

The River and the Well

by John Bonsing (originally published on Caer Australis 1997)

A look at the importance of the rivers of Europe to the Celts as they emerged into history and their reverence of the River Goddess

ERIDANUS



In the 450s BC, the historian Herodotus presented his History to wide acclaim at Athens. This work (Rawlinson 1952) included a review of the geography of the world, including Europe and the Celtic lands: The river Ister (the Danube) he says, "has its source in the country of the Celts near the city Pyréné, and runs through the middle of Europe, dividing it into two portions...before it empties itself into the Euxine (the Black sea) at Istria."(II, 33). The 'country of the Celts' at the headwaters of the Danube that Herodotus refers to was well known to the Greek civilization through the considerable trade they conducted with the Celts out of Massilia. That colony (modern Marseilles; Refs 1,2) had been founded some 150 years prior to Herodotus, around 600BC, specifically near to the mouth of the Rhône river which was a principal Celtic trade route.

At the headwaters of the Danube, Rhône and Rhine rivers, the Celts had established a substantial heartland able to access and control the natural resources of northwest Europe. As a consequence, what lay beyond the Celtic heartland remained only vaguely known to the people of the Mediterranean. "Of the extreme tracts of Europe towards the west I cannot speak of with certainty," says Herodotus (III, 115), except that the "northern parts of Europe are very much richer in gold than any other region" (III, 116).

Herodotus had clearly heard reports about the region, but he was sceptical of their accuracy because, he continues (III, 115), "I do not allow that there is any river, to which the barbarians give the name Eridanus emptying itself into the northern sea, whence (as the tale goes) amber is procured; nor do I know of any islands called the Cassiterides (the 'Tin Islands'), whence the tin comes which we use." He states that "though I have taken vast pains, I have never been able to get an assurance from an eyewitness that there is any sea on the further side of Europe. Nevertheless," he concedes, "tin and amber do certainly come to us from the ends of the earth."

For his much lamented eyewitness account of the Celtic lands, Herodotus would have needed to wait another 150 years. In the years around 325 - 300 BC, after Massilia had been in existence some three centuries, the navigator Pytheus (Boardman, Griffin and Murray 1986) took advantage of a break in the war with Carthage to sail through the Pillars of Hercules into the "sea on the further side of Europe" and follow the coast of Europe northwards, visiting trading centres on the Atlantic coast where tin ingots and furs were processed for transport overland and by river across to Massilia; he sailed across the Channel

to the Cassiterides, where he witnessed the huge and dirty enterprise of tin mining, smelting and the production of ingots. Pytheus sailed so far northwards that he witnessed the arctic midnight sun and icebergs, and turning east he visited the north of Europe and the source of the amber so valued in the Mediterranean.

It was through the trade of gold, tin and amber that the Celts acquired their wealth. And also through copper and iron ore, which was of tremendous economic importance in the Iron Age. And through furs. And mercenaries made themselves famously available for the right price.

These resources enabled the Celts to import goods up the Rhône and down the Danube from the classical and oriental civilizations. An idea of the range of goods imported is found in grave goods dating to around the time of Herodotus. In a Celtic tomb (Cremin 1992) dating after about 450 BC and excavated in 1879 at Hallstatt was found an Etruscan stamnos (wine holder), a cista (container) from the northern Italian region of Ticino, and ceramic cups from Attica in Greece. Also found were local products whose forms were based on other imports, including a wine jug based on an Etruscan oenchoe and drinking horns covered with gold sheet, based on a Scythian design.

Along the Danube and at its headwaters, the Celts had become rich. With the lands of the north and west of Europe at its disposal, the Celts had access to resources that required development, and they had access to the Mediterranean cultures with whom to trade. Inspired by its wealth, the Celtic culture had grown more assertive and more sophisticated, and this found its expression in the art form that the Celts developed (Cremin 1992), the famous La Tène Celtic art. With all the goods coming in from foreign places came decorative patterns used by the cultures that made them. With the La Tène Celtic art, the Celts transformed the simple palm motif used by the Classical culture into whorls and spirals; simple handles on jugs or lids on containers became animated into human, animal and plant fantasies combining elements of each into rich and often confounding designs, and brooches and other ornaments, the distinctive Celtic torc (neck ring), weapons, helmets and shields, and coins too, all came alive with complexity in the hands of the Celtic artist. This art became itself a commodity of trade, for objects of Celtic design have been found throughout the Germanic lands east and north of the Rhine up into Denmark. The emergence of Celtic art is seen in the same grave goods just described. Though the wine jug is Etruscan in its form, and the drinking horns Scythian, their decorations are of the new Celtic form. The same grave contained jewellery and other personal ornamentation including a bracelet, an iron belt-hook and an iron-cored gilt bronze plaque, and their decorations are again the spiralling complexities characteristic of the La Tène Celtic art form.

DANUVIUS



Apart from the lack of "an assurance from an eyewitness" in 450 BC about the nature of the Celtic lands, the other reason Herodotus rejected whatever reports he had received was his objection to the concept of the 'River Eridanus'. He writes (III, 115) that, "in the first place the name Eridanus is manifestly not a barbarian word at all, but a Greek name, invented by some poet or other". Indeed, in the night sky Eridanus is the constellation of the River. However, Herodotus may have been less dismissive had he known any Celtic. The very river that Herodotus had a sound knowledge of, the Ister, was known in Gaul by the name Danuvius, and hence the Danube is known to us today from its Celtic name. Both the Greek name Eridanus and the Gaulish name Danuvius are words with a common origin, the proto-Indo-European (Mallory 1989) word for 'river', *danu-.

The Danube, whose Celtic name eloquently means 'the River', represents the first of the Celtic rivers. When the Celts developed out of the common proto-Indo-European peoples in the second millennium BC, their territory was located adjacent to the Danube: the Celts from this era are known in archaeological terms as the Hallstatt culture. In the later bronze age from around 1200BC - 500BC, this culture first gained wealth from its salt mines and its ability to use copper. At the discovery of the great rivers of northwest Europe, the Celtic homelands spread toward the west and along these rivers, establishing the heartland at the sources of the Rhine, Rhône and Danube, and the definitive Celtic culture, known from archaeology as La Tène and its fabulous art described above. When technology had advanced to the use of iron, from around 500BC, the Celtic resources of iron ore along the Rhine only added to their wealth. Herodotus writes dismissively of the "Eridanus emptying itself into the northern sea", but whatever report he had obtained is readily interpretable as a description of the Rhine, whose name is also Celtic, with a meaning of 'the sea'.

From their heartland at the headwaters of the Danuvius, the Celts of the La Tène culture held sway over the north and west. Throughout these lands their language and their genes spread, and so came into existence the expanse of the Celtic realms. The beautiful Celtic art could be found by the second century BC throughout almost all of the Danube basin in the east, throughout the Alps, Gaul, Britain and much of Ireland, in the north of Iberia adjacent to the Pyrenees and along the Po river basin in the north of Italy.

The Danube, the Rhine, the Rhône, the Marne, the Moselle, the Seine, the Saône, the Loire, the Garonne, the Vienne, the Thames, the Don, the Shannon and Boyne; all these names are, or are from, original Celtic names, and all these rivers define the lands of the Celts. In fact, the rise of the Celtic culture at the headwaters of the Danuvius coupled to the spread of the Celtic people and their language along the rivers of the north and west of Europe gives rise to an elegant impression that the Celts were the People of the Rivers.

DANU



Inextricably bound to the names of the Celtic rivers is the concept of the river as Goddess, and this is recorded on numerous occasions within Celtic mythology and tradition (Dillon and Chadwick 1967, Delaney 1989, Gantz 1976). While the concept of a river as a deity is by no means confined to the Celts, being an ancient concept held in common throughout the Indo-European civilizations, it is notable how robustly the Celts recorded the prime role of the Goddess river. The world opened out to the Celts by way of the river, and in the shared heritage of Celtic myth the Great Mother of the Celtic gods bears as her name *Danu, the ancient word for 'river', *danu-.

In the Mabinogion, we find her as the Goddess Dón in the myths Math ap Mathonwy and How Culhwch won Olwen. She is the mother of Gwydion the druid, Gilvaethwy the false and Govannon the smith, and to her virgin daughter Arianrhod. She is the archetypal Modron (Mother) found throughout the Mabon ap Modron myths of Cymru. In Ireland, we find her as the Great Mother, and all of the Celtic deities refer to themselves the Tuatha De Dannan, the People of the Goddess Danu.

In Gaul we find her again, and here the link between the Goddess of the river with Modron the mother is completed, for Matrona had a sanctuary dedicated to her near the headwaters of her river, the Marne: Here Modron, who is Dón or Danu the mother, is Matrona and she is the Goddess of the river. In the Mabinogion, the source of the river is shown to be where Mabon ap Modron, the son of the mother, is imprisoned: this is revealed in the myth of Culhwch by the Salmon of Llyn Llyw, the most ancient of creatures. As a Salmon of Knowledge, he would originally have lived at the source of the river, a spring or well such as described in the Book of Leinster, eating the nuts of nine hazel trees growing there and so gaining the knowledge of the world. The well was inviolable, but the waters rose up at the approach of the Goddess Boann and flowed out from the well as her river the Boyne; when Siann approached the well she caused it to flow as the river Shannon.

The creation of the river by the Goddess is also shown at the sanctuary to the Goddess Coventina, in Northumbria. In Roman times, in the second or third century AD, marble slabs dedicated to her were added to the original Celtic temple, depicting her reclining on a water leaf pouring water from a goblet. This is the illustration used in this essay. Another marble shows three water nymphs holding a jar in each hand, one held upright, the other upturned with water flowing. Like a wishing well today, coins would be thrown into the basin and Coventina's sanctuary remained in use up to the fifth century. In Gaul at a sanctuary dedicated to the Goddess Sequana, at the source of her river, the Seine, the offerings made were associated with healing, and hundreds of wood carvings of people, heads, torsos, limbs and internal organs, and others of animals have been found there that date from around the first century AD suggesting another Roman influence on a much older use of the sanctuary.

Each of the Celtic rivers has its Goddess, as we can see so clearly from Matrona, Sequana, Boann, Siann and Coventina She is its Creatrix, and by creating the river, so opened the land through which it flows. Because of this, she is Modron the great mother; from whom the deities were born, and she is the source and creatrix of the Celtic lands. River by river the world expanded before the Celts; but at first there was just one, when in the most ancient of times the Celts emerged as a distinct people along the banks of a *danu. They named this first Celtic river 'The River', Danuvius, and at its source they would first have paid homage to their Modron, the Goddess of the Danuvius, and she was the Goddess Danu.

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