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Gods, Heroes, & Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain

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Gods, Heroes, & Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain

Description

The islands of Britain have been a crossroads of gods, heroes, and kings-those of flesh as well as those of myth-for thousands of years. Successive waves of invasion brought distinctive legends, rites, and beliefs. The ancient Celts displaced earlier indigenous peoples, only to find themselves displaced in turn by the Romans, who then abandoned the islands to Germanic tribes, a people themselves nearly overcome in time by an influx of Scandinavians. With each wave of invaders came a battle for the mythic mind of the Isles as the newcomer's belief system met with the existing systems of gods, legends, and myths.

In *Gods, Heroes, and Kings*, medievalist Christopher Fee and veteran myth scholar David Leeming unearth the layers of the British Isles' unique folkloric tradition to discover how this body of seemingly disparate tales developed. The authors find a virtual battlefield of myths in which pagan and Judeo-Christian beliefs fought for dominance, and classical, Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and Celtic narrative threads became tangled together. The resulting body of legends became a strange but coherent hybrid, so that by the time Chaucer wrote "The Wife of Bath's Tale" in the fourteenth century, a Christian theme of redemption fought for prominence with a tripartite Celtic goddess and the Arthurian legends of Sir Gawain-itself a hybrid mythology.

Without a guide, the corpus of British mythology can seem impenetrable. Taking advantage of the latest research, Fee and Leeming employ a unique comparative approach to map the origins and development of one of the richest folkloric traditions. Copiously illustrated with excerpts in translation from the original sources,*Gods, Heroes, and Kings* provides a fascinating and accessible new perspective on the history of British mythology. [*From the publisher*]

Keywords

British history, Medieval history, mythology, myth, folklore, paganism, Judeo-Christian beliefs

Disciplines

English Language and Literature | European Languages and Societies | Folklore | Linguistic Anthropology | Literature in English, British Isles | Medieval History | Medieval Studies

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Comments

Attached is the introduction of Christopher Fee's book, *Gods, Heroes, & Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain.*

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INTRODUCTION

The islands of Britain have been a cross-roads of man, myth, and god for thousands of years. Massive standing stone circles such as that at Stonehenge, ancient Stone Age villages such as Skara Brae, and imposing chambered tombs (also known as cairns or barrows) like Maes Howe all provide mute testimony to the civilizations that existed in Britain at least five thousand years ago. These monuments—some older than the pyramids in Egypt—provide tantalizing clues to the religious beliefs and rituals of the peoples who left them. Some scholars have suggested a religious system based on myths and rites of fertility and of sun worship. In fact, historical and literary records reveal little before the arrival of the Celts from mainland Europe.

The Celts, a group of related tribes who by early in the third century BCE were a significant presence in Europe from the Balkans all the way to Greece and Asia Minor, sacked Rome in 387 BCE; later, as every student of Latin knows, Celts fought Julius Caesar as Gauls in lands now called France and Germany. The Celts who

invaded the British Isles during the last five centuries BCE came in waves of mutually hostile groups speaking different dialects. The descendants of the Gaels (Goidels) are still found in Ireland and Scotland. Relatives of the Gauls, the Cymri, and Brythons (Britons), including the Belgae, are the source for people in Wales and Cornwall (and Brittany in France). The word *British* comes via the Middle English *Brittish* and the Old English *Bryttisc* from the Breton *Bryttas*, a word for the Celts of the British Isles. The ancient Celts and their beliefs displaced the earlier indigenous Stonehenge peoples and their gods, although the Celts perhaps appropriated some of the earlier customs. They most certainly put old ritual sites and structures to new uses; this sort of recycling of pre-existing sites and traditions, such as the probable use of stone circles in Celtic druidic rites, happened again with each new set of invaders of Britain.

Like those who lived in Britain before them, the Celts lacked a practical writing system, and thus before their conversion to Christianity they were not a literary people, at least not in the modern sense of the word. It is only because of interaction with the Romans—and before them, with the Greeks—that accounts of the Celts were recorded. Herodotus, Hecataeus of Miletus, and, of course much later, Julius Caesar all wrote about the Celts. But among themselves, the Celts, like their Germanic neighbors to the north, passed their stories and traditions down through the generations by word of mouth. Our understanding of the Celts during their preliterate period comes, therefore, largely from the pens of their enemies.

The first challenge to the Celts in Britain was the Romans, who first crossed over what we now know as the English Channel in force under Julius Caesar in about 50 BCE. Although these new invaders consolidated their control of the southern portion of the island in less than two hundred years, they never reached Ireland, and they won only marginal footholds in Scotland and Wales. Where they did conquer, though, the impact of Roman civilization was very great indeed, as the multitude of Roman baths, villas, roads, and walls proclaims in Britain to this day. Furthermore, from a mythological point of view, the Roman influence upon the British Celts is of particular interest, as is that of the Celts on the Romans. The Romans were tolerant rulers, leaving many local customs, social structures, and religious practices in place, only putting a stop to those rituals deemed bloodthirsty, barbaric, or unseemly. Many of the religious ceremonies and military customs of the Celts were distasteful to their Roman overlords—human sacrifice and ritual head-hunting being chief among these—but few of the gods of the Celts seemed alien to the Romans, and the worship of these deities was not curtailed. Indeed, the Romans made a practice of accepting foreign gods into their pantheon as new manifestations of old familiar spirits.

The golden age of Roman rule was to be short-lived, as by the middle of the fifth century CE affairs elsewhere in the empire required the removal of the Roman legions; they would never return. Germanic raiders and pirates—from modern day coastal Holland, Denmark, and Germany—who had begun to raid Roman Britain around the year 300 CE, now pressed their attacks on

the nearly defenseless Celts, who appear to have won a short respite from these marauders in a great battle fought in about 450 CE. It is from this shadowy historical event that the legend of King Arthur seems to have been born. In any case, by the year 500 CE the Germanic Angles, Saxons, and Jutes had returned in earnest, and they soon drove the British Celts to the margins of the island—to Wales, Scotland, and Cornwall—and across the sea to Ireland and to Brittany.

These Germanic tribesmen brought with them such gods as Tiw, Thunor, and Frige, to whom the more familiar Tyr, Thor, and Frigg correspond in the Norse pantheon. Theirs was a dark and brooding religion, and bloodthirsty, too: contemporary continental historical records and archeology agree that human sacrifice was practiced by these northern peoples. The most demanding of these gods was Wodan—Odin to the Norse—from whom Wednesday takes its name, and in the name of whom countless animals and humans were strangled or hanged. Further, the rather dismal Germanic view of the afterlife probably hastened the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. At the behest of Pope Gregory the Great, the first Roman Catholic mission to the kingdom of Kent was established at Canterbury by Augustine in 597 CE, and the conversion of the English was accomplished within a century; as we shall see, however, some heathen practices and motifs remained for much longer.

Although the Anglo-Saxons suffered occasional setbacks in their drive to overrun the British Celts, the story of the two or three centuries following their initial mass invasion is primarily one of the conquest of Celtic territory tempered by a great deal of squabbling among the invaders themselves. Eventually seven main Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were established in what would become England (from the Old English *Engla Land* or Land of the Angles, one of the Germanic tribes), with an ebb and flow of power between Northumbria in the north, Mercia in the Midlands, and Wessex in the southwest. Although they mainly drove out their Celtic neighbors rather than assimilating them, these Germanic invaders were highly influenced by the peculiar religious rituals and beliefs and unique artistic forms of Celtic Christianity, which had been imported into the north of Britain from Ireland before Augustine arrived in Kent. The Roman form of Christian worship represented by Augustine eventually held sway over most of Britain, as established in a synod held at Whitby in 664 CE. Regardless of the victory for Roman Catholicism, by this time a Celtic stamp was indelibly affixed to the character of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. This character is perhaps most notably illustrated in the ornate Celtic interlace and animal figures of the manuscript illuminations of the monastery at Lindisfarne in northeast England, and in the intricately carved stone crosses such as the one at Ruthwell in southern Scotland, which combines Christian imagery with Irish artistic patterns and Germanic runes and poetic heroic sensibilities. Furthermore, stories of saints and their miracles were the most popular narrative form of this period in Christian Europe. As we shall see, the indigenous British saints' lives likewise illustrate this blending of religious, mythological, and symbolic traditions.

The Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain was really only the first in a series of Germanic invasions of the island. In 793 CE the first Viking raid of England took place at the monastery at Lindisfarne, and this event marks the beginning of a presence in Britain that culminated with the crowning of a Danish king of England, Cnut, in 1016 CE. The Vikings were Scandinavian (primarily Norsemen from Norway and Danes) adventurer-raiders who were first cousins to the Anglo-Saxons, who were following the same migratory patterns to Britain, and who made their way, like the Celts, to Spain and Asia Minor but even farther, to North America. The etymology of the term *Viking* is uncertain; the Old English *wiking* has to do with a war band, and hence may denote a warlike pirate, while the Old Norse *vikingr* comes from a root meaning "bay" or "inlet," and thus may refer merely to those associated with those places and the crafts that plied them. These Scandinavian invaders still adhered to the old religion, and thus their appearance in Britain reinvigorated the old pre-Christian Germanic elements in the cultural melting pot.

The Anglo-Saxon period drew to a close with a final wave of Germanic invaders, the Normans, who conquered England under William in 1066. Although they came from France and used the French language, the Normans were partial products of the Germanic Frankish people who conquered Gaul in the sixth century CE, and, as their name (*Norman* = Northman) indicates, of the Germanic-Scandinavian Vikings from northern Europe. The Normans brought with them new social and governmental approaches, and it was also during the Norman period that new literary forms began to take shape in Britain, forms which would reach their greatest flower in the retelling of some, of the myths, legendary histories, and narrative motifs brought by the preceding waves of invaders.

Each of the groups who came to Britain brought with it legends of heroes and myths of gods, rites of sacrifice and other religious practices, belief systems particular to each culture, place, and era of origin. With each succeeding wave of invasion, new mythic systems came into contact and conflict with the older systems already established in Britain. Indeed, these waves of invasion themselves sometimes generated new mythic traditions, to which the legends of Arthur certainly attest. New gods sometimes supplanted old gods, but often traditions merged and accommodated one another, bringing to life new, uniquely British mythic systems. This accommodation is even true of Christianity, which was, for example, transformed by Celtic culture into something quite unlike its continental counterparts. In Britain, as nowhere else in Europe, Germanic, Celtic, classical, and Christian influences came into contact, conflict, and eventually confluence; the consequent assemblage of ancient heroes, gods, and practices resulted, long after "pagan" beliefs were assumed dead and gone, in a particularly rich, fertile, and volatile medieval literary tradition, a tradition through which it is possible to gain genuine insight into the shadowy gods of ancient Britain.

Although we are most interested in examining how the various cultures and mythological systems of the British Isles tempered and transformed one another, ours is fundamentally a comparative study. This is to say that we will

examine the mythic systems of the British Celts, Romano-Celts, Anglo-Saxons, and Vikings side by side according to certain more or less universal categories or archetypal motifs, the mythic manifestations of the unconscious ways in which all human societies construct their religions and understand their roles in the physical and spiritual universe. Through a comparison of Celtic, Roman, Germanic, and Christian realizations of the universal themes of creation, the hero quest, and apocalypse in Britain, for example, we will achieve a clearer view of a peculiarly "British" mythology, a British way of articulating the human condition.

Any comparative examination of British mythology must explore the tension created by two related oppositions: that between Christian and Pagan cultures and that between literate and oral cultures. In a study of the history of the development of British mythic traditions these two oppositions are inextricably mixed. Although the Romans and the Greeks—and other Mediterranean and Near Eastern peoples—were literate long before the time of Christ, literacy as we understand it came to northwestern Europe only as an aspect of Christianity. It is possible that certain Celtic and Germanic methods of inscription for messages and charms may predate Christianity, but these systems (e.g., the Celtic ogham and the Germanic runic scripts) would be ponderous for recording narratives of any length and might in fact have been based upon Roman models in the first place. It is, in any case, safe to say that storytelling in both of these cultures was fundamentally an oral art form, and that it was only with the coming of Christianity that these ancient mythologies found a form of written expression that has survived to the present day. Before moving on to the myths themselves, then, it will be beneficial to touch very briefly on the nature of oral culture and to discuss in broad terms how and why British Christianity was transformed by its contact with the Celtic and Germanic mythologies.

Oral storytellers work in ways fundamentally different from their literate counterparts. While a written story—once committed to paper—remains static through multiple readings, oral storytellers did not ply their craft through rote repetition of the same stories; instead, working from a bare outline of characters and events committed to memory, a storyteller wove a new narrative in each retelling of any particular story. The general players and conflicts remained the same, to be sure, but the storyteller also drew upon a huge hoard of stock characterizations and associations, mythic elements, poetic metaphors, and the like. The Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf, to take one example, contains a host of colorful metaphors—called "kennings"—that allow the poet to mention the same thing or concept over and over without boring repetition. "Whale-road" for sea and "sea-wood" for ship are classic examples of such kennings and often seem odd to a modern reader. Further, today's reader of Beowulf often becomes lost in the network of vague allusions to unrecounted episodes and the series of fully recounted but seemingly unrelated asides that disrupt the main narrative of the poem. All of this material must have been clear to the original audience and would in fact have shifted from telling to telling, as the poet strove to emphasize different points. This under-

scores that, when we read written versions of oral traditions, it is important to look for narrative patterns, much as we look for archetypal patterns in our reading of mythology. The patterns of repetition, poetic metaphor, and stock characterization, for example, often reveal to us those elements considered most important by the culture from which the story comes.

The myths and legends of any people have much to tell us about the nature of that people, and the early British cultures are revealed to us, in some small part, as much by the types of stories they told and the way that they told them as by what any given story was about. Poets were revered in early Celtic culture, just as the *scop* (the "shaper" of words or oral poet) held a special place in Anglo-Saxon society, and the *skald* (the scop's Nordic cousin) among the Scandinavians. Such respect for storytellers is a common attitude among those who rely on oral tradition and fundamentally rests upon the storyteller's role as repository for family history, religious ritual, protective charms, medicinal knowledge, and all of the cumulative lore and wisdom of any society that has no other way to pass its traditions from one generation to the next.

This book is a comparative study of the conflict and confluence of the mythologies of ancient Britain, and such a study requires that we examine closely how Christianity—which became the dominant cultural system in Britain—helped to transform the mythological systems that predated it, and how it in its turn was transformed through contact with the earlier systems. We must begin this examination by noting that the story of the early Christian church in Britain is largely the story of the Irish church, and thus Irish narrative traditions and forms played a particularly important role in the development of British Christianity. The conversion of the Irish is traditionally attributed to Patrick, and the general consensus is that this conversion took place late in the fifth century. Just as the Romans never reached the shores of Ireland, however, the Irish church in many ways remained independent of and different from the Rome-based church throughout the early medieval period. Once again, distance and lack of contact were primarily responsible for this independence, but Irish social structures also played a role. Ireland at the time had no real urban centers, no system of well-maintained Roman roads, and no centralized political infrastructure. The model of Christianity that developed in such an environment, then, was as decentralized and autonomous as its Roman Catholic counterpart was rigidly hierarchical and dependent upon authority from Rome. Therefore, while the medieval continental church maintained an important monastic tradition, fundamentally it was structured around the parish, the diocese, the archdiocese, and their relationship to one another. The Irish model, on the other hand, was entirely monastic and idiosyncratic, and therefore drew, from monastic cluster to monastic cluster, upon different samplings of a wide variety of Celtic belief systems, literary models, artistic traditions, and interpretations of Christian scripture. This idiosyncratic nature most overtly manifested itself in the Irish art and manuscript tradition of the period, influences which were extremely important in the development of the Anglo-Saxon church in Britain. Important areas of contention with the Roman Church included such matters as the

unique Irish tonsure (the method of the shaving of the head of monks), and the method of calculating the date of Easter. These conflicts came to a head in the struggle for supremacy in Anglo-Saxon Christianity, as we have already noted, but it is important to add that Celtic and Germanic heroic literary traditions gave birth to an Anglo-Saxon understanding of the nature of Christ as warrior that was equally idiosyncratic.

In sum, then, these British cultures were on the margins of Europe in every sense of the word: isolated from the center of the Christian West geographically by water and temporally by the long and difficult journey from Rome; surrounded by a cultural chasm as difficult to bridge as the physical ocean; steeped in ancient traditions that were alien to the Mediterranean cultures that spawned Roman imperial culture and Christianity, but that were at the same time resilient and adaptable. The interaction of Christianity with these older cultures was particularly noteworthy as a result of the marginal position of Britain, and the resulting cultural and mythological context was highly volatile; although Christianity undoubtedly carried the day in Britain, all of the mythologies of Britain were transformed through their contact with one another, and the literary tradition of medieval Britain is a testament to the long-term influence of early pagan narrative traditions upon later Christian Britain.