Joanna Kowalewska
Uniwersytet Gdański

RITUAL AND THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS IN THE CULTURES OF THE CELTS AND GERMANS

Ritual is one of the main elements requiring study in order to understand a society's values and workings. Interconnected with religion, custom, law, language and mythology, it is rooted in repetition and strict observance. Totemic and/or animistic in origin, ritual served as a way for the individual to understand and interact with the physical world around him/here, both opening him/her up towards the vast and ungraspable, and giving a second dimension to the tangible, practical objects in his/her immediate surroundings – for example, hand-made clay objects used as votive offerings to a deity. As more and more individuals are involved in ritual practice, it in turn expands to involve the interactions between them. In other words, ritual is the link between the sacred and the profane, the individual and the group. This link develops in a multitude of ways, giving rise to a plethora of cultures; it also evolves within a society itself due to internal or external factors.

The Celtic and Germanic cultures are distinct in their archeology, language, customs and mythology, yet there are many similarities, or even commonalities that link them. This may be a result of repeated geographic, economic and marital interaction spanning several centuries, if not millennia (the question of prehistory is as interesting as it is complicated and disputed; therefore, for the purposes of this article, the majority of the data discussed will date from the 3rd century BCE onward, although there will be references to the Bronze Age and the early Iron Age). Ritual is one of the similarities distinguishable between the two cultures. In both of them, the natural world plays a strong role in facilitating communication with the supernatural; also, community and ritual are interdependent, in the sense that most ritual action was built upon some form of interaction with other community members, and that various forms of ritual became increasingly dependent upon the social aspect. As Juliet Wood explains, most of the available evidence pertaining to the Celts, both pagan and Christian, indicates that these peoples did not see a distinct separation between elements of the real and the surreal, but that a complex system of ritual was in place to preserve harmony between the human world and the divine (Wood 2007) – the same holds

true for Germanic tribes. It can further be said that ritual practices, along with a strong oral tradition, maintained coherence within the society, in lieu of an institutionalized system.

Ellis-Davidson characterizes holy places as "a means of communication between man, gods, spirits and forces of nature" (H. Ellis-Davidson 1988: 13). This is reflected in the animistic and totemic tendencies especially present during the earlier stages of Celtic and Germanic cultures. Among the oldest forms of worship amid Germanic peoples, dating to the Bronze Age or even the European Stone Age, are pole gods – carved wooden poles or branches erected in stone piles. They can be seen as a form of early tree cult, which later manifested in the mythological Yggdrasil world-tree. Their popularity lasted centuries; in fact, the most famous pole god is Irminsûl, allegedly destroyed by Charlemagne in 772 CE, sparking war between the pagan tribes and Christian France. The poles could be fairly crude constructions near a village, or they could be more elaborate sculptures in important locations. Other early Germanic sacred sites were exceptional places in nature, or man-made natural wonders. Vé were fairly large open areas for public worship, often V-shaped, marked by a wall of stones or ropes. They were usually forest clearings, near a source of water, and located not too far from places of settlements. More private areas of worship were the *hϕrg*, which initially were as simple of a stack of rocks in a field and could be created by anyone at any time. Over time, the word *hϕrg* was used to indicate a special building. It is possible that burials mounds, which reached in size to small hills, were an evolution of this concept. Another type of sacred site, found mostly in Sweden and Denmark, were the ship-settings. Initially, this meant natural rock formations whose shape resembled that of a ship, where religious rituals took place, as can be surmised from the traces of wood fires and other remains. As in the case of *hϕrg,* this concept was later expanded to include funerals and other important events, where stones were placed in the shape of ships in commemoration. These elaborate constructs were also meant to catch the eye of passers-by, inviting them to visit, pay their respects and admire the local predecessors.

Among early forms of religious practice among the Celts were rituals performed in *nemeton* (sacred grove, sanctuary). These were generally circular clearings in the woods, or a circle of trees or stones in a field. Most often, these places also had a special formation of earth and water elements, such as a mound or a pool. The purpose of the ring of trees was to provide a protective barrier against the forces outside of the *nemeton*, but it also served as a sort of wall encircling the ritual stage. Revered sites for various rituals accompanied by votive offerings, as well as blood sacrifices both animal and human, *nemeton* also inspired great fear. In *Pharsalia,* Lucan describes *nemeton* as dark places with the bloody remains of human sacrifice scattered about the site, places which sometimes even the druids approached warily (Green 1992), but it is debatable how much of his description is truth and how much of it is a foreigner's misrepresentation.

The fact that most religious and cultural activities took place outside can be explained in several ways. Firstly, the totemic belief that a special combination of the elements was a manifestation of a divine presence, as well as a conduit to great power, facilitating communication with supernatural forces. Secondly, the practicality of such sites, where rivers, seas, cliffs, dense forests, etc., facilitated or, to the contrary, restricted access and travel. Another reason why the outdoors was preferred would be the fact that it was open to the view, and so any happenings taking place could be witnessed by a larger number of people than in the limited space of a building. That is not to say that temple and sanctuary structures did not exist – they did, although there were few of them, and it is posited that the Celts and Germans borrowed the idea from the Greeks and Romans in the few centuries before the Christian era.

Celtic temples and sanctuaries were built usually of stone or wood. In the southern part of the Celtic world they were most often four-sided, most likely due to Roman influence, while in the north the circular shape particular to *nemeton* was more common, although the pre-Roman temple near Gobeck's Farm close to Colchester is rectangular. Other exceptional examples include the oblong sanctuary at Libenice, the triangular temple to Brigitania in Verulanum and the underground temple in Bavay. It would seem that an important factor taken into consideration when choosing a site was the presence of water. Large, influential cult sites such as Aquae Borvonis, St. Germain-Sources-Seines, and Roquepertuse were all built on water pools; the La Tène complex is on the shores of Lake Neuchâtel; and the sanctuary of Church Island is situated, obviously, on an island. The circle was important not only in the shape of the temple, but also in the ring surrounding it. Archeological remains on Church Island or the Isle of Whithorn, among others, show that the sanctuaries were surrounded by a circular embankment, whereas biographical poems of some canonized founders of monasteries mention that before construction was started, a circle was ploughed in the earth around the projected site, or a bulwark was built. This may have been a practical resort, for protection or demarcation of property, but could also have been a symbolic construction of a scene where different rules applied and specific behavior was expected. One was required to act accordingly, or otherwise be beholden to the community or the gods, as transgressions entailed material restitution and/or bodily harm; this also holds true for Germanic *frið-garðar.* Specific codes of conduct vary according to particular locations or dates, but generally prohibit the use of weapons (or regulate their use, in the case of duels), require proper hygiene and/or clothing, and specify ritual gesticulations and body movements. The great importance of the sacred ring survived into Christian times in the Irish and Welsh words for church *kil* and *llan*, respectively, both of which also mean "bulwark, fence".

In the Germanic world, sacral constructions were even more rare. Best-known examples are the temples at Uppsala and Helgafell. However, the exact nature of these temples and activities performed there are contested, considering that the attestations we have of them are strongly influenced by Christianization and archaeological findings are often inconclusive. Ellis-Davidson believes that the most convincing evidence showing the existence of a pre-Christian Germanic temple can be found at Mære on Trondheim Fjord, but alas, knowledge gained from the ruins is limited, especially since the earlier constructions were built-over – through the Middle Ages, it was customary to build Christian churches on top of pagan sites (Ellis-Davidson 1988). This was partially for practical reasons, in that the existing foundations and materials could be reused, but also in part a symbolic annihilation of pagan tradition. In any case, these great temples would have been used only rarely, on great occasions turned into spectacular events, such as the Danish festival held at Lejre. According to the description by Theitmar of Merseberg in his twelfth-century *Chronicon*, every nine years, offerings of ninety-nine people and ninety-nine horses, dogs and cocks were made (Andersen 2006). It is debatable how much truth there is to this, but it is undisputed that Lejre served as a religious and commercial center, as well as a burial complex, including Viking Age ship-settings.

The transformation of a religious site into a socially multifunctional one is common, both among the Germans and the Celts. The Germanic system of *frið-garðar* (peace enclosures) was quite elaborate. The basic principle is that there was a space with a clear outside and an inside, delignated by a barrier of stone, rope or wood. The inside was a holy place of power where violence or even the carrying of weapons (or unauthorized weapons in the case of duels) was prohibited, under pain of excommunication or even death. The type of *frið-garðar* *v*aried according to its purpose. In *vé*, offerings could be made to supernatural beings, often accompanied by chants, magic formulae, coded gestures and actions; these activities were done publically, both in the sense of communal and open. *Hof*, public places of worship, were also common, but they were either small buildings adjacent to an important village building, or were in fact the dwelling of a leader figure; halls of large farmsteads doubled as temporary temples when needed. This relation between *hof* and leadership indicates a correlation between figures of power and the divine: the leader's role extended beyond governing over human matters to being the community's representative and ritual leader. This may be because among the Germanic peoples there was no figure of a priest and, therefore, the most influential person was by default chosen to take on some of the responsibilities typically associated with priesthood and temporarily incarnate the gods' earthly representative. The fact that *hofs* were common among the Germans can be seen in the preponderance of the words *hof*, *heimr* (homestead), *land* (estate), etc., compounded with a god's name in place names. Many

place names also include a god's name paired with a natural element such as *dalr* (valley), *eng* (meadow), *mörk* (forest). These phenomena are a further indication of the perdurance of animistic beliefs.

Another type of *frið-garðar w*as the *dómhringr*, or court of law, an area on an open plain encircled by a ring of rope on hazel poles, although over time it was occasionally placed within the village or great hall. Legal proceedings were held either in the home of the highest-ranking official, who presided as judge, or outside in a common area accessible to all. Statements from the interested parties and witnesses were taken into consideration when considering cases, and were often crucial to the deliberations. The accused, defendant and witnesses were all given a chance to speak and answer questions, both from the ruler and free people witnessing the proceedings. After trial, the judge announced his ruling and, if necessary, the punishment. Careful precision was required in the pronunciation of legal formulations, in for example making an accusation or giving a verdict. Any mistake would render the formula unbinding (this verbal rigor was also observed for religious and magical formulations). The necessarily public nature of legal proceedings can be explained by many reasons, beginning with the concept of deterrence, setting and perpetuating laws, but also with instilling the feeling of individual involvement in the public system. The public aspect also worked as a system of checks and balances, both on the scale of the community, as well as between individuals, or more particularly in groups of more than three, where the third party acted as a neutral, true source – one of the reasons why personal honor and truthfulness were so highly valued, and lying and oath breaking so despised. In addition, the enforcement of contractual obligations was most often assured by a third party acting as a surety. Monetary or material restitution carried over generations, or onto other family members, as often did the shame laid upon the perpetrator.

The working of *dómhringr* was echoed in the *hólmgöngustaðir*, or the ring for dueling, often situated on an island. The duels which took place in hólmgöngustaðir unfolded according to a *hólmgangulog* (dueling code) that varied among the tribes, but generally had several steps – the challenge, combat with shields, combat with only weapons and the concession of defeat with accompanying payment of restitution, called *hólmlausn*. Dueling also took place outside of *hólmgöngustaðir*, although it was not so much a way of resolving conflict of a legal or personal nature, but more as a show of strength or a manifestation of divine favor, both within a clan and between clans. It was also a way to reduce loss of life in battles, where chosen representatives faced each other off in a duel, which allowed the entire community to engage at least emotionally in the conflict, in a manner similar to that of the Greek *catharsis*.

The most-known Germanic temple, and also an excellent illustration of the evolution of sacral site into polyvalent social gatherings, is the temple at Uppsa-

la. The most-known attestation of the celebrations at Uppsala comes from the fourth book of *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* by Adam of Bremen, an eleventh-century German chronicler (Tschan 1959). He describes the temple building, encircled much like a stage by small hills, as bedecked with a golden chain, whose glitter can be seen from far away. In the temple are statues of Thor, Odin and Freyr, and it is to them that the festivities, held for all the Swedish provinces over nine days every nine years, were dedicated. Uppsala was composed of three parts: the hall housing the statues, a grove adjacent to the hall, and an evergreen tree near a spring. The grove was probably the most spectacular of the three, for all around this grove were hung the bodies of the blood sacrifices – nine male specimens of animals and humans were sacrificed each day. The chronicler explains that the grove as a whole, and even each separate hanging tree, was believed to be sanctified by the death and purification of the offerings. From the placement of the offerings, it can be surmised that animal and human sacrifice ranked equally. It is probable that the human victims were proud of their role in this ritual, for they played their part in the greater scheme of their world. The Uppsala festivities were presided over by the king and other leaders, who used the opportunity to engage in economic and political dealings, both among themselves and against outsiders. The king could preside from his seat at *Uppsala öd*, located near the temple. He also coordinated other cultural happenings at Uppsala, such as things, recruitment and law courts.

The Icelandic Althing was founded in 930 CE in Thingvellir as a meeting of the country's most powerful *goðar,* or leaders, held to establish legislation and hold a legal court. With time, the Althing began to include all free men and eventually became the social event of the year, where not only justice was dispensed and law laid down, but also trade and literature flourished. The distinguishing feature of the site is the wall of rocks, which acted as a natural sounding board, on a principle similar to Greek amphitheaters; along it was theLögberg, or Law Rock. This rock served as the seat of the leader, who opened and closed the festivities, and, most importantly, recited the current laws.

Although among Germanic peoples *frið-garðar* generally developed into a precise system, among the Celts, the development of *nemeton* remained more fluent. Instead of breaking up into specific parts, *nemeton* simply grew into multifunctional sites, from a sacred space for rituals to a place where many political and military issues were solved and where culture was nourished, even to the point where a *nementon* developed into a larger sanctuary or city, for example Nemetodurum, Fidnemed and Durnemeton. An illustration of this is the Galatian Durnemeton, where, as Strabo writes in *Geographia*, there was an annual congress of twelve tetrarchs and three hundred other people; the aim of the assembly was to judge murderers and settle other weighty issues. Lughnasadh sites are another example of the polyvalence of social gatherings. Aside from ritual activities, the

weeks-long Lughnasadh festival for the god Lugh was a time for settling legal and political matters, trading, promoting arts and marriage. What sets Lughnasadh apart is the theatrical enactment of episodes from the mythological cycle *Cath Maige Tuired*. Indeed, according to Kondratiev, when choosing a festival site, hilltops with a water source were especially favored, as they were symbolic of the joining of the Above, or sky-realm, and Below, or land of the watery Fomorian of Celtic myth (Kondratiev 1997).

We have seen the ritual sites, but what about the rituals themselves? For the Celts and Germans, the basic concept is sacrifice, or the offering of objects, animate or inanimate, to the divine in supplication, thanks, honor or contrition. Sacrifice could even be expanded to actions, in that specific behavior was required. A notion key to sacrifice is ritual damage, or the idea that in the offerings used in sacrifice must be broken or manipulated in order to remove their earthly function. The practice was most widely used on weapons, which would most often be thrown into water or bogs, but also included coins and precious objects. It can also be argued that animal and human sacrifice were related to the idea of ritual damage.

Sacrifice is crucial to the Celts and Germans; in Germanic languages there was no word equivalent to *belief* or *faith.* The word designating man's relationship with thegods was the verb *blóta* – to offer (blood) sacrifice, to strengthen (a god). It is not always clear whether the offerings were killed specifically for the ritual, or if specimens already dead from natural causes or in battle, were used. Often, the sacrificial offering would be burned or interred whole, for example in order to accompany a deceased figure in the afterlife. More frequently, however, the animal sacrifices such as cattle, fowl or horses, would be consumed as a part of the ritual. Animal sacrifice was practiced on smaller occasions, such as a seasonal fertility ritual, or as a part of more elaborate celebrations. Among Germanic tribes, human sacrifice was reserved for special instances, such as the Uppsala festival, to honor a particular god, especially Odin, or in times of particular hardship, such as draught or famine. In any case, the Germanic sacrificial rites were presumably much more complex and specialized then the little we know from written accounts, as can be seen in *Hávamál*, stanza 144: "If you know how to carve/Do you know how to advise/ Do you know how to color/ Do you know how to ask/ Do you know how to bid/ Do you know how to send [sacrifice]/Do you know how to slaughter?" (Simek 1993: 272).

Animal sacrifice among the Celts basically resembled that among Germanic peoples, although perhaps it was more widespread. Animals were included in burials; for example, a horse, along with a cart, was interred with the chieftain at King's Barrow, and dogs accompanied the deceased at the Winchester cemetery. Animals were also used as blood offerings in a myriad of rituals. This may be due to the fact that, as Caesar remarked in *De Bello Gallico*, the Celts believed

that supernatural powers required the exchange of life for life. In *Natural History,* Pliny describes a complicated fertility ritual intended as a treatment for barrenness: on the sixth day of the moon cycle, a druid needed to scale a sacred oak tree with a golden sickle and use it to cut down mistletoe, which would be caught in a white cloak. The mistletoe would then be sacrificed along with two bulls (Green 1992).

Human sacrifice was also more widely practiced among the Celts. As in the case of animals, not all of the sacrifices were performed with live offerings. As concerns live sacrifices, the victims most often were prisoners and criminals, although innocents were used in case of a deficit. The offerings were made as a supplication for defense against war threats or famine, as appeasement for gods, for divinatory purposes or in a combination of ritual with capital punishment. The Berne scholiasts state that sacrifices to Taranis were made by burning, to Teutates by drowning, and to Esus by strangulation and stabbing (Green 1992). Criminals were often impaled on poles or shot with arrows after a five-year prison sentence, although other methods were also employed, such as the pole-axing, garroting and throat-slitting of the Lindow Man, or the impalement and live burial of a couple and their fetus. There was also the practice of suttee, or the burial of slaves or even family members along with their master; it would appear that this practice was abandoned around the beginning of the Common Era. There are many attestations of human sacrifice used for divination by Celtic druids. Diodorus Siculus and Strabo both refer to the ritual stabbing of victims in order to foretell the future based on their dying writhing (Green 1992). Strabo also described the Cimbri ritual of slitting the throats of their sacrifices and then examining the expelled blood, collected in cauldrons. Tacitus describes the blood- and entrail-drenched altar at the *nemeton* on Anglesey, which the druids studied before addressing the gods.

Decapitation was an important Celtic ritual, although, again, not always performed on living subjects. It is also unclear whether live victims were killed by decapitation, or if the ritual was performed just after death. The actual decapitation was carried out in a ritual manner – always with a knife, from the front of the throat and in such a way as to cleanly sever the vertebrae. The heads of fallen warriors, both friendly and enemy, were hung from saddles, on city walls, or on poles as a sign of victory or as a cautionary measure. They could also be offered to gods as trophies, or kept as prized possessions at home. The shrines at Roqueperteuse and Entremont had pillars with niches storing the heads of fallen warriors. The head was perceived as a seat of power and the human spirit, and so its severance and preservation could be understood as a form of respect towards the former bearer. The heads of important enemies were celebrated and even used as cult vessels, such as the head of Roman general Postumius, killed in battle in 216 BCE. It is also possible that the head was severed from a defunct in order to

facilitate his or her migration to the Otherworld, on a similar basis as ritual damage. There is also the possibility, particularly in the case of female beheadings and burials, usually with the head between the legs, that the decapitation was done with the intent to prevent the women performing acts of witchcraft before transmigrating. In Dorset in the third and fourth centuries CE, several women's heads were found with the lower jaw removed, possibly in an attempt to prevent them from speaking spells. A different explanation would be that the women were the village scolds or gossips, and the disfigurement was a form of cruel joke. Celtic mythology is full of severed heads, some even possessing magical capabilities; the second branch of the Mabinogi describes the severed head of Bendigeidfran as talkative, the harbinger of good fortune.

Not all Celtic and Germanic rituals were gruesome. One of the most common forms of ritual, in fact, was rather a merry event – feasting. Originally, fertility rituals accompanied by food sacrifices, feasts became an occasion for various forms of social dialog, and some were even established a part of cultural tradition; for example, the Germanic Yule feast began as a ritual fertility drinking sacrifice, but over the years became a festive, celebratory time, or the Samhain ritual feast, a night of communion with the dead, which became Halloween. Feasting is also present in mythology: it is an everlasting feast at Valhalla; *bruidhen*¸ Otherworld hostels where feasting was presided over by deities; or the image of Dagda with his giant cauldron ever full of food. Feasts allowed for rich men in a position of power to gain or maintain a community's approval, but also for members to issue challenges or petitions, propose military action, to boast of their accomplishments in an attempt to raise their social standing, or simply to ensure that their words and opinions were at least heard. During more solemn occasions, men would sit in a circle with the most influential of them occupying the central place. Roasted meat, often used in a sacrificial offering, would be cut and distributed according to hierarchy; disputes as the ranking could even lead to duel to the death. A steady flow of mead allowed for conviviality, the forging or breaking of alliances, and various other economic or personal dealings. In any event, reneging on any deals struck during a feast, even when inebriated, resulted in bad luck, or even in feuds. The Spanish Arab At-Tartuschi describes a feast at the influential town of Hedeby near the end of the tenth century:

> "They celebrate a feast [in honor of Sirius] at which all get together to honor their god and to eat and drink. He who slaughters a sacrificial animal puts up poles at the door to his courtyard and impales the animal on them, be it a piece of cattle, a ram, billygoat or a pig so that his neighbors will be aware that he is making a sacrifice in honor of his god" (qtd. in Roesdahl 1996: 137).

Feasts then were also events where one was meant to be seen and heard, where one could be judged and evaluated as a member of the community. They also expand on the concept of public validation that we have seen earlier, in that one was held accountable for actions taken in front of witnesses.

Another example of the public factor as validation is the horse sacrifice kingship ritual used in Ulster among the Kenelcunil tribe, described by Gerald of Cambria in *Topographia Hibernica* in the twelfth century (Fortson 2004). In order for his sovereignty to be validated, the king was obligated to copulate with a white mare in the presence of his people. The mare was then killed and boiled; next, the king bathed in the same water while eating the mare's flesh, which was also distributed among the people. The ritual was completed when the king drank all of the water using only his mouth. This elaborate scene was played out publicly so as to deter any contestation of the king's position. But why a white mare? White is the color traditionally associated with religious practices and rule, whereas a mare or a horse symbolizes many Celtic goddesses associated not only with military strength and prosperity, but also with the transferal of power to a male. Also, the king was supposed to intercede with the gods in order to assure prosperity for his people. The feeding of the boiled mare is a symbol of this dispensed prosperity, an assurance to the community of the king's aptitude to provide, while the coupling is a symbol of fertility bestowed by the gods.

There were more rituals associated with the assumption of power by a leader. The pre-Christian Celtic Stone of Fál on the hill of Tara would give a loud cry when touched by a rightful king elect – a ritual which almost certainly gave rise to the legend of Arthur and the sword. Another ritual is *tarbhfhess* or 'bull-sleep,' whereby a chosen individual would partake of the flesh and broth of a sacrificed bull and then dream of the rightful king. The king's responsibility, both among the Celts and the Germans, was to assure his people's prosperity by performing rituals, particularly fertility; his people's prosperity was a measure of how strong his bond with the gods was. An unfit, unprofitable king would be removed, or even sacrificed himself, as was the case of King Domalde who, according to the Ynglinga saga, was offered in a sacrificial ritual intended to assure better harvests and assured victory in future wars (Simek 1993).

A king's ritual role in Germanic society was particularly important since the Germans did not have a strictly priestly figure; rather, religious and magical activities were practiced by various people at various times. The local leader presided over rituals in *hof*, or over feasts, but each individual attempted communication with the gods by giving offerings at a *hørg*, or simply by invoking them when the situation required it. In need, recourse to magic was taken, even though it was generally seen as disgraceful and, as such, fell into the dark women's sphere. There was white magic, or prophesy, divination and healing spells, and black magic, including love potions, setting up of wooden poles carved with

an image of a face to be cursed, viewed as harmful, or, at least, unbecoming of a man. Battle magic was seen as somewhere between the two. *Hávamál* enumerates battle spells which could be invoked to dull the enemy's blade, to increase resistance to wounds, or stop an arrow in flight. *Berserk* were warriors who were said to be possessed by magic, although it was more accurate to say the trance into which warriors fell was a result of adrenaline, alcohol, breathing techniques, psychological factors and the narcotic effects of eating or drinking brews of mushrooms. Divination by interpretation of dreams, signs, bird and horse movements, throwing of lots and runes, was practiced by military leaders before a battle. *Vita Ansgarii* from the ninth century recounts how a squad backed out of attacking the trading point in Birka because of a bad omen. In any case, communication with the gods was difficult and unclear, signs and divinations were often vague, open to interpretation and often understood only after the fact. This did not stop people from seeking out seers, seeresses and prophets, who resorted to all manner of divination and intoxicating brews to see into the supernatural.

Among the Celts, the task of communicating with gods fell to the druid. Druids supposedly acquired the capacity to understand the speech of the gods, and so they were the only ones capable of being intermediaries. As such, they were the ones charged with transmitting their dictates and interpreting their whims, and ensuring that they were enacted. Although druids' influence spanned over all of society, there were two groups in particular to which druids gave divine instruction: the youth and rulers. Druids were charged with giving the youth a guide to understanding religion, values and morality. This education could take place locally, but often was given in *nemeton*. This kind of education was a way of safeguarding the transmission and perpetuation of values and tradition, ensuring the ability for generations to communicate. Where rulers are concerned, the relationship between them and their druid was often a life-long one. It was the practice that kings would have a druid as a tutor in childhood and that the teacher would later stay on as the king's advisor, assuring continuity. In fact, the druid could be so close to the king that it was the former who held the real power. In *Oratiae,* Dio Chrysostom gives an example of the kings of Ulster who were prohibited from making decisions or taking action without first consulting the druids. In mythological texts, druids had the power to control the elements, day and night, and even the seasons. For example, in the *Cath Maige Tuired* the druid Figola brings down a rain of fire, while King Connu called in snow in the middle of summer. (Green 1992) The symbiosis between ruler and druid, as well as *fili* and *brehon*, was a sort of system of checks and balances.

The druids' power stemmed from their mystic knowledge of the language of the gods and the power hidden in their own speech. They had the capacity of using words to control supernatural forces surrounding a person, such as their health or even fate. A druid could also cause a person's or animal's death with

words spoken in anger; perhaps it is another reason why adherence to a behavioral code and rigidity of emotion were so important. Other manifestations of their verbal power include magical formulae intended to, for example, foresee the future or heal, or the casting and uplifting of *geas*, a magical obligation or prohibition. These were often delivered as cryptic poems and it was this stylized, literary quality that set these formulae even more apart. The druids were avid poets, and operated almost entirely in the oral tradition. Although literate with knowledge of Ogham, Greek and Roman scripts, druids did not believe in setting words to paper, which would have allowed them to create a lasting literary testament that would serve future generations as a guide and code. This can in part be attributed to a desire to protect the secrets and mystique of the druid community, but also to the notion that "living words," which retained such power, must not be degraded by the use of "dead markings." Also, oral transmission of their knowledge required rigorous exercise of the memory, which strengthened mental acuity, an element crucial to the druid society.

Another function of druids, although to a smaller extent, was that of judge, which vested them with the power to exclude someone from ritual sacrifices, separating them from divine favor, and even excommunication, which was one of the highest punishments. However, the role of judge fell primarily to *brehon*, who, much in the manner or druids, spent many years committing oral legal documents to memory, and then travelling among villages and courts reciting the law and settling disputes. The word of *brehon* was final and the highest authority, to which even the king must submit. *Brehon* also acted as a censor, if the need arose, to *filidh* – poets, historians and bearers of mythological tradition, whose satire could cross into verbal abuse, high offense indeed.

The Germanic equivalent of *filidh* were the skalds. Skaldic poetry became particularly important with the increase of centralized power, especially in Iceland, to the point where a skald became of must at the hall or court of a figure of power. Skalds were generally young men looking for adventure, fame, recognition, who attached themselves to a noble retinue, recorded their lord's deeds, and served as a public entertainer and private counsellor. The poems were often an instantaneous reaction to current events, a personal experience gained while counseling the ruler, or even the formulation of an opinion on a particular aristocrat. The skald's performance, be it a private show given for the benefit of the aristocrat or intended for the wider audience of the court, served as a way to praise, scold and instruct the present ruling class, and also as a means of commemorating current events for the sake of instructing posterity. Reciting the works of previous skalds was intended not only to pass on historical knowledge and counsel, but also served as a sort of instruction on how to act and to what aspire. For what greater honor is there than to know that one's exploits will one day be sung or recited to an enthralled audience?

Although over the course of the Middle Ages the works of skalds began to be written down, for centuries the poetry was a part of oral tradition. Written literature did not exist until well into the Middle Ages, which is not to say that writing was unknown to the Germans. In fact, they had their own alphabet, called *futhark* after the first six runes it contained. All in all, little can be said about writing among the Germans, for much about it is unknown – *futhark* itself is not very developed, as it did not have runes to represent all of the Germanic phonemes, thus many symbols could represent various sounds, leading to difficulties and discrepancies in interpretation. The rate of literacy is also unknown, as is the manner of its acquisition and the status accorded to the rune-master. Some suppose that short messages may have been transmitted by runes inscribed on bits of bark. However, the bulk of runes were intended to be read by a wide audience, with a strong accent towards posterity. Runic inscriptions include such mundane things as boundary posts, marker stones, owner and maker markings, and even graffiti left by bored individuals. Those inscriptions that are known are difficult to decipher and often considered to be magical in nature, but Graham-Campbell dismisses this as the erroneous "tendency for epigraphists to think that all inscriptions that they find hard to interpret are magic" (Graham-Campbell 2001: 158), as runes are not in origin a magic script. They were most likely intended to elaborate upon the commemorative constructions made for the departed. These memorials, in the form of wooden stakes, burial mounds, ship-settings or simple stones were intended to commemorate those who had played out their earthly role well. For as goes stanza 76 of *Hàvamàl*: "Cattle die/ kinsmen die/ you yourself die;/ I know one thing/ which never dies:/ the judgement of a dead/man's life."

We have seen that ritual permeated essentially all spheres of life for the Celts and Germans. Melded with ritual is social interaction. Few matters were celebrated or solved in private, as if the public aspect was what validated actions. *Public* is a relative concept, ranging from the gathering of entire tribes (such as at Uppsala and Durnemedon) to a meeting of three people. Several explanations for this can be given. The Celts and Germans had a very strong sense of family and community – exclusion from ritual celebrations or even excommunication were among the most severe forms of punishment. A person without a tribe was without a place in the world; therefore, it was imperative that one merged with the workings of the community to assure its smooth working. Conversely, one was continually scrutinized and sized-up by other community members. That is why qualities such as honor, valor, generosity, loyalty, hospitality, oratory, among others, were highly valued. It also allowed for manipulation of perception for personal gain. As to communication within the societies themselves, we have seen one of its forms in feasting, where particular importance was placed on eloquence and truthfulness, among others. Feasts pertained mostly to the here and now, the happenings of the present, near past and future. But multigenera-

tional dialogue was of tantamount importance; it was enabled by the figures of druid, fili and bard among the Celts, and skald among the Germans, as well as the importance placed on descendancy, in legal, historical and genealogical matters, and the strong presence of oral tradition.

Another key function of ritual was its unifying force, as exemplified by the evolution of religious sites into polyvalent ones. Aside from being a sign of the evolution of Celtic and Germanic societies, these cultural centers were a means of consolidating the tribes against foreign, increasingly Christian, influence and conquest. Paradoxically, this attempt at cultural cohesion was one of the factors that lead to the fall of pagan traditions. One explanation is that the Christian philosophy of respect of life and repudiation of the idea of fate and predestination were likely factors that lured the Celts and Germans away from some of themore stringent tenets of their religions (Roesdahl 1996). Another is that singular instances of Christian conversion sowed strong dissent among the societies, weakening the power structures. An excellent illustration of this would be the Norwegian king Haakon the Good (934–960 CE) who lost his political standing when he refused to wholly partake in an annual ritual feast, where the participants were obligated to partake of horsemeat, an act in defiance of Christian practice. Aware of the negative impact of his refusal, the king attempted to sidestep the issue by eating separately; when his exit was foiled, he resorted to making a sign of the cross on the food, saying it was a symbol of Thor's hammer. Despite this solution, his support waned, and a few months later at a gathering in Trøndelag, he was forced to publically eat horse liver without prior consecration. Christian converts were obligated to pay their way out of participating in pagan rituals, a practice that began spreading throughout Viking-age Scandinavia and soon became a point of conflict between baptized rulers and traditional subjects, leading to the loss of cultural cohesion.

This is not to say that Celtic and Germanic cultures vanished with no trace. There are myriad examples of cultural and religious syncretism, such as Yuletide having become a synonym for Christmas, featured in carols such as *Deck the Halls*, or the replacement of Samhain with Halloween. Furthermore, there has been increasing interest in these cultures ever since the Romantic Period, manifesting in a plethora of works of art, literature and opera, such as Wagner's famous *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Recent decades have seen a neo-pagan revival, especially in Celtic countries. Exploring either of these phenomena would illuminate to what extent the ancient tenets have perdured and acclimated in present times.

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Summary

Ritual and the Socio-Religious in the Cultures of the Celts and Germans

This article focuses on ritual as known to have been practiced among Celtic and Germanic people. It attempts to discern the role and significance of ritual within the religious and social context of these cultures, as well as find points of comparison within the two. Ritual plays a part on several levels, at times focusing on the individual or on a specific group, while at other times, ritual serves as a liaison between different units, as well as between the real world and the supernatural. In addition, ritual is a form of interaction across time, linking an individual or group with ancestors or descendants. It also plays a crucial role in cultural identity and cohesion.