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The Great Mother

The Cult of the Bear in Celtic Traditions¹

Introduction

In his classic discussion of totemism, the famous French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss declared that animals are “good to think” because their perceptible reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought to be attached to them (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 89). One area where our cognitive affinity with animals is especially salient is in religious symbolism. Animals have, from the earliest time to the present, had a major presence in religious beliefs, practices and images. Religious traditions engage with animals at multiple levels but one of the more prominent is to use representations of animals as symbolic tools in communicating fundamental insights (Waldau 2005, 355–356). As Stanley Walens declares:

Wherever they appear, animal symbols are used to convey the deepest and most abstruse dimensions of human existence. They are symbols of core values and categories, representations of the most fundamental ideas and images of a culture. As core symbols, they are multivalent, complex, antimonic, used simultaneously to capture and display many different image and meanings at many different levels. As core symbols, they also serve to link other domains of symbolic discourse, creating juxtapositions and contrasts of images from which people derive meaning and from which they generate narrative forms. The natural realm of animals is an important part of the way in which people project their knowledge and experience through symbolic discourse (Walens 1987, 291).

The Celtic traditions of Iron Age Western Europe present a typical case of the importance of animals in the communication of religious ideals. Visual representations of animals are much more frequent in Celtic traditions than those of humans, for example, and animals also played an important role both as sacrifices in rituals and narrative actors in Celtic stories (See Green 1989; Maier 1997, 16). Because of this pervasive role played by animals in Celtic symbolism, it has been suggested that their religious beliefs were fundamentally animistic and that they believed in the sanctity of the natural environment in all its manifestations (Green

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1989, 131). However, we should be careful in making claims like this, because the symbolic use of animals can be explained simply as a matter of cognitive naturalism. Human cognition is built so that when we deal with metaphysical or abstract information, our minds anchor this information with mundane images hijacked from our everyday environments (See e.g. Kosslyn 1994; Barsalou 1999, 577–660). The Iron Age Celts lived in a society based on herding and hunting, so animals would have worked as obvious anchors for dealing with religious and other metaphysical data present in the traditional lore.

Indeed, a sizeable proportion of Celtic animal symbolism deals with domesticated animals. Dogs, for example, are frequently depicted in Celtic art, and young warriors, functioning as the guardians of the tribal lands, are frequently equated with dogs in the early Irish narratives. The horse was the most crucial animal for the Celtic way of life. It was associated especially with those of high rank and functioned therefore as a symbol for the warrior class and of prestige. Bulls and cows also symbolized prestige and wealth, as they functioned as the basic unit of value in Celtic societies (see Green 1989, 144–151; Kelly 1997, 27–101).

Of the wild animals, those preferred in symbolic presentation were the big game animals, like stags and boars, but also birds and snakes were used. The bear, which in this case is the ordinary brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), was also among the hunted animals, and it was admired because of its strength and ferocity. However, although hints of bear-symbolism emerge here and there in Celtic mythology, actual bear-imagery is surprisingly rare. One reason for this is that in Ireland, where our main textual evidence comes from, the bear had been hunted out already during the Neolithic, or the early Bronze Age, so the Celtic tribes living there had no direct experience of bears. Nonetheless, even the Irish sources show a good deal of acquaintance with the bear and at least among the Continental Celts it also acquired a clear mythical importance (see Green 1987, 134; Kelly 1997, 190; Maier 1997, 32).

Searching for the Celtic bear

There are two native words for bear in Celtic languages. The older one of these is **artos*. The use of this word seems to go far back into the Common Indo-European times and closely related forms are found from other Indo-European languages. The second word for bear is **matus*. This word is derived from the root **matu-* meaning “good” and can be translated as “the good one”.² Thus, it appears to be an eponym that the Celts used of the bear, maybe because it was on some occasions a taboo to call the bear by its real name. This interpretation would at least be in line

² The asterisk before the words denote that they are modern scholarly constructions – a kind of Common Celtic idealizations based on the variety of bear-words in the known Celtic languages. For example, the words used for bears in Irish and Welsh are *art(h)* and *mat(h)*, while in Breton the word is *arzh* (See Delamarre 2003, 36).

with what we know of the hunting practices of such North European traditions as the Germans, Balts, Finns, and the Slavs (see Delamarre 2003, 55–56; 221).

The importance of bear-symbolism in Celtic traditions has frequently been mentioned by earlier authors but the actual essence of this symbolism has seldom been explored. One reason for this is that the largest body of evidence related to bear-symbolism comes from data on the basis of which it is hard to make very far-reaching observations. For example, representations of bears are found on Gaulish coins (MacKillop 1998, 32). We do know that **artos* and **matus* were among the complementary metaphors used in the Celtic traditions of warriors. The bears on coins could thus refer to the strength and warrior identity of the ruler distributing the coins. However, the same words were frequently used also as roots for many Celtic personal names (e.g. *Art*, *Artán*, *Artacán*, *Artgal*, *Artrí*, *Math*, *Mathgemain* and *Mathgen* or *Matugenus*) and most likely the bear-representations could simply refer to and identify a ruler who had this type of a name (See DIL sv. *art*; sv. *math*; Maier 1967, 32).

Indeed, because of this connection between bears and warriors, it is from the nomenclature where we find the strongest evidence for the importance of the bear in Celtic traditions. While bear coins and bear names in themselves do not as such allow us to make any further assumptions of any religious aspects of bear symbolism, it is possible to suggest that bears functioned – or at least had functioned – as totemic ancestor animals for at least some Celtic tribes. The existence of totemism in Celtic traditions is a debated issue and, if it ever existed, the exact nature and importance of it for the Celtic tribal societies remains an open issue (See MacSuibhne 1961; Maier 1997, 270). However, allusions to some kind of beliefs that a person or his kin, or tribe, is associated with an animal can be found, for example, in the early Irish literature dealing with taboos. The best known example comes from a medieval tale called *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (TBDD), where Conaíre Mór, one of the prototypical mythical rulers of Ireland, is forbidden through a taboo to hunt birds, because he is related to them both from his father's and his mother's side (TBDD §§ 7, 13, 16; Sjöblom 2000, 156–179).

As far as I am aware, we do not have similar types of stories about bears in the Celtic sources, but we do know that in many traditions names are often thought to be linked with the very essence of its bearer and, in such traditions, a man and his namesake had a close connection often highlighted by taboos (Holden 2000, 187–190). If we take, for example, the above mentioned Matugenus, this name means “A descendant of a bear”. It invokes the idea that the totem animal of this particular man would have been a bear (Maier 1997, 32). Moreover, in addition to Conaíre Mór, we have in the early Irish tradition another famous ruler as well – indeed the most famous of them all – whose name is Cormac mac Airt. Cormac is the central figure in a whole cycle of tales and anecdotes, all written down in the early medieval period. He is the first king to have occupied Tara, the hill that became the centre of the cult of sacred kingship in Ireland, and he was described as the wisest

man living (See Ó Cathasaigh 1977; Dillon 1994, 15–29). My present concern with Cormac is his name, or more specifically his patronymic dedication. Cormac mac Airt can be translated as “Cormac son of a bear”. Connected with evidence from personal names like Matugenus and the evidence provided by TBDD, this patronymic dedication can be taken to allude to some kind of totemistic belief. If Conaire was a descendant of birds and his reign was described as a bird-reign (TBDD §16), then Cormac could be descended from bears and his reign might be described as a bear-reign.

It would still be quite adventurous to suggest that some kind of bear-cult existed among the Celts on the basis of this alone. After all, both Cormac and Conaire are fictional characters and it is possible, maybe even likely, that the name of Conaire’s father was chosen just because of the qualities that bear-derived names alluded to in Celtic traditions. However, another group of nomenclature connected with bears is place-names. From France we can find such places as *Artobriga* and *Artodunum* (today Arthun), both having the meaning “a fort of the bear”, and *Andematunnum* (Langres) meaning “the fortress of the great bear” (D’Arbois de Jubainville 1905, 196–199). While such place-names could simply refer to a king or warrior responsible for the construction of the fort in question, we do know that Celts had a tradition of naming fortresses with a reference to the local deity. Indeed, this is understandable, because many of the tribal centers were also temples and cult-places for the local deities (Brunaux 1988, 5–7). The most famous case for such divine fortresses is the common place-name *Lug(u)dunum* (e.g. Lyon), which is usually adduced as evidence for the cult of the famous Celtic god Lugus (See Maier 1997, s.v. *Lugus*).

Nomenclature alone would leave us with very little else than scholarly guesswork in our hunt for the Celtic bear-cult. Fortunately, we do not have to rely on names alone. We can also use the evidence from iconography. Bear representations are found on many Celtic statuettes. For example, a series of little jet bears have been found from Malton, which is situated north-east from York in Britain (Ross 1967, 435). It appears that humans had been buried with them and they have been interpreted by Miranda Green as being some kinds of amulets (Green 1986, 184). A similar finding has been made in Armagh in present-day Northern Ireland. Here stone animals, including two bears, were recovered during the rebuilding of the protestant Cathedral of Armagh in 1840. Under the Cathedral was a pre-Christian Iron Age burial ground and the statues were clearly connected with these burials. Many more animals were found than what survives today, but it is possible that more than two of the original score represented bears (Ross 1967, 435). This find suggests that images of bears, together with images of other animals, were used as some kind of votives for gods or ancestors in burial rituals. It might even suggest that individuals of a certain totemic affinity were buried with an idol marking his or her totemic relationship. Such idols could be thought to function as guides for the deceased on their journey to the other world.

Bear Gods and Bear Goddesses

Nevertheless, the strongest evidence for a bear-cult existing in Celtic traditions is found when we turn to the gods of the Celts. The Celtic world can be described as a network of tribal societies who shared a common cultural background (Moscati *et alii*. 1991; Green 1995). They did not have same religious beliefs or same divinities in all parts of the network, but following the wording of Venceslas Kruta, they can be said to draw their religious beliefs and practices from the same mythical pool (Kruta 1991, 499). The Celtic gods were usually local divinities, attached to certain geographical areas or natural features in the landscape. The first thing that strikes a present-day observer is thus the multiplicity of the names of gods that modern scholars have been able to establish among the Celts. Among the Continental Celts alone, 374 different names have been found. However, as Celts had the habit of calling their gods with complementary titles suitable for the immediate concerns of the worshipper, it is possible that at least some of the different divine names occurring in inscriptions and dedications refer actually to the same god. Moreover, although we have nearly four hundred names of gods, over three hundred of them occur only once (Sjoestedt 1994, 14–15). The actual information concerning the nature of the gods and their cults is, therefore, very limited.

Gods with bear names appear to be both male and female. Thus, we have from Beaucaumont in modern day France a male patron of bears known as Artaios. As he is equated in the dedication with the Roman god Mercury, he might have been a god of money-making and plenty (Green 1989, 139; McKillop 1998, 290). Unfortunately, besides this one dedication we do not know anything more about this Gaulish bear-god. A little bit more can be said about a bear-god called Matunos, worshipped among the British Celts at Risingham, north of Hadrian's Wall. Here a whole shrine seems to have been dedicated to the worship of the Bear (Ross 1967, 435), and a second altar erected for Matunos has been identified at High Rochester. The name of this divinity may be derived from the proto-Celtic **Matu-on-os* meaning a "male ursine spirit".³ Again, this could be interpreted as referring to Matunos as an ancestral spirit or tribal totem.

This worship of the ursine spirit in the North of Britain also has some interesting implications for the much later tradition of King Arthur. Most of the modern scholars today agree that there has never been a historical king named Arthur. Indeed, in the earliest references to Arthur he was not described as a king, but as a military leader, and even these early references imply that Arthur was a generic name under which memories about old heroes and legendary battles were recollected in order to make them survive in the oral memory of the British Celts (See e.g. Bromwich, Jarman & Roberts 1991; Padel 2000; Snyder 2000; Higham 2002). While most Arthurian

³ More information about Matunos is available from the internet encyclopaedia Wikipedia. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matunos>.

scholars today dispute the Celtic origins of Arthur – and I myself belong to these skeptics – a bear-cult in Britain might explain why the name Arthur, whatever its origins, was selected for this generic hero. Arthur’s name, of course, can be derived from *arth*, the Welsh word for bear and the ending (*g)wr* (hero), making him the “Bear Hero” (McKillop 1998, 23). Indeed, at least in one 12th century poem called the *Dialogue of Arthur and the eagle*, this British hero is characterized, among other things, as “bear of the host” (*arth llu*) (Sims-Williams 1991, 58). Before drawing too strong conclusions from this, we should keep in mind that the Arthurian tradition is a young tradition that seems to have developed during the early Christian period, and it is to the early Christian traditions that most of its symbolism and the spirit of the tales can be derived⁴

There are more representations connecting the Bear with a goddess than with a god. For example, seven votive inscriptions to the goddess Andarta (“the Great Bear”) have been found from in or around the town of Die, in Southern France (Maier 1997, 16). Again, not that much is known of this goddess, but she appears to have been the patron goddess of the Vocontii tribe. Geographically the Vocontii occupied the South-Western slopes of the Alps and it is here, in the Alpine areas of the Celtic world, where the strongest evidence for a Celtic bear-cult comes from. This evidence comes in the form of a small statuette dedicated to the goddess Artio, i.e. “She-Bear” (Delamarre 2003, 55–56). Indeed, according to some scholars, Andarta and Artio might actually be different names for the same local goddess (e.g. McKillop 1998, 14).

The cult of Artio is attested as far up north as around the German town of Trier, near the borders of modern-day Luxemburg (Green 1992, 139). However, the centre of her cult was clearly in Muri, near modern-day Bern in Switzerland, and this is why the goddess is often referred to as Artio of Muri. The bear has even today important associations with the areas around Bern. According to the legend, the city itself, founded in 1191 AD, got its name from the bear, which was the first animal that Berchtold V, Duke of Zähringen, killed during a hunting trip. Thus, the bear also appears in Bern’s coat of arms. However, during the Iron Age, this region was occupied by the Celtic tribe of the Helvetii. They were among the more powerful of Gaulish tribal coalitions and known to be fierce warriors. From this perspective, a cult of a bear-goddess appears as a relatively natural choice.

The statuette of Artio, now in the Historisches Museum in Berne, is itself a beautiful artifact. It is made of bronze and is about 20 cm high. It shows the

⁴ Note that the name “Arthur” might also be a local British derivation from the Roman name Artorius. This is the preferred interpretation of most contemporary scholars. Artorius is, of course, a derivation from the Latin word for bear, and thus it would be functionally compatible with its Welsh cognates. However, if this is the case, the legend of king Arthur does not provide any strong support for any kind of bear-cult in Northern Britain (See Littleton & Malcor 2000, 72–73 for a concise discussion of this topic).

goddess in seated position offering a bowl of fruit to a bear (Meier 1997, 25). Some interpretations of this statuette argue that it describes an event where the goddess is sacrificed to the bear. However, a more likely interpretation is that the statuette is a pictorial representation of the goddess in her two different aspects as a bear and a woman (D'Arbois de Jubanville 1905, 196–199; Green 1992, 28). This was a rather typical feature of Celtic iconography and it can imply that Artio had a dual function as protector of bears against hunters and of humans against bears. However, the bowl of fruits in the hands of the goddess suggests that connections with fertility symbolism were her most important framework. She was most likely an earth goddess and the personification of the tribal territories of the Helvetii. These types of territorial goddesses are well established in Celtic traditions and one of the more important rites connected with them was the symbolic marriage – i.e. the so-called *hieros gamos* – between the goddess and the tribal king (See e.g. Ross 1986, 124–125; Green 1986, 72–102).

In conclusion

In this presentation I have been describing the traces of bear-cults in the Celtic traditions. While the bear as an animal was common enough in order to become a part of Celtic iconography and symbolism, the actual significance of the bear and the beliefs connected with it are not easy to trace. However, a benign reading of the available evidence suggests that the bear may have had religious importance at least on two different levels.

First, the bear statuettes used as talismans and grave-goods, together with the additional indirect evidence like the use of bear in patronymics, suggests that at least during some earlier phase, the bear might have been some kind of totemic animals for the Celts or their ancestors. This evidence comes mainly from Britain and from Ireland, but as at least some of the bear statues found in Britain seem to have been imported from the Rhineland, totemistic associations of the bear might well have been a common Celtic feature.

Secondly, there is strong evidence for the existence of bear-gods and bear-goddesses among the Celts. The evidence for a cult of bear-divinities is especially strong in southern and eastern Gaul and the Alpine region. The association of the bear with the earth goddess is particularly well established and while the evidence does not allow us to say anything specific about the actual beliefs connected to her, we have enough evidence to argue that for the Alpine Celts, at least, the bear was foremost the Great Mother, the spirit of the land from which all life originated.

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