

**Did the Ancient Celts Practise
Human Sacrifice?**

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by

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**Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation
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Abstract

This dissertation sets out to examine the generally accepted claim that one of the features of ancient Celtic society was the practice of human sacrifice, and to find out whether the available written and archaeological evidence supports this claim. It was decided to limit the period under review to the six hundred years from c. 500 BC to AD 100. After reviewing the literature on the subject, a number of texts from ancient Greek and Roman writers were examined to ascertain what was said. A number of these writers referred to the ancient Celts practising human sacrifice. Next the results from a variety of archaeological investigations was looked at to see if there were any material remains which would support these references in the classical writings. It was discovered that there is little material evidence to support the allegations of human sacrifice among the ancient Celts, that those finds which have been used to verify these assertions have more than one interpretation, and that the vast majority of serious writers on the subject maintain that there is almost no evidence to back up the equally widely held assumption that such practice must have existed. The conclusion of this study is that there is no reliable evidence for the practice of human sacrifice among the ancient Celts. It is recommended that further research might be carried out into a) the relationship between bodies and artefacts found in water; b) alternative explanations for how 'bog bodies' might have died, and c) why scholars believe human sacrificed was practised by the ancient Celts.

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Did the Ancient Celts Practise Human Sacrifice?

Chapter 1 - Introduction

There has been much written about the ancient Celts, and their religions or rites, which have often been said to include human sacrifice. Most writers seem to take such suggestions at face value, with many references to both allusions in the classical writings or interpretation of archaeological remains. Although almost every reference to the practice of human sacrifice by the ancient Celts has the general comment that there is little actual evidence, particularly in Britain (Ann Woodward acknowledges that ‘The evidence for human sacrifice at shrines in Iron Age Britain is slight’¹), it is nevertheless generally asserted that the fact of there having been such sacrifices is fairly certain.² Not much has been written questioning whether human sacrifice did in fact occur, or asking whether such few descriptions as are extant might not have been invented by those who considered themselves enemies of such tribes who were alleged to practise such acts of ritual slaughter. However, studies of similar reports of barbaric practices elsewhere in the world would seem to suggest that lurid tales of shocking rites are related by those who consider themselves to have a vested interest in demonising their opponents, whilst actual observation by the recorders themselves is absent.³

William Arens gives a number of examples of this, two of them from the time of the Spanish conquests in South America. He tells of the first encounter of Christopher Columbus with two island peoples in the Caribbean, the Arawaks and the Caribs. The friendly Arawaks told tales of their neighbours the Caribs, who included one-eyed men and those with dogs’ noses and who ate men and drank their blood. Although Columbus didn’t believe such stories, and one of his contemporaries ‘flatly denies’ it,

¹ Ann Woodward, *Shrines and Sacrifices* (London: B T Batsford Ltd, 1992), p. 79.

² See, e.g. E. Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of the Modern Ideas* (London: MacMillan, 1906), pp. 434-76; J-L Brunaux, *The Celtic Gauls: Gods, Rites and Sanctuaries*, trans. by D. Nash (London: Seaby, 1988); J. R. Magilton, ‘Lindow Man: the Celtic Tradition and Beyond’, in *Bog Bodies: New Discoveries and New Perspectives* ed. by R. C. Turner, and R. G. Scaife (London: British Museum Press, 1995), pp. 183-87; Marion Löffler, ‘Sacrifice, Human’, in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO) 2006, pp. 1549-52; *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice* ed. by Jan N. Bremmer (Leuven: Peeters, 2007).

³ W. Arens, *The Man Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (New York: OUP, 1979); Bremmer, 2007, p. 2.

the rumours spread and even gave us the name cannibal, a corruption of the name Carib.⁴ When the Spaniards moved on to mainland America, the adventurer Hernando Cortés, although making no such claims during his letters at the time, later rationalised his genocide of the Aztecs by saying that they ‘were both sodomists and cannibals’.⁵ Nearer to home at Rome, Sallust writes that Cataline demanded his followers drink human blood, although this was almost certainly untrue.⁶ How, therefore, can one be certain that such reports as do exist of the ancient Celts sacrificing human beings to seek some divine blessing are based on actual witnesses, rather than the kind of myths that one group likes to spread abroad in order to discredit the other group? That being said, Nigel Davies makes a valid point when he asserts that ‘The very laws which the Romans drew up against certain kinds of human sacrifice are the surest proof that they existed.’⁷ In addition, how can it be known that what was recorded during one era applies equally to another? When scholars write about the ancient Celts and their practices, they are often informed by the writings of the Greeks and Romans. However, those written records of the cultic practices of the ancient Celts as are still extant were generally written during the first centuries BC and AD, and one cannot assume that what was recorded as being the case then were the same for people living in earlier centuries.⁸ So, for example, the writings of Julius Caesar about the Gauls and those of Tacitus about the Britons can’t be assumed to give information about peoples living two or three centuries earlier. It is important, therefore, that when examining either written or archaeological records findings are not extrapolated to earlier or later time periods.

In order to examine the question of whether the ancient Celts practised human sacrifice, it is important first to understand who the Celts were. There have been many attempts to answer this question over the years. Many, from the sixteenth century onwards, have defined the Celts as those peoples who spoke Celtic

⁴ Arens, 1979, p. 54.

⁵ Ibid., p. 58.

⁶ Miranda Aldhouse Green, *Dying for the Gods – Human Sacrifice in Iron Age and Roman Europe* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2001), pp. 57-58 and note also Strabo’s comments on the Irish being cannibals and committing incest in *Geography* II 4.5.4.

⁷ Nigel Davies, *Human Sacrifice* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 47.

⁸ Jane Webster, ‘At the End of the World: Druidic and Other Revitalization Movements in Post-Conquest Gaul and Britain’, *Britannia*, 30: (1999) 1-20 [online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/526671>] <accessed 29/10/2013>.

languages. These would include George Buchanan and Paul Yves Pezron in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,⁹ as well as a number of current scholars, such as John Koch,¹⁰ although Simon James disagrees with being able to identify the Celts as those who spoke Celtic languages.¹¹ This definition is difficult to establish, due to the paucity of written language. Apart from one or two texts, such as the one of two hundred words on a bronze tablet from Botoritta,¹² and the partial calendar at Coligny,¹³ the only written records in Celtic languages are a few inscriptions together with names of people, places, gods and groups recorded by the Greeks and Romans. Additionally, although studies have been made of ancient languages, it is difficult to map out the extent of the Celtic peoples on the basis of language alone. Another way of defining the Celts is by art forms, usually the Hallstatt and La Tène material cultures. This method of defining the Celts also has its difficulties, due to the amount of interpretation of archaeological remains required. Does the presence of La Tène style demonstrate the Celtic nature of the possessor, or imports from such? The terms Keltoi, Galli, Galatae, used by the ancient Greek and Roman writers seem to have referred to a wide range of barbarian peoples both east and west of the Rhine¹⁴ who may or may not have shared similar languages or culture. Keltoi, first used by Hecataeus of Miletus and Herodotus,¹⁵ appears to have been a vague term applied to north-western Europeans,¹⁶ of whom little, if anything, was known by the writers who may well have simply heard tales from afar which would have been retold, and no doubt changed and embellished, many times. Caesar found it expedient to state that the border of the Celtic lands was the Rhine, beyond which were the Germans.¹⁷ He also called the Celts Galli, which seems a little more specific, and to have referred to the various tribes populating present day France, Northern Italy,

⁹ Michael A. Morse, *How the Celts Came to Britain: Druids, Ancient Skulls and the Birth of Archaeology* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2005), p. 15.

¹⁰ *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006) p. xx.

¹¹ Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts: ancient people or modern invention?* (London: British Museum Press, 1999), pp. 81-83.

¹² Simon James, *Exploring the World of the Celts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 10.

¹³ Miranda J. Green, *The World of the Druids* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997(B)), p. 37.

¹⁴ Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (London: St Martin's Press, 1992), p. 203.

¹⁵ Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville, *Cours de Littérature Celtique 12: Principaux auteurs de l'antiquité à consulter pour l'histoire des Celtes* ([Paris]: [n. pub.], 1902), pp. 12-15, 29-30.

¹⁶ Herodotus Histories [online] http://www.maryjones.us/ctexts/classical_herodotus.html <accessed 28/11/2013>

¹⁷ Caesar *The Gallic War*, trans. by H. J. Edwards (London: Heinemann, 1917) 1:1.

Switzerland and Belgium. Further afield, the Galatae were considered a group of Celts who settled in present day Turkey. Thus maps of the extent of the ancient Celts typically show an area stretching from Spain in the West across central Europe to Romania, with some peoples moving as far as southern Russia and Anatolia in Turkey. They are also shown inhabiting regions as far south as Spain, and north to Britain and Ireland.¹⁸

The problem with this depiction of the extent of the ancient Celts, is that when investigating human sacrifice, one type of find which is generally presented as evidence, namely ‘bog bodies’, is mainly seen in parts of Northern Europe which are not considered to have been part of the ancient Celtic world, although there have been a number of finds in Britain and Ireland. This would suggest that there was a common culture across what has been considered both Celtic and also non-Celtic cultures. For the purposes of this study, however, and following the majority of scholars, the ancient Celts will be taken to mean those peoples who spoke, or are thought to have spoken, some form of Celtic language, even though this means that some of the evidence considered falls outside this definition. The period under consideration will stretch back as far as written and/or archeological evidence permit, and up to the Roman Empire, although there was no Roman era in Ireland and Scotland. This is a rather flexible span of time, but for practical purposes will compass the period from c. 500 BC to approximately AD 100.

Another term which needs to be considered is ‘human sacrifice’, and what precisely is meant by that. The term ‘human’ is fairly self-explanatory, in that only men, women and children, and not sacrifices of animals, plants or inanimate objects are being considered. However the term ‘sacrifice’ is not necessarily clear. Sacrifices can be living or dead. Where a person is killed, there are a variety of types or reasons for this, not all of which are considered as sacrifices, and some of those that are, are not termed ‘human sacrifices’. For example there have been numerous references to people, usually men, sacrificing their lives for their country. This is generally taken to mean men who go to war and are killed. However, no-one generally considers this

¹⁸ John Haywood, *The Historical Atlas of the Celtic World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001).

to be an example of human sacrifice. Christians worship a god who is believed to have sacrificed himself for mankind, yet Jesus is not considered by his followers to be a human sacrifice. Other examples of the deliberate killing of people include execution of criminals, execution of prisoners of war, execution of people for their religious (for example during the Inquisition) or political (for example in former USSR) beliefs, or because they are otherwise considered to pose a danger to the state (for example Osama bin Laden). Further forms of killing include infanticide and abortion, the latter still considered acceptable in many countries today. However, all of these are not generally considered to be human sacrifices, even in the case of people killed because of their religious beliefs, because there is no sense on the part of the killers of religious or divine ritual involved.

It is this latter which is generally considered as needing to be present in order for the act to be considered human sacrifice. That is, it is expected or hoped that something will be gained from the sacrifice. This might be fertility, healing, good crops, rain, wealth or victory in war. For example, in 216 BC, when facing a critical time during the war with Carthage, the Romans buried a man and a woman alive.¹⁹ Alternatively, the human sacrifice might be to avoid an unwanted situation, such as crop failure or defeat in war. Human sacrifice can also be carried out to please a deity without any expectation of something in return - as an act of worship perhaps. Woodward defines sacrifice as ‘slaughter of a living body [...] in a pagan religious context.’²⁰ In addition, it is possible that a person may volunteer him or herself as a sacrifice, possibly with the intention of journeying to the ‘Otherworld’ in order to convey a message for the benefit of the community. Philip Freeman mentions both archaeological and written sources, suggesting that some human sacrifices were willing victims,²¹ although it seems highly unlikely that such an assertion could ever be substantiated without written evidence. For the purpose of this study, human sacrifice will be defined as the killing of a human being, whether voluntary or

¹⁹ Davies, 1981, p. 47.

²⁰ Woodward, 1992, p. 9.

²¹ Philip Freeman, *The Philosopher and the Druids* (London: Souvenir Books, 2006), p. 123.

otherwise, in order to please or propitiate a god or spirit. This sacrifice may take place with or without ritual.²²

Having defined, for the purposes of this study, both the meaning of human sacrifice and who the ancient Celts were, this thesis sets out to look at the evidence for human sacrifice, and to suggest that such evidence as exists is both unreliable and open to interpretation, and that such human sacrifice as may have existed was in fact either execution for crimes committed (possibly with a religious purpose),²³ or the slaughter which occurs in war, either on the battlefield during the fighting, or of prisoners taken and then killed. It will be maintained that neither of these scenarios can conclusively be said to be human sacrifice with all the sensational connotations that such a term is associated with today. The main areas to be examined are ancient writings from the period and archaeological remains. Although there is a rich vein of material and various motifs from Welsh and Irish storytelling, this will not be included in the study, due to the need to limit the scope and also the difficulty of extracting historical fact from tales which weren't written down until many centuries after the period in question, when they would have been heavily influenced by Christian beliefs.²⁴ This dissertation will argue that the evidence is overwhelmingly circumstantial or of dubious authenticity and that there is insufficient indications that the ancient Celts practiced human sacrifice, which myth has been perpetrated by those seeking to vilify other races, and perpetuated by people's love of horror and the macabre.

In seeking to understand something of the nature of ancient Celtic ritual, scholars generally tend to look at various archaeological artefacts alongside ancient writings from the time, in order to piece together a picture of what happened, how and why. The problem is that very little in the way of written accounts was left by the ancient Celts about their cultures. Other than inscriptions, there are only two Celtic texts, written on bronze, that have so far been discovered. The only narratives extant were

²² Davies, 1981.

²³ Marion Löffler, 'Sacrifice, Human', in *The Celts: History, Life, and Culture*, ed. by John T. Koch (gen ed.) and Antone Minard (ed.) (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012), pp. 688-90, p. 688.

²⁴ Bremmer, 2007.

authored by peoples who were alien to the cultures they wrote about, who often had little or no experience of the relevant lifestyles or beliefs, and who often relied on second or third hand accounts for their source material. They did not have a rigorous attitude to their writing which had many of the features of the tabloids of today. Many wished to write in an interesting and possibly racy fashion about what, to their readerships, were strange exotic peoples with lifestyles far removed from those of the civilised world. Horror stories, full of the macabre, have always been of interest, and such touches would have increased the number of readers. In any case, these writers may well have accepted the stories they were told, or other accounts they read, without questioning too closely their veracity. Aside from this, there were often political reasons for depicting the Celts as barbaric and in need of civilising (not to mention plundering and taxing) were funds and other resources to be made available. Julius Caesar certainly needed to assure both politicians and plebeians in Rome of the continuing necessity for his campaigns of conquest and pacification, as did Tacitus writing for Agricola.

It is difficult, therefore, at this distance, to know how much, if any, credence can be given to the accounts of the ancient Greek and Roman writers about the peoples they termed Celts or Gauls. Even if the narratives are accepted as evidence for the attitudes and rites described, and for human sacrifice, as Miranda Green points out,²⁵ there is no reason to extrapolate from these back in time, to retrospectively ascribe, say, to the peoples of the 6th century BC the same practices as those from the 1st century. Many of the written accounts extant of the subject matter are concentrated around the first centuries BC and AD, and say nothing of the Celts living up to half a millennium previously. Here there is almost no mention of the Celts at all, and certainly none about their religious beliefs and rites. However, the accounts are, to a greater or lesser extent, generally accepted by those who have studied the peoples of the late bronze and early iron age, albeit with reservations. One of the questions that this dissertation will address is whether this general acceptance is justified, or whether the various classical references to human sacrifice should rather be

²⁵ Green, 2001, p. 13.

considered as exaggerated but curious comments on a group of peoples beyond the ken of the civilised world.

Besides the written texts, which are open to interpretation, there are the material remains to consider. In some respects these are a lot more concrete, yet no less, and possibly rather more, open to interpretation. A skeleton may show undeniable signs of having been dismembered, but was this pre- or post-mortem? Does the way a body may have been treated show evidence of human sacrifice or funerary rites? It may be clear that human remains show a violent death, but was this due to human sacrifice, or was the man/woman a convicted criminal, or the unfortunate victim of a violent mugging? There are often several possibilities, and it is important to accept that material remains may often have more than one interpretation. Even where there are Celtic pictures or sculptures, for example in the La Tène style, it is difficult to be certain whether the images are of human beings or of gods? Sometimes there are inscriptions, but often the intended depiction is left to the imagination. There are a number of remains that are worth looking at more closely. Some are those of skeletons or skeletal remains, both human and animal, for example at Gournay and Ribemont in France, both of which have yielded a large number of human bones which appear to be in a ritual context. In addition, in the hillfort at Danebury in England a large number of deep pits have been uncovered containing a number of skeletal remains of both humans and animals, which appear to have been specially deposited, possibly with some ritual, whilst at Roquepertuse in France there is a stone structure containing niches for human heads, some of which were still present on discovery. There are also numerous artefacts, including weapons, jewellery and pottery found at places such as Llyn Cerrig Bach in Wales and La Tène and Halstadt in Switzerland and Austria, which may suggest certain practices or beliefs involving sacrifice, although these cannot be substantiated without a written explanation of the context, such explanations being absent or else highly questionable.²⁶

²⁶ James, 1993; Barry Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts* (London: Penguin Books, 1997); Green, 1997 (B); Hayward, 2001.

One type of material remains has given rise to a large amount of interest and reasoned speculation due to the extraordinarily high degree of preservation. This is what is generally termed the 'bog body'. There have been a number of finds, over the past 200 hundred years, of ancient bodies preserved in bogs, mostly in Denmark, but also in other north European sites, including Britain and Ireland - one discovered very recently. Due to the anaerobic qualities of the environment, bodies which end up in water do not decompose in the usual way, and are often so well preserved that the skin, and even hair and nails, as well as stomach contents, are generally sufficiently conserved to enable a very good forensic examination. It is generally considered that such individuals were killed deliberately and that this was either due to their being criminals, or for some religious purpose. Often the bodies were pinned down in the water, and it is thought by some that this was to prevent them returning to this world and causing problems for the living. Peter Glob catalogues in detail the different finds, drawing attention to the similarities of their death and deposition, as well as approximate dates of death.²⁷ These people are generally thought to have died *c.* 100 BC – AD 500, generally around midwinter, although there have been some from over five thousand years old. (One recent find in Ireland is of a man who died approximately four thousand years ago, and so outside the time period of this study.²⁸ However, the idea advanced that this man was a victim of human sacrifice in the same way as those younger by more than one thousand years seems somewhat implausible given the implication that the same rites would have been conducted over such a long time. This may be a good example of the need for caution when before inferring that such bodies are the remains of human sacrifices.) Glob asserts that 'feast days accompanied by human sacrifice attracted participants from all over the district, and special persons were selected as the sacrificial victims,'²⁹ However, not everyone agrees with these theories, due to a number of problems, in particular the lack of certainty regarding date of death.³⁰ It has been posited that at least some

²⁷ P. V. Glob, *The Bog People* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969).

²⁸ McGrath, Matt 'World's oldest bog body hints at violent past', *BBC News: Science & Environment*, 24 September 2013 [online] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-24053119> <Accessed 19/01/14>.

²⁹ Glob, 1969, p. 188.

³⁰ C. S. Briggs, 'Did They Fall or Were They Pushed? Some Unresolved Questions about Bog Bodies', in *Bog Bodies: New Discoveries and New Perspectives* ed. by R. C. Turner and R. G. Scaife, (eds) . (London: British Museum Press, 1995), pp. 168-82.

of these bodies were from a much later era than radiocarbon testing would suggest, that there are practical considerations regarding a ritual execution in water,³¹ and that the composition of the environment may be incompatible with the generally accepted theories of human sacrifice or execution.

In a different, but analogous, study,³² Arens seeks to demonstrate that much of what is accepted wisdom with respect to cannibalism, does not stand up to scrutiny. He examines the reports of cannibalism in the West Indies, Latin America, Papua New Guinea, and even ancient Britain, and shows that although commonly accepted by anthropologists as established fact, these reports lack any tenable evidence, and emanate in the main from fanciful reporting of enemies of the purported cannibals. Eileen Murphy points out that Arens is here demonstrating that practically all cultures demonise other groups so as to show their own superiority, and that Herodotus did the same when he attributed cannibalism to the Scythians because that is what foreigners did.³³ Davies, however, claims that Arens 'is writing sheer nonsense'³⁴ given the number of eye-witness accounts. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see to what extent academic theories and descriptions were developed from highly dubious sources which would not be accepted by academics today. This may also be the case with the generally accepted thesis that human sacrifice, in some form, was practised by the ancient Celts.

The final area which is often looked at when seeking to determine the evidence for human sacrifice, is that of the Welsh and Irish storytelling tradition, the earliest written examples of which date back to the eleventh century,³⁵ but which would have had their origins in oral tales from a much earlier period. These stories tend to be mythological with recurring motifs, and there may indeed be some factual basis for some of the ideas, but it is very difficult to unravel the themes and meanings. There

³¹ Briggs, 1995.

³² Arens, 1979.

³³ Eileen Murphy, Ilia Gokhman, Yuri Chistov, and Ludmila Barkova 'Prehistoric Old World Scalping: New Cases from the Cemetery of Aymyrlyg, South Siberia', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 106: 1 (2002), pp. 1-10 [online] <http://www.jstor.org/stable/507186> <Accessed 29/10/12> et al, 2002, p. 8; Rankin, 1996, p. 49.

³⁴ Davies, 1981, p. 153.

³⁵ Bremmer, 2007, p31.

is much mythology in ancient Greek writings, yet these are not generally taken to point to actual practices in ancient Greece. Celtic mythology is a whole area in itself, and it is not proposed to examine these stories here, although some reference will be made to them at times.

The dissertation will then be looking at what has been written on the theme of human sacrifice among the ancient Celts from the fifth century BC to the first century AD, identifying the main theories currently being put forward. This is a long time frame and covers a wide range of communities over a very extensive area. Cultures and cultic practices will have varied greatly over time and throughout Europe, and the number of individual gods probably numbered in the thousands.³⁶ As John Haywood points out, historians and archaeologists 'have imposed a degree of order and unity on [...] a diverse group of peoples.'³⁷ It will in particular note the fairly common conclusion that, although there is little actual evidence for the practice, and what evidence is presented is open to interpretation, human sacrifice can be accepted as having taken place. Then the classical writings will be considered, as well as the main archaeological findings and their possible interpretations. These will be looked at together to see to what extent the various theories regarding human sacrifice are supported by the evidence currently available, and it will be concluded that the evidence is rather weak and mostly speculative. As Barry Cunliffe asserts, 'Convincing evidence of human sacrifice is surprisingly rare in the archaeological record.'³⁸ However, it may well be that the reason this is surprising is due to the a priori assumptions made by so many, perhaps because of the desire to believe that more primitive societies must have been more barbaric, that human sacrifice must have taken place. It is not here suggested that human sacrifice never happened, but that any such cases would have been outside of accepted practice, rather than sanctioned by the traditions of the time, in the same way that there have on rare occasions been news items of particularly gruesome ritual killings in modern times, but that is not to suggest that modern society practices human sacrifice.

³⁶ Haywood, 2001, p. 64.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

³⁸ Cunliffe, 1997, p. 192.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The literature on the ancient Celts and their possible participation in human sacrifice encompasses a time span of over two thousand years from the first mention of Keltoi by Hecataeus in the early fifth century BC³⁹ right up to the present day, and is written from a number of different viewpoints and disciplines, including politics, history, archaeology, and indeed fiction. One of the problems in looking through the various writings is in separating fact from opinion, and another is in deciding which are relevant to a study of Celtic prehistory, given that much of the information and evidence given straddles the Celtic and the non-Celtic European worlds, the latter usually thought to include Germany and Denmark. Although this study is concerned with the Celtic world, that is those peoples who are believed to have spoken some form of Celtic languages, there is no escaping the relevance of other parts of European cultures, and so reference will be made to archaeological finds which are not considered Celtic as such. The period under investigation was long before the rise of the nation state, and boundaries were much more fluid. In addition, the influence of the Celts whether through trade or war went beyond their homelands, as evidence by artefacts found outside the afore stated boundaries, or Greek and Roman accounts of Celtic invasions. It is difficult to be certain as to exactly where the Celtic lands ended and the non-Celtic ones began. However, for the purposes of this study, the area considered Celtic is that area of maximum expansion covering present day France, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria and reaching as far as Galatia, as well as all but the south-eastern part of Spain, and the British Isles.⁴⁰ Most of the literature considered in this study is relatively recent, but some reference will be made to writers from earlier centuries.

As Michael Morse writes, 'Classical descriptions of northwestern European peoples, called "Keltoi" in Greek sources and "Galli" in Latin, were vague, contradictory and never mentioned the British Isles',⁴¹ although according to de Jubainville the Celts were mentioned in the Iliad and the word for tin, which was mined in Britain, is Celtic. Nevertheless, Malcolm Chapman maintains that there were no Celts in Britain

³⁹ de Jubainville, 1902, pp. 12-15.

⁴⁰ James, 1993, pp. 16-17; Haywood, 2001, pp. 64-65.

⁴¹ Morse, 2005, p. 9.

before the eighteenth century.⁴² Although George Buchanan, writing in the 16th century, recognised a group of related languages which he called ‘Gallic’,⁴³ the first person to have used the word Celt to talk about ancient Britons was Edward Lhuyd in his book *Archaeologica Britannica* published in 1707, in which he talked about the connections between a number of languages.⁴⁴ His French counterpart at the time, Pezron, writing a little earlier was also interested in understanding the connections between languages and the origins of the Celts, whom he equated with Gauls.⁴⁵ Following these writers, a number of others were keen to understand more about the origins of the Britons and the Gauls, although British and French authors had different interests. The British wanted to discover their origins, often trying to square what they read in the classics with the Bible, whereas the French writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were keen to emphasise their glorious past.⁴⁶ At this time, those interested in tracing their past had little in the way of archaeological evidence to go on, and so relied heavily on the writings of the classical authors of Greece and Rome to inform their research, which they often tried to tie in with the Bible.⁴⁷ With a less critical approach to the ancient writings than might be the case today, they were keen, particularly the French authors, to view their past in a good light, and so wanted to downplay references to human sacrifice.⁴⁸ The view was often that of the ‘noble savage’, a type of primitive savant.⁴⁹

Later, in the mid-nineteenth century, and with the beginnings of archaeology and a growing interest in ancient artefacts, John Kemble, a student in Germany, became interested in distinguishing Celtic grave goods from those of other peoples.⁵⁰ His criteria were then used to identify the finds at Hallstadt and La Tène as being in the Celtic style,⁵¹ which led to a wider understanding as to who the ancient Celts were,

⁴² Chapman, 1992, p. 201.

⁴³ J. Collis, *The Celts: Origins, Myths and Inventions* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003), p. 37.

⁴⁴ Chapman, 1992, p. 205; Morse, 2005, pp. 19-22; Edward Lhuyd, *Archaeologia Britannica: Text and Translations* ed. by Dewi W. Evans and Brynley F. Roberts (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2009).

⁴⁵ Paul Yves Pezron, *Antiquites des Gaulois* (Paris: [n. pub], 1703), p. iii.

⁴⁶ Collette Beaune, *Naissance de la nation France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), pp. 9, 16; R. E. Asher, *National Myths in Renaissance France* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 90-102.

⁴⁷ Pezron, 1703, pp. iii-iv.

⁴⁸ Asher, 1993, pp. 95-96.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-93; Beaune, 1985, p. 16.

⁵⁰ Morse, 2005, p. 133.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

and included artwork as well as language. In amongst all the various aspects of ancient Celtic life that scholars and non-academics alike were interested in, was the religious or cultic side, and the few references in the Greek and Roman sources to the Celts having learned men called Druids. There had already been much speculation about these people, generally by those such as Aubrey and Stukeley in the 17th and 18th centuries, who had a somewhat romantic idealisation of the past.⁵² With a renewed, but perhaps more scholarly, interest in the twentieth century in the druids, who were written of by Greek and Roman writers as being philosophers, adjudicators or officiators at ritual sacrifices in Gaul and Britain,⁵³ the occasional references to human sacrifice by Greek and Roman writers⁵⁴ were now linked with archaeological finds to build theories of human sacrifice practiced in the ancient Celtic world and involving the Druids as priestly officiators. However, this widened the debate as to who exactly were the Celts, and there continues to be differences of opinion as to how the term is to be defined. Some, such as Koch⁵⁵ and Green⁵⁶ amongst others, consider the ancient Celts to be those who spoke what had by now come to be regarded as a distinct related group of Indo-European languages, whilst others prefer to concentrate on cultural elements such as the La Tène style of craftsmanship.⁵⁷ Some, such as James, maintain that it is not possible to define such a diverse people by language or culture alone, and even query whether there is such a people as the Celts, certainly in the British Isles.⁵⁸ Do all these theories, or rather speculations, result from what has been discovered, or from general prejudices about ancient primitive peoples? Whatever the origins of the speculations, they seem to have been fairly well ingrained. The hunt was on to find evidence of human sacrifice. If evidence was found that had more than one interpretation, it was acknowledged that there was no definite proof, but it was likely that this particular artefact was evidence of human sacrifice.

⁵² Green, 1997 (B), pp. 139-59.

⁵³ Nora K. Chadwick, *The Druids* 2nd ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press) 1997.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Koch, 2006, p. xx.

⁵⁶ Miranda J. Green, *The Gods of the Celts* (London: Sutton, 1997(A)).

⁵⁷ Collis 2003, p. 82.

⁵⁸ James, 1999.

When scholars look for evidence of human sacrifice among the Celts, there are a number of assumptions made. Many of these assumptions are about the nature of prehistoric societies and the degree of civilisation they can be expected to have. Assumptions include ideas about possible religious rituals, and human sacrifice is generally assumed to have taken place. Much of what is understood about human sacrifice is due to the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans, whose occasional references were picked up on by writers such as Pasquier (seventeenth century), and have been accepted, with various degrees of scepticism, ever since. Mid-twentieth century writers on the Celts who contributed a lot to the debate were scholars such as Stuart Piggott, Anne Ross and Nora Chadwick.⁵⁹ More recently Green⁶⁰ and James⁶¹ have written a good deal for the general reader about the Celts, including about their religion and human sacrifice.

Ideas about what human sacrifice consists of varies, although it is generally considered to involve the deliberate killing of a human being, and to have some sort of cultic or divinatory aspect to it. Al Alvarez⁶² mentions the need to be careful not to project current attitudes and concerns on to people of other times. Jan Bremmer quotes Sopater as giving what he considers the earliest definition of human sacrifice, 'people kill certain other human beings for a specific reason as an offering to supernatural beings.'⁶³ Davies⁶⁴ notes that the distinction between execution and sacrifice is a fairly modern notion, and he discusses different ideas of motive for sacrifice. However, he considers that although the distinction between sacrifice and judicial killings was not so clear in ancient times, as when Caesar had two men executed in 46 BC for mutiny to appease the god Mars,⁶⁵ for a death to be considered a deliberate sacrifice there needs to be both religion and ritual.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, although one might be able to determine from archaeological remains whether a

⁵⁹ Stuart Piggott, *The Druids* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968); Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (rev. ed) (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1992); Chadwick, 1997.

⁶⁰ Green, 1997(A), 1997(B), 2001.

⁶¹ James 1993.

⁶² A. Alvarez, *The Savage God* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), p.47.

⁶³ Bremmer, 2007, p.31.

⁶⁴ Davies, 1981, p. 52.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

death may have involved ritual, there has so far been no incontrovertible proof that such have been human sacrifices.

Recent literature about human sacrifice among the ancient Celts is generally approached in three different ways. The author is either writing about the ancient Celts as a people, and/or the druids, and includes rites and sacrifice as a part of this.⁶⁷ Some accounts of sacrifice come within works of archaeology.⁶⁸ A further type of writing is about what are generally referred to as ‘bog bodies’, which have generally been discovered accidentally. The first of these areas encompasses the people considered to be the Celts, whereas the other two areas go beyond the Celtic regions. In particular, the majority of bog bodies unearthed have been in Denmark and northern Germany, which are outside what is generally considered Celtic areas. Some of the similarities from these finds suggest common cultural areas across vast geographical areas, including both Celtic and non-Celtic lands, thereby suggesting a fairly uniform northern European culture. The following will look at these three general areas in turn, beginning with what the ancient writers have told us.

When considering the Celts, many scholars begin with the classical writers of ancient Greece and Rome,⁶⁹ for that period which is the Celtic prehistoric, is the Classical historic. Although the subject peoples were not literate, or at least little of what they may have written has been preserved, they were written about by Greek and Roman writers. The Celts themselves wrote down little that is extant, but when they did record anything by writing, such as the Coligny calendar, they generally used the lettering of other cultures to do so. For example, they used the Greek and Roman alphabets in France, a derivative of the Etruscan alphabet in northern Italy, and a derivative of the Phoenician alphabet in the Iberian peninsula. In parts of the British Isles, especially Ireland the Ogam script was used. Although archaeological finds are concrete, they are open to interpretation or speculation, whereas words written down can be understood more completely. However, even when these ancient forms of Celtic languages are correctly understood, they do give rise to a problem of

⁶⁷ Green, 1997 (B); James, 1993.

⁶⁸ Cunliffe, 1997.

⁶⁹ Chadwick, 1997; Green, 1997 (B); James, 1993.

interpretation, where many things need to be considered, such as context, motive, culture and genuineness.

Although early antiquarians may have taken the classical writings very much as they stood, scholars today are concerned to study them much more critically. Many of the Renaissance French writers were keen to show that France had a glorious past, and as they equated Celt with Gaul, they attributed the Celtic victories mentioned by the classical authors to Gaul.⁷⁰ They also glossed over any reference to human sacrifice or compared them to those made by the Hebrews or Romans.⁷¹ Some of the writings on which we depend for our understanding of the period are no longer extant, and we need to piece them together from others. For example one Roman writer who is often mentioned, Posidonius, needs to be understood from those who had read and absorbed his writings, such as Caesar and the Greek ethnographer Strabo. Chadwick⁷² believed that although there are a number of writers from the period, they are drawing largely on the writings of Posidonius, and that nothing is certain to have been recorded by eye witnesses. She also points out that they were writing for a readership that was interested in the curious and bizarre. Jane Webster⁷³ contends that there were political reasons for Roman antipathy to the druids, and so for them highlighting human sacrifice. However, she also casts doubt on the idea that all of Caesar's writings come from Posidonius, given that there are aspects of what he wrote that are not found anywhere else,⁷⁴ and also that he did have first hand experience of Gaul. Chadwick questions the link between the druids and human sacrifice, pointing out that many of the classical writers, for example Tacitus, mention human sacrifice, but not in connection with druids, saying only that they were present during the attack by Suetonius on Anglesey.⁷⁵

Jean-Louis Brunaux⁷⁶ suggests that there is no reason to doubt Caesar's accounts of the execution of criminals, but he also expresses scepticism about Caesar's assertion

⁷⁰ Beaune, 1985, p. 16; Asher, 1993, p91.

⁷¹ Asher, 1993, p. 96.

⁷² Chadwick, 1997, p. 11.

⁷³ Webster, 1999.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁵ Chadwick, 1999, p. 30; Tacitus, trans. by Freeman and Koch in *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales* ed. by John T. Koch and John Carey (4th edn) (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003), p. 34.

⁷⁶ Brunaux 1988, p.127

that innocents were substituted when criminals were lacking. It is not clear, however, on what basis he accepts some assertions and not others. He also considers Caesar's account of the wicker contraption as extraordinary, and suggests that the three types of sacrifice mentioned by Lucan could be fables. He does, however, assert that descriptions by Diodorus of Sicily should be taken seriously due to the precision of his account. Brunaux also casts doubt on accounts of execution of prisoners, due to the improbability of having the resources to imprison them all for five years first. It is difficult to see why he should think prisoners of war needed to be imprisoned for a few years before their execution, unless he is extrapolating from the experience of Vercingetorix. There also seems to be an equation in his thinking of execution of prisoners of war with human sacrifice. Although there was in all likelihood less of a distinction in ancient times between the sacred and the secular, to suggest that the killing of criminals or prisoners of war was a type of human sacrifice would not resonate with the general thinking of today.

One source which does not appear to be mentioned within the literature, presumably because it would not appear relevant, is the Bible. Although a whole book of the New Testament is written to the Galatians, nothing is mentioned of Celtic religious rites, although there is much warning against Jewish ones. It is, of course, an argument from silence, and it may well be that this Celtic community had been settled for so long in that area that ancient ways had given way to the surrounding Greek culture. However, the period of writing does fall within that under consideration, and it would be reasonable to expect that if the local population had been engaging in sacrificial activity of any kind, the writer may have made reference to this.

Most writers on the ancient Celts refer to various archaeological remains in relation to the possibilities of human sacrifice having taken place during the later Bronze Age and Iron Age.⁷⁷ One of the pieces of evidence which writers point to in support of the idea of human sacrifice is skeletal remains which suggest some sort of ritual. Many writers point to finds at Ribemont in France where an ossuary of human bones were arranged in a manner suggestive of some sort of ritual. Brunaux states that studies

⁷⁷ See, e.g. Brunaux, 1988; James, 1993; Green, 2001;

here show that bodies were clearly dismembered, but that they can't say that this was due to sacrifice, and that dismemberment after death is the best theory.⁷⁸ However, he also states that bones in 'sanctuaries' give more solid evidence for human sacrifice, because 'remains in a cult context show traces of blows and are mixed in with the remains of animals which we can be sure were sacrificed.'⁷⁹ He does, however, concede that bones found at another site, Gournay, show little sign of cuts, but more of blows delivered after death, these being possible dismemberment after death during funerary rites. His conclusion is that evidence for human sacrifice is rare. Green details a number of archaeological finds where ritual killing, or treatment of corpses is evident.⁸⁰ She mentions ritual deposits at Gournay and Danebury as including both human and animal remains, including the placing together of infant and calf, but acknowledges that it cannot be certain if both were sacrificed, or the animal was sacrificed when the person died.⁸¹

One very specific area of archaeology that has been referred to in support of the various theories, is the remains of individuals who have been found preserved in wetlands. These corpses are generally known as bog bodies, interest in which was first popularised by P. V. Glob in his seminal work on the subject, *The Bog People*, published in 1969⁸². In this book, Glob details a number of finds of bodies preserved in bogs, otherwise known as mosses, mostly from Denmark and northern Germany, although with a number found in Britain and Ireland. He indicates that the majority of these finds date from 100 BC to AD 500, although there have been occasional finds from over five thousand years old.⁸³ However, according to Christian Fischer,⁸⁴ recent advances in radiocarbon dating have narrowed this down to c. 500 BC - AD 1, which all falls within the period known in Scandinavia as the Celtic Iron Age⁸⁵ and the late Bronze Age. C. S. Briggs,⁸⁶ however, states that radiocarbon dating of bodies is difficult and that many estimates overstate their age. He also states that if the

⁷⁸ Brunaux, 1988, pp17-18

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 133

⁸⁰ Green, 2001.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 44

⁸² Glob, 1969.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 105.

⁸⁴ Christian Fischer, *Tollund Man: Gift to the Gods*, (2nd ed.) (Stroud: The History Press, 2012), p. 9.

⁸⁵ Glob, 1969, pp. 125, 142; Fischer, 2012, p. 9.

⁸⁶ Briggs, 1995.

bodies were the victims of Celtic and Germanic ritual practices, then their age must be in the period of *c.* 300 BC to AD 400. However, Briggs was writing over fifteen years before the latest edition of Fischer, which would suggest Fischer's dating is likely to be more accurate.

Due to the high degree of preservation of the bog bodies, there has been much interest in the supposed manner of the individuals' deaths, and suggestions that these were generally ritual deaths. Part of these suppositions come from their having been laid to rest in water, or marshy land. Due to the number of depositions of valuable metals in water during the period in question, it has been considered that the Celts would devote weapons, jewellery and coins to various deities by placing them in water, water being considered to have been one of the nebulous areas between the living and the dead.⁸⁷ This being so, most authors consider the placing of bodies in bogs to have had special significance. Green⁸⁸ claims there is 'abundant evidence' for the importance of water in the Celtic religious ideas, due to the large number of offerings of metal and wooden objects recovered from watery places, and quotes Strabo's reference to treasure left in sacred lakes, as well as mentioning the finds at Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland.⁸⁹ This importance is extrapolated to include the bodies that have been found in bogs. James also refers to the importance of water to the Celts, mentioning various finds of deposits in water, including those from Llyn Cerrig Bach on Anglesey, as well as the finds at La Tène.⁹⁰ However, as Briggs points out, both metal and bodies are better preserved in water, and therefore water will yield more remains than dry land. He contends that 'to impute a motivation of ritual deposition, purely on the grounds that artefacts and bodies happen to be well preserved in bogs or anaerobic soils, is therefore to create circularity of argument by hindsight.'⁹¹ This is a valid argument, which needs to be considered when drawing conclusions about depositions of bodies and artefacts in water.

However, it is not just the placement in water that leads most authors to contend that the bog bodies were ritually killed. There is also consideration given to the state of

⁸⁷ Woodward, 1992, p. 51

⁸⁸ Green, 1997 (B), p. 25.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p109

⁹⁰ James, 1993, p. 94.

⁹¹ Briggs, 1995, p. 169.

the recovered bodies, and evidence of the manner of their deaths. The most famous of these bog bodies in Britain is Lindow II, generally referred to as 'Lindow Man' due to his being discovered in 1984 in Lindow Moss. Lindow is a Celtic place name possibly meaning 'black pool'.⁹² Green, in her book *The World of the Druids*, describes a number of features of the corpse which she considers to strongly suggest this was a man ritually sacrificed, although she concedes he may have been executed as a criminal.⁹³ She admits that there is no firm archeological evidence for human sacrifice, but argues that bodies found in bogs show signs of having been victim to this, on account of how they are thought to have died. She points out the apparent three-fold manner of Lindow II's death as being indicative of a ritual murder, and finds further significance in the discovery of mistletoe pollen in the man's stomach. Green links the 'triple death' to Irish myths as further evidence of the importance of the number three. She also sees significance in the 'severe trauma' which many recovered bodies appear to have suffered.⁹⁴ However, according to Fischer, many of these bodies were crushed by the effect of the peat resting on them.⁹⁵ He also explains the softening effect that long immersion in water has on the skin, and the consequent need to be cautious about stating that 'victims' had done no hard labour and so must have been from the elite classes.⁹⁶

Any treatment of religion or ritual among the ancient Celts refers to the Druids, a somewhat shadowy group of people whose function is not entirely clear. As Green points out,⁹⁷ the only record of the druids is in the ancient writings, as archaeology leaves no record of them, other than the Coligny calendar, which seems to have been of religious significance although without mention of druids. Green writes of them as being 'involved in politics, sacrificial ritual, prophecy and the control of the supernatural world. They were teachers, keepers of oral tradition, royal advisers and, in some instances, they were themselves rulers.'⁹⁸ Druids are generally referred to as

⁹² Ross, 'Lindow Man and the Celtic Tradition', in *Lindow Man: The Body in the Bog*, ed. by I. M. Stead, J. B. Bourke and Don Brothwell (London: British Museum Publications, 1986) 1986, pp. 162-69, p. 169.

⁹³ Green, 1997 (B), p. 81.

⁹⁴ Green, 2001, p. 51.

⁹⁵ Fischer, 2012, p. 180.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁹⁷ Green, 1997 (B), p. 8.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

being priests, although Chadwick doesn't consider them so.⁹⁹ She prefers to think of them as philosophers and rulers, although others dispute this. Scholars refer to a number of passages in the classics which speak about the Celts and the druids, when considering the practice of human sacrifice, although not everyone notes the distinction between them, or the period of the writing. Chadwick suggests that 'the area of the druids was not widespread',¹⁰⁰ only being mentioned in connection with Gaul and Britain, and yet many of the archaeological finds, including bog bodies, that are referred to as evidence of human sacrifice among the Celts come from outside the realm of what is considered the Celtic lands, and certainly outside Britain and Gaul, where the druids are mentioned.¹⁰¹ It seems questionable, therefore, that the archaeological remains can be considered as evidence of human sacrifice overseen by the druids. This is not to say, however, that they cannot be evidence of cultic practices of the Celts, although the bog bodies found in Germany and Denmark are outside the Celtic domain.

Although writing on a different subject, Arens¹⁰² looks in great detail at the evidence for cannibalism at various times and in various cultures, but considers these as a mixture of unsubstantiated travellers' or missionaries' tales, or political justifications for the subjugations of peoples. He states that all cultures have, at some points, been labelled as cannibalistic as this, together with allegations of incest, implies a savage or inhuman nature.¹⁰³ The idea is that those peoples who practice such things are guilty of a savagery that goes beyond what can be considered acceptable. These people are therefore inferior and/or in need of subjugation in order to civilise them. If so many accounts of cannibalism are without any credible evidence, then can the same scepticism not be applied to those cultures who have been accused of practising human sacrifice? It is not sufficient to merely assume that because such peoples lived at a great distance from modern civilisation, that they probably practised something which is generally considered barbaric. Bremmer also points out the lack of credible references to cannibalism:

⁹⁹ Chadwick, 1997.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁰¹ Glob, 1969.

¹⁰² Arens, 1979.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 146.

Although recent decades have recognised that cannibalism is far more often the subject of myths and stories than of real practices, the one-time existence of human sacrifice is beyond any doubt, even though here too we regularly find the practice ascribed to innocent peoples, tribes or groups, as we will see presently.¹⁰⁴

However he later refers to refers to ‘so-called Celtic human sacrifice’¹⁰⁵ which seems to suggest less certainty. Brunaux notes that the ancient ethnographers did not witness the events of which they wrote.¹⁰⁶

Throughout the literature, there is one consistent overriding contention: although there is no definite evidence in the archaeology, and although the written evidence is inconsistent, biased and not backed up by personal experience, yet all the writers make an explicit assumption that human sacrifice amongst the Celts did happen. Is it acceptable academic writing, to make an assertion and then show that there is little evidence for it? Is this conclusion not rather evidence of a natural bias towards the idea of the barbarity of the barbarians? What does the evidence actually show? This is what will be examined next.

¹⁰⁴ Bremmer, 2007, p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁰⁶ Brunaux, 1988, p. 136.

Chapter 3 – The Written Evidence

The evidence generally looked at is that of Greek and Roman writers, predominantly from the first centuries BC and AD, and one needs to ask how credible these are. Sallust writes of Cataline requesting his followers to drink human blood, and both Plutarch and Dio Cassius say he required human sacrifice.¹⁰⁷ Yet not much credence is given to these details about a man who was vilified by so many. Again, Strabo wrote of the Irish as man-eaters¹⁰⁸ – the ultimate in barbarity, yet he never travelled to Ireland. In the second / third centuries AD Christians were accused of cannibalism, and in reply levelled the same accusation against their accusers.¹⁰⁹ In the midst of all these records, many of which were manufactured horror stories to vilify the opposition, how can one give credence to other records of barbarian sacrifices? First, it is important to consider those writers who recounted tales of human sacrifice and consider when they wrote what they did, what their own experience was, what they simply took unquestioningly from other writers, and what their motives may have been for writing.

Although the Celts are first mentioned as far back as the late sixth /early fifth century BC,¹¹⁰ there is little detail given as to their culture much before the first century BC, although both the Greeks and Romans had had bad experiences of meeting the Celts in war long before this.¹¹¹ However, not all the experiences of the Greek and Roman peoples in meeting the Celts were bad ones,¹¹² and probably not uniform either. The Celts were not one people, but a collection of loosely connected groups speaking related languages, who sometimes worked together and at other times worked against each other.¹¹³ It is important not to lay modern ideas of the nation state view of the world onto a time where this did not exist. Some Celts were happy to be part of the Roman Empire, and to collaborate with the Romans, whilst others had very different

¹⁰⁷ Green, 2001, pp. 57-58.

¹⁰⁸ Strabo, *Geography: Book 3-5*, - trans. by Horace Leonard Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923) 4.5.4.

¹⁰⁹ Green, 2001, p. 58.

¹¹⁰ de Jubainville, 1902, pp. 12-15, 29-30.

¹¹¹ Haywood, 2001, pp. 38-39, 42-43; Livy 'The Gauls' Invasion of Rome: c. 390 x 387 BC' 5.35-48, trans. by Philip Freeman, in *The Celtic Heroic Age* pp. 26-27; Justin 6-8, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, trans. by Philip Freeman, pp. 28-30.

¹¹² Ross, 1992, p. 80.

¹¹³ See, e.g. Caesar, 1917.

ideas. For example, while Caesar was seeking to bring the whole of Gaul under the sway of Rome, he had contact with two brothers. One of the brothers, Dumnorix, was helping to lead the opposition to Caesar's ambitions. The other brother was his ally.¹¹⁴ In this and other cases, Caesar saw for himself how lacking in unity the Gauls were. Caesar had problems when seeking to deal with the threat posed by the Celtic leader Vercingetorix, where different people within the same tribe were both allying themselves for and against him.¹¹⁵ Although Caesar had a lot of experience of the different allegiances of the different Celtic tribes, as well as differences within the tribes, other writers would have had more one-sided experiences. All of this will have affected the writers' views on the Celts. In addition, each writer has a purpose in writing, and this purpose will *inter alia* determine which pieces of information are selected for inclusion in a book or letter, and which are not. All of this needs to be taken into consideration when reading accounts written a very long time ago.

In addition to these difficulties of interpretation of what people wrote, needs to be added the difficulty in being sure what they actually did write. For well over a thousand years all books, articles and other writings were created by hand, and were then copied by hand. This raises the question of the accuracy of what has been handed down to us today, partly from the possibility of errors in copying due to misunderstanding, but also the possibility that some of the works may have been deliberately altered during a period when copying was chiefly carried out by the Christian clergy, who may have had their reasons for highlighting or omitting parts of the original texts. There is also a problem of interpretation where original manuscripts are partly or wholly missing or not accurately recorded in the first place. Such is the case with the missing works of Posidonius (*c.* 135 – *c.* 50 BC),¹¹⁶ who is presumed to have been quoted by a number of later writers, but whose works are no longer extant and available for checking. His writings are reconstructed through those of later authors such as Caesar and Strabo, who had read his books and used them as source material, but one cannot be sure of what was in the original. In addition, many court cases involved lengthy defence speeches which were written

¹¹⁴ Chadwick, 1997, pp. 103-11.

¹¹⁵ Caesar, 1917, Book 7.

¹¹⁶ Chadwick, 1997.

down, but after the event and possibly amended. For all these reasons, any theories of past events need to be held lightly, as a best guess at what may have been the facts.

Most of the accounts of the religious or cultic practices of the Celts were written in the first centuries BC and AD, which only covers part of the period under consideration. The authors are writing in very different situations and from different perspectives. Writers such as Caesar and Cicero were dealing during the Roman Republic either directly (Caesar) or indirectly (Cicero) with the Celts, and each had his own agenda. Later writers such as Strabo, Pliny and Lucan¹¹⁷ were writing in the context of the Roman Empire, when the relationship between the Celts and the Romans was rather different and the authors had less personal experience of their subject. Later still Tacitus was writing with personal experience yet still within the context of empire rather than republic. All these different contexts need to be considered when drawing conclusions about the nature and admissibility of the descriptions they create, and to avoid anachronism.

The other group of writers, who were at a much greater remove from their subject, were those commonly referred to as the Alexandrians.¹¹⁸ Authors such as Dio Chrysostom and those who came after him were mainly interested in the philosophies of the druids, considered to be the priests / prophets / philosophers or seers of the Celts, although Ross maintains that there is no evidence to support the ideas of the classical writers that the druids were philosophers.¹¹⁹ There was little interest among these later writers in such barbaric practices as human sacrifice. Indeed, they were much more interested in showing what advanced scholars the druids were. As Webster is careful to point out,¹²⁰ although none of these writers had any first hand experience of the Celts, and even though they lived over a hundred years after the conquest of Gaul, yet a great deal of credence is given to what they write about the druids. Although the time of the Celts is considered to cover a period of almost a thousand years (and possibly more, though there is no way of knowing

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ross, 1992, p. 82.

¹²⁰ Webster, 1999.

this) actual writings of those who had direct experience of these societies is limited to less than two hundred years, and much of that experience is itself very limited. Given the way societies change over time, and especially thinking of the great differences Rome's expansion of its sphere of influence must have caused to the Celtic communities throughout Europe, it is important to be cautious in using any descriptions of the Celts written during these two hundred years to extrapolate either forward or backward in time.

Apart from the supposition as to what Posidonius wrote, it needs to be borne in mind that he did not have a great deal of personal experience of the Celts himself.¹²¹ He had been to the southern part of Gaul only (although Freeman asserts he would 'undoubtedly' have visited Bibracte and Alesia).¹²² This is also the case with the ethnographer, Strabo.¹²³ So very little has been written about the Celts from first hand experience. For this reason, careful note must be taken of what little first-hand experience remains to us. There are two kinds of reports about the Celts - those rather general rumours, the type of ideas people had, and specific accounts of specific practices. Of the former, the remarks made by Cicero in his defence of Fonteius are typical.

Finally, can anything appear holy or sacrosanct to men who, if ever they are so worked upon by some fear as to deem it necessary to placate the gods, defile the altars and temples of those gods with human victims, so that they cannot even practise religion without first violating that very religion with crime? For who does not know that to this very day they retain the monstrous and barbarous custom of sacrificing men?¹²⁴

In these remarks, given as part of his defence of a man who was accused by the Gauls, Cicero makes no reference to any specific instances, but asks general 'who does not know' rhetorical question as though appealing to common knowledge which was probably based on rumours together with vague fears and suspicions of barbarians in general.

¹²¹ Chadwick, 1997 p. 16.

¹²² Freeman, 2006, p. 98.

¹²³ Webster, 1999, p. 9.

¹²⁴ Cicero, *Pro Milone, In Pisonem, Pro Scauro, Pro Fonteio, Pro Rabirio Postumo, Pro Marcello, Pro Ligario, Pro Rege Deiotaro*, trans. by N. H. Watts (rev. edn.) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953) 14.31.

The other kind of reports made about Celts is where specifics are mentioned. The writer who probably had most to do with the Celts in general, and who gives the clearest account of them is Caesar, who devoted an entire volume to detailing the Roman conquest of Gaul.¹²⁵ In the sixth book of this he gives an account of the customs of the Gauls, including aspects of their religious beliefs and practices, and references to human sacrifice.¹²⁶ When writing about human sacrifice, Caesar does not explicitly differentiate between ritual and judicial killing. He makes two observations on human sacrifice in chapter fourteen of book six. Firstly he recounts how the Celts sacrifice human beings in order to gain help or favour from the gods either to heal someone who is gravely ill or to find favour in battle.¹²⁷ He gives no specific instances of this, and no suggestion that he has witnessed such killings, so it is possible to suppose that his information came in part from Posidonius, and partly from those he was in contact with in Gaul. Caesar was very good at gaining intelligence of the enemy.¹²⁸ Before taking any action, and while planning strategy, he would get as much information as possible from the locals, some of whom considered it in their interests to support Rome. However, those who were willing to furnish Caesar with such information about his enemies would in all probability not be interested in their welfare, and might have been more than willing to embellish the truth. It may well have been the case that some of these tales of sacrifice came from local sources who were not wholly disinterested, and who wanted to increase the case for Caesar's intervention. Alternately, people may have wanted to cause the Roman troops to doubt their ability to win in battle, by suggesting the Celtic gods would be on the side of the Gauls on account of human sacrifices given.

Caesar's other contention was a description of something that could be seen as human sacrifice, but which could equally be seen as judicial executions of criminals. Caesar refers to the mass execution of criminals by fire, where a number of the guilty (and occasionally the innocent if there were insufficient criminals) were placed into a giant figure made from willow branches, which was then set alight.¹²⁹ This same

¹²⁵ Caesar, 1917.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.11, 13-20.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.16.

¹²⁸ A. Ezov 'The Missing Dimension' of C. Julius Caesar', *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 45:1 (1996), pp. 64-94 [online] <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4436407> <Accessed: 10th July 2010>.

¹²⁹ Caesar, 1917, 6.16.

event is described by Strabo,¹³⁰ although he mentions the giant figure being filled with animals as well. Strabo earlier in his account of different kinds of human sacrifice, references Posidonius as the source of his information. If so, it would seem that Caesar also got his account from Posidonius rather than local people, especially given that there is no suggestion that he personally witnessed such an event. However, as Green points out,¹³¹ there are a number of traditions continuing even to this day where people make straw effigies which they then set alight. It is possible that reports of a similar custom at the time had been embellished to make the barbarians out to be quite horrific. Lucan, in his epic poem *Pharsalia*, makes several graphic allusions to ‘savage rites’ and speaks of trees ‘sprinkled with human gore’,¹³² although without giving any specific details of how the trees came to be in that state. In Strabo’s account there is mention of Posidonius having personally seen men with human heads as trophies of war.¹³³ Diodorus also refers to this practice, probably taking his account from that of Posidonius.¹³⁴ This reference to the witnessing of an event by the account’s author suggests that the other accounts of sacrifice given by Posidonius were not witnessed, but were probably rather ‘travellers’ tales’ collected on his journeys. No doubt he would have picked out the ones of most interest to a readership drawn to the exotic and curious.¹³⁵

It is not unlikely that the Celts would have executed criminals guilty of serious crimes, or that they may have kept the heads of the enemies they had slain in battle as war trophies. However, neither of these acts can be considered human sacrifice, where such is defined as a ritual killing, although as has been noted earlier, there was less of a clear distinction at the time between the sacred and secular. In a time where religious beliefs permeated the whole of society, it is difficult to be exact as to whether a particular event was religious or not, and so whether a death was a human sacrifice or not. During the Middle Ages, men went on the crusades for religious

¹³⁰ Strabo, 2.4.4.5.

¹³¹ Green, 2001, p. 69.

¹³² Lucan, *The Civil War: Books I-X (Pharsalia)* trans. by J. D. Duff (London: Heinemann, 1928) [online: <https://archive.org/stream/lucancivilwarboo00lucauoft#page/n5/mode/2up>] <accessed 22/01/2014> III, ll. 403, 405.

¹³³ Strabo 2.4.4.5.

¹³⁴ Diodorus of Sicily *In Twelve Volumes: Books IV (continued) 59- VIII*, trans. by C. H. Oldfather (London: Heinemann, 1939) 3.5.29.4-5.

¹³⁵ Chadwick, 1997, p. 11.

reasons, yet the killing they did in those wars has never been spoken of as human sacrifice. This may be because there were no rituals involved even though people believed they were doing something for God, although it may be that the more recent suicide bombers of Islam consider themselves human sacrifices. They certainly consider their acts to be a demonstration of their faith.¹³⁶ Again, however, there is the question of whether specific rites or ritual are involved. The question is whether killings occurred among the ancient Celts which fall more clearly into the modern idea of human sacrifice. Strabo gives other instances.

In the passage already mentioned, he writes of men being killed for divination purposes.¹³⁷ The idea of determining from death throes or from entrails something of the will of the gods or future outcomes was not unknown in the classical world. This happened on many occasions when officiants would slaughter birds to divine such things. It may have been this that was in Strabo's mind as he transferred the idea from those of the 'civilised' world slaughtering birds for divination, to those from the 'barbarian' world slaughtering not birds or animals, but men. Diodorus also mentions this, giving slightly different details, as he says the men are killed by being stabbed above the diaphragm,¹³⁸ as opposed to Strabo stating it is a knife to the back. Alternatively, this could be yet another travellers' tale. Given that there is no mention of Posidonius or any other of the writers at the time having witnessed such events, there is no certainty of the veracity of such accounts. This seems even more the case when reading the following passage in Strabo's *Geographia* where he recounts a fabulous tale of extraordinary ritual taking place on an ocean island. The details of this do not seem very credible and it is in all probability a mythical legend handed down over the years.¹³⁹

In Cicero's treatise on divination,¹⁴⁰ he mentions the custom of the Celts to use both augury and conjecture for the purposes of divination. Interestingly, although he uses his acquaintance with the Aeduan druid Divitiacus as authority for his assertion, he

¹³⁶ Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (rev. edn.) (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

¹³⁷ Strabo, 2.4.4.5.

¹³⁸ Diodorus, 3.5.31.3.

¹³⁹ Strabo, 2.4.4.6.

¹⁴⁰ Cicero, *Cato Maior de Senectute, Laelius de Amicitia, De Divinatione*, trans. by William A. Falconer (London: Heinemann, 1927) 1.41.90.

makes no mention of divination involving human victims. Unless it were the case that Divitiacus felt it prudent not to inform an influential Roman friend of what would be considered a barbaric practice, then it seems strange that Cicero would not have mentioned this. Even when Cicero is maligning the character of the Celts in order to defend Fonteius,¹⁴¹ he does not make mention of such a specific practice, although he is quite clear when writing to his brother that Divitiacus had told him of the druids' means of making predictions. Given that neither Caesar nor Cicero, who both had dealings with the Celts, made any mention of their stabbing human victims for reasons of divination, the accounts of this by Strabo and Diodorus must be a little suspect.

Diodorus goes beyond the other authors of the time in asserting that some of the Celts were cannibals.¹⁴² He includes here the Scythians and the Irish. It is unclear whether he includes the British Isles in the peoples he refers to as Celts, but he probably extends the term to the Germans and other groups around the Celtic heartlands.¹⁴³ He does not offer any evidence for his assertion, other than to say 'we are told'.¹⁴⁴ There are no other authorities for this, and so it is likely that this is another instance of lurid travellers' tales being passed on as fact, which are likely to have begun as ways of besmirching the reputation of rival tribes. Diodorus seems to be following Posidonius when he refers to the Celts' habits of executing criminals and prisoners of war, as he says they kill them with animals taken in the course of war and kill them 'or burn them or do away with them in some other vengeful fashion.'¹⁴⁵ This may be a reference to the colossus of willow or straw. In any event, his accounts are in some points somewhat vague, lacking any real detail, and in any case are not a reference to human sacrifice.

Caesar, on the other hand, had a great deal to do with the Celts, having spent the best part of a decade in Gaul where he had first hand experience of dealing with not one nation but a disparate group of tribes, many of whom sought to use Rome for their own ends. There were numerous power struggles going on within the Gallic tribes,

¹⁴¹ Cicero, *Pro Fonteio*, 14.31.

¹⁴² But note Strabo, 4.5.4.

¹⁴³ Diodorus, 3.5.24.3, n.1.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.5.32.3.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.5.32.6.

during which Caesar would have been given different accounts by different individuals or groups. Some of what he wrote about the Celts seems to have come from Posidonius, given the similarities with other writers. Yet he was also able to write from personal experience, although much of what he said about religion and ritual was reinterpreted for a Roman readership. For example he recounts the Celts worshipping Roman gods¹⁴⁶, which is unlikely, especially in northern Gaul where Roman influence would have been much less than in the southern Romanised provinces. It is also important to remember that Caesar was very keen to stay in Gaul, and continue to pacify the whole country. For that he needed to justify his actions to the Roman senate, and so it was in his interests to emphasise the barbarity of the Celts, and perhaps the power of the druids. As David Rankin points out, 'Caesar's description of the druids makes them a much more formidable group than a collection of witch-doctors'.¹⁴⁷ Although he did not appear to witness any human sacrifices, he still wrote about them, presumably for a Roman readership that would make judgments based on what he wrote about the desirability of him continuing his campaigns.

Those writing in the first century BC and a little into the current era had an agenda to pursue - the suppression of those who might be a threat to Rome. Part of this threat, as already mentioned, was manufactured by Caesar as justification for his campaigns in Gaul, which he considered necessary due to both the need to pay off the huge debts he had amassed, and to avoid likely prosecutions if he were to return to Rome. Later writers from the School of Alexandria were rather more interested in philosophy, and saw the Celts very differently - as the 'noble savage' whose philosophy was similar to that of Pythagoras. It is important that the later writings from the time of the Roman Empire are not used to understand earlier times and practices from the Republic era.¹⁴⁸

Rome had quite a civilising effect on the Celts, and so one would expect their various cultural practices to change after the conquest. However, the Romanisation of the Celts did not just happen during the decade of Caesar's campaigns in Gaul. It had

¹⁴⁶ Caesar, 1917, 6.17.

¹⁴⁷ David Rankin, *Celts and the Classical World* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 134.

¹⁴⁸ Chadwick, 1999; Webster, 1999.

started long before, with the exposure to Mediterranean cultures arising from war and trade. Although the Romans and Greeks were aware of barbaric tribes living to the north (and beyond other boundaries) of the then civilised world, not a great deal of thought was given to them until the Celts decided to pay them a visit. Although initial contacts were friendly, the Greeks were rudely awakened to their presence when in 279-278 BC Brennus led his army to the Delphic Oracle in an attempt to conquer this most sacred of Greek places.¹⁴⁹ Previously a group of Celts from Gaul had gone all the way to Rome in *c.* 390 or 387 and defeated the city.¹⁵⁰ Had they not accepted a huge ransom to depart, history would no doubt have been very different, but the Romans never forgot this most ignominious defeat to the huge barbarians from the north. It would be strange if the Romans had not, after this, spread stories of Celtic atrocities and their uncouth and uncivilised behaviour.

¹⁴⁹ Haywood, 2001, pp. 38-39.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Chapter 4 – Material Remains

Much more concrete than the writings left to us are material remains which first antiquarians, and then archaeologists, have discovered and often sought to interpret. Although Freeman asserts that ‘there is good archaeological evidence to suggest that at least some victims of human sacrifice went willingly to their deaths’,¹⁵¹ *Celtic Culture* points out that archaeological evidence is ‘rare and its interpretation difficult’.¹⁵² There is very little solid evidence for human sacrifice from archaeology,¹⁵³ and as Green points out, it is difficult to ascertain practice from architecture without knowing the belief systems giving rise to them.¹⁵⁴ Hence the problem of circularity of theories - archaeologists reference the classical writings, and classicists use archaeology as evidence. Material remains, as relevant to the subject of human sacrifice, include inanimate remains such as weapons, jewellery and pottery, and animate remains, such as human bones and preserved ‘bog bodies’, as well as the contents of graves and pits, which often contain a mix of the two. However, although Lindow II is often referred to as showing very convincing evidence of sacrificial death,¹⁵⁵ a number of the theories don’t stand up well on close examination.

There have been archaeological finds dating to the Bronze Age and Iron Age over a wide area of Europe, but certain places in France, Switzerland, Denmark and Britain have yielded a particularly large number of such finds, which have given rise to a number of interpretations regarding the lives of people living at the time, including ideas about possible human sacrifice. Often it is the juxtaposition of artefacts and human or animal remains that suggest a connection between different kinds of ritual. The Gournay sanctuary in France, for example contained, in addition to the large number of human bones, hundreds of destroyed weapons, suggesting some form of sacrificial giving to the gods.¹⁵⁶ The way in which the artefacts and bones were arranged is also suggestive of some kind of ritual.¹⁵⁷ Interpretations strongly suggest

¹⁵¹ Freeman, 2006, p123.

¹⁵² Löffler, 2006, p. 1549.

¹⁵³ Cunliffe, 1997, p. 192; Löffler, 2012, p. 669.

¹⁵⁴ Green, 2001, p. 15.

¹⁵⁵ Cunliffe, 1997, p. 192.

¹⁵⁶ Green, 1993, p. 71.

¹⁵⁷ James, 1993 p. 93.

that these are connected, which leads on to the idea that if the weapons are ritual donations, so too the human remains may be those of people ritually sacrificed. This is a possibility, although there are other possible interpretations. In England, thousands of coins, mainly clipped to render them worthless to the giver or any finder, have been discovered in a reservoir at Bath. This suggests the ritual giving of what is valuable, a custom that has survived to the present day with people often throwing coins into wells and pools of water.

This deposition of articles in water is linked by Glob to articles and people found in bogs,¹⁵⁸ thus giving rise to the idea that the latter were also sacrifices. However, there appears to be a difference between artefacts discovered in water and those found in bogs. Whereas those articles recovered from water are often found to have been ritually broken, and also generally deposited in the same places, finds from bogs have been generally isolated and undamaged. One study conducted into finds in bogs in the Netherlands discovered that objects found from a very long timespan have been fairly ordinary every day objects,¹⁵⁹ including a number of shoes and pottery vessels, some with animal or vegetable remains, but none with weapons, which were isolated depositions.¹⁶⁰ This may well suggest that artefacts from bogs had been dropped by accident rather than placed there deliberately as acts of sacrifice, although Wijnand van der Sanden considers them to be votive depositions.¹⁶¹ Briggs, moreover, tells us that no bodies have yet been found with ‘diagnostically Bronze Age or Iron Age artefacts.’¹⁶² Bogs are treacherous places, and it would have been easy to accidentally drop something which could then not be recovered, or worse, for someone to fall in and be unable to escape. These areas may well also have been used by robbers as out of the way spots where they could find easy prey, robbing travellers and disposing of their bodies in such a way as to make it highly unlikely they would be found. Glob, however, refers to pottery vessels containing food placed in bogs, which does suggest the possibility that these were placed there

¹⁵⁸ Glob, 1969, p. 146.

¹⁵⁹ van der Sanden, Wijnand ‘Wetland archaeology in the province of Drenthe, the Netherlands’, in *Bog Bodies, Sacred Sites and Wetland Archaeology*, ed. by Bryony Coles, John Coles and Mogens Schou Jørgensen (Exeter: WARP, 1999), pp. 217-25, p. 217.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 223-24.

¹⁶² Briggs, 1995, p. 169.

intentionally,¹⁶³ and there have on occasion been considerable finds in bogs, such as a number of weapons placed in a boat and deposited in a bog in Hjortspring in Denmark.¹⁶⁴ Even so, considering the limited number of finds in bogs for the over five hundred years time period in question, it is difficult to believe that most artefacts recovered are not in fact possessions that were simply lost by travellers.

One artefact dating to the first century BC¹⁶⁵ which has been of considerable interest to archaeologists is a silver cauldron of considerable size found at Gundestrup in Jutland. Although discovered in an area not considered to be Celtic, the images on it are considered to depict scenes and ritual associated with the Celts and it is considered to have originated from the lower Danube area.¹⁶⁶ One image on the cauldron which is often posited as evidence for human sacrifice is that of a man being held head first over a great cauldron as though being sacrificed.¹⁶⁷ Although J. R. Magilton suggests that it shows ‘few stylistic affinities in the Celtic world’,¹⁶⁸ Cunliffe maintains that torcs, shown with a seated god, have ‘a deep religious significance’,¹⁶⁹ while John Collis points out that there was a long tradition of exotic items imported from the lower Danube area, starting from as early as *c.* 4000 BC.¹⁷⁰

One very common archaeological find throughout Europe is that of shafts dug like deep wells in the ground, which contain a variety of remains of grain, animal and human remains, ritually broken weapons and carvings,¹⁷¹ particularly at the Danebury hillfort in Hampshire.¹⁷² There are a number of theories about these pits and the reasons for them. One suggestion is that they were a means initially of grain storage, and that later they were used to bury domestic rubbish.¹⁷³ However it has also been suggested that these were ritual deposits which could have included human sacrifices, due to the bodies of humans as well as animals found interred there.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶³ Glob, 1969, p. 146.

¹⁶⁴ Cunliffe, 1997, p. 195.

¹⁶⁵ Green, 1997 (B), p. 19.

¹⁶⁶ Collis, 2003 p. 184.

¹⁶⁷ Ross, 1992, p. 62.

¹⁶⁸ Magilton, 1995, p. 183.

¹⁶⁹ Cunliffe, 1997, p. 99.

¹⁷⁰ Collis, 2003, p. 184.

¹⁷¹ Green, 1993, p. 67.

¹⁷² James, 1993, pp. 61-62; Cunliffe, 1997, pp. 192-97.

¹⁷³ James, 1993, p. 62.

¹⁷⁴ Green, 1993, p. 67; Cunliffe, 1997, p. 196.

The presence of ritually broken weapons may also support this idea, although the manner of death of the various human bodies unearthed there is uncertain.¹⁷⁵ A number of such pits, covered by a wooden building, thought to have been a shrine, have been found at Gournay, which has also yielded discoveries strongly suggestive of sacrifices or some kind of ritual.¹⁷⁶ In addition to around two thousand broken weapons and a large number of animal bones which appear to have been ritual sacrifices,¹⁷⁷ there are a large number of human bones. These latter could be considered the remains of human sacrifices, but the evidence is not clear.¹⁷⁸ The bones show little evidence of cuts, as might be expected if these were sacrificial victims, but more of blows delivered after death, possibly to do with funerary rites.¹⁷⁹

It has been thought that certain 'interfaces' between this world and an 'Otherworld' were particularly significant, and that 'shafts or wells piercing the surface of the life giving earth' were one kind of interface.¹⁸⁰ It could be considered, therefore, that animal or human bones found in pits may have a ritual significance in an attempt to communicate with the Otherworld. Whilst shafts in the British Isles are found in hillforts, most shafts in continental Europe are located in the rectangular enclosures called *viereckschanzen*.¹⁸¹ Closely allied to burials in pits are the finds of both human and animal remains beneath the foundations of both buildings and hill fort ramparts.¹⁸² Davies mentions the foundation sacrifices at Dinas Emrys and Gwrtheyrn.¹⁸³ Human remains have been found in pits and ditches and beneath hillfort ramparts,¹⁸⁴ although how they came to be there is not known. It has been suggested that animal remains found at the base of such storage pits suggest animal sacrifices,¹⁸⁵ yet these could also have been the remains of meat eaten as part of ritual feasting. Depositions in shafts appear to have increased during Roman times, yet with fewer human remains.¹⁸⁶ At Gournay in France a number of dismembered

¹⁷⁵ Cunliffe, 1997, p. 192-93.

¹⁷⁶ James, 1993, p. 93.

¹⁷⁷ Cunliffe, 1997, p. 204.

¹⁷⁸ James, 1993, p. 95; Green, 2001, p. 43.

¹⁷⁹ Brunaux, 1988, p. 136.

¹⁸⁰ Woodward, 1992, p. 51.

¹⁸¹ Cunliffe, 1997, p. 200; Haywood, 2001, p. 64.

¹⁸² Woodward, 1992, p. 79.

¹⁸³ Davies, 1981.

¹⁸⁴ Woodward, 1992, p. 79.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

headless skeletons were found which appeared to have been beheaded with axes. Although study of the vertebrae of these remains suggests deliberate dismemberment, the exact cause of death has not yet been determined, and it is thought that the bodies were dismembered after death rather than as part of a ritual human sacrifice.¹⁸⁷ Nearby at Ribemont an ossuary was discovered containing a large number of human tibias, femurs and humeri, from approximately two hundred to two hundred and fifty young men. Some of the human remains at Danebury in England show evidence of having suffered great injury, including crushed pelvis, which some consider possible signs of fertility rituals.¹⁸⁸

When considering whether remains are the result of human sacrifice, Green mentions the need to distinguish between pre- and post-mortem injuries.¹⁸⁹ Brunaux states that ‘Archaeological clues relating to the question of human sacrifice have for a long time been scarce and equivocal.’¹⁹⁰ However he then goes on to say that discoveries of bones in ‘sanctuaries’ give more solid evidence for such sacrifice because ‘remains in a cult context show traces of blows and are mixed in with the remains of animals which *we can be sure* were sacrificed.’¹⁹¹ (my emphasis) There have been a number of finds where human bones and animal bones were deposited together in ways that suggest some kind of association, for example where a neonatal infant was found placed with a newborn calf.¹⁹² This association is written of by both Strabo and Livy, who mention sacrifice of humans and horses together in parts of the Iberian peninsula.¹⁹³ It is difficult to know, however, whether both human and animal were sacrificed together, or whether the animal was sacrificed as part of the funerary rites when the person died. Even so, it is not clear that these animals were sacrificed at all. Animal remains suggest they were killed during the autumn,¹⁹⁴ which may have been when they had been fattened up before winter. As Green points out¹⁹⁵ it is difficult when examining the ‘remains of butchery’ of animals to distinguish between

¹⁸⁷ Brunaux, 1988, pp. 17-18.

¹⁸⁸ Green, 2001, p. 54.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁹⁰ Brunaux, 1988, p. 133.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁹² Green, 2001, p. 44.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁹⁴ Woodward, 1992, p. 77.

¹⁹⁵ Green, 2001, p. 43.

sacrificial and ordinary preparations, as with the above-mentioned discovery of a thousand decapitated and dismembered human bodies found at Ribemont carefully arranged, together with animal remains.¹⁹⁶

How and why the people died, though, is unclear. In Austria remains were found in 1997 of a deep pit from around 200 BC in which both humans and animals appear to have been burnt.¹⁹⁷ All the humans were found to have had a deformity of the jaw, and Green asks whether this may have been a sacrifice. Another find of humans and animals buried together, this time from the sixth century BC, was discovered in Moravia, where there were a number of mutilated women and horses.¹⁹⁸ There is some speculation that this was some sort of blood sacrifice.¹⁹⁹ In any event, Brunaux points out that evidence for human sacrifice is rare and that the ancient ethnographers did not witness any.²⁰⁰ What does suggest, however, that some kind of ritual practice was happening here, is the presence in the vicinity of grave goods such as knives, razors and small surgical instruments which could suggest some kind of priestly class and the practice of sacrifice.²⁰¹ This is a possibility, but there are other explanations, as such artefacts may have been used for surgery rather than carving up sacrifices. There is some archaeological evidence for the special treatment of heads, both in finds of human remains, and iconography, and these tie in with classical accounts of head hunting and ritual treatment of heads.²⁰² Although evidence for a head cult is quite strong, there is no suggestion that this formed part of human sacrifice. At Roquepetuse and Entremont in France, shrines have been discovered which contain niches for human heads, or sculptures of heads.²⁰³ Some of the heads found there show signs of having been victims of battle.²⁰⁴

More than 1,800 finds,²⁰⁵ over the last two hundred years, of ancient bodies preserved in peat have given rise to a number of theories about who they were and

¹⁹⁶ James, 1993, p. 94.

¹⁹⁷ Green, 2001, p. 69.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 87.

²⁰⁰ Brunaux, 1988, p. 136.

²⁰¹ Green, 2001, p. 184-85.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 97.

²⁰³ Cunliffe, 1997, pp. 200-01.

²⁰⁴ James 1993, p. 93; Green, 2001, p. 97.

²⁰⁵ Nick Parker Pearson, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* (London: Sutton Publishing, 1999), p 67.

how they may have died. Unlike bodies found in dry graves, many of the bodies' components have been preserved, including indications of how they may have met their deaths. Whereas with corpses discovered within dry graves nothing remains but the skeleton, the anaerobic and chemical composition of bogs tend to preserve skin and tissue, although often not the bones. With the advent of radiocarbon dating, it has more recently been possible to determine to within a few decades when a person may have died, although there have been suggestion that such radio-carbon dating is not entirely reliable when it comes to human remains, and may overstate the age of bodies found,²⁰⁶ which can be noted particularly when matched with the style of clothing remains.

Although the majority of these corpses have been found in Denmark and North Germany, there have been over two hundred finds in the British Isles.²⁰⁷ One of these which has given rise to much speculation about human sacrifice is Lindow II, named due to his having been found at Lindow Moss, a place whose fringes show no signs of settlement or agriculture having occurred around the time the bog bodies were deposited.²⁰⁸ This body was discovered in 1983 by peat cutters, and carefully removed from its surrounds for close examination. He was discovered to have had what seemed to have been a 'triple execution', in that he had received a severe blow to the back of the head, had a garrote around his neck, and had his throat cut. Given that three is considered to be a special or sacred number among the ancient Celtic peoples, this supposed three-fold murder has given rise to the suggestion that the man was a human sacrifice for the gods. It has also been suggested that the druids would have been involved, a suggestion made more cogent by an examination of the remains of the man's stomach, which revealed that his last meal included mistletoe, being a plant supposedly sacred or mystical to the druids. However, mistletoe was rare in that part of England²⁰⁹ and it is quite likely from the presence of pollen only that the mistletoe had been taken for medicinal purposes, especially given that

²⁰⁶ Briggs, 1995, pp. 172-13.

²⁰⁷ A. N. Garland, 'Worsley Man, England', in *Bog Bodies: New Discoveries and New Perspectives*, ed. by R. C. Turner, and R.G. Scaife (London: British Museum Press, 1995), pp. 104-07.

²⁰⁸ Turner, R. C. 'Discoveries and Excavations at Lindow Moss 1983-8', in *Bog Bodies: New Discoveries and New Perspectives*, ed. by R. C. Turner and R. G. Scaife (London: British Museum Press, 1995), pp. 10-17.

²⁰⁹ Magilton, 1995, p. 193.

Lindow III nearby showed no such presence,²¹⁰ which suggests that it was not part of a sacrificial rite. Lindow III had eaten hazelnuts before death. Although there have been suggestions that the hazel had special significance, the nuts were common in the area and probably used generally to supplement the basic diet.²¹¹

Not far away another body found, 'Worsley Man', dating from a similar time also had a cord around his neck, a fractured skull, and his vertebra cut.²¹² The find has been compared with other bodies found in Denmark showing some similarities to Lindow II. This comparison itself should give rise to some misgivings about the theory of him having been a sacrificial victim, given that there is no suggestion of druids having practised in Denmark. If therefore these bodies are victims of human sacrifice, it would seem that this would not be anything to do with Celts or druidry, due to the geographical distance between them. This would suggest that any human sacrifice that may have been practised would either have been a pan European custom, or that individual groups of people a long way apart happened to practise similar rituals. However, in order to evaluate the possibilities of people being victims of human sacrifice, it is important to look at the similarities and the differences between the various finds, considering time, manner of death and manner of deposition.

The estimated dates of death of the over 1,800 bog bodies²¹³ found throughout northern Europe vary considerably, but the majority are thought to have originated over the 600 year period from 100 BC to AD 500, although there have been discoveries of bodies going back five thousand years.²¹⁴ Although there have been numerous records over the years of people reported missing, none of the bodies found so far has been positively identified as historic, rather than prehistoric,²¹⁵

²¹⁰ Scaife, R. G. 'Pollen Analysis of the Lindow III Food Residue', in *Bog Bodies: New Discoveries and New Perspectives*, ed. by R. C. Turner and R. G. Scaife (London: British Museum Press, 1995), pp 83-85, p. 84.

²¹¹ Holden, T. G. 'The Last Meals of the Lindow Bog Men', in *Bog Bodies: New Discoveries and New Perspectives*, ed. by R. C. Turner and R. G. Scaife (London: British Museum Press, 1995), pp. 76-82.

²¹² Garland, 1995, pp. 104-07.

²¹³ Parker Pearson, 1999, p. 67.

²¹⁴ Glob, 1969, p. 101.

²¹⁵ Briggs, 1995, p. 175.

which begs the question as to why all the finds are dated to before historic times.²¹⁶ Many bodies discovered in Ireland have been presumed prehistoric, yet radiocarbon dating has confirmed medieval or later date.²¹⁷ Dates have also been estimated by examining the style of clothes worn, dendrochronology and analysing the peat layers in which bodies have been found. One man found had his hair tied in a Swabian knot, a hairstyle described by Tacitus writing about the Germans.²¹⁸ This suggests he had died at around the time Tacitus was writing, although it is not certain over what period men wore their hair in this fashion. More recently, archaeologists have used radiocarbon dating as well as examining the composition of the peat in which bodies have been buried. There are, however, disagreements over the results of radiocarbon dating, with some asserting that the method is not very accurate for determining the dates of human remains, and results often overstating ages by hundreds of years.

Excavations of bog bodies have shown both similarities and differences in the presumed manner of death. Mention has already been made of Lindow II and the apparent three-fold nature of his death. It has been noted that he received a heavy blow to the back of the head, was strangled with a garrotte, and had his throat cut. Many bodies discovered have also been found to have had similar injuries. Recent research, however, suggests that those bodies that seem to have received severe blows to the head may rather have had their skulls crushed over time by the weight of the peat building up over them. It has also been noted more recently that other indications of, for example, the victims being of high rank, may be based on unsound observations. For example, with many of the bodies it has been noted that their hands appeared smooth, suggesting that they had done no manual work, hence the presumption that they would have been of high, some have said priestly, rank.²¹⁹ It is now known, however, that one of the actions of the chemicals in the peat is to soften the skin over time so giving the appearance of soft hands that had done no work. Examples of bodies that have been found with their skull crushed - whether by a

²¹⁶ But see Ó Floinn, R 'Recent Research into Irish Bog Bodies', in *Bog Bodies: New Discoveries and New Perspectives*, ed. by R. C. Turner and R.G. Scaife (London: British Museum Press, 1995), pp 137-45, who says most are 16th and 17th centuries.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 142.

²¹⁸ Glob, 1969, pp. 116-18.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90; Parker Pearson, 1999, p. 70.

deliberate blow before death or by the action of the peat post-mortem - are those of Lindow II and Worseley Man in England, Borremose I and III in Denmark and Clony Cavan Man in Ireland.²²⁰ Borremose III in particular was discovered to have skull damage akin to that of a high impact, not of a type that would have been deliberately inflicted at the time of death.²²¹ Other damage probably caused by the pressure of the peat rather than deliberately inflicted at the time of death can be seen in Borremose III and Grauballe Man, both of whom had broken legs. Close examination of these wounds using CT scanners has shown that it is highly unlikely that Borremose III suffered this damage at the time of death, and that the similarities in Grauballe Man's fracture suggest that this was due to the pressure of peat also.²²²

Many of the garrottes found around the necks of bodies have knots inconsistent with those of experienced executioners.²²³ This has given rise to some suggestion that they may have been the results of failed rescue attempts.²²⁴ It does seem, however, rather unlikely that someone trapped in a bog would put a rope thrown to them around their neck, rather than holding it to be pulled out. An alternative explanation might be that the person was a victim of a family quarrel or a mugging whereby an inexperienced individual had used a garrotte to commit murder. Although 'Tolland Man' was discovered with a twisted cord around his neck, he appeared to have been hanged rather than strangled.²²⁵ Another man found at Borre Fen also had a cord around his neck, as did 'Worseley Man'.²²⁶ Glob likens the cord around the neck to a torc, worn by many Celts and possibly having some religious significance, possibly as something which would enable him to reach 'the mother goddess'.²²⁷ He asserts that 'the neck-ring is expressly the sign of the fertility goddess in this period.'²²⁸ He compares the twisted rope found round the man's neck to the twisted rope like pattern on a that of a torc similar in design to some of those found at Snettisham in

²²⁰ Garland, 1995, pp. 104-07; Parker Pearson, 1999, p. 68; Niels Lynnerup, 'Computed Tomography Scanning and Three-Dimensional Visualization of Mummies and Bog Bodies', in *Advances in Human Palaeopathology*, ed. by Ron Pinhas and Simon Mays (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), pp. 108, 114.

²²¹ Lynnerup, 2008, pp. 108, 114.

²²² Lynnerup, 2008, p. 112.

²²³ Briggs, 1995, p. 178.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²²⁵ Glob, 1969, p. 32.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90; Garland, 1995, pp. 104-07.

²²⁷ Glob, 1969, p. 166.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

England.²²⁹ Close examination of these cords, however, do not give the impression of them doubling up as a torc. They are much thinner and plainer than the torcs which archaeologists have found, or those pictured on statues and pottery, and would appear to be simply the means of inflicting a quick death.

‘Grauballe Man’ is estimated to have died between AD 210-410²³⁰ and had had his throat cut almost ear to ear.²³¹ He was found without any trace of clothing so, with his throat having been cut so savagely, could very well have been a victim of robbers. He is one of several finds to have been described as having an expression of terror on his face.²³² This is another observation which has been shown by later research to have been due to the action of the bog.²³³ Briggs queries the assumption that bodies deposited in watery places were so placed due to some form of sacrifice or ritual.²³⁴ He points out that given the anaerobic and acidic nature of bogs, such bodies have been preserved to this day whereas bodies deposited in dry land would not have been, and so the only special treatment received is that brought about by the chemicals in the bogs.²³⁵ Although these various people appear to have been murdered, rather than died a natural death, none of the indications of death point conclusively to human sacrifice, and in fact some of the injuries may well have been post-mortem, partly due to the effect of the peat crushing them as it built up over the centuries. Some bodies found show no external signs of violence, and so it is presumed they were drowned. Glob suggests that one such young girl may have been led to the water to be drowned.²³⁶ However, he does not say why her death must have been deliberate rather than an accidental falling into the bog.

When speculating about the possibility of the bog people having been sacrifices, attention has been focused on the stomach contents of the bodies recovered. A number of assertions have been made in this regard. For example, it was found that Lindow II’s last meal had included mistletoe, considered significant to Celtic

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 165; James, 1993, p. 108.

²³⁰ Glob, 1969, p. 45.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 48.

²³² Ibid., p. 39.

²³³ Green, 2001, pp. 201-02.

²³⁴ Briggs, 1995, pp. 169.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 169.

²³⁶ Glob, 1969, p. 114.

ritual.²³⁷ The significance of this arises from Pliny's description of druids cutting mistletoe from oak trees.²³⁸ However, as Pliny is the only classical writer to mention mistletoe, possibly due to his own interest in medicine, and given also that a number of Pliny's accounts in his histories were rather fanciful, his account needs to be treated with caution. As already mentioned, the mistletoe may well have been medicinal rather than ceremonial. Another point made is that stomach contents show no summer or autumn fruit, but only spring grains and flower seeds, meaning that they had died before the spring, and that this may indicate some kind of fertility rites.²³⁹ However, in Ireland Clonycavan Man was found to have ingested vegetables, suggesting he may have been killed in summer, and that Old Croghan Man could have died in winter owing to a recent diet of meat.²⁴⁰ One interesting discovery was that Grauballe man had ingested ergot, a hallucinogen.²⁴¹ This may be significant in terms of his death, but whether something to do with him being special in some way, or to dull the pain of having his throat cut, or whether being under the influence of drugs he fell prey to thieves, can only be speculated on. It is also quite likely that the ergot had simply been food contamination, although the amount was quite significant.

There have been a number of theories as to how the bodies could have been deposited in their watery resting places, with some scholars believing that, as water was often used in Celtic times for depositing offerings to the gods, the bodies found in peat bogs were of people who had also been sacrificed to the gods. Some bodies have been found in positions that suggest they had been deliberately placed there, and on occasion their immediate surrounds show a difference in composition from the surrounding peat. There are those, however, who maintain the improbability of people being ceremonially buried in such watery, and so treacherous, places. Due to the nature of the terrain, Briggs asserts that 'deliberate bogside burials would have been impractical and dangerous'.²⁴² There are also particular problems when

²³⁷ Green, 2001, p. 124.

²³⁸ Pliny, in Freeman and Koch (trans), in Koch and Carey, 2003, p. 32.

²³⁹ Glob, 1969, p. 163.

²⁴⁰ Anon. 'Iron Age 'bog bodies' unveiled', *BBC News: Science & Environment*, 7 January 2006 [online] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/4589638.stm> <Accessed 19/01/14>.

²⁴¹ Parker Pearson, 1999, p. 68; Green, 2001, p. 194.

²⁴² Briggs, 1995, p. 168.

considering the burial of the Lindow bodies as the surrounding peat is a lot older than they are.²⁴³ In addition the state of preservation of Lindow II is such that he would have to have been totally submerged immediately after death. However, at the time, Lindow Moss is believed to have consisted of shallow pools,²⁴⁴ making the immediate total immersion difficult had he been deliberately deposited,²⁴⁵ although how he ended up there is still unexplained.

There are a number of problems with the generally accepted ideas about the manner of death of the bog bodies. Firstly there is the need to consider how an execution, particularly a ritual execution, could have been performed in the middle of a bog. One suggestion is a road across the bog made from logs which would normally have served in other ways,²⁴⁶ and Green refers to the discovery in some places of the remains of roads constructed across the bogs.²⁴⁷ This would have made it possible for people to safely walk across such places. So although seemingly fraught with difficulties, such executions would not have been impossible. Secondly there is the number of similarities among the finds over a very wide geographical area, including those far outside the lands considered to be Celtic. If the deaths had been the result of ritual murder, possibly overseen by the druids who are only ever mentioned in the classics as being active in Gaul and the British Isles, then one has to ask why such druidic rituals were taking place in northern Denmark.

A further issue is the paucity of bodies found in the various locations.²⁴⁸ If the bogs had been special burial sites, one would have expected more finds to have occurred, with several bodies deposited near to one another, particularly if the roads built had been for this purpose, as has been posited.²⁴⁹ However, bodies are not always isolated. The site of the Almosen bog in Denmark has yielded a number of human and animal remains together with a variety of artefacts dating to around 600-400 BC

²⁴³ P. C. Buckland, 'Two Views on Peat Stratigraphy and the Age of the Lindow Bodies. A: Peat Stratigraphy and the Age of the Lindow Bodies', in *Bog Bodies: New Discoveries and New Perspectives*, ed. by R. C. Turner and R. G. Scaife (London: British Museum Press) 1995 pp 47-50, 1995, p. 47.

²⁴⁴ Briggs, 1995, p. 171.

²⁴⁵ Buckland, 1995, pp. 47-50.

²⁴⁶ Fischer, 2012, pp. 97-99.

²⁴⁷ Green, 2001, pp. 17-21.

²⁴⁸ Briggs, 1995, p. 175.

²⁴⁹ Green, 2001, pp. 17-21; Fischer, 2012, pp. 97-99.

and near what was thought to be a prehistoric road or ford.²⁵⁰ The other query relevant to this is that no distinction seems to have been made between those bodies that may have been ritually killed, and the hundreds which one would have expected to have unwittingly fallen prey to bogs over the years. All finds tend to give rise to speculations as to how the person may have died and about the supposed ritual manner of this. Yet it would be unrealistic to suppose that people did not get lost, fall in and become trapped by the marshlands, or become victim to robbers and murderers. As Briggs points out, given the general poor visibility especially in wet weather, ‘That people were lost traversing British and Irish bogs in Medieval and later times through accident, misadventure or even murder can hardly be in question.’²⁵¹ If there were clear differences between bodies in the manner of death and deposition, then one would be able to consider the possibility of human sacrifice, but the range of types of injuries and manner of placement does not show any particular pattern that would be expected from ritual murder.

A number of bodies have been found with sticks or branches placed over them, or occasionally stones, and this has given rise to a number of speculations. Much emphasis has been placed on the significance of the sticks or branches with suggestions such as the possibility of keeping bodies from wrecking vengeance on their killers. Many have postulated the theory that people were pinned down either prior to their death to avoid them escaping, or afterwards to prevent their spirits breaking free.²⁵² This presumes much about the beliefs of people who predate the Christian era and many middle ages beliefs and superstitions. It was suggested that a 50 year-old woman found at Haroldskjaer Fen had been pinned down alive,²⁵³ although there is no firm evidence of this, other than the supposed look of terror on her face. However, later re-examination put paid to some of these theories.²⁵⁴ It is also difficult to see how people might have been ‘pegged down’ in such watery places. It has also been suggested that the sticks could be the result of unsuccessful

²⁵⁰ Anne Bloch Jørgensen, David Robinson & Charlie Christensen ‘Almosen, Denmark: A ritual bog site from the 1st millennium BC’, in *Bog Bodies, Sacred Sites and Wetland Archaeology*, ed. by Bryony Coles, John Coles and Mogens Schou Jørgensen (Exeter: WARP, 1999), pp. 121-23.

²⁵¹ Briggs, 1995, p. 175.

²⁵² Glob, 1969, p. 105.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²⁵⁴ Green, 2001, pp. 201-02.

attempts by others to rescue someone trapped in the waters, although this is rather speculative.²⁵⁵ On the other hand there is the case of Borremose III, a woman who was found laid on a bed of cotton grass flowers which did not come from the immediate surrounds.²⁵⁶ It is hard to reconcile this with the idea of her either having been thrown or fallen into a bog, or having been deliberately killed.

Many of the bodies recovered have had little clothing, and some have been found with clothing laid on or next to them. A lot of the clothing found is leather, which was not generally used as clothing during that time period.²⁵⁷ This raises a number of questions, including whether there was some particular symbolic meaning in the use of leather.²⁵⁸ Alternatively, it may be that leather is better preserved in the environment of the bog than textiles. Analysis of the peat within and around the bodies that have been recovered can reveal something of the time and conditions of deposition. The state of preservation of Lindow II is such that he must have been submerged immediately after death, although there is a possibility that the surrounding peat is older than he is, suggesting that he was killed elsewhere.

Given the range of finds of human remains recovered from graves, shafts, caves and bogs, and the great variety of conditions of these, together with the uncertainty and speculation surrounding the manner of their deaths, there seems very little evidence of ritual killing. Examination of the contents of graves has led a number of people to posit the possibility of human sacrifice having been carried out, both from examination of the bodies and also from the artefacts buried with them. Brunaux asserts that:

the evidence for precise and formulaic ritual action at sites such as Ribemont and Gournay - whether or not human sacrifice was involved here - testifies to the presence of presiding officials who controlled access to the *locus consecratus* and what took place there.²⁵⁹

Yet although there is strong evidence for ritual throughout the Celtic regions, that for human sacrifice is both weak and rare. There is no conclusive evidence in the

²⁵⁵ Briggs, 1995, pp. 179-80.

²⁵⁶ Parker Pearson, 1999, p. 68.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 70.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

²⁵⁹ Brunaux 2000, 26-9, quoted in Green, 2001 p. 184.

archaeological record, and it would appear that the arguments for human sacrifice having been practised rest largely on assumptions of what prehistoric peoples would have done, rather than on actual evidence.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion and Recommendations

For over two hundred years, much has been written on the subject of the Celts, and most of the writings have made reference to the cultic beliefs and practices, including human sacrifice, of the various peoples so labelled. Yet we cannot be certain of what may or may not have happened. As James²⁶⁰ affirms ‘the past is completely inaccessible to us’ and we can only piece together partial records, written and/or physical, to form conclusions. As he goes on to say, such conclusions will inevitably be distorted by the prejudices of the original writers as well as our own.²⁶¹ Most evidence, if such it is, of the practice of human sacrifice comes from interpretations by archaeologists and others of human remains recovered from bogs and shafts,²⁶² combined with an analysis of the writings left to us by Greek and Roman writings. This research was an attempt to piece together all that has been written on the subject of human sacrifice amongst the ancient Celts, and combine that with the classical writings and archaeological discoveries in order to determine whether there is sufficient evidence to maintain that the ancient Celts did indeed practice human sacrifice. This chapter will summarise the findings in order to give a qualified answer to the question, clarify the contributions of this dissertation to the general debate on the subject, and will then make recommendations as to what further research might usefully be carried out.

It was decided for the purposes of this study to define the ancient Celts as those communities who spoke what we understand to have been Celtic languages, inhabiting a large swathe of Europe from Spain in the West as far as Galatia in present day Turkey, and including the British Isles. It was also decided to limit the time frame under consideration to the six-hundred year period beginning with the first writings of those who specifically mention the Celts *c.* 500 BC up to *c.* AD 100, when the area was mostly under the sway of the Roman Empire. The focus of the study was further narrowed down by excluding consideration of the extensive range of early Welsh and Irish literature, due to the time distance from the subject matter. The question of what is meant by the term ‘human sacrifice’ was then considered,

²⁶⁰ James, 1999, p. 33.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Haywood, 2001, p. 78.

and it was determined that for the purposes of this study it would be taken to mean the intentional killing of a human being, with or without ritual, for the purpose of propitiating or pleasing a deity. It was noted, however, that in the ancient world the distinction between judicial and sacrificial killing was not so clear as it is today, such that it can, therefore, be difficult to determine whether an execution was carried out primarily as punishment for a crime committed or to please the gods.

A review of the literature showed that, despite the great range of different opinions, and the changing trends in thinking over time, the general conclusion amongst those who have taken an interest in the question of human sacrifice, whether rigorously argued or romantic, has been almost overwhelmingly that it did take place, although perhaps not on a regular basis.²⁶³ At the same time, having read the literature, the interesting thing about this widely held opinion is that most of those who hold it, in particular those archaeologists who have looked very carefully at the various evidence of material remains, state that there is little unequivocal evidence for human sacrifice having taken place, and that what there is can be interpreted in different ways.²⁶⁴ As Magilton states, ‘It has been for so long a standing joke among archaeologists that the unusual or otherwise inexplicable must be interpreted as ‘ritual’’.²⁶⁵ All of this is not to say that human sacrifice never took place, but that there is no tangible evidence to show that it was part of the culture, or cultures of the ancient Celts. On the other hand, Davies makes a valid point when he asserts that the Roman laws enacted against human sacrifice are themselves evidence that such did take place.²⁶⁶

When examining the writings of the Greeks and Romans, it was seen that a number of them, including Caesar, who had substantial personal experience of Celtic communities, assert that the Celts did practise human sacrifice. However, none of these writers testified to having themselves witnessed any of these rites, other than the taking and preserving of heads as spoils of war, and many took their accounts from previous writers, sometimes mixing them in with stories that are clearly

²⁶³ M. Green, 2001, prologue.

²⁶⁴ Löffler, 2006, p. 1550.

²⁶⁵ Magilton, 1995, p. 183.

²⁶⁶ Davies, 1981, p. 47.

fabulous. It was argued that there were various reasons for these writers wanting to attest to inhuman acts, including human sacrifice, committed by the barbarians, and that often the writers would impute anecdotal accounts from one foreign people to another. Motives included, for example, seeking justification for war (Caesar), winning a court case (Cicero), seeking to demonstrate the superiority of Greek and Roman culture (Strabo), and providing entertaining reading (Lucan). Apart from clear references and allusions to human sacrifice, a number of the writers spoke of the tendency for the Celts to sacrifice criminals or prisoners of war to or for the gods, and it is here that there seems to be something of a grey area. As already stated, there was not always a clear distinction, or indeed any distinction, in ancient times between judicial and sacrificial killing. However, as accounts of killing enemies are generally written in more of a factual vein and can be accepted as likely to have occurred (although still allowing for exaggeration and bias), the conclusion as to whether human sacrifice was practised will in part depend on whether such killing of enemies to please the gods is considered to come within the above-stated definition of human sacrifice.

The Greek and Roman writers used a mixture of hearsay and myths as well as some personal observations in order to inform or entertain their readerships, and it was important to examine the findings of archaeology to see if evidence of the practices they described could be discovered. It was found that while various artefacts, grave goods, and human and animal remains pointed to ritual of some kind, there was little that demonstrated human sacrifice had taken place. One possible exception to this is the Gundestrup cauldron with its depiction of what could have been human sacrifice. In addition a number of shafts with human and animal remains, as well as some extraordinary finds of bones, such as the ossuary at Ribemont, leave no lack of questions as to what may have taken place. However, it was seen that in the main, bodies appear to have been dismembered after death, rather than having been specifically sacrificed. Next, the 'bog bodies' phenomenon was examined, and considered alongside the general prevailing view of the importance of water in regard to ritual offerings, and that depositions in water were a substantial part of the cultic life of the ancient Celts.

A large number of bodies have been recovered from bogs over the years, and these have given rise to much speculation, both among scholars and the general population. Given that there is much evidence to suggest that it was common throughout Iron Age Europe to deposit items of value in water, as offerings to the gods,²⁶⁷ it is not unreasonable to consider whether what is known about religious beliefs surrounding water, and the offerings made there, could be extended to the deposition of bodies into watery places as ritual offerings. However, rigorous academic enquiry needs to give serious consideration to other possibilities, and a number of archaeologists have posited alternative hypotheses. It also needs to be considered that objects deposited in water or waterlogged places are much more likely than those interred in dry land to survive intact, due to the anaerobic conditions and also lack of disturbance from later settlement activity. This itself should urge caution in giving special significance to the large number of finds in water. Other things being equal, one should expect to uncover more finds in water or places that were at one time waterlogged, than on dry land. Findings in general have proved inconclusive, and conclusions have been changing over time due to developments in dating techniques, forensic science, and understanding the ecology of the peat within which the bodies have been found. However, the general trend in thinking among archaeologists appears to be away from the traditional idea of the bog bodies having been human sacrifices, although still with a number of questions to be answered.

As a result of this research, it would seem that there is little evidence for human sacrifice as such. The Greek and Roman writers had a number of reasons for depicting their Celtic neighbours as inferior, untrustworthy, barbaric and to be feared. The archaeological remains leave a great deal of evidence of human beings being killed, and/or ritually treated after death as part of funerary rites. There is also evidence pointing to people having been murdered, and of heads from the slain being kept as trophies. There will always be those who commit murder for supernatural or magical reasons, even today, but that is not to say that this is in any way sanctioned by society, which in fact overwhelmingly views such cases as aberrant and abhorrent.

²⁶⁷ See, e.g. Cunliffe, 1997, p. 194;

However, this research has not turned up any substantive corroboration of the tales of human sacrifices in the classical writings. It would seem that the general assumption of the practice of human sacrifice rests on *a priori* assumptions about the ancient world, largely fed by allusions in the Greek and Roman writings.

Given the discrepancy between the evidence and the almost universally held belief that human sacrifice must have happened, the question remains as to why most scholars have come to that conclusion. In a modern day trial, were the prosecution to offer little evidence and mostly speculation, and given the general idea of ‘innocent until proved guilty’, the end verdict would certainly be ‘not guilty’. Given the paucity of evidence for human sacrifice, and that the main prosecution statement is ‘agreed, but they probably did it anyway’ with much speculation as to motives, should not academics today say ‘not guilty’ due to lack of evidence? It is suggested therefore that the main contribution of this research to the general debate is to demonstrate the significant gap between the widely held belief that human sacrifice did take place among the Celts, and the lack of substantiating evidence.

There are a number of areas in which this research could be continued. There are questions surrounding depositions in water, and it would be instructive to make a detailed survey of both bodies and artefacts recovered from water, including their relation to each other. Questions to ask would be, how much correlation is there between where bodies and ritual depositions of artefacts have been found? One difficulty with this line of inquiry may be the issue of the conditions necessary for the preservation of human remains. Certain kinds of peat have qualities that allow for bodies to be preserved for a very long time, whereas fresh water, such as that in a lake or river might not preserve organic matter. It may also be interesting to conduct a systematic investigation into alternative theories as to how the human remains, particularly those discovered in peat, could have met their demise. A third line of inquiry would be to explore the reasons that researchers have for maintaining that human sacrifice almost certainly took place, despite their own assertions that there is practically no solid evidence for this.

This has been a fascinating subject for me to have studied, and a challenging one - not least because all the people who could have provided some useful insights have

been dead for a very long time! Apart from what I have learned about the ancient world through my research for this dissertation, I have also learned much about the importance of having an outline to work with, and of tackling one aspect at a time. The importance of being well organised and of not procrastinating has been a big lesson to me, as has the need to read and write at the same time. My tendency through this undertaking has been to do lots of reading, and then have so many notes I didn't know where to start. In addition I tended to become overwhelmed at the sheer size of the task. I realise now that I would have done much better to write as I read, so that I would have had the basic material written, and then found it much easier to shape it up into the final form. However, aside from substantially increasing my knowledge of the subject matter, I have learned a lot from my mistakes and have also gained in confidence in my ability to undertake a large project and stay with it to a successful conclusion.

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