian times. The pagan motif of a severed head was too integral to the story to be taken out by the Christian scribes. Mesgegra does indeed get his revenge, for he incapacitates and ultimately kills the king of Ulster. Crucially, it is his brain that gets revenge, for it is within his brain that the desire for revenge would have resided.

It is not only warriors who are beheaded in battle: supernatural beings can also fall victim to this fate. Such is the case with Cu Roi mac Dairi, a supernatural being who is generally not friendly to the Ulstermen. At the siege of Fir Falgae, Cu Roi had abducted Blathnat, an Ulsterwoman with whom Cu Chulainn was in love. Cu Roi also stole the three cows of Iuchna and a special cauldron. Because of all this, Cu Chulainn plots Cu Roi's death, with the help of his lover Blathnat. Blathnat pours milk down the river as a signal to the Ulstermen that she has tied Cu Roi to his bed and opened the doors

of the stronghold. Though Cu Roi and his men put up a good fight, Cu Chulainn beheads him and wins the day.

When the Ulstermen finally have Blathnat back safely with them, one of them remarks that “it was only by striking off Cu Roi’s head that we obtained her deliverance” (Cross and Slover, 332). One way to understand this statement is in the literal sense, namely, that it was only in killing Cu Roi, the leader, that the Ulstermen were able to overcome his forces. But the warrior specifically says that it was only in decapitating Cu Roi that the victory was achieved. Cu Roi has supernatural powers; these include the gift of foresight, his power to move magically from one place to another, and his ability to keep his stronghold in Kerry spinning at all times. It is a common theme in mythology that such supernatural beings are difficult, if not impossible, to kill and that this can only be achieved by beheading them. Indeed, oftentimes one must make an extra effort to ensure that the head and body do not reunite and subsequently come back to life. To try to kill Cu Roi by any means other than beheading him would have failed; it is only by decapitation that they were able to overcome his enchantment and ensure victory.

Although the taking of heads is often discussed in a serious tone, there are instances in which the references are ironic or even comic. In “The Story of Mac Dathó’s Pig,” a severed head is brought into the story purely for dramatic effect, and Conall’s irony is clearly intended. In the tale, the men of Ulster and the men of Connacht are both in the stronghold of Mac Dathó, for each group has come to ask for Mac Dathó’s legendary pig. Mac Dathó sets up a feast for them, but they cannot agree on how to divide the food. It is a tradition that at every feast those gathered must determine the best warrior present, for it is he who divides the feast and takes the champion’s portion. At

this occasion, the best warrior is deemed to be Cet mac Metach of Connacht. Conchobar cannot bear the thought that his men had lost their claim to the champion's portion and so he begs his men not to allow Cet to carve the pig. Each of Ulster's best warriors challenges Cet, but Cet is able to refer to his defeat of each of them, therefore disgracing the whole province of Ulster. At length, however, Conall the Victorious of Ulster arrives, a warrior who was known for having "never been a day without having slain a Connachtman, or a night without plundering, nor [had he] ever slept without the head of a Connachtman under [his] knee" (Cross and Slover, 206). Cet acknowledges that Conall is a better warrior than he is and therefore will win the champion's portion but claims that if only his brother Anluan was there, he would match Conall's valor. He laments his missing brother, saying,

"[I]f Anluan mac Matach (my brother) were in the house, he would match thee contest for contest, and it is a shame that he is not in the house tonight."

"But he *is*," said Conall, taking Anluan's head out of his belt and throwing it at Cet's chest, so that a gush of blood broke over his lips. After that Conall sat down by the pig, and Cet went from it. (Cross and Slover, 206)

The presence of Anluan's head proves to Cet and to the other Connachtmen that Conall is the most valiant of all the warriors present. Anluan is there in spirit, as witnessed by his head, but now all his bravery and strength has been transferred to Conall, the new owner of the head. Conall answers Cet's wish for his brother's presence, though not as Cet had anticipated.

The irony represented by Conall's action is intensified in the "Sick-Bed of Cu Chulainn," a tale with intentionally comic moments. The beginning of the story describes how every year the men of Ulster held a festival around the time of Samain. A main

reason for this festival was to provide every man with the opportunity to give an account of the battles he had won and the men he had slain in the previous year, so that those gathered might determine who was the best warrior. As we know, the heads of valiant enemies were taken immediately after a victory, but such a practice is not practical in every situation. In order to keep track of his victories, “each man used to cut off the tip of the tongue of a foe whom he had killed, and carry it with him in a pouch” (Cross and Slover, 176). By carrying the tongues with them, the men are prepared at any moment to take them out and display their prowess. Some of the men were not as honorable as others, however, and in order to increase the purported number of their victories, they would cut off the tips of the tongues of animals and try to pass them off as legitimate conquests. This absurd custom shows that the warriors felt it necessary to have actual material proof of their valor, a proof that most often comes in the form of actual heads but can come in other forms as well.

The practice of taking heads is thus well documented, but the beliefs underlying this practice are what make it unique to the Celtic territories. As discussed earlier, the literary record reveals that besides being able to frighten and terrorize enemies, the Celts believed that the head housed the life energy, or life force, of a person.⁵ Soldiers, suicides and martyrs were all believed to have died before reaching their full potential and therefore their dead bodies had an excess of this life energy. It was believed that this energy could be transmitted to whoever had possession of the head. The taking of the head is then to be seen as a ritual of placing this energy in the service of the victor. The reason the heads of particularly valiant foes were so prized is because, as the seat of the

⁵ Sterckx, 37ff.

spirit, the head is also the locality of a man's attributes. Therefore the victor could hope to gain courage, strength and other qualities from the head. This belief also helps to explain why the Celts were said to drink out of skulls. The liquid that rested inside the skull of the enemy could also transfer some of the life energy to the drinker. The Irish tale of Conall Cearnach relates that after Conall died, it was prophesied that each time his men drank out of his skull their own strength and vitality would be restored. Scottish legend contends that a drink out of the skull of a suicide victim will cure a case of epilepsy. Sometimes the Celts are reported to have drunk human blood out of such skull cups, for the blood would also have contained a part of the life energy of the enemy.⁶ The most prized part of the head is not actually the skull or the blood, but the brain, for it is inside the brain that the life energy is actually stored. As discussed in the tale of Conchobar's death, the brains of enemies were sometimes mixed with chalk and lime to make a sort of ball. This was apparently a common custom, for not only did the brain contain the most life-energy, being therefore the most important part of the head, but it could also be carried away easily.

Speaking heads in Irish literature

All heads taken in battle were believed to retain the life energy of their owners. Occasionally, these heads actually seem to have retained their life as well. Tales of severed heads magically joining back with their bodies or even bodies that search for their heads are common in folklore tradition. Even more interesting are heads that speak after they are severed, and such references abound in the Fenian cycle in medieval Irish literature.

⁶ Further discussion of this practice can be found in Sterckx, 9ff.

In the story of “The Headless Phantoms,” Finn and his men are out hunting when they take shelter in a strange house. A churl greets them and orders that they be entertained. At this order nine headless bodies rise up from one corner of the room and nine heads from the other.

They set up nine horrid screeches: though matched in loudness, they were not matched in harmony: the churl answered in turn and the headless bodies answered. Though each rough strain of theirs was bad, the headless body’s strain was worse: there was no strain but was tolerable compared to the shriek of the one-eyed man. The song they sang for us would have wakened dead men out of the clay. (Cited in Coe, 21)

After the terrifying song, Finn and his men battle with the headless men, and all but Finn are killed. In the morning they are all restored to life and discover that the whole encounter was an illusion. The churl and the bodies were Otherworldly beings who, in typical fashion, took an opportunity to distress the mortal inhabitants of the world. Their supernatural nature explains the ability of the heads to sing and to move about, but in other tales the explanation is not so obvious.

In the story of Finn’s fool Lomna, we learn that Finn’s wife is having an affair with Coirpre. Coirpre kills Lomna after he reports the affair to Finn. Finn tracks down Lomna’s body and then finds his head placed on a stake in a tent in which Coirpre is cooking salmon. Coirpre divides the salmon for Finn and his warriors but does not give any to the head. Lomna’s head protests that he was not given his share. Again Coirpre divides the salmon and again Lomna demands his share. Coirpre then orders the head to be placed outside, but it protests from there as well. Finn becomes enraged with Coirpre’s mistreatment of Lomna’s head and so finally kills him. In the story, Lomna’s head demands that he be treated as if he was still alive, but he does not need a share of the salmon for sustenance. He is only demanding that he be recognized for the deeds he

performed in life. This episode foreshadows the description of the action of Finn's own head after his death.

After killing Finn, the three sons of Ugríu take his head into an empty house. They then cook salmon over a fire. Each time they divide the salmon amongst themselves, an extra portion magically remains. They do not understand the phenomenon until Finn's head demands his portion from the corner. The salmon is sometimes seen as a symbol of poetic insight and wisdom, and this motif of the poet demanding a redivision of the salmon is similar to the demanding of a redivision of a cooked pig in other Irish tales, such as Mac Dathó's pig discussed above.⁷ As a warrior, Finn would have demanded the choicest portion of the pig at a feast, in order to prove his prominence. When he here demands the salmon, he is asserting his value as a poet. The heads in both of these tales evidently feel slighted by being ignored and so speak up to get what they deserve.

The story of Fothad Cainidia, or "Fair God," provides another instance of post-mortem speech in the Fenian cycle. Fothad is one of triplets, all of them with the same name. In other cultures twins, by virtue of their rarity, are often thought to possess magical abilities, sometimes for good and sometimes for evil. The number three has a special cultic significance for the Celts, however, and so the motif of triplets is often seen as representing a supernatural ancestry. Fothad is a chief of a *fian*, or warrior band, and a poet, and he never sits down to a meal without severed heads in front of him to prove his prowess as a warrior. His constant enemy is Ailill; unfortunately Fothad falls in love with Ailill's wife. When a tryst between the lovers is discovered, the two men and their

⁷ See Coe, 23.

warriors wage battle. Fothad is decapitated, and when his lover lifts up his head, it sings a long poem to her in which he instructs her on what to do with his possessions and laments the futility of battle. As with Finn, Fothad's speech after death encompasses both his warrior and poetic aspects. As a king he must ensure that his possessions are properly taken care of, but his poetic side laments the battle that has led to his untimely death.

The story of "The Battle of Allen" relates three separate instances of severed heads. Fergal, the king of Ireland, his minstrel Donnbo, and Hua Maiglinni, the *rigdruth*, or kingly fool, of Ireland, are all killed and decapitated in the battle. When Hua Maiglinni, famous for his recitation of tales of battles and deeds is first captured, his captors command him to make a "buffoon's shout" prior to his execution. "Then a blow was delivered across his neck. . .his shout remained in the air to the end of three days and nights" (cited in Coe, 25). Before the battle began, Donnbo promised Fergal that he would sing for him, no matter where they might be that night. When a Leinsterman goes out into the field to find a head to bring back to the feast at the bequest of Murchad, he hears Donnbo's severed head singing for his lord. When he attempts to pick up the head to bring to Murchad, Donnbo rebukes him, telling him that he will sing only for Fergal, as promised. The warrior brings the head back anyway, and it is placed on a pillar and asked to sing. Only after Donnbo turns around so that he is facing the wall does he begin to sing, for then he can imagine he is singing to Fergal, and not to his enemies. He sings so sweetly and sorrowfully that everyone present begins to weep. Finally Murchad requests the removal of the head.

The same warrior went with the head till he reached its body. "Good indeed!" says the head to the warrior: "join my head to my body". Then the warrior fitted the head to the body and straightway it adhered thereto. That took place in order to fulfill [St.] Columkill's word, for Columkill

was security that Donnbo should go northward again to his mother and tell to her and to every one tidings of the battle and Fergal's death. (Cited in Coe, 25)

This tale provides a curious mixture of pagan and Christian beliefs. No explanation is given as to why the head sings, but it is to be understood that the reanimation of the body by the rejoining with the head has been effected by the saint's prophecy.

The last head to be decapitated in the story belongs to Fergal. Fergal's head is carried off and treated with great honor and reverence. The hair is washed, combed, and braided, and a velvet cloth is put upon it, as if preparing it to attend a feast. Then seven oxen, seven rams, and seven pigs are cooked and placed before the head, as though it was the focus of a ritual. This ritual preparation is reminiscent of the veneration accorded to Cu Chulainn's head and hand when they are laid on a silk-covered sick-bed. When the animals are laid before it, the head blushes and raises its eyes to God to give thanks for the honor that has been shown it. This is another instance of the blending of pagan and Christian traditions, for the head thanks God for what is an apparently pagan offering. In earlier traditions, actual offerings such as these may in fact have been placed before venerated heads. Coe points out that while the two poets continue to have the power of speech after their death, Fergal only blushes, without speaking. This difference "may indicate that the heads of poets, whose words mediate between this world and the Otherworld, are considered to retain more of the function and essence of their owners than those of kings or warriors." Of all these heads in the Fenian cycle, those that speak after death are those that "belong to a person who in life has the potential for communicative access to the Otherworld. . . . The heads' retention of oral expressive powers is manifested in poetry, song, or prophecy (including warnings)—transcendent

forms of communication that seem to involve the Otherworld” (Coe, 26-27). Coe’s theory is that it is this connection with the Otherworld during life that allows certain heads to speak after their death.

Outside of the Fenian cycle, Conaire, a king of Ireland, is also reported to have spoken after death; his story is related in the “Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel.” When Conaire became king, many taboos, or *gessa*, were placed on him, that he could break only on peril of his life. One night, the inhabitants of the Otherworld decide to get revenge on Conaire because his grandfather had destroyed their fairy mound. Using their magic, they arrange circumstances so that Conaire breaks all of his *gessa* and so falls victim to his treacherous foster-brothers. During the battle, Conaire is overcome with a consuming thirst. All the liquid in Da Derga’s hostel has been used to put out fires that were set by the enemies, and the water of the nearby river has seemingly dried up. He sends Mac Cecht to look for water, but Mac Cecht must search a great distance, and Conaire dies of a fever before he returns. As Mac Cecht returns to the hostel, he sees Conaire being decapitated by two men. After killing these men, he pours the longed-for water into the mouth of Conaire’s severed head, whereupon the head speaks:

“A good man Mac Cecht! An excellent man Mac Cecht!
A good warrior without, good within;
He gives a drink, he saves a king, he doth a noble deed;
Well he ended the champions I found. . . .” (Cross and Slover, 125)

Conaire’s words in this speech are interesting, for he says that Mac Cecht has saved him. It is unclear which of Mac Cecht’s actions Conaire is referring to. Has Mac Cecht saved him from disgrace by chasing down and killing the two men who dishonorably sought to take his head? Or has he saved him by bringing the water and thereby allowing him to speak one last time?

Ross believes that this story contains an echo of the traditional associations of severed heads with waters, as seen in the lakes and wells discussed above (123). This statement seems to imply that Conaire is only able to speak because the water is poured into his mouth. Perhaps this is not the case, however, and he merely drinks the water because his throat is dry, not because he needs it to speak. Whichever is the case, it is important to note that Conaire has supernatural ancestry on both sides of his family tree. His father was a bird-man, and his mother was the daughter of the god Midir of Bri Leith. Coe's theory would provide for Conaire's speech simply through these Otherworldly origins, but his drink of water can also be seen in light of her theory. Mac Cecht also has Otherworld associations, and the water that he brings is not ordinary water, as can be attested by the fact that it is the only water remaining in all of Ireland. Since sources of water are traditionally portals to the Otherworld, perhaps by drinking this water Conaire's supernatural associations are enhanced. The water then is not associated to wells and lakes for their healing powers, but for the opening it provides to the Otherworld. Perhaps it is only through the drinking of the water that he is allowed to enter fully into that world, and it is that entering which allows his head to speak.

Talking heads are not confined to the Irish tradition. The story of Bran, found in the *Mabinogi*, a twelfth-century collection of Welsh tales, contains a description of the most animated head yet. In "Branwen daughter of Llyr" we have the story of Bran's death. Bran crosses the water to Ireland to rescue his sister, who has married an abusive Irish king. A bitter fight between the Irish and Welsh ensues, after which only seven Welshmen escape alive. Bran is among their number but is mortally wounded. He asks his men to cut off his head and then prophesies what will happen in the ensuing years.

And take the head and carry it to Gwynfryn (white mount) in London and bury it with its face toward France. You will be on the road for a long time: you will be feasting in Harlech for seven years with the birds of Rhiannon singing to you, and the head will be as good company for you as it ever was when it was on me. Then you will be in Gwales in Pembroke eighty years, and until you open the door toward Aber Henfalen—in the direction of Cornwall—you can remain there, and the head, untainted, will be with you. But from the time you open the door you cannot remain there; go to London and bury the head. (Ford, 70)

His companions do as he instructed, and everything that he had prophesied comes true.

His head is indeed a wonderful companion to them and presides over all the feasts for the eighty-seven years until it is buried. While it is buried, his head is known as one of the three fortunate interments, and it becomes one of the three unfortunate disinterments when it is dug up, for “no oppression would ever reach this island from across the sea while the head was secreted there” (Ford, 72).

Bran’s Otherworld affinities are quite numerous. He is always described as being so large that no house could hold him. He is able to wade over to Ireland while his men must use boats, and when they come to a river without a bridge, he uses his own body to be the bridge for his men. When he goes to attack Ireland, he carries the poets and musicians on his back, suggestive of his patronage of the arts. That his head speaks after his death then comes as no great surprise.

Bran fits Coe’s theory perfectly. His prophecy before his death, and the fact that he is a patron of the arts, shows a strong connection to the Otherworld, which is made manifest by the fact that he is also a deity. It is this strong connection that allows his head to maintain its life for eighty-seven years. Even after this amount of time though, his powers have still not diminished. His head maintains in death the power he had to threaten and terrorize in life; simply by being buried facing France he is able to keep

opponents from attacking at that front. The action is in fact much like burying a head in the ramparts of a stronghold, for the whole island is his castle, and London is its gate.

The most recognizable tale of a talking severed head for an English-speaking audience is that of “Gawain and the Green Knight.” This story has its roots in the Irish tale “Bricriu’s Feast.” The tale is remarkable for the fact that the head, once severed, is able to reunite with the body night after night. “Bricriu’s Feast” begins with a contest between Cu Chulainn, Conall, and Loegaire, the three bravest warriors of Ulster, to see which of them should receive the champion’s portion at the feast served by Bricriu. The three go through many contests, and in every one Cu Chulainn is declared the bravest warrior. Conall and Loegaire nevertheless refuse to acknowledge his prominence. This continues until finally Cu Chulainn performs a remarkable act of courage that makes him the indisputable champion.

One night when all of Ulster is gathered at a feast, save the three aforementioned warriors, a huge churl enters the hall; he is twice as tall as any man with fingers as thick as a normal man’s wrist. The churl, or *bachlach*, asks for a boon, telling the guests at the feast, “Conchobar I put aside for the sake of his sovereignty, and Fergus mac Roig also on account of his like privilege. These two excepted, come whosoever of you that dare, that I may cut off his head tonight, he mine tomorrow night” (Cross and Slover, 278).

The Ulstermen do not like this bargain, for as Dubtach says, “it is given to thee alone if thou hast the power, being killed night after night, and to avenge it the next day” (Cross and Slover, 278). Not wishing to appear cowardly, however, they agree to the bargain if the roles are reversed: that is, they may cut off his head first, sacrificing their own the next night. The first warrior to make the covenant with the churl is Munremur.

Munremur took the axe from the *bachlach*'s hand. Seven feet apart were its two angles. Then the *bachlach* put his neck across the block. Munremur dealt a blow across it with the axe until it stood in the block beneath, cutting off the head so that it lay by the base of the fork-beam, the house being filled with blood. Straightaway the *bachlach* rose, recovered himself, clasped his head, block, and axe to his breast, and made his exit from the hall with blood streaming from his neck. (Cross and Slover, 279)

The next night, Munremur shirks his duty and refuses to allow his head to be cut off. In order to save Ulster's reputation, Loegaire makes the covenant with the *bachlach*. But he too breaks his promise, as does Conall the following night. Cu Chulainn is the only warrior remaining who can salvage Ulster's reputation for valor. He does not wish to enter into the covenant with the churl, but when the *bachlach* insults him by saying he is afraid to die, Cu Chulainn springs up and chops off the *bachlach*'s head and then smashes it to pieces. The next night the *bachlach* returns. Cu Chulainn proves himself as the only warrior who fulfills the promise made the night before by presenting his head to be struck off. But the churl only brings the axe lightly onto his neck, and declares that Cu Chulainn truly is the champion of all Ulster. He praises Cu Chulainn and exhorts him to rise, for "of the warriors of Ulster and Erin, no matter their mettle, none is found to compare to [Cu Chulainn] in valor, bravery, and truthfulness" (Cross and Slover, 280). Cu Chulainn kept his promise when none of the other warriors had the courage to offer their own lives to save Ulster's reputation.

The churl is reportedly Cu Roi, who comes with the intention of declaring Cu Chulainn the champion. During the previous contests for the champion's portion, Loegaire, Conall, and Cu Chulainn visited Cu Roi so that he could judge between them. Cu Roi declared Cu Chulainn the champion, but his verdict was not upheld when the three returned from their quest. When Cu Roi learned of this, he designed this final

contest so that he might fulfill the promise he made to Cu Chulainn, namely that the champion's portion would be his.

Cu Roi's Otherworldly connections have already been established in the discussion of his death, so the fact that he can survive after being decapitated is not too remarkable. It is interesting that he doesn't ever speak as he leaves the hall with his head in his arms, whereas in the derivative tale of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," the severed head does in fact speak. It is interesting to consider that while normally the taking of heads brings honor to a warrior, in this tale only by offering his own head does Cu Chulainn win the champion's portion.

Severed heads in literature influenced by the Celtic traditions

The English poem "Gawain and the Green Knight" is clearly based on "Bricriu's Feast," for similarities between the two abound. In both, a huge stranger visits the court of a great king to challenge those assembled to an exchange of blows. In both he then berates the men for not taking him up on the offer, declaring that their reputation for honor is not deserved. It is only the best warrior in each court that goes through with the game, and in the end he is spared.

The Green Knight presents the same bargain to Arthur's court that the *bachlach* did to the Ulstermen. Several of the Ulster heroes offer, only to subsequently quail at the consequences, leaving Cu Chulainn as the champion. But the focus of the Middle English narrative is on the bravery of Gawain, who is the only one to accept the challenge. After Gawain has chopped off his head, the Green Knight calmly retrieves it and remounts his horse,

his head by the hair in his hand holding;
 and he settled himself then in the saddle as firmly
 as if unharmed by mishap, though in the hall he might wear no head.
 (Tolkein, 36)

He then turns the head so that it faces the knights, and opening its eyes, it addresses
 Gawain:

“. . .To the Green Chapel go thou, and get thee, I charge thee
 such a dint as thou hast dealt—indeed thou hast earned
 a nimble knock in return on New Year’s morning!
 The Knight of the Green Chapel I am known to many,
 So if to find me thou endeavor, thou’lt fail not to do so,
 Therefore come! Or to be called a craven thou deservest.” (Tolkein, 36)

His speech acts as an admonishment to Gawain to ensure that he fulfills the bargain he
 has made. Coe predicts that severed heads will speak in poetry, prophecy, or warnings,
 and the exhortative nature of the Green Knight’s speech fit this predicted model, as do his
 Otherworldly connections.

The knight’s large size alone is enough to signal that he is no normal human. Add
 to that his red eyes and his green color (traditional for Otherworld beings, such as the
 leprechaun familiar to modern audiences), and it is clear that some sort of magic is
 involved. When the Green Knight finally reveals himself as Bertilak de Hautdesert, he
 tells Gawain that he has been enchanted by Morgan le Fay, who used Merlin’s magic to
 give him his guise. His supernatural powers then are a product of Morgan le Fay’s magic,
 just as the churl’s powers in “Bricriu’s Feast” are a product of Cu Roi’s own magic.

Kittredge proposes a theory that the Green Knight is part of a class of supernatural
 beings whose origins are serpent-monsters or water-demons with serpentine
 characteristics. He states that their ability to reunite head and body comes from the

widespread belief that a snake's head will rejoin with its body after it has been severed (Kittredge, 20). In the Scottish Highlands it is reportedly maintained that a serpent's head

should be completely smashed, and removed to a distance from the rest of the body. Unless this is done, the serpent will again come alive. The tail, unless deprived of animation, will join the body, and the head becomes a *beithis*, the largest and most deadly kind of serpent. (Kittredge, 192)

That the Green Knight arose out of a serpentine ancestry seems unlikely, for as Kittredge himself establishes, the story is taken from the Irish tale. In "Bricriu's Feast," Cu Roi's magic alone is strong enough to explain the churl's supernatural abilities, and no serpentine characteristics are mentioned or seem applicable.

The theme of severed heads has survived into the present day within science fiction and fantasy literature. Perhaps the most famous of these modern-day heads occurs in C.S. Lewis' novel That Hideous Strength. Within the story, the severed head appears to be able to speak because of technological advancements. Technology can be seen as a kind of modern-day Otherworld: the possibilities for developments seem limitless, and operations have an air of mystery to the layman. The head is taken from the prisoner Alcasan; it no longer matters if the person was a brave warrior or if the head is taken honorably. It can be argued that Alcasan, as a master criminal, is a warrior in his field. The fact that his head is taken while he is a prisoner, however, indicates that it was not taken in the traditional, reverential manner.⁸ Alcasan's head enters the world of Otherworldly beings by becoming a technological achievement, not because of his own supernatural ancestry.

While in the medieval literature heads could speak of their own accord, in Lewis' novel Alcasan's head can only speak when certain requirements are met. Numerous tubes

⁸ Recall Suppe's discussion of the differences between the customs of the Welsh and the Anglo-Saxons.

are attached to his head, and these tubes are in turn connected to levers and dials, all of which are controlled by the scientist Filostrato. The only time the head can speak is when Filostrato turns on the air and the artificial saliva pumps to the head, and even then speaking is a laborious affair. Filostrato makes sure that the room in which the head is kept is always closely controlled. People can only enter in hygienic suits and the proper air pressure always has to be maintained or the head will disintegrate.

Filostrato thinks he is controlling the head's speech. At the end of the book, however, he learns that he is not really needed at all.

What he thought impossible began to happen. No one had read the dials, adjusted the pressures, or turned on the air and the artificial saliva. Yet the words came out of the dry gaping mouth of the dead man's head. 'Adore!' it said. (Lewis, 354)

We learn that technology is not at all what was enabling the head to speak; instead it was the Macrobes speaking through the head so that humans might understand their speech. The Macrobes are described as being above the animal level; they are "more permanent, dispose of more energy, and [have] greater intelligence" than any animal (Lewis, 257). In this way, the Macrobes somewhat resemble the inhabitants of the Otherworld. Present-day readers generally no longer believe in fairies and demi-gods such as might inhabit the Otherworld. What we do believe in, however, are alien beings of greater intelligence than humans. Lewis has written his story to attract the modern reader by changing the nature of the other-worldly beings, while still retaining old themes that are so prominent in the Irish tradition.

For the ancient Celts, the taking of the heads of enemies was not only a symbol of the victor's valor; it was also a means of honoring the abilities of the slain warrior. As the custom evolved over time, the magical powers reported in connection with severed heads

increased. These grew from the ability of a head to protect a stronghold to the capability of a severed head to speak, and even at times to reunite with the body. While Coe proposed her theory on speaking heads only in connection to the Fenian tradition, her discussion can be expanded into the other literature on severed heads. Celtic and non-Celtic writers alike seem to recognize the necessity of a severed head's connection to the Otherworld in order for it to be able to speak. By tracing the evolution of the tradition and its representation in literature, this paper demonstrates that even after the actual practice of taking heads died out, the traditional beliefs in a head's magical powers has remained active. Even though we may now deem them barbaric, the Celtic customs that began over two thousand years ago still influence our thinking today, proving their enduring nature.

Works Cited

- Chretien de Troyes. Erec and Enide. Trans. Burton Raffel. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Coe, Paula Powers. "The Severed Head in Fenian Tradition." Folklore and Mythology Studies 13 (1989): 17-41.
- Cross, Tom Peete, and Clark Harris Slover. Ancient Irish Tales. New York: Barnes and Nobles, 1936.
- Diodorus of Sicily. Vol. III, v. Trans. C.H. Oldfather. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1939.
- Ford, Patrick K., trans. The Mabinogi and other Medieval Welsh Tales. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.
- Geoffrey of Monmouth. The History of the Kings of Britain. Trans. Lewis Thorpe. London: Folio Society, 1966.
- Kittredge, George Lyman. A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight. Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1960.
- Lewis, C.S. That Hideous Strength. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996.
- Ross, Anne. Pagan Celtic Britain. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967.
- Sterckx, Claude. "La Tête et les Seins." Langues et Civilisation Celtiques: Institut des Hautes Études de Belgique. 1981: 5-138.
- Suppe, Frederick. "The Cultural Significance of Decapitation in High Medieval Wales and the Marches." The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies. 36 (1989): 147-160.
- Tolkein, J.R.R., trans. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975.