SEVERED HEADS IN WELLS: AN ASPECT OF THE WELL CULT

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The human head has been accredited with supernatural powers by many peoples. Its superstitious veneration can be traced back to the Mesolithic period in Europe where, in some areas at least, there is archæological evidence for a cult of skulls. E. O. James (1957:20) draws attention to several examples of archæological discoveries suggestive of such a cult. One of these comes from Ofnet in Bavaria where twenty-seven human skulls, dating from the Mesolithic period, were found in a group embedded in red ochre, looking towards the west. A few yards away was a second identical group of six skulls. The heads were apparently severed from the bodies after death. Some of the skulls were decorated with shells. Skulls from Jericho, adorned with pebbles and shells, together with many other early examples cited by James, demonstrate that the veneration and respect paid to the human head goes right back to man's earliest religious consciousness.

This cult of the head then is found widely in many temporal and geographical contexts, especially amongst people at a certain stage of development. The present writer was informed by a native of Borneo that only in recent years did head-hunting become illegal there. The practice still persists and heads are taken from time to time. The heads were smoked, placed in baskets which were suspended from the ceilings of the houses and offerings were made to them at the appropriate seasons. Young men were regarded as especially eligible suitors if they had a large number of heads to their credit, and it was the custom to tattoo a stroke on each finger to represent every head taken by the warrior. He must however be able to produce the heads if required to do so.

Such examples could be multiplied indefinitely, but the foregoing are sufficient to indicate that the superstitious

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veneration of the human head is by no means confined to one people or to a single period of time.

The Celts revered the human head and, in common with many other peoples, they were head-hunters, decapitating their enemies and exhibiting the crania as trophies about their forts, houses and shrines (Ross 1959:11-12). The Celts however were unique in that they developed this common reverence for the human head into a subtle and sophisticated cult. Not only did they decapitate their enemies and preserve the heads, but they came to regard the head as a religious symbol, connoting divinity, the powers of the Otherworld (a head often presided over the divine feast), and prophetic knowledge. They used the head constantly in their highly-stylised art, and any consideration of the corpus of La Tène art will serve to demonstrate this feature. The term "godhead" is one which can confidently be applied to the Celtic use of the human head as a religious symbol. The various manifestations of this cult in the British Isles have been discussed in detail in a recent paper (Ross 1959) and it is not necessary to elaborate it further in this context.

Another object of veneration amongst the Celts for which there is an overwhelming amount of evidence is water, in the form of wells, springs, pools and boggy places. Once again, although it is not peculiar to the Celtic peoples, the cult of wells played an important part in their mythology. The numbers of shrines which have a well or spring as their focal point, pertaining to the pre-Christian period is impressive, while votive deposits from wells and deities associated with such places are numerous. The vernacular tradition of the British Isles is likewise full of examples of the veneration of wells, which corroborate and elaborate the archæological evidence for such beliefs. Christianity, rather than obliterating the cult, tended to adopt it, and we find practically every early Celtic saint having a holy well associated with him, while his local "cult legend" is often a practically unmodified perpetuation of the earlier pagan tradition. The veneration of wells and springs then is one which has, in Celtic areas, a more or less unbroken continuity from the Iron Age down to its final collapse in the present century, superstition and habit replacing earlier belief and cult practice.

When these objects of superstitious belief, the head and the well, are brought into association with each other in tradition, it becomes clear that there is some deep-rooted cult connection between them. Without a knowledge of the widespread religious

significance of these two objects, the isolated archæological discovery of a head in a well, or the single literary reference to this association, could be passed over as having no particular interest. Once the background is appreciated, however, the occasions when the head and the well are connected with each other can be observed more particularly, and it will be seen that a very interesting pattern emerges.

Archæology can furnish us with several impressive examples of a well, known to have been dedicated to a specific deity, containing a human head, or being in some way associated with heads. The most outstanding example of this comes from the North of England, from Carrawburgh, beside the Roman fort of Procolitia on Hadrian's Wall. Known locally as the Roman Bath, the importance of the well as a cult focus in Roman times was only fully revealed in 1876 when the activities of lead prospectors in the area drew it to the attention of local archæologists (Clayton 1880). The well, dedicated to the Celtic goddess Coventina, occupied the central position within a temple, forty feet square. When excavated, the well was found to contain an amazing variety of objects, including more than thirteen thousand coins dating from A.D. 41 to A.D. 383, twenty-four undamaged altars, several of them dedicated to the goddess, pins, brooches, vases, fragments of Samian ware and a human skull. One of the altars, like one to Fortuna found nearby, and dedicated to Coventina, has an iron ring fastened to the focus by means of lead. This suggests that these altars were suspended over the well, or ritually immersed in the water. Coventina would appear to have been a local goddess, although a dedication to a deity of similar name from northern Italy indicates that her cult may also have been known in Europe (Cagnat 1950:180). The pins show her connection with fertility, while the presence of the human cranium is given added significance by the recovery of three votive heads in bronze, one representing a male having a long narrow face with a pointed beard. The skull is now exhibited in Chesters Museum, Northumberland, together with most of the other contents of the well. It is noteworthy that, in the summer of 1960, a second well was excavated at Carrawburgh, a few yards away from Coventina's Well. An altar dedicated to the Nymphs and the *Genius Loci* and a small bronze of the *Genius Loci* were recovered, while excavations showed that the altar was associated with the well and that both had been contained in a small building which had been demolished about A.D. 300.

This recent discovery, made by Dr. David Smith, Keeper of the Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, adds to our knowledge of the cult of wells in this region, for which there is plentiful evidence. The report of the excavation awaits publication.

The presence of the human head in Coventina's Well is of especial interest from the native viewpoint. Any analysis of a group of Romano-British wells reveals the consistent occurrence of human heads together with pottery and objects of a cult nature. One or two examples may be cited here. From the bottom of a circular steined well at Caves Inn, Warwick (Tripontium), the figure of a horseman was recovered, bearing spear and shield, together with a bronze disc, apparently part of a shield, the base of a Samian cup, a coarse jar of second century A.D. date, and the skull of an adult female (Anon. 1953:118). Again, from the site of the Westbury Ironworks at Heywood, Wiltshire, a well, cleaned out in 1879, was found to contain Romano-British sherds, animal bones and human skulls. No structural remains were found (Pugh and Crittall 1957:76).

An interesting parallel to these wells comes from Trelleborg, Sealand. The late Professor Nørlund found six wells, five of them dating from before A.D. 1000. In his opinion the wells were used for sacrifices which may have taken place in small round enclosures nearby. In some of the wells Nørlund found the bones of horses, pigs, goats, sheep, cows and children. In one of them the skull of a man of about thirty-five years of age was found.[1] The circular enclosures associated with these wells may have affinities with a site in Dorset. Near Winterborne Kingston a well dating from Roman times was discovered, containing objects of a Celtic cult nature. About four feet from the well was a curious circle, consisting of eight burnt tiles of varying sizes, placed on edge at ten inch intervals. In the centre was a small sarsen with an iron knife close to it, and an oblong pit filled with pottery, flint and ashes, all subjected to fire. This would appear to suggest that the well and the area immediately adjacent to it was the site of some form of ritual practice (Farrar 1953:74-5, and pl. XVIII).

The recovery of skulls from the underground pool in the River Axe at Wookey Hole in Somerset is also of relevance here (Mason 1950-51). These human skulls were likewise associated with pottery. In 1946, three skulls and some Romano-British pottery were recovered between the first and third

chambers of the cave. The find was sufficient to stimulate archæological interest, and work was carried out between 1947 and 1949, resulting in some important discoveries. These included some Romano-British pottery of the first or second century A.D., of a form descended from Belgic prototypes, and no less than fourteen human skulls. Of singular interest is the fact that the heads all belonged to people between the ages of twenty-five and thirty years, with the exception of one of forty years. This is reminiscent of the human skulls found at the pre-Roman sanctuary of Roquepertuse in southern France, which were subjected to forensic analysis and found to belong to young men in the prime of life, none being older than forty years (Benoit 1955). When considering the possible significance of the discovery from Wookey Hole, we may also bear in mind the altar from Apt, France, inscribed *Marti Vectirix Reppavi f.v.s.l.m.* The names are Celtic and it is clear that the native war god is here invoked in the guise of his classical counterpart. Under the altar eight or nine male skulls were found, showing that they had been placed there seemingly as an offering to the war-god in Roman times (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* XII: 1077). Also of relevance here is Cormac's gloss on the Irish crow/raven goddess of war and fertility. This glossary (an Old Irish compilation of the ninth century) refers to Macha in the following terms: "*Macha*, that is a crow, or it is one of the three Morrignas. *Mesrad Machae*, Macha's mast, that is the heads of men after their slaughter" (Stokes 1868:XXXV). This suggests that at some stage the *heads* of the slain were dedicated to the Irish goddess of war. These examples, together with the Celtic tradition of associating human heads with wells and pools, may be of some assistance in finding a satisfactory explanation for the presence of the human skulls in the pool at Wookey Hole. Various suggestions have been made, including the supposition that the heads were human sacrifices made to the Witch stalagmite in the First Chamber (Mason 1935-51: 242). The evidence however can give no support to this theory. Although there is no evidence for actual sacrifice, a knowledge of the wider background of Celtic belief does suggest a cult connection of these heads with the pool, and their presence there can hardly be fortuitous. The associated material indicates that the skulls date from the Romano-British period, at which time the veneration of the human head was fully operative. Thus, no matter what the cause of death, it seems most probable that these heads, together with the pottery,

had been deliberately placed in the water as a votive offering or for some ritual purpose. The heads, being those of young people, may have been taken in war, but the fact that at least two of the skulls are apparently female may argue against this suggestion. Whatever the reason for the placing of the heads and the pottery in the pool, their presence there dovetails well with what we know of the Celtic custom of placing severed heads in sacred pools and wells.

These examples, drawn from archæological contexts, and dating from a period when the cult importance of both the head and the well are fully attested, give a firm foundation of fact against which the later evidence for the association of severed heads with wells can be reviewed.

Turning now to the sphere of literary tradition and folk-lore, there are several interesting examples from Wales of the head as the hereditary guardian of the well (Jones 1954:115-16). The skull of a fourteenth-century Welsh nobleman, Gruffydd ap Adda ap Dafydd, killed at Dolgelley, was kept at Dolgelly, and was used as a drinking-cup for the cure of whooping cough and other illnesses. Water was drunk from a human skull at Ffynon Llandyfaen, which was used as a well-cup, and belief in its efficacy persisted into the nineteenth century. The waters of another well, Ffynnon Deilo, were drunk from the skull of Teilo, of which the heads of the family of Melchior were the hereditary keepers. In 1840, a boy with tuberculosis came from Glamorgan to drink the healing waters of the well. He omitted however to drink them from the skull, and received no cure. His father, discovering that he had failed to observe the traditional ritual, brought him there for a second time, and ensured that he drank the water from the head. This time the boy was completely cured. This tradition that healing waters could only benefit sufferers if they were drunk from the skull serving as the hereditary keeper of the well casts a new light on the presence of heads found in wells. A similar tradition was still current in comparatively recent years in the island of Lewis. An elder in the United Free Church in Ness had an epileptic daughter. He eventually decided to try to cure her of epilepsy in a traditional manner. Between sunset and sunrise and without speaking to a living thing, he walked five miles to the family burial-ground at Teampull Chrò Naoimh at North Galson. There he dug up the grave and removed the skull from it. He came back home with the skull, awakened the epileptic girl and made her drink from the skull. He then walked

FIG. 1—Site of Coventina's Well, Northumberland (see p. 33)

FIG. 2—Skull from Coventina's Well (see p. 33-4)

PLATE II

Well of the Heads—Loch Oich (see p. 43)

back to Teampull Chrò Naoimh to re-bury the skull. My informant did not know the name of the well from which the water was taken, but it is likely to have been a healing well and its name should still be ascertainable.[2]

The literary tradition of early Ireland furnishes several examples of the association of severed heads with wells. The *Dindshenchas*, the topographical legends of Ireland, contain much of mythological significance, the traditions being preserved in the explanations for the names of the various geographical features. One story accounts for the naming of a hill, *Sliab Gam*, by the following legend (Gwynn 1913:145). A young man named Gam was decapitated beside the well on the hill which subsequently became known as *Sliab Gam*, Gam's Hill. The head was cast into the well. Its presence in the well magically affected the water. For part of the day it was a grey, bitter, salt stream, and for another part of the day it flowed with pure water. This caused great wonder in Ireland.[3] In another tradition from the Dindshenchas we learn that the well *Tipra Brothlaige* was so named because the sons of Morna slew Dornmar and Indascland and Imgan of Finn ua Baiscne's household, and threw the three heads into the well (Gwynn 1924:300). The well of Sen-Garman (*Tipra Sen-Garmna*) was named on account of the slaying of a woman called Sen-Garman beside the well by the hero Finn. He decapitated her and in true Celtic fashion set up her head on a stake beside the well and cast her body into the well (Gwynn 1913:242; Stokes 1894:446). The supernatural effect, beneficial or otherwise, of the presence of a severed head or heads in a well or spring is illustrated further by the following example, also from the Dindshenchas (Gwynn 1913:324; Stokes 1895:273). In a fierce skirmish between two opposing Irish factions, only one hero, Riach, escaped with his life. The heads cut off in the fight were brought to a well in a glen beside Druim Sam. Riach then built a structure over the spring, now seemingly possessed of evil powers. He put a door across the opening of the well but, despite his efforts to contain it, the magic water boiled out in fury and drowned a thousand men, Riach amongst them. Although not always specifically connected with a head, the reaction of a well to the casting into it, or deliberate drowning in it, of some person is frequently that of rising up in fury and forming a lake. For example, at the Feast of Tara, which took place for three days before and three days after the first of November (*Samuin*, a date of great ritual importance for the

Celts), a period of peace and festivity, one man, Garman, broke the traditional peace by stealing a gold diadem. He was pursued and drowned by his pursuers in the Well of Coelrind. When this act was committed, the well rose up and formed a great lake (Stokes 1894:430). A further connection between severed heads and water, thereby magically affected, is found in the explanation for the name *Loch Cend* "The Loch of the Heads" (Gwynn 1924:258). A battle was waged beside the loch between two early Irish heroes, Colman Mor, son of Diarmaid, and Cairpre. Cairpre was victorious and he threw the nine hundred heads of his opponents, including that of Colman, into the loch "so that it is blood below and above". It was then called *Loch Cenn*, "The Loch of the Heads".

The deep-rooted and universal nature of this association of heads with wells in Celtic societies can be demonstrated still further for the early period. Even in contexts where the head is only associated with water in an oblique fashion, it is suggestive of the underlying tradition. For example, in the legend of Dermot's triple death (O'Grady 1892:86-8), a complex death which itself has its origins in pagan Celtic tradition, the hero is stabbed by a spear, burnt and drowned.[4] After this violent death his destruction is complete, with the exception of his *head* which alone did not perish. This was carried to Clonmacnoise. Another striking instance of the association of a severed head with a well is found in the cult legends of Saint Melor of Cornwall and Brittany (Doble 1927). In one respect the saint bears an extraordinary resemblance to the early Irish divine king *Nuadu*. After the saint has had his right hand and his left foot cut off by servants of his malevolent uncle they are replaced by a silver hand and a brazen foot. These, like Nuadu's artificial hand of silver, grow and become flexible like flesh so that it is impossible to tell them from real flesh and bone, and the saint is able to bear arms. This came about in the following manner. When the boy was fourteen years of age and was being reared in a monastery, the abbott of the monastery gathered nuts and gave them to the boy as an offering to his lord (the boy being Prince of Brittany). Melor took them with his silver hand and it became supple as if it were flesh.[5] The boy was eventually murdered by the orders of his wicked uncle, and the murderer cut off his head and set out with it to the uncle. He became weak and faint with thirst on the journey, and near to death. In his agony of thirst, he cried out for help. The head which he was carrying then spoke, and instructed

him to fix his staff firmly in the ground, when a spring would gush 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 roots an unfailing fountain began to well forth" (Doble 1927:7). Here we have a tradition of a healing well (for Melor was concerned with healing waters) brought into being on the instructions of a severed head. The importance of Melor's *head* is demonstrated in yet another episode in his cult legend. After his death his body was buried on Mount Arat, and the head was buried some distance from the torso. In the Amesbury version of the legend, the head rose up of its own will and sought the body which was separated from it. Saint Melor is essentially a healer. His holy well at Linkinhorne in Cornwall is well-known, and in Brittany the centre of his cult is Lanmeur. In the crypt beneath the Parish Church is a small holy well dedicated to him. Near Lanmeur is a holy well associated with the saint where women cause their children to drink the waters to make them strong. Numerous wells are dedicated to the saint in Brittany. Here we have an example from the life of a Celtic saint (who, as the artificial limbs show, had attracted to himself elements of Celtic folklore) of a severed head speaking, and causing a sacred tree and a spring to appear simultaneously.

Another tradition, associating a saint's head with the origin of a well, comes from France, and is connected with the sacred springs of Alesia, venerated by the Celts in pre-Christian times. One of these springs, retaining the tradition of its healing powers into a Christian context, became connected with a saint of the third century martyred under Maximian. The legend relates how, upon the martyr's head striking the ground, a healing spring burst forth, and this was known as the Spring of Sainte-Reine (Cagnat 1922:197). A well arose where St. Justinian's head fell on Ramsay Island (Jones 1954: 36), and this tradition frequently attaches itself to the heads of Welsh saints. For example, St. Lludd was beheaded by a pursuer in Brecknockshire, and her head rolled a little way down the hill and came to rest on a rock from which a spring of pure water immediately gushed forth (Jones 1954:38). One well reacted by drying up when the head of a saint fell into it. St. Cynog was beheaded while praying in Brecknockshire one Sunday morning, and his head fell into the well (by which he must have been praying) which immediately dried up. The saint picked up his head and carried it down the hillside

(Jones 1954:37). Such examples could be multiplied indefinitely, showing how, in Wales, this pagan association of a head with a sacred well has become transferred to the legends of the saints whose heads are in some way supernaturally connected with wells. Mention may also be made here to a similar tradition still current in Ireland. It concerns a fight which is reputed to have taken place at Drishogue, Ballysteel, in Offaly. A bishop was killed in the encounter and decapitated. His head bounced along the road and fell into the Holy Well. The well, seemingly of great age, is situated behind a hedge near the present road.[6]

An interesting episode in which a head and a sacred well are closely connected, and which seems to be related to the traditions under consideration, occurs in a sixteenth-century English play [7] (Peele 1595, see Dyce 1861). It is described as follows:

> Zantippa goes with a pitcher to the Well of Life: she offers to dip her pitcher in, and a Head rises in the well:
>
> *Head.* "Gently, dip, but not too deep,
> For fear you make the golden beard to weep.
> Fair maiden, white and red,
> Stroke me smooth and comb my head,
> And thou shalt have some cockell-bread."
>
> *Zan.* "What is this?
> Fair maiden, white and red,
> Comb me smooth and stroke my head
> And thou shalt have some cockell-bread?"
>
> " 'Cockell' callest thou it, boy? faith, I'll give you cockell-bread."
>
> She breaks her pitcher upon the Head: then it thunders and lightens;
>
> (p. 454)
>
> Enter Corebus and Celania to the Well of Life for water:
> . . .
>
> *Cel.* "Ay Corebus, we are almost at the Well now. I'll go fetch some water: sit down while I dip my pitcher in."
>
> A head comes up with ears of corn which she combs into her lap.
>
> *Head.* "Gently dip not too deep
> For fear you make the golden beard to weep
> Fair maiden, white and red,
> Comb me smooth, and stroke my head,
> And thou shalt have some cockell-bread."

A second head comes up full of gold, which she combs into her lap.

Head. "Gently dip but not too deep
For fear you make the golden beard to weep
Fair maiden, white and red,
Comb me smooth, and stroke my head
And every hair a sheaf shall be
And every sheaf a golden tree." (p. 456)

This reference to the combing and smoothing of the head is reminiscent of an episode in an early Irish tale (Ross 1959:38). In the story of *Cath Almaine*, Fergal Mac Maile Duin is slain and decapitated. His head is taken and treated with honour. It is washed and braided and *combed smooth*, and a silken cloth is put about it, and seven oxen and seven wethers and seven pigs are cooked and placed before it as an offering. The head blushes in the presence of the Munstermen, opens its eyes and speaks its gratitude for such honourable treatment.

Before leaving the written traditions about heads and wells, reference should be made to a Norse tradition which has striking affinities with the Celtic material. This concerns the head of Mimir which was cut off by the Vanir. Óðin took the head, cured it with herbs (in the manner of the Celts, who preserved the heads of their enemies with oil and herbs), and apparently kept it at or in a well, known as *Mimir's Well* (Mimis Brunnr). He recited magic over it, so that it became capable of speech and prophesy, and told the god many secrets. In the Völuspá we are told that Óðin hid his eye in the Well of Mimir. Thus we have, in a Norse context, a group of motifs which, untypical as they are of Norse tradition, are completely familiar from Celtic sources. The decapitation of the head, its preservation, its association with a well, and its powers of prophesy and otherworld knowledge are all features which recur in Celtic tradition and belief. All the evidence suggests that this episode in Norse mythology, if not a direct borrowing from a Celtic source, at least owes its presence in the Norse tradition to a detailed knowledge on the part of the story-teller of such beliefs amongst the Celts.[8]

It is an interesting example of the longevity of tradition amongst the Celtic peoples when we find that this most ancient of motifs, that of the severed head in the well, is still current in stories told to-day in Gaelic-speaking parts of the Highlands. One example, collected in Vatersay, Barra, in the summer of 1956, has been discussed elsewhere (Ross 1961). It is thus only

necessary to give a very brief synopsis of the story in order to demonstrate its place in this tradition. Three brothers are murdered at a well called *Tobar nan Ceann*, "The Well of the Heads". The severed heads are carried home by the father of the men. One of the heads speaks and utters three prophecies, one of which concerns the avenging of the murder. In due course this prophecy is fulfilled by the son of the man whose head uttered it. The boy is requested by the murderer, who is unaware of the youth's identity, to fetch him a drink from the well. The boy breaks the cup, and the murderer then has to go and get the water from the well himself. While he is there, the boy, who has tricked him into going to the well, draws a short sword from his sleeve and decapitates him. He leaves the head in the well, which is called *Tobar a' Chinn*, "The Well of the Head".[9] In this Scottish Gaelic tale then we have both the motif of the prophetic head, and of the head in the well. Whether the broken cup was thrown into the well also is not made specific.

Two other comparatively recent traditions associating heads with wells are relevant here. One concerns the avenging of the Keppoch murder by the MacDonalds. In September 1663, Alasdair MacDonald, assisted by a MacDougall, assassinated his two young nephews in order to obtain the Keppoch chieftainship. It was not until about two years after the crime was committed that the murderers were brought to justice. According to one tradition (MacDonald 1929:95) they were caught and decapitated at Inverlair House in 1665, and the seven heads of those slain were placed in a basket and taken to Inverness. On the way, the party stopped at Invergarry and the heads which had grown restless in their basket "were making a kind of grinding noise as they clashed against each other". Iain Lom, the Gaelic poet, who played a leading role in bringing the guilty to justice, is reputed to have remarked "Ubh! Ubh! Nach còrd sibh 's gur cloinn chàirdean sibh fhéin". "Oh dear, can you not agree and you related to each other." The episode of the severed heads clashing together is reminiscent of a passage in the Irish tale *Buile Suibhne*, where the demented Suibhne is pursued by five bristling rough grey heads clashing against each other as they leap furiously about the road after him (O'Keefe 1913:122-4). The heads of the Keppoch murderers were washed in a spring which became known as *Tobar nan Ceann*, "The Well of the Heads". A monument, inscribed with a poem composed by the Gaelic poet

Ewen MacLachlan to commemorate the episode, was erected there, and the pillar was surmounted, in true Gaelic fashion, by representations of the seven "têtes coupées". MacLachlan describes the episode of the heads in the following lines:

". . . chaidh Dioghailt na leum,
Mar bheithir bheumnaich nan nial,
Ghlac e 'n dream a dheilbh an fhoill,
'S thug lan duais mar thoill an gniomh.
Lamh riut-sa ghorm fhuarain ghrinn,
Dh' ionnlaideadh seachd cinn nan lub,
'S aig casan a ghaisgich aigh
Thilgeadh iad air lar a dhuin."

". . . revenge leapt
like the destructive thunderbolt of the clouds
and seized the plotters of treachery
to give the full reward for their deed.
Beside you, blue pretty spring
seven treacherous heads were bathed
and at the feet of the noble hero
they were thrown on the floor of his fortress."

The site is well known to motorists in the Highlands to-day, many of whom stop to look at the monument on their way to or from the west. Few however pause to make the short descent to where the "Well of the Heads", invisible from above, still flows strongly into Loch Oich.

Another "head" tradition is associated with the Keppoch family of MacDonalds. Angus Odhar, grandson of the chieftain Alasdair nan Cleas, fought in the battle of Stronaclachan, Killin, in 1646. While he was taunting his enemy Menzies by calling him *Crùnair nan Cearc* "Crowner of Hens", Menzies decapitated him, and his head rolled down the hill-side shouting *cearc, cearc* "hen, hen" (MacDiarmid 1910: 148).

An awareness of this traditional association in Celtic contexts of severed heads with wells made it of especial interest to find several examples of this type of tradition still current in Skye in April and in August 1961. One such well, *Tobar a' Chinn*, "The Well of the Head", is situated in Torrin, Strath. It is one of the few wells which are named on the one-inch Ordnance Survey maps for Skye (published in 1957). With a knowledge of the importance of the head in earlier Celtic belief and its association with wells, the name on the map, although appearing in a grammatically incorrect form (*Tobar Ceann*),

was of sufficient interest to make local questioning important. This resulted in two Gaelic versions of a story accounting for the name of the well. The first version was recounted by a crofter in Kilbride, Strath, who was encountered by chance and asked for directions. He provided the exact location of the well, which is situated in the Aird of Strath near Torrin on a ridge of moorland known locally as *Druim Ghiùrain*, and appearing on the one-inch map as *Druim an Fhuarain*. It is close to an old *ceum* or footpath. His version of the story concerned a girl who, travelling from Elgol with money, hid it in her hair for safe keeping. She was attacked, robbed and then murdered by Mac Raing, the legendary brigand of the Cuillins. His son threatened to make public the brutal murder, whereupon his father killed him, cut off his head and left it in the well, which became known as *Tobar a' Chinn*, "The Well of the Head".

A second version of this was recorded from Alec Stoddart, Kilbride, Strath. It is a variant of a widespread Skye tradition. There was once a bailiff in the service of the ruling family of Strath Aird. He had a very bad reputation on account of his brutal behaviour to widows and other helpless people who were unable to pay their rent. There was a poor widow living in Breakish whose only son was a soldier in foreign service. When he returned to Skye he found his mother's house deserted. He learnt that she and others had been turned out of their homes because they had been unable to pay the rent. Determined to avenge his mother, the son borrowed a horse and saddle from a neighbour and learning that the bailiff was on the road between Breakish and Aird, he set out to intercept him. He caught up with him at Druim Ghiùrain. The bailiff realised who was accosting him and drew his sword. The widow's son drew his own sword and decapitated the bailiff while he was still on horseback. He then washed the head in the well which was called, as a result, *Tobar a' Chinn* (Forbes 1923:424).

Another tradition associating a well with heads was recorded in Holmisdale, Duirinish, Skye, on 16th April from Norman MacAskill, crofter. He has many interesting traditions associated with place-names, and although he knew nothing of the Well of the Head in Strath, he had a story about a local well called *Tobar nan Ceann*, "the Well of the Heads". This isolated well is situated between the deserted township of Lorgill in the Glens, and Beinn Alamaish, a few miles from

Glendale. The story, which he recorded in Gaelic, is briefly as follows. Three *bodaich* (usually signifying old men) were on their way from Lorgill to Hamara in Glendale to pay their rent. They started to quarrel, and when they reached the foot of Beinn Alamaish they set upon each other and a fierce fight ensued. In the skirmish they managed to kill each other. Their bodies were found beside the well. A cairn was erected beside the well to commemorate the men and it is still to be seen. The well became known as *Tobar nan Ceann*. Clearly, in the original story, the heads of the *bodaich* must have been put in the well, but this motif has now dropped out, only the name of the well suggesting the missing element. That this element was once present in the tradition was confirmed in August when another version of the story was obtained from Norman Ross, Fàsach, Glendale. According to his tradition seven men fought each other beside the well. Six of the men were killed. The seventh man cut off their heads with his sword and left them at the well. Information was also obtained in August about the location of another *Tobar nan Ceann* on a track leading from Skinidin to Glendale. The informant knew of no tradition concerning the origin of the name and had always supposed it was so called because passers-by bent their heads down over the well in order to drink!

In April a "head" tradition was recorded in Kilmuir, Trotternish. It consisted of an explanation for the place-name *Loch nan Ceann*, "the Loch of the Heads" at Cuidrach, Trotternish. According to local tradition there was once a battle between the MacLeods and the MacDonalds on the hill above this small loch. The MacDonalds won the fight and cut off the heads of the defeated MacLeods. The heads then rolled down the hill crying *theab*, *theab a latha dhol leinn* " almost, we almost won the day".

The hill was consequently called *Cnoc Theab*. The heads rolled into the loch, which became known as *Lochna nan Ceann* "The Loch of the Heads". This is clearly a similar tale to that told about the head of Angus Odhar of Keppoch at the battle of Stronaclachan, and it is in the same tradition as the Irish *dindshenchas* about the origin of the name *Loch Cend*, "Head Loch". A similar tradition is suggested by the place-name *Cairidh nan Ceann* recorded by Forbes (1923:97), who locates the weir on the Snizort river, and says it was so called on account of the heads of combatants in a certain fight which were lodged there, having been washed down the river. The

heads in the River Axe at Wookey Hole may perhaps be relevant here.

In August two further examples of this traditional association of severed heads with wells were obtained in the Kilmuir district of Skye. In one instance the name, *Tobar a' Chnuaic*, "the Well of the Head" alone was noted. No associated traditions were obtainable, but these may be current in other parts of the district. The word *cnuac* is used in Gaelic especially to connote a head cut off in battle. It occurs regularly in Scottish Gaelic poetry. The second well of this type in Kilmuir is called *Tobar a' Chinn*, "the Well of the Head". It is situated near the shore, close to the dùn known as Dùn Bhorghnasgiotaig. According to the informant the well was once a *tobar-tighe* "house well" for the inhabitants of the dùn. One final example of traditions of this kind current in Skye at the present time was heard from an elderly man in the Aird of Sleat. He did not know of any well of this name in his own locality, but he stated that the *Well of the Dead* at Culloden was originally and correctly called *Tobar nan Ceann*, "the Well of the Heads". It is not easy to determine the source of his information, but it is sufficiently relevant to be noteworthy at least of mention.

Having seen some examples of the longevity and universality in the Celtic world of such traditions in both cult and folklore contexts, it is perhaps not altogether surprising to find that these contemporary *head in the well* traditions are remarkably similar to those found in the Dindshenchas of Ireland, the legends used to account for the naming of places. It is thus rewarding to realise, upon studying these early Irish traditions, mirroring as they do an essentially heroic society, that traditions, recognisably related, can still be recorded in the Gaelic-speaking areas when the question "what is the reason for the name of this well" is asked. Future field investigation may yield, amongst many other fragments of early custom and belief, further examples of this most deep-rooted of Celtic traditions, that of the association of the severed head with the once-sacred well.

NOTES

[1] I am grateful to Pastor Høgsbro Østergaard, Denmark, for providing me with this information and reference.

[2] I am indebted to Mr. William Matheson, Department of Celtic, University of Edinburgh, for this information.

[3] For the prose version of this legend see *Rennes Dindshenchas*, ed. Whitley Stokes, Revue Celtique 16 (1895): 436.

[4] For a discussion of this motif see Jackson 1949:535 ff.

[5] I am indebted to Mrs. Rachel Bromwich, Lecturer in Celtic, Cambridge, for drawing my attention to this parallel.

[6] This information was kindly supplied by Miss K. M. Dickie, J.P., who heard the tradition from a native of Drishogue on April 7th, 1961.

[7] I am indebted to Professor Stuart Piggott for kindly drawing my attention to this reference. The *Heads in the Well* group constitutes part of a special form of the Aarne-Thompson tale-type 480. There are 36 versions. The group is of some interest because the earliest printed version of Type 480, that included by George Peele in his remarkable drama *The Old Wives Tale* of 1595, belongs to it. Because Peele's version contains some unusual elements not found in any oral version, it is obvious that the written version has had no influence on oral tradition. For details see Roberts 1957.

[8] I have discussed this episode in detail with Mr. Hermann Pàlsson, Lecturer in Icelandic, University of Edinburgh, and have greatly benefited from his expert knowledge. He has kindly pointed out that references are contained in the following sources: *Ynglinga Saga* (Ch. IV); Heimskringla, Vol. I (1941) 12-13 and 18; Edda Snorra Sturlusonar (1931); Völuspá, stanzas 28 and 46; Sigrdrífumál 13.

[9] A second version of this tradition, also recounted by Nan MacKinnon of Vatersay has a slightly different beginning. A woman, Mór nan Ceann, was the wife of the chieftain of Barra, and she and her husband were at that time staying at Eoligarry. Upon a certain crime having been committed, Mór nan Ceann had the three sons of one of her husband's servants decapitated and ordered that the heads should be thrown into the well. The father picked out all the heads and put them in a creel in order to carry them to St. Brendan's in Borve to be buried. The tale then proceeds as in *version one* above. Mór nan Ceann was supposed to have washed the three heads in the well which, in the second version, was known as *Tobar Mhór nan Ceann*, "The well of Mór of the Heads".

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