

THE HEAD CULT:

**tradition and folklore surrounding the symbol of the severed
human head in the British Isles**

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ABSTRACT

Evidence relating to the use and veneration of the human head in a religious context is found repeatedly in the archaeological record and folklore of the British Isles. This has been documented from the earliest period, and manifests itself throughout prehistory and recent history in a variety of forms, from human skulls used as talismans to carved stone heads produced as part of a folk tradition of long standing. Until recently, much of the literature relating to the head as a sacred symbol has been produced from the perspective of Celtic studies, the material being interpreted as evidence for the existence of a “Celtic cult of the head” with roots in the pagan Iron Age. It has been claimed that this cult left an indelible mark both upon the archaeological record and the popular consciousness of later peoples, which has survived in superstition and folklore. This study aims to examine the evidence from archaeology, documentary sources and the folk tradition from outside the confines of the Celtic viewpoint, and to discuss the relationships between the different forms of material through a series of case studies.

A cross-disciplinary approach is adopted as a method of interpreting this material using approaches from the viewpoints of both folklore and archaeology. Existing sources are complemented by original fieldwork, incorporating material collected from a wide range of continuing traditions surrounding the use of carved human heads and skulls. These were used for a variety of protective and luck-bringing purposes within living memory, many of them having been overlooked by previous studies. This study demonstrates the importance of integrating evidence from both archaeological and folkloric contexts as a method of understanding and interpreting ritual and religion from the past.



This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Mary Constance Bentley, nee Hibbert (1905-1988) and William Bentley (1907-1996), who sowed the seeds.

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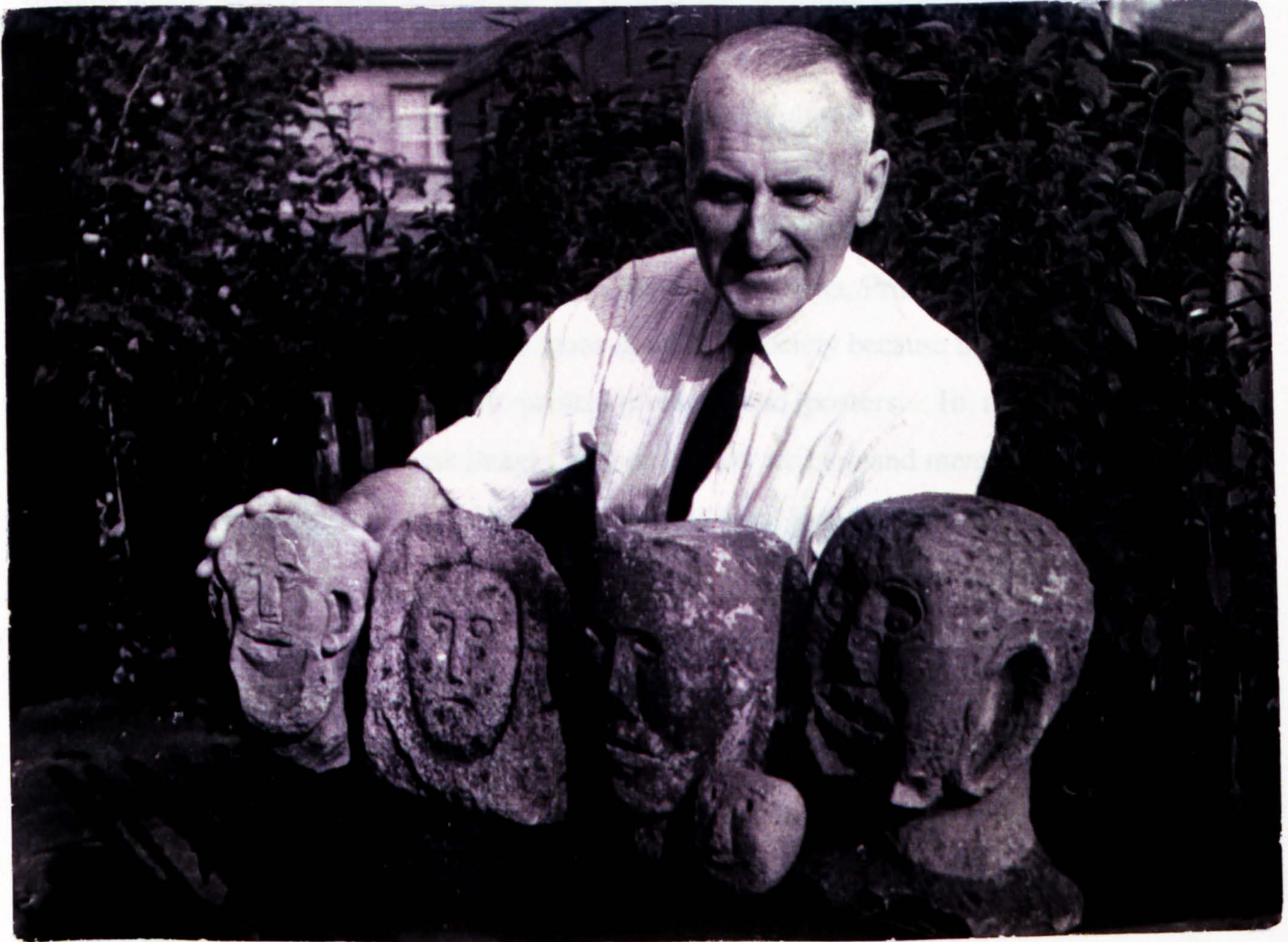
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Chapter 1

Introduction and Review of the Literature



head /n., adj., & v. n. 1. the upper part of the human body, or the foremost or upper part of an animal's body, containing the brain, mouth and sense organs. 2a the head regarded as the seat of intellect or repository of comprehended information..

Oxford Concise English Dictionary ¹

1.1. Definition of the study

The head and face are among the most potent human symbols we know. The face is the first symbol to be drawn by a child, which is logical as basic recognition is primarily through the senses located in the head, via the eyes, nose, mouth and the ears. Through the head we perceive and view the world; it is the centre of our perception of reality, our thoughts and dreams and as such it is only natural that the symbol has pervaded religion and mythology since the beginning of recorded time, predating all other symbols.

The face is unique because it is more distinctive and individual to a particular person than any other part of the human body. As such it has great importance symbolically because it is the means by which individuals can survive death. The facial features of dictators like Hitler and Stalin, film stars and royal personalities like Monroe and Diana, Princess of Wales, heroes and assorted villains have become powerful icons in modern society because their images have been reproduced thousands of times in prints, pictures and posters. In many cases, clever manipulation has enhanced these images so they remain striking and memorable, emphasising their continuing power over the collective consciousness, long after death has removed those individuals.

In prehistoric societies where the written word and photography did not exist, and a developed tradition of accurate portraiture in carving techniques had not developed, faces did not represent individuals. In these societies information about gods and heroes was transmitted from generation to generation by oral tradition alone, and within this context individual personality could only survive transmission in the most general of ways. As a result, images of faces and heads which appear in a religious or ritual context do not portray individuals but idealised gods, goddesses and ancestors. In Europe, the first highly developed forms of portrait painting and sculpture date from the time of the civilisations of Greece and Rome, a distinctive change which marks a clear cultural boundary between the art style of the Mediterranean and the pagan Celtic world of northern Europe, which included the British Isles. Here the archaic style of depicting heads and faces continued in a parallel fashion until the present day, at times drawing influence from the Mediterranean in its evolution. At the same time, the archaic style has survived in many of the more isolated conservative regions of northwest Europe, with uniform features stylised to the point of abstraction.

From the time of the Classical civilisation of Europe the portrayal of the individual has become more and more important and an increasingly secular influence upon elite art and sculpture. However, in some areas of upland Britain and Europe, as in African tribal art, faces and masks created out of a tradition of folk belief have continued to express the unchanging nature of ritual and ceremony for the people who created them. The religious and symbolic role of the head as an underlying influence upon belief is attested by numerous myths and legends which stress multi-headedness as an aspect of divine power, along with a rich body of archaeological and ethnographic evidence for rituals in which the human head is hunted, preserved and venerated. Some of the earliest writings of the Greek philosophers located the impulses of anger and violence as having their base in the head, which was seen as the seat of life, and of the soul. The Pythagoreans believed the head was the source of human sperm and located it as the source of life and the spiritual centre of man, one of many similar examples from Europe and further afield.²

As a centre of life, the human head and skull naturally became the focus of ritual attention and many ancient and traditional cultures conceived of the head as the seat of vital energy, or the active principle of the whole individual. From these beliefs developed a wide range of rituals involving head-hunting, the offering of human heads as sacrifices, the veneration of ancestors' skulls and the use of heads for their evil-averting and luck-bringing qualities. In Europe, archaeology demonstrates how head-hunting and belief in the head as the seat of the soul were part of a continental heritage from the very earliest times, long before it has been argued the Celtic tribes emerged as a distinctive cultural entity. Anne Ross has said that to the pagan Celtic tribes the human head was as important a religious symbol as the cross in a Christian context.³ Ross has further argued how the Celtic "cult of the head" developed into a central element of their religious ideology, a deep preoccupation which lasted from the beginnings of their culture until the final conquest, leaving an indelible imprint upon their mythology, art and folk tradition. As a result, in Europe and Britain the stylised form of the archaic head has been consistently used to represent a symbol of magical power and a protective device against evil at many levels. Although similar traditions of belief can be identified in many other parts of the world, from Australia to North America, the present study sets out to discuss the use of the head in the folk tradition of one particular geographical region, namely the British Isles.

In order to study the growth of belief and tradition around the human head, the symbol must

first be seen in the context of the different categories of evidence which will be examined in the following chapters, namely archaeological, historical and oral tradition. Although evidence for head ritual is common to all three categories, each have their own specific problems of interpretation and their limitations, such as chronological and geographical diversity, and therefore must be regarded as separate entities when used as a means of understanding the material. Archaeologists are only just beginning to accept the existence of head-related ritual in European prehistory, and due to various problems of evidence and methodology have found it difficult to recognise the religious context of the image and artefacts associated with it from the archaeological record. Folklorists too have been aware of the influences and practices connected with the alleged "head cult" but have never collated the information in a comprehensive and useful format.

The study of manifestations of the head symbol in Britain encompasses a vast area of belief and tradition covering many areas of folklore and mythology, and for the reasons outlined above it is not possible to study it from the one standpoint alone. For the purposes of this research I have adopted a multi-disciplinary survey which incorporates many different viewpoints and disciplines, with the emphasis upon the dynamic and changing nature of belief as illuminated by the evidence of folklore and oral tradition. The present research aims to gather together for the first time the vast amount of extant material from a number of separate fields, ranging from the empirical evidence of archaeology to the more nebulous body of folk tradition and personal narrative. The material ranges from the surviving ritual artefacts from the prehistoric and proto-historic record of Britain to more speculative areas on the fringes of folk and supernatural tradition, including a central case study of the "guardian skull" legends which form an important but neglected part of British folk tradition.

Another central feature of the study will be a detailed examination of the origins, typology and function of the numerous archaic carved stone heads in Britain. Various described as "Celtic heads," "carved heads of the Celtic tradition" or "archaic heads" this large group of puzzling artefacts was first brought to the attention of archaeologists during the 1950s. Since that time interest in these fascinating objects waned when it was realised that the vast majority were not "Celtic" in origin. In recent years the study of stone heads and associated folk tradition has passed to a small group of fieldworkers, including archaeologists and antiquarians, and a growing number of case studies have been produced cataloguing and classifying examples. This

study aims to draw together the latest research on archaic stone heads and associated artefacts, discuss new theories and conclusions about their age, nature and function, and offer suggestions about future avenues of research into this topic.

1.2. Background of the study

The scope of the study is defined by its title, *The Head Cult: tradition and folklore surrounding the symbol of the severed human head in the British Isles*. The title covers a range of subject matter spanning both time and space, and is hinged upon the projected existence of a "head cult" which is currently the subject of controversy among archaeologists, historians and popular writers. This argument has been centred upon a narrow definition of this supposed "head cult," namely that of the existence of a "Celtic head cult," "Celtic" being a catch-all phrase used to define a fluid hegemony of tribes which inhabited Britain at the time of the Roman invasions. At this stage it is necessary to make it clear that there is no existing evidence to suggest that the British tribes ever called themselves "Celts," and Classical commentators who first mention the Keltoi never used this general term to describe the inhabitants of Britain or Ireland.⁴ Therefore from the very beginning we should be aware of the pitfalls of imposing a modern interpretation upon a vast and highly disparate collection of material culture, languages and archaeological remains, an argument which is discussed more fully in Chapter 2. As a result, throughout this study the word "Celtic" will be used with caution in reference to the tribes of ancient Britons and Irish at the time of the Gaulish Celts described by Julius Caesar in the first century BC.⁵

Claims that a head cult was observed by the British tribes have been difficult to prove because of the sparse archaeological remains from the late Iron Age in Britain and the complete lack of contemporary documentary evidence. Conclusions can be drawn only by reference to the writings of the Classical writers, who were describing neighbouring tribes in Gaul, which are known to be notoriously unreliable as objective accounts of native traditions.⁶ The case for the existence of a Celtic head cult in Britain has therefore fallen back upon the scant archaeological record, and the parallels drawn between the ritual practices and beliefs of the British tribes and their counterparts on the European continent. Unfortunately, the lack of comparable stone built temples from the archaeology of the British Iron Age has left the evidence for a head cult dependent upon a few chance finds of skulls in ritual contexts, and a large number of carved

stone heads, none of which can be dated with any accuracy to the pagan Celtic period. This state of affairs has led many archaeologists to conclude that there is little if any evidence to suggest that Iron Age Britons observed a religious cult centred on the human head, the inference being that all "Celtic heads" must therefore be modern and unimportant from the point of view of archaeology. Until new archaeological discoveries change this situation dramatically, the postulated existence of such a cult must remain open to debate.

However, the existence of hundreds, if not thousands, of sculptures which have been dubbed "Celtic heads" by the popular literature has done nothing but add to the confusion surrounding the controversy. A few brave attempts have been made to classify them, but by and large archaeologists have avoided having to deal with them because so few have been found in datable contexts. An alternative method of tackling this problem is to step backwards and approach the material from the viewpoint of folklore. The term *folklore* was coined by W.J. Thoms in 1846, and is defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary as "the traditional beliefs and stories of a people; [and] the study of these."⁷ By examining how deeply the concept of the head as a venerated object survives in the traditional beliefs and in folk memory, it is possible to bypass problems surrounding dating and context which have confounded the archaeologists, and to focus directly upon the nature of the beliefs which centre upon the physical manifestations of those beliefs, namely the skulls and carved heads themselves.

The human head has been chosen as a specific focus because it has been the subject of veneration throughout time and space in human mythology. The geographical focus of the study limits its coverage to Britain and Ireland, with comparison material from continental Europe and further afield referred to where necessary to provide archaeological or ethnological comparisons. The vernacular traditions of the British Isles contain a rich store of material from three broad and complementary areas, namely the archaeology, written sources and oral tradition, which relate to the human head. At the same time individual regions within Britain and Ireland have their own unique historical and cultural background which have influenced the distinctive ways in which those traditions have developed. The effects of invasion and settlement by incoming Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Danish and later settlers have all played a role in the evolution of both the archaeological record and religious traditions of both Britain and Ireland, but left Ireland unique in having no Roman level to separate the archaeology of the pagan era from the early Christian era. As a result, Chapter 3 will examine the archaeological,

documentary and oral traditions individually, while Chapter 5 will discuss the regional variations within all three categories of material in more detail.

1.3. Personal involvement

At this stage it is useful to outline the history of my own interest and involvement in the fields of archaeology, folklore and the paranormal which led me to devote more than ten years of my life to the study of this subject. I was born in Sheffield less than five miles from the border with the Peak District and from an early age became fascinated by the landscape, its natural history, archaeology and the stories and traditions which surrounded it. This stemmed from tales I heard from my maternal grandparents who were both born in the working class terraced houses of the city during the early twentieth century. Their stories of the strange and uncanny, ghosts and hauntings and old characters fired my imagination and formed the background for my involvement in the study of local history which in turn led me to study archaeology initially at undergraduate level.

My interest in folklore and the paranormal flowered during this period, and led to research and investigation into a whole host of fringe phenomena, from "Earth Mysteries" to a variety of related subjects, including ghosts, hauntings and other unexplained phenomena, which have been classified as "Fortean" from the writings of the American writer and iconoclastic philosopher Charles Fort (1874-1932).⁸ Fort was sceptical about glib scientific explanations for the collection of data he dubbed "the Damned," observing how the scientists of his day argued for and against various theories and phenomena according to their own beliefs and prejudices. He was appalled that data not fitting the collective paradigm was ignored, suppressed or explained away. Fort is thought to have been one of the first to speculate that mysterious lights in the sky might be craft from outer space. He coined the word "teleportation" and collected stories about a host of "strange phenomena", from falls of fish from the sky, ghosts and poltergeists to out of place animals, and fringe archaeology. A magazine, *Fortean Times*, was founded in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort and I have contributed regular news and feature articles since the mid-1980s on a range of subjects, including head traditions and folklore.⁹

The collection of personal experience narratives which resulted from this interest helped develop

my recording skills and interest in a career as a writer and journalist. As a result I co-wrote my first book on the paranormal, *Phantoms of the Sky: UFOs, A modern myth?*¹⁰ which took a sceptical socio-psychological viewpoint on the mystery. This was followed by a smaller volume on ghost traditions in the Peak District,¹¹ and three other books, all related to subjects on the boderline between fringe archaeology and folklore have appeared since this time.¹² Material related to "Celtic-style" heads, guardian skulls and associated traditions were included in all three of these later volumes, drawing directly upon my fieldwork at that stage. The undergraduate course in archaeology was completed at a time which coincided with the continued growth of my interest in fringe topics which were touched upon by archaeology, such as the role of religion and ritual in early societies. This soon led me to the subject of "Celtic stone heads," following the publication of a newspaper report by David Keys on the subject of Manchester University's survey of stone heads, which was featured in *The Independent* in 1988.¹³ I had already come across the subject of "Celtic heads" in the fringe literature of Earth Mysteries up to two years before the appearance of this article, and had noted the location of several related carvings during walking trips in North Yorkshire and Derbyshire. This led me to carry out a preliminary literature search which fuelled my interest and led me to choose the "Celtic head cult" as the subject of my third year dissertation for the Department of Archaeology. What fascinated me about the carved heads was the way they had been effectively ignored by the archaeologists because of their ambiguous dating. The only studies which had been attempted at that time were those of museum curators and fieldworkers such as Sidney Jackson, and my preliminary literature surveys seemed to suggest the existence of a vast amount of published material relating to the subject. Moreover, much of the subject matter shaded into the very areas of tradition and belief which fascinated me, and which I felt were unjustly shunned by establishment archaeology.

Heads of the Celtic tradition, as the Manchester University survey preferred to label them, were surrounded by tales and traditions about their use as lucky charms, to avert evil and to exorcise ghosts. I set out to discover how much of this body of belief was of recent origin, and how much of it could be traced back to earlier archaic pagan beliefs which could perhaps be utilised to date these artefacts. As a result the research for my undergraduate dissertation involved the collection of a considerable amount of material relating to the archaeological and documentary evidence for the head cult.¹⁴ I soon realised that I could only skim the surface of the extant

evidence within that dissertation, some of which I had collected during fieldwork and a literature survey. The fieldwork for the current research effectively began in the late 1980s and continued on a part time basis after I completed my undergraduate studies and developed into a career in journalism. The skills I subsequently developed as a full time news reporter, including the use of Teeline shorthand to record personal narrative and testimony, became an invaluable tool in the collection of fieldwork data as my research developed throughout the 1990s.

My fieldwork method followed in the footsteps of Charles Fort, who collected thousands of individual notes on scraps of paper during eight years of study in the British Library, London, during the 1920s.¹⁵ While my collection of notes and references cannot be compared with that of Fort in terms of its size, I followed the same tradition he established, categorising the material in terms of subject, and cross-referencing where necessary to explore avenues I found interesting and illuminating. Ten years of this research and fieldwork resulted in the collection of hundreds of notes, photographs and files of correspondence, newspaper cuttings, offprints and transcribed interviews. The method and constitution of the fieldwork collection will be examined in more detail in Chapter 2. However, before this is scrutinised further, a comprehensive review of the literature relating to the subject of the head symbol in archaeology and literature is necessary.

1.4. Introduction to the review of the literature

A vast amount of material has been produced on all aspects of symbolism concerned with the human head, face and skull in belief and tradition. Anthropological literature is rich with accounts of head-hunting among native peoples in the Americas, Asia, Africa and the Pacific Islands, which in the writing of this study have been consulted for contextual purposes only. For the purposes of this chapter, attention is focussed on writings which have dealt with the symbol from the viewpoint of archaeology, history, folklore and folk art. The purpose is to build a core sample of examples featuring skulls and carved stone heads within a datable context, from which conclusions about function and tradition surrounding them can be drawn. Geographically, material reviewed in the study relates primarily to the British Isles, with a concentration upon evidence from England, Scotland and Wales, and contextual material where relevant from Ireland and the continental Europe. Much written evidence in the European

archaeological context has concentrated upon studies of the claimed Celtic cult of the head. However, folklorists have examined other aspects of belief and tradition concerning the head from Anglo-Saxon, Norse and later medieval contexts which are highly relevant to this study. Other writers have investigated parallel phenomena such as the Foliate Head or Green Man, Sheela-na-gigs and other related Celtic-style sculpture, which will be referred to where relevant to the study of the appearance of the head in British folklore and tradition, for example in Chapter 5.

1.5. A survey of early writings

The earliest written sources concerning the head in European tradition come from the Graeco-Roman authors, the most important of whom is Posidonius.¹⁶ Other writers, such as Diodorus and Strabo drew directly upon his writings in their descriptions of the head-hunting practices of the tribes of Gaul. Although these cannot be used as direct evidence that similar practices were current among British tribes in the late Iron Age, inferences that this was indeed the case can be drawn from archaeological and iconographic evidence reviewed in Chapter 3. Of vital importance are the first written records from the British Isles themselves, which survive in the form of a series of stories and annals known as the Irish Sagas. These were committed to writing by scribes working in monasteries during the early Christian period, but experts agree they draw directly upon an earlier collection of tales and sagas which have direct roots in the heroic Celtic period of the early first millennium AD in Ireland.¹⁷

These sagas and tales are replete with supernatural traditions surrounding the motif of the severed human head, but as Ross notes "no statement is anywhere made that the Irish or Welsh at any time believed their gods to manifest themselves in the form of a head, or a multiple head."¹⁸ However, there are numerous references to characters having multiple or marvellous heads, or heads capable of supernatural feats such as speaking or making predictions after they are severed from the body. Similar motifs are found in some of the earliest written evidence from Britain, in the form of the Welsh cycle of tales known collectively as the *Mabinogion* which date from a period of the middle ages, slightly later than the Irish tales, but once again draw upon archaic traditions rooted in the earlier pagan Celtic period.¹⁹ References to the early traditions and beliefs surrounding the head also appear frequently in the later medieval literature,

including the Arthurian cycle popular from the fourteenth century in England and the Continent, and in an evolved form in the stories surrounding the Holy Grail which are described in detail in Chapter 3.

1.6. Antiquarian references to the head cult

The significant British guardian skull traditions appear in the popular literature as early as the seventeenth century. These were enthusiastically adopted during the Victorian period by antiquarian writers who began to gather the corpus of material together for the first time, and will be discussed in Chapter 7. Little if any attention was paid at this time to the subject of the human head in folklore contexts, and the concept of the "Celtic head" or the existence of archaic stone heads in the archaeological and folkloric record. Before the 1950s the appearance of carved heads on buildings and other structures appears to have been regarded as a local idiosyncrasy which are noted rarely, if at all, in many recorded histories. This absence is explicable because of the lack of any developed tradition within the historical or antiquarian literature of an association between the severed head and the historical "Celts" until the late nineteenth century. It was only when specific examples of material culture were defined as "Celtic" that heads and skulls began to be noted and recorded within this particular context. These carvings appear to have become such an integral part of the landscape that their very presence appears to have been overlooked by centuries of recording by visiting topographers and historians. Isolated references to heads can be found in the nineteenth century archaeological literature, but they are never placed in a context outside of a specific site and are often discussed in terms of Roman, Classical or Romanesque art, rather than a native Celtic one. A good example of this comes from the early twentieth century account by a Derbyshire historian of a collection of curious carved stones from the site of Mouselow Castle, Glossop, which included a number of Celtic-style heads, including one depicting the horned god. In this account, the stones are classified as Anglo-Saxon despite their apparent Romano-British context, and the horned figure is inexplicably referred to as Thoth, an Egyptian deity!²⁰

One of the earliest Victorian writers to identify the image of the head as sacred or revered object of superstition was the Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould.²¹ His 1892 book *Strange Survivals* includes a chapter discussing charms associated with house gables which illustrated the use of

the image of the head in European and British folk art and tradition, both in the form of human and animal skulls and carved stones representing heads. Baring-Gould drew his examples mainly from Europe, yet clearly placed the use of animal and human heads in their correct architectural context and identified their apotropaic function as threshold guardians. In addition, he discussed early evidence that Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian peoples used horse heads and human skulls to adorn the apex of principal gable heads of timber houses, adding that:

*"...their use was not only practical, they were there affixed for religious reasons also, and indeed principally for these."*²²

Baring-Gould saw the heads as sacrificial offerings to the pagan gods, principally Odin or Woden in the Germanic lands, and saw the creature offered to the god taking on divinity, "its skull acting as a protection to the house, because that skull in some sort represented the god." Heads and skulls acting as oracles, as in the case of Bendigeidfran's head in the Second Branch of the Welsh *Mabinogion*, and the head of Mimir in the Norse sagas, are both discussed by Baring-Gould within this context. He also connected the practice of affixing heads of criminals and traitors to gates of cities and castles in the later Middle Ages with the earlier sacrificial offerings to the gods. Crucially, Baring-Gould identifies the evolution of the use of the head in folk architecture thus:

*"...skulls and decaying heads came to be so thoroughly regarded as a part, an integral ornament of a gate or gable, that when architects built renaissance houses and gateways, they set up stone balls on them in substitute for the heads which were no more available."*²³

During the late nineteenth century historians and etymologists drew up some of the first definitive collections of Old English place names. During the course of this research an intriguing collection of names associated with heads, both animal and human, with suggestive pagan cult contexts were unearthed. One of the first to discuss this connection was linguist Henry Bradley who, in a lecture on Old English place names in 1907, drew attention to those which were a compound of both an animal name and the word *head* (OE "heafod") as commemorating the former sites of pagan rites.²⁴ Bradley pointed to names like Gateshead (Bede's *Ad Caprae Caput*), Swineshead and Hartshead as classic examples, and mentioned

others concealed by a change of the word form, like Farcet in the Fens which is Fearresheafod (bull's head) in an earlier form. A number of these names coincided with the location of Anglo-Saxon hundreds, or places of assembly, an association which led Bradley to suggest they originated in:

*"...a custom of setting up the head of an animal, or a representation of it, on a pole, to mark the place of open air meetings."*²⁵

Bradley's speculative remarks were later supported by Professor Bruce Dickins who in an article published in 1933 suggested that some of these places were "once the site of bloody sacrifice in which the head, animal or human, was offered to a heathen deity."²⁶ Dickins listed twenty five examples containing the "heafod" element, and at least nine additional ones have been found in county place name surveys since that time. Some of these may refer to a resemblance between natural or topographical features which had a *simulacrum* image of a head, and it is quite possible the names may translate older Celtic ones.²⁷ In the Celtic regions of Britain there are in fact numerous examples of place names with a similar formation, in this case a compound of *penn* or *cenn* and that of an animal. One study lists fourteen in Wales, three in Cornwall, two in Brittany and fourteen in Ireland.²⁸ In only one case is there supporting written evidence, in this case referring to a Welsh place name, Penychen, one of the five ancient cantrefs of Morgannwg. The explanation for this name given in Wermonoc's ninth century *Life of St Paul de Leon* reads:

*"Penn-Ohen, which means the head of the ox, because the inhabitants of that place followed the example of country people and in antiquity used to worship the head of an ox as god."*²⁹

For the English names Dickins supported his argument with reference to Roman and early medieval accounts of Anglo-Saxon and Norse rituals which seem to involve human and animal sacrifice followed by the dedication of a sacred head. For example, in the sixth century AD Pope Gregory the Great wrote of the pagan Lombards killing a goat and offering its head to "the Devil" (pagan god) "running around in a circle and dedicating it with evil songs,"³⁰ while four centuries later two independent writers described Swedes making offerings of heads to heathen gods.³¹ However, Professor A.H. Smith, in his *English Place-name Elements*

dismissed the theory by pointing out that in the majority of cases "heafod" simply means "hill" or "headland," perhaps frequented by a certain type of animal.³² Also on the negative side are corresponding names in Germany which are accepted as having non-religious origins. Despite these caveats, the consensus of opinion today appears to accept that there is some evidence for a pagan interpretation of a residue of the more obscure "heafod" names. In particular, there are two names identified by the Anglo-Saxon historian Sir Frank Stenton as possibly "preserving a memory of human sacrifice."³³ These are the Bedfordshire hundred name Manshead, and the Mannesheved which occurs as a field name in the thirteenth century at Hawton in Nottinghamshire.³⁴ There are no direct Celtic equivalents, other than those composed of *penn* /*cenn* and a personal name as in Penn Arthur, Pen Rhys and Pen Pych in Wales.

Most authorities now accept the Old English Manshead names as more likely candidates for head ritual, and one suggestion is that they mark the spots where criminals' heads were exposed on posts, a practice possibly referred to in the Cumbrian place name Thiefside which means "thief's head."³⁵ It is possible that if names of this type could be identified in north Britain, they may provide pointers to the former existence of cult heads acting as guardians of tribal boundaries. Sidney Jackson of the Bradford Museums Service noted a number of place names which mention "stone head" rather than "manshead" in the card index of his survey covering Yorkshire. For instance, he listed four places with that prefix in the small Yorkshire Dales village of Cowling alone, referring to a lane, brow and bridge.³⁶ Another "heafod" name associated with a rock outcrop was recorded in a place names survey near the Peak District parish of Taxal. The name "headland at the stones" noted in fourteenth century, has evolved into "Stone Heads" recorded in 1831, as a district on the outskirts of the present village on the border between Derbyshire and Cheshire.³⁷ A similar example has been identified during the present research near Dinnington, South Yorkshire, but site investigation has failed to find evidence of heads in either carved or simulacra form.³⁸

A 1961 analysis of pagan Anglo-Saxon place names by Margaret Gelling expresses scepticism about the topographical simulacra explanation for "heafod," but concludes:

*"The possibility of a pagan origin for some of these names is not, of course, invalidated by the difficulty of finding a tamer explanation for the rest."*³⁹

In addition, Gelling suggests the presence of carved animal and human heads as protective

devices upon house gables as one possible contender for the origin of the more problematical "heafod" names. A more fruitful line of inquiry in my opinion is that suggested by Alan Smith in his 1962 article in *Folklore*.⁴⁰ This was the first general survey of the role played by the head specifically in British folklore and tradition, utilising evidence from folk customs, traditions, place names and archaeology primarily in an Anglo-Saxon and Norse context. Smith assembled examples of local customs in which an animal's head figured in a ritual contest, game or other ceremony, to demonstrate how a cult of animal (and human) heads was a feature of both Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and other native traditions. It was from ceremonies like these, identified with a particular village, field or hundred that Smith suggests "head" place names or traditions may have developed. He writes that ritual contests like the Cow Head Feast at Westhoughton (Lancashire), Kidlington's Lady of the Lamb (Oxfordshire) and others like the ritual football games and Haxey Hood have at their core "the belief in some luck to be derived from gaining possession of the head of a slaughtered beast."⁴¹ He saw these ceremonies as providing some clues to the kind of ritual which may have led to the naming of places like Gateshead and Farcet, identified earlier this century by Bradley and Dickins. Traditions surrounding the parallel use of animal masks, heads and skulls in local customs and beliefs in Britain and throughout continental Europe have been collected and scrutinised by E.C. Cawte in his volume *Ritual Animal Disguise*.⁴² In some instances, animal skulls have been used for broadly similar protective and luck-bringing purposes, both as part of vernacular architecture and as part of a general European tradition, and a number of examples are cited by Baring-Gould and more recently Ralph Merrifield.⁴³ Folklore suggests that horse skulls were used to cover the projecting beams of gable ends both as protection against the elements and for magical purposes too. In another context, there is archaeological evidence for the manipulation and special attention focussed upon animal skulls, and more highly developed rituals and traditions within folk customs across Europe and elsewhere. However, as animal heads by definition fall outside the scope of this survey which concentrates on the symbol of the human head, this material will not be discussed further in this context.

Further research is clearly required within the individual county place name surveys before any clear connections can be made between "head" place names and head related traditions and customs. A survey of this kind also falls outside the scope of the present study, but subsequent chapters will touch on the manifestation of head symbolism in local traditions in a variety of

contexts which are relevant to the proposed connections outlined above.

1.7. Heads in Romanesque architecture

Before the 1950s few regional studies identifying or examining the role and significance of heads within vernacular and ecclesiastical architecture had appeared in the archaeological and historical literature. Lady Raglan's seminal paper in *Folklore* in 1939 identified the foliate head as specific phenomenon in early medieval churches and coined the phrase "the Green Man" to describe them.⁴⁴ Her speculative remarks were given weight by C.J.P. Cave's thorough study of carvings and iconography in medieval roof bosses.⁴⁵ During the course of his survey Cave visited hundreds of English parish churches and cathedrals and recorded not only large numbers of foliate heads but also related sculpture such as the Sheela-na-gigs which had never been systematically noted and photographed before. His study, published in 1948, defined not only the attributes of the foliate head but in the same chapter grouped together other heads found within an ecclesiastical context. This included both king and queen heads, grotesques, beasts, and unclassified carvings with three or more human faces, and Cave concluded:

*"The subject of heads is an immense one; we find single heads and groups of heads everywhere; except foliage, they form the most numerous type of bosses."*⁴⁶

Another important and little known paper appeared in a Welsh antiquarian journal in 1944 in the form of a survey entitled "Carved corbels, brackets and label stops in Anglesey Churches."⁴⁷ The author, Canon Hulbert-Powell, focussed on the appearance of carved heads and faces in the architecture of a group of medieval churches on the island which has retained a long and archaic Celtic tradition stretching back to the Iron Age. His study is unique for that time because it identified carved stone heads as being not only common in pre-Reformation architecture, but also as being possible survivals of earlier traditions. Hulbert-Powell's examples show a clear evolution in the form in which heads could be depicted, beginning with the archaic early style and developing later into the form of Gothic-style gargoyles, portrait and "king" and "queen" heads in church architecture. It also demonstrated the continued "archaism" displayed by these heads, which is a recurring theme in the style of carving employed by the artisans who created them.

These early surveys were supplemented by a study of heads decorating the arches of parish churches in the Romanesque period from the twelfth to the fourteenth century by art historians Francoise Henry and George Zarnecki in a paper published in 1957.⁴⁸ They concentrated specifically on arches containing human and animal heads, using Spain, Italy, France and the British Isles as their geographical focus. They found England and France had the greatest number of examples, with England having 150 out of a total of 230, although they admit the survey was not exhaustive as Romanesque churches were “too numerous.” They explained the concentration identified in northwest Europe as having a direct connection with human heads found in Celtic and Roman art, and ask:

“Is it too far fetched to suggest that if the human-head motif became so popular in France and in Ireland it may be because of its analogy with Celtic decoration, just as the immediate transformation into monster heads in England may be due to the extensive use which the Saxon artists had made of such ornament?”⁴⁹

Since Henry and Zarnecki’s study appeared, much work has been undertaken on all aspects of heads in church architecture, including studies of the Green Man by Kathleen Basford, Roy Judge and William Andersen,⁵⁰ and of the Sheela-na-gigs and a range of related sexual explicit medieval carvings by Jorgen Anderson, Anthony Weir and James Jerman.⁵¹ A thorough examination of these motifs falls outside the scope of this study other than those areas where they overlap with the symbolism of the severed head, for example in the context of church architecture discussed in Chapter 5. One useful general survey of the overlapping motifs displayed by the foliate heads, Sheela-na-gigs and other head-related church sculpture and their possible parallels in the pagan Celtic tradition was published by Anne Ross in 1975, with illustrations by Ronald Sheridan.⁵²

1.8. “Celtic Heads” and the Celtic cult of the head

Art historians were the first of the twentieth century scholars to begin to identify and classify the many different kinds of carved stone heads associated with Celtic and Romano-British contexts. Some of the earliest surveys to include heads in their collections were those of Paul Jacobsthal in *Early Celtic Art*, published in 1944⁵³ and Toynbee in her volume *Art in Roman Britain* first

published in 1962.⁵⁴ Another important early work directly focussed upon the importance of the head in Celtic Gaul appeared in 1954, in the form of a survey by the archaeologist P.Lambrechts.⁵⁵ *L'Exaltation de la Tête dans Pensée et dans l'art des Celtes* drew mainly on evidence from France, Spain and the Rhineland. A comprehensive examination of the important Celtic iconographic evidence in the English language appeared when Dr Anne Ross first published the initial results of her fieldwork in Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquities of Scotland* in 1957.⁵⁶ The complete results of her fieldwork and iconographic studies appeared ten years later in her magnum opus, *Pagan Celtic Britain*.⁵⁷ This was the first major work to pay detailed attention to the distribution and function of heads fashioned in stone, pot, wood and other materials in the British Isles, and crucially set these in a context which included a range of mythological traditions and documentary evidence. Ross made it plain that the abundance of these artefacts, some of which appeared to predate the Roman occupation of Britain, indicated the existence of a "cult of the head" among the native Celtic tribes which she suggested had survived in a vestigial form into the later medieval period. In Britain, few carvings could be ascribed with certainty to the Celtic Iron Age, but Ross related what information there was to archaeological evidence. This includes the human skulls recovered from Iron Age hillforts such as Bredon Hill and Stanwick in Britain, and cult sites from continental Europe, for example Entremont and Roquepertuse in Provence.⁵⁸ This argument was supported by a collection of references from the insular Celtic literature, transcribed from oral traditions in Ireland and Wales during the later Dark Ages and the early medieval period.

Ross quickly became the most influential British writer in the field of Celtic studies, and her volume brought the subject of the Celtic head cult to the attention of a wider audience for the first time and provided a sourcebook of examples which set the template for the popular conception of what came to constitute the definition "Celtic Head." Ross and other Celtic historians and archaeologists drew many of their examples from the "Celtic homeland" areas of central Europe and Gaul, particular attention being paid to the unique temple sanctuaries of southern Provence where direct and datable archaeological evidence for a head cult, in the form of votive human skulls and carved stone heads, has been found. Distinctive Celtic sculpture from elsewhere in Europe, such as the Pfalzfeld pillar from Germany and the stone head from Msecke Zehrovice in Czechoslovakia, dated to the fourth century BC and earlier, were used by

Ross initially as yardsticks to date a corpus of unprovenanced and ambiguous carvings from Britain and Ireland.⁵⁹ Many subsequent writers directly followed this traditional nomenclature or classification system, the most influential of whom was fieldworker Sidney Jackson.

However, archaeological revision in more recent years has thrown serious doubts upon the authenticity of many of the examples described by Ross, as the practice of using stylistic evidence to date carvings began to be perceived as seriously flawed. For example, sculpture such as the male head from the Bon Marche site in Gloucester described by Toynbee and later Ross as "one of the most impressive of the Romano-British heads from the artistic viewpoint"⁶⁰ has since been reconsidered and art historians now argue the carving is of Romanesque origin, possibly from an ecclesiastical context of the fourteenth century AD.⁶¹ Many dozens of other heads and associated stone sculpture, previously classified as "Celtic," not least the examples catalogued by Sidney Jackson in West Yorkshire, are now accepted as being of medieval and later origin. Many appear to have been carved within living memory, often with features which would have led them to be classified as "Celtic" as recently as twenty years ago.

Nevertheless, the appearance of Ross's volume inspired the collection of similar material in other areas of the British Isles and encouraged researchers and fieldworkers to gather their own material. Important amongst these were K.M. Dickie in Scotland, Etienne Rynne in Ireland and most outstanding of all, Sidney Jackson in Yorkshire. Ross's pioneering work had caught the attention of Jackson at an early date, when he was Keeper of Antiquities at the Cartwright Hall Museum in Bradford, West Yorkshire. From 1965 the museum had acquired a number of archaic-looking stone heads which had been brought in from places in the Aire Valley region, and which on stylistic grounds alone Jackson believed could be dated to the Celtic Iron Age. He used Ross's corpus as a dating tool, although none of his examples came from an undisputed archaeological context. In 1973 Jackson wrote of his survey:

*"What brought about the start of my stone head survey was the taking of several, at intervals of some months, to the Museum. Press publicity about these finds produced a flow of information about other examples which steadily increased until, after some heads were shown on television, the flow became a flood."*⁶²

During the course of the ten year survey, more than seven hundred heads and related sculpture were recorded from all parts of the north of England and also from southern England, Wales,

Ireland and the European continent. However, the majority of examples came from the Aire and Calder valleys of West Yorkshire. This concentration may have been merely coincidental, or an example of sample bias resulting from Jackson's highly-publicised presence and fieldwork in that area, and he was careful to point out that more localised publicity in areas like Derbyshire and Cheshire could possibly bring forward a flood of similar examples.⁶³ Parallel studies by Billingsley and Petch have found the geographical concentration identified by Jackson to hold true, with few comparable carvings identified in the south and east of the country, and these are discussed fully in Chapter 5.

A series of booklets illustrating the heads recorded by Jackson were planned, but only one appeared before Jackson's sudden death in 1974 brought an end to the survey.⁶⁴ This illustrated pamphlet included a foreword by Anne Ross and a gazetteer of 62 stone heads displaying a wide range of style, material, function and architectural context. Although incomplete and difficult to utilise, Jackson's card index file, preserved in the Yorkshire Archaeological Society archives in Leeds, remains a unique research resource. Subsequently, the index has been used as the starting point for a number of recent local surveys, including those of Petch in northwest England, Billingsley in the Calder Valley, and the case study of head sculpture in the Peak District and Cheshire which forms part of the current research discussed in Chapter 5. Jackson's notes make it clear that towards the end of his survey he had come to accept that many of the carvings being reported to him were clearly not "Celtic" in date even if they were so in style, and he makes that distinction clear in the title of his booklet *Celtic and Other Stone heads*. After Jackson's death the study of carved heads sank into obscurity, a fact bemoaned by the late Guy Ragland Phillips, a Yorkshire journalist who wrote a number of newspaper and magazine articles describing Jackson's discoveries. Phillips' own limited survey of heads and traditions were summarised in his "mysteriography" published in 1976.⁶⁵

By the end of the 1970s the theory of a cult of heads in antiquity had begun to suffer a backlash within the writings of archaeologists and historians. Since the publication of Ross's study in 1967 doubt had been cast upon the Romano-Celtic origin of many of the heads claimed as such. In addition, her belief, which became defined in later writings⁶⁶ that the head itself was worshipped, has been challenged by a new wave of archaeological revisionists, particularly Dr Ronald Hutton. Indeed, so complete was the transition in attitudes to this data that Hutton was able to write confidently in 1991:

“...but it can now be said that there is no firm evidence of a ‘cult of the human head’ in the Iron Age British Isles, as was once asserted, as a working concept, the idea of such a cult should now perhaps be set aside.”⁶⁷

Hutton based his statement on the assertion that “no stone heads survive which can firmly be dated to the [Celtic Iron Age] period,” and claimed that the frequent appearance of the head on metalwork and other artifacts suggested nothing more than that it was a favourite decorative motif, indeed one of several recorded. On the one hand stood the Celticists in the form of Anne Ross and Barry Cunliffe, and on the other the revisionist school of archaeology best expressed by the writings of Ronald Hutton in the 1990s. For the first time since the 1960s the Celtic origin of the carvings documented by Ross, Jackson and others were being questioned, along with their function as sacred or ritual objects forming part of a native pagan cult or belief system. This interpretative change among Iron Age archaeologists to an attitude of defensive caution is best expressed in the recent writings of Hutton and Gerald Wait. Wait, in his study of ritual and religion in Iron Age Britain, acknowledges the probable existence of a head cult “with a potential for considerable antiquity” but rejects the idea of a sacred meaning attached to the head itself. Drawing upon archaeological evidence from the late European Iron Age, he writes:

“...north of the Massif central... the evidence for such a head cult is at best very sparse. Nowhere are there convincing associations of skulls and sculptured heads with religious sites. There are, of course, a few sculptures of human heads, but an occasional stone head is too scant evidence on which to build a cult.”⁶⁸

The revisionist stance of archaeologists has been balanced by numerous regional and specialist studies of aspects of the head symbol. Probably the most important of these to emerge in the last twenty years are the writings of folklorists and art historians such as Hilda Ellis-Davidson, whose material sets the role of the head in a religious context as a gateway to the Otherworld, not just in Celtic mythology and iconography, but also among the traditions of other peoples, such as the Germanic and Scandinavian tribes of northern Europe.⁶⁹ Vincent and Ruth Megaw, in a series of comprehensive surveys of early Celtic art in wood, stone and metal, directly contradict the revisionist stance on heads as cult symbols. They conclude that not only did the severed human head play a major symbolic role, but it was also a very common feature of an art tradition which was “basically religious.”⁷⁰ In a recent article Vincent Megaw underlines the

importance of the head in Celtic art “and the relative paucity of renderings of the complete human form.”⁷¹ This, he suggests, is possibly due to the existence of a taboo in Celtic society, as well as demonstrating the Celtic capacity for rendering visual ideas by representing only part of the whole.

The most prolific writer on Celtic religion during the 1980s, Dr Miranda Green of the University of Wales, has cast doubt upon the idea of a specific “cult of the head” among the tribes of the British Isles. She has chosen to discuss the meaning of the head in terms of religious symbolism in a series of works including *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*. In *The Gods of the Celts* she describes the importance of head ritual to the Celts as being “unequivocal” and concludes that cult importance of heads manifests itself throughout all aspects of Celtic religion, to the extent that in art it was often represented as oversized or exaggerated in its dimensions. Green concluded:

“Why the human head was so important can never be entirely understood, but it was the means of identifying an individual, and was recognised as the power centre for human action... I refute any suggestion that the head itself was worshipped, but it was clearly venerated as the most significant element in a human or divine image, representing the whole.”⁷²

This more balanced viewpoint is reflected in the conclusions of Frances Riddell, who attempted to place the head in the much broader terms of Romano-Celtic ritual and behaviour in her dissertation for the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.⁷³ Taking the Brigantian head material gathered by Jackson and Ross as a database, she argued that the use of the word “cult” to describe the motives of the artisans who created these objects is inappropriate. Although she claims there was certainly no specific “cult of the severed head” she concludes that the use of heads in many different contexts, as stone heads, tricephaloi, janiform heads, face pots, wooden carvings, masks and antefixa, was nevertheless an important feature of the general “Romano-British phenomenon.”⁷⁴ She adds:

“Undoubtedly some heads did have some meaning and significance to those who made them and in some cases went to considerable lengths to manipulate and assemble objects such as stone heads, face pots, skulls and so on.”⁷⁵

In addition, the former deputy director of the British Museum, Ralph Merrifield, has contributed

a valuable review of votive practices throughout the Romano-British and early historical periods in Britain in his 1987 study *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*. Merrifield views ritual objects, carvings and skulls as part of an intermittent continuum of superstition or folk practice and tradition which transcended both ethnic and religious change from prehistory to the present day. Although he makes no specific study of stone heads of the Celtic tradition, he discusses a range of skulls discovered in ritual contexts which suggest a continuity of tradition from the protohistoric to the early medieval period.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, the large corpus of Iron Age and Romano-British carvings and iconographic material used by Ross and others has been published since 1977 in a more accessible format in a series of fascicules, *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani*, published by the Oxford University Press. The volumes by Phillips and Coulson on Hadrian's Wall, Brewer on South Wales and Cunliffe and Fulford on Wessex⁷⁷ are particularly helpful, but clearly illustrate the problems inherent in drawing conclusions based upon a collection of material which is datable often by style alone. Hutton and Wait have argued that these conclusions cast doubt upon the early assertions by Ross about the existence of a specific Celtic cult which revolved around the worship of the head itself. However, in her defence, Ross clearly states that there are very few heads in stone which can be confidently dated to the pre-Roman period, though many examples found in the Hadrian's Wall region are unquestionably of native Celtic origin from the time of the Roman occupation. Ross is careful to point out that:

*"...due to the conservative nature of the tradition, and the lack of artistic skill [many heads] would apparently ante-date the Roman occupation."*⁷⁸

This element of caution is tempered by Green who notes the dangers of becoming too speculative and going beyond the limits of the material, and I have adopted a broadly similar stance in my discussion of the pitfalls inherent in the present study, discussed in Chapter 2.

1.9. Carved heads as "folk art"

While arguments surrounding dating, style and interpretation continue among historians and prehistorians, a useful parallel approach to the study of the carvings formerly classified as "Celtic heads" has developed independently, most notably in the writings of fieldworkers,

including Peter Brears, John Billingsley and others. This has led to the re-assessment of many hitherto puzzling stone heads within the context of folk art, and to the study of the function and purpose which motivated the masons and native artists who created them, rather than focussing upon dating problems alone. In the most recent in-depth study of the problem Billingsley has argued convincingly for the term "Celtic head" to be dropped and the term "archaic head" substituted in view of the above.⁷⁹ Another fieldworker, Martin Petch, has suggested the use of the term "carved heads of the Celtic tradition" in view of the fact that the majority of the examples collected in his sample from northwest England are clearly not of Romano-Celtic date.⁸⁰

Among the growing number of local studies now extant are two valuable surveys of folk art in Ireland. In 1972 Etienne Rynne published the results of his survey of stone pagan Celtic sculpture from Ireland, which included a number of heads hitherto unrecorded, demonstrating connections with examples recorded elsewhere in the "Irish Sea Province" linking Ireland with North Britain and the Continent.⁸¹ A parallel study was published by Dr Helen Hickey who focussed on the archaic traditions which have persisted in the Lough Erne basin of Northern Ireland. She stressed the importance of the objects as folk art as well as archaeology. Although the region in which she worked maintained its predominantly "Celtic" population, the archaic style of the carvings featured in her book bear striking similarities with those recorded by Jackson in the north of England, emphasising the curious parallel nature of both iconographic and oral tradition. Hickey's study underlines the fundamental difficulties experienced by archaeologists and historians who attempt to date stone sculptures. Continuity of folk tradition in carving from the Iron Age to the present is best demonstrated by the art found in the Lough Erne region, where on stylistic grounds it can be difficult to distinguish a nineteenth or even twentieth century piece from one made in prehistoric times. In this region, as in Yorkshire, heads similar to prehistoric examples are even now being made in concrete!

In northern England, Peter Brears of Leeds Museum reaffirmed the value of treating heads as examples of folk art which he labelled "The Old Man's Face" after John Castillo, an eighteenth century mason from the North York Moors, in his study published in 1979. Avoiding any attempt to date the heads, Brears concentrated on their use within insular architecture and concluded it was "far more than mere coincidence" that the variety of carvers working in the area during the past three hundred years should have placed their stone heads "almost solely in

situations which have such a long and well-established ritual significance.’⁸² This important study argues that it was quite possible, given the conservative nature of culture and society in the upland Pennine valleys of Brigantia, that folk practices and habits established as long as four thousand years ago survived in a vestigial form through to recent times. Brears concludes that empirical evidence of the kind which would satisfy archaeologists is unlikely to be found because of its nebulous nature, and he concluded:

*“...it is significant that the first permanent stone structures feature these heads in comparatively large numbers especially in areas such as West Yorkshire and the northern borders of England where the survival of British culture was particularly strong, and where a number of British place names are still in use today.”*⁸³

Similar collections of local material have appeared since 1951, when Mary Nattrass published a series of articles on gable heads on buildings in the North York Moors region.⁸⁴ These include a local sample from the Ribble Valley and Forest of Bowland region of northeast Lancashire, published by historian Alice Smith.⁸⁵ This local overview has been developed more recently in the work of John Billingsley in Calderdale, a Pennine valley in West Yorkshire, where heads are found within vernacular architecture with a frequently unknown in comparable contexts elsewhere. This research began in the late 1970s as a survey of archaic stone heads in the valley initiated by the earlier work of Jackson and Phillips. Billingsley’s research resulted in the completion of a manuscript which included a catalogue of more than one hundred examples photographed by John Greenwood. This study remained unpublished when Billingsley left England to work in Japan. On his return to England in 1990, Billingsley updated his material and added a number of new examples to his catalogue, culminating in the completion of a study of archaic head carvings in Calderdale and elsewhere, now held in the archives of the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield.⁸⁶ A popular summary of Billingsley’s research and conclusions was published in book form early in 1998 under the title *Stony Gaze: Investigating Celtic and Other Stone Heads*.⁸⁷ This book is unique in being the first complete work within the folklore literature to concentrate solely upon the study of the head symbol in the form of carved stones and skulls, and is a highly useful appraisal of the evidence from archaeology and folklore in Britain and Europe.

Billingsley’s initial study in West Yorkshire coincided with a museum-based fieldwork survey

on the opposite side of the Pennines. During the 1980s archaeological fieldworker Martin Petch had begun work to draw up a catalogue of stone heads and related sculpture in the northwest of England, which was to be based at Manchester Museum, in the University of Manchester. This project originated in the late 1960s when Shelagh Lewis, an archaeologist and fieldworker, conducted a limited survey of stone heads and associated traditions in the Peak District and neighbouring areas of Lancashire and Cheshire which fell within the museum's hinterland. A number of Celtic-style stone heads and related sculpture were acquired by the Museum during the 1960s and 1970s and this had aroused the interest of the keeper of antiquities, Dr John Prag. Exhibitions and publicity surrounding new finds, enhanced by the discovery in the 1980s of the prehistoric bog bodies at Lindow Moss in Cheshire, resulted in an exhibition of Celtic sculpture which led Petch to discover more carvings, following the example of the pioneering work by Jackson in Yorkshire.⁸⁸ The Manchester survey began life as a card index catalogue for northwest England to complement Jackson's work, and has resulted in two exhibitions of stone heads which accompanied the return of the Iron Age Lindow Man bog body to the Museum in 1987 and 1993 respectively. Although the results have yet to be published, Petch's survey of five hundred square miles of Greater Manchester, Cheshire, Derbyshire and Lancashire has recorded around one thousand previously undocumented examples, "doubling the number of Celtic sculptures known to exist in the northwest of England."⁸⁹

Dovetailing with the conclusions of regional surveys such as my own described in Chapter 5 of the current research, the sample of heads recorded by Petch has resulted in the tentative conclusion that a third of the heads may indeed date "from the Iron Age, Romano-British or Dark Age times," while the bulk of the remaining sculptures are probably of fairly recent origin. On this basis, Petch feels that a more accurate way of describing heads previously classified as "Celtic" would be to describe them as "stone heads of the Celtic tradition, as many of these heads are clearly not of the Celtic Iron Age."⁹⁰ Summarising the current state of the survey in 1996, Petch writes:

*"The survey has been running for about twenty years all told and the area covered is primarily the northwest but information from elsewhere has been collated for comparative purposes. Numbers of examples recorded must be around one thousand but these vary in type, age, etc and many are modern, even gargoyles. Dating is of course problematical, as there is no means of dating except by style which is inaccurate and therefore a database for comparative study is the most useful end result."*⁹¹

Apart from the present research, the most recent original fieldwork to date has been that begun by Chris Copson, an archaeologist based in southwest England. He began gathering material for a survey of carvings recorded in Somerset, Dorset and surrounding counties with the help of colleague Rodney Legg, who holds a private collection of stone heads acquired from sources including auctions, antique shops and private sale. Many of his forty examples originate in north Britain, and the majority are believed to be of medieval or later origin. Following the example of Jackson, Petch and others, Copson and Legg appealed for information about new examples in the local and national Press, and were deluged with calls about previously unrecorded examples.⁹² Following an exhibition at Dorset County Museum, Copson is currently working on a survey of heads in southwest England. This collection includes a concentration of carvings from Dorset and Somerset, along with examples from an Iron Age hillfort, the floor of a Roman villa and the ruins of a farm building, described in Chapter 5. This summary brings the survey of literature and fieldwork on the subject of the human head in British folk tradition up to the present date. The following chapter will concentrate on the development of the present research and how material was collected during the course of the writer's own fieldwork in Britain.

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- ¹⁶ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 98-99.
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- ²³ *Ibid.*, p.53.
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- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.
- ²⁶ Dickins, 'English Names and Old English Heathenism', 148-53.
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- ³¹ A.W. Smith, 'The Luck in the Head: A Problem in English Folklore', *Folklore*, 73 (1962), 14.
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- ³⁷ Kenneth Cameron (ed.) *The Place-names of Cheshire*, Part 1 (London: English Place-names Society, 1970), p.177.
- ³⁸ Letter in Sidney Jackson correspondence file, dated May 1970, from F.L. Preston, Research Secretary, Hunter Archaeological Society, Rotherham, South Yorkshire. The letter refers to an area to the southeast of Dinnington, near the source of a small brook, "Stone Heads Plantation", marked on the 1841 one inch Ordnance Survey map and the current six inch map.
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- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 149-55.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 122.
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Chapter 2

Methodology



“Superstitious ritual can be studied objectively like any other human behaviour, and archaeology can make a major contribution towards its investigation, in the historic periods down to the present day no less than in prehistory.”

Ralph Merrifield.¹

2.1. Introduction

The previous chapter introduced the background to my involvement in this research, and reviewed the published literature which has dealt with the subject of the human head in British archaeology and folklore. This chapter is divided into two major sections, the first dealing with fieldwork itself and the second with the method used in the analysis of the fieldwork material. The first section summarises the fieldwork and the way source material was collected for the current research. It begins with a discussion of the different categories of source material which were gathered, including the primary material collected during fieldwork and secondary published sources used to supplement it, examining the strengths and weaknesses of the card index surveys which formed the starting point of the research. The second section looks at the analytical approach employed in my interpretation of the collected material, and the reasons why some areas that were singled out for in depth study and other avenues were not pursued. As part of this analysis, two important historical interpretations of this material, the "Celtic cult of the head" and the idea of continuity from paganism to Christianity, are singled out for discussion. The discussion which follows concentrates upon the collection of the primary and secondary material which form the basis of the fieldwork for the present study between 1990 and 1998, when the research was completed. Fieldwork began in 1986 with a few brief notebook entries recording carved stone heads which had been identified, incorporated into fieldwalls and old farm buildings in the Derbyshire Peak District and elsewhere. In addition a small file had been opened, containing a collection of cuttings from national newspapers referring to "Celtic" stone heads, a leaflet concerning the subject produced by Manchester Museum and various offprints from archaeological journals. I had also read Anne Ross's seminal study which contained a highly influential chapter on the "head cult," along with a panel of photographs depicting stone heads and related sculpture from a variety of contexts.² Ross had also contributed a foreword to Sidney Jackson's pamphlet *Celtic and Other Stone Heads* which was available from the Bradford Museums Service.³ From this basis a collection of primary and secondary sources was slowly assembled, which formed the basis of this research. My undergraduate dissertation had utilised a basic collection of secondary source material primarily relating to West Yorkshire heads culled from the archaeological literature, including articles from the journal *Antiquity* and the *Archaeology Group Bulletin*, a newsletter published by the Bradford City Museums and Art

Galleries, which was edited by Sidney Jackson, and published bi-monthly between 1956 and 1967 in thirteen volumes.⁴ At this early stage I decided it would be unproductive to produce another "catalogue" or index of stone heads as this method had already been utilised by the Bradford and Manchester surveys. Both of these surveys were based upon the established antiquarian and archaeological method of listing artefacts which are categorised by certain criteria, in this case carvings of human heads or faces primarily in stone but also in other media. This kind of listing is useful as a starting point and an empirical base which can provide information on geographical distribution, style, and provenance, a method which has been usefully employed in other contexts such as the cataloguing of Romano-British sculpture in the series of fascicules published under the title *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani*.⁵

However, surveys of this kind can only provide a starting point for the survey planned in the Peak District. Both the Bradford and Manchester surveys were primarily fieldwork-driven and the card index files and lists they have produced lack any accompanying in-depth research or examination of the context within which these sculptures were produced. Jackson died in 1973 before he was able to use his data as the basis for any publication which could adequately make sense of the corpus of material he had collected in West Yorkshire in an analytical way. Since that time his data has been scarcely utilised and does not offer much opportunity for development and interpretation, due to the form in which the information it contains has been preserved. The Manchester Museum survey, which was initiated in the late 1960s by Shelagh Lewis, and has been continued during the 1980s by Martin Petch, is an on-going project which so far has produced little in the way of analysis or statistical breakdown of the material, other than that contained in a text which accompanied an exhibition catalogue in 1989.⁶ Until a publication of this kind appears, the survey will remain of limited use for purposes such as the present study.

Both the Jackson and Manchester Museum surveys are focussed upon a method of listing carvings which I found to be of limited use in the pursuit of a folklore context for the sculptures. While my own approach to the subject also included the production of a list of carvings from the Peak District, it was always the intention to take this further by breaking the material down into categories based upon age and function which were not attempted by Jackson until a later stage in his survey. At an early stage in the current fieldwork it became obvious that many of the carved stone heads, which are eminently portable, had been moved,

lost and stolen since Jackson's survey which ended in 1974. From my initial fieldwork in the Peak and West Yorkshire, it was apparent that between a third and half of the total examples not held in museum collections which were listed by Jackson in the early 1970s were no longer in situ twenty years later.

Therefore, rather than concentrate upon Jackson's database alone, it was decided to produce an original survey which would be focussed primarily upon the Peak District but would include a comparative sample of stone heads from other regions including Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire. I began work with a colleague, Andy Roberts, who was based in West Yorkshire, to draw up a representative sample of the best preserved heads, with the primary aim of recording extant folklore associated with them. This was a three-pronged project which involved:

1. Photographing and recording in notebooks the locations of stone heads of the Celtic tradition in situ, primarily in the north of England, with a view to using these as a basis to interpret other examples from elsewhere in the British Isles.
2. Producing a database of all published material on the subject of stone heads, head cult and head folklore. This consisted of articles both in archaeological, historical, folklore and fringe books and publications, magazine offprints, booklets and pamphlets, and newspaper articles.
3. Recording the numerous legends, stories and traditions which made up the surviving body of beliefs which surround stone carved heads, skulls and other surviving artefacts, with the goal of finding common themes or stories associated with them.

One method of gathering information was by direct appeals published in newspapers and magazines. Latterly, limited use has been made of appeals via the Internet and this may be an approach which could be pursued by future researchers. Articles on the research published in both specialist and non-specialist newspapers, magazines and newspapers, including the *Yorkshire Post*, ⁷*Peak and Pennine*, ⁸*Pennine Magazine*, ⁹ and *Fortean Studies*, ¹⁰ brought forth a steady flow of information from people who either owned heads or who knew the whereabouts of examples hidden in barn walls or cottage gardens.

Most of the published documentary material on the subject of the head cult proved to be inaccessible and many articles were uncovered following repeated searches of the archaeological and folklore literature and cross-referencing of sources. Ten years of research has brought much of this to light by a steady process of following up references from a group of basic sources including Dr Anne Ross's seminal study published in 1967. By the mid-1990s the literature on

the subject had been enhanced by the completion of John Billingsley's thesis on heads in Calderdale¹¹ and his subsequent book *Stony Gaze*, which was published in 1998 as the current research was nearing completion.¹² During the literature search two earlier undergraduate theses completed in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne were read, and proved useful as they presented two opposing viewpoints on the subject.¹³

Focussing upon the archaeological literature, the indexes of regional archaeological and antiquarian journals were checked specifically for entries under head, skull, Celtic art and Celtic religion. Articles and references which came to light during this research are listed in the bibliography. Similar literature searches were conducted using the entire back catalogue of the journal *Folklore*, the journal of the Folklore Society, and the *Yorkshire Dalesman* magazine.

Contact was also established with various County Archaeological Survey offices. South Yorkshire's survey allowed me to spend a day searching their record files for material, while their equivalents in Derbyshire and Cumbria supplied me with computer printouts of head-related sculpture recorded in their files. City museums in Sheffield, Manchester, Carlisle, Birmingham, Cardiff and elsewhere were also consulted and provided lists and references to heads in their respective collections and notes about examples further afield. The British Museum, the London Museum, the National Museums of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, along with a number of English provincial museums, provided material, offprints and references which proved useful in the creation and assemblage of the database. "Fringe" literature was also extensively consulted for supplementary material, as much material of relevance to the subject has been collected by amateur archaeologists and antiquarians and subsequently published in a number of lesser-known publications, particularly in the field of Earth Mysteries.

This basic investigation provided a database which was used as the starting point for my own fieldwork. It gave me a sound empirical base for the development of my approach to the analysis of the material which forms the basis of this research. The next section will discuss in greater detail the strengths and weaknesses of the listings which formed the major part of the secondary source material, and how these differed from the way I approached my own fieldwork.

2.2 Secondary source material

The most important secondary source used as a starting point for this study was the material collected by Sidney Jackson of the Bradford Museums Service in West Yorkshire. Jackson's card index file and supplementary material were extensively utilised in the early stages of the fieldwork, which was made possible by an extended loan of the entire collection by the Yorkshire Archaeological Society.¹⁴ Additional supplementary material was provided by the card index of heads initiated by the Manchester University Museum in the 1970s, to which I was allowed access by the keeper, Dr John Prag.¹⁵

2.2.3. *The Sidney Jackson card index*

This index of carved stone heads was compiled by archaeological fieldworker Sidney Jackson in West Yorkshire and formed the major secondary source utilised in this study. As noted earlier, between 1965 and his death in the early 1970s Jackson was curator and keeper of antiquities at the Cartwright Hall Museum, part of the Bradford Metropolitan Museum service in West Yorkshire. The Sidney Jackson card index consists of two files containing small-sized record cards labelled 1-463 (File One) and 464-675 (File Two). However, file two actually contains record cards numbered up to 751. This cleared up some confusion which has surrounded the total number of heads recorded by Jackson, as Stephen Kerry, writing in *Current Archaeology*, said that Jackson had recorded 350 when he died.¹⁶ Webb, in her BA dissertation, says that she found 650 index cards when she consulted his papers during the 1980s,¹⁷ while Selkirk, writing in 1974, notes that "some 730 heads have been recorded from the West Riding, and the number increases weekly."¹⁸

All the cards in the Sidney Jackson index contain brief handwritten and typewritten entries describing heads from every region of the British Isles and a small number from overseas, although the majority are located in the Aire Valley of West Yorkshire where he was based. A large percentage of the cards have original black and white photographs attached, depicting examples, while oversized photos are stored in larger files which accompany the index. The quality of these photos varies from good to poor, and it appears that the negatives relating to the entire collection are no longer stored with the card index itself. As far as I was able to ascertain,

no effort has been made to update the files, or to produce good quality colour photographs of the many heads currently in the keeping of the Bradford Museums service.

On the subject of the card index itself, it was found that much of the information recorded was poorly presented and the majority of the surviving notes were recorded in Jackson's own longhand which was difficult to decipher and lacking in many important details. Additional material, including photos and slides mentioned on record cards was found to be missing and, most importantly, stories and traditions about the use of heads themselves were scarce and appeared to have been recorded as an afterthought. The cards contain basic information which is often confined to place or provenance, four and six figure ordnance survey grid reference, brief comments upon style or distinctive features and an approximate date for the sculpture. Information was also recorded relating to references in journals or newspapers, and cross-references to correspondence in a separate file. A typical entry, chosen at random from card number 41 reads:

*"ECCLESFIELD, Sheffield. Romano-British date. Building rubble. SK 358936. Yorkshire Archaeological Journal clxiii 1965, p.322."*¹⁹

Supplementary envelope files stored alongside the index itself contain Jackson's own writing and correspondence during the fifteen year span of the survey, offprints of articles, press cuttings and other notes. An additional three small filing cases contain correspondence, notes and cuttings relating to the entries in the two card files, all cross-referenced. The correspondence is filed in alphabetical order, using the surnames of correspondents. Furthermore, there is another small file labelled "Ephemera" which contained material on related "Celtic sculpture," including stone animals and Sheela-na-gigs. Supplementary material concerning many of the stone heads recorded and catalogued by Jackson was also available from the back issues of the *Archaeology Group Bulletin*, a magazine edited and produced by Sidney Jackson and published by the Bradford Art Galleries and Museums Service.²⁰ Back issues of the magazine covering the early 1960s were photocopied for immediate reference at an early stage in the research. Forming an important addition to the collection itself was a manuscript containing camera-ready material, complete with photographs, detailing 215 of the more interesting carvings from the card index. This material proved to be more useful than the poorly-recorded notes contained in the card index itself, which appear to have functioned as

Jackson's personal shorthand system, and were clearly not intended for the use of anyone except himself. The camera-ready material featured individual heads described on sheets of A4 paper, with concise details accompanied in most cases by quality black and white photographs. Information included provenance, grid reference, description of context and dimensions and a certain amount of discussion concerning style. A randomly selected example, numbered nineteen in the card index file, contains the following information:

*"No.19. Bradford (Wilsden). Grid ref. SE 0935. Along with No. 20 forms a pair, one each built into the wall beside a barn door archway at Honey Pot Farm, Wilsden.Sandstone. 8ins. high. Characterised by quite elaborate carving, with hair coming down over the forehead, the eyes with upper and lower eyelids, and the pupils indicated by small hollows, the mouth thick-lipped and curving downwards. The cheeks are rounded. It is probably that this head in three-dimensional."*²¹

While a certain amount of useful material is provided by this form of presentation, little in the way of context, history or tradition is directly recorded from the current owners of the heads, information which is central to the theme of my own fieldwork. In the case of the heads from Honey Pot Farm at Wilsden, I visited the farm during fieldwork in West Yorkshire during 1990 and quickly established that the two heads had been incorporated into the barn wall within living memory, and had actually originated from the ruins of a church or chapel in the nearby village. This kind of information is of vital importance to the dating and categorisation of material but is often absent from the listings which are all that remain of Jackson's survey.

The unpublished manuscript was presumably meant to form the basis of a future publication which would work towards the completion of a comprehensive survey of stone heads in Yorkshire envisaged by Jackson. In the event the single published work to appear before his untimely death was the booklet *Celtic and Other Stone Heads*, which was published in 1973.²² Nothing survives in the collection of papers to suggest what conclusions, if any, Jackson had reached about the heads he had recorded and collected during the course of his survey. His booklet contained a general survey following the nomenclature of dating and style established by Ross, and contained sixty-two examples of heads and related sculpture, drawn mainly from the West Yorkshire valleys of Airedale and Wharfedale.

The card index file has been stored in the archives of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society at the University of Leeds, since the late 1970s when the papers and material were donated to the

Society by Jackson's widow. Although the material was accessible to serious researchers, because of restricted opening hours and the form in which the material was recorded, the files have been scarcely consulted. I applied to the Society for a one year loan of the files early in 1994 in order to draw up a database of material for use in the study. The committee of the Society agreed for the loan to be extended until the summer of 1995 at the end of that year. During those eighteen months I worked slowly through the index, carefully extracting all useful information directly from each card, using the cross-references provided to access supplementary details from correspondence and cuttings. Material was logged by shorthand notes on fifty four pages of A4 paper in a file labelled JC 1-4 in the fieldwork log which forms Appendix 2.

The initial plan was to use these notes to draw up a listing which would contain all useful information relating to the examples in the Jackson file. This would have formed an appendix to the current research, with the material cross referenced to the discussion of heads which is featured in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. However, the limitations of the material which have been outlined above, and the development of my own survey of Peak District stone head carvings for the purposes of the case study featured in Chapter 5 eliminated the requirement for a database of this kind for direct use. No attempt has been made to utilise the information for statistical purposes, or to develop a typology of heads, as this was felt to lie outside the scope of this study, which primarily aims to analyse traditions and folklore surrounding the artefacts. To this extent I have extracted all useful data from the file and preserved it in a form which future researchers may wish to use as a base for further research. The information from the Sidney Jackson index was thereafter utilised as a secondary source within the collection of fieldwork notes itemised in Appendix 2.

Despite its shortcomings the Jackson card index forms a useful case study, as the majority of his examples are drawn from the Aire and Wharfe valleys of West and North Yorkshire, an area rich in sculptured heads in stone from a wide variety of architectural contexts. This material can be used effectively to compare and contrast with case studies such as those of John Billingsley in Calderdale and my own centred upon the Peak District, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. Of the stone heads themselves, Jackson in his 1973 publication notes how press publicity left him overwhelmed by further inquiries and gifts of heads from owners in and around West Yorkshire. After his death the sculptures remained in the ownership of the

Bradford Museums Service to whom they had been donated. Today they are divided between two major museum centres. The vast majority are at the Manor House Museum in Ilkley, where there are approximately fifty five carvings in storage and two on display, one of which functions as a gable head inside the art gallery itself. I was able to examine all these examples in the company of Gavin Edwards, the assistant keeper of history, when I visited the Museum in April 1993. He said there were no plans to produce a permanent display of the heads, and added that very little was actually known about their provenance, function and age. He told me that the vast majority of heads from the collection were donated before 1967, but a small number continued to arrive as gifts, including one as late as 1983.²³ In addition, a small permanent display of a dozen heads from the collection can be seen at the Cliffe Castle Museum in Cliffe Gardens Lane, Keighley, West Yorkshire. Other isolated examples recorded by Jackson are on display or in storage at a number of other museums in the north of England including Wakefield, Sheffield, Saddleworth, Skipton and Buxton. For the purposes of this study, records held by these museums reveal little in the way of useful information about the function or use of these heads in local tradition. In the majority of cases what records there are consist of provenance and date, the nature of the material or stone from which the head is fashioned, and the details of the owner or finder. Testimony of the kind I was seeking could only be obtained by direct contact with those people who had knowledge of the reasons behind how and why these heads were carved, and how they were used as part of living traditions in the north of England. Seeking out and recording oral tradition relating to them therefore became the next stage in the fieldwork methodology which formed the primary database for the present research.

2.2.4. The Manchester Museum stone head card index

The importance of this source has been described in the previous chapter, but its use has been limited in respect of the present investigation. The card index here was originally begun by fieldworkers at the museum as a response to Sidney Jackson's work in Yorkshire during the 1960s.²⁴ The aim was to produce a similar corpus of material from the northwest Pennines to complement Jackson's research in Yorkshire. In more recent years Martin Petch has utilised Jackson's card index as a starting point for his own fieldwork in Greater Manchester and Lancashire, which has surveyed some five hundred square miles and recorded around one

thousand previously unknown sculptures, including heads of the Celtic tradition, Sheela-na-gigs and other related sculpture. Material collected during the course of this fieldwork survey, along with photos and details sent in by correspondents are stored in a card index file in the Museum archive, using much the same method as that utilised by Jackson in his card index file. Heads recorded in the Manchester card index are divided into geographical groups by English counties, with basic information presented in an identical fashion to those in Jackson file.

During the early stages of my research two visits were made to the Manchester Museum to examine the contents of the file, and notes were made from cards relating to those heads which fell within the geographical and thematic area of coverage of the present study, which included the counties of Derbyshire, Cheshire and neighbouring parts of Greater Manchester. Martin Petch generously offered assistance by providing a list of carvings he had recorded from the Peak District for use in the study, along with a series of good quality black and white photographs of examples from the museum's own collection. In addition, he was able to supplement my knowledge of sculptures with associated folklore that fell outside the geographical remit of the Peak District study. In summary, the material collected by the Manchester survey was not utilised in any extensive fashion for the purposes of my own survey, but acted as a supplementary source of information which added to the database initially supplied by the Jackson card index.

To supplement these two major secondary sources, the files of public libraries were consulted for additional information. Card indexes, files of newspaper cuttings and locally published pamphlets yielded many useful references to stone heads, skulls and associated folklore in the areas which were the subject of fieldwork. Many of these were followed up by visits to locations where possible, and if necessary by letter, phone call or personal interview. The main library utilised was that attached to the archives at the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition at the University of Sheffield, where the research was based. A wide range of folklore related books, magazines, journals and cuttings are available there and were easily accessed. The other main libraries utilised were the Sheffield University Library, which has complete series of the Derbyshire Archaeological Society publications, *Antiquity* and other archaeological journals. Sheffield and Rotherham Local History Libraries, Chesterfield Central Library, Manchester Library, Derbyshire County Council Central Library in Matlock and Derby Central Library also supplied valuable references. During this research a substantial body of secondary

source material was unearthed, including references and articles published in journals including the *Hunter Archaeological Society Proceedings*, *Folklore*, *Derbyshire Life and Countryside*, *The Dalesman* and others. Of equal importance was a collection of material of varying quality published in the fringe literature, including magazines which fall under the broad umbrella of "Earth Mysteries," antiquarian publications and the vast literature on the paranormal. Magazines consulted from this genre include *Fortean Times*, *The Ley Hunter Journal*, *Northern Earth Mysteries*, *Mercian Mysteries*, *At The Edge* and *Source: The Journal of Holy Wells*. Many of these journals and individual writers have published booklets and pamphlets dealing with such subjects as holy wells and springs, standing stones and folklore, which yielded much primary material relating to heads and skulls. Other snippets of information were provided by letters, reports of site visits and notes published by these magazines which refer to stone heads, skulls and related folklore. In addition, early in the 1990s letters and articles outlining the survey were sent out to newspapers, periodicals and magazines covering the Peak District, inviting direct response from informants which has continued to bear fruit up to the completion of the study in 1998. Over a seven year period articles appealing for information appeared in a number of local newspapers including *The Sheffield Star*, *Derbyshire Times*, the *Glossop Chronicle and Reporter*, *Macclesfield Express*, *Buxton Advertiser* and periodicals including *Peak and Pennine*, *The Dalesman* and the *Derbyshire Advertiser*.

2.2.5. Analysis of the secondary source material

The limitations of the material preserved in the Jackson survey were apparent during my initial appraisal of the material. This was because the criteria employed by Jackson and the Manchester Museum study were primarily directed at the listing of archaeological artefacts themselves. This kind of material was useful in that it provided an empirical base for my own research, a base which could be developed in the search for surviving tradition associated with these artefacts. However, due to the flaws in the recording of material preserved in the Jackson survey, and the lapse of more than twenty years since its inception, it was not considered practical to follow up the examples listed by Jackson. It appeared more suitable to begin my own survey of heads, based in one geographical zone, and to collect information relating to the history and traditions associated with heads from the inception of the project. As a result I spent the years between

1990 and 1998 working in the field, using the basic information I had collected as a beginning, and supplemented it with new information on surviving tradition and context. The intention was to explore the areas where these carvings were produced and find out more about their original context and use within the landscape itself, and the motivations of those people who continued to use them for magical purposes such as charms against evil, or protective talismans, in the present day.

While the Peak District case study drew upon a number of examples listed originally by Jackson and Manchester Museum, it was original in that I used my own contacts in the field to collect background information about the carvings which had largely been ignored by the two earlier surveys. A similar criterion has been used before by John Billingsley in his survey of stone heads in Upper Calderdale, West Yorkshire.²⁵ Billingsley's fieldwork was probably the closest to my own, as he was also listing material for a database but at the same time was placing it in the context of an ongoing tradition which remained vibrant. During the course of his research, Billingsley was able to complement the material on heads in Calderdale originally noted by Jackson, and collected many new examples, as well as extant lore and tradition surrounding them which Jackson had failed to note in his survey.

My own research was therefore far removed from the basic listing method employed by Jackson, and broadly similar to the limited case study attempted by Billingsley. The primary fieldwork was divided into two sections: a microcosm in the form of the Peak District case study which functioned both as a listing and a contextual analysis of data, and a macrocosm consisting of a nationwide survey of beliefs relating to the head and skull in folklore and tradition, primarily focussed upon the guardian skulls which are recorded from more than thirty individual locations in the British Isles. The skull material was not collected in form of a basic listing such as those attempted by Jackson, but as a structured gazetteer containing all extant contextual material. This form of presentation of fieldwork data is the first of its kind to collect examples of this motif together in one comprehensive survey, both in terms of the archaeological and folkloric record, and set it in an overall context.

2.3. Fieldwork methodology and primary source material

The primary fieldwork data consists of oral tradition collected specifically for this study, and

forms the most important source for the current research. The data, itemised in Appendix 2 makes up the bulk of the material used for this study and can be broken down into two principal categories: (1) traditions relating to carved stone heads primarily in the north and midlands of England, and (2) guardian skull traditions of the British Isles. Fieldwork began as early as 1986, and has continued effectively to the present day, the bulk of material being collected between the years 1990 and 1998. The majority of the information collected forms the basis for the detailed discussions presented in Chapters 4 and 5 (Peak District case study), and Chapters 6 and 7 (Skull traditions). A listing of carved heads recorded during the Peak District fieldwork accompanies the research as Appendix 1. The following sections discuss in detail how the material which formed the two major collections was gathered during the fieldwork, and how this data was then used as a basis for the detailed analysis which forms a major part of the current research.

2.3.1. Stone head traditions case study

At the inception of the fieldwork it was decided to focus attention upon the Midlands and North of England as the base for the collection of material, as these areas were of easy access to my base at the University of Sheffield. As the Jackson survey had recorded more than seven hundred examples, primarily from West Yorkshire, the logistics of extending the fieldwork to areas like Ireland and Wales which I knew contained a large number of unrecorded examples proved to be impracticable. I therefore set about collecting material primarily from the Peak District region, centred upon the county of Derbyshire and in addition, where necessary, forays were made into Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cheshire and elsewhere when supplementary references and informants came to light. The Peak District was chosen as it was geographically the closest to the Sheffield base and is a self contained area of great geological contrasts, with a long history of human settlement, all enclosed by the boundaries of a modern National Park. The results of this fieldwork are contained in the Peak District Case Study which forms the basis of Chapter 5, and the discussion of the stone head traditions which makes up the primary fieldwork contained within Chapter 6. Sidney Jackson's listing of heads was consulted, and examples from Derbyshire, South Yorkshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire were recorded in notebooks. As already mentioned, Jackson's efforts were concentrated primarily upon North

and West Yorkshire, but he recorded a number of examples from the southern Pennines and noted in his *Celtic and Other Stone heads* in 1973:

*"It is probable that when further publicity about the subject is given in Lancashire, Cheshire and Derbyshire, from where a number of heads have already been recorded, they will be found to be comparably as dense as they are in the West Riding."*²⁶

Manchester Museum's card index file contained Jackson's examples, a number of which had been visited subsequently by the Manchester team, and others from the Peak District region which the museum had either acquired for its collection or recorded since the 1960s. In addition, Martin Petch had produced a document entitled *A list of Celtic heads and associated sculpture in Derbyshire* for Derbyshire County Council's Sites and Monuments Record in 1989 which has been entered onto a computer database and could be accessed by keyword search.²⁷

This growing database of Peak District heads was complemented by information supplied by museums and county Sites and Monuments Indexes which were consulted at the outset of fieldwork. Both sources are particularly useful because museums function as centres for the collection of archaeological artefacts, and are often the first official body contacted when an object such as a carved stone head is unearthed by members of the public. Similarly, Sites and Monuments registers have been set up by Act of Parliament to record archaeological material for use in town and county planning and are run and staffed by archaeologists and historians employed by local authorities. Although Sheffield's dedicated Archaeological Unit closed in the mid-1990s as a result of funding cuts, its survey material was accessed for the purposes of this study in the late 1980s. Derbyshire County Council's Matlock-based Archaeology Unit produced a computer printout of stone heads from its database specifically for use in this study, which was of great help in the compilation of the material used in my Peak District case study.²⁸ The unit continues to inform me whenever new examples are brought to their attention by members of the public.

Staff at Sheffield's Weston Park Museum allowed access to files which contained a small card index list of stone heads recorded both in South Yorkshire and the neighbouring Peak District. In addition, a file of photographs, slides, correspondence and offprints was also made available for study. Manchester's Museum's records are contained within the card index file maintained by Martin Petch which was consulted at an early stage for examples which were useful for the

Peak District stone heads and guardian skull case studies. Additional helpful information was obtained from a number of other sources including the Derby Museum and Art Gallery, Buxton Museum, Chester Grosvenor House Museum, Glossop Heritage Centre, Wakefield Museum and Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery.

During the course of the research I was in contact with a wide range of historians, local experts, archaeologists and historical societies throughout the Peak District and neighbouring areas who became a valuable source for material pertaining to continuing folklore and traditions relating to stone heads and skulls. Informants were able to provide many snippets of information which led to the discovery of further examples in the field. Every small item of lore or information concerning heads was recorded during the course of the survey, ranging from empirical information about their original provenance and history of secondary usage, to items of folklore and belief, which often included stories concerning ghosts and paranormal phenomena which had become attached to a number of examples. This was the category of information which formed the primary basis of the investigation, and is the single factor which marks the essential difference between this research and that of earlier fieldworkers including Sidney Jackson. It is my contention that the collection of information of this kind is the most effective method of producing a fieldwork base before analysis or speculation can begin relating to the original purpose and context of these enigmatic artefacts. Unlike other archaeological artefacts, for example Iron Age rotary querns, which are functional in nature and are "silent" in terms of a continuing tradition, stone heads speak loudly because they are the physical remains of the belief system which produced them. From their very nature, they were utilised for a variety of superstitious and magical practices with a long history in human society, and have acted as focusses of an evolving tradition because of the symbolism attached to the human head in a number of contexts. It is only through a study utilising both archaeological and folkloric data that conclusions can be reached about the original context of these carvings. This primary research, the product of more than eight years fieldwork in the Peak District and surrounding areas, is I believe the first of its kind to study this fascinating body of material in this depth and wide ranging fashion.

2.3.2. *Guardian skulls fieldwork*

Collection of material relating to skulls took a separate course from the early 1990s, and full details of the fieldwork methodology employed in this area are presented in the introduction to Chapter 6. In summary, research began with the collection of secondary sources including book and magazine references to the better known skulls featured in popular gazetteers of ghost stories. A basic list of the better-known skull traditions was then drawn up and used as a base from which to trace the earliest references to the traditions which popular writers had used as the basis for their accounts. This method unearthed a considerable amount of earlier literature from the eighteenth century onwards which contained numerous references to skulls hitherto unrecorded and unremarked in modern accounts of the guardian skull legends.

Using this collection of source material as a starting point, efforts were made to visit all the locations associated with skull legends. As the gazetteer of skull traditions had grown from a small number to more than thirty separate stories, which appeared to be grouped geographically in clusters spanning the western fringes of Britain from Cumbria to Cornwall, this entailed a substantial amount of travel during the fieldwork period. Efforts were made to visit local history libraries in close proximity to the skull legends to search card index files, a method which unearthed more references and established contact with local historians and informants who provided more information relating to the stories. Letters were again placed in local newspapers describing the study, together with appeals for additional memories relating to the skulls which proved to be highly fruitful. In addition, personal contact was made by letter and telephone with the current owners of all those skulls which were currently on display or in private ownership. This testimony was gathered by shorthand notes and correspondence, and where appropriate personal visits were made to gather material. Most were very helpful and hospitable, bearing in mind the fact that owners of guardian skulls invariably receive a steady stream of curious visitors during the course of every year because of the exposure the artefacts have received in the media.

The accumulated source material relating to guardian skull traditions was organised into four files containing notebooks and miscellaneous sources which are itemised in Appendix 2, and used as basis for the detailed discussion presented in Chapter 7. The basis of this chapter is a structured gazetteer of thirty two skull traditions, which are presented in a format that includes

all the available history and context which surrounds these stories. This research is the first of its kind to focus upon this little known motif which forms an important, and previously overlooked, category within British folk tradition. Although skull traditions are primarily folkloric in nature, they contain much information which overlaps with related disciplines, including archaeology, anthropology and psychology, as outlined in Chapter 8. It is perhaps the multi-disciplinary nature of this research which explains why the skull traditions have been overlooked by researchers in the past.

2.4. Research outline

This section reviews the direction which the research took from the completion of fieldwork described in the previous section, into the period when analysis began of the material which had been collected. It was at this stage that important themes relating to the use and function of heads and skulls within British folk tradition began to emerge from the database.

2.4.1. *Initial stages of the study*

The first section of this chapter summarised the method employed in the collection of the material which forms the basis of this study. From that point it was necessary to decide which areas of the subject were to be investigated further and which were not likely to prove as productive. At the outset when the process of writing began, it was envisaged this study would consist of a detailed analysis of the archaeological evidence for head ritual in the prehistoric and early medieval period. In particular, at the initial stage the intention was to focus on the carved stone heads of the "Celtic tradition" as the main database for analysis, using the Sidney Jackson archive as the main secondary source. This reflected my archaeological background and training, and the perceived necessity for a solid empirical base to provide a firm foundation from which to examine the more nebulous areas of belief and ritual. Following this line of reasoning, the archaeological evidence could then be scrutinised in the context of the documentary evidence, in particular the earlier written sources and later insular traditions of the British Isles. However, it soon became apparent that this approach had been employed before in the seminal studies of Ross and others, and although there was much new and extant material available it

was unlikely to provide the necessary folklore context which the present study demanded. This view was enhanced by my review of the contents of Sidney Jackson's card index file which, as became evident in the early stages, produced little in the way of useful data that could be used for the analysis of context and tradition. However, it presented a range of tantalising suggestions for research and opened up new avenues of inquiry into fields of tradition surrounding the artefacts themselves, including the use of heads for apotropaic and guardian purposes in vernacular architecture, the significance of symbols associated with carvings with two or more conjoined faces, the appearance of "cigarette holes" and traditions such as the painting of heads described in Chapter 4.

This kind of multidisciplinary approach had been attempted by John Billingsley in his study of stone head sculpture in Calderdale.²⁹ However, Billingsley's study had focussed upon one manifestation of the head symbol, namely stone heads, and took the form of a case study based in one valley. It was decided that the present research would include a number of case studies of different manifestations of the head symbol in material culture, literature and oral tradition, with the skull traditions forming a collection of equal importance in terms of surviving and evolving tradition. It became necessary to rule out a number of parallel lines of inquiry which were not directly related to the subject of the study. These included examples of foliate heads and masks which are known by the colloquial term "Green Man." This well-known category of sculpture has clear links with the broader use of the human head in folk tradition. However, as Kathleen Basford demonstrated in her study of this style of medieval carving, examples appear to be specifically associated with Romanesque architecture and form a specific subject in their own right.³⁰ Other forms of "Celtic" and Romano-British sculpture with links to the head symbol, including the various exhibitionist carvings such as the Sheela-na-gigs, and full figure sculpture such as the hunting gods, were not included in this survey other than for contextual purposes.

It was important to define a geographical limit to the study. Following the specific terms of the study title this included the British Isles, defined as England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland to a lesser extent due to limitations of time and fieldwork coverage. Some evidence from continental Europe will be examined, particularly in the context of the archaeological background reviewed in Chapter 3, as this proved to be a vital tool for the interpretation of the surviving material evidence for the veneration of the human head from the earliest period of prehistory.

Ethnological comparisons from head-hunting cultures in Asia, the Americas, Africa and the Pacific will be drawn upon in Chapter 8 and other chapters where necessary to throw light upon material from Britain.

2.4.2. Changes in direction from 1992 onwards

As a result of these decisions, the form and direction of the later stages of fieldwork radically changed during the early part of the 1990s as the criteria for what would be included in the study became more clearly defined. One aspect of the research in particular, that of the guardian skulls of British folklore, proved extremely fruitful, to the extent that in the end it became the main focus of the later stages of the study. Initially, it was planned to use the skull guardian traditions as one item in the analysis of human heads in British folk tradition and literature in what now forms part of Chapter 3. However, an initial survey of the literature on the subject produced such a plethora of references that in 1992 it was decided to pursue this avenue as a major part of the fieldwork. Opportunities for direct interviews with owners of skulls and visits to locations where they are preserved soon opened up, producing a mass of primary and secondary source material which formed the basis of a major catalogue and analysis of British skull traditions. This was the first time a comprehensive collection of these traditions had been attempted, and provided an ideal springboard from which to interpret the archaeological and documentary material concerning heads already at my disposal. At this point in the research, it became apparent that any study of the veneration attached to the human head would have to be cross-disciplinary in nature. It was pointless to concentrate purely upon one aspect of the subject, such as the archaeological evidence alone, as this would produce biased results.

I wanted to use the material gathered during the fieldwork to investigate the interface between archaeology and folklore, and the subject of the alleged "Celtic head cult" appeared to offer a potential starting point for a study of this kind. Martin Petch makes the point that so-called Celtic heads are clearly very important ancient relics; therefore it appears strange that they remain so shrouded in mystery.³¹ Although there is plentiful source material available, and Britain has been left with a substantial though disjointed and poorly documented record of sculpture which has its roots within the traditions of the ancient British population, to date no exhaustive corpus of this material has been compiled, despite it becoming obvious that only

through the existence of such a listing could a much clearer and more detailed picture of the tradition be gained. Petch adds significantly: "In a way this study could be best accomplished in a multi-disciplinary manner."³²

The listings which had been attempted by Sidney Jackson in West Yorkshire, and by Manchester Museum in northwest England, had been useful in that they produced a solid empirical basis for further research such as the present study. Jackson, who was primarily a fieldworker, had embarked upon his survey with the intention to establish stone heads as a legitimate area of archaeological study and hoped his listing could establish a workable typology of heads which could be used as a tool to accurately date the carvings.³³ However, Jackson's survey did not pay sufficient attention from my point of view to the context of the artefacts which were the subject of these listings, in particular the beliefs which surrounded their production and use as part of an evolving folk tradition. This was precisely the avenue which was pursued during the fieldwork for the present research, as this was felt to be the most lucrative from the point of view of placing these artefacts within their correct overall context. Therefore, from this point onwards, the Jackson card index which had been obtained for the purposes of this research through a temporary loan from the Yorkshire Archaeological Society, was utilised primarily as a supplementary source of information. While the material recorded by Jackson was useful and provided much inspiration and lines of inquiry for my own study, it could not be used as a primary database as originally envisaged because of its inadequacies and limitations outlined above.

The method employed to collect the material used in the present research can be defined as a "case study" approach, similar to that employed by Billingsley in Calderdale, West Yorkshire, which became the main analytical tool used by the present research. This involved the selection of one area of the British Isles, the Peak District, as a microcosm of the wide region surveyed by the Jackson and Petch surveys, and collecting all available extant material relating to the use of carved heads within that region, including both archaeological and folkloric evidence. Material collected as part of this case study could then be compared and contrasted with the findings of the regional surveys elsewhere, including those of Billingsley. In addition, a parallel case study gathered together material relating to guardian skull traditions throughout the British Isles, a group of artefacts which were surrounded by a rich body of material both from folklore and oral tradition. In the past, stories and traditions relating to these skulls had never been

collected in a systematic way. Archaeologists had ignored them because although they were clearly ancient artefacts, they were still in use as part of a living tradition. Folklorists had not studied this collection of material because it overlapped so many other disciplines, and the material itself was disparate and dispersed throughout a large body of popular literature. The guardian skull case study which was undertaken as part of the current research is unique because it is the first time this important body of material had been collected together from a wide variety of sources and analysed using the criteria discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

2.5. Archaeology and folk memory

Claims for the existence of prejudice on the part of archaeologists against the study of “ritual” or “superstitious” interpretations of archaeological material have been discussed by Ralph Merrifield.³⁴ He believes this has been partly due to the perceived fear on their part of becoming associated with “the lunatic fringe” and partly as a result of the established view of archaeology as a science, in which data can only be seriously considered if it can be measured and quantified, which is not always possible when investigating ritual behaviour. Scientific methodology cannot be applied to the study of human religious beliefs or behaviour, which are produced and influenced by a variety of psychological and sociological factors, many of which are inherently irrational, and are for this reason not easy to isolate or quantify using traditional methods. Merrifield makes the point that archaeologists are happy to attribute ritual interpretations to material from the early periods of human history, for example the megalithic monuments of the Neolithic and Bronze Age, but those studying the later periods have in some cases developed what he calls a “ritual phobia” towards artefacts from periods nearer our own time.³⁵ Much of this more recent evidence, from the proto-historical period, relates to repetitive acts, such as foundation deposits in buildings and the ritual destruction of high-status artefacts in ritual contexts, which suggests some may be evidence of popular and repeated religious customs or behaviour. Other examples, such as the production of singular charms or talismans, which have no obvious practical use, appear to be evidence of attempts to influence or interact with the supernatural world on an individual basis. Merrifield summarises the evidence in this fashion:

“One advantage of studying the archaeology of ritual in the historical period is that we know a

great deal about contemporary thought from written sources, and our knowledge increases the nearer we come to our own times. Even so, a wide range of popular custom and belief slips through the net of the historian, and it is only for the last one hundred and fifty years or so that we are able to draw upon that great other source of information on this subject, namely surviving folk memory, which can sometimes throw a surprising light on very much earlier practices.”³⁶

What Merrifield defines as “folk memory” can be used to categorise the various customs and beliefs collected during fieldwork for the present study. These survive within the oral tradition which forms the human context within which these artefacts were visualised, created and used as part of a living tradition of evolving belief. However, caution is necessary, for as Valerie Yow notes, although oral history does indeed offer information about real events and practices which can be consistent with other documentary accounts, no single source or combination of sources can ever give a picture of the total complexity of the context which gave rise to the beliefs themselves. She writes:

“We cannot reconstruct a past or present event in its entirety because the evidence is always fragmentary.”³⁷

Another important factor noted by Yow concerns the interpretation of the evidence itself, a process which is affected by the beliefs and background of the person who is making the interpretation and the prejudices he or she brings to the material. This caution is underlined by Gillian Bennett, who points out the dangers of treating personal narratives as classic realist texts. In a study of her mother’s recollections of rural life in southern Shropshire earlier this century Bennett writes:

“When folklorists set out to record a picture of the past from the mouths of living informants...they inevitably record their story as well as their history, for the two are inseparable...The particular value of oral as opposed to written history is that it can supply the contexts for past events and reveal the attitudes and values of those who lived in the past. Yet it is just this significance and these attitudes and values that are most affected by the use of the past to interpret and order the present. These values may be those of today, not yesterday.”³⁸

Although some categories of empirical archaeological evidence such as the distribution of human skulls in ditches and megalithic tombs have the least “mediation” during the recording

process, a personal oral account of a past experience has numerous inbuilt layers of meaning added before it is collected and a historian begins to interpret the recorded evidence. This means that all conclusions based upon interpretations of material drawn from the oral tradition should be tentative in nature, as there always remains the possibility that new material, of a supplementary or contradictory nature, may one day emerge. Therefore, on this basis, any analysis such as attempted by the current research should go no further in its conclusions than what the evidence available at the present time suggests. While speculation is useful, it should not go beyond the bounds of what the empirical facts established by archaeology and the accumulated evidence provided by the collection of traditions from comparable contexts, appear to suggest.

In my view, the subject of "Celtic" stone heads is unique because in addition to a surviving body of folk tradition there is a factual, archaeological basis for the existence of the use of heads, both in the form of human skulls and representative carvings in stone and wood in prehistory, even if a direct link with later carving traditions remains ambiguous. As a result, the study of "Celtic" stone heads, guardian skulls and other manifestations of the head symbol will inevitably cross over into the domains of many different disciplines, including art history, ethnology and anthropology, alongside that of conventional archaeology itself. Archaeology is helpful to a certain extent, but can only go as far as dating and context will allow. When dealing with ritual and superstition in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, where we must look for the origins of later belief surrounding the head symbol, we are totally reliant upon the findings of archaeology as a source of evidence, because of the lack of documentary sources. However, the nearer we move towards the historical period the more we can utilise the tools of written evidence and the oral tradition or folk memory to throw light upon the subject of ritual and magic, as Merrifield suggested.

The subject of beliefs surrounding the human head is eminently suitable for study because of the potential for its manifestation in the prehistoric, historic and recent past in the form of religion, superstition and finally as folk magic. I was interested in how the extant empirical evidence could be utilised to illuminate the overall context which lay behind documentary material from the proto-historic period and the surviving "folk memory." Most archaeologists would be highly cautious about the use of folk traditions and nebulous medieval sources to draw conclusions about isolated archaeological data which is often without context, and from an early stage I

became aware of the dangers of speculation and how easy it would be to develop extraordinary theories from limited material evidence, a warning which was underlined by the literature concerning the pitfalls of recording oral tradition discussed by Yow. It was essential therefore to base any conclusions upon direct empirical evidence drawn from a number of different disciplines, and then follow the most productive avenues which emerged from this mass of related data. One drawback of the multidisciplinary approach is that its wide ranging net produces so much material that it proved impossible to produce a comprehensive survey of the subject in all its many and varied manifestations. It therefore became necessary to focus upon those aspects which would produce results and which had not hitherto been the subject of focussed primary research. In the event, the avenues it was decided to pursue were precisely those which explored the central focus in the title of the study, namely "folklore and tradition surrounding the symbol of the severed human head."

Due to the very nature of the subject matter which makes up the bulk of this study it has been necessary to employ three different but interlinked methods of examining material as a result of the diversity of evidence. These can be described as archaeological, art historical, and oral historical. The study is unique in that it is unlike many others which are based upon the collection and analysis of folk traditions and oral narratives alone. At the centre of the study are actual archaeological and historical artefacts, carved stone heads and skulls, which have become the focus of a range of beliefs and practices which have followed a very traditional structure. These artefacts have remained enigmatic because they have resisted conventional archaeological and historical scrutiny which has helped us categorise and interpret other contemporary remains, for example pottery and fragments of human bones from excavations which can be dated using a variety of scientific methods. Interpreting the date and original context of stone carvings from an art historical standpoint is also problematical because, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 4, there are serious difficulties involved in dating them by style alone. All the stone heads discussed in this study are mute, and exist with very few exceptions, without surviving inscriptions or original documentary evidence concerning their original context. The majority are simply crude carvings without any known provenance or date, and we are left with little more than their overall context as part of a tradition of carving and usage from which to draw conclusions about their use and meaning both to individuals who created them and their society as a whole.

2.6. Interpretations of the material

As the research reached its final stages, a series of important themes emerged from the data which were crucial to the interpretation of the material collected in the field. Two of the most important controversies which have affected and influenced the way in which the data has been analysed will now be examined in detail. Firstly, it would be useful briefly to survey some of the major arguments which have been developed since the beginning of the twentieth century as part of attempts to interpret the material which falls under the open-ended subject of belief and tradition surrounding the human head in prehistory and folk tradition. It should be noted that the study of the context of the material evidence for these beliefs remains in its infancy. The great corpus of Celtic sculpture from the British Isles alone awaits systematic cataloguing and classification, and until this has been attempted discussion can take only a very tentative format.

2.6.1. *The Celtic interpretation of European history*

Many writers refer to the "Celtic head cult" and "Celtic heads" in their discussion of the evidence relating to the use of the human head in an Iron Age and Romano-British context.³⁹ These highly descriptive and emotive terms developed directly out of an established tradition of interpreting the period of European history before the Roman Empire in terms of the movement and migration of a "Celtic" people or race from a central European homeland. This tradition of categorising proto-history has directly influenced how historians have interpreted both the material and documentary evidence which relates to this period of the past. Reference has already been made in Chapter 1 to the history and development of the Celtic view of European history which has affected how the whole corpus of material has been interpreted, classified and catalogued both by archaeologists and historians since the end of the nineteenth century. The traditional view maintained that the Celts were a unified people who emerged in central Europe around 500 BC and migrated from their continental homelands westwards, bringing with them a Celtic language and a distinctive social structure made up of chiefs, warriors and druids.⁴⁰ This way of interpreting the "Celtic" past made it easier to draw continental parallels between disparate material culture separated by wide distances both in geography and time. The expansion of the Roman Empire was accepted as having played a part in destroying the Celtic

culture, leaving it relatively untouched only in those areas on the northwest fringes of Europe such as Ireland and Wales where "Celtic" peoples and languages were perceived to have survived.

During the last twenty years there has been a movement away from the traditional view of the "Celtic history" which has dominated the teaching and interpretation of the past which persisted during the first half of the twentieth century. The revisionist school of archaeology evolved out of the growing influence of the social sciences upon the subject during the 1960s, and brought a completely different range of models and methods to the interpretation of evidence and material culture from the past. The revisionist school suggested that the peoples habitually labelled "Celts" who inhabited Scotland, Wales and Ireland were separate indigenous tribes who evolved slowly from the background of early Bronze Age communities of the prehistoric British Isles. This approach is best summarised by Dr. J.D. Hill of Southampton University's Archaeology Department, who writes:

"...Of all the new debates on the period, the most acrimonious is over the issue of the Celts. Popular images of the period are usually inhabited by Celts based on contemporary and later written evidence that describes real and mythical peoples who spoke a Celtic language in different parts of Europe over at least 1,500 years. These images have been added to nationalistic, even racist, conventional modern images of "the Celts." This image of the warrior Celts has received great criticism from British archaeologists in recent years...No one is denying that people in Iron Age Britain spoke Celtic languages, or shared common cultural traditions with their contemporaries in mainland Europe...what has been shown to be untrue, however, is that there existed a single Celtic race whose members all had the same religion, psychological traits, and type of society, and who recognised themselves as 'Celts.'"⁴¹

As surveys of Iron Age material culture make clear, the archaeological evidence from this period is diverse in nature and does not support the hypothesis of a single ethnic or racial "Celtic" people, but rather a fluid polity of tribes and petty kingdoms who shared a common group of languages at the time of the Roman expansion in the first century AD.⁴² Hill makes the important point that the Iron Age was not homogeneous across Britain and Ireland, where there is evidence of substantial differences in terms of society, burial rites and settlement between regions. These differences appear to show that the lives, religious beliefs and type of society within which Iron Age peoples lived were markedly different at any one time during a period of seven hundred years, in different parts of the British Isles. The consequence of this "is that it is

difficult to talk meaningfully about a single Iron Age Britain.”⁴³

As a result of this controversy, claims such as those made by Anne Ross that a head cult was a specific feature of a greater pan-Celtic religious instinct have been dismissed by authorities such as Ronald Hutton, who concludes there was no firm evidence for any kind of head cult in Iron Age Britain.⁴⁴ To illustrate the dichotomy which exists between the two schools of arguments, one can do no better than quote two prominent, and diametrically opposed, commentators upon the subject. One important proponent of the “Celtic” camp, archaeologist Barry Cunliffe, writes uncompromisingly in respect of what he defines as a Celtic head cult:

“The explicit account by Diodorus Siculus typifies the head hunting that was so common among the Celtic tribes. The practice was not merely bloodthirstiness, however. In common with many primitive peoples, the Celts believed that the soul resided in the head. The head symbolised the very essence of being, and consequently could exist in its own right. By possessing someone’s head, one controlled the person and his spirit. These beliefs are manifest in the archaeological evidence, the classical tradition, and the Irish and Welsh literature.”⁴⁵

On the other side of the fence, historian Malcolm Chapman maintains that the whole concept of the “Celtic head cult” is an artefact produced by the writings of the Celtic interpreters of European prehistory. He writes:

“...One example of the creative scholarly invention of the ‘Celts’ is to be found in ‘the cult of the severed head’; this purported ‘cult’ is, according to many sources, an archetypal Celtic feature, still alive in the present day. Strabo (iv. 4.5) refers to the Gaulish warrior habit of taking the heads of slain foes and decorating the saddle or house with them. This was, for classical observers, a shocking breach of good practice, and notable therefore. What we know about this is that it shocked its observers; we are told nothing thereby about how important this was to the people who practiced it, nor about how long it endured or how widespread it was, nor about how elaborated it was in the pleasant horror of retelling. These observations, however, have become the basis of the modern notion that there existed, among the Celts, a pagan ‘cult of the severed head.’ The idea of such a cult is shockingly different, pagan and superstitious, and as such fits with ease into scholarly wishful thinking about the Celts. The avid pursuit of the Celtic exotic, however, has led to the creation of what one might almost call ‘the cult of the cult of the severed head’ with Celtic folklorists as its votaries.”⁴⁶

At the present time this controversy continues with recent claims that the whole concept of a

Celtic civilisation never existed and was based upon "an historic fantasy." Dr Simon James of Durham University, for example, has dismissed the theory that the people living in the Celtic fringes of Europe were separate communities of ancient Celts, and believes the traditional division of Celtic society into a culture of warriors, druids and peasants has no foundation in fact. He traced the origins of the notion of Celtic ethnicity to the the early eighteenth century, when the term was first coined to describe the family of languages which included Gaelic, Breton and Welsh. He writes:

*"...crucially, other people rapidly extended the meaning of the term Celtic. Within a couple of generations, educated people across Europe were employing it as a quasi-ethnic name...the linguistic connection between northwest European peoples provided the inspiration for the idea that late prehistoric Britain and Ireland were part of a far-flung ethnic "Celtic world."*⁴⁷

James writes that once the Celtic label took hold, all the later archaeological evidence was habitually interpreted by reference to it, including the way we have interpreted material evidence such as stone heads in terms of evidence for the "Celtic head cult." Hill writes that the Celtic interpretation of the past led to the selective utilisation of evidence to explain away the archaeological evidence, while ignoring material remains which did not fit.

*"...This allowed one to describe the structure of beliefs, while explaining the minutiae of the archaeological record: faunal remains as evidence of the feast, skulls in pits as evidence of the 'Celtic' fixation with the head."*⁴⁸

While I would support this revised viewpoint in broad terms, I was aware of the importance of an ethnological context for background of belief and veneration of the human head from an early stage of the current research. Therefore any discussion which confined discussion of head ritual to a pre-defined and narrow Celtic context, with the exclusion of parallel evidence from other cultures, would be unlikely to illuminate the longevity and universal influence of the head as a religious symbol. As a result, from an early stage I did not venture into the trap which befell earlier researchers who have interpreted the evidence from Britain purely in terms of a Celtic head cult. I believe the evidence for head ritual and symbolism from the British Isles can only be interpreted in the terms of what we know from ethnology of other peoples, both in neighbouring parts of Europe and Asia, and as far removed as the Pacific Islands and central

America, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

2.6.2. *Continuity and survival: from paganism to Christianity*

Many popular writers who have touched upon the subject of the claimed “Celtic” head cult in Britain have used it as evidence to support the notion, popular since the time of the writings of the nineteenth century antiquarians, which claimed the furtive survival of pagan beliefs many centuries after the official Christianisation of the country. This popular theory suggests the cult of the head was so fundamental to pagan belief that it survived two thousand years of Christian ministry, which by and large allowed the traditional practices of the peasantry to continue in the countryside often with tacit approval, and sometimes the overt connivance, of the clergy themselves. Evidence was found to support this “survival” theory from a range of disparate folk traditions and calendar customs, and from scattered historical evidence such as the letter from Pope Gregory to Abbot Mellitus who was sent as a missionary to Anglo-Saxon England in the late sixth century AD. This suggested that pagan idols of the English people should be destroyed, but the temples which contained them should be preserved, and re-dedicated for the use of the new religion. The relevant passage, reproduced in many popular surveys of folklore material, reads:

*“...for we ought to take advantage of well-built temples by purifying them from devil-worship and dedicating them to the service of the true God. In this way, I hope the people...will leave their idolatry and yet continue to frequent the places as formerly, so coming to know and revere the true God.”*⁴⁹

This evidence suggests a certain amount of continuity between paganism and Christianity during this period of change in early Anglo-Saxon England. In particular, site continuity from pagan temple to Christian church and the appearance of heads of archaic appearance in the structure of churches and cathedrals has proved highly significant to writers including the Bords and Anne Ross who have searched for evidence for the continuity of pagan belief into modern times.⁵⁰ However, as both Merrifield and Billingsley note, the survival of pagan concepts within folk tradition is not evidence of the continuity of pagan belief as such, as the church’s successful accommodation of a wide range of customs and festivals from well-dressing to Hallowe’en

demonstrates. Throughout history, people have always looked back to the past in order to find evidence of earlier beliefs which can provide identity and comfort in a changing world. Billingsley draws comparisons between the carving of heads and other forms of quasi-pagan traditions such as the equally long history of offerings to springs and wells. As an analogy, he describes a new tradition which developed within recent years when the public began to throw coins into a pool of water surrounding the Lord Mayor's coach in London:

*"Not, obviously, as offerings to some water spirit, but for luck. There is no reason to suppose that the offerings made to wells and other seemingly heathen customs recorded from the Middle Ages or later centuries were any more explicitly pagan than that; and it must be borne in mind that folk religion is composed of rituals that were felt to be necessary or beneficial in themselves, not because of their affiliation to some creed. They were thus human, not religious, responses to a situation and were not seen in terms of conflict with Christianity, which is a conflict largely created in modern minds."*⁵¹

As a parallel to the use of archaic stone heads to support claims of pagan Celtic survivals, the reappearance of the image of the foliate head or Green Man as a symbol of the New Age and environmental movements in the late twentieth century is another example of this re-interpretation of the past within the the framework of the preoccupations of the present day. As Kathleen Basford has shown, prototype images showing a human face intertwined with leaves and foliage can indeed be traced back into prehistory, but they reappear again in the Middle Ages in a thoroughly Christian context, not as the result of the direct continuity of belief in a Celtic nature god, but as the result of the resurgence of the motif in popular consciousness manifested in Christian architecture.⁵²

I believe the same processes can be seen to be at work in the appearance of the head symbol over the last two millennia in British material culture and folk tradition. The village mason who fashioned heads from stone in the early twentieth century cannot be said to be directly continuing the beliefs of the Celtic artisans who produced broadly similar creations. The separation in time means we will probably never know the motivations which lay behind the creators of these heads. A better way of interpreting both traditions would be to see them as drawing upon a store of folk belief and tradition which has archaic roots that are not necessarily Celtic in origin, but are more likely common to mankind as a whole, as the appearance of carved heads and masks in a variety of materials across the world suggests. In his study of collective or

“social” memory, the sociologist Paul Connerton argues that rituals and ceremonial performances of the past directly influence our experience of the present.⁵³ These rituals and habits, of which the tradition of head carving forms one distinct example, appear to have been transmitted from one generation to another via and as part of an evolving tradition. In the context of stone heads this tradition may have had an origin in pagan religious rituals, but it is not necessary to invoke these as the primary motivation behind the appearance of the images during the medieval period when they appear in a Christian context. We should beware of imposing interpretations which are the product of contemporary preoccupations upon our interpretation of the past, in the way the concept of the “Celtic” peoples has been used in another context. As Billingsley writes in reference to heads associated with early parish churches and cathedrals:

“We need not suggest a deliberate inclusion by stonemasons of pagan symbols in Christian edifices, although it is indisputable that the ecclesiastical heads have a pre-Christian religious origin; it is far more likely that the idea of the head as an appropriate and apotropaic symbol for thresholds had taken root in popular consciousness at the level of superstition and custom.”⁵⁴

In another context, Kim McCone questions the survival of stories depicting savage head-hunting expeditions and the keeping and display of trophy heads which are described in the manuscripts of the early Christian period, and which have been used to support claims of a surviving pagan Celtic head cult in early Irish society.⁵⁵ She argues these stories were committed to writing not because the monks deliberately and consciously wished to preserve elements of pagan Celtic beliefs, but because there was no reason for them to be squeamish about a practice which continued in secular society during their own time, and “almost certainly continued pagan usage.”⁵⁶ There is considerable evidence that the decapitation and display of heads continued in early Christian Ireland and indeed in medieval England, and there are also examples of similar barbarity in many stories in the Old Testament itself. McCone summarises this tradition by concluding:

“The beheading of enemies for display would hardly, then, have struck a medieval Irish churchman as an intrinsically pagan or, or as he would have put it, ‘gentile’ practice.”⁵⁷

In conclusion, I believe that the notion of direct continuity from pagan Celtic head ritual to its

more recent manifestations can be put aside in favour of an approach which uses anthropological and psychological approaches to interpret the processes which produced these beliefs. The appearance of severed heads in the motif index of folk tales and literature which are noted in Chapters 7 and 8 suggests that the symbol can be traced back to the very earliest Indo-European mythology in a variety of magical and ritual contexts. Furthermore, rather than being a symbol which can be identified as a specific cult focus of the Celtic tribes of northwest Europe, it would appear the head has been the subject of belief and veneration among many non-Celtic peoples. Anne Ross maintains the Celts:

*"...were singular in the extent to which they carried this veneration incorporating the head in their art and in their religious practices as a symbol and as an object of superstitious regard."*⁵⁸

However, given the continuing controversy over who or what group of peoples could be accurately described as "Celts," it appears this pan-European approach to the interpretation of the material evidence is unlikely to provide fruitful results in the present study. The method followed here relies upon a comparative approach, using empirical evidence from case studies of beliefs and traditions from specific regions of the British Isles. As a result, where possible the term "Celtic" will be avoided as part of the general discussion, other than where it is necessary when referring to the interpretations of other authorities or writers.

2.7. Presentation of material

The aspects of belief associated with the human head analysed by this research are presented in the following order in this study:

1. An introduction and review of the extant literature dealing with the human head in British folklore and tradition;
2. A chronological review of the archaeological evidence for head ritual in Britain, beginning from the earliest times, followed by a review of the written sources and the insular folk traditions.
3. Analysis of the corpus of material relating to carved heads, followed by geographical case studies, drawing upon fieldwork data.
4. Presentation of primary and secondary fieldwork sources relating to oral traditions

surrounding carved heads and guardian skulls in British tradition, presented in the form of a gazetteer in the latter case.

5. Comparative analysis of the fieldwork material relating to stone heads and skull traditions from Britain in an ethnological context.

6. Conclusions, followed by a series of appendices.

These subjects have been expanded into nine chapters which discuss all aspects of archaeological, historical, mythological and traditional evidence relating to beliefs surrounding the human head in the British Isles. Because Chapters 5, 6 and 7 contain a large amount of fieldwork material they each have separate preambles which set out the methods by which the data was gathered and presented. The chapters which follow can be divided roughly into three overlapping groups. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 present a general overview of the surviving material relating to archaeology, documentary evidence and surviving tradition collected from secondary sources. The case study presented in Chapter 5 marks the beginning of a second group of chapters which include the bulk of the primary fieldwork collected during the course of the research. Finally, Chapters 8 and 9 place the foregoing material into context, and include analysis, conclusions and ideas for future research.

Contents of individual chapters which follow this methodology can be summarised as follows: Chapter 3, Archaeology and Documentary Evidence for Head Ritual, is divided into three sections which overlap, namely the empirical evidence of archaeology from the very earliest times until the Romano-British and early English period, where it overlaps with the written evidence. The documentary evidence for the head cult consists of the writings of the Graeco-Roman authors, followed by the earliest insular literature of the British Isles, which includes the early Irish sagas and annals, and the earliest English sources. The final section includes a wide range of folk traditions and stories from the early medieval period onwards. Chapter 4, Archaic Stone Heads of the Celtic Tradition, collates the extant material on carved stone heads which has been touched upon in the previous chapter in the context of archaeology. Here the more complex problems relating to interpretation, dating and typology of heads are examined, and attempts are made to group carvings into broad categories, including Celtic and Roman, medieval, ecclesiastical and modern. Attributes of heads, including double and triple faces and other symbols, are examined and their meaning in a folklore context explored. The geographical distribution of these enigmatic artefacts and their significance from the context of folklore and

archaeology are the subject of the case studies featured in Chapter 5. The first half of this chapter begins with a review of the work already undertaken by fieldworkers including Sidney Jackson, Helen Hickey, Martin Petch and John Billingsley in northern England and Ireland. The second half consists of my own case study of stone head material from the Peak District, including analysis and distribution maps.

Following this grouping of chapters, Chapters 6 and 7 contain the bulk of the fieldwork which form the basis of this study. Both primary fieldwork material and secondary sources, mainly the Sidney Jackson card index file, are utilised for this analysis of oral traditions relating to carved heads of the "Celtic" tradition and later. Chapter 6 consists of a contextual preamble followed by a discussion which divides the stories themselves into three tentative categories, each containing a number of sub-categories. Chapter 7 discusses the important "Guardian Skull" traditions which form an important category of British folk tradition. The structure aims to fit the stories into a broad context alongside the archaeological evidence and the traditions relating to stone heads, which they very closely parallel. Primary and secondary sources relating to the traditions are presented in the form of a gazetteer or catalogue, ordered alphabetically by English county, and within each county traditions ordered again by alphabetical order. Thirty two separate stories are represented with all available source material, both documentary and oral, presented in chronological order.

Following on from the material presented in the gazetteer of skull traditions, Chapter 8 aims to collate the evidence presented in Chapters 6 and 7, with the aim of highlighting similarities and differences between the head and skull stories in British folklore. These are set in the context of ethnological and anthropological material from outside Europe. Finally, in Chapter 9, the issues discussed during the whole study are here drawn together. This chapter discusses how the aims of the initial research have been achieved, and offers a critique of the various techniques and approaches adopted. Suggestions are also made for future research which could evolve from the basis of this material and the main body of the study.

Following the bibliography, which provides a comprehensive guide to the primary and secondary sources utilised, the study concludes with a series of appendices. These include as Appendix 1 the database of Peak District heads used as a basis for the primary case study in Chapter 5. A list of the fieldwork material is included as Appendix 2. Photographs and maps cross-referenced to the text appear as Appendix 3 and 4.

Chapter 3, which follows, marks the beginning of the section of the current research which presents a summary of the empirical evidence for the existence of beliefs and ritual activity surrounding the human head in a variety of contexts from the earliest times. While the earliest archaeological evidence is wide-ranging both in time and space across the European continent, the focus of attention shifts directly towards Britain as we move nearer the dawn of recorded history and the material becomes more amenable to scientific analysis and interpretation.

- ¹ Merrifield, p.184.
- ² Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*.
- ³ Jackson, p.1.
- ⁴ Sidney Jackson (ed.) *Archaeology Group Bulletin*, Bradford Art Gallery and Museums Service, West Yorkshire, Vol 5, No 7 (July 1960), Vol 10, No 1 (January 1965).
- ⁵ *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani*, Vol 1, fascicules 1-6, published by the Oxford University Press, see individual references to Brewer, Coulston and Phillips, Cunliffe and Fulford, Keppie and Arnold, Phillips and Tufi.
- ⁶ Martin Petch, *Celtic Stone Sculptures* (London: Karsten Schubert and Rupert Wace Ancient Art, 1989), pp.5-31.
- ⁷ Stephen Biscoe, 'A stony gaze into history', *Yorkshire Post*, 13 December 1990.
- ⁸ David Clarke, 'Digging up our past in the vale of the Celts', *Peak and Pennine* (November/December, 1997), 42-46.
- ⁹ David Clarke, 'Head Hunting', *Pennine Magazine*, 11, no. 3 (June-July, 1990), 32-33.
- ¹⁰ Andy Roberts and David Clarke, 'Heads and Tales: The Screaming Skull Legends of Britain,' in *Fortean Studies* (ed.) Mike Dash, Vol. 3 (London: John Brown, 1996), pp. 126-59.
- ¹¹ Billingsley, 'Archaic Head Carving in West Yorkshire and Beyond.'
- ¹² Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*.
- ¹³ Riddel, *Stone heads from the North- Some observations*; Matilda Webb, *The Cult of the Severed Head in the Celtic Tradition* (unpublished undergraduate dissertation, Department of Archaeology, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1986).
- ¹⁴ Yorkshire Archaeological Society: Sidney Jackson's Index of Carved Stone Heads and related sculpture. Archive reference number 1277, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 23 Clarendon Road, Leeds LS2 9NZ, West Yorkshire. The card index was transferred temporarily to the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, University of Sheffield, from January 1994 to July 1995 by special arrangement for the purposes of this research.
- ¹⁵ Manchester Museum stone head card index file, care of Dr John Prag and Martin Petch, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL.
- ¹⁶ Stephen Kerry, 'The Bradford Collection', *Popular Archaeology* 2, No.2 (1981), 33.
- ¹⁷ Webb, p.4.
- ¹⁸ A. W. Selkirk, review of *Celtic and Other Stone Heads*, *Current Archaeology* 44 (1974), 269.
- ¹⁹ Sidney Jackson card index, no. 41.
- ²⁰ Sidney Jackson, *Archaeology Group Bulletin*, Volume 5, No 7 (July 1960), 13.
- ²¹ Sidney Jackson card index file, no.19.
- ²² Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone Heads*.
- ²³ Personal communication from Gavin Edwards, Ilkley Manor House Museum, 21 April 1993. This and subsequent references to correspondence and fieldwork interviews will note dates where possible, or approximate dates when no precise date was recorded or cited in correspondence.
- ²⁴ Petch, 'Celtic Stone Heads.'
- ²⁵ Billingsley, 'Archaic Head Carving in West Yorkshire and Beyond,' pp. 1-12.
- ²⁶ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone Heads*, p.4.
- ²⁷ Martin Petch, *A list of Celtic Heads and associated sculpture in Derbyshire* (unpublished manuscript, Manchester Museum, 1989).
- ²⁸ Personal communication from Peter Clark, Chief Planning and Highways Officer, Derbyshire County Council, County Offices, Matlock, 24 July 1991.
- ²⁹ Billingsley, 'Archaic Head Carving in West Yorkshire and Beyond.'
- ³⁰ Basford, *The Green Man*.
- ³¹ Petch, *Celtic Stone Sculptures*, p.6.

- ³² Ibid., p. 8.
- ³³ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone Heads*, pp. 2-4.
- ³⁴ Merrifield, pp.1-9.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p.3.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p.7.
- ³⁷ Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* (London: Sage, 1994), pp. 21-22.
- ³⁸ Gillian Bennett, 'Tales my mother told me: The relevance of oral history,' in *Aspects of British Calendar Customs* (ed.) Theresa Buckland and Juliette Wood (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press,1993), pp. 102-3.
- ³⁹ See for example Barry Cunliffe, *The Celtic World* (London: Bodley Head, 1979),pp.15-19; and Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp.94-172.
- ⁴⁰ For the traditional view of Celtic migration see T.G.E. Powell, *The Celts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), pp. 13-61.
- ⁴¹ J.D. Hill, 'Weaving the strands of a new Iron Age,' *British Archaeology*, 17 (September 1996), 8.
- ⁴² For an example of the revisionist view see John Collis, *The European Iron Age* (London: Batsford, 1984), pp. 9-23.
- ⁴³ Hill, 9.
- ⁴⁴ Hutton, p. 195.
- ⁴⁵ Cunliffe, *The Celtic World* , p.15.
- ⁴⁶ Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: The construction of a myth* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), p.287.
- ⁴⁷ Alec Marsh, 'Is the Celtic civilisation merely a myth?', *Daily Telegraph* , 12 March 1998.
- ⁴⁸ J.D. Hill, 'Re-thinking the Iron Age,' *Scottish Archaeological Review* , 6 (1989), 21.
- ⁴⁹ Janet Bord and Colin Bord, *The Secret Country* (London: Granada, 1976), p. 116.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 115-143.
- ⁵¹ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze* , p.180.
- ⁵² Basford, pp. 9-22.
- ⁵³ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 1-5.
- ⁵⁴ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze* , p.94.
- ⁵⁵ Kim McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present in early Irish literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990; Maynooth Monographs No. 3), pp. 29-30.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 30.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 30.
- ⁵⁸ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* , p. 95.

Chapter 3

Archaeology and documentary evidence for head ritual



“The motif of the severed head figures throughout the entire field of Celtic cult practice, temporally and geographically, and it can be traced in both representational and literary contexts from the very beginning to the latter part of the tradition.”

Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*¹

3.1. Introduction

This chapter sets out the archaeological evidence for head related ritual activity and the veneration of the head in British prehistory. While the evidence will be drawn from the archaeological record primarily of Britain and Ireland, material from the European continent will be used where necessary to provide context. During the first four millennia BC so much of the archaeological record of Britain has to be viewed within a wider European context, as many artefacts and burial rites for example are influenced by developments on the continent as well as having their own unique insular peculiarities.

The archaeological evidence is followed by a discussion of the references to head-hunting among the Celtic tribes of continental Europe by the Graeco-Roman writers, where this is relevant to the British evidence. Subsequently the evidence for head ritual from the vernacular Celtic writings of the later medieval period in Ireland and Wales will be discussed. Finally, the rich complementary evidence from the folk traditions and legends of Britain will be examined in the context of the archaeological and documentary evidence discussed earlier.

3.2. The Stone Age in Europe

The earliest manifestation of the veneration of the human head in Europe can be traced back to the Old Stone Age, where there is evidence from a number of cave sites of what James calls "a cult of skulls." From a number of caves dating from the Upper Palaeolithic there is evidence of ritual attention focussed upon the skull. Examples include a skull from Czechoslovakia painted with red ochre, and others from France surrounded by shells and stone, while still others appear to have been fashioned into cups for drinking.² At the Mesolithic site of Ofnet in Bavaria twenty seven human skulls were found showing evidence of being severed from the body after death, and then:

*"...carefully preserved for ritual purposes, doubtless, as in Borneo today, because in them it was supposed that soul-substance resided having the properties of a vitalising agent."*³

These skulls had been coated in red ochre and some were decorated with shells, while others showed signs of injuries which suggested organised rituals in which decapitation and the

preservation of the head took place. James suggested the purpose behind this was "either to extract its soul substance or as a trophy."⁴ Billingsley has drawn attention to head motifs which appear upon some of the earliest sculptures and art which have survived from this period. These include faces carved on cave walls like those from El Juyo in northern Spain estimated to be around fourteen thousand years old, and others carved upon a wall and a pillar at the nearby Altamira cave.⁵ Some of these appear to have been the centre of ritual attention.

Excavations in the pre-pottery Neolithic B levels of settlements in the Middle East, near Damascus, found evidence of similar treatment of skulls dating from 7,000 BC. At Jericho and Tel Ramad, skulls had been carefully buried beneath the floors of huts. Some had been modelled with plaster and painted with red ochre, with eye sockets either painted or decorated with cowrie shells to produce the appearance of a "death mask." Gowrie suggested the special treatment of the skull appeared to suggest the existence of a cult of ancestors or heroes, with individuals of exceptional worth chosen to have their heads removed and preserved after death.⁶ Evidence suggests a widespread cult of human skulls existed in other parts of the Near East, including Cayonu in Turkey where a special ritual structure was discovered containing seventy crania, which was described by the excavators as "The Temple of the Skull."⁷

Evidence from the archaeological record of the Neolithic or New Stone Age in Britain (circa 5,000-2,200 BC) appears to support the view that a similar cult of skulls existed, or at least skulls were singled out for special treatment in the chambered tombs and other ritual sites where traces of an ancestor cult have been discovered. Discussing evidence from Wessex and southern England, Stones notes the very careful preservation of the remains of the dead and subsequent burial of selected bones in specially constructed tombs like the West Kennet long barrow in Wessex, which may have functioned as a shrine for an individual tribe or family's territory.⁸ At West Kennet and roughly contemporary tombs in Orkney and elsewhere, skulls and long bones were carefully separated and piled together, as if to prepare them for some ritual use. Skulls are noteworthy not only because of their numbers, but also in some cases by their complete absence, as noted by Burl at West Kennet where skulls were missing as if they had been deliberately removed for rites elsewhere.⁹

Cranial fragments are prominent in the finds from the earthwork ditches at Windmill Hill, Wiltshire, Hambledon Hill in Dorset and elsewhere which are thought to have been excarnation centres where the bodies of the dead were left to decay. At Whitehawk in Sussex a

"disproportionate" number of skull and lower jaw fragments were found along with animal bones, pottery and charred flints close to a hearth.¹⁰ Burl suggests certain bones had been deliberately brought to Windmill Hill for:

*"...magico-religious rites, having been abstracted from tombs like West Kennet and then reburied when they had been used, bones especially selected for the purpose."*¹¹

He suggests bones, especially skulls, were removed from tombs specifically for use in outdoor rituals, and may have been carried along the avenues at Avebury to the stone circles for "fertility rites" in the cove and the Sanctuary on nearby Overton Hill.¹² Skulls from the long barrow at Fussell's Lodge in Wiltshire showed signs of weathering as if they had been removed for outdoor rituals elsewhere and then replaced at a later date.¹³

An insight into the powers that were believed to lie within ancestor skulls can be inferred from the seemingly deliberate placing of some of the skulls. At Gorsey Bigbury henge in Somerset, a man, woman and child had been buried in a ditch and a later period after decomposition the skulls of the woman and child, minus the lower jaw, had been disinterred and then reburied against the eastern entrance.¹⁴ Burl suggests this was to provide a "dedicatory offering," perhaps to watch over the entrance. At the Neolithic causewayed enclosure of Hambledon Hill in Dorset, severed heads some with jaws and parts of the spinal column still attached were carefully placed in pits and ditches. This led the excavators to conclude the skulls may have been deliberately placed for ritual purposes to "reinforce or enhance" the boundary of the sacred area, echoing later boundary rituals involving skulls and heads from the Iron Age and later periods of history.¹⁵

Writing of the Neolithic Wessex culture, Stones notes that:

*"...one cannot escape the conclusion that some form of head-hunting must have been practised and formed part of the Western Neolithic culture since similar cranial fragments, including cranial amulets, have also been recorded from France and Switzerland."*¹⁶

The carefully preserved and sorted skulls uncovered at tombs such as that at Isbister in the Orkney Islands, where two side chambers were filled with skulls and others were placed on top of heaps of unrelated bones in the side chamber, indicate their importance in rituals which may

have connected the tribe with the ancestors. This tradition appears to have continued into the Bronze Age in areas like Orkney where later stone cists show an arrangement of skulls reminiscent of the treatment in the early long barrows and chambered tombs.¹⁷

The Neolithic also marks the appearance in Northwest Europe of the earliest designs depicting stylised faces in the passage-grave art which is found in chambered tombs in Ireland, Britain and at Gavrinis in Brittany.¹⁸ While in some cases it is unclear whether the designs were specifically intended to represent a human face, in others, for instance the carving from the wall of La Hougue de Denus, a chambered tomb on the Island of Guernsey, the features are unmistakably human.¹⁹ In this case the minimal features of recessed eyes and lines demarcating the nose and mouth are all that was necessary to provide a striking image. While there must remain some doubt as to whether some of these designs were really meant to depict human faces, there is even at this stage an overt emphasis on the eyes which was to become such an important feature in later human representation in the Bronze Age.

3.3. The Bronze Age (2200-1000 BC)

The Bronze Age in Western Europe is characterised by both continuity from the Neolithic in areas like Orkney and Ireland, and at the same time great social changes elsewhere in Britain with an emphasis upon individual wealth, land ownership and the development of hierarchies. Alongside the introduction of metals, there were distinct changes in religious ritual away from the great megalithic monuments towards individual cremation burial.²⁰ This period also sees the gradual appearance of stylised faces both on statue menhirs in central Europe and upon Etruscan and Greek burial urns and masks in the Mediterranean. From Britain, faces are depicted upon three chalk cylinders from the grave of a child on Folkton Wold, East Yorkshire, dated to around 1800 BC. The cylinders are decorated with highly stylised faces reminiscent of the early Neolithic tombs, with the features depicted in purely linear forms. Ross suggests their placement within a grave suggests they had an apotropaic or cult function.²¹

From a slightly later date in the Bronze Age there is a sculptured cobblestone from the centre of a cairn excavated from Mecklin Park in Cumbria, at more than eight hundred feet above sea level on Irton Fell. Dated to the first half of the second millennium BC, the pebble of Borrowdale Java was found at a depth of eighteen inches below the cairn surface. Its surface had been

pecked with a stone tool to depict a pair of eyes and a mouth, with engraved lines possibly representing facial hair, the whole appearing as a crude representation of a human head.²² This stone provides the earliest excavated evidence of a stone head from the British Isles.

Evidence of the archaic style found in later Celtic art is found on a number of artefacts which have survived by chance from the archaeological record of the Bronze Age, including the crude wooden figurine recovered from a bog near Ralaghan, in County Cavan, Ireland. Once thought to be Iron Age in date, recent radiocarbon dating has placed it in the late Bronze Age.²³ The crude naive style of the face can be compared to other wooden cult figurines recovered from watery sites like that from Ballachulish in Argyllshire, Scotland. Another early attempt at depicting the human form are the Roos Carr pinewood figures found in the Humber Estuary, and assigned to the late Bronze Age.²⁴ The huge eye sockets which characterise the figurines, and simple features of the face resemble those of a skull. This kind of stylistic rendering, along with the eyes formed by quartz pebbles, are features also associated with some of the carved stone heads discussed later. Also of this date is a carved ash runner discovered beneath the prehistoric roadway at Corlea, County Longford, Ireland, whose crude form creates a zoomorphic or anthropomorphic impression.²⁵ It may be a prototype of the carved totem pole which existed as a cult focus in the Phase Four structure at Navan Fort in Ulster, and elsewhere in continental Europe particularly in Germany. Some of these idols appear to have been carved from natural timbers with varying degrees of crudeness to represent the human form, and it is possible this tradition evolved into the later Iron Age pillar stones surmounted by heads like the sculpture from Pfalzfeld in Germany described later.

Raftery has drawn analogies between these timber carvings and the description by the poet Lucan of a Gaulish sacred grove destroyed by the Roman legions in the first century AD:

*"...From the black springs water wells up and gloomy images of the Gods, rough-hewn from tree trunks, stand there...the people do not frequent it to worship but leave it to the gods..."*²⁶

3.4. The development of Celtic art in Europe and Britain

Archaeologists and art historians agree the development of beliefs centred upon the human head among the Celtic tribes who inhabited north and central Europe during the Iron Age emerged from earlier traditions which had their roots in the Bronze Age. Benoit notes the veneration of

the head grew out of early Chalcolithic traditions of the coastal Mediterranean, including the "owl-heads" of the lower Rhone valley and the statue-menhirs of Languedoc and Cisalpine Liguria.²⁷ Similar carvings are known from Bronze Age contexts in Sicily and Corsica, where burial urns in caves contain single skulls but no other parts of the skeleton.

Images of the stylised human heads emerge in the abstract art in Bronze Age contexts which have been traced by the Megaws. During the seventh and sixth centuries BC, for example Etruscan artists used the image of the head as a feature of their bronze death masks, and face pots and urns also feature human heads in elaborate funerary rites. The Etruscans used the image of the head alone to depict a whole warrior on their burial urns, and the features used were typically stylised and archaic, in a style which is summarised by Raymond Bloch: "for simplification and stylisation, for the evocative rather than the realistic line."²⁸ Vases from this period contain images of people consulting heads which may have acted as oracles as well as focusses for votive offerings to the spirit world. The similarity of the early Etruscan masks and faces to later "Celtic" imagery is obvious. Later Etruscan masks, fixed to the side of urns and pots, show the growing influence of the portrait style imported from their Greek and Roman neighbours. They also display the association between heads and skulls and the world of the dead in their association with funerary rites, a feature also associated with some Romano-British carved heads.

Later the stylised rendering of the human face found in Etruscan art was blended with native La Tene art on Celtic metalwork of the La Tene period, by artists and smiths working in bronze and iron. Heads and faces frequently appear in metalwork upon cult vessels such as buckets, cauldrons, masks and objects with a martial theme such as chariot fittings and weaponry such as daggers, swords and shields like the Wandsworth shield boss recovered from the River Thames. Archaeologists have identified two phases of Celtic art which are named after two separate stages in Celtic culture, Halstatt and La Tene, which take their names from archaeological sites in continental Europe. Each art style had individual characteristics, with humans and animals featuring strongly in the artwork of the early Halstatt period. These themes slowly develop more abstract imagery during the later La Tene phase, which overlaps into the Roman period, with styles developing motifs based upon designs incorporating foliate and vegetal forms which can be viewed as the earliest prototypes of the foliate heads found in medieval churches and Cathedrals (see Chapter 5).

As the Bronze Age in central Europe evolved into the Iron Age the Megaws point out the growing importance attached to the human head in symbolic art, alongside the rarity of depictions of the whole human form in the developing La Tene style. Representations of the human head are clearly an important feature of the entire La Tene period, both on metalwork and carved in stone on pillars or freestanding stone heads in central Europe. The Megaws write:

*"This is generally thought to be connected with ideas of basic importance in Celtic religion, since the head was regarded as the seat of the soul as well as of the intellect. It is possible that the avoidance of depictions of whole bodies may be due to some kind of taboo in Celtic society, as well as demonstrating the Celtic capacity for rendering visual ideas by representing only part of the whole."*²⁹

During the period of the early La Tene art style the Waldalgesheim or continuous vegetal style heads on metalwork become more and more elusive, often appearing only as a suggestion of an eye or a nose buried in the foliage or tendrils. This is a style of face classified by Jacobsthal as the "Cheshire Cat." He wrote:

*"One can often hesitate whether a face is intended or not. There is something fleeting and evanescent about these masks which often are not even complete faces, only parts of a face...It is the mechanism of dreams, where things have floating contours and pass into other things. If it were not too frivolous, one might call this the Cheshire-style: the cat appears in the tree and often just the grin of the cat."*³⁰

Infrequently, "Celtic heads" appear during this early Celtic period carved in stone. The stone pillar from Pfalzfeld, St Goar, in the territory of the Treveri dates from the fourth century BC. It features human heads, foliage and ropework on each of its four sides near the base of the five feet high sculpture. Ross sees these objects as combining both native Celtic and Etruscan elements which are subtly blended.³¹ The Pfalzfeld stone has been interpreted by Enright (see Chapter 4) as a cult pillar stone featuring two powerful symbols, the head and the phallus, a combination which is known from tombstones in Etruria and in north Britain.³² Commenting upon the significance of this juxtaposition, Ross notes:

"...although the symbolic head and phallic stone are known from Etruria as separate elements, the uniting of the two into a potent apotropaic symbol must be regarded as a Celtic

*development of elements common to both cultures.*³³

It is during the last five hundred years BC that the first evidence of "Celtic stone heads" appear in the archaeological record of Europe. Although none are known from the British Isles during this period, the examples from continental Europe display some of the characteristic features which are associated with the "Celtic tradition" evident in later sculpture from northwest Europe. Of the small number of free-standing stone heads which can be securely dated to the La Tene period, that from Msecke Zehrovice in Bohemia has been studied extensively by the Megaws.³⁴ The ragstone head was found broken into five pieces just outside the southwest corner of a *viereckschanze*, a ritual enclosure, in a pit associated with bones and pottery consistent with a second century BC context. The features of the head, including curved eyebrows, almond eyes, moustache, hair depicted as ridges sweeping back from the forehead and a neck ornament or torc have been described as typical of the early La Tene period which have been identified upon contemporary metalwork such as a bronze flagon mount from the Durrnberg in Germany. The Megaws use the Bohemian example to illustrate the essential differences between "Celtic" representations of the human head and Classical portrait heads of the same period. They write:

*"The differences between the mimetic and representational nature of classical art and the abstract and symbolic nature of Celtic art can be clearly seen in the different treatment of the human head...Individual portraiture as such was alien to the basic conception of Celtic art, which relies instead on the extraction of the universal essence of the Celtic head, whether divine or human, rather than the representation of specific persons."*³⁵

Later in the La Tene period heads and faces remain of continuing importance, and appear with increasing frequency and realism as the Iron Age ends. Human faces are explicit on the decoration of coins, bowls and weapons where they are probably of both talismanic and supernatural significance, as Ross records a tradition from Ireland that weapons were inhabited by demons.³⁶ Faces appear on knife handles and swords of both Gaulish and British origin, where the heads are set between arms of the hilt. These faces are typically Celtic in their treatment of the hair, almond eyes and "expressionless" stare.

Similar divine or stylised heads appear on a number of later Iron Age coins before the influence of Roman and Greek culture led to the increased portrayal of "portrait" heads. One British

example was excavated in situ from the Romano-Celtic temple at Harlow in Essex and appears to illustrate the Celtic predilection for head-hunting or human sacrifice described by the Romans. It depicts a club or sceptre-bearing deity or priest brandishing what appears to be a severed human head in his right hand, held by the hair.³⁷ Another coin from Petersfield in Hampshire, dating from the first century AD, depicts a head with antlers and a wheel-crested headdress which may depict the Gaulish horned god, Cernunnos.³⁸

3.5. The Iron Age (1000 BC-AD 55)

The most spectacular archaeological evidence which has been used to support claims for the existence of a "head cult" in continental Europe is found in southern Gaul during the period immediately preceding the Roman conquest. Here a number of Celto-Ligurian religious shrines display grim evidence for the offering of severed heads of sacrificial and battle-victims to the gods, and the prominent role which the head played in organised pagan religion and ritual. The temples featuring skulls all date from the fourth to the second centuries BC and are found alongside carved representations of heads in stone. Although the sculpture is influenced by Mediterranean styles due to the presence of Greek colonists in nearby Massilia, the uncompromising severed head imagery is alien to civilised Classical taste.

At Entremont, the hilltop shrine dates to the last phase of the oppidum of the Saluvii before it was destroyed by the Romans in 123 BC. The sanctuary was a substantial stone built structure, complete with porticos decorated with stone carvings of severed heads and real human skulls nailed into specially-made niches.³⁹ One skull had a javelin head embedded in it and two others had been fractured by javelin balls, supporting the suggestion some at least were trophy heads of warriors obtained in battle. To complete the martial picture a room at the shrine known as the Hall or Sanctuary of the Skulls, contained stone sculptures depicting piles of severed heads, alongside crushed and mummified skulls which may have at one time been placed on stakes along a sacred way. One stone, which appears to have functioned as a threshold pillar, features twelve crude incised stone heads carved in relief, the lowest in the series inverted, which Green suggests symbolised death or descent into the Underworld.⁴⁰ Each of the mouthless heads consists of a pear-shaped face, with the basic features consisting of a brow ridge and nose forming a T-shape.

Another suggestive carving from the portico depicts a horseman with a human head dangling from the neck of his mount, an image which invokes the descriptions of the Celtic head-hunters from Graeco-Roman sources. A similar shrine lintel was found at the Celtic oppidum at Nages, near Nimes, containing a frieze depicting severed heads alternating with images of galloping horses. The connection between horse images and severed human heads is suggested by reliefs from Roquepertuse, and horse skulls were found together with human and ox-skulls in a votive pit at Newstead Roman fort in north Britain dating from the second century AD.⁴¹ In Hindu mythology, a severed horse head imparts esoteric secrets and the “secret of sacrifice: how the head of the sacrifice is put on again and becomes complete.”⁴²

Remains were found at Entremont of statues depicting cross-legged warriors in armour, often clasping severed human heads beneath their palms. The stone heads are depicted with closed eyes, seemingly representing death, a feature associated with the carved heads beneath the claws of a carving depicting a wolf-like monster known as the “Tarasque of Noves”, from the same period. It has been suggested by Green that these images may have represented “the triumph of death over human life.”⁴³ In the context of Entremont Green suggests the presence of carved stone heads directly alongside real human skulls:

“...implies that the head was an essential offering: perhaps if the human supply dried up, then symbolic representations would do instead.”⁴⁴

Similar images are known from contemporary Provençal shrines at Roquepertuse and Glanum, both centres of the Saluvii. Roquepertuse, like Entremont, was similarly a mountain sanctuary, entered through a portico made up of three stone pillars with lintels or cross-beams upon which were nailed the skulls of young adult males who may have been battle victims. The sanctuary dates from as early as the sixth century BC, but the skulls and sculpture may date from an earlier period between the fourth and third centuries. The temple features a great raptor-like goose perched above the entrance portico which was guarded by a janiform carving of two human heads separated by a raptor’s beak. Five life-size statues of cross-legged men, a frieze featuring horse heads in profile, and severed heads are consistent with the nearby Provençal shrines, but none can surpass the imagery of the skull niches from the portico at Roquepertuse.⁴⁵

Increasing Roman influence upon the head cult and associated carving traditions in this area of

Celtic Liguria is demonstrated at the temple at Glanum, situated in a mountain valley in the Alpilles. Here the sanctuary was focussed upon another recurring feature associated with the head, a water shrine. This temple was built around a spring and cave at the confluence of the rivers Rhone and Durance, and the walls had pillars and recesses shaped to admit human skulls in a similar fashion to those at Entremont and Roquepertuse. At Glanum a stone capital was discovered which appears to date from a period after the Roman prohibition on sacrifice in the first century AD. On the capital, the crudely-carved heads of the earlier friezes have been replaced by more Classically-influenced faces, but these continue to display strong native Celtic influence. Two of the carvings depict horned male heads and a third shows a female wearing a diadem, all rising from acanthus leaves.⁴⁶

The existence of so many religious shrines where ritual appears to have been focussed so specifically upon the head as a cult object in this region near the mouth of the Rhone has led some archaeologists to suggest this area was exceptional in a wider European context.⁴⁷ Gerald Wait in his survey of the evidence for religion in Iron Age Britain has said there is no evidence for any similar head cult north of the Massif Central, which he concluded was "limited in distribution to the Celto-Ligurian area."⁴⁸

3.6. Evidence for use of the head as a religious symbol in Iron Age Britain

The evidence for head ritual in Britain from this period has been broken into three categories which will be examined separately, in terms of metalwork, archaeology of burials and watery contexts.

3.6.1. Metalwork and iconography

Evidence for head ritual from the archaeological evidence of the British Iron Age has remained ambiguous due to the paucity of finds and the lack of identifiable religious centres or temples.

In the metalwork of the period, depictions of the human face are rare, but as the Megaws note religious imagery was associated more with stone and wooden objects.⁴⁹ James and Rigby note the Britons did not personify their gods in stone or bronze like the Greeks or Romans, and that a tradition of stone carving was absent until the arrival of the Romans.⁵⁰ Wooden sculpture has

survived only in very rare instances, and the large number of stone sculptured heads cannot be dated other than stylistically, a method which has serious flaws. These examples will be discussed in Chapter 4.

However, human heads do appear on metalwork, which James and Rigby see as possible evidence of “a major change” over the earlier British avoidance of depictions of the human form and write:

“...perhaps this change, certainly of Gallic inspiration, reflects deeper innovations in British religious belief, and ways supernatural beings were conceived.”⁵¹

One of the earliest recognisable human representations found in Britain is a cast bronze hilt of an iron sword found in a burial of the second century BC from North Grimston, East Yorkshire. The pommel is in the form of a human head modelled in the round, with the face youthful and clean shaven, the hair drawn back from the forehead in stylised waves, but straight at the back.⁵² Of a slightly later date are the distinctive human heads which adorn two shield mounts from Tal-y-Llyn, Gwynedd, part of a hoard deposited in the first century BC. Here the faces are joined by a long neck common to both, but also forming part of an abstract pattern too.⁵³ More stylised human masks stand out from a metal bucket found at Aylesford in Kent, with typical expressionless faces which are similar to examples found on the continent. Significantly the eyes are depicted without pupils and apparently closed as if in contemplation, a feature found on many carved stone heads of later date. Less thoughtful human faces appear in repousse work on a metal vat from Marlborough, Wiltshire, of late Iron Age date. Their features, including moustaches, have been compared with those on late Iron Age coins from Britain, like the fully-bearded face on a bronze coin minted between AD 5 and AD 40 inscribed “TASC” for Tasciovanus, a tribal leader at the time of Caesar’s campaigns.⁵⁴

Both buckets are believed to have been manufactured around 50 BC and were possibly imported from Gaul, though the imagery has relevance to both British and Continental native contexts. They can be compared with three cast bronze masks from Welwyn, Hertfordshire, of a similar date, which may have originally functioned as bowl mounts. Highly stylised faces in relief also appear on the well-known shield boss found in the river Thames at Wandsworth in London which appears to have been deposited in a ritual context. Similar La Tene-style faces, complete with almond-shaped eyes, peer out from the repousse scrolls which encircle the gold torc

terminal found at Snettisham in Norfolk, an elite object symbolising royal power.⁵⁵ In addition, highly stylised male faces with long curled moustaches form part of the collection of horse-harnesses and weaponry found within the defences of the first century AD earthworks at Stanwick in North Yorkshire. These examples underline the importance of the head in a religious context because of the appearance of the symbol on elite objects such as weaponry, cauldrons and buckets which were used for ritual, rather than practical, purposes.

3.6.2. *Archaeology*

Much of the burial evidence from the British Iron Age has remained difficult to interpret due to the general lack of elaborate funeral rites at this period which has led to confusion in the differentiation of funeral and ritual deposits on settlement sites.⁵⁶ However, one type of burial which appears to be restricted to hillforts consists of single male skulls in pits such as those excavated by Cunliffe at Danebury hillfort in Hampshire.⁵⁷ These finds appeared to be buried as part of a complex group of rituals involving sacrifices and foundation deposits during different phases of construction of the earthen ramparts of the hillfort. Of the large number of human remains discovered, the absence of heads and arms was noted as a recurring feature, suggesting certain parts of the body were being removed before deposition. Isolated human skulls and fragments of skulls were found in eight pits; six were of adult males, one belonged to a child and one was female. Cunliffe found sufficient evidence to suggest male heads were being afforded "special treatment and it may be that this is archaeological evidence for head-hunting ritual."⁵⁸ Cunliffe interprets this evidence as being consistent with the later documentary evidence from Classical authors and the vernacular literature which refers to head-hunting and the taking of skulls for trophies. Describing the Danebury skulls, Wait writes:

*"...their final deposition is probably less a mortuary ritual than a votive or apotropaic treatment of the symbolically potent skulls of enemy dead."*⁵⁹

However, as Cunliffe notes there is nothing to distinguish the Danebury skulls between those of enemies or venerated ancestors.⁶⁰ Alternative explanations for the context of the skulls suggest they could have been foundation sacrifices as part of elaborate rites of termination, perhaps to provide apotropaic guardians of the hillfort's defences.⁶¹

New archaeological evidence has emerged in recent years which has added to the current knowledge of the special status which the head developed during the Iron Age and early Roman period in Britain. In the summer of 1994 a survey team from Bradford discovered a human skull in a *grike* or crevice in a limestone outcrop which formed part of a unique three thousand year old religious complex high up in the limestone hills near Grassington, in North Yorkshire.⁶² The site, which includes evidence of probable human and animal sacrifice, is situated on a plateau flanked by steep cliffs in Upper Wharfedale, bounded by the rivers Wharfe, Skirfare and Cowside Beck. Archaeologists working on the site at Skyrethorne have identified the remains of walls and buildings inhabited since the Bronze Age. The skull was found on a plateau covering about ten acres, cut off from surrounding countryside by a long wall which terminated close by a man-made circular depression in the rock. The skull was found in a rock cleft at the end of the wall. The excavators believe the plateau functioned as a sacred enclosure as unlike much of the surrounding countryside, it was grass covered, and may never have been cultivated in prehistory. The skull was found at the bottom of a deep grike at the southern end of the man-made wall. The jawbone was missing and the surface is badly eroded. Part of the cranium is covered with a deep green coloured moss. The context suggested it was deposited for ritual purposes either as an offering or a battle trophy which may have fallen from a niche or the pole upon which it was originally displayed. Analysis later ascertained the skull belonged to a slightly built young man aged between twenty and fifty years. Carbon dating of the skull at Oxford resulted in a date of between 770 and 390 BC.⁶³ Further excavation of the 150 metre long wall, which points due north, close to where the skull was found, uncovered three pony tibia bones. The bones, pointing upwards, were interred at regular intervals in a manner which suggested ritual rather than structural deposition. The three bones were all from different ponies, yet all seem to have been deposited at the same time. Vertically they are at the same level within the wall and excavators believe they were placed there possibly during the Iron Age. Survey leader Rob Watts has suggested the human skull from Skyrethorne was deposited as the result of the Celtic custom of decapitating enemies, with warriors displaying the heads as trophies outside their huts or religious sanctuaries.⁶⁴ Alternatively, it is possible the skull made its way into the *grike* as a result of natural processes or was carried there by a predator if the body had been exposed on a platform above the plateau.

Although the reconstruction of the original context of the Skyrethorne skull remains

problematical, trophy skulls have been identified at a number of other Iron Age and early Roman sites in Britain, including the hillforts at Stanwick, North Yorkshire and Bredon Hill in Gloucestershire. Here the skulls were retrieved from findspots which strongly suggested they had been deliberately placed on poles for display at or near the entrances to the fort, and can be compared to similar examples from hillforts in Spain and Gaul. Wait interprets these finds as martial trophies which should not be interpreted as evidence of religious attitudes centred upon the head,⁶⁵ but given the emphasis upon individual burial of skulls and the appearance of stylised faces on ritual metalwork during this period it seems trophy heads can provide additional evidence for the importance of the head as a symbol in both religious and apotropaic contexts. At Bredon Hill excavators found evidence of an early first century AD massacre in the gateway to the hillfort with evidence of subsequent head removal. The victims, where identifiable, were young males between twenty and thirty years of age. Excavator T.C. Hencken wrote:

*"From their position it may be suggested that they had come down with the burning gate, and it may be tentatively put forward as a suggestion that some severed heads had been set up on the gate, which had then been fired."*⁶⁶

The skull excavated near the entry to the great Brigantian fortress at Stanwick, North Yorkshire, had been detached from the neck below the fourth vertebra and the skin was intact when it was deposited. From its context it appears to have been deposited around the time of the capture of the fortress by the Roman forces in AD 71-74, after which the defences were dismantled. No other human bones were recovered from the site and the excavator, Sir Mortimer Wheeler, wrote:

*"The general inference is clear; the skull is that of an enemy or prisoner who had been violently attacked with sword or axe and had subsequently been beheaded. The head had probably been placed on a pole at the gate, or on the gate structure itself, perhaps as part of a trophy of which the accompanying sword and scabbard may have formed part."*⁶⁷

Similar human crania found near the settlement areas at the Glastonbury and Meare lake villages in Somerset featured sword cuts suggesting display or trophy origins.⁶⁸ Skulls from All Cannings Cross, Wiltshire had pieces cut out, one of which was polished and perforated

presumably for suspension, while others from Hillhead Broch in Caithness and Hunsbury in Wiltshire, have three holes drilled in the top for the same, or another ritual purpose (see Chapter 7). A skull excavated from a pit in the Roman city of St Albans displayed clear evidence of violent injury and cut-marks which seemed to indicate deliberate de-fleshing to produce a trophy skull of a youth aged fifteen to eighteen years in age. The skull was found during excavations at Folly Lane, St Albans, which revealed features of a Romano-British temple along with cremation and inhumation burials.⁶⁹ The pit containing the skull was dated to the second century AD, contemporary with the temple, and was found beside the remains of a dog and an iron knife. The lower mandible of the skull was missing, and it is assumed this had fallen off or been removed after the skull had been defleshed and exposed. A scanning electron microscope showed evidence of more than ninety cut marks on the cranium and holes caused by blows to the head, and analysis showed these were more likely to be the results of de-fleshing rather than scalping. Mays and Steele speculate that the St Albans skull had been displayed within the temple for ritual purposes before being placed in the pit. Part of the skull known as the foramen magnum was missing so it was not possible to say if this had been damaged as a result of it being mounted upon a staff or pole.⁷⁰

This skull appears to be unique from the Romano-British period in displaying deliberate signs of defleshing, which suggest the skull itself was the valued object. At Wroxeter parts of up to nine skulls but only two jawbones were found in the Roman basilica where they had become incorporated in rubble during the fourth century AD, but their original date and location remains ambiguous. Two showed evidence of sword cuts, and a fragment of a cranium from a pit displayed knife marks on its brow suggesting it had been scalped before deposition. The skulls had a ginger discolouration which later examination revealed had been caused by a coating which consisted of linolenic acid, or a related substance found in preparations such as linseed oil. The preservation of trophy skulls in linseed oil is specifically noted by Strabo and other Roman commentators writing contemporaneously. The excavator at Wroxeter, Philip Barker wrote:

*"The inescapable conclusion is that the heads had been detached from their bodies...and the skulls treated with oil, presumably so that they could be preserved and perhaps displayed as relics or trophies."*⁷¹

Marsh and West produced a catalogue of human skulls or parts of crania, which had been found as deposits at a number of pre-Roman Iron Age, and later Romano-British sites.⁷² Some of this evidence suggests connections between skulls and early British shrines or temples, as most powerfully demonstrated in a number of pre-Roman shrines in southern Gaul. For example, parts of two skulls were found built into the stone wall of a Romano-Celtic temple at Cosgrove in Northamptonshire which replaced an earlier timber shrine. The excavator suggested the skulls may have functioned as cult objects in the earlier British shrine before they were re-used as foundation deposits when the stone temple was built.⁷³

Elsewhere in Britain during the late Iron Age and early Roman period there is evidence for the existence of cult activity surrounding the head, including trophy skulls, individual skulls found in springs and wells and cephalotrophy, the ceremonial burial of the head alone. While some of these skulls appear to be directly related to the Celtic custom of head-hunting and collection of head trophies, others appear to be those of sacrificial victims buried as part of an elaborate ritual perhaps to provide apotropaic guardians of tribal boundaries. However, it is sometimes difficult if not impossible to differentiate between these two functions in the fragments which survive from the meagre archaeological record of the British Iron Age, so conclusions based upon this evidence should remain tentative at the present time.

3.6.3. Heads in watery contexts

The connection of heads and skulls with water in the form of sacred springs and pools, rivers and bogs is much in evidence during the late Iron Age and early Roman period. Evidence both from archaeology and the vernacular tradition indicates rivers, lakes and pools were places where it was believed deities could be contacted or consulted. As a result, precious objects dedicated to the gods would be an appropriate offering at a watery shrine during this period. Carved heads and human skulls are also associated with early water shrines, a tradition which can be traced back to the Bronze Age in Europe. The heads at the Iron Age temple in Glanum, Provence, have already been noted, and Ross has pointed out the "seeming fundamental association" of the Celtic head cult with venerated waters.⁷⁴ A large amount of wooden Celtic sculpture has survived in Gaul which has been preserved in the waters of two important shrines. More than three hundred votive offerings were found at the source of the Seine near

Dijon, from the pool of a Gallo-Roman sanctuary which dates from the first century AD. The collection contains carved human heads which the Megaws date from the pre-Roman period because they show no sign of Mediterranean influence in their style.⁷⁵ Similar wooden statues were found in a thermal spring at the source of the Rhone at Chamalieres in the territory of the Arverni in the Massif Central. These show more Classical influence in their realistic style, but the Celtic tradition continues in the characteristic oval eyes found on the figures and heads.⁷⁶

Water shrines appear as important cult centres early in the Bronze Age and the instinct to make offerings to them continues into the later Iron Age and early Roman period. In addition, the importance of water as a threshold or boundary between life and death, and an entrance to the Otherworld, is marked in both the vernacular tales and folk traditions. As liminal places, heads and skulls would be wholly appropriate as offerings or ritual objects at water shrines, and many examples of carved stone heads at spring sites in Britain are described in Chapter 6. There is also evidence for skulls buried in pits and ritual shafts which may have been seen as portals for communication or propitiation of chthonic powers.

Marsh and West have shown that human skulls were frequently offered in ritual contexts at watery places during the Roman period, apparently as a direct continuation of a deeply-rooted native British tradition. One skull found on the site of the Bank of London was found as part of a deliberate filling of an early Roman well, dating from the first to the third century AD, which suggested it was part of a complex foundation ritual.⁷⁷ Ross states "any analysis of a group of Romano-British wells reveals the consistent occurrence of human heads together with pottery and objects of a cult nature."⁷⁸ The existence of a long-standing tradition of offering skulls to watery places may explain a number of isolated finds in the archaeological record, such as the skull of a young woman complete with jaw and several vertebrae which was found buried in the lining of a well at a first century settlement in Odell, Bedfordshire.⁷⁹ In Brigantia, a well at a Romano-British settlement site at Rothwell near Leeds dating from the fourth or fifth centuries AD yielded a single human skull. Pathological examination found it belonged to an adult male aged around twenty five years. It appeared the head had been severed from the body by a direct blow resulting in the loss of the jaw, or had been placed in the well after the flesh had decayed.⁸⁰ Merrifield has noted a number of similar instances from Roman London, and another skull from the third century well of a Roman villa at Northwood, Hertfordshire, which had apparently been thrown in as a complete decapitated head and was found alongside a natural stone with a crude

likeness to a head, with its eyes accentuated by peckings.⁸¹ Describing these puzzling finds, he says heads are unlikely to be dropped into wells by accident or as discarded rubbish, and sees significance in the fact that heads are often found as “closing” deposits into wells which previously supplied water for domestic or industrial purposes. He interprets the single skulls, and the larger groups of skulls from the river Thames and its tributary the Walbrook, described later, as the result of native Celtic ritual practices which survived in a modified form during the Roman occupation, as: “in all respects, Roman London seems to have been a city of contrasts, a curious mingling of civilisation and barbarism.”⁸²

Direct evidence of a skull found in what Merrifield describes as “demonstrably a holy place and the home of a water deity” comes from the site of Coventina’s Well beside the Roman fort of Procolitia on Hadrian’s Wall.⁸³ This well, dedicated to the native goddess Coventina, occupied a central position within a stone temple which was forty feet in diameter. When it was excavated at the end of the nineteenth century the waters of the well were found to contain an large variety of votive objects including thirteen thousand coins dating from the period between AD 41-383, which marks the end of the phase in which the waters were in use. Other discoveries included pins, pottery, brooches, three bronze masks and altars carved with masks or heads in stone. Alongside the votive deposits was the top part of a human cranium, now on display in Chesters Museum nearby.⁸⁴ The presence of the skull among the objects in this sacred well underlines its ritual function, and fits the pattern observed earlier of the deposition of skulls in pits, wells and shafts both in the late Iron Age and early Roman period. Salway argues that such a cult would have been prohibited and suppressed by the Roman authorities as a result of the prohibition against human sacrifice.⁸⁵ However, the evidence reviewed in this chapter suggests that native practices connected with the human head continued in a modified form and as Coventina’s Well was itself dedicated by a military Praefect it suggests native traditions were allowed to continue, if not with the direct blessing of the military authorities, in an essentially Roman form. In their detailed description of Coventina’s well, Allason-Jones and McKay conclude that the number of head-related votive offerings discovered there: “suggest that the human head was not without significance to worshippers of Coventina.”⁸⁶

As further evidence of ritual continuity in Romano-British times, Marsh and West have pointed to the finds of large numbers of human skulls concentrated in a small number of locations along the course of the River Thames and its tributary, the Walbrook, in central London. In the

nineteenth century, the number of skulls revealed by dredgers near one location at Battersea Bridge led to that location being described as “a Celtic Golgotha.”⁸⁷ Of the large number uncovered, almost three hundred complete and fragmentary skulls survive today in museum collections, but Bradley and Gordon claim this evidence has been overlooked by writers on Iron Age ritual practices. An initial analysis of forty eight of the Walbrook skulls by Marsh and West indicated they were all of Iron Age or Roman date, their deposition occurring before the middle of the second century AD.⁸⁸ A further study of more than two hundred skulls from the Thames resulted in the conclusion that:

“...there was good reason to suppose that half the measurable skulls belonged to a single population, dating from the later prehistoric period...[the] population shared characteristics with the Bronze Age and Iron Age populations, but was also very similar to the Walbrook material.”⁸⁹

In order to reach more definitive conclusions, collagen samples were taken from nine of the skulls for radiocarbon dating. The results from three Walbrook specimens were consistent with the metrical analysis, with two dating from the late Iron Age and one from the Roman period. The six skulls from the Thames included four dating from the middle and late Bronze Age.

However, one suggested explanation for the Walbrook skulls, that they were the results of a massacre, was disproved by the analysis “since they are not a typical cross-section of a population, but rather a group of “selected” individuals.”⁹⁰ Sixty percent of the Thames skulls were those of adult males, while those from the Walbrook were mainly young adult males. Interpreting these results, Marsh and West said the skulls could only be seen in context by “the recognition that skull deposition was practised throughout Britain in the Roman period and, in particular, London.”⁹¹ However, doubts have been raised about this interpretation of the material by Knusel and Carr who attribute the appearance of large numbers of skulls in certain locations along the river to differential deposition of bones as a result of fluvial action in water, and suggest the find locations may not be the original context for the skulls.⁹² Fluvial action has been suggested as an alternative explanation for a group of human skulls recovered from an underground pool in the River Axe at Wookey Hole, Somerset, which were classified as a ritual deposit by Ross.⁹³

These examples demonstrate how caution is required before crania found without precise

recorded context in rivers can be used to support claims of widespread ritual deposition of heads in watery places. However, the evidence appears more convincing in the case of human heads as deliberate deposits in wells, springs and shafts in a number of different ritual contexts, during prehistory and the early historic period, both in European and the British Isles.

3.7. Cephalotaphy in late Iron Age and Romano-Celtic Britain

The predilection to make offerings of precious objects, metalwork and even human heads to the capricious supernatural powers in watery places also extended to the dark bogs and marshes where much evidence for prehistoric ritual has been found. Probably the most important finds in northwest Europe have been the human remains dubbed "bog bodies" which have been uncovered, mostly by accident, during peat-cutting in recent recorded history, primarily in Denmark and Germany, but also to a lesser extent in Ireland and Britain. The majority of these bodies, which have been remarkably preserved by saturation in the anaerobic bogs, date from between the last two hundred years of the Iron Age and first five hundred years of the first millennium AD.⁹⁴

Careful scientific analysis of those bodies which have proved to be prehistoric has uncovered evidence that a number did not die as a result of accident, as many appeared to have been brutally killed as victims of executions and/or sacrifices. The methods used to despatch the unfortunate victims have been described as a kind of overkill with the victims hanged, garrotted, stabbed and staked down in the bog to die. Of the large number of bog remains recorded in Denmark, there are a number of severed heads including those of two women who had been decapitated possibly as a sacrifice.⁹⁵ The practice of burying the head alone, cephalotaphy, is known from other areas of northern Europe and appears to have continued as a folk tradition late into the historic period which makes dating these finds problematical (see Chapter 8).

While the exact motives which lay behind the deaths of the majority of the bog bodies will probably never be known, there is evidence to suggest that ritual sacrifice, often by decapitation, played an important role in a number of the cases which have been studied. It is in these cases that we are more likely to find evidence of ritual centred upon the human head, for example in the burial of the head separately from the body. The most important British bog burials come from the peat mosses of northwest England, where human remains have been

found from at least ten sites since the beginning of the eighteenth century.⁹⁶ Significantly, a number of these burials were of single human heads buried without their bodies which suggests the involvement of ritual motives in the light of the attention focussed upon the head discussed above. Billingsley and other writers have connected these practices with traditional fear of the dead which in other contexts led to the decapitation of corpses in order to prevent the spirits of suicides, traitors and other undesirables wandering, a practice discussed in Chapter 8.⁹⁷ In Danby, North Yorkshire, a tradition recorded in 1891 states that in the case of the doer of an atrocious deed, the head would be severed from the body and placed between the legs or under the arm.⁹⁸

The most important ritual bog burials in Britain are those from Lindow Moss in Cheshire, which date from the late Iron Age and early Roman period. The first discovery was the upper part of a human skull discovered by peat cutters in 1983, and which was initially believed to be that of a woman murder victim. However, radiocarbon dating at the Oxford Research Laboratory for Archaeology placed the skull in the Roman period, probably the second century AD.⁹⁹ Despite this conclusion the murderer, by then convicted, did not withdraw his confession and because his wife's body has never been found controversy continues to surround the date and origin of the skull.¹⁰⁰ The confusion has been compounded by the subsequent finds in the peat moss in 1984 and 1987, of two complete human bodies. The first, known as Lindow II or "Lindow Man," probably died in the first two centuries AD and was a fit, well-nourished man in his mid-twenties who had been brutally killed in a fashion similar to the Danish victims, as part of a gruesome "triple death" which consisted of a brutal blow to the head, followed by strangulation with a thin cord twisted round the neck. Finally the victim's throat was cut and his body was deposited in the dark waters of the bog.¹⁰¹ The second body found at Lindow Moss was also of a man in his mid-twenties whose body came to light in many pieces during peat processing. His head was missing and it believed the skull initially found in 1984 may belong to this body, because of the closeness in the radiocarbon dates.¹⁰²

Ian Stead has suggested that Lindow Moss may have been a ritual area where offerings and sacrifices were made to water deities in the late Iron Age and early Roman period, when the layer of peat containing the two bodies was first laid down.¹⁰³ Links have also been drawn between the severed head and triple death motifs and another severed head found buried in peat on Chat Moss near Worsley, west of Manchester, in 1958. Despite extensive searches of the

peat at the time of the discovery, no body was discovered and a multidisciplinary investigation by the Department of Pathology at Manchester University found the owner of the head had been decapitated. Once again the head was that of a man in his twenties, who like Lindow Man had suffered a triple death. The skull was fractured, and there was a garotte around the neck of the man whose throat had been cut before he was decapitated.¹⁰⁴ Radiocarbon dating at the Oxford Laboratory placed the deposition of the head in the same period as the remains from Lindow Moss, namely the first or second centuries AD.

Records at Manchester Museum suggest there may be a number of other instances where heads have been buried separately in rituals linked to a native tradition.¹⁰⁵ The closest to Lindow Moss are those from Worsley and another since lost found at Red Moss, Horwich, in 1942, which was described as the skull of a woman aged about thirty with a thick plait of reddish hair. The skull, dated to the late Bronze Age, was found lying near an antler pick.¹⁰⁶ A similar date has been suggested for the head of woman discovered by peat cutters on Pilling Moss above the Lune Estuary in west Lancashire in 1824 and reported by a local surgeon in the *Preston Chronicle*.¹⁰⁷ Once again the head was found alone with no evidence of a body. The hair had been died red by the peat, and the head was found along with two strings of cylindrical jet beads and one large amber one. Like the head from Worsley, these two heads had been buried separately presumably for ritual reasons which appear to have played a part in the deposition of the two bodies from Lindow Moss. The burial of the human head alone is known from other archaeological contexts, including both deposition in water and in pits in what Merrifield has dubbed foundation or closure rituals.¹⁰⁸ In some cases cephalotaphy has been linked to fertility cults, and a single skull found inside a small barrow on Easton Down, Wiltshire, was beside a roughly chipped bar of flint which had been placed erect beside the bones. The skull and flint were dated to the early to middle Bronze Age which suggests the deposition of the head alone had a long pedigree in ritual practice before these first century AD finds in the northwest.¹⁰⁹

In these contexts a ritual motive for head burial is clear rather than implied. In the case of the skulls from Worsley and possibly Lindow the skull became a powerful object obtained as a result of a sacrificial death for a motive which probably involved the propitiation or manipulation of supernatural powers. For this reason its burial alone in peat was probably a deliberate act to nullify any malevolent power which may have been thought to lie within the skull following its ritual use. A similar explanation has been suggested for the carved stone

heads which have been found buried on moor and farmland in Britain and Ireland, which will be discussed further in Chapter 4 and 6.

3.8. Archaeological evidence for head ritual from Ireland

Skulls and carved stone heads in Ireland are habitually described as Celtic, despite the fact there is no archaeological evidence to suggest the island was ever subject to intrusive groups of continental immigrants during the Iron Age.¹¹⁰ It appears more likely that the “Celtic” society of Ireland developed out of the existing late Bronze Age people, who gradually absorbed “Celtic” culture, as the few La Tene style objects found may have been imported into the country by rich immigrants. Controversy continues to surround a large number of stone carvings which have been ascribed a tentative Iron Age date by a number of scholars. Many of these are representations of the human form, primarily the human head carved in stone, but their precise dating on stylistic grounds alone is fraught with problems which will be examined in more detail in Chapter 4. Etienne Rynne has divided Celtic sculpture in Ireland into two forms, the aniconic pillar stones and iconic sculpture which includes stone heads which are believed to belong to the pagan Celtic period. Rynne writes that it is unlikely

“...that any of the Irish carvings antedate Romano-British influence and equally unlikely that the arrival of Christianity in the mid-fifth century succeeded in abruptly terminating the practice of carving them.”¹¹¹

Furthermore, Rynne describes the difficulties inherent in dating any of the Irish sculptures conclusively to the pagan period, as most of them are associated with early Christian churches rather than pagan sanctuaries, and “in consequence it is not yet possible to claim a definite pagan origin for any stone idol from Ireland on the basis of its association or provenance.”¹¹²

Identification of the surviving sculpture with the pagan Celtic period therefore has to be based upon art-historical criteria which has a number of inherent problems described in Chapter 4.

The head from Beltany Ring stone circle in County Donegal is identified by Rynne as a single example with distinct “Celtic” attributes, namely the faint traces of a collar or torc around its neck. It is carved upon a thin slab and has a “wild and barbarous appearance,” the torc providing a strong argument in favour of a pagan Celtic origin (see Fig. 4).¹¹³ A small number

of other carvings, including those from Cathedral Hill in Armagh and Boa Island in County Fermanagh, where there is a Janus-type pillar-stone, have an inherent archaic style which suggests an early date but could equally belong to the the Christian period.

Probably the most important cult carving dated to the pagan Celtic period on stylistic criteria alone is the three-faced head from Corleck Hill, County Cavan, which is currently on display in the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin. Anne Ross and most recently Barry Raftery have placed this carving firmly within a late Iron Age context purely upon stylistic grounds, the latter claiming the head "is one of the finest instances of Celtic stone sculpture in Ireland."¹¹⁴ Billingsley has recently challenged this classification based upon the ambiguous nature of the head's original provenance and in respect of the inherent archaism displayed by heads created as recently as the nineteenth century in the same region. This controversy will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

There is however some scattered evidence for the importance attached to the human head from the archaeological record of Ireland, and to a lesser degree Scotland, during the Bronze and Iron Ages, none of which is directly comparable with the British or Continental evidence or the emphasis upon severed heads found in the later medieval Irish literature. The earliest evidence of a human skull in a ritual context comes from the Neolithic court cairn at Audleystown, County Down, and three skulls from beneath the floor of a Late Bronze Age crannog at Ballinderry, County Offaly.¹¹⁵ In Ulster, human skulls were found in two lakes which form part of a ritual landscape near the important Royal site of Emain Macha in Ulster. One of these, recovered from a pool known as the King's Stables, was that of a young adult male. It was in the form of a mask, which had been formed by cutting away the front portion of the skull after death.¹¹⁶ At Carrowmore in County Sligo, skull bones and teeth had been inserted as secondary burials into a tomb of Neolithic date. This concentration of bones was dated by radiocarbon to the Iron Age. This discovery prompted the excavator to suggest that "an early Iron Age tradition with deposition of skulls, as sacrifices or burials, cannot be ruled out."¹¹⁷ More significantly, excavations at a monument in Raffin, County Meath, which may have been one of the great ritual centres of pagan Ireland, found a single human skull buried in a pit within a large circular enclosure. The pit was marked by squat, naturally rounded boulder and contained an adult skull and animal bones. A calibrated radiocarbon date of 100 BC-AD 130 for the skull was contemporary with dates from other debris at the site, which Raftery regards as being purely of

a ritual nature.¹¹⁸

3.9. The Romano-British period (c. AD 55-410)

At the time of the Roman conquest in Britain during the first century AD we have demonstrated there existed a native religious tradition associated with the human head. However, from the evidence it is not possible to state the archaeological evidence is sufficient to demonstrate there existed a specific "cult of the head" comparable to that which clearly existed in Celto-Ligurian Gaul. Gerald Wait has gone so far as to claim there is no convincing evidence for any pre-Roman cult of the head north of the Massif central.¹¹⁹ I feel this overlooks the heads which clearly do occur on metalwork and utensils decorated in the Celtic style from native British contexts, and the evidence for rituals centred upon the burial of individual skulls which have been discussed above. This seems to suggest the head played a central role within an overall religious attitude, where the head could be seen as a cult object utilised both on its own and within other religious frameworks for a number of magico-religious purposes. This instinct appears to have been so strong and deeply rooted it survived changes of religion, race and culture which characterised British proto-history following the Roman conquest. The categories of evidence from this period have been broken into three categories which will now be examined separately. These categories include the important corpus of carved heads, heads in pottery, and those on metalwork.

3.9.1. Romano-British stone heads

As the Iron Age becomes the Romano-British period of history, evidence for the use of the head symbol in ritual contexts becomes more and more plentiful. The Roman invasion brought an influx of skilled artisans and craftsmen into Britain, along with an advanced carving tradition which appears to have stimulated native art, and encouraged the expression of religious preoccupations in stone. A very large number of cult heads in stone have been recorded from Roman Britain, with great concentrations in areas on the frontier of the military zones such as Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland and the Cotswolds. Stone sculpture was rare or non-existent in the pre-Roman Iron Age but the few examples which survive from continental Europe display

a non-classical carving style consistent with what Billingsley terms “a folk tradition” rather than a developed cult like those from Entremont and Roquepertuse.¹²⁰ Both Ross and Green agree upon the fact that the numerous carved stone heads found in Gaul and Britain are of Romano-Celtic, rather than Celtic date, and portrayed a number of local gods or deities via schematised features. The features and styles which identify heads of early date are described more fully in Chapter 4, along with the problems with using style alone to date sculpture of this kind.

A major problem with the identification of stone cult heads in a ritual context is the lack of clearly identifiable sites of native British religious shrines comparable with those in Gaul. As Petch notes the Graeco-Roman writers said Celtic religion was non-urbanised and worship appears to have been centred upon natural shrines in forest clearings, springs and water sites and other landmarks.¹²¹ Archaeologists have noted how a number of small Iron Age shrines which have been excavated in Britain show evidence of continuity into the Romano-British period, making dating and interpretation difficult. Evidence of a de-fleshed human skull from the St Albans shrine, and preserved human skulls from Wroxeter and Cosgrove provide tantalising glimpses of heads in religious ritual during this period, the nearest comparisons there are to the highly advanced head cult sites in Provence. In addition, a recent find from a Roman temple at Lamyatt Beacon, Somerset, from a fourth century AD Roman brick depicts three human heads carved in a strip one above the other, which has drawn comparisons with the symbolism found at Entremont.¹²²

Possibly the most interesting evidence of heads, possibly representing local deities or warriors, from a British shrine in early Roman Britain comes from the site of the Roman mansio at Wall (Letocetum) in Staffordshire. Here stones carved with a group of crude human heads, some of which are horned, were found buried within the foundations of a later Roman building. The excavator was of the opinion the stones originated from a native Celtic shrine upon which the mansio was built around the mid-second century AD, with the stones built into the foundations, perhaps to neutralise an earlier power.¹²³ The framing of the face by the stone slabs found in the heads from Wall is paralleled by stone heads from the late Iron Age and Romano-Celtic sanctuary of Foret d’Halatte (Oise) in Gaul.¹²⁴ Green has compared the deep set eyes of the Wall heads with those of a head discovered on the island of Steep Holm in the Bristol Channel for which she suggests a Romano-British date.¹²⁵ A head excavated from the floor of a late Roman shrine at Caerwent in South Wales showed the typical Celtic features of prominent eyeballs in

oval outlines, a straight nose and featureless expression (see Fig. 6).¹²⁶ The back of the head was carved flat in such a way as to suggest it was designed to be set in or against an architectural feature within a shrine, a feature found on other heads of Romano-British date like an example now in Cleveland Museum.¹²⁷

A number of other carved stone heads and figurines which emphasise the head out of proportion to the body have been excavated in Romano-British contexts. A chalk figurine excavated from an underground chamber beneath a second century AD hilltop site at Deal in Kent displays typical archaic features, with a crude carved face with deep set eyes, a slit mouth, a long slender neck and a block-shaped body, designed once again to fit into a niche in the shrine.¹²⁸ Genius loci or fertility gods are suggested by small figurines representing the twin symbols of head and phallus, excavated at a number of Romano-British sites, which will be described in Chapter 4.

Among the heads from archaeological contexts in southern Britain during this period is a stone excavated from a site east of a Roman building at Camerton in Somerset dated not earlier than the late third century AD.¹²⁹ Carved in white limestone the flat head has typical "Celtic style" features, with a long straight nose attached to the eyebrows and circular protruding eyes. Another example from an early context, now lost, was found buried eleven feet below a peat bog in Piltdown, Sussex. It was carved on a roughly squared rectangular block of stone, depicting thick curly hair, boldly carved eyes with drilled pupils, jutting eyebrows and a deeply carved, lipless mouth.¹³⁰

Of the numerous heads in stone excavated from the Hadrian's Wall region, two examples are outstanding for the way they illustrate different aspects of the native Celtic tradition which they represent. The harsh and angular horned ram-horned head from the Netherby outpost fort in Cumbria has been described as "one of the most expressive pieces of Celtic sculpture found in Britain,"¹³¹ and its crude and expressive imagery is purely native in origin (see Fig. 13). This head has been dated tentatively to the second or third century AD and is the best example of a series of horned heads known from the Brigantian frontier of northern Britain, other examples coming from Carvoran, Lemington and West Denton, along the line of the wall.

More developed in its style and execution is the head from an unstratified site at Corbridge, which has been identified as a representation of the native god Maponus by Ian Richmond.¹³² The stone is without doubt an impressive and individual piece of sculpture displaying a fusion of native and Roman influence. This head is depicted with large lentoid eyes which appear to

bulge from their sockets, and are emphasised by means of drilled pupils. The nose is long and slightly bent towards the right, the hair closely cropped and linked by sideburns to a thin moustache and a short beard. Upon the top of the head is a hollowed focus which may have been a receptacle for offerings or libations. Phillips concludes the Corbridge head was probably a depiction of a local god by a Celtic artist incorporating some Roman influence in the shape of the focus, "but the use of the head for ritual purposes as though it was a small altar is not Roman and reflects the Celtic interest in the head as a cult object."¹³³

The merging of native Celtic and Classical influences into a unique Romano-British style of sculpture is reflected in some of the carved stone heads recovered from Roman sites. One example is the head of the god Antenociticus from the site of a Roman temple at Benwell on Hadrian's Wall, which appears to have been broken from a cult statue.¹³⁴ Although its overall appearance is consistent with a Roman context, the native treatment of the eyes and the suggestion of horns or antlers in the stylised hair demonstrates an underlying Celtic influence. Possibly the best example of what has been claimed as a fusion of the Classical and Celtic style in the form of a head is the famous Gorgon's head or Gorgoneion from Bath.¹³⁵ The head was mounted upon an impressive triangular pediment of the Romano-British temple of Sulis-Minerva situated above the hot springs. Medieval accounts describe a carved head surviving in the ruins of the temple, as John Leland noted in 1542: "an antique hed of a man made al flat and having great lokkes of here as I have a coin of C.Antius," in Bath; while fifty years later Camden saw a similar carving in the wall between the south and west gates of the city, which he described as a "Medusaes head with haires all Snakes."¹³⁶ It is not clear whether this was the Gorgeoneion, or a second head, which may have eventually been buried by Christians at a time when the older powers it represented were suppressed or feared. The Gorgon's head which survives has been described by Cunliffe as "the most remarkable manifestation of Romano-British art," a conclusion which has been reached because unlike the Greek Gorgon, this sculpture clearly represents a male head.¹³⁷ Its two-dimensional form with deeply furrowed brow and moustache has been compared with native Celtic sculpture, the Classical influence being displayed by the hair which transforms into writhing serpents perhaps representing the solar power manifested in the hot springs. However, this interpretation has been questioned most recently by John Hind who claims the sculpture is "not a Celtic head" and believes its meaning can be found entirely in the context of Classical mythology, in the legends of the earth-born Giants who fought the

Olympian gods.¹³⁸ One of them, Pallas, was slain and Athena used his hide as a protective shield. In a similar fashion the severed head of the Gorgon Medusa was used as an apotropaic device in Graeco-Roman tradition. Hind suggests the inspiration for the Gorgon's head came from legends of a classical giant who was used to personify the geothermal activity at the Bath springs. This interpretation does not alter the significance of the context in which the head was used, a context which would not have been lost on Romano-British visitors to the shrine.

3.9.2. Pottery heads

While a small number of three-dimensional heads made from fired pot were recorded in West Yorkshire by Sidney Jackson and are discussed in Chapter 4, heads appear in Romano-British pottery in two very specific groups of separate artefacts. These include the clay antefixa associated with Roman military building, possibly used for decorative and apotropaic purposes, and the face and head pots associated with the civilian population which are found in both funerary and ritual contexts. Both utilised symbolic heads which appear to have represented native gods or supernatural power.

3.9.2.1 Antefixa

These were triangular tiles which were attached to the gable apex of Roman buildings, presumably to act as both a decorative and a protective or apotropaic device. The adjective antefixus means "fixed" or "fastened in front of" and the tiles can be regarded as an early manifestation of the tradition which has been continued by the carved stone heads of later folk tradition.¹³⁹ A number of clay antefixa depicting human faces have been found at Roman military sites in Britain, including the towns of Caerleon and York. At Caerleon the tiles are associated with buildings including barrack blocks and chambers associated with the defences of the fort between the first and third centuries AD. Green's study of the examples from Caerleon argued the repeated appearance of the human head paired with cosmic symbols upon the tiles supported the sacral interpretation of their function, and cast doubt upon claims that they were purely a decorative motif.¹⁴⁰ She found the tiles divided into two groups, the first of

which portrayed a neckless human head associated with an eight-spoked solar wheel which appears at the apex of the triangle. The second group consisted of heads associated with images which appeared to be derivative of wheels and other celestial motifs. Heads depicted on the tiles ranged from those of crude Celtic style with lentoid eyes, slit mouth and head-dresses, which may depict horns in some cases, to more naturalistic faces in the Classical style which appear in the second group of tiles, some of which are stamped with the name of the Legio II Augusta. Boon suggested the heads and sky symbols possessed a sympathetic and apotropaic significance for their creators, but Green believes the faces represent "the Celtic solar/sky divinity himself, accompanied by his celestial attributes."¹⁴¹ Troops stationed at Caerleon were drawn from the Strasbourg region of Alsace, and may have brought with them imagery and traditions surrounding a Celtic solar god, imagery which evolved and was influenced by native British cults during the legion's stay in Britain. Green suggests the setting up on buildings in the Roman military station of images depicting a Celtic supernatural power "may be evidence not only of the well attested tolerance of Rome towards foreign religions, but possibly also of the potency of such a cult."¹⁴² Another interpretation suggests the use of the image of a Celtic god in this context may have symbolised the Roman domination over the Silurian Celts. Whatever the explanation, the use of the head symbol in an apotropaic context on roof tiles which is established by the evidence of the antefixa marks the earliest evidence we have of this tradition in Britain. Stone heads built into gables and walls of medieval and later buildings appear to be a continuation of this folk instinct to provide a protective emblem in later tradition.

3.9.2.2. Face Pots and Head Pots

Romano-British face and head pots have been studied extensively by Gillian Braithwaite.¹⁴³ She defined face pots as crude, barbaric and almost comic-looking masks which are found moulded upon the side of well-made Roman jars. They appear to have been imported from the Continent and developed their own insular style. Head pots are pots moulded in the shape of a head with more naturalistic features and contrived hair styles. This type is found only in the province of Britain and appear to have been a purely insular development, quite different in execution from the stylised face masks found in Celtic and Germanic art, and more closely related to the classical traditions of the Greek world. Braithwaite found the distribution of both types of pot

was confined to the eastern zone of Roman Britain in domestic areas of a wide range of settlement sites, including towns, forts, villages and villas, in contexts which would suggest use in ritual or foundation deposits. The lack of evidence for pots in the west of Britain cast doubt upon suggestions that the pots could be linked with native Celtic traditions surrounding the head, but do not rule out an underlying native influence upon the unusual insular style of the pots.

Braithwaite's study concludes the face pot tradition evolved on the Continent in the first century AD and was brought into Britain by the Roman army, taking root in Eastern England and the northern military zone.¹⁴⁴ Head pots evolved later, and have a similar distribution. There are few clues as to what the faces represented, but Braithwaite suggests they were meant to depict specific gods, or a mixture of different deities and protective household spirits. One significant clue is provided by a head pot from Lincoln which has the words "DO MERCURIO" inscribed around the base, providing an explicit identification with a known deity from a Romano-British context.¹⁴⁵ Others show evidence of vestigial horns and one a small snake, and some appear to have been buried complete as a ritual deposit. Braithwaite also draws parallels between the faces depicted upon the pots and the archaic tradition of mask-wearing which has a long history from Roman contexts to both theatrical and folkloric contexts in native traditions throughout Europe over a long period of prehistory and history. Parallels can also be drawn with the tradition of making faces upon the pots known as Witch Bottles or Bellarmine for magical purposes, which emerged in the Low Countries in the seventeenth century AD and later spread into Britain (see Chapter 6). Bellarmine were also utilised for superstitious or magical purposes within a native domestic context, and were associated with a grotesque carved face said to represent the witch herself. Braithwaite concludes:

"The face pot tradition which appears sporadically in the archaeological record in Eastern and Northern Europe from the Neolithic onwards, continued long after the Roman period, in Germany, Frankish Gaul and Anglo-Saxon England, up to the seventeenth century Bellarmine, and even into modern times with Toby Jugs. What exactly the faces represented we shall almost certainly never know, but the face pot tradition, based on some ancient superstition no doubt long since bereft of its original significance, lived on long after Rome was forgotten."¹⁴⁶

3.9.3. Metalwork

Heads appear on metalwork during the Roman occupation of Britain in a number of different contexts. Their most obvious form are in the bucket mounts and dagger hilts which show continuity from the late Iron Age. Examples include masks from Welwyn, Aylesford, Brough-on-Humber and two solid bronze face masks from Roman contexts at Chiddingfold and Titsey, now in Guildford Museum. Alcock suggests these objects continue the tradition of Celtic face masks, with their stylised hair and staring eye sockets which probably originally contained enamel or coral.¹⁴⁷ Woodward suggests face masks were a common manifestation of the head cult in Britain, the most famous example being the tin mask found in the culvert of the hot springs at the temple of Sulis-Minerva at Bath in 1878.¹⁴⁸ In this case, the mask's grooved hair, elongated nose and eyes depicted by sockets which were probably also once filled with glass, all fall within the native British tradition. Martin Henig has suggested this mask and others known from Roman Britain may once have been fixed to a votive image made from wood which has since been lost.¹⁴⁹ Other metal masks from Celtic religious contexts in Britain include a native-style image on a copper alloy plaque from Nettleton, Somerset, which is dedicated to Apollo, and small masks executed both in native and Classical style recovered from Coventina's Well in Northumberland.¹⁵⁰ All these examples may have started life as decorative mounts upon metalwork, buckets or furniture of some kind and appear to have been deposited as ritual offerings in the contexts they were found.

The secondary use of parts of objects for votive purposes can be compared with the decapitated heads of statues which appear to have been singled out for attention in other contexts. Examples include the mutilated limestone head of Mercury from a pagan temple in Uley, Gloucestershire, which appears to have been smashed from a full sized statue and used as a foundation deposit beneath the floor of a later building, possibly a Christian chapel.¹⁵¹ A similar fate appears to have befallen a bronze statue of the Emperor Hadrian, whose head was found in the river Thames near London, possibly as a result of a deliberate attack by Christians upon pagan idols. Merrifield says the frequency by which this kind of deposition occurs in the archaeological record suggests that:

*"...the rite of decapitation in this form was intended to separate the soul from the body and to send it on its way...liberating the spirit and remove any fear of haunting."*¹⁵²

Analogies can be drawn between this belief and that associated with foundation sacrifices, such as those at the Springhead temple in Kent where decapitated infants were excavated in the corner foundations of a Romano-British shrine.¹⁵³ In these cases it appears the idea was to bind a spirit to a building and therefore protect it and strengthen it with a supernatural guardian. The number of times the head appears to have been selected for attention in this way underlines its role as the seat of supernatural power within native tradition in Romano-British society, and has direct analogies with later folk traditions discussed in Chapter 6. Woodward describes as further evidence for the importance attached to the head, studies of two metal figurines from Henley Wood and Uley. In the case of the Iron Age female figure from Henley it was the face which appears to have been worn most by handling, suggesting that was where the greatest power was believed to reside, “and that this power was believed to be transferable by touch.”¹⁵⁴

3.10. References to the Head Cult in the Graeco-Roman literature

There are a number of references to head hunting and head ritual within the continental Celtic tribes among the chronicles of contemporary writers from the Classical world. None of these passages directly refer to head-related practices known among the British tribes, but inferences have been drawn upon Irish and British material in the light of comments about the activities of the tribes known to the Romans as the Keltoi in Gaul, which may or may not be accurate.

Green has referred to Greek and Roman writings about their barbarian neighbours as being full of bias, distortion, misunderstanding and omission, but they do have one important advantage over the later evidence, that of contemporaneity.¹⁵⁵ There is very little information in the Graeco-Roman writings about the nature and specifics of Celtic religion, which was an alien concept to the urban-based civilisation which those historians were part of. However, a number of Mediterranean sources specifically and consistently refer to head-hunting by the Celts in the context of battle spoils, and all treat the practice as barbaric and without need of further examination. Among the earliest written reference to trophy head-taking among the Celts are those found in Polybius's histories of the Punic Wars, dating from the second and the middle of the first century BC.¹⁵⁶ An account by Livy of the defeat of a Roman legion by the Senonian Gauls at Clusium in 295 BC describes the tribesmen collecting the heads of the slain, and fastening them onto the saddles of their horses, while others were impaled on spear points. His

account describes how:

“The Consuls got no report of the disaster until some Gallic horsemen came into sight, with heads hanging at their horses’ breasts, or fixed on their lances, and singing their customary songs of triumph.”¹⁵⁷

The most influential of the Classical commentators upon Gaulish customs was Posidonius, a Greek philosopher of the Stoic school, whose late first century BC writings are lost but were utilised by later Roman writers including Strabo (late first century BC/early first century AD) and Diodorus Siculus (60-30 BC). Both later writers refer to the Celtic practice of preserving the severed heads of vanquished enemies as grisly trophies. Diodorus Siculus writes specifically about the Gaulish practice of decapitating enemies in the following passage:

“They cut off the heads of enemies slain in battle and attach them to the necks of their horses. The blood-stained spoils they hand over to their attendants and carry off as booty, while striking up a paean and singing a song of victory; and they nail up these first fruits upon their houses, just as do those who lay low wild animals in certain kinds of hunting. They embalm in cedar oil the heads of the most distinguished enemies, and preserve them carefully in a chest, and display them with pride to strangers, saying that for this head one of their ancestors, or his father, or the man himself, refused the offer of a large sum of money. They say that some of them boast that they refused the weight of the head in gold....”¹⁵⁸

A number of points emerge from this detailed description; namely, the collection of heads as battle trophies and their subsequent deposition as trophies in houses, as specially revered heirlooms which were preserved and given a place of honour. In this way the victorious warrior owned the power or spirit of the vanquished foe, and by the subsequent use of the head he was utilising that power to protect his own community. Here the Roman writers part company with the later interpretation, for they could see the practice as nothing more than barbaric boasting. There is no mention, however, in these two accounts of the worship or dedication of heads to the gods, and the description of head-hunting appears in a completely martial context as an attempt to gain power over an enemy by the possession and display of a trophy.

There is one reference by Livy to a head severed as a battle trophy which was dedicated to the gods in a temple. This concerns an ambush in northern Italy in which the Roman consul-elect Lucius Postumius was killed by the Boii, a Celtic tribe who inhabited the Po valley in northern

Italy. Livy describes how the tribesmen:

*"...stripped his body, cut off the head, and carried their spoils in triumph to the most hallowed of their temples. There they cleaned out the head, as is their custom, and gilded the skull, which thereafter served them as a holy vessel to pour libations from and as a drinking cup for the priest and the temple attendants."*¹⁵⁹

This is the earliest documentary evidence we have of a skull dedicated in a religious ritual in a pagan Celtic shrine, although there is archaeological evidence for this in prehistory, discussed earlier in Palaeolithic and later Iron Age contexts in Europe and the Near East.. A number of scholars have drawn direct parallels between the limited information offered by the Roman observers and the archaeological evidence, in particular the highly developed temples dedicated to the head cult in southern Gaul. However, these conclusions cannot be extended to include other regions occupied by Celtic tribes as the temples of Provence are unique in the extent to which head related motifs were carved in stone. Graham Webster remarks that it is strange that Caesar's detailed descriptions of his campaigns in Gaul and his incursion into Britain in 55 BC fails to mention the practice of head hunting about the native tribes there.¹⁶⁰ This may however not be a significant omission when it is realised that head-hunting appears to have been rife among the Roman auxiliary troops who made up a significant percentage of the Roman armies. Webster notes that they were allowed to continue their native practices, provided the heads taken were always those of Roman enemies. There is direct evidence to support this suggestion from Trajan's Column in Rome. On one plate Trajan is depicted being offered two Dacian heads by dismounted auxiliary troops, but he turns his head away, as corpses were taboo subjects to all Roman citizens. Other plates show severed heads of Roman soldiers captured by the Dacians in Transylvania, placed upon stakes to look out from behind defensive fortifications facing the advancing Roman troops, in a deliberate attempt to cause fear and panic among the ranks of the advancing enemy, many of whom had been recruited from the Romanised areas of Celtic Europe.¹⁶¹

The lack of any direct surviving Roman reference for head-hunting or head ritual in the British Isles is not surprising given the sparse contemporary written source material relating to the province. Comparisons can be drawn between the Continental and British tribes, but caution is necessary before conclusions can be drawn. However, the lack of contemporary references to

Celtic beliefs is compensated for by the large body of later vernacular literature which is rich in indirect information concerning native head hunting and the veneration of the head in insular pagan society, which will now be examined. These surviving texts and traditions also form a bridge between the mists of prehistory and the later evidence provided by folk traditions such as the practice of carving heads in stone which survived in Britain until the present century.

3.11. The vernacular literature

The earliest writings of northwest Europe exist in the form of a collection of sagas, stories and legends which first began to be preserved in a written form around the sixth century AD.

These early sources are written in the native Celtic languages of Irish and Welsh and contain a large amount of material directly relating to the native mythological tradition, although the earliest surviving manuscripts date from the twelfth century, almost six centuries after the arrival of Christianity. An additional problem relates to the fact that the stories concern Ireland and Wales alone, regions which lay on the very periphery of the greater Celtic world during the Iron Age and would therefore be unlikely to contain elements which relate directly to belief systems held by tribes in other parts of the British Isles and the European Continent.

The manuscripts themselves were compiled within a thoroughly Christian context, the majority written down by monks working within Irish monasteries. McCana writes that although the earliest appear to have been codified no earlier than the eighth century AD, the society portrayed in the myths is basically pagan with a Christian overlay, the product of an extensive period of oral transmission.¹⁶² Gerald Wait in his analysis of symbolism from the sagas, concludes that:

*“...an origin in the first two centuries AD seems a reasonable compromise..in any event, the milieu of these stories is a pagan Celtic society...”*¹⁶³

The interest and value of this great body of documentary evidence lies in the inclusion of material which relates to an earlier era of Irish proto-history, namely the Celtic period before the fifth century AD. Most authorities on this material are in broad agreement that the vernacular traditions do contain fragments of archaic pagan belief. For the purposes of this study, the early Irish stories are important because of the link they share with the Classical sources and the archaeological evidence in respect of the religious significance of the human head. Green notes

that of the three types of evidence, only the earliest writings and the archaeology contribute substantially to the reconstruction of the Celtic belief system.¹⁶⁴ Despite the great chronological and geographical divergences between the two different types of evidence, there remain a few features common to both categories which are too idiosyncratic to be due to chance. The supernatural power of the human head is evidenced both in the archaeological record of ritual behaviour, and is emphasised in the earliest written records. For example, Wait's analysis of the Irish tales notes the repeated occurrence of the motif of the severed head and says the head serves as "a symbol of the supernatural," and the collection of heads as war trophies serving to "emphasise the head as a symbol, both of the whole man and of his skill and power."¹⁶⁵

Paula Coe notes the lack of correlation between the archaeological evidence and the rich body of later written tradition concerning the importance of the human head, but notes:

*"The numerous references to trophy head taking found in the medieval Irish narratives and poems more than makes up for any deficiencies in the Irish archaeological record in affirming the cultural importance of the severed head. At different times and under different circumstances described in medieval Irish texts, the heads may be understood as religious icons, emblems of rebirth, metaphors for oral prophecy and poetry, apotropaic devices, and battle souvenirs."*¹⁶⁶

3.11.1 Head-hunting in the Irish sagas

*his heap of plunder -
nine heads in one hand
and ten more, his treasure*

from *The Tain Bo Cuailnge* story cycle¹⁶⁷

An analysis of the material from the early Irish sagas reveals two distinct contexts in which the symbol of the head appears. The first of these is the head as a battle trophy, and a symbol of martial prowess. In the second context, there are the more developed stories of severed heads which are capable of speech or song after death, and function as intermediaries with the Otherworld whose influence is found in all these early stories and has clear analogies in the broader context of Indo-European tradition discussed by Joseph Nagy.¹⁶⁸ In just one of

numerous examples of head-hunting and head collecting from the Irish sagas, the Ulster hero Cu Chulainn is described as taking an enormous number of heads in his various contests. A typical example from *Fled Bricrend* (Bricriu's Feast) appears in an episode where the Ulster champion spots intruders while guarding the stronghold of Cu Roi.

*"Chu Culainn sprang at them, and nine of them fell dead to the ground. He put their heads into his watch-seat. but scarcely had he sat down to watch when another nine shouted at him. He killed three nines in all and made a single heap of their heads."*¹⁶⁹

A head-hunting expedition is described as a centrepiece of the very first expedition which the youthful Cu Chulainn undertakes as warrior elect in the *Tain Bo Cuailnge*. First he decapitates the three sons of Nechta Scene and as he returns in triumph to the fortress of Emain Macha a woman is watching for his approach. She reports:

*"A single chariot warrior is here...and terribly he comes. He has in the chariot the bloody heads of his enemies."*¹⁷⁰

In a later battle with Ferchu Loingseach and his retinue on the plain of Murthemne the following passage appears:

*"...and they came forward to the place where Cu Chulainn was, and when they came they did not grant him fair play or single combat, but all twelve of them attacked him straightaway. However, Cu Chulainn fell upon them, and forthwith struck off their twelve heads, And he planted twelve stones for them in the ground, and put a head of each one of them on its stone, and also put Ferchu Loingseach's head on its stone. So that the spot where Ferchu Loingseach left his head is called Cinnit Ferchon, that is Cennait Ferchon (the Head-place of Ferchu)."*¹⁷¹

This kind of battle scene is a regular feature of the *Tain* and the other early Irish texts, along with the appearance of huge severed heads with supernatural powers. In the *Tale of Mac Da Tho's Pig* another Ulster champion, Conall Cernach, boasts that he sleeps every night with the severed head of a Connachtman under his knee.¹⁷² In another story Conall Cernach retrieves the severed head of Cu Chulainn himself and places it on a standing stone, but its power is such that it splits the stone in two, burying itself deep within it.¹⁷³ This motif is also found in the story of the Tuatha god Lugh's battle with the leader of the Formorians, earlier monstrous

inhabitants of Ireland, Balor of the Baleful Eye. Balor is defeated and decapitated by Lugh, and his head is placed upon a stone which is split by the venom it exudes.¹⁷⁴ The connection of heads with standing stones is marked in a number of these tales, and parallels can be drawn with skulls excavated in hillforts and temples both in the British Isles and Continental Europe, which were mounted in or nailed upon stone porticos.

Heads severed in battle may have been displayed in temples and dedicated to the gods and goddesses of war. Cormac's *Glossary*, which dates from around AD 900, defines the term *mesradh Machae* as "the nut harvest of Macha (the war goddess)," or "the heads of men after they have been cut down."¹⁷⁵ In the Ulster sagas Macha is a triple goddess, one of a group of three female deities who are associated with war, fertility and the prosperity of Ireland. Her name is linked with that of the crow, and is found in Emain Macha, the capital and royal court of Ulster. Coe connects the Irish goddess Brigit, and her North British counterpart Brigantia, with the functions associated with the symbol of the severed head in Irish tradition, namely prophecy, poetry, healing and regeneration and as apotropaic emblems.¹⁷⁶ The head of the Irish St Brigit herself was a major relic in the eighth century Abbey of Hoanu in Alsace, and a seventeenth century account refers to the veneration of a carved head representing the saint at Urney Church in County Cavan, Ireland.¹⁷⁷ Sacrifices to a god whose name has connotations with a head are described in one Irish text, the *Dindshenchas*, which describes how male sacrifices were offered to a deity named Cenn Cruiach or Cromm Cruaich at the feast of Samhain, a name which translates variously as "Head of Slaughter" or "Head of the Mound."¹⁷⁸ Trophy head taking and severed heads which speak, sing or make prophecies turn up repeatedly in the Fenian cycle of stories which revolve around a band of outlaws or *diberg*, living on the boundary of early Irish society. In one of the earliest stories, Finn himself is decapitated and his head comes to life and demands a portion of a feast.¹⁷⁹

Kim McCone has advised caution in the attribution of pagan significance to the severed head motif in early Irish monastic literature. Although she says the practice of head collection and display was undoubtedly a continuation of pagan usage, it continued into the later Christian period in Ireland and "would hardly have struck a medieval Irish churchman as an intrinsically pagan practice."¹⁸⁰ Indeed, there are a number of instances recorded in the early medieval *Annals of Ulster* which suggest heads continued to be taken and sometimes used to intimidate or demoralise an enemy. In AD 1185 in County Fermanagh, for example, the severed head of

Gilla Crist Mac Cathmhail, Royal chief of the Cenel Feradhaigh was carried away by his killers and kept for a month. In the same county in 1457 the chieftain Thomas Og Maguire celebrated his victory over the O'Rourkes by adorning the posts of his garden with the severed heads of sixteen of his enemies.¹⁸¹

Head hunting should not be seen as a practice which was confined specifically to the Celtic tribes of northwest Europe. Strabo's account notes that the custom was to be found among most of the northern tribes in barbarian Europe, and Graeco-Roman writers describe similar customs among the Thracians and Dacians of Eastern Europe, and the Norse and Germanic peoples. In Tacitus's account of the carnage in the Teutoburg wood where three Roman divisions had been slaughtered by German warriors, an observer describes how six years later the bodies still lay where they fell while severed human heads were fastened to tree trunks. In the sixth century AD Pope Gregory the Great refers to "holocausts of severed heads" among the Alemanni of central Europe.¹⁸²

Indeed, the exhibition of severed heads on stakes as a warning to enemies or potential traitors is continued in the displays of heads of criminals and traitors on city gates, which was commonplace in medieval England and appears to have archaic roots. Thompson refers to heads placed on stakes or brandished to intimidate foes in his *Motif Index of Folk Literature*.¹⁸³ The motif is found in one of the Welsh stories *Culhwch and Olwen* which is the earliest Arthurian tale in the cycle and is believed to date from the tenth century AD. At the end of the story, the huge head of Arthur's chief adversary Ysbaddaden Chief Giant, is severed and placed on a stake for all his enemies to mock.¹⁸⁴ This motif is also found in the beheading myths, the earliest of which is found in the early Irish story *Bricriu's Feast*, dating from the eighth century AD.

In the later middle ages, the practice of staking the heads of traitors, criminals and executed kings and usurpers to the throne continued, with the severed heads fixed at the end of poles on city gates or boundaries of territories. During the Wars of the Roses, for example, the head of Richard, Duke of York, was spiked on York's Micklegate Bar. The tradition of displaying the heads of criminals over the principal entrance to cities certainly continued in England until 1754. In Shakespeare's *Queen Margaret*, the following passage appears:

*"Off with his head and set it on York Gates; so York may overlook the town of York."*¹⁸⁵

This practice is much in evidence during the seventeenth century when a resurgence of interest in the symbol of the severed head coincided with the execution of the King Charles II at the end of the English Revolution. In addition, there remained a long tradition in the isolated West Yorkshire valleys of decapitating thieves who stole from the yeomen clothiers. They were executed by a gibbet which continued in use until the end of the eighteenth century. Billingsley has drawn connections between this treatment of the heads of executed criminals, brigands and heretics which he calls "liminal enemies" whose actions put them on the boundaries of their own culture and its values and therefore required a special punishment which may give clues to the context of some enigmatic burials in Iron Age contexts.¹⁸⁶ Evidence for this treatment of criminals has also been found in the graveyard surrounding the high status ship burials of pagan East Anglian kings or chiefs at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk during the seventh century AD. A number of bodies excavated here appear to have been decapitated or mutilated following execution.¹⁸⁷

3.11.2 *"God heads" in the vernacular literature*

Severed heads with magical and oracular power to speak, sing and entertain after death appear regularly in the vernacular literature, both in the early Irish tales and in the later Welsh stories and folk traditions. Thompson describes this type of motif as "the vital head" in his motif index, and it is by no means limited to the Celtic, or even the Indo-European world.¹⁸⁸ In northwest Europe stories involving this motif can be traced from the very earliest period into the later medieval romances including the Arthurian cycle of stories, where the head is synonymous as a symbol with the Holy Grail.¹⁸⁹ Supernatural heads are often described as enormous in size and can bestow life and strength to those who drink from them, an attribute also associated with the Grail in medieval legend. Here the similarities with the magical cauldrons of early Celtic mythology, and the later Christian legends of the Holy Grail begin to dovetail. A good example of one such head is that of the Ulster hero Conall Cernach. Closely associated with Cu Chulainn, he is one of the three great warriors of Ulster in the Ulster Cycle of stories. The stories associated with him suggest he was regarded as an ancestor deity and a guardian of Irish borders. The most significant story relates to Conall's death which emphasises the supernatural properties of his severed head. The head is described as enormous and capable of holding four calves, four men or two people in a litter. Like a magic cauldron the head has magic powers,

and it is prophesied that the exhausted warriors of Ulster would regain their strength if they drank milk from it.¹⁹⁰

Jospeh Nagy compares the Celtic tales of “vital heads” with those from a broad Indo-European tradition, stretching from Scandinavia to India, and finds parallels with the story of the head of the poet Orpheus in Greek myth.¹⁹¹ Like those of Conall Cernach and Bendigeidfran it continues to entertain and prophecy after it is struck off and tumbles into the river Hebrus, from where it makes its way to the Island of Lesbos where the head becomes the centre of an oracular shrine. Nagy writes that in all these stories:

“...heads tend to be severed and rendered miraculously communicative under a set of narrative circumstances that form a recurrent pattern.”¹⁹²

The motif recurs again during the early medieval period in a Christian context relating to the martyrdom by decapitation of saints such as St Winifred, whose heads are reanimated and are associated with holy wells. In the earlier Irish stories heads are often brought to a feast as warriors are celebrating a victory and food and drink may be offered to them. The head may then be placed on a pillar or spike and come to life, entertaining their hosts with song or making prophecies. The most detailed story of this kind appears in the the eleventh century AD story *Cath Almaine*, preserved in the *Yellow Book of Lecan*. The story begins with The Battle of Allen between the Leinstermen and a northern king, Fergal Mac Maile Duin, who is killed and decapitated. The head is then taken and placed before King Cathal of Munster, who is angered at the slaying because he had a truce with Fergal.

“Then Fergal’s head was washed and plaited and combed smooth by Cathal, and a cloth of velvet was put around it, and seven oxen, seven wethers and seven bacon-pigs, all of them cooked, were brought before the head. Then the head blushed in the presence of all the men of Munster, and it opened its eyes to God to render thanks for the respect and great honour that had been shown to it.”¹⁹³

Although this story is contained within a thoroughly Christian date and context, it exhibits similar features to those found in the later Welsh story of Bendigeidfran, namely the head of the hero severed in battle, presides over a feast in which offerings are placed in front of it, the head comes to life and entertains its hosts. Ross sees these and other stories as being: “suggestive of

earlier traditions of actual offerings being made to venerated heads" in the early pagan Celtic era.¹⁹⁴ In the same eleventh century story is an account of a head singing at a feast held by the King of Leinster, who was victorious in the battle against Fergal, the invader of his territory. King Murchad offered a rich reward to any of his men who would return to the battlefield and fetch a man's head. A warrior who takes up the challenge hears the severed head of a youth called Donn Bo singing for his dead king, and it transpires that the minstrel had been unwilling to sing the night before the battle but had sworn to make music the following night, no matter where they might be. The head is taken back to the hall of the Leinstermen, and placed upon a pillar, whereupon it begins to sing a lament so sweet that none of the warriors could refrain from weeping. Both stories emphasise the respect by which the severed heads of Fergal and Donn Bo are treated by the victorious warriors.¹⁹⁵

The importance of showing respect to the powers believed to lie within a severed head are emphasised by the story of Finn and Cairbre.¹⁹⁶ In this tale, Finn's bard Lomna reveals that Cairbre was sleeping with the hero's wife and is killed and decapitated. Lomna's severed head is taken by Cairbre and his fleeing entourage, who seek refuge in an empty house while they cook salmon. The head comes to life and requests a portion of the meal, but is ignored, and is banished outside when it complains a second time. The third time the head speaks it leads Finn's posse directly to Cairbre's hiding place, and results in the slaughter of himself and his followers. Here the importance of the proper and respectful treatment of severed heads is underlined in an early story, although its significance may remain obscure. Jones connects the salmon with both the symbols of the severed head and the Holy Grail.¹⁹⁷

3.11.3. Prophetic heads in Norse literature

Heads which utter prophecies or demand vengeance after they are struck off on the battlefield are known from both early Irish and later English and Norse literature. The head of Sualtam, father of Cu Chulainn, is severed by his own shield as his horses suddenly rear up as he rides away in anger after failing to persuade the men of Ulster to go to his son's aid. The horse then gallops back to the Ulstermen and the severed head utters the same words spoken before death, causing Conchobar to swear an oath to call out his army and go to Cu Chulainn's aid without delay.¹⁹⁸ Ellis-Davidson notes similar prophetic heads in the Norse sagas, for example in the

Njals Saga a supernatural figure seen in a dream conjures up a picture of severed heads on a battlefield thus: "Heads in plenty/will be seen on the earth..."¹⁹⁹ In the *Eybyggja Saga* a skull lying on a place call Geirvor where a battle is due to take place utters the verse: "Red is Geirvor/with men's blood./She will kiss/human skulls."²⁰⁰ The best known of these stories is that from the *Ynglinga Saga* which describes Odin consulting the severed head of Mimir, one of the Aesir who were beheaded by the Vanir while being held hostage. The head is sent back to Odin, whereupon:

*"Odin took the head and smeared it with herbs so that it would not rot, and spoke spells over it and wrought magic so that it spoke with him and told him many hidden matters."*²⁰¹

This tradition appears to have been drawn from a line in the *Voluspa* which refers to Odin speaking to Mimir's head on the eve of Ragnarok: "Shrilly shrieks Heimdallr's/horn across the sky; Odin whispers/with the head of Mimir..."²⁰² In the same poem Mimir appears as the guardian of the spring at the foot of Yggdrasill into which Odin casts an eye in return for hidden knowledge. Here the motifs of head and spring are interchangeable, and suggest a common tradition between Celtic and Norse peoples, rather than a borrowing by a north European writer as suggested by Ross.²⁰³ There are in fact traditions in both later English and Scandinavian folktales referring to speaking heads rising from wells and providing gifts and luck to those who treat them with reverence which seem to combine a number of earlier myths and legends.²⁰⁴ The motif of the head which speaks after it is severed is also known from later English tradition, this time in the context of a miracle. When the holy king of the East Angles, St Edmund, is killed by the pagan Danes in AD 870, his head was severed and hidden in thick brambles in a wood, so that it could not be buried. Afterwards, as his people searched for the head calling "Where are you now, friend?" the head answered "Here! Here! Here!" every time until the head was found, guarded by a grey wolf among the brambles.²⁰⁵ This story was told by an Anglo-Saxon cleric, Aelfric in the late tenth century AD who transformed Edmund into a Christian martyr. He may have drawn upon extant Celtic or Norse tradition concerning severed heads which speak to create a new story within a Christian context.

3.11.4. *The severed head in medieval English literature*

There are a number of references to heads which continue to live when separated from the human body in medieval literature, of which the cycle of stories called the *Mabinogion* form one distinct part. The early Welsh vernacular traditions are poorly documented when compared with those from Ireland, and are more heavily influenced by the Christian scribes who recorded them. The earliest Welsh traditions are preserved in the *White Book of Rhydderch* and the *Red Book of Hergest*, and date to the thirteenth and fourteenth century. Miranda Green has noted that international story motifs are apparent in the early Welsh material, along with strong links with the Continental cycle of Arthurian romance.²⁰⁶ In these stories the hero who visits the Otherworld is Arthur, and although the context of the stories is a Christian one they also contain references to early pagan Celtic beliefs in the appearance of enchanted or magical animals, cauldrons capable of resurrecting the dead and human heads with divine properties. In the later medieval stories, there are links with the early Irish literature in the form of the beheading ritual which reappears in the early English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which is set firmly in the genre of stories surrounding the court of King Arthur and the quest for Holy Grail, which reached the height of their popularity in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries in the form of Chrétien's *Perceval* and Eschenbach's *Parzival*.²⁰⁷ The severed human head has been recognised as the central symbol in the cycle of Arthurian stories which surround the quest for the Holy Grail, a mystical symbol which has been traced back to the early Welsh and Irish pagan Celtic stories concerning the god Lugh and his magical cauldron. Here the head is analogous to the cauldron as a vessel which functions as a gateway to communicate with the Otherworld.

3.11.5. *The head of Bendigeidfran (Bran the Blessed)*

This is probably the most important of the early Medieval vernacular stories in which a supernatural head appears. Bendigeidfran was a mythical godking who appears in the Second Branch of the Welsh *Mabinogi*.²⁰⁸ The name means "Blessed Raven" and he is also known as Bran the Blessed, a name which suggests later Christian connotations, and Ross suggests the earliest form of the name may have included the element *penn*, the original name being

“Bran...the Head.”²⁰⁹ Bran is the son of Llyr the sea god and the brother of Branwen and Manawydan, and throughout the Second Branch his superhuman stature and powers are overtly emphasised. He is described as being so enormous in size that no house or boat could ever hold him. When Bran sets out to attack Ireland, where his sister Branwen is being held captive, he does so by wading across the Irish Sea, where he appears like a huge mountain as he approaches the shore. During the ensuing battle the Welsh and Irish warriors virtually exterminate each other and Bran is wounded in the foot by a poisoned spear. Only seven Welshmen escape, Bran included, and mortally wounded he issues a command to his companions to cut off his head and carry it along with them on their return to Wales. The relevant passage reads:

“And then Bendigeidfran commanded his head to be struck off. “And take the head,” he said, “and carry it to the White Mount in London, and bury it with its face towards France. And you will be a long time upon the road. In Harddlech you will be feasting seven years, and the birds of Rhiannon singing unto you. And the head will be as pleasant company to you as it was at best when it was on me. And at Gwales in Penfro you will be fourscore years; and until you open the door towards Aber Henfelen, the side facing Cornwall, you may bide there, and the head with you uncorrupted, But from the time you have opened that door, you may not bide there: make for London to bury the head. And do not cross over to the other side.”²¹⁰

After it is struck off, the severed head entertains the warriors, provides them with all the food and drink they need at a joyous Otherworld feast which is named The Assembly of the Wondrous Head, prophesying along the way about future happenings. When one of the warriors opens the forbidden door the spell is broken:

“...and they were as conscious of every loss they had ever sustained..and of every ill that had come upon them..and from that moment on they could not rest, save they set out with the head towards London. However long they were upon the road, they came to London and buried the head in the White Mount. And when it was buried, that was one of the Three Happy Concealments, and one of the Three Happy Disclosures when it was disclosed, for no plague would ever come across the sea to this Island so long as the head was in that concealment.”²¹¹

The burial of Bran’s head as an apotropaic guardian in the White Mount is affirmed by the Welsh *Triads* , in two of the earliest passages which Bromwich believes date to the ninth or tenth centuries AD. The first describes the burial of Bran’s head:

*"37. Three Fortunate Concealments of the Island of Britain. The head of Bran the Blessed, son of Llyr, which was concealed in the White Hill in London, with its face towards France. And as long as it was in the position in which it was put there, no Saxon oppression would come to this island."*²¹²

Later, the *Triads* describe how the head was later disinterred by King Arthur who wanted to be the sole protector of the sovereignty of Britain, in an act which the *Triads* call one of the Three Unfortunate Disclosures:

*"...And Arthur disclosed the head of Bran the Blessed from the White Hill, because it did not seem right to him that this island should be defended by the strength of anyone, but by his own."*²¹³

Ross in her analysis of the Second branch says the motif of Bran's severed head "makes explicit all that material representations of the head in cult contexts implies."²¹⁴ The head of the god is divine and has apotropaic qualities, keeping evil and ill-will at bay, it is prophetic and presides over a divine feast. Billingsley develops this further when he writes about the breakage of the spell which ends the Assembly of the Wondrous Head. He draws attention to the fact that the door which opens and breaks the spell is described as a window, significant in the appearance of later archaic heads above windows and doorways in a protective context. He writes:

*"Bran's magical posthumous journey contains crucial elements which reveal the prized values of the severed head - prophecy and oracular speech, personality and life after death, and a power to protect. Moreover, its presence transports the Assembly into a time and place between worlds, a spellbound liminal zone from which exit is only made when a window is opened upon the everyday world."*²¹⁵

Parallels can also be drawn between the elements in the Bran story and a folk tale from Northern Europe, *The Little Sea Hare*, which contains a number of archaic motifs.²¹⁶ In this story an omnipresent princess inhabits a room with twelve windows, through the first of which she can see better than anyone else and so on until the twelfth through which she can see everything above and below the earth. She swears she will only take a consort who could become so small she could not see him through this window, and all those who tried were decapitated and their heads displayed on stakes around the palace. Three brothers tried for her hand, two failed and

the third succeeded by hiding in a raven's egg, then the belly of a fish, and finally by entering a spring with a fox, the two merging magically transformed as a pedlar and a sea hare. Thereupon, the princess who has been unwillingly sworn to marriage, slams the window so hard that all the glass is smashed and the magic undone. In this story a number of archaic elements, including the power of magical springs to transform, the severed heads on stakes in an Otherworld palace, and the appearance of a window as a bridge between this world and the next.

3.11.6. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the beheading myths

This early English tale has been dated to the fourteenth century AD and is set firmly within the context of the Arthurian cycle of stories which were then popular in continental Europe and appear to have been based upon earlier material drawn from an earlier Celtic tradition.²¹⁷ One of the most important themes found in the story is the severed head, which appears to be directly influenced by earlier Irish prototypes, specifically from the story of Bricriu's Feast which forms part of the Ulster Cycle.²¹⁸ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* opens at King Arthur's court in Camelot where the knights are celebrating New Year with a great feast. The door bursts open and in rides the Green Knight. He is depicted as a fairy warrior or a denizen of the Otherworld and his clothes are green, the colour of nature. He challenges the knights to strike him one blow with an axe, on condition that he may return the blow exactly one year and one day later. Only Gawain comes forth to take up the challenge and strikes off the head of the Green Knight, which rolls onto the floor. As the astonished court looks on, the headless horseman picks up the severed head by the hair and holds it up. The eyes open and the Green Knight's severed head speaks, issuing a stark challenge to Gawain:

*"Be prepared to perform what you promised, Gawain; Seek faithfully till you find me...Go to the Green Chapel... and gladly will it be given in the gleaming New Year. Such a stroke as you have struck."*²¹⁹

Heeding the challenge, Gawain sets out with his steed Gringolet on Samhain, travelling through the mythical winter landscape of Logres, across many marshes and mires, "unto North Wales and then over by the Holy Head to high land...in the wilderness of the Wirrall."²²⁰ Finally at

Christmas Eve he reaches a castle where a temptation episode takes place, which Gawain fails by accepting a magical girdle which will protect him from the Green Knight's axe. Afterwards, the poem graphically describes Gawain's approach to the Green Chapel itself, "a chapel of mischance," along a path to the bottom of a valley where there are rocky crags. The chapel is clearly depicted as "a smooth-surfaced barrow beside a stream."²²¹ It has holes in either end "and was overgrown with grass in great patches..it was hollow, nothing more than an old cave or a fissure in some ancient crag it was within." Here he hears the sound of the Green Knight sharpening his axe and the second phase of the beheading game begins, with Gawain being compelled to submit his neck to the blade. In the end he receives just a nick from the blade, which is meant to symbolise his failings and inability to resist temptation during the quest. Although set in a medieval Christian context, the cyclical story contains many archaic elements, most notably the beheading sequence which has a direct parallel, with CuChulainn playing the role of the hero, in eighth century AD Irish tale *Bricriu's Feast*.²²² What both stories have in common is the figure of a giant who is beheaded, and the power of the severed head to come to life and make prophetic utterances. In this case the Green Knight, despite his appearance within the Christian knight's world, is clearly a denizen of the Otherworld and his power is centred upon his severed head.

Significantly, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written by an unknown author whose style and dialect have allowed linguistic experts to conclude that he lived in a small area of land on the border between present-day south-east Cheshire and north-east Staffordshire,²²³ an area which is redolent with British traditions including stories about the powers of the severed human head to protect buildings from evil influence.

3.11.7. *The symbol of the head and the quest for the Holy Grail*

As discussed above the severed human head appears within the cycle of medieval stories which make up the grail tradition, where it is sometimes serves as a substitute symbol for the grail itself. Indeed, throughout the centuries the Holy Grail has been described not simply as the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper and later by Joseph of Arimathea to catch blood from Christ's wounds at the Crucifixion, but also as a plate, a tray, a stone, a cauldron and a chalice. In the original stories, the bearer of the grail is a mysterious figure called the Fisher King, who

possesses a magical cauldron capable of giving and taking away life. The similarities between the Fisher King and the godking Bran who appears in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogion, are extensive and have been traced by Loomis.²²⁴

Leslie Jones summarises the symbols associated with the grail into three basic forms: cup, head and stone, and draws parallels between the pagan magical cauldrons and heads and the Christian tradition of the grail as presiding over a feast, providing everyone with the food that most pleases them, and the notion of resurrection.²²⁵ The analogies between the grail tradition and the magical cauldrons, with their connotations as the givers of life and the receptacles of sacrifice, are an archaic feature which can be traced back to the very earliest Irish traditions. Of further significance are the appearance of heads in a religious context depicted upon Iron Age metalwork, including the mounts of buckets and cauldrons, discussed earlier.

Claude Sterckx has traced a metaphorical progression in the grail stories from the severed head to the cauldron of rebirth to the grail itself,²²⁶ while Jones argues there is a stronger and more direct connection between the head and the the grail, without invoking the cauldron. Jones sees the severed head as:

"...a Celtic element that accounts for all the visual manifestations of the grail, an element that can be seen most clearly by comparing the mythological elements associated with the grail with the representations of severed heads in non-Arthurian literature."²²⁷

A severed human head appears in the early Welsh story *Peredur Son of Efracw*, one of the three later Arthurian romances which form part of the *Mabinogi*. Although not the oldest version of the Grail legend, it is believed to contain the most archaic features. The story has abundant evidence of Norman-French influence, although one school of thought maintains the continental romances were derived from Welsh sources, whatever their links and form of transmission.²²⁸ The reference appears in the context of a Grail procession, which is first found in the text of Chretien de Troyes' epic story *Perceval*, which dates from the early thirteenth century. In *Peredur*, the head appears on a salver following the appearance of two youths who enter the chamber carrying a great spear running with blood:

"...After silence for a short while, thereupon, lo, two maidens coming in, and a great salver between them, and a man's head on the salver, and blood in profusion around the head. And then all shrieked and cried out, so that it was hard for any to be in the same house as

they."²²⁹

Jones describes as "striking" the extent to which the grail narratives are permeated with severed heads, and notes: "...it seems that the more closely the narrative is focussed on a grail quest, the more heads there are."²³⁰ The French *Perlesvaus*, for instance, includes 152 heads in various forms, sealed in gold, lead and silver carried around by a trio of women, heads sought as trophies and used to heal a wounded knight, or acting as lucky talismans until Perceval has conquered the Grail Castle. In both *Perlesvaus* and *Peredur* the grail is both a sacred talisman and a magical vessel presented in a Christian context, but manipulates the symbolism and associations attached to the head which are found continuously from the pagan to the Christian era. Jones suggests the continuity which exists between the pagan head and Christian grail traditions was facilitated by medieval legends such as those connecting Adam with the Crucifixion and which placed his skull at Golgotha as a receptacle for Christ's blood, and the popularity of stories about severed heads which sing and speak at Otherworld feasts.²³¹ Jones concludes:

"I suggest this originally pagan set of symbols, disconnected from the mythology that bound them together...was revitalized under the influence of the Christian network (which, coincidentally or not, used the same general set of symbols), and formed the new myth of the Holy Grail. The myth was compelling not because it allowed the old Celtic symbol to live on in Christian dress, nor because it supplanted the pagan myth with the True Faith, but rather because it synthesized the two and came up with something completely new."²³²

3.12. Severed heads in British folk tradition

This section sets out to examine the appearance of the human head in a number of disparate contexts from the folk tradition of Britain, a large body of lore and literature of varying date and provenance. The material includes medieval documentary references to local cults surrounding the heads of martyred Christian saints, to the continuing traditions surrounding skulls used as part of elaborate rituals to provide cures for ailments such as epilepsy which were known to have continued within living memory in parts of the Scottish Highlands. All of these tales and traditions contain elements of archaic belief and practice which demonstrate the continuing importance of the head symbol during the Medieval and early modern periods. This is a period

when the head lost its earlier status as a symbol of pagan religious tradition, and became part of a folk tradition, but retained its essential elements such as the association with good luck, protection against evil and as a means of communicating with the supernatural world.

3.12.1. Saints, heads and wells

The potential of the head motif to gather around itself stories of magical or miraculous happenings is reflected in the numerous legends connecting the heads of martyred Celtic saints with holy wells. This is an international motif noted by Thompson,²³³ and illustrates the continuity from the earlier Indo-European motif of the "vital head" noted by Nagy in Celtic, Norse and Indian contexts.²³⁴ Francis Jones collected a number of "headless saint" stories in his essay on holy wells of Wales in 1954, and concluded:

*"...the emergence of a well is characteristic of the martyrdom of many saints, and locomotion after death and the carrying of a severed head is sometimes present also."*²³⁵

His list includes of martyrs includes St Justinian's head which was severed on Ramsey Island; where it fell a well arose, and the saint simply picked up the head and walked across to the mainland where he was buried. St Decumen was beheaded in Somerset, but he washed his head in a well, then tucked it underneath his arm, and crossed the Bristol Channel to South Pembrokeshire, where his well still flows.²³⁶ While most of these stories concern wells which appear as the miraculous last act of a saint, one concerns a well which dried up when a saint was decapitated, possibly as punishment to the executioner. This story concerns St Cynog, who was beheaded whilst at prayers in Merthyr Cynog. His head fell into a well which immediately dried up, whereupon the saint picked up his head and walked down the hillside!²³⁷

The most developed motif of this kind concerns the cult of St Melor of Cornwall and Brittany, who was murdered and decapitated by a wicked uncle who took his head on a long journey. During the journey, he became weak and frail and cried out for help, whereupon the severed head spoke, instructing the uncle to fix his staff firmly in the ground, whereupon a pure spring of water appeared and a tree took root. Like many other saints who suffered a similar fate, the spring subsequently became the centre of medieval healing cult, a cult often associated with relics which could include the skull of the saint.²³⁸

The best known story of this kind concerns the seventh century virgin St Winifred, whose shrine at Holywell in Clwyd has an unbroken history of Catholic pilgrimage for more than one thousand years.²³⁹ The earliest account appears in her eleventh century *Life* written by Robert, Prior of Shrewsbury, who became the custodian of her relics.²⁴⁰ According to Robert, a chieftain named Caradoc attempted to seduce the virgin, but she escaped his clutches and ran for the sanctuary of the church at Holywell built by her uncle, St Beuno. Caradoc caught Winifred before the door of the church and struck off her head with his sword. Where the head fell a spring of water suddenly appeared from the ground. When St Beuno appeared, he picked up the severed head, placed it back upon the body and began to pray, whereupon the head and body were miraculously reunited. St Winifred later became the Abbess of Gwytherin near Llanrwst, where she died. Her remains were removed in 1138 and translated to the abbey at Shrewsbury, where Robert wrote her *Life*.

The story of Winifred's martyrdom contains elements of archaic beliefs concerning both severed heads and healing water, which are found in other Celtic religious contexts. More specifically, the central motif of a spring of water appearing where a severed head falls also occurs in a number of contemporary saints lives, which suggests they are all derived from a single early medieval source. James Rattue argues that the earliest record of the head motif in the legends of six separate medieval saints, namely Decuman, Fremund, Juthware, Kenelm, Osyth and Justinian occurs in the fourteenth century *Nova Legenda Anglie* by John Capgrave, which was a collection of stories compiled from the work of John of Tynemouth who died in 1349.²⁴¹ Rattue notes how the motif of beheaded saints and wells was not confined to Celtic saints, and he cites examples from Continental Europe and as far east as the island of Chios in Greece. All these stories may be derived from one or more early medieval source, and he writes:

*"The need to make up a good story by borrowing from legends which were already famous was not disingenuous; for medieval people "truth" meant adherence to the eternal divine model, not to ideas of historical fact."*²⁴²

Also important in this context was the cult of saint's relics which reached a highly developed form at the time these stories were circulating in thirteenth and fourteenth century Europe. As part of this cult it was commonplace to detach the heads of saints to provide subsidiary shrines, and for the skull in tradition to become the part of the body which imparted benefit if used as a

drinking vessel at a holy well associated with a particular saint. Professor Michael Swanton has studied the iconography of one peculiarly localised head and well cult, surrounding the West Country St Sidwell, which was confined to the city of Exeter and places with strong connections with the city.²⁴³ Like Winifred, the source of the Sidwell legend is a fourteenth century account, in this case the *Legenda Sanctorum* of Bishop John Grandisson, and refers to events alleged to have taken place in the early Anglo-Saxon period, several hundred years before. The earliest mention of Sidwell's cult and relics date from the tenth century. She was a virgin of noble birth, hated by her wicked stepmother who conspired to have her murdered by a group of haymowers who cut off her head with a scythe. Where the head fell, a clear spring of water sprang up, and three days afterwards her body appeared surrounded by a radiance, carrying the severed head in her hands, to the place where her church was later founded.²⁴⁴

St Sidwell appears in later medieval iconography in association with images of a scythe and a spring of water, elements she shares with another little known Devon saint, Urith of Chittlehampton, who was also said to have been beheaded by haymakers at the instigation of her stepmother, and subsequently carried her head in her hands. The similarity between the two legends and those of Juthware (Sidwell's sister), are reflected in sixteenth century stained glass depictions in a number of Somerset parish churches where the identity of the saint they depict is ambiguous until it is specifically labelled, as Urith is at Nettlecombe.²⁴⁵

Swanton suggests the elements found in Sidwell legend and those of Urith, Juthware, Osyth and Winifred are so similar and widespread geographically to suggest the core story "is symptomatic of some fundamental native impulse." This impulse he associates with earlier Celtic interest in the cult of the severed head and its "apparently fundamental association with venerated waters and their powers of inducing fertility and averting evil."²⁴⁶ Also significant are the elements in the story which can be associated with the universal motifs of virgin sacrifice associated with the harvest, death and fertility, and the veneration of wells and springs.

A second example of an early medieval head and well cult has been studied by John Billingsley in the West Yorkshire valley of Calderdale.²⁴⁷ Here the motif appears again in connection with the association between the murdered virgin, but in this case a tree takes the place of a spring. The story is centred upon the town of Halifax, the urban capital of Calderdale, where Billingsley writes how "there is what amounts to an obsession with heads" in local tradition, as manifested in the frequent appearance of carved stone heads as a protective device upon

entrances and doorways to the yeoman houses which date from the seventeenth century onwards.

There are a number of rival theories for the naming of Halifax, all of which have questionable origins in antiquarian speculation. However, all seem to take their cue from a cluster of stories which surround the existence of an earlier shrine or hermitage dedicated to St John, the patron saint of the Halifax parish church, who is continually associated with water and heads. Two of these legends concern the motif of the severed head. A representation of “the face of St John the Baptist” appears on the coat of arms of the town, displayed prominently over the entrance to the Piece Hall. This relates to a legend that the town was in the Middle Ages a centre of pilgrimage and:

“...within the hermitage chapel of St John there was preserved, as a most sacred relic, the face of that saint. This gave peculiar sanctity to the spot as a place of pilgrimage, and so attracted great concourses of people from every direction.”²⁴⁸

The antiquarian William Camden recorded a very similar tradition when he visited Halifax at the end of the sixteenth century. In his work *Britannia*, published in 1586, he tells a story of how a monk from Whitby arrived in the Calder valley after searching for “a wild and solitary spot” to live.²⁴⁹ He erected a hermitage or cell on the spot where the town now stands which attracted many pilgrims, one of whom was a young nun who aroused such desire in the hermit that he became deranged and was convinced “the fair penitent was none other than the Devil himself, who had taken this fair form to allure him to mortal sin”. In a fit of madness, he decapitated the nun and fixed her head in a yew tree “as a warning to others,” after which he flung himself from a rock face. Camden describes how the head was hung on a yew tree, where it became an object of pilgrimage, with visitors plucking off branches from the tree as holy relics. Eventually the tree was reduced to a mere trunk, but retained its reputation of sanctity among the people,

“...who believed that those little veins, which are spread out like hair in the rind between the bark and the body of the tree, were indeed the very hair of the virgin...thus the little village which was previous called Horton, or sometimes the Chapel in the Grove grew up to a large town, assuming the new name of Halig-fax or Halifax, which signifies Holy Hair.”²⁵⁰

These strange and patently pagan legends hark back to earlier beliefs connected with the

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veneration of heads and sacred trees, both of which are found in Celtic tradition. It is interesting that the Christians thought it fit to dedicate their church at Halifax to St John the Baptist as the severed head of this saint figures strongly in the cult of relics during the Middle Ages. Pieces of the head or skull of the saint were preserved as holy relics in a number of separate Christian shrines on the European continent. St John was also the adopted patron saint of the order of monks known as the Poor Knights of the Temple of Solomon or the Knights Templar. The order was dissolved by the Pope in 1307 after the order were accused of heresy and idol worship. One of the accusations levelled against them was the worship of the human head and among the allegations it was said that in each province they kept idol heads "of which some had three faces and some one, and others had a human skull."²⁵¹ It was said the Templars worshipped these heads in their chapters and assemblies, believing the heads: "could save them, that it could make riches, that it made the trees flower, and the land germinate."²⁵²

What Billingsley describes as an obsession with the symbol of the severed head in Calderdale has its most arresting manifestation in the famous "Halifax Gibbet." Despite its title, the gibbet was not a scaffold but a guillotine which was used to decapitate criminals during the Middle Ages, all but unique in England and of special importance because of the tradition of carving archaic Celtic-style heads which survived particularly strongly in this valley. The Halifax Gibbet was at one time universally feared, and became part of the thieves' litany: "From Hell, Hull and Halifax, may the Good Lord deliver us." The gibbet began life as a deterrent to cattle rustling and cloth stealing, for during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the domestic woollen industry was the main livelihood of people in these Pennine valleys. Harsh treatment was given for minor offences, with the law stating that anyone found guilty of stealing cloth to the value of thirteen pence halfpenny (less than 6p today) would "be taken to the gibbet, and there have his head cut off from his body."²⁵³

The earliest record of the gibbet is from 1106 when the Warren family were granted the power to execute thieves caught within the bounds of their Manor by King Henry I. The family may have used decapitation as a method of dealing with criminals. The first recorded execution was in 1286, with more than fifty people being despatched in this fashion between the years 1541 and 1650. Although the original wooden structure no longer exists, workmen excavating near the base of the gibbet in 1889 discovered two human skulls, presumably those of its last victims. Local tradition relates that the only way a condemned criminal could escape execution

was to withdraw his head as the blade fell and escape across the Hebble Brook, the parish boundary, and never return.²⁵⁴

3.12.2. *The well of the heads*

Alongside the legends associating the severed heads of early British saints with the creation of holy wells and springs are a substantial body of stories in the folk tradition where heads are connected with wells in a secular context. The majority of these are found in Scotland, and are largely concerned with murders, the severing of heads and their placement in springs and wells performing a role in a form of ritual vengeance within the community. There is a strong mythological element within these tales, with the traditions being preserved in the explanations for the names of geographical features. This kind of tradition is also found in Ireland and is recorded in the *Dindshenchas*, the topographical legends of places in the landscape. One of these accounts for the naming of a hill, Sliab Gam, which described how a young man called Gam was decapitated beside a well on the hill which then became known as Gam's Hill. His head was cast into the well, which was magically affected, so that for part of the day it was a grey, bitter, salty stream and another part of the day it was clean spring water, becoming one of the wonders of Ireland.²⁵⁵ Ross records a number of similar legends from the same genre, including one which describes the slaying by Finn of a woman called Sen-Garman, who was decapitated and her head placed on a stake beside the well, while her body was cast into the water.²⁵⁶ All these tales emphasise the supernatural effect, beneficial or otherwise, which followed the placing of a severed head in a well or spring, which may account for the recurrence of this motif in the folklore record.

Of the "well and head" stories known from the Scotland, the best known has a stone monument, inscribed with a poem composed by the Gaelic poet Ewen MacLachlan, beside it and is surmounted by a carved representation of seven severed heads. The monument stands beside the A82 road south-west of Fort Augustus in the Highlands of Scotland and is a familiar landmark for motorists travelling towards Loch Ness. The stone plinth which stands above Loch Oich at Invergarry, has an inscription carved on four sides which reads, in English, Gaelic, French and Latin:

"As a memorial of the example and summary vengeance which, in the swift course of feudal

*justice, inflicted by the order of Lord MacDonell and Aross, overtook the perpetrators of the foul murder of the Keppoch Family, a branch of the powerful and illustrious clan of which his lordship was chief. This monument is erected by Colonel McDonnell of Glengarry, XVII Mac-Mhic-Alaister, his successor and representative, in the year of Our Lord 1812. The heads of the Seven Murderers were presented at the feet of the noble Chief in Glengarry Castle after having been washed in this spring; and ever since that event, which took place in the sixteenth century, it has been known by the name of Tobar-nan-Ceann or the Well of the Heads.*²⁵⁷

This story is one of the best known of the Highland folk tales and contains two of the most fundamental concepts in Celtic tradition, that is the combined powers of the human head and water. In this case the folk tale is related to a real historical event, namely the slaying by Alasdair MacDonald of Keppoch of his two young nephews in order to steal the chieftainship of the clan, in 1663. He was assisted by six other men, and it was not until two years later that they were all brought to justice and executed by decapitation, their severed heads placed in a basket and taken to Inverness. The story describes how on the way, because the heads were crashing and grinding against each other, the party stopped by the roadside and washed them in the waters of a spring. The well of spring water, which flows strongly into the loch below, thereafter became known as the Well of the Heads.²⁵⁸

Both Dr Anne Ross and Alasdair Alpin MacGregor have noted how this was not an isolated legend, for there are many other wells and springs bearing the name throughout the western Highlands and Islands.²⁵⁹ All of these are natural springs in remote locations which are connected with a battle, massacre or murder to account for their enigmatic name. During her research in the Western Isles in 1956, Ross heard of a similar story told in Gaelic by a woman on the remote island of Vatersay, on the southern coast of Barra in the Outer Hebrides. It was a folk tradition handed down in the oral tradition for generations, concerning the murder of three brothers who were decapitated and their heads left in a well. In this tale one of the heads spoke, and was able to make prophecies. The story, told by Nan MacKinnon, tells how the father of the murdered brothers collected their heads in a sack, but as he was returning home to bury them he passed a standing stone where one of the heads came to life, telling him to find a certain woman who was about to give birth. She would bear a son belonging to the dead man who would avenge the murder. In due course, the boy was found and grew to avenge his father's killer, by cutting off the head of the guilty man as he drank from a spring, which thereafter became known as *Tobar a'Chinn*, the Well of the Head.²⁶⁰ Five years later, while collecting

stories on the Isle of Skye, Dr Ross came across a similar collection of stories concerning wells and heads. She wrote:

*"There are at least seven wells on the island, and a loch and a fish weir at the mouth of a river, which are all called the well, loch or weir of the heads."*²⁶¹

None of these stories, which concerned decapitation at wells, had ever been recorded before and were known only by local people who had heard them from local stories in their childhood.

On the Island of Mull a story of this genre relates to a long-running feud over land between two families, the descendents of two brothers born in the fourteenth century. One member of the Duart family was shot and killed by an arrow fired by a Lochbuie man, and his wife exacted her revenge by cutting off the heads of the two children of Lachland Lubanach, of the Lochbuie clan, dropping them down the shaft of a well which became known as the Well of the Heads. This act led to the feud between the two houses becoming more bitter and deadly, ending in a final act of vengeance, the decapitation of the chieftain of the Lochbuie clan, Ewen of the Little Head, in battle as prophesied by a fairy woman. Thereafter he assumed the role of a banshee, appearing as a headless horseman or warning whenever death threatened the Maclaines of Lochbuie.²⁶²

This kind of headless horseman tradition is widespread and is a powerful symbol of life persisting after a death, a motif which is found in many other parts of the world. In the Celtic regions the headless rider appears to be associated with guarding boundaries and holy wells. An oral tradition of this kind was recorded by Dumfries Museum in 1902, and concerns St Bride's Well, which lies at the foot of a hillfort near Moniave in Nithsdale known as Tynron Doon.²⁶³ The road from the hillfort to the well was said to be haunted by a headless horseman, and the story recorded locally accounted for the haunting in this way:

"Yin o' the McMilligans o'Dalgarnock had gane tae veesit his lass, a dochter o'the Great McGachan o'Dalquhat, in Tynron Castle. Yin o'her brithers cam in unexpectedly an' wisna ower taken wi' seein' them thegither, sae McMilligan an' him hid a fa'ini --oot. Young MacMilligan an' aff like the Bars o'Ayr, Hooiver, it wis a dark nicht an' in the confusion he raid the naig richt ower the craig: the beast tummlet ower an' ower, threw him aff, an' he fell an' brack his hause-bane. Mair nor that, he rummled doon the craig wi' sick force that his heid came aff an' went runmlin' an' stottin' doon the brae till - pop! - it landed in St Bride's Well at

*the edge o' Clonrae fiel'. He hid been a decent, God-fearin' lad but, as ye'll realise, he couldnae win tae the Guid Place wantin' the heid: and that's for why ye'll still see him an' his naig noo an' again gaun' alang tae the aul' Cross.'*²⁶⁴

The symbolic connection between the head and well continued to play a theme in oral tradition during the Middle Ages, where in the sixteenth century it is found in an Elizabethan play or ballad known variously as *The King's Daughter*, *Princess of Colchester*, or *The Three Heads in the Well*.²⁶⁵ The story concerns a princess who is forced to leave her palace by a wicked stepmother and comes upon the Well of Life from which three golden heads arise one after the other. The heads utter prophecies, the first saying:

*"Gently dip but not too deep,
For fear you make the golden beard to weep.
Fair maiden, white and red,
Stroke me smooth and comb my head,
And thou shalt have some cockell-bread."*²⁶⁶

The young woman does as she is asked with good manners and care, and after lowering the heads into the well receives her thanks in the way of beauty and union with a fine prince which allows her to return to her father's court on equal terms with her stepmother. Her envious rival then attempts to retrace the girl's steps but when the heads appear she beats and insults them. By return, the woman receives bad luck and ill health. Although it is found in chapbook versions of East Anglian origin dating back to 1595, variations of this story are also known in Germany and Scandinavia, and are in fact noted by Thompson as an international motif, of which there are over forty different versions.²⁶⁷ Ross notes the poem in five lines, contains "all the elements of the Celtic tradition," while I would suggest the tradition is an international one, of which the people of the Celtic regions recognised one particular version.²⁶⁸

3.12.3. Skulls used as part of a traditional ritual in folk medicine

There is a large body of surviving tradition from Scotland and Ireland concerning the use of human skulls in magical or superstitious contexts concerned with the cure of epilepsy, which in some areas appears to have continued into the present day. As epilepsy was an affliction

associated with the head, it would seem appropriate that a cure could be sought by sympathetic magic via the use of a skull and springwater, both powerful symbols in their own right. Although all of these accounts were recorded during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, they appear to draw upon folk traditions with older roots. Pliny refers to water drunk from the skull of a slain man as a cure for epilepsy in his *Natural History*, and in the sixteenth century Scott alludes to a cure for:

*"...the falling evill...Drinke in the night at a spring, water out of a skull of one that hath been slaine."*²⁶⁹

In Scotland it seems skulls used for traditional cures had, like some stone heads and lucky charm stones, human guardians or Dewars, whose job it was to act as intermediaries between the supernatural world and those who wished to use these artefacts for healing and other purposes. Sheila Livingstone refers to the skulls of suicides being "sought after and treasured" for use as a receptacle for springwater drunk as a cure for epilepsy²⁷⁰ while MacGregor provides several examples from the wild Wester Ross region in northwest Scotland of the practice of keeping skulls for the same purpose.²⁷¹ A centre for this continuing tradition was centred upon the Loch Torridon area where the skull of a female suicide victim was used in a ritual cure for epilepsy as recently as the late 1970s. This was known as the Annat Skull and its reputation was so great over a century ago that those afflicted travelled from as far away as Perthshire in search of a cure from the guardian of the skull. Murdoch MacDonald refers to the skull as "probably last in a long line of skulls used for this purpose," and says it "had its traditional guardain among the Annat people, and this duty was inherited."²⁷²

MacGregor writes how the skull was first described in a paper read to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1905 by the Rev C.M. Robertson, minister of Strontian, in the Morven district. At that time it was held that three drinks from it, of running water, "one in the name of each of the Trinity" would cure epilepsy if the sufferer believed in the cure. Robertson described how:

*"The thinner portions of the skull now in use have crumbled away. It is kept in a hollow under a flat stone over the head of the grave to which it belongs, and to which the name Uaigh Bean a'Ghranndaich, the Grave of Grant's Wife is given."*²⁷³

Both MacDonald and MacGregor claim the skull was that of Mary Mcleod who moved to the Torridon district at the end of the eighteenth century and married the son of a local wiseman, Donald Grant. She became mentally ill and after several suicide attempts managed to evade a constant watch and flung herself from a cliff into the sea where she drowned. Her body was laid to rest outside the burial ground and out of sight of the loch, but according to MacGregor “not long afterwards, the grave was desecrated for her skull because of a case of epilepsy in the district.”²⁷⁴ MacDonald and Ross give a different version of this story, claiming the skull was found above ground after the burial “and this was recognised by the wise men of the village as being a supernatural sign.”²⁷⁵ Thereafter the skull was kept in the stone box hidden on the hillside near a stream called the *Allt nan Corp*, beside a spring which had a reputation for healing. Ross describes this spring as a holy well, and says it was called *Tobar a’Chinn*, The Well of the Head, but it is not clear if this name was attached to the spring before the skull was stored at the site. MacDonald describes how the power of the healing water was “greatly magnified” when it was dispensed from the skull. One old Gairloch man told him how the water tasted very bitter when dispensed from the skull and he was told after taking part in the ritual “that he would take one more mild epileptic attack, then they would cease...his family testified that this indeed proved to be the case.”²⁷⁶ MacDonald described the ritual involving the skull in detail:

“When a cure was desired, the patient and his or her companions would go to the house of the Guardian, where they were instructed in the ceremonies to be performed. The patient was asked if he or she had complete faith in the power of the Skull; this was necessary. Then, when the sun had left the hill, the patient and Guardian climbed up to the spring. They had to go in complete silence, When they had reached their destination, the Guardian took the skull from its box, while the patient walked three times sunwise around the spring. The skull was dipped in the spring and offered to the patient to drink, the Guardian invoking the Holy Trinity. This was done three times, and the Guardian then put a number of secret “prohibitions” on the patient, things that he or she must never do. These were, as far as I have been able to ascertain, that he or she was not to carry a bier at a funeral, or take much in the way of strong drink. They then walked down the hill again. The whole ceremony had to be completed before the sun touched the hill again.”²⁷⁷

Dr Ross describes how she was shown the Annat Skull during fieldwork in the Torridon region during the 1950s, when it remained a living tradition. She was shown the skull by the male

“guardian,” a local charmer who was appointed to the position, which remained hereditary. At this time the skull was still kept in a stone box-like container hidden on the hillside near the *Allt nan Corp*, and was used only on rare occasions for the ritual cure. Dr Ross described how she was taken to see the well and the head “which lies in a hollow in the hill, and would be virtually impossible to chance upon.”²⁷⁸ The ritual connected with the skull was explained in detail to Ross, and she said it appeared to have been a mixture of both pagan and Catholic Christian belief. MacDonald, writing in 1997, says the traditional cure was carried out as late as the 1970s, but was fading with advent of modern drugs and notes “the faith which was so necessary has all but vanished too.”²⁷⁹ He adds that as far as he is aware the skull remains in its stone container but “if you respect these old customs it seems wrong to enquire or search”.

Two writers note that before the time of the Annat skull that of another suicide, Finlay Macrae, was used in Torridon for the same purpose. This unfortunate had apparently wandered for miles with an unhinged mind before he hanged himself on a peninsula on the shores of Loch Torridon, which became known as Finlay’s Knoll. MacGregor writes:

*“In the knoll bearing his name his remains were buried-all except his skull, for, curious as it may seem, although a suicide was debarred from burial in consecrated ground..the skull of a suicide was held to possess occult properties. For this reason, Finlay’s skull was kept for many years. Kept, in fact, until it decayed away.”*²⁸⁰

To this day there are still people who resort to the traditional cure for epilepsy, which Dr Anne Ross says “was held in reserve as a final measure when all other, less dramatic remedies had failed.”²⁸¹ In one instance recorded by Ross on the Isle of Lewis, part of the Western Isles, the skull of an ancestor was dug up from a kirkyard, after sunset and before sunrise, and water from a sacred well was placed inside the cranium; this was taken to the patient who had to drink it as part of a ritual which was held in complete silence.²⁸²

MacGregor describes a number of similar traditions relating to the powers of the skulls of suicides in his topographical and folklore survey of Wester Ross, *Land of the Mountain and the Flood*. A native called Murdo MacLeay described to a colleague of MacGregor how as a youngster in the Torridon district he had been despatched to a local cemetery to bring back the skull of a suicide which was lying buried outside the walls. The skull was required by a gathering of anxious natives who wanted a epileptic neighbour to drink from it. The neighbour

was blindfolded for the ritual, and it was said he never had a fit thereafter, and lived to the age of ninety. MacLeay said he also knew a man in the neighbouring Shildaig district who “solemnly declared that he himself, an epileptic, had frequently drunk from a suicide’s skull kept for this purpose at a secret spot there.”²⁸³

The use of human skulls as a traditional cure for epilepsy was not confined to the Wester Ross region of Scotland, as similar traditions are known from Ireland and Wales. Indeed, a number of skulls are recorded in association with holy wells and springs throughout the British Isles for use as a drinking vessel for spring water, traditionally a practice which enhanced the healing powers of the water. In folklore the head and the well were both imbued with magical properties of healing and prophecy, and a number of the guardian skull traditions described in Chapter 7 contain stories describing the use of the cranium as a drinking receptacle. It appears the powers which were believed to dwell within skulls could be enhanced when they were used in association with springwater. McCulloch relates this to more primitive beliefs that drinking from the skull of an ancestor was to acquire the courage or wisdom of the dead man, be he a warrior or a saint.²⁸⁴

In the Western areas of Britain including Wales, Scotland and Ireland human skulls were until recently preserved as the “guardians” of a number of holy wells. Francis Jones lists a number of Welsh springs and wells associated with skulls, some of which appear to have had guardians or Dewars who dispensed water to those suffering from epilepsy and a number of other afflictions. At *Fynnon Llandyfaen* in Carmarthen, water was drunk from a human skull until 1815, and in Dolgelly the skull of a fourteenth century Welsh prince, Gruffydd ap Adda ap Dafydd, was used for a similar purpose.²⁸⁵

Possibly the best known example of a well/skull association of this kind is *Fynnon Deilo* at Llandeilo in North Pembrokeshire. This is worthy of particular attention because there is a considerable body of tradition surrounding it which sheds light on the origins of other stories of this genre, and by default on the keeping of guardian skulls in houses described in Chapter 7. The waters of *Fynnon Deilo* at Llandeilo were drunk from the skull of “St Teilo,” kept beside the well, of which a local family were the hereditary guardians. St Teilo’s Well, also known as *Fynnon yr Ychen* (the Oxen’s Well), still flows one hundred yards to the north-east of a ruined church dedicated to the saint at Llandeilo Llwydarth. Here cures for whooping cough, tuberculosis and other ailments were obtained by people who drank out of the skull, said to be

that of the saint, who was the Bishop of Llandaff during the sixth century AD, and the founder of many churches.²⁸⁶

Early this century, this relic was in the possession of a family with the name of Melchior (pronounced 'melshor'), who lived in the farm beside the well. For the cure to work it was essential for pilgrims to drink the spring water from the skull, and the water must be dispensed, according to local tradition, by a member of the family born in the house. Over the centuries, the Melchiors charged nothing for their service, but it was said they did not believe in the efficacy of the skull or the well, but it was claimed many who came were healed.²⁸⁷ One tale concerns a man who brought his son all the way from Glamorgan for healing, but returned home none the better for the journey. Then he remembered that the boy had not actually drunk the water from the skull itself. He then repeated the journey, and the boy drank from the skull as prescribed, and was subsequently healed. Francis Jones records another story of an old man, alive in 1906, who remembered people coming to the well who "were cured by faith" and said that when he was a boy he and two others were cured of an illness after drinking spring water from the skull early in the morning.²⁸⁸

But where and how did the connection between the skull of the saint and the healing well originate? It is this connection which has led some writers to draw links between this particular skull and the Celtic predilection for skulls at water shrines which has been used as evidence for claims of a continuing head cult in medieval Britain. One theory from a version of St Teilo's *Life* suggests the saint had a favourite maidservant from Llandeilo in Pembrokeshire who attended him on his deathbed. He gave her a strict command that at the end of a year's time from the day of his burial at Llandeilo Fawr she was to take his skull to the other place which bore his name "and to leave it there to be a blessing to coming generations of men who, when ailing, would have their health restored by drinking water out of it."²⁸⁹ This tale neatly sidesteps proclamations by a number of other medieval churches who claimed to house the body of St Teilo, who it is said, divided his own remains into three identical corpses, one of which was taken away by each delegation! Further doubts concerning these stories were raised by an examination of the skull earlier this century which concluded it was actually that of a young woman!²⁹⁰

In 1927 "St Teilo's skull" was sold by Miss Dinah Melchior for £50 to Gregory Macalister Mathew, a descendant of the Mathew family who had been the hereditary keepers of St Teilo's

tomb in Llandaff Cathedral since the twelfth century. A number of sources claim the skull disappeared in 1927, and no one knew where it was today. However, research by Major Kemmis Buckley traced the history of the skull from the earliest record to its return to Landaff Cathedral on St Teilo's Day, February 9, 1994.²⁹¹ Records show how the Bishop handed the skull of the saint, at that time preserved in Llandaff Cathedral, to Sir David Mathew in 1403 after the building was sacked. A descendent of Sir David moved to live at Llandeilo, in north Pembrokeshire, and the family line continued to live there for seven generations until the death of William Mathews in 1658. Before his death, William entrusted the care of the relic to the Melchior family who owned Llandeilo farm, and it remained in their possession until 1927, when it was sold to Gregory Mathews. He kept it in a bank vault in southern England, from where it was bequeathed in a will to another branch of the family living in New South Wales. The skull travelled full circle across the world when the current keeper, Captain Robert Mathews, agreed to return it to the keeping of Llandaff Cathedral, where it now reposes in a reliquary in St Teilo's Chapel.²⁹²

This story illustrates how once St Teilo's skull and well had become associated with each other, a cult quickly grew up around them which developed and took on a life of its own. More recently, parallels have been drawn between the role played by the Melchior family, as guardians of the well and skull, and the Druid priests and priestesses who are believed to have presided over the mysteries of Celtic water shrines. Professor John Rhys, writing in 1901, described the hereditary keeping of the skull by one family as:

*"...a succession which points to an ancient priesthood of a sacred spring, sacred before the time of St Teilo and one of the reasons why the site was chosen by Christian missionaries."*²⁹³

Subsequent to this, popular writers, such as Janet and Colin Bord,²⁹⁴ have included St Teilo's skull in the the context of the Celtic head cult and its association with sacred waters. Claims of a direct link between this skull and a cult or priesthood is demolished by Major Buckley's research which demonstrates how the cult surrounding the skull and well developed from the seventeenth century onwards and had no pagan Celtic antecedent, but the story illustrates how a skull can act in itself as a focus for extant folk tradition. As John Billingsley concludes:

"...it shows the potency of belief in the severed head, which evidently has the power to gather

about it tales of the supernatural and miraculous."²⁹⁵

Evidence from similar contexts elsewhere demonstrates that there was a pre-existing belief in the healing powers of spring water when dispensed from a human skull during a specific ritual. It is the existence of such an oral tradition which appears to be the important factor, not the age or origin of the skull itself.

3.12.5 Miscellaneous traditions

The final category of evidence from the English folk tradition which contains evidence of emphasis upon the head is that of the miscellaneous traditions and calendar customs which continue in a scattering of villages and hamlets across the country. Alan Smith, in an essay in *Folklore* published in 1962, described a number of obscure customs and observances which he suggested had at their core "the belief in some luck to be derived from gaining possession of the head of a slaughtered beast."²⁹⁶ The customs he examined were solely concerned with animal heads, and they included the well-known Haxey Hood game in Lincolnshire, and others including the Lamb Ale at Kidlington in Oxfordshire, the Cow head Feast of Westhoughton, Lancashire, and a group in the Midlands which included the Hallaton bottle kicking of Leicestershire and the Painswick Feast in Gloucestershire. All these customs, he argued, appear to be focussed upon a struggle for the possession of the head or part of the hide of a totem animal, a sacred object which functioned as a luck-bringing talisman for the community. Smith hoped further research could identify clues as to the type of rituals which may once have been carried out at places whose surviving names suggested the existence of a shrine where an animal head may have been offered to a pagan god, a theory discussed in Chapter 2. In personal correspondence Smith writes:

*"My case, which I believe was well argued., would have been clinched by a head custom being celebrated at or very near a place with an appropriate name. That I never found. As folklorists are well aware many ancient seeming customs are in fact quite recent (historically speaking) and continuity with the deep past too easily assumed. However, such a piece of evidence may yet be found."*²⁹⁷

Of the examples cited by Smith, none appeared to involve a custom centred upon a ritual contest

for the possession of a severed human head, although the question of ceremonial football matches in which heads played an important point was suggested as one possible example. Shrovetide football continues to be played at a number of locations in England, and the earliest record of this type of tradition dates from the mid-sixteenth century, when there were forty four venues for the custom. Of the surviving examples, a number do have a surviving oral tradition which suggests the football was originally a human head. For example Sir Walter Bodmer, in his account of the traditional street football played in Kirkwall on the Orkney Islands on New Year's Day, notes the "strange tradition...that the original ba [ball] was a human head."²⁹⁸ Sir Walter suggests the tradition perhaps dates from the Celtic era, but it appears unlikely that an object which the native tribes regarded as sacred would be treated with such disrespect.

In other areas, traditions associate these rough and tumble ball games with a later period of history. At Sedgefield in County Durham the annual Shrovetide game is said to have begun "with the kicking around by the Saxons of the head of a Dane."²⁹⁹ However, this kind of tradition appears to be a recent accretion, and I am unaware of any early documentary reference to support a claim of this kind.

One possible example of a custom centred upon a ritual battle for the possession of an artificial human head is Riding the Black Lad, which took place every year at Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire, on Easter Monday. The ceremony was suppressed by the authorities in the mid-nineteenth century, but continued in a modified form until 1960.³⁰⁰ In local tradition the Black Lad was an effigy of a knight in black armour, who was paraded around the town to the jeers of onlookers, and then pelted with stones and even shot at. The effigy was meant to represent Sir Ralph de Assheton, lord of the nearby manor of Middleton during the fifteenth century, and remembered as a great oppressor of the peasantry. To commemorate the antagonism between the lord and the peasants, money was annually given by the estate to pay for the effigy to be made. Kate Griffith who spoke to old people who remembered the tradition at the end of the nineteenth century, discovered the only part of the effigy which was preserved from year to year, was the head which was kept at Ashton Hall. The head was described as:

*"...wooden, and on it was placed a helmet. Some say its face was florid, some bronzed, some black...and some say the head was always kept at the Hall."*³⁰¹

At the end of the parade, the head was detached from the effigy and and thrown into the crowd

to be scrambled for.

“...the man who secured it receiving money in exchange for the head where it was kept for use at the following Easter ... It used to be kept at the Hall, afterwards it was simply exhibited there, or at the estate office, and lodged at some public house until it was next wanted.”³⁰²

The preservation of the head, which was believed to embody the luck of the community, is important when placed in context with the traditions surrounding stone heads described in Chapters 4 and 6, and the guardian skulls of Chapter 7. In all these cases, it appears there was a belief that luck of one sort or another was concentrated in the head, which was perhaps an extension of the belief in the head as the seat of the soul. Parallels can be drawn between the description of the Ashton Black Lad ceremony and the various ritual struggles involving animal heads described by both Smith.³⁰³ In a number of these customs, which continue in certain parts of the English Midlands, animal heads, particularly those of horses, are either fought for or used for ritual disguise at important seasonal points in the year. Of significance to this study is the fact that a number of these heads have been preserved in some form from year to year and accorded a degree of respect which has been associated with magical heads in the earlier vernacular stories and legends. The horse skulls are in fact the centre of the ritual and provide the means by which the wearer can be transformed at Hallowe'en into the character known as the Wild Horse in Cheshire, a figure with ritual connotations.³⁰⁴ A number of villages in this part of the Midlands at one time jealously guarded their own horse skull, which in some cases was painted black and carefully hidden away at the end of each performance. Like the human skulls and heads discussed in Chapter 7, analogies can be drawn between the animal skulls utilised in this way and the human skulls which functioned as supernatural guardians, as both functioned as symbols of luck

There are a number of other analogies to be drawn between the ritual attention accorded to both heads of animals and humans in the archaeological and folkloric record. These similarities include the manipulation and deposition of skulls in a repetitive or idiosyncratic fashion so as to imply ritual function, the use of stylised faces or heads in religious or at least liminal locations and the use of masks, both artificial and constructed from real skulls, in ritual dramas or rites.

Analogies can also be made here between the use of masks in this context and the frightening faces made by children at Hallowe'en, including the faces cut upon turnip lanterns which are

said to represent evil spirits. Also in Britain, there are examples of fantastic masks in the folklore record including the terrifying horned Ooser from Somerset, and the elaborate masks used in the Obby Oss ceremonies at Padstow and Minehead in Cornwall on May Day. As Poppi notes in her study of ritual masks in European tradition, they “transform and fix” identities and are used as part of ritual dramas performed at critical junctures in the yearly cycle, for example times of transition between the seasons of which Hallowe’en is one good example.³⁰⁵

The chapter which follows will describe the most important and enigmatic manifestation of the head symbol in Britain, that of the carved stone heads of which many hundreds of examples have been discovered and recorded during the last forty years.

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- ²⁴⁸ T.W. Hanson, 'The Face of St John the Baptist,' undated pamphlet, Halifax Library, West Yorkshire; Thomas Parkinson, *Yorkshire Legends and Traditions*, (London: Elliot Stock, 1888), pp. 162-65.
- ²⁴⁹ Billingsley, 'Archaic head carving in West Yorkshire,' p. 28.
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- ²⁵¹ See Laidler, pp. 164-86.
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- ²⁵⁴ 'Halifax Gibbet', undated leaflet published by Calderdale Leisure Services Department.
- ²⁵⁵ Ross, 'Severed heads in wells,' 37-38.
- ²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 42-43.
- ²⁵⁸ Ross, 'Severed heads in wells,' 42.
- ²⁵⁹ Anne Ross, 'Gently Dip but Not Too Deep,' *The Listener*, 30 August 1962, p. 313-14; Alasdair Alpin MacGregor, *The Peat Fire Flame* (Edinburgh: Ettrick Press, 1937), pp. 152-53.
- ²⁶⁰ Anne Ross, 'A Story from Vatersay,' *Scottish Studies*, 5 (1961), 108-9.
- ²⁶¹ Ross, 'Gently dip but not too deep,' p. 314.
- ²⁶² Gerald Warner, *Tales of the Scottish Highlands* (Edinburgh: Shepherd-Walwyn, 1982), p. 43.
- ²⁶³ Undated letter from Dumfries Museum in Sidney Jackson correspondence file, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Leeds.
- ²⁶⁴ *Ibid.* I collected a broadly similar oral tradition in Moniave, Annandale, in August, 1998.
- ²⁶⁵ See Kevin Crossley-Holland, *Folktales of the British Isles* (London: Faber, 1985), pp.336-40; the earliest recorded version in England is that included by George Peele in his drama *The Old Wives Tale* of 1595.
- ²⁶⁶ Ross, 'Severed heads in wells,' 40-41.
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- ²⁶⁸ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, 314.
- ²⁶⁹ Iona Opie and Moira Tatem, *A Dictionary of Superstitions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 359.
- ²⁷⁰ Sheila Livingstone, *Scottish Customs* (Edinburgh: Berrinn, 1996), p. 87.
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- ²⁷² Murdoch MacDonald, *Old Torridon* (Torridon: Torridon Publishing, 1997), p. 20.
- ²⁷³ MacGregor, *Land of Mountain and Flood*, p. 48.
- ²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

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- ²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ²⁷⁸ Ross, *The Folklore of the Scottish Highlands*, p. 82.
- ²⁷⁹ MacDonald, p.22.
- ²⁸⁰ MacGregor, *Land of Mountain and Flood*, p. 47.
- ²⁸¹ Ross, *The Folklore of the Scottish Highlands*, p. 81.
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- ²⁸³ MacGregor, 1965, p. 47.
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- ²⁸⁵ Jones, *The Holy Wells of Wales*, p. 115.
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- ²⁹³ John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), p.399.
- ²⁹⁴ Janet Bord and Colin Bord, *Sacred Waters* (London: Grafton, 1985), p. 20-22.
- ²⁹⁵ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p. 144.
- ²⁹⁶ Smith, 'The Luck in the Head,' 15.
- ²⁹⁷ Personal communication from Alan Smith, 11 January 1998.
- ²⁹⁸ Sir Walter's Journey, *Horizon*, BBC1, 28 March 1994.
- ²⁹⁹ Paul Screeton, 'Kicking a Few Heads Around,' undated news cutting from the *Hartlepool Mail*.
- ³⁰⁰ Christina Hole, *English Custom and Usage* (London: Batsford, 1942), pp. 52-53.
- ³⁰¹ Kate Griffith, 'The Black Lad of Ashton-under-Lyne', *Folklore*, 9 (1898), 381.
- ³⁰² *Ibid.*, 382.
- ³⁰³ Smith, 'The Luck in the Head,' 15-16.
- ³⁰⁴ Hole, *English Custom and Usage*, p. 10-11.
- ³⁰⁵ Cesare Poppi, 'The Other Within: Masks and masquerades in Europe,' in *Masks: The Art of Expression*, [ed.] John Mack (London: British Museum Press, 1994), p. 194.

Chapter 4

Archaic stone heads of the Celtic tradition



*Then I found a two-faced stone
On burial ground,
God-eyed, sex-mouthed, its brain
A watery wound.*

*In the wet gap of the year,
Daubed with fresh lake mud,
I faltered near his power-
January god*

*Who broke the water, the hymen
With his great antlers-
There reigned upon each ghost tine
His familiars,*

*The mothering earth, the stones
Taken by each wave,
The fleshly aftergrass, the bones
Subsoil in each grave.*

January God , by Seamus Heaney¹

4.1. Introduction.

This chapter deals specifically with the phenomenon of carved stone heads, a category of folk art which is currently the subject of controversy both in the fields of archaeology and folk studies. Traditions and folklore associated with these artefacts, which form one of the main focuses of this study, are examined in detail in Chapter 6. This chapter provides the archaeological and art historical background upon which this material should be viewed. The chapter begins by describing the history of the term “Celtic head” and how this definition has changed as fieldwork revealed how so few of these carvings could be definitively classified as dating from the pagan Celtic Iron Age or Romano-British period. A typology of features which identify a head as belonging to a “Celtic tradition” of long duration are described, along with the various individual ways in which features associated with heads can provide clues towards their age and function. Finally, a list of symbols and attributes associated with heads recorded in the present study is used to draw conclusions about their context as part of insular folk tradition in Britain.

4.2. History and definition of the term “Celtic head”

“Celtic” stone heads are enigmatic objects, the majority of which are three-dimensional, lifesize, and carved in the round as crude representations of the human mask. Grouping of these heads by type, material and style is a relatively recent undertaking, because the widescale cataloguing and classification of examples began just thirty years ago. The vast majority of examples have little if any history associated with them and are rarely found in association with datable context, with archaeological evidence either obscure or missing. As a result of their portable nature, they are readily moved and re-used and as a result are often found in a variety of locations from gardens and fields to stone walls and houses. Stone heads are found in astonishing numbers, particularly in the north of England. Jackson’s survey recorded more than seven hundred examples, while the on-going Manchester Museum survey has recorded in excess of one thousand sculptures.² Billingsley has calculated that if the density of heads he recorded in Calderdale, West Yorkshire was repeated over the rest of the country, there would be more than 14,000 in England alone.³ However, bearing in mind the concentration of the motif in certain

geographical zones and its complete absence in others, this appears to be an unlikely figure. The distribution of these artefacts, and the many regional variations are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

The term “Celtic head” is a relatively recent label and indeed can be said to have originated in 1967 when Anne Ross published her study of iconography and tradition, *Pagan Celtic Britain*.⁴ In terms of a strict definition, “Celtic head” should only be applied to those carvings which have been excavated *in situ* from a site where associated material can date them securely within the pagan Celtic Iron Age period. There are in fact very few if any examples of this kind from Britain, and the best known head from Europe is that from Msecke Zehrovich in Bohemia discussed in Chapter 3. A number of heads have been securely dated in Britain to the Romano-Celtic period, but these are few in number compared with the modern examples which they resemble.

Although not using the term directly, Ross defined “Celtic heads” as being characterised as a crude and stylised approximations of the human head, with certain typical features marking them out from the more naturalistic Classical or portrait-style sculptures, namely the trademark pear-shaped face, wedge-shaped nose, lentoid eyes and slit mouth. The frequency with which this kind of head occurs in north and west Britain led Ross to describe the head as having religious significance to the extent that it was possible to talk of the existence of a “cult of the human head” in areas such as Hadrian’s Wall where numerous carved heads of Romano-British dating were known.⁵ As Petch notes:

“...the variety of styles in which the heads are sculpted further complicates dating and grouping..[and] for these and other reasons “Celtic” heads have escaped serious consideration until comparatively recently.”⁶

Before Ross’s definition little or no attention had been paid by archaeologists to the study and recording of head sculpture. Archaeologists are reliant on dating techniques, provenance and specific contexts to provide empirical evidence, all of which are lacking among the collection of stone heads recorded from Britain. As a result archaeologists have by and large treated the subject of carved heads with a great deal of caution, if not suspicion. This vacuum was subsequently filled by a variety of other scholars, including art historians, ethnologists and antiquarians who have brought their own expertise to bear upon the subject.

“Celtic” stone heads can be said to have reached their greatest public exposure in the late 1960s when fieldworker Sidney Jackson began to record and accumulate information on the profusion of examples found in West Yorkshire. Jackson became increasingly fascinated by the heads he was then recording which appeared to him to have been ignored by archaeologists. Initially, he concluded at least some of them appeared to be of pagan Celtic origin, mainly as a result of direct comparison with indisputable early examples from continental Europe published by Ross in her 1967 work.

In a paper published in the *Journal of the Huddersfield and District Archaeological Society* in 1973, Jackson writes how easily it was for heads to escape classification before Ross’s study appeared.⁷ He noted how a Bradford schoolboy had unearthed a head made of glazed pot from beneath a layer of peat on Morton Moor in August 1957 and brought it along to Cartwright Hall Museum, where Jackson was then working as curator.

“Being ignorant about Celtic God heads, I could tell him nothing about it. Two years later came a stone head which had been unearthed at Manningham, only half a mile from the museum [and] when publicity was given to this in the local press it brought reports of other heads, and I then realised the importance of these discoveries and began to study Celtic heads in earnest.”⁸

By January 1967 Jackson had recorded over one hundred stone heads both from West Yorkshire and further afield, and was able to show representative photographs of his collection at a meeting of the Council for British Archaeology. After an illustrated note about the collection appeared in the London newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*,⁹ and was followed by a major feature in the *Yorkshire Post*,¹⁰ a TV station from Leeds sent a cameraman to film the heads and the item appeared on television news. This brought “a staggering response” from the public and a flood of information about, and donations of, stone heads from individuals which continued unabated until the early 1970s. In 1972 Jackson’s booklet *Celtic and Other Stone Heads* further defined his belief in the antiquity of the sculpture, the introduction claiming the heads were “deemed to be Celtic because of their resemblance to others found in Scotland and Ireland and on the Continent.”¹¹

When Jackson began publishing examples from his growing survey of West Riding heads his findings were initially treated with scepticism, and questions were asked as to why such a large number of them had not been recorded before. In reply, Jackson compared his collection of heads

with another hitherto overlooked collection of artefacts, the beehive quern, which were hand millstones of the Iron Age and Romano-British period. Like the heads, he argued, the querns had never been recorded properly by archaeologists and historians, mainly as a result of academic prejudice because none came from a securely dateable context.¹²

Thirty years later archaeologists and folk historians are a little more prepared to accept the existence of a head-carving tradition which, if not a result of direct continuity from the Celtic period, certainly appear to exhibit what Petch calls “a vestigial link with a Celtic tradition of some antiquity.”¹³ It is becoming increasingly clear that heads have been carved from stone, wood and a variety of other materials for a variety of “superstitious” reasons during the course of the last two millenia in series of resurgences and revivals. Of more than one thousand examples recorded by fieldworker Martin Petch in a continuing survey of Celtic sculpture in northwest England, two thirds have been tentatively dated to the modern period. This has led him to conclude that it would be more accurate to describe the carvings as “stone heads of the Celtic tradition,” and he adds:

“The argument as to antiquity remains unresolved and perhaps we should accept that stone heads manifest a vestigial link with Celtic tradition, the later examples as a folk echo.”¹⁴

John Billingsley has taken this line of argument further, suggesting that style alone cannot be used as a means of dating to an early Celtic context.¹⁵ He maintains that the primitive style was not a typically Celtic attribute but “a deliberately archaic and traditional device” which was used as a template to produce heads between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. By style alone, these heads could be dated to virtually any period from the Late Iron Age to the present day. Billingsley proposes the term “archaic head” to describe this genre of sculpture, adding:

“What had come to be called the Celtic head, therefore, was based on a pattern that was only 350 years old, whatever antecedents it could claim. It is therefore a false description for the great majority of crudely-featured stone heads and for this reason I no longer use the term “Celtic head” to describe them; a more accurate term, which expresses both their timelessly simple features and the longevity of their popularity, is “archaic head.”¹⁶

For the purposes of this study it has been decided to dispense with earlier classifications of these sculptures and simply refer to “carved stone heads,” a description which has no

connotations of either age or origin. Where necessary, the term “Celtic head” will be used where Celtic provenance is not in doubt.

4.3. Materials used by head sculptors

Throughout the Iron Age and early Roman period representations of heads have been carved upon a variety of mediums, including metalwork, coins, face pots and wooden objects which have been described in Chapter 3. It is likely for example that many representations of heads were carved in wood in both prehistoric and historic contexts, but these have not survived except in the rare cases where they have been preserved by chance in anaerobic conditions, for instance when submerged in a bog or watery place. This section will describe the different materials employed by the artisans who produced freestanding head sculpture during the last two millennia.

4.3.1. Wood heads

Wooden artefacts would appear to have survived only in very exceptional circumstances, although they may well have been equally as common as stone heads if not more so. Indeed, it is possible the first Romano-British stone heads may have been modelled upon earlier wooden examples produced by native Britons in the pre-Roman Iron Age. A large number of votive wooden sculptures including heads were recovered at two waterlogged cult sites near the source of rivers in Gaul, and were referred to in Chapter 3. There are no direct British equivalents other than isolated finds such as the Bronze Age figurine recovered from a bog at Ralaghan in County Cavan, Ireland.¹⁷ Brewer dates a small female head from Llanio, Dyfed, as Romano-British on the grounds of its distinctive “plaited” hairstyle, the ancient character of the timber and its discovery buried in a bog adjacent to an auxiliary fort.¹⁸ The small number of wooden heads carved in the Celtic style include one without a firm provenance preserved in Harrogate Museum,¹⁹ an example of possible medieval date found in the wall of a house in North Yorkshire (see Chapter 6) and a third from Footlands Farm, Sedlescombe in Sussex, which has a human face carved in the Celtic style on a pointed oak peg or stake.²⁰ None of these examples has to date been subjected to dendrochronological or carbon dating techniques.

In 1992 Billingsley recorded a fifteen foot long oaken tie-beam featuring a typical archaic head, carved in relief alongside a collection of other protective symbols.²¹ The beam was found inside an old house near Halifax, West Yorkshire, and was estimated by an expert from the West Yorkshire Archaeology Service to date from the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. The whole of one side of the beam was carved with talismanic symbols, including the carved face, a tree of life, a spiral and other markings similar to those found on witch-posts in Pennine farmhouses. Billingsley concludes that the beam:

“...was most likely to be a pattern piece for a carpenter, illustrating the various protective designs available to the patron...the association of the archaic face with these other designs makes clear its place in the realm of apotropaic designs.”²²

The survival of this beam illustrates the likely continuation of the head motif even when there is little concrete evidence for it in the form of stone, bone or pot artefacts in the archaeological record.

4.3.2. Bone heads

On rare occasions, animal bone has been used to depict heads and faces, possibly for use as an apotropaic charm. A janiform sculpture from Lothbury, London, depicts two opposing faces carved on either side of a deer's antler, the serrated edge of the base forming the hair and beard of each head.²³ Six very primitive human masks are similarly carved upon an antler found at Blenau Ffestiniog, Wales, and illustrated by Ross.²⁴

4.3.3. Pot heads

A small number of pot heads have been recorded, a category which can be distinguished from the face pots of the Romano-British period described in Chapter 3. The examples discussed here are complete head sculptures made entirely from pottery. This category includes two examples from West Yorkshire noted by Jackson. An interesting head made from glazed pot, seven inches in height, was unearthed in a garden on Leeds Road, Huddersfield, in 1961. While it may not be of Celtic date, it exhibits archaic characteristics including simple incisions for eyes, a straight

sided nose without lobes, and a slit mouth.²⁵ Another pottery head was unearthed on Morton Moor, Airedale, in 1957, beneath a layer of virgin moorland. Here the eyes had been made separately and inserted into sockets specially prepared for them. A pottery expert told Jackson the firing of the piece was "of a very primitive style."²⁶

4.3.4. Stone heads

By far the most common material used by artisans who produced heads which have survived today was locally available stone. Little if any work has so far been attempted on the taxonomy of the stone which has been employed to produce these artefacts, but in general the vast majority of examples are fashioned from sandstone which is the common material for building and sculpture in northern England.²⁷ A smaller number of heads are known carved from the hard-wearing millstone grit in the high Pennines, and limestone heads are recorded in lowland areas of the southern Pennines. To date, little if any attention has been paid to the type of tools, or the technique used by artisans who produced these heads, which may be revealed by the analysis of the toolmarks which are visible on some specimens; this may prove to be a fruitful line of future inquiry.

Billingsley has noted the fact that stone heads are not found in areas of the country where buildings were predominantly timber constructed, and their distribution seems to be confined to the upland valleys where there was a good supply of workable stone.²⁸ Sandstone is a common material for building and sculpture in the north of England, and the vast majority of examples are carved from this material. In the upper Calder Valley area discussed by Billingsley, the most commonly available stone is Pennine Millstone Grit, which varies in composition from coarse to fine grain and is invariably difficult for use in sculpture. Billingsley notes:

*"These factors contribute to the possibility that a head exposed to the elements for a couple of centuries may not look appreciably different from one that has lain buried for over a thousand years. Archaism [of style] is simply a further complication."*²⁹

As there is no reliable technique for measuring the age of stone carvings at present available to archaeologists, dating the vast majority of examples remains an unresolved problem. The pitfalls presented by style, and the deliberate archaism of technique employed by the artisans

who produced the heads, combine to ensure that the majority of examples will probably never be conclusively catalogued by ultimate date alone.

4.4. Stone head typology

There is widespread evidence that the human head was an important motif in the art and religion of widely separated cultures across the world. Arguments have been made that to the pagan Celtic tribes of northwest Europe the head was elevated to cult status because of the existence of a specific belief in it being the seat of the soul. The difference between "Celtic" stone heads and most Classical or naturalistic sculpture is that the latter are specifically non-representational. As Megaw noted, the dichotomy between the native Celtic representation of the human head and the Graeco-Roman portrait heads becomes marked as early as the La Tene Iron Age in Europe.³⁰ While the gods of the Mediterranean were depicted as idealised men and women, the artists of the Celtic tribes tended to depict the human figure in a non-naturalistic way, using symbols to express the spiritual potency of their gods. In this tradition the head is purely a symbolic motif whose apparent simplicity of style can be easily mistaken for crudity of execution. The important distinction between the timeless primitive appearance of the archaic stone heads and the Classical "portrait" heads is discussed in detail by Billingsley, who writes:

*"The value of a symbol is that it conveys a complex of meaning from only a minimum of information. The rudimentary and skull-like features of the archaic head...relate to human faces everywhere, whether living or dead. On the other hand, classical faces narrow the range of affinity towards the point where portraiture disqualifies any claim to universality, and anchors the image to one person in one time and in one space. The corresponding loss of symbolic value is obvious - the symbolic head is too firmly placed within the human and mundane world."*³¹

The inherent archaism exhibited by heads of the Celtic tradition is the main factor which has contributed to the confusion over their dating and classification by fieldworkers and art historians. One of the informants whose local knowledge was drawn upon during the course of the present study was the late Anthony Myers Ward, a Derbyshire-based Roman historian who was fascinated by the subject of "Celtic" stone heads. During the last years of his life Ward carved a number of heads out of a variety of materials and subjected them to weathering in a bid

to identify clues concerning the age and regional styles of other examples from the north of England (see Fig.24). He writes:

“After some twelve years of work, I would still find difficulty in identifying any stone head as genuinely Celtic unless it had been found in situ on a site under excavation. As for the “characteristic Celtic style,” it is now fairly clear that the facial characteristics are often the results of naive or unskilled workmanship, but inclusion of torcs, Celtic hair styles or definite attributes does tip the balance towards a positive identification. After making twenty seven of the things in various materials I am a little closer to being able to discern a pattern of regional styles and to be able to suggest the original appearance of some badly worn heads and icons but absolute certainly is, I think, impossible.”³²

Similarly, in her study of Brigantian heads, Frances Riddell abandoned all attempts to produce a typology of artistic features, adding: “I believe such an approach, particularly the construction of a typology, would lead us no further into the subject as a whole.”³³ Clearly, the features displayed by stone heads are immensely varied, making dating hazardous and difficult, but many do share a basic set of characteristics which can help to classify them as being part of an evolving tradition of long standing, which is the approach I intend to adopt in this study. Steven Fliegel has commented upon the wide range of types which is as broad as the chronology involved, and writes: “What emerges in the study of these stone Celtic heads is the almost infinite capacity for variation within a given type.”³⁴ At a basic level, the majority of the surviving sculptures are three dimensional and free-standing. A large percentage of the heads recorded in the north of England are simply and crudely carved, as Ward notes, with features minimally rendered, and attempts to depict ears or hair being relatively uncommon. However, on the more advanced specimens where hair appears it can be used as a useful device for dating by its style, as in the case of the Winterslow head excavated in datable strata on the line of a Roman road in Wiltshire.³⁵ The portrait style and greater understanding of the canons of proportion displayed by this sculpture show the influence of Romanisation upon the artisan who produced it, but the underlying Celtic influence remains in the use of small lentoid eyes, wedge-shaped nose, slit mouth, pointed chin and shallow features.

Petch concludes that in spite of the basic set of common features which can identify a head as being “of the Celtic tradition” there are actually no hard and fast rules. He concluded:

*“Often it is more a question of looking for distinguishable features which positively identify stone heads as not of the Celtic tradition, such as medieval corbel heads, gargoyles, king’s heads, basically heads of an ecclesiastical Christian nature as these “Celtic heads” are of course fundamentally pagan.”*³⁶

At face value, sculptured heads without datable context appear to be ancient and certainly pagan in origin, which again supports claims of early dating, but these connotations appear to have led some researchers astray because their apparent role as an integral part of the landscape has allowed them to remain unrecognised as important objects for such a long time. Fieldworker Martin Petch has listed a number of basic characteristics which help to classify the physiognomy of the Celtic tradition of head carving, and these have been further adapted by later studies, like those of John Billingsley.³⁷ Fliegel summarised the Petch physiognomy of the Celtic tradition by listing some or most of the following characteristics: lack of defined cheek bones, simple lentoid or “spectacle” eyes, simple slit mouth, crude rectangular nose, general lack of proportion, expressionless features, flat face with tapering, pointed chin, and a neck of unusual length or bulk, sometimes missing altogether.³⁸

Combining these basic features together the following list of six characteristics can be used as a guideline for identifying a head as belonging to a “Celtic tradition” of long antiquity:

1. **FACE** : Lack of defined cheekbones, with a general overall lack of proportion. In shape, pear, oval or circular forms are best known. The face is usually flat, which a tapering, pointed chin and expressionless features.
2. **EYES** : Simple lentoid, oval or “spectacle” eyes often bulbous; pupils may be depicted as drilled holes or slits. Often the upper and lower eyelids are joined to form a pointed or round-ended oval, sometimes with “double” eyelids, which resembles spectacle lens frames.
3. **MOUTH**: A simple horizontal slit very common. In other cases the mouth is oval or rectangular, sometimes exaggerated with full lips, protruding tongue or even a line of holes to represent teeth. These kind of features are also found on gargoyles and other grotesque sculpture associated with medieval church architecture. Open mouths may indicate an oracular function for heads, as do the enigmatic “cigarette holes” referred to below.
4. **NOSE** : Crude triangular or wedge-shaped, without lobes, frequently joined to the ridge of the eyebrows to produce the classic “Celtic” style notch or T-shaped mask, classified as the “*trompe l’oeil*” mask by Billingsley.³⁹

5. **NECK** : The majority of examples are carved in relief on a single block of stone without a neck. Necks are usually a feature of free-standing examples and often in this case, there is a neck of unusual length or bulk; in a few cases the neck takes the form of a collar-like ornament or even a torc.

6. **EARS** : Most often completely absent, at others just one ear serves the whole head. In a few cases, elaborate “cauliflower ears” are known. Sometimes represented by holes or ridges, and in other cases replaced by elaborate hairstyles or horns. In some instances drilled holes in the place of ears may have functioned as devices for the insertion of antlers or other animal horns.

4.5. Characteristic features of archaic stone heads

A number of recurrent features are found as part of the carving style associated with archaic stone heads, which Petch refers to as a means by which individual sculptures can be classified as belonging to “the Celtic tradition.”⁴⁰ The appearance of these features cannot be utilised as a guide for the absolute dating of individual sculptures, as some such as the “cigarette hole” have recently been argued to display evidence of modern, rather than archaic connotations. Nevertheless, the following list discusses eight symbols which occur frequently in the iconography displayed by archaic stone heads. Some of these features are found in isolation, at other times two or three may be displayed by one sculpture. The “Celtic eye” is a feature associated with a great number of carvings, while spirals and neck ornaments are relatively rare and more likely to indicate an early dating as a result of their direct connection with the early art of Celtic Europe. All eight features are deserving of detailed discussion, and will be dealt with in alphabetical order in the checklist which follows.

4.5.1. “Cigarette holes”

A mysterious feature found on a number of stone heads both from Britain and the Continent, is a small hole drilled into the centre of the mouth or at one end or another. This feature, often with the diameter of a pencil or cigarette, hence its name, is also known as the “whistle hole” or “*Seelenloch* ” (soul-hole). However, the association with cigarettes is modern in origin as

tobacco was unknown to the pagan Celts. This baffling feature is found on the two tricephalic heads from Greetland, West Yorkshire, associated with a Roman altar to Victoria Brigantia which suggests an early dating.⁴¹ Archaeologists have interpreted these holes both as both a s a channel for oracular speech or for the release of the spirit which was believed to inhabit the head. Jackson also found the feature on a number of heads he recorded in West Yorkshire, and used it as supporting evidence for his early stance on the Celtic date of some of his finds.⁴² In this instance he was supported by archaeological evidence, as the mysterious hole has been found on a number of heads and sculpture of undoubted prehistoric date, including the famous head (dubbed “Sir Mortimer Wheeler”) from Msecke Zehrovice in Bohemia. This head has been recently dated to third century BC on stylistic and contextual grounds.⁴³ Moreover, the “soul hole” or *Seelenloch* has an even greater antiquity in Bronze Age Europe, appearing upon statue menhirs both in Malta and Southern France.⁴⁴

However, Billingsley has suggested a far more humble origin for heads with this feature as the Aunt Sallys in fairgrounds of the last century.⁴⁵ Aunt Sallys were painted wooden heads set up as targets at travelling shows in which customers would throw missiles in an attempt to dislodge a clay pipe set in a drilled hole. Billingsley suggests this as an ingenious explanation for the battered appearance of a number of these Celtic-style stone heads, but admits use as an Aunt Sally does not prove the head was made for that purpose alone. He uses this theory to cast doubt upon the Iron Age date suggested for the tricephalic head from Corleck in County Cavan, described as Celtic by Ross⁴⁶ and more recently by Raftery,⁴⁷ suggesting a date as recent as the nineteenth century as a more likely alternative.⁴⁸ Although it is an ingenious suggestion I feel Billingsley’s Aunt Sally theory does not stand up to close scrutiny. Crucially, Dr Vanessa Toulmin, of Sheffield University’s Fairground Archive has cast doubt upon the suggestion that travelling showpeople would ever have employed Aunt Sally heads sculptured from stone, due to their prohibitive weight. Heads uses for this purpose on fairground stalls were always made of wood, and there was never a tradition of attaching a pipe to a hole drilled in wooden heads as a target for missiles, as Billingsley suggests.⁴⁹

4.5.2. “Eyes” in Celtic sculpture

The bulk of the examples of sculpture classified as “Celtic heads” display only very basic

features. Eyes, nose and mouth are always present except in a few examples and often the eyes appear to be the most important feature of the carving. The treatment of the eyes often dominate the visage, with the double-rendering of eyelids commonly referred to a “spectacle-eyed” being a common feature of a number of heads from northern England. Often eyes are oversized or bulbous, and this may reflect a tradition that the size of the eyes were a reflection of the size or power of the soul. Following the Celtic tradition of the head being the seat of the soul, it would be expected that the size of the eyes would represent spiritual power. Eyes also feature prominently on a number of stylised carvings, including the chalk drums from Folkton Wold, of late Bronze Age date, described in Chapter 3.

In some cases the depiction of eyes may provide powerful clues to the function of heads. Heads with open eyes may have been carved to “keep watch”, whereas those with closed eyes may depict death or defeated enemies such as those represented in Gaulish Celtic sculpture. D.J. Smith has drawn attention to this feature in his study of a head found near Hadrian’s Wall.⁵⁰ This head was carved with open eyes but the artisan who produced it chose not to drill holes to represent its pupils. This may suggest the function of the head was to watch or guard a boundary or threshold in the landscape where it was positioned. In a few cases heads were carved depicting closed eyes, or with a single eye closed, for example on the head of a stone idol of possible early Christian date from Lustymore Island, County Fermanagh in Northern Ireland.⁵¹ This sculpture has a single eye fully carved, indicating that the remaining left eye is blind. A head of this kind is recorded in my Peak District survey from Castleton in Derbyshire, and described in Chapter 5. The finely-carved sandstone head, now in Sheffield Museum, has one purposefully closed eye. Fieldworker Shelagh Lewis compared this carving with others which appear to have a single closed eye, or lopsided features which she has suggested may depict people who have suffered a stroke or some other facial deformity.⁵² In other cases the depiction of a single eye may represent the Evil Eye of folk tradition and heads of this kind may have been utilised for baleful rather than benign purposes. In a few instances this may represent a one-eyed god like those who referred to in the old Irish and Norse literature, such as the divine hags described as blind in the left eye who are encountered by Cu Chulainn in the Ulster Cycle; in this case the hags or crones are believed to be manifestations of the war-goddesses.⁵³ Ross illustrates a stone head of a one-eyed deity from Ireland and draws parallels with stories about one-eyed deities in early Irish literature.⁵⁴ One, “Balor of the Evil Eye”, appears in the

one of the early mythological cycle of tales which describes a battle between rival groups of gods. In this case the evil eye has invincible powers of evil and destruction. In one version of the story, Balor asks his rival Lugh to decapitate him after the destruction of the eye and place his head upon his own head so that he can transfer his deadly powers to Lugh. But the clever Lugh, sensing a trick, instead places the severed head upon a rock, whereupon the venom which seeps out splits the stone from top to bottom.⁵⁵ These kinds of stories and legends provide an earlier template for the folk stories associating evil-looking heads with bad luck described in Chapter 6.

4.5.3. *Foliage*

A small number of carvings depict leaf crowns or foliage which may indicate considerable antiquity and can help identify a head as representing a forest deity. The “leaf crown” is a feature associated with heads from Pfalzfeld and Heidelberg in Germany which have been dated to the fifth and sixth centuries BC, and are discussed in Chapter 3. Jackson recorded a head from Heaton in Bradford, West Yorkshire, which featured a carving of an oak leaf upon its long, square neck.⁵⁶ However, this carving also featured a distinctive upturned imperial moustache which suggests the head dated from the Victorian era and casts doubt on an early date for this particular piece based upon style. Foliate heads form a category of sculpture in their own right, with direct associations with the head symbol and will be treated as a distinct category of associated sculpture discussed in Chapter 5.

4.5.4. *Hair*

Head hair depicted on stone heads appears to be a product of synthesis of Celtic and Roman art style, though not exclusively. This took the form of a gradual synthesis of native interaction with Roman pagan religion. Hair combed directly back from the forehead in strands is accepted as a peculiarly “Celtic” feature and is depicted on some of the earliest human representations found on metalwork in the British Iron Age, described in Chapter 3. This kind of hairstyle features on a number of early stone heads, for example the carving excavated at the site of the Roman Mithraeum at Hulme, Manchester, in the nineteenth century.⁵⁷ Facial hair, beards, side

whiskers, and in particular moustaches, are well represented in the collection of heads from north Britain recorded by Jackson, and some of the styles are quite elaborate. A number of heads displaying moustaches have been classified as dating from the Romano-British period, including several from the Hadrian's Wall region.

4.5.5. *Hollow crowns*

This is a feature present on a number of heads presumed to be of early date, including the "Maponus head" from Corbridge, dated to a period between the second and fourth centuries AD (see Fig. 18), and a small tricephalous from Sutherland deemed by Ross to be of Iron Age origin.⁵⁸ Ross states that the head, "over and above any other symbols or attributes it may have, is sometimes fashioned so that it serves as a font."⁵⁹ A head in Cleveland Museum dated to the Romano-British period features a triangular groove on the crown of the head, which Fliegel suggests may be an unfinished example of a votive hollow of this genre.⁶⁰ The hollow where present acts as a focus which turns sculptures into portable altars or shrines in their own right. It is generally believed the focus was a receptacle for libations, or the offering of food or drink to the deity believed to inhabit the head, and has been associated with the Celtic cult practice of using actual skulls in shrines, examples of this practice were described in Chapter 3. Parallels can also be drawn with the skulls used as receptacles for drinking spring water in recent folk tradition, also described in Chapter 3. Alternative ideas have suggested the hollow was a device for disinfecting coins, a tradition associated with basins in a number of stones on the edges of rural communities during the middle ages.⁶¹ In other cases the hollows may have been carved for use as mortars, sockets for tenon joints as in the quadrocephalic heads from Buxton, Derbyshire (see Fig. 2)⁶² or even ornamental garden pots.

4.5.6. *Neck ornaments*

Distinctive collars and neck ornaments are a feature of a small group of stone heads, particularly from West Yorkshire. A head from found north of the Roman road at Appleby, Cumbria, has a distinctive turned up moustache, close cropped hair and a high collar round the neck which is open at the front. Classified as Romano-Celtic in age, the style of the collar suggests a more

likely origin at the end of the last century.⁶³ In other cases, the presence of a torc or neck ring can indeed suggest an early dating. The torc was itself a powerful symbol known from a variety of Celtic religious contexts, for example in temple sculpture and as a feature of the complex symbolism on the Gundestrup Cauldron, and appears to have been a ceremonial accessory for the Celtic warrior aristocracy. Torcs are found around the neck of a group of “Celtic” heads known from Continental Europe, and a small number of examples are known from Britain, for example a head from Chester now in Manchester Museum, and classified as Romano-British in date.⁶⁴ A torc also features on the powerfully-executed carving known as the Serpent Stone from Maryport in Cumbria which combines a number of Celtic religious motifs in one figure, including the head and the phallus.⁶⁵

4.5.7. *Striae*

These are incised lines, usually carved upon the forehead, which are also known as “worry lines” or “frownmarks.” Examples are found on the Celtic bust from Otley Chevin, Yorkshire,⁶⁶ and the three dimensional head from Chisworth, near Glossop, in Derbyshire.⁶⁷ Petch suggests the lines may represent concentration on behalf of the deity or spirit inhabiting the stone head, perhaps along with closed eyes representing deep thought.⁶⁸ This in turn would suggest some heads were meant to represent living deities rather than death masks.

4.5.8. *Spirals*

These are relatively rare but when present suggest an ancient origin in all probability. Spirals have magical and symbolic connotations which date back to the very earliest times and are found in association with Neolithic passage-grave art, for example at Newgrange, County Meath, in Ireland. A large head from Rossendale, Lancashire, features both a spiral decoration on one cheek and ram’s horns, and was shaped in a way which suggests it was employed as a cornerstone in a building, perhaps for apotropaic purposes.⁶⁹

4.6. Ritual painting of stone heads

One of the few Celtic stone heads subjected to scientific analysis is an example owned by the Cleveland Museum which has been dated stylistically to the second or third century AD.⁷⁰ Microscopic examination of the sandstone sculpture revealed traces of the original paint remnants, which revealed the entire surface of the head was painted red in its original context. Comparisons can be drawn with this discovery, and the Janus heads from Roquepertuse, Provence, dating from third or second century BC, whose faces were also painted red in antiquity.⁷¹ Traces of original paint also remained on the Romano-Celtic limestone head from the Bon Marche site in Gloucester, initially dated to the first century AD but more recently claimed to be of Romanesque origin.⁷² However, there is evidence that much Celtic sculpture in Britain, and Viking age sculpture in England and Scandinavia, were originally painted red, and indeed traces of red paint were found on the whetstone sceptre decorated with heads discovered at Sutton Hoo which is thought to depict a *polycephalous* deity associated with royal power.⁷³ Fliegel suggests “the recurrence of the colour red in conjunction with a number of Celtic stone heads would appear to suggest cult significance,”⁷⁴ however further detailed study and sampling of heads would be necessary before this assertion could be tested. There is the additional problem of proving that a layer of paint is contemporary with the original carving and provenance of a head, as a number of examples have been painted within living memory sometimes as a result of a continuing folk tradition. For example, the tricephalic heads found at Greetland, West Yorkshire, following a landslip in 1956, were painted red by the finder who used them as garden ornaments.⁷⁵

Another recurrent tradition appears to have been the periodical whitewashing of certain heads. A recent exhibition in Manchester Museum featured a bearded stone head from Middleton, Manchester, which still displayed traces of whitewash, as a result of being painted to resemble Adolf Hitler during the 1936 Middleton Centenary celebrations.⁷⁶ A similar tradition is attached to a head built into the north gable of Nudge House Farm at Addingham, North Yorkshire. Jackson noted how: “A tradition attached to this head is that it must be painted each year, the face white, the nose, eyes and mouth outlined in black.”⁷⁷ Petch notes heads both painted black, red and white in his survey of heads in northwest England.⁷⁸

4.7. Original context of stone head sculpture

A number of attempts have been made to ascertain the positioning of stone heads in their original contexts. Carvings like the one excavated from a late Roman building at Caerwent, was found on the clay floor of the shrine entered by gravel steps in which it appeared to have been the focus of ritual attention; the head is flat at the back and on the base, and appears to have been carved as if meant to be viewed from the front only.⁷⁹ This is a feature which has been noted on a number of carved stone heads, including the Romano-British example subjected to analysis by Cleveland Museum. This sculpture had been deliberately carved so that the head and face tilted slightly forward away from the line of axis, "...suggesting that the sculpture was intended to be viewed from slightly below...in its original setting the head would therefore have likely been placed above eye level."⁸⁰ The theory was supported by the unfinished state of the back of the head where there was no evidence of modelling, implying that the back of the head was never meant to be seen. This suggests the head was specifically produced for placement in a niche or for incorporation in some larger design, perhaps as part of a native shrine. Examination of the head under ultra-violet light revealed patches of uneven fluorescence which were possibly the result of its uneven exposure to the elements in antiquity. Fluorescence was absent altogether on the bottom two inches of the neck and its underside, indicating that the bottom was at one time inserted into a niche of some kind.⁸¹ The deliberate sculpting of the Cleveland head so it could be viewed from the front and below has direct parallels with other carvings of the Romano-British period. The relief carving excavated at the Sewingshields Milecastle on Hadrian's Wall was in the opinion of the finder "...subtle and well planned so that the face is most clearly seen when viewed from above suggesting that the stone was set low in the milecastle wall."⁸² Dodds noted the unusual style of a carved head upon an ovoid water-worn boulder from Dumfries which appears to look upwards at an angle of forty-five degrees. He concludes: "With graded lighting it would look most impressive in some primitive shrine. This may have been the original intention."⁸³ Other examples, like that discovered on the island of Steep Holme in the Bristol Channel, in 1991,⁸⁴ are carved upon shaped stone with the apparently deliberate intention that they should be inserted in the niche or a building or wall, suggesting this was the original context of a number of these enigmatic sculptures.

4.8. Special typologies of stone head sculpture

This section deals with the significant number of carved stone heads which are symbols in their own right in terms of their overall design or conception. At face value this can help towards their interpretation and classification, if not direct dating of sculpture. The attributes reviewed in the previous section could be described as incidental to the form of the sculptures, whereas the carvings discussed in this section have apparently been carved as complete symbols, although they may also display additional features such as cigarette holes or the Celtic eye. This kind of head can be divided into two categories, namely those sculpted as multiple heads, and those sculptured so as to display specific attributes of a deity or power, which includes horned and phallic heads.

4.8.1 Multiple heads

The appearance of multiple heads as a symbol of divinity is a feature known from the mythology of cultures across the world. Meslin described polycephalic deities from both Hindu, Celtic and Finno-Ugarian contexts and writes:

“Indo-European mythologies represented the diverse fields of application of the divine power by endowing the gods with three heads.”⁸⁵

There is much evidence from Gallo-Roman iconography and later tradition to support the claim that the tribes of Gaul worshipped a deity with three faces or three heads. Groups of three heads and triple profiles are also known from the Bronze Age Urnfield culture, Iron Age La Tene art and from Gaulish coinage, and according to Ross these:

“...are undoubtedly earlier attempts to give visual expression to the deep-seated Celtic concept of the triadic nature of divinity which received its full artistic form in the Roman period.”⁸⁶

Triple faces are also known from metalwork and coinage, particularly in Gaul during the late Iron Age, and are well documented on the Continent. The same emphasis upon three is found in the early Irish literature, where the number had important magical and ritual connotations. In the

early Irish stories there are numerous references to three semi-divine beings, and deities are often described as having three heads or three faces. The number also appears throughout insular Celtic iconography and mythology, for example in the Welsh Triads, the motif of triple death and in the images of the *tres matres* (three mothers) and the *genii cucullati* (triple hooded gods). In the later medieval period the vernacular tradition describes mythological and supernatural beings occurring in trios, such as *t'Ellen trechend* (three-headed Ellen), a malevolent creature who would emerge from the Cave of Cruachan to devastate Ireland at Samhain.⁸⁷ Other beings appear in trios, bearing the same name, being born at one birth and sometimes meeting the same fate, often decapitation.

It is not the case, however, that three faced images were unique to the tribes of northwest Europe as the motivation to depict the divine in triple form can also be found in Eastern Europe, in later Roman religion in the form of the Three Holy Mothers and in the later medieval depictions of the three headed Trinity. These Christian images became frequent from the fourteenth century AD and are common in Renaissance art.⁸⁸ Pettazzoni notes the dichotomy inherent in these Christian depictions of the Trinity as a three-faced head, as earlier carvings used the same image to depict demonic forces representing the struggle with paganism, emphasised by the addition of horns and an evil leer to the images. The later depictions depict heads with expressions of repose and meditation. This implies the significance of triplism in divine representation was deeply rooted within the consciousness of the artists and worshippers alike. The ultimate pagan origins of these triple-faced images clearly alarmed the church by the time of the Counter Reformation, for in 1628 Pope Urban VIII condemned this form of representation of the Trinity in a bull which was upheld by Pope Benedict XIV. However, condemnation did not stop popular devotion to the tricephalic image of divinity which was still widely venerated in some parts of the Alps as late as the nineteenth century.⁸⁹ This tradition may well lie behind a number of the stone carvings depicting triple heads recorded in Britain which are discussed below, and which have been dated to the late Iron Age and Romano-British period. As Billingsley notes, caution is required because although the motif is certainly ancient, depictions of tricephalic heads are also a facet of medieval Christian and folk art, and some of these carvings may be of much more recent date.⁹⁰

Imagery of gods with three, four or more *conjoined* heads and faces are known from other Indo-European pagan religions, and Pettazzoni has suggested they all have a common origin in a

belief in a *polycephalous* deity.⁹¹ Medieval literary sources provide evidence of idols with three heads among the Baltic Slavs, including the god Triglav worshipped in Pomerania, whose name means “three-headed.”⁹² In addition other references describe wooden idols of Svantevit, with four heads, Rugievit, with seven heads and Porenut, who had four heads and a fifth on his breast. Some of these images appear to have been kept inside temples, and parallels have been drawn between Saxo Grammaticus’ description of Svantevit at Arkona and the carved heads on the spectacular whetstone found in the Anglo-Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, dating from the seventh century AD, and discussed later in this chapter.⁹³

In addition to the multi-headed gods of the Slavs, there are also depictions of a tricephalous god from the Balkans who is known as “the Thracian Rider”. He appears on hundreds of stelae dating from the second and third centuries AD associated with horses and a horn of plenty. Horse imagery is associated with some of the Balkan multi-headed deities and also appears in Celtic contexts, at the Ligurian temples of Roquepertuse and Glanum in Provence (see Chapter 3). The pan-European distribution of beliefs surrounding a *polycephalous* god is further emphasised by a wooden image from the Obdorsk region of Siberia which shows seven human heads one above the other, carved on a tree trunk. This artefact has been interpreted as representing the different gods met by shamans during their journeys to the seven different worlds represented by the image of the world pillar. The Ostyaks call this type of carving “the wood with the faces of God” and their god of heaven Sanke is described as “the sublime father of the seven heavens who looks in three directions.”⁹⁴ This kind of belief appears to have been shared by the tribes who inhabited Scandinavia and Siberia in prehistory and early historic periods, and Meslin refers to the many-headedness as symbolising:

“...the faculty of seeing and knowing everything that the Finno-Ugarians attributed to the sun, which was the principal manifestation of the god Num.”⁹⁵

The existence of head idols during the early historical period in the Baltic is attested by the evidence of the arab Ibn Fadlan, a tenth century envoy to the Baltic Swedes, who reported seeing wooden posts bearing human faces to which offerings were made.⁹⁶ The common European urge to produce images of gods with two, three or more heads or *conjoined* faces must be used to place in context the growing number of *polycephalous* carvings in stone and wood recorded from the British Isles. In native tradition, a common technique which was employed to

give stone heads greater potency was to carve a number of heads or faces upon a single block of stone. Janiform, tricephalic and even quadrocephalic (four-faced) carvings are known, but the triple-faced form appears to be the most important and significant from the point of view of native British beliefs.

4.8.1.1. *Two faced (janiform) heads*

Usually carved back to back upon a single block of stone, this kind of carving is well-represented and has considerable antiquity which actually predates the Roman cult of the god Janus. A double-faced head from Holzgerlingen in Germany is one of the few securely-dated carvings from the late Iron Age La Tene period. It is carved on a tall pillar stone, which has been dated from the fifth or sixth century BC.⁹⁷ This head once sported a pair of horns or a variation of the "leaf crown" associated with other Celtic sculpture of this period. Another well known Janiform head, with the two faces separated by the beak of a bird of prey, is known from the Celto-Ligurian temple of Roquepertuse in Provence, southern Gaul, and dates from the third or second century BC.⁹⁸ The introduction of the Janus cult into Britain following the Roman invasion may well have served to popularise this Continental motif in native art. Ross sees heads carved with two opposing faces as suggestive of the divine favour attributed to twins, or:

*"...perhaps reflecting some concept such as the power of the god to look forward into the Otherworld, and backwards into the world of mankind, a power which could be doubled, perhaps, in the case of four-faced heads."*⁹⁹

Heads of this kind can be compared with the Roman tradition of *Janus viales*, stone sculptures which guarded doorways and entrances. Some of these sculptures may have been positioned to look along roadways and provide apotropaic guardians. Examples of Janiform carvings from Britain include the carving on an antler from Lothbury, London, referred to earlier in this chapter, and the two-faced idol from Boa Island in County Fermanagh, classified as Celtic but whose dating by style alone has been questioned more recently.¹⁰⁰ The Janiform head found at the site of the Roman fort at Corbridge, Northumberland, is however of unquestionable Romano-British date.¹⁰¹ In rare cases the power of the twin heads could be doubled by the carving of four heads, as in the tetracephalous from Ovingham, Northumberland.¹⁰²

4.8.1.2. Three-faced (tricephalic) heads

The common appearance of this type of carving is often three adjacent faces placed around one block of stone, the individual faces occasionally sharing features such as ears and eyes. Examples of this kind of carving may indicate a depiction of a specific tribal god or concept of divinity, rather than the crude abstraction apparent on the majority of simple carved heads. Green notes triple headed images can take several forms, including simple three-faced heads with no attached body, single bodies surmounted by three faces or heads, “or the image may appear on its own or associated with attributes of other images which may give a clue to its identity.”¹⁰³ Some triple faced heads represent the juxtaposition of both youth and old age, male and female symbols which associate them with other images like those of the antlered god and the three mothers, known in Romano-Celtic sculpture.

Carved three faced heads are known from Gaul, particularly from the territory of the Remi, where Ross says the image

“...served as an equivalent for the classical Mercury, under the influence of interpretatio Romani, and the wreathed, bearded Celtic god frequently has the cock, or an actual representation of Mercury, associated with him.”¹⁰⁴

Three faced carvings are not peculiar to the Remi, as Lambrechts recorded over thirty examples from Gaul in his survey of Celtic sculpture published in 1954.¹⁰⁵ They were also depicted on coinage as well as carved in stone. However, this kind of carving had its greatest density in the territory of the Remi, which suggests the image functioned as a totemic symbol of divinity identified with that tribe. This type of head is also known from Denmark¹⁰⁶ and other parts of Continental Europe, as well as the British Isles where the number of recorded examples is relatively few but has been steadily growing. Possibly the best known example of a tricephalic head is the “Corleck God” from Corleck Hill, County Cavan, Ireland, currently in the National Museum of Ireland. This head was fashioned from a block of sandstone, the features in low relief bearing a striking resemblance to the janiform heads from Roquepertuse in Provence. The faces are distributed around the ball-shaped head, and a dowel-shaped hole in its base suggests the carving was originally attached to a stone pillar or pedestal, upon which it may have been exhibited. The Corleck head has been claimed by Ross and most recently Raftery to be one of

the few examples from an unstratified site in Ireland which allows fairly close dating on stylistic grounds alone, as Ross notes its features

*"...correspond closely to Celtic anthropoid representations of the Iron Age [suggesting] a date in the late La Tene period."*¹⁰⁷

Raftery describes the Corleck head as "one of the finest instances of Celtic stone sculpture in Ireland" despite its questionable provenance and lack of datable context. Raftery bases his conclusion upon the archaic style of the head, with its

*"...deceptive simplicity verging at times almost upon crudeness, which manage, nonetheless, to evoke a deeply impressive feeling of the supernatural."*¹⁰⁸

However, as Billingsley and others who have studied heads in the context of folk art have pointed out, the more primitively "Celtic" the facial features, the more caution is required on behalf of the observer, "for it is this very primitiveness which links these heads stylistically through many periods."¹⁰⁹ The tradition of classifying heads as "Celtic" through style alone appears to be a trait among Irish archaeologists in particular. For example, one of the three faces carved upon a stone bust discovered by fieldworker Etienne Rynne at Woodlands, near Raphoe in County Donegal, was described by Rynne as "convincingly Iron Age in style."¹¹⁰ Caution must again be applied where archaism is used as a direct measure of age, and this head may equally be the product of folk art within the recent historic period. The Woodlands head had only one ear serving for the whole head, a feature which was also found on another tricephalic head from Bradenstoke, Wiltshire, which was found in an old hedgerow.¹¹¹ The unusual treatment of ears is a feature typical of many archaic stone heads, and in many instances they are either lacking altogether or have been replaced by animal ears.

Further examples of British tricephalic heads include one identified in a clear Romano-British context at the fort in Risingham, Northumberland and a second from the Roman station in Wroxeter.¹¹² Two good examples carved in yellow sandstone were unearthed following a landslide at Greetland, West Yorkshire, in 1956, near a site which has produced a Roman altar dedicated to Victoria Brigantia.¹¹³ Each of the three faces features a "cigarette hole" drilled into one side of the lips, a feature also found on the Corleck head and other examples some of which

come from a Bronze Age context in Europe. Two further tricephalic heads are known from West Yorkshire. One of these is associated with a wayside spring at Green Springs, Calderdale,¹¹⁴ and features a broad hollow in its crown, similar to an example from Sutherland in Scotland which has been dated stylistically by Ross to the time of the Roman conquest.¹¹⁵ The second example features three faces carved on a phallic-shaped stone unearthed in a garden at Saltaire, near Bradford, in 1966, and recorded by Jackson.¹¹⁶

In my own case study of Peak District heads four tricephalic examples were recorded during fieldwork for the present study. However, two of these were clearly of recent origin which underlines the caution which is necessary in dating and classification. A fine example depicting a central face flanked by two profile faces is known from a context associated with Roman fort at Melandra Castle, Glossop, and has been tentatively dated to the late Iron Age by Manchester Museum (see Fig 1).

As noted above, caution is necessary in the dating of triple heads to the "Celtic era" on stylistic grounds alone, as the notion of the trinity of godhead also survives in Roman tradition as the Three Holy Mothers and the trinity found in the Christian church. During the middle ages a number of three-faced images appear to have been used to depict the Christian Trinity, sowing further confusion, as ecclesiastical heads also appear in threes. Good examples can be found in Ripon Cathedral and the York Minster Chapter House, while others include the unique triple foliate heads carved on wooden misericords in medieval Whalley Abbey, Lancashire. A wooden tricephalos hangs from a nail in the church of Llandinam, South Wales, of indeterminate date,¹¹⁷ and three faced stone carvings are known in association with churches at La Poquelaie in Guernsey, Cartmel Priory in Cumbria and *Teampull na Trionaid* (Trinity Temple) at Carinish, on North Uist,¹¹⁸ demonstrating the wide geographical spread of the motif.

4.8.2. Heads with the attributes of a Celtic deity

This sub-category contains those heads which by reason of the appearance of animal horns can be directly identified as being representations of a native god identified by the Celtic tradition. However horns should not be regarded as a purely Celtic attribute as they also appear on later medieval ecclesiastical sculpture in the form of grotesques and gargoyles, where the symbol is meant to symbolise the Devil of Christian tradition. Examples of this tradition continue to appear

as late as the nineteenth century in Gothic architecture. The final category includes heads which are carved in the form of a phallus, another important religious and apotropaic symbol in Celtic belief and tradition.

4.8.2.1 Horned heads

This form of portraying heads is second only in frequency to the depiction of multiple faces, and is particularly well represented in northern England, specifically in the region of Hadrian's Wall. Horned deities appear in both art and iconography throughout the western Celtic world and a number of examples are known from Britain. The cult has been traced in northern Europe as far back as the Bronze Age. In Romano-British times the image could appear both as ram-horned or bull-horned and is often associated with Mercury, in the same manner that a number of Celtic warrior gods became assimilated with Mars under *interpretatio romani*. Some of the horned figures illustrated on Celtic and Romano-Celtic artefacts may represent Cernunnos, a Gaulish Celtic god around whom a separate pagan Celtic cult can be traced, second only to the cult of the head in the opinion of Anne Ross.¹¹⁹ Cernunnos is known from one inscription from Paris, and there is no evidence to suggest the name was ever used as an epithet for a horned god in Britain. However, a silver Celtic coin depicting an antlered deity is known from Petersfield, Hampshire, dating from the first century AD.¹²⁰ The single inscription which has survived from Britain associated with a horned carving comes from the outpost fort of Birrens on the Roman Wall and appears to refer to the Roman god of fertility, Priapus or a Gaulish equivalent.¹²¹ These examples show that caution must again be exercised in attributing pan-Celtic names to localised gods even if they may display traits which are represented over a wider geographical area.

The portrayal of the horned god as a head alone is according to Ross "a fully appropriate way for the tribal god to appear in native iconography."¹²² She explains the popularity of the symbol in north Britain as being a result of an association between this god and a pastoral economy which may be reflected in the depiction of ram horns. In Celtic religion, the ram and the mythical ram-horned snake were symbolic of war and fertility. In addition, the numerous horned heads associated with the frontier region surrounding Hadrian's Wall may suggest the god was invoked there as a by-product of the continuing turbulent nature of the area at the time

when it lay on the frontier of the Roman Empire. In northern England there are a number of stone heads which appear to represent animals or have animal attributes, particularly ram's horns, which may represent a separate cult of the horned god among the Brigantes.¹²³ Petch suggests this may be an insular offshoot of the horned god known elsewhere, with the god identified by ram's horns rather than antlers as Cernunnos is depicted in Gaul and at Cirencester and Verulamium.¹²⁴ Antlers may well have been difficult to carve upon the coarse sandstone and gritstone rock available in north Britain, and it is suggested that ram horns became popular as they were easier to trace by following the outline of the head. In other cases, the problem may have been solved when socket holes were drilled into the sides of heads into which real antlers could then be inserted. A head from Caerwent in South Wales is one possible example of this practice, as the deeply indented, slot-like ears may have been originally intended for the insertion of cervine or equine ears.¹²⁵

These examples illustrate the process whereby essentially separate native Celtic cults may have combined and intermingled especially during the period of Romanisation when native artists were stimulated to carve religious symbolism in stone. In some cases, it seems the mixture of symbols and attributes could have been deliberately employed in order to bestow more power upon the final hybrid form of the god which was being depicted. Jackson recorded a number of interesting examples of this type, including an impressive janiform head from Mirfield, West Yorkshire, which consists of a human head paired back to back with that of a ram, the horns of which turn the reverse direction (see Fig. 14).¹²⁶ A very similar carving is known from the County Cavan area of northwest Ireland, discussed by Helen Hickey, which may suggest a parallel tradition across the Irish Sea province.¹²⁷

Traces of ram's horns can be identified upon the two profile faces on the tricephalic springhead carving from Melandra Castle in Derbyshire, described above, which suggests the motif was a familiar one to the tribes who inhabited the foothills of southern Brigantia. A figure with incised horns springing from its forehead has been identified among a group of Romano-Celtic carvings from a burial site also near Glossop, in the Derbyshire Peak District, dating to the late Roman period (see Chapter 5). In addition, a stone from a native shrine decorated with two horned heads in profile, facing each other, forms part of a group of nine excavated from the ruins of a Roman *mansio* dating from the first century AD at Wall (Letocetum) in Staffordshire.¹²⁸ These examples may provide evidence for a cult of horned gods in the area inhabited by the tribes

known as the Cornovii and Brigantes during the Romano-British period. Petch speculates that the Cornovii may have taken their name from the horned god Cernunnos in the same way the Brigantes took their tribal name from the goddess Brigantia,¹²⁹ but caution is again necessary before drawing such a conclusion based upon evidence which is completely lacking.

Although there is evidence for the veneration of a horned god in the south and Midlands, the best known examples come from the frontier region on either side of Hadrian's Wall which was built in the second century AD. The finest example is the ram-horned head from Netherby, an outpost fort north of the Roman Wall near Carlisle, where it was found in 1794, and is described in Chapter 3 (see Fig. 13). Fashioned from local red sandstone and eight inches in height, the head is square faced with a flat head, a heavy forehead, narrow, deep-set eyes, drawn back lips and a grim, warlike countenance. Large ram horns curl round the ears and flow down towards the base of the neck. Coulston and Phillips describe it as "a crude but highly effective piece of sculpture executed wholly in the Celtic style"¹³⁰ owing nothing to Classical representation. Colin Richardson of Tullie House Museum in Carlisle describes it as "one of the finest pieces of primitive native sculpture to have survived from Roman Britain."¹³¹ The ram's horns and fierce, scowling expression make it likely that the head represents a native warrior god.

The Netherby stone can be compared directly with a similar horned carving from Lemington, Tyne and Wear, now in the Museum of Antiquities at Newcastle. The stone was discovered in a garden just four hundred yards from Milecastle eight on Hadrian's Wall in 1980.¹³² Carved in rugged yellow sandstone, the rectangular mask-like face has a brutal, deeply incised mouth with thick lips like the Netherby head. The eyes are widely spaced and appear as two incised ovals without pupils below a protruding forehead. Significantly, there are traces of a protuberance emerging from the forehead above the left eye, which may suggest the horn of a goat or ram. Similar vestigial horns are depicted on the horned head found at Carvoran fort, Northumberland, which shares the closed or sightless eyes without pupils which D.J. Smith suggests are "the sightless eyes of death."¹³³ He continues by suggesting:

*"...that such heads either confuse or consciously combine the idea of divinity with the supernatural powers attributed by the pre-Roman Celts to the severed heads of slain heroes and renowned warriors: in short, they portray a syncretic 'god head.'"*¹³⁴

In 1969 yet another head turned up just feet from the same Roman Milecastle which produced the Lemington head. This was a crudely carved sandstone specimen, apparently unfinished as the left side is more fully carved, with evidence of a drooping moustache, eyes represented by two curving incisions, and a crudely-indicated left ear.¹³⁵ Distinctive rough marks of a six-point claw chisel were evident over the forehead and top surface. All the above examples of horned heads are geographically associated with Roman military contexts, whether these are forts or milecastles. Three heads are associated with the Lanchester Roman fort in County Durham, two of these also display evidence of vestigial horns.¹³⁶ In the case of heads associated with horned imagery it appears there are strong arguments for classifying this feature as indicative of an archaic date. It seems horned warrior gods could be portrayed in the form of a head, and those in turbulent areas like the Roman wall portray two concepts in one syncretic god-head. However, horns certainly appear in later Christian contexts associated with the Devil and demons, which may serve to show the potency which this image retained in popular consciousness into medieval times. A large number of grotesques and gargoyles carved upon Romanesque and Gothic churches feature horns, some of which were created as late as the nineteenth century.

4.8.2.2. *Phallic heads*

The head was regarded by the Celtic tribes as a powerful apotropaic symbol and was sometimes used by them as a symbol representing specific deities, or a combination of attributes of different deities. As a result of its important status within native religion it seems the head was also endowed with potent fertility-giving properties, a belief which has survived in folk memory. The phallus was another symbol which, although not exclusively Celtic, had similar associations with fertility and apotropaic properties. When paired with the phallus, another strong evil-averting symbol, the overall power of the object could be increased, especially in the case of a head is set upon a stone pillar. This category of heads will be discussed later in this chapter in the context of ritual whetstones and their analogies with Celtic pillar stones, Graeco-Roman Herms and boundary markers which were carved in the form of a pillar topped by the human head. Probably the best example of a phallic stone head from Britain is the well-known Serpent Stone from Maryport in Cumbria, which has a human face carved upon a stone pillar

with the features marked upon the glans. In this case greater potency is given to the carving by the addition of a neck ornament or torc. Similar pillar-like stones with faces carved in relief upon the shaft or glans are known from Port Talbot, Glamorgan, and Megaw has dated these to the Romano-British period.¹³⁷ Pillar stones featuring heads are also known from Laugharne in South Wales¹³⁸ and Rochdale, Lancashire, where two stones functioned as gateposts on a farm near Wardle, perpetuating the threshold function found elsewhere.¹³⁹ Billingsley ascribes the Rochdale heads to an origin within the last four hundred years as further examples of folk art, but associates them with the Mediterranean *herm*, from the Greek equivalent to Mercury.¹⁴⁰ These were short rectangular pillars with a head above and phallus below which were used as boundary markers.

Other carvings which combine the head and phallic imagery include small amulets in the form of heads like that from Eype in Dorset, which displays four interlaced circles below the tiny face¹⁴¹ and the stone from Broadway, Worcestershire, whose features are typical of native cult figures which perhaps represented local gods.¹⁴² In addition a recent find from a Romano-British farmstead at Guiting Power in Gloucestershire consists of a crude human figure phallic in shape, with head forming the glans.¹⁴³ As this figure displays vestigial horns, this would increase its potency threefold. Green notes the appearance of a phallus and goat horns on a face pot from Colchester which may reflect another manifestation of this tradition.¹⁴⁴

4.9. Interpreting stone head iconography

The following section discussed the motivations behind the people who produced the carved heads which have been discussed earlier in this chapter, and deal with some of the specific contexts in which heads have been found. In particular, the suggestion that heads were carved to represent pagan Celtic deities will be examined in the light of the evidence which has been assembled so far by this research.

4.9.1. "God" heads

Some writers have suggested a number of archaic stone heads from the British Isles may have been specifically carved as images of Celtic or Romano-British pagan deities. Jackson, for

instance, wrote that the examples he recorded in West Yorkshire,

*“...are believed to have been god figures of the Celtic peoples who inhabited this part of Britain during the Roman occupation and earlier.”*¹⁴⁵

The appearance of symbols such as torcs, “cigarette holes”, spirals, vestigial horns and other symbols of divinity on a number of examples support the notion that at least some heads were intended to represent regional or tribal gods or goddesses. Although Green rejects the notion that heads were worshipped directly, she says:

*“...the significance of the head to the Celts means that...it could on occasions represent the whole. Thus a number of deities could sometimes be depicted by the head alone.”*¹⁴⁶

As the analysis presented earlier in this chapter has demonstrated, stone heads frequently had schematised features, and it is likely that they were intended to portray the attributes of a number of different deities in one symbolic “godhead.” The overt identification of deities appears to have been less important to the native Celts than the functional definition of Imperial deities was to the Romans, as according to Green: “...deities depicted merely as heads needed no positive means of definition: both god and devotee knew who was being invoked.”¹⁴⁷

Direct association of stone heads with specific Romano-Celtic deities is difficult other than the few cases where a specific inscription has survived. The historical and iconographic evidence from Gaul alone contains about four hundred god-names, and of these over three hundred occur only once which suggests most of these were extremely localised deities. Of the few which do stand out on a pan-European level, it is their symbols and iconography which often survive rather than their name. This kind of intense localisation makes the task of identification more difficult, and attempts to identify Romano-Celtic carved heads with a specific deity name have been fraught with difficulties. Heads and names can rarely be equated, and as many heads have few identifying characteristics it is difficult to identify them with any specific native cult or deity other than through symbols such as horns, animal attributes or multiple faces. For example, Ian Richmond’s theory that the sombre-looking gritstone head from the second century AD context at Corbridge in Northumberland depicted the native god Maponus¹⁴⁸ has since been questioned by Coulston and Phillips who find this suggestion unconvincing (see Fig. 18).¹⁴⁹ Although they

conclude the head probably does represent a local god, they say it is far too sombre and elderly in appearance to be equated either with Maponus or the classical Apollo, with whom the native god was equated on the Roman Wall, as these were both depicted as youthful in appearance.

There are a small number of severed head images which undoubtedly depict gods, as a few have surviving inscriptions. Possibly the best known is the carving from Paris depicting the antlered god of the Gaulish tribes, who is identified by the name Cernunnos. From the fort at Birrens in southern Scotland there survives a stone bearing the head of a man with horns emerging from the forehead and curling backwards. Beneath his face is the inscription *[P]riapi*.¹⁵⁰ The carving is dated to the first or second century AD and the name is thought to refer to the Roman god of fertility Priapus, although Ross has associated it with the Gaulish Erriapus.¹⁵¹

In other cases, heads have been excavated in a context which suggests they functioned as a symbolic "god-head" even if the name of the deity invoked remains unknown. Possibly the best example of this kind is the stone found at Caerwent in South Wales, which was found in a context which Boon refers to as "the Shrine of the Head."¹⁵² Near the Roman fort a native shrine was excavated which appeared to be focussed upon a carved stone head. A well and a rock cut pit or pool nearby contained three human skulls associated with Antonine material, just one hundred feet south of a later fourth century AD site. Green described this carving as "perhaps the most interesting head from outside North Britain."¹⁵³ The freestanding, three-dimensional mask-like head is carved in local sandstone and was found sitting on a platform in a chamber which was "evidently a shrine, situated in a remote part of the grounds belonging to a late Roman house."¹⁵⁴ Boon suggests the owner of the house may have been a practising Christian who banished the older native Celtic beliefs, followed by lower-status inhabitants, to a remote part of the grounds.

Connotations which associate carved heads directly with native pagan gods are also a feature of folk traditions collected in parts of the British Isles and Ireland where fieldwork has been undertaken. In some regions of Ireland, stone heads continue to be associated with identifiable local supernatural deities and nature spirits in folklore. For example, a crude female head incorporated into a wall at Clannaphilip Church, County Cavan, is said to be a portrait of the "Cailleach Gearagain," a local supernatural being.¹⁵⁵ Another stone, recently stolen, but once built into the wall of an old church at Cloghane, County Kerry, is known in local tradition as the head of Crom Dubh.¹⁵⁶ In oral tradition, Crom Dubh was a pagan chieftain who was converted

to Christianity by St Brendan in the sixth century AD. Another version of the tradition recorded in 1841 states more bluntly:

“Crom Dubh was the god of the harvest who the pagans had worshipped until they were converted by the saint.”¹⁵⁷

This head was formerly kissed as a cure for toothache and this ritual was incorporated into a pilgrimage associated with the festival of Lughnasa connected with Mount Brendan at whose foot the church was built. Maire MacNeill in her analysis of the Lughnasa folklore suggests that:

“...with the legend of Crom Dubh buried for three days with his head only above the ground, and with the many references in Irish mythology to a head on a hill, we may speculate that there was a custom of bringing a stone head from a nearby sanctuary and placing it on top of the hill for the duration of the [Lughnasa] festival. During this time the god may have been looking propitiously on the ripening corn plots.”¹⁵⁸

In the case of the Crom Dubh carving, a stone head can be identified with a definitive pagan deity, as Etienne Rynne notes “on stylistic as well as on traditional grounds, therefore, this head can confidently be regarded as of pagan and Celtic origin.”¹⁵⁹ The direct association of carved heads with pagan deities is also dimly remembered in the folk tradition of northern England, particularly the High Peak area of Derbyshire. In some areas heads appear to have functioned as “hearth gods” or household genius loci. In the Longdendale Valley of Derbyshire heads are still carved and buried surreptitiously according to local informants, and local belief identifies them with “the Old Ones,” a term for the ancient deities and spirits.¹⁶⁰ In a number of areas respect is still paid to carvings which guard entrances and boundaries, either in the form of simple offerings “for luck” or in a general acknowledgement of their “presence,” several examples of which are recorded in Chapters 5 and 6. The question of whether pagan deities are still “worshipped” is a question which is not easily answered, but it appears more likely that any pagan beliefs surrounding the heads has given way to habit, superstition and local magic, in the form of the folk traditions recorded by Merrifield and Billingsley. This explains the connection of the carvings with white witchcraft, and their use in parts of Cheshire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire in efforts to cure illness, encourage fertility and ward off ghosts and evil spirits, as described more fully in Chapter 6.

4.9.2. *Ritual whetstones decorated with human heads*

The clearest context in which carved heads may be seen to represent "divine" gods or protective spirits are where they appear upon ceremonial whetstones, of which eight have been recorded from the British Isles and dated to the early medieval period. Whetstones are fine-grained stones used for sharpening the edges of tools and weapons, and were surrounded with a mystique linked with the cult of the sky-god, the smith and Royal power in northern Europe.¹⁶¹ Archaeologists have dated this group to the early medieval period, that is between the seventh and twelfth centuries AD, and six of the eight examples are known to have originated in the north and west of the British Isles, which suggests they are of native Celtic rather than Anglo-Saxon in manufacture. The remaining two both come from Anglo-Saxon burials, one from Lincolnshire and the second, most important being the famous four-sided "whetstone sceptre" from Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, excavated in 1939.¹⁶²

None of the other ceremonial whetstones found in Britain can be directly compared to the Sutton Hoo sceptre in its complexity, sophistication, size and quality. The others are similar only in their emphasis upon the head motif which in all cases is carved upon the end of the stone, as in each case only one end of the shaft survives. The group includes examples from Llandudno in Gwynedd, North Wales; Lough Currane in County Kerry, southwest Ireland; Broch of Main in the Shetland Islands; Portsoy, Banffshire in central Scotland; Lochar Moss in Dumfries and Galloway; Dinting, near Glossop in the Derbyshire Peak District, and Hough-on-the-Hill in Lincolnshire.

The most important example from this secondary group is a broken stone from Lochar Moss, Dumfriesshire, which appears to be the remains of the top of a ceremonial whetstone or mace.¹⁶³ The stone was found in a peat bog near the village of Collin, is made of fine-grained micaceous sandstone, and stands four inches in height. Anne Ross has identified the head carved upon the stone as the god Maonus, as a result of its proximity to the site of the *locus* of this Celtic deity at nearby Lochmaben, and its resemblance to the so-called Maonus head from Corbridge "even to the peculiar twist in the long narrow nose."¹⁶⁴ Objections have been raised against this identification,¹⁶⁵ but there can be little doubt that the Lochar Moss head symbolises a divine ancestor or protective tribal god of some kind, and it is the appearance of the symbol upon a ceremonial whetstone which is in itself significant.

Of similar size is a ceremonial whetstone from Lincolnshire, which is shaped to represent the head and shoulders of a man.¹⁶⁶ The face is crude and rudimentary with empty eye sockets which might once have been filled with precious stones. There is a round dowel hole in the top of the head suggesting it was used as part of a mace of some kind. Although only half the size of the Sutton Hoo stone, it has some parallels even though it is different in shape. Of the remaining examples, that from Lough Currane comes from a monastic context and has been dated to the twelfth century AD.¹⁶⁷ It is finely carved stone, almost five inches in length, tapering at each end and with a human head carved in relief at one end, complete with braided hair. A similar whetstone, this time broken, was found near Llandudno in 1940, with the human mask accompanied by incised lines representing hair in a triangular pigtail.¹⁶⁸ A swastika and a cruciform marking are scratched upon the sides of the three inch long stone, and Kendrick concludes the character of the mask suggests it is of Irish or Welsh manufacture, possibly of the eighth or ninth century AD.

The stone from Portsoy, Banffshire is almost six inches in length, with two human heads, one at either end of the tapering stone, their chins pointing towards the centre. Both have ring-shaped ears, brow-lines, pointed chins and are accompanied by a variety of Pictish symbols including fish, crescents and horseshoes.¹⁶⁹ The conical stone from Broch of Main is a little under two inches in height, with a Celtic-style face carved on the tapering end. Goudie suggests this could have been a "chess-man" rather than the broken end of a ceremonial mace.¹⁷⁰

A date in the early Romano-Celtic period may be possible for one small whetstone, carved in millstone grit, found at Dinting not far from the Roman fort at Melandra, near Glossop in Derbyshire (see Chapter 5). Three and a half inches long and one and half inches wide, one end is neatly rounded and the other broadens slightly to form a crudely carved little face around two inches long. The eyes are almond-shaped, the nose triangular and the mouth a long slit in the archaic "Celtic-style." Although its precise provenance is unknown, the whetstone is made of local stone and its weathering suggests considerable age. Glynis Reeve suggests the face could represent the owner's mark or that of a pastoral or warrior god depending upon its function.¹⁷¹

Vera Evison's study of pagan Saxon whetstones found that the "head" motif was extremely rare among hundreds of early medieval hones discovered in early English graves.¹⁷² A few large hones found in later Anglo-Saxon graves may have been used for ritual, but they are associated with the very end of the pagan period and lack carved heads, which occur at the same period in

the Celtic areas of north and western Britain. Their primitive faces can be compared with those carved on cult pillar stones of the La Tene period in Iron Age Europe, described in Chapter 3. These comparisons have led to suggestions the whetstones in fact are smaller representations of phallic pillarstones which are related to the fertility-bringing mystique surrounding early kingship, both in native British and early English contexts.

Michael Enright has pointed out that the provenance of the whetstones decorated with the head motif suggests the style "was comparatively familiar to the Celts, but was less well known to the seventh century Anglo-Saxons."¹⁷³ Furthermore, although the Sutton Hoo whetstone was found in an unambiguous Anglo-Saxon funerary context, the object itself appears to have been an imported prestige object, perhaps the product of a British workshop in the north or west. The stone, which can best be described as a "whetstone sceptre" is actually a four sided staff or stone bar, twenty two inches long and two inches wide in the middle. It tapers towards the ends where it terminates in two spherical knobs. The bottom end of the sceptre was designed to sit comfortably upon a bronze saucer, which could rest upon the thigh or kneecap of a seated king or chief. The whetstone was found lying parallel to the wall of the burial chamber covered by a ship of Anglo-Saxon origin in the pagan cemetery at Sutton Hoo near Woodbridge, Suffolk.¹⁷⁴ Although the identity of the personage buried in the ship is not clear, archaeologists believe it could have been a king of the East Anglian royal dynasty the Wuffings, perhaps Redwald who died a pagan in the second decade of the seventh century AD. Redwald was the first East Anglian king to become *bretwalda*, or overlord, of the other early English kingdoms. He exerted considerable power while maintaining a foot in the door of both the old pagan religion and the new Christianity imported by the Augustinian mission during the last decade of the sixth century AD.¹⁷⁵ Archaeologists have suggested the whetstone was never used for practical purposes but acted as a symbolic device "representing the power of the sword-sharpener."¹⁷⁶ Rupert Bruce-Mitford wrote:

*"It is an impressive, savage object, which seems to symbolise in a striking manner the pagan Saxon king in the role of Wayland the Smith - the forger, giver, and master of the swords of his following."*¹⁷⁷

Equal in importance from the point of view of a "ritual" context are the appearance of a series of finely-carved human faces which appear at either end of the stone bar, below the knobs, all

gazing to the four points of the compass and with their heads pointing towards the apex of the bar. Some are decorated with beards and moustaches, others are clean shaven suggesting they could be female, perhaps representing a god and a goddess. All the sombre faces are surrounded by a pear-shaped ring with a medallion attached, which suggests parallels with the Celtic torc, or neck ring, a symbol of divine power in Irish mythology.¹⁷⁸ Analysis has shown the heads were at one stage painted red, a colour used to adorn a number of carved heads including those from Roquepertuse in France and the head studied by experts at Cleveland Museum, discussed earlier in this chapter.

A further fundamental association between the whetstone sceptre and the native Romano-British tradition is the provenance of the greywacke stone from which it is carved. Evison has demonstrated this stone is not native to southeastern England, and most probably came from the Galloway region of southern Scotland.¹⁷⁹ A similar origin seems likely for the stone used to make the other comparable whetstone from an Anglo-Saxon funerary context, found at Hough-on-the-Hill, Lincolnshire.¹⁸⁰ These and the find from Lochar Moss, Dumfries, suggests they may all be the products of the same native British workshop in southwest Scotland or Dalriada. Several attempts have been made to identify the deity or deities symbolised by the faces carved upon both ends of the Sutton Hoo whetstone. Early scholars related the royal power symbolised by the sceptre to the Anglo-Saxon cult of Woden/Odin, while Sidney Cohen argued the god depicted was more likely to be Nordic Thor.¹⁸¹ He wrote:

“Not only does it have four faces, but three of the faces are bearded. Thor was distinguished, in Nordic myth, by a red beard. Moreover, it will be remembered that the knobs on the whetstone were painted red, perhaps in an attempt to signify that the god had red hair.”¹⁸²

Furthermore he directly related the four sided whetstone with pagan four-headed deities and four-sided earthwork temples found in northern Europe, described earlier in this chapter. These, he suggests, were designed around a four-faced idol or pillar stone representing the god Thor which was placed centrally, with each face looking out through a window or threshold. In support of this hypothesis, he cites Saxo Grammaticus who wrote that an idol of Svantowit destroyed by Bishop Absalon at Arkona in 1169 had four faces, each directed to the points of the compass.¹⁸³ In the previous century the Norwegian missionary king St Olaf overthrew an idol of Thor which was fed four loaves of bread daily, presumably via four mouths.¹⁸⁴

Given the native British provenance of the Sutton Hoo stone, more general parallels can be drawn between the symbolic heads and Celtic pillar stones, like that from Pfalzfeld in Germany, which has been tentatively dated to 400 BC and significantly has four sides, each decorated with a pear-shaped human head.¹⁸⁵ Originally five feet in height, the stone was surmounted by a Janiform head and rested upon a phallic-shaped knob which was originally painted red. Significantly each face on the pillar bears the distinctive La Tene "leaf crown," and Enright claims the similarities between this and other Celtic pillar stones with the Sutton Hoo whetstone are "remarkable." If correct this suggests the form of early medieval whetstone sceptres was influenced by earlier pagan Celtic cults linking the human head and fertility. This could be expressed in terms of heads carved upon the glans, as found on early pillar stones like those from Pfalzfeld and elsewhere. In a later early medieval context, the relationship appears to have been expressed via the appearance of the head motif on ritual sceptres, where the head/fertility association became a symbol of the power of kings and their relationship with divine ancestors who protected the tribe.

4.10. Continuing tradition

This section examines the evidence for a stone carving tradition, particularly in northern England, which has continued to produce examples of sculpted heads in a distinctly archaic style. The use and context of these heads are the subject of a more detailed discussion in Chapter 6.

4.10.1. Archaic heads and stonemasonry traditions

The existence of a strong and vibrant continuing tradition in the north became apparent during the fieldwork for the present research in a number of locations in northern England. Early in the research Martin Petch brought to my attention a mysterious carving which had been reported to Manchester Museum by a group of ramblers from the Oldham area of the Lancashire Pennines.¹⁸⁶ They regularly visited the wild and beautiful moorland region surrounding the ruins of the Roman fort at Castleshaw, a popular destination for weekend walking expeditions. In the summer of 1987 the group were pioneering a new route on the moors west of the fort, on

a ridge of land above the Castleshaw reservoir two miles from the foothill village of Delph. That summer the moor had been burnt and was completely clear of heather, and as the walkers climbed the blackened earth one morning they were surprised to see a shadowy form staring back at them from a two foot high stone pillar by the side of the rough path. The sculpture, which looked freshly-cut and recent, was of a powerful and archaic-looking face filling the width of the isolated stone gatepost. Carved on one side of the stone only, the face had sunken blank eyes with deep eyelids, a triangular nose and thick double lips. Most striking of all, from either side of the head sprung expertly carved ram's horns. Walker Alan Chattwood told me:

*“Only part of the carving was done when we first saw it. Some months later we passed the stone again and found another bit had appeared. Whoever was carving the statue was obviously taking some time over the job and putting a lot of artistic effort into it.”*¹⁸⁷

Photos taken of this elaborate sculpture in its final stages show a powerful form very evocative of the Celtic gods, depicting a seemingly hermaphrodite deity with both ram's horns and breasts. It was almost a year after its apparent “creation” that the presence of this stone on the isolated moor came to the attention of fieldworker Petch, and it was not until a second visit in October 1989 that I located the carving itself. By that time, I was astonished to find that it had been deliberately attacked and the solid gritstone pillar shattered into two separate sections. The face of the mysterious god or goddess had been clearly been the target of the attack, and the features were badly defaced.¹⁸⁸ Despite a number of local enquiries I was never able to establish who carved this statue and why. It would have taken considerable time and effort to create such an image, slowly in a number of stages, on hard gritstone rock on a remote moor. Did the person who created the image then deliberately destroy his creation as part of some mysterious ritual act to nullify its power? Or was the carving a victim of a fundamentalist backlash against a potent symbol of a continuing tradition?

The evidence for an existing tradition provided by the example of the Castleshaw head serves to illustrate the wider collection of carvings which are known to be of recent origin, but exhibit the typical features of the “Celtic tradition” discussed earlier in this chapter. Some heads appear to have been carved as crude portraits of figures of hatred, such as Napoleon, Hitler and other dictators and may well have then served as Aunt Sally effigies, in the fashion suggested by Billingsley.¹⁸⁹ This kind of tradition is illustrated by the story surrounding two stone heads

which were unearthed in the garden of a house in Burnley, Lancashire, in 1968, and subsequently exhibited in the local heritage centre beneath a plaque reading "Celtic heads, found in Wheatley Lane."¹⁹⁰ In 1994 the centre removed the heads from its display after the brother of the man who carved them identified them as being fifty rather than two thousand years old. Ted Ridings said the heads, which feature the same grim expression, "Celtic eye" and slit mouth found on earlier examples, were the handiwork of apprentice architect, Len Ridings, who carved them to depict the fascist dictators Hitler and Mussolini during his lunch breaks in 1939. Len, who died on D-Day in 1942, had exhibited the carvings at Burnley Town Hall and they later went on show at dances to raise money for the war effort. After his death they returned to the home of Len's mother at Fence, near Nelson. She died in 1966 and the house was sold to Roger Preston, who unearthed the heads in the garden where they had been buried. Len Ridings expressed his puzzlement over the fact that no one had recognised the heads which had been on display in the centre for more than twenty years to a reporter:

*"The carvings became quite famous during the war. I can only think the conflict took so many lives that no one remembered afterwards that the heritage centre's centrepiece was an early Leslie Riding."*¹⁹¹

This example demonstrates the existence of a fine thread of tradition which can so easily be broken and lead to gross errors in the interpretation and dating of stone carvings like these. A further example concerns the heads found at Hexham in Northumberland and Bingley, West Yorkshire, which are discussed in Chapter 6. As well as individual heads carved for a specific purpose like those produced by Len Ridings, there is evidence for the existence of a head carving traditions within the repertoire of stonemasonry and wood carpentry in north Britain, particularly in parts of the North Riding and Calderdale, during the medieval period. The existence of the wooden tie beam depicting a pattern book of apotropaic symbols, including an archaic head, illustrates how little is known about the large numbers of wooden sculptures which are presumed to have existed in the past but have not survived.¹⁹²

Stone heads have also been carved within living memory in parts of the Peak District, Yorkshire Dales and other parts of northern and western Britain. In some areas where stone is readily available, heads have been fashioned by local masons and artists only in relatively recent times. During the course of this research I have examined and photographed a number of stone heads,

which while not of the "Celtic tradition," have been expertly carved by local residents during the last thirty years, and have interviewed a number of contemporary Celtic sculptors, such as Craig Chapman of Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, who have copied the Celtic style from recent books and magazine articles and developed in some cases their own idiosyncratic style.¹⁹³ For instance, at the village of Birchover in Derbyshire there are "authentic" heads of the Celtic tradition from an early medieval church currently built into the porch of the parish church dedicated to St Michael, which dates from the nineteenth century. On the main street through the village, a head carved in the portrait style can be seen placed above the porch which forms the entranceway to the Post Office. According to local information it was carved by the village stonemason, Bernard Wragg, in 1969, following the style of other examples in the area.¹⁹⁴

Jackson and Ross have expressed the opinion that few of these recent heads incorporate the distinctive characteristics of the Celtic tradition and Jackson said: "to a careful observer, none of these modern reproductions would mislead."¹⁹⁵ I would argue that the evidence suggests it is not as easy as Jackson would claim to distinguish heads of the "Celtic tradition" from ones carved in recent years, as many of the newer examples deliberately incorporate archaic features and symbols. The existence of large numbers of these sculptures, and their highly portable nature, suggest they are likely to continue causing problems for those who attempt to classify and interpret them.

Of the prolific head carvers within the last two hundred years, one of the better known was Samuel Swift, born in the village of Cawthorne, near Barnsley, South Yorkshire in 1846. Some of his work is built into a roadside wall in the village.¹⁹⁶ Other recently carved heads, probably the handiwork of a single mason, are known in the Burnley region of Lancashire, the Shap area of Cumbria and North Yorkshire. At Kirkby Moorside, on the North York Moors, two stone faces framing the village signpost were carved by two local masons, Harry Jackson and Charles Rickaby, one of the hobbies of the latter being the carving of stone heads.¹⁹⁷ Some of these recent heads are said to have been produced to commemorate local characters, dignatories and even hate figures like the pair from Burnley discussed earlier. One example is the head which tops the gable end of Mytholmroyd Farm in Calderdale, West Yorkshire, which is said to be that of a witch who once lived in the house.¹⁹⁸ At Eccleshill in Bradford, a stone head from the gable of the district Council offices was said in local tradition to be a depiction of Julius Dalby, a local councillor and inspector of weights and measures. However, Sidney Jackson, who remembered

the head from his childhood in Eccleshill, observed: "...we think it was carved long before Julius appeared on this earth."¹⁹⁹

This kind of tradition is also reflected in the grotesque carvings of the Norman period often found in medieval churches which are often claimed to be depictions of the stone masons themselves, or of medieval worthies. One of the best known head carvers of the nineteenth century was Irish-born John Castillo, who was both a mason and a Methodist preacher and lived in North Yorkshire. According to Jackson, "because of this man's work, some heads in Cleveland which have definite Celtic characteristics are attributed to him."²⁰⁰ Castillo's work can be seen today incorporated into a number of chapels, bridges and buildings in Cleveland and the North York Moors region, some of which are described in Chapter 6. Castillo also refers to a head in his dialect poetry as the "aud man's face" and suggest youths who were throwing stones at the carving could be courting bad luck.²⁰¹ Similarly in the Newtownhamilton area of Armagh in Northern Ireland, stone heads are associated with buildings erected by a nineteenth century craftsman, Joseph Kernaghan who "according to local tradition, had a supply of these heads and built one into every house he erected."²⁰² Kernaghan was also involved in the renovation of Armagh Cathedral in the 1830s, where heads of probable pagan origin have been identified, and it is possible that he may have obtained some heads from this source and perhaps used these as templates for new heads. It is likely that Castillo, Kernaghan and some of the other recent craftsmen, had inherited traditional knowledge about the use and placement of these heads and carved them as part of a continuing folk tradition. The evidence I collected and have summarised in this chapter strongly suggests heads with archaic features continued to be produced up until the present century, and many examples originate in the last three centuries rather than being of pagan Celtic origin, as was initially suspected. It is possible that the inspiration for some of these recent carvings came from older examples which were familiar from local architecture, or through carving traditions which were kept alive in the stonemason's profession and lore. Further research would be required before any firm conclusions could be reached, but the existence of stone heads of very recent origin and the motives which lie behind their creation must be taken into account before attempts can be made to interpret examples claimed to date from earlier periods of history and prehistory.

4.10.2. Carved heads associated with quarries and caves

A number of carved faces have been recorded cut upon living rock, or on freestanding boulders in the north of England, and Billingsley lists caves, pits and quarries in his examples of locations where the “severed head” symbol recurs in folk tradition. Examples have been noted in abandoned quarries at Mytholmroyd and Batley in West Yorkshire, and another at Newchurch-in-Pendle, Lancashire, there is a stylised face of a bearded man, with bold facial features carved into a rock outcrop. Local tradition states that the head was produced to commemorate the death at the site of a well-liked local quarryman, a tradition which is known elsewhere connected with a death during the construction of a building.²⁰³ However, it is necessary to draw a distinction between relatively modern quarries such as the above examples, which date from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, and the older cave and quarry sites like Grimes Graves in Norfolk or Alderley Edge, Cheshire, where there is evidence of mining activity stretching back to the Bronze Age. A number of carved heads and faces on the outcrop sandstone at Alderley Edge, including the face above the Wizard’s Well, are known to date from the mid-nineteenth century and are in fact the handiwork of Robert Garner, the great-great-grandfather of author Alan Garner.²⁰⁴ However, heads are not found in modern quarry sites in any consistent fashion, and as Billingsley suggests were probably carved by workers in their spare time as products of folk art, and do not have any deeper ritual significance.²⁰⁵ However, as he points out:

“Even if ‘only’ folk art, such heads are significant in suggesting that the vehicle of transmission of the archaic or severed head motif may well have been the quarryman/builder, rather than the guild sculptor, which would further underline the rural peasant context of the motif, and its transmission via an anonymous thread of cultural tradition.”²⁰⁶

The association of heads either with, or acting as guardians of, entrances or openings in the ground has early precedents in archaeology and ethnography. Examples have been discussed in Chapter 3 from Stone Age contexts in Europe where stylised carved faces and skulls have been found in ritual contexts within caves, both natural in formation, and artificial like those upon entrances to Neolithic chambered tombs. In a non-European context, carved stone heads, mummified heads of ancestors and “skull guardians” are associated with sacred store caves

explored by Thor Heyerdahl on Easter Island in the Pacific. He found the heads were regarded as “keys” or “titles” to the cave entrances.²⁰⁷ Their appearance in these contexts can be interpreted as symbolising the gateways or thresholds between ritual areas connected with the earth and the chthonic powers. Similar “threshold” carvings are found at sites associated with springs, wells and junctions between rivers and tributaries in the traditions collected in Chapter 6. A single carved head in the Celtic style is known from a coastal cave site overlooking the Severn Estuary in Walton Bay, north Somerset. The head is cut in crude relief upon a wall of rock inside Babyface Cave, which is prone to flooding at high tide.²⁰⁸ Across the Severn estuary, at *tarren deusant* (“two saints”) on the west side of Nant Castellau in South Wales relief carvings of human faces are found on a rockface above a spring at a numinous location.²⁰⁹

It is in this guardian or talisman context that a curious carving from Knaresborough in North Yorkshire should be classified. The sculpture can be found inside an ancient rock cut chapel or cave, but its significance has been ignored by all those who have described the chapel over the last six hundred years. The most glaring prejudice was shown by historians early in the present century, one of whom attributed the heads which at that time survived inside the chapel as being the products of vandals, as a result of which three were removed from the wall during the last “restoration.”²¹⁰ The Chapel of Our Lady of the Crag at Knaresborough dates from around AD 1408 and is believed to be the handiwork of one “John the Mason”, a master builder who was employed in restoring the castle and parish church in the town.²¹¹ The tiny chapel or grotto is carved out of the foot of the limestone cliff below Low Bridge on the banks of the River Nidd, and measures twelve feet long by eight feet broad and seven feet high. The chapel was probably created by enlarging an existing cave, which could have had earlier religious associations. As a functioning Catholic shrine, today the chapel is owned by Ampleforth Abbey, the North Yorkshire Benedictine community, and is probably best known to visitors by the appearance of a crude figure of an armed man or knight, drawing his sword from a scabbard, which is carved in relief to the right of the doorway, which he appears to guard. However, the limestone rock upon which the figure is cut erodes so easily it is unlikely the current carving dates from the fourteenth century, and historians believe it is of late seventeenth or early eighteenth century origin.²¹² It is to this period that Abbot Cummins, writing in 1926, attributes a series of carvings on the interior wall of the chapel, which he describes as “grotesque faces” or masks. He writes that it is likely that far from being ancient “...both the figure outside and the

grotesque heads inside are the work of some idle occupant long after the chapel's desecration."²¹³ Cummins dismisses their significance in the following manner:

*"The sympathetic craftsman who carved the floriated capitals and artistic bosses of altar and canopy could never have perpetrated these hideous masks; still less could he have meant them to represent the Blessed Trinity."*²¹⁴

The heads carved in relief into the limestone wall of the chapel were present as far back as 1695, when in notes appended to the manuscript to Camden's *Britannia*, Bishop Gibson describes "three heads which (according to the devotion of the age) might be designated for the Holy Trinity."²¹⁵ Hargrove, in his description of the interior dated 1821, describes,

*"...the figures of three heads, designed, (as is supposed), for an emblematical allusion to the order of the monks of the once neighbouring priory; by some of whom they were probably cut..."*²¹⁶

He also mentions a fourth head, "said to represent that of John the Baptist, to whom this chapel is supposed to have been dedicated." This suggests the fourth head was cut in the wall of the chapel sometime in the intervening period between the seventeenth century and the early part of this century. Abbott Cummins says there were four heads present in the 1920s, but the three heads noted by Gibson and Hargrove were "removed" when the chapel was restored in 1916.²¹⁷ No contemporary illustrations depicting the heads exist, but it is clear they occupied a small section of the wall near the surviving carved face. It is possible they were carved as the original descriptions suggest, to represent a triple deity, possibly the deity to whom the rock-cut chapel was originally dedicated. Today the single head which remains can be seen on the interior wall immediately adjacent to the tiny arched doorway as one enters the chapel. It is cut in low relief slightly below head height, and is carved in a striking, crude style including large lentoid eyes, narrow straight-sided nose and slit mouth typical of the archaic heads recorded by Jackson and Billingsley in West Yorkshire. Its outline is formed by a bank cut in relief from the wall of the rock, with the pecking made by the tool still evident. In style and appearance, the nearest comparative carving I have found comes from the late tenth century chancel arch in the church at Barton-upon-Humber in the East Yorkshire.²¹⁸ Both have the characteristic blank expressionless

stare which is typical of these carvings. The appearance of the head close to the doorway emphasises its guardianship of the threshold, another feature associated with heads from time immemorial, the significance of which is described fully in Chapter 6. Another head appears in a similar context carved in relief upon the doorway arch of Mow Cop folly castle in Cheshire, which was built in 1754, again by two stonemasons commissioned by a local landowner, on a place which already had connotations of earlier religious sanctity.²¹⁹ The head at Mow Cop has a crude, blank style which has parallels with the Knaresborough carving.

Hargrove's mention of a tradition connecting the fourth head with St John the Baptist is interesting because of the association of this saint with the symbol of the severed head image during the medieval era, possibly as a result of the saint's martyrdom by decapitation. As John Billingsley has shown, a similar cultus grew up around the execution of King Charles II during the seventeenth century, coincident with a resurgence of the head motif in West Yorkshire.²²⁰ The presence of the head in the Chapel at Knaresborough is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it has been carved in a sacred place whose numinosity probably predates its Christian dedication in later years. The earliest dedications, from the fifteenth century onwards, associate it with the nearby quarry, hence "Our Ladie of the Quarrell." As has been demonstrated, carved stone heads have been recorded from a number of cave and quarry sites both in Britain and elsewhere, and emphasise the significance of the boundary between this world and the underworld and its inhabitants. Carvings at places where stone was quarried may have therefore acted as a means of propitiation of these powers, or acted as guardians of the boundary between the two worlds.

A more detailed discussion of the context of stone head carvings and the traditions which surrounded their use is presented in Chapter 6. The following chapter examines the geographical distribution of the carvings in Britain and Ireland, and focusses upon one particular region of the English Midlands where good examples of all the different styles and dates associated with these enigmatic carvings can be found.

- ¹ Quoted in Hickey, p. 12.
- ² Personal communication from Martin Petch, 28 June 1996.
- ³ John Billingsley, 'Carved Heads in the Calder Valley; interpreting a local folk tradition,' *Halifax Antiquarian Society Transactions*, New Series, 4 (1996), 15.
- ⁴ Ross, 1967, pp. 94-171.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Petch, *Celtic Stone Sculptures*, p.8.
- ⁷ Sidney Jackson, 'Some Celtic Heads,' *The Brigantian: The Journal of the Huddersfield and District Archaeological Society*, 2 (1973), 8.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ F.W. Perfect, 'Ancient stone head cult unearthed,' *Daily Telegraph*, 19 January 1967.
- ¹⁰ Guy Ragland Phillips, 'The Magic of Old Harry,' *Yorkshire Post*, 28 March 1967.
- ¹¹ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, p.2.
- ¹² Ibid., p.4.
- ¹³ Petch, 'Celtic Stone Heads.'
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ For a summary of this argument see John Billingsley, 'Archaic head carvings in West Yorkshire,' *The Yorkshire Journal*, 5 (Spring 94), 38-48.
- ¹⁶ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p. 15.
- ¹⁷ Raftery, p. 186.
- ¹⁸ Brewer, p. 38.
- ¹⁹ Sidney Jackson, 'Wood and Pot Heads,' undated article in Jackson correspondence file, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Leeds. Jackson writes: "...among the Yorkshire heads only one is made of wood. This crude carving is only three inches high, and has a mouth with the tongue showing between the lips...found in a store cupboard at Harrogate Museum this wooden head is unfortunately without any information as to its provenance."
- ²⁰ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 140.
- ²¹ Illustrated in Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p. 73.
- ²² Ibid., p. 71.
- ²³ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p.113.
- ²⁴ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 51.
- ²⁵ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, p. 22. Jackson card index number 142.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 21. Jackson card index number 72, Cartwright Hall Museum collection, Bradford.
- ²⁷ Fliegel, 98.
- ²⁸ Billingsley, 'Archaic head carvings in West Yorkshire', pp. 5-6.
- ²⁹ Billingsley, 'Archaic head carvings in West Yorkshire,' 40.
- ³⁰ Megaw and Megaw, 'The stone head from Msecke Zehrovice', 632.
- ³¹ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p.4.
- ³² Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 22 September, 1993.
- ³³ Riddel, p. iv.
- ³⁴ Fliegel, 98.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 97.
- ³⁶ Petch, 'Celtic Stone Heads.'
- ³⁷ Billingsley, 'Archaic head carvings in West Yorkshire,' pp. 54-57.
- ³⁸ Fliegel, 99.
- ³⁹ Illustrated in Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p. 112.
- ⁴⁰ Petch, 'Celtic Stone Heads.'

- ⁴¹ Sidney Jackson, 'Tricephalic Heads from Greetland, Yorks,' *Antiquity*, 54 (1968), 314-15; illustrated in Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, p. 34. The pair of tricephalic heads are now the property of the British Museum.
- ⁴² Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, p.2.
- ⁴³ Megaw and Megaw, 'The stone head from Msecke Zehrovice,' 638-39.
- ⁴⁴ See Jacques Briard, *The Bronze Age in Barbarian Europe* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 74.
- ⁴⁵ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, pp. 89-90.
- ⁴⁶ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 109-119.
- ⁴⁷ Raftery, p. 186.
- ⁴⁸ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p.90.
- ⁴⁹ Personal communication from Dr Vanessa Toulmin, Fairground Archive, University of Sheffield, 14 June, 1998.
- ⁵⁰ D.J. Smith, 'A Romano-Celtic head from Lemington, Tyne and Wear,' in *Between and Beyond the Walls*, ed. R. Miket and C. Burgess (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1984), pp. 221-24.
- ⁵¹ Hickey, pp. 33-37. Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.
- ⁵² Personal communication from Shelagh Lewis, 9 June 1998.
- ⁵³ Anne Ross, 'The Divine Hag of the Pagan Celts,' in *The Witch Figure* (ed.) Venetia J. Newall (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 139.
- ⁵⁴ Anne Ross and Richard Feacham, 'Heads Baleful and Benign,' in *Between and Beyond the Walls*, (ed.) Roger Miket and Colin Burgess (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1984), p. 346.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, see also Macneill, p. 6.
- ⁵⁶ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, p. 13. Sidney Jackson card index number 127. Cartwright Hall Museum, Bradford.
- ⁵⁷ F.A. Bruton, *The Roman Fort at Manchester* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1909), pp.34-35; G.D.B.Jones and Shelagh Grealey (ed.) *Roman Manchester* (Altrincham: Sherratt for the Manchester Excavation Committee). Press, 1974), p.16.
- ⁵⁸ Ross, 'The Human Head in insular Pagan Celtic Religion,' 10-11.
- ⁵⁹ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 117.
- ⁶⁰ Fliegel, *ibid.*
- ⁶¹ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p. 91.
- ⁶² See Appendix 1, P20 and Appendix 3, Fig. 2.
- ⁶³ On permanent display at the Tullie House Museum, Carlisle, Cumbria.
- ⁶⁴ Displayed at the Lindow Man exhibition, Manchester Museum, 1991.
- ⁶⁵ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, 126-27.
- ⁶⁶ Jackson, *Celtic and other Stone heads*, p. 23. Sidney Jackson card index numbers 36 and 37. Items in private ownership.
- ⁶⁷ See Appendix 1, P21; Chapter 6, p. 283.
- ⁶⁸ Petch, *Celtic Stone Sculptures*, p. 10.
- ⁶⁹ Displayed at the Lindow Man exhibition, Manchester Museum, 1991.
- ⁷⁰ Fliegel, 98.
- ⁷¹ Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 179.
- ⁷² Greene, 'The Romano-Celtic head from the Bon Marche site,' 338.
- ⁷³ Enright, 123.
- ⁷⁴ Fliegel, 88.
- ⁷⁵ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, p. 34.
- ⁷⁶ Displayed at the Lindow Man exhibition, Manchester Museum, 1991.
- ⁷⁷ Sidney Jackson card index number 30.

- ⁷⁸ Petch, 'Celtic Stone Heads.'
- ⁷⁹ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 122.
- ⁸⁰ Fliegel, 87.
- ⁸¹ Ibid.
- ⁸² Illustrated in Lindsay Allason-Jones, 'Sewingshields,' *Archaeologia Aeliana*, series 5, 12 (1984), 97.
- ⁸³ Wilfred Dodds, 'Celtic Heads from Dumfriesshire,' *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, 3rd series, XLIX, (1972), 36-38.
- ⁸⁴ Green, 'A Carved Stone Head from Steep Holm.'
- ⁸⁵ Michel Meslin, 'Symbolism and Ritual Use,' in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* (ed.) Mircea Eliade (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 221.
- ⁸⁶ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 107.
- ⁸⁷ Ross, 'The Human Head in insular Pagan Celtic Religion,' 36.
- ⁸⁸ R. Pettazzoni, 'The Pagan Origins of the three-headed representation of the Christian Trinity,' *Journal of the Calarburg and Courtauld Institute*, 9 (1946), 133-51.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid., 155.
- ⁹⁰ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p. 105.
- ⁹¹ Pettazzoni, 139-40.
- ⁹² Ibid., 138.
- ⁹³ Enright, 123.
- ⁹⁴ Pettazzoni, 145-46.
- ⁹⁵ Meslin, p. 221.
- ⁹⁶ Smith, 'The Luck in the Head,' 14.
- ⁹⁷ Megaw and Megaw, *Celtic Art*, p. 74; Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 119
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 178-79.
- ⁹⁹ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 123.
- ¹⁰⁰ See Rynne, 'Celtic stone idols in Ireland,' 85-86.
- ¹⁰¹ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 113-14.
- ¹⁰² Anne Ross, 'Some new thoughts on old heads,' *Archaeologia Aeliana*, new series 5, 1 (1973-74), 1-2.
- ¹⁰³ Miranda Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, p. 173.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 107.
- ¹⁰⁵ See Lambrechts, *L'Exaltation de la Tete dans Pensee et dans l'art des Celtes*.
- ¹⁰⁶ See Ross and Robins, *The Life and Death of a Druid Prince*, pp. 161-63, for examples of two and three-faced stone heads in Danish contexts, associated with medieval churches and holy wells.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 107.
- ¹⁰⁸ Raftery, p. 186.
- ¹⁰⁹ Coulston and Phillips, p.xvii.
- ¹¹⁰ Rynne, 'Celtic stone idols in Ireland,' 86-87.
- ¹¹¹ Anne Ross, 'A Celtic Three-faced Head from Wiltshire', *Antiquity*, 41 (1967), 53-56.
- ¹¹² Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 110-11.
- ¹¹³ Sergio Rinaldi Tufi, *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani*, Vol. 1 fasc, 3: Yorkshire (Oxford: University Press, 1983), p. 20.
- ¹¹⁴ John Billingsley, 'Celtic Survivals Threatened,' *Northern Earth Mysteries*, 30 (Summer, 1986), 10-13.
- ¹¹⁵ Ross, 'The Human Head in insular Pagan Celtic Religion,' 10-11.

- ¹¹⁶ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads* , p. 38; Sidney Jackson card index number 63. Item in private possession.
- ¹¹⁷ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* , pp. 111-12.
- ¹¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 171-221.
- ¹²⁰ Boon, 'A coin with the head of the Cernunnos.'
- ¹²¹ L.J.F. Keppie and Beverley J. Arnold, *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani* , Vol.1 fasc. 4: Scotland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 7.
- ¹²² Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* , p. 117.
- ¹²³ For a full discussion see Anne Ross, 'The Horned God of the Brigantes,' *Archaeologia Aeliana* , new series 4, 39 (1961), 63-89.
- ¹²⁴ Petch, 'Celtic Stone Heads.'
- ¹²⁵ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* , p. 122.
- ¹²⁶ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads* , p. 31; Sidney Jackson card index number 108. Item in private possession.
- ¹²⁷ Hickey, p. 26.
- ¹²⁸ Ross, 'A Pagan Celtic Shrine at Wall, Staffordshire,' 4-5.
- ¹²⁹ Petch, 'Celtic Stone Heads.'
- ¹³⁰ Coulston and Phillips, pp. 134-35.
- ¹³¹ Colin Richardson, 'A Celtic horned god from Netherby, Cumbria,' Tullie House Archaeology Information Sheet No. 2 (Carlisle City Council, undated).
- ¹³² D.J. Smith, 'A Romano-Celtic head from Lemington.'
- ¹³³ Ibid., 223.
- ¹³⁴ Ibid.
- ¹³⁵ R.M. Harrison, 'A Sandstone Head from West Denton,' *Archaeologia Aeliana* , 48 (1970), 346-48.
- ¹³⁶ Wilfred Dodds, 'Two Celtic Heads from County Durham,' *Archaeologia Aeliana* , 45 (1967), 27-31.
- ¹³⁷ J.V.S. Megaw, 'A Celtic Cult Head from Port Talbot, Glamorgan,' *Archaeologia Cambrensis* , 115 (1966), 94-97
- ¹³⁸ J.V.S. Megaw, 'A further note on Celtic cult heads in Wales,' *Archaeologia Cambrensis* , 116 (1967), 192-94.
- ¹³⁹ Personal communication from Debbie Walker, Museum Services Officer, Rochdale Museum Service, 22 April 1993.
- ¹⁴⁰ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze* , p. 175.
- ¹⁴¹ Cunliffe, *Bath and the rest of Wessex* , p. 35.
- ¹⁴² C.F.C. Hawkes, 'A Romano-British phallic carving from Broadway, Worcestershire,' *Antiquaries Journal* , 28 (1948), 166-69.
- ¹⁴³ Alastair Marshall, 'A Romano-Celtic carved stone phallic figure from Guiting Power, Gloucestershire,' *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* , 102 (1984), 212-215.
- ¹⁴⁴ Green, *The Gods of the Celts* , p. 100.
- ¹⁴⁵ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads* , p. 2.
- ¹⁴⁶ Green, *The Gods of the Celts* , p. 220.
- ¹⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁴⁸ Richmond, 'Two Celtic heads in stone from Corbridge, Northumberland.'
- ¹⁴⁹ Coulston and Phillips, p.44.
- ¹⁵⁰ Keppie and Arnold, p. 4.
- ¹⁵¹ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* , p. 163.
- ¹⁵² Boon, 'The Shrine of the Head, Caerwent.'

- ¹⁵³ Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 218.
- ¹⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵⁵ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 153.
- ¹⁵⁶ Rynne, 'Celtic stone idols from Ireland,' 90.
- ¹⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁵⁸ MacNeill, p. 426.
- ¹⁵⁹ Rynne, 'Celtic stone idols in Ireland,' 90.
- ¹⁶⁰ Keys, 'Heads of stone cast new light on Celtic cult' ; oral tradition collected from John Broadbent, Old Glossop, 24 August 1996.
- ¹⁶¹ See Jacqueline Simpson, 'The King's Whetstone,' *Antiquity*, 53 (1979), 96-101; William Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), pp. 145-47.
- ¹⁶² See Carver, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* and Angela Care Evans, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial* (London: British Museum Press, 1989).
- ¹⁶³ On display in the Burgh Museum, Dumfries. See Lloyd Laing, 'The Angles in Scotland and the Mote of Mark,' *Transactions of the Dumfries and Galloway Natural History and Archaeological Society*, 50 (1973), 45.
- ¹⁶⁴ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 465.
- ¹⁶⁵ E.J. Phillips, *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani*, Vol. 1, fasc. 1: Corbridge, Hadrian's Wall East and North of the Tyne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 44, suggests the identification is unconvincing as the Corbridge Maponus was equated with Apollo who should be represented in a more Classical, rather than native Celtic, guise; secondly, the head is "far too sombre and elderly for a god possessing the characteristics of Apollo." Phillips suggests the head represents a small altar produced by a native artist, between the second and fourth centuries AD.
- ¹⁶⁶ D.F. Petch, 'Archaeological Notes for 1956,' *Lincolnshire Architectural and Archaeological Society Reports and Papers*, 7 (1957), 17-19.
- ¹⁶⁷ Reginald Smith, 'A medieval hone from Ireland,' *Antiquaries Journal*, 7 (1927), 323-24.
- ¹⁶⁸ T.D. Kendrick, 'Portion of a basalt hone from North Wales,' *Antiquaries Journal*, 21 (1941), 23.
- ¹⁶⁹ Charles Thomas, 'The interpretation of Pictish symbols,' *Archaeological Journal*, 21 (1963), 48.
- ¹⁷⁰ James Goudie, 'Donations to the Museum,' *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 58 (1923-24), 16.
- ¹⁷¹ Glynis Reeve, 'A Celtic Whetstone?' *Current Archaeology*, 124 (1991), 191.
- ¹⁷² Val Evison, 'Pagan Saxon Whetstones,' *Antiquaries Journal*, 55 (1975), 79.
- ¹⁷³ Enright, 119.
- ¹⁷⁴ See Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial* Volume 1 (London: British Museum Press, 1975), pp. 695-717.
- ¹⁷⁵ The Venerable Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (ed.) Leo Shirley Price (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 130-31. Bede describes how Redwald had adopted Christianity while visiting Kent whose king Aethelbert had converted at an early date in the mission, but to his great disgust returned to paganism upon arrival in East Anglia when "his wife and certain perverse advisors persuaded him to apostacise...so his last state was worse than his first for he tried to serve both Christ and the ancient gods, and he had in the same temple an altar for the Holy Sacrifice of Christ side by side with an altar on which victims were offered to devils."
- ¹⁷⁶ Simpson, 'The King's Whetstone,' 96-101.
- ¹⁷⁷ Bruce-Mitford, p. 22.
- ¹⁷⁸ See Anne Ross, 'Chain symbolism in Pagan Celtic religion,' *Speculum*, 34 (1959), 39-59.
- ¹⁷⁹ Evison, 79.
- ¹⁸⁰ Petch, 'Archaeological Notes for 1956,' 18.
- ¹⁸¹ Sidney Cohen, 'The Sutton Hoo Whetstone,' *Speculum*, 41 (1966), 466-70.

- ¹⁸² Ibid., 469.
- ¹⁸³ Ibid., 469.
- ¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 469.
- ¹⁸⁵ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 96.
- ¹⁸⁶ Personal communication from Martin Petch, Manchester Museum, 30 January 1989.
- ¹⁸⁷ Personal communication from Alan Chattwood, April 1991 and January 1995.
- ¹⁸⁸ Illustrated in Clarke with Roberts, *Twilight of the Celtic Gods*, p. 52.
- ¹⁸⁹ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p. 89.
- ¹⁹⁰ Alice Smith, 'Celtic Heads,' 13.
- ¹⁹¹ Stephen Oldfield, 'Who do you think you kidded, Mr Whittler?' *Daily Mail*, 23 July 1994.
- ¹⁹² Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, pp. 71-73.
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- ¹⁹⁴ See Chapter 6, pp. 304-305.
- ¹⁹⁵ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, p. 4.
- ¹⁹⁶ K. Dawson, 'Storied Stones,' *The Dalesman*, June 1960, 14.
- ¹⁹⁷ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, p. 4.
- ¹⁹⁸ Billingsley, 'Archaic head carvings in West Yorkshire,' p. 103.
- ¹⁹⁹ Sidney Jackson card index number 33. Cartwright Hall Museum, Bradford.
- ²⁰⁰ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, p. 4.
- ²⁰¹ Brears, p. 32.
- ²⁰² Rynne, 'Celtic stone idols in Ireland,' 83.
- ²⁰³ See Chapter 6.
- ²⁰⁴ Collected from Alan Garner, Holmes Chapel, Cheshire, April 1995.
- ²⁰⁵ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p. 79.
- ²⁰⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁰⁷ Thor Heyerdahl, *Aku-Aku* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958), pp. 56-58.
- ²⁰⁸ Paul Newman, 'Babyface Cave: A Personal History,' *Third Stone*, 28 (1997), 8-11.
- ²⁰⁹ Brewer, p. 112.
- ²¹⁰ See Abbott Cummins, 'Knaresborough Cave-Chapels,' *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 28 (1926), 80-88.
- ²¹¹ *The Chapel of Our Lady of the Crag, Knaresborough*, undated guidebook produced by the Friends of the Shrine, p.3.
- ²¹² Personal communication from Mary Kershaw, Curator, Harrogate Museum, 15 July 1998.
- ²¹³ Cummins, 86.
- ²¹⁴ Ibid.
- ²¹⁵ Personal communication from George Capel, North Yorkshire County Libraries, 22 January 1998.
- ²¹⁶ E. Hargrove, *History of the Castle, town and forest of Knaresborough* (Knaresborough: privately published, 1821), pp. 88-89.
- ²¹⁷ *The Chapel of Our Lady*, p.2.
- ²¹⁸ Illustrated in Brears, p. 36.
- ²¹⁹ See Appendix 1, P48.
- ²²⁰ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, pp. 69-71.

Chapter 5

Archaic stone heads: Case studies



“Things are as they are because they were as they were.”

Thomas Gold, astronomer.¹

5.1. Introduction

This chapter develops the theme of carved stone heads whose origin, style and date have been discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Geographical variations previously noted will be expanded upon in this chapter, which begins with a regional survey of carvings recorded in Britain and Ireland, a theme which is developed further in my own case study of sculpture in the Peak District of central England, research which was undertaken specifically for the purposes of the current research. The chapter ends with a detailed discussion of the evolution of the head motif within the context of medieval church architecture, with specific relevance to the Peak District case study. The discussion will examine the significance both of the archaic style carved heads associated with pre-Reformation churches and those which produced human heads as a feature of the developing Romanesque and Gothic carving traditions. Variant carving traditions which grew from the Romanesque period include the distinctive types classified as the Green Man and Sheela-na-gig which were popular symbols in medieval church decoration during the Middle Ages, and drew their ultimate inspiration from the severed head motif, if not in directly in style, then in function.

5.2. Geographical distribution of head sculpture

Attempts to draw conclusions from the distribution of carved stone heads of the Celtic tradition in Britain have so far been confined to a small number of individual case studies such as that of John Billingsley in West Yorkshire.² No single study before this study has produced an overview drawing upon all the available material. However, it is apparent that the plotting of individual carvings upon distribution maps is a fruitless exercise as the original findspots are seldom recorded. Due to the portable nature of these stones and their frequent secondary use in structures such as field and garden walls, rockeries and other temporary structures which are an integral part of the landscape, their original provenance is frequently unknown. In addition, publicity which has surrounded the recording of heads since the 1960s has added collectability to the factors which have influenced the movement of examples away from their original homes. The frequent appearance of heads in antique auctions and during the last thirty years has added to the confusion with, for instance, examples from North Wales migrating with their owners to

Yorkshire and vice versa. In another instance a head from a Peak District fieldwall travelling to Devon as a result of a bequest to the son of the current owner.³

The confusion which often surrounds the original provenance of these sculptures, added to the lack of secure dating, has resulted in a feeling of exasperation on the part of archaeologists who have included examples of carved heads in surveys of Romano-Celtic sculpture. In the current discussion, distribution of carvings will be described in a general sense, with attention focussed upon geographical zones which have consistently produced a significant number of examples over a period of time. It will be noted that groupings of heads and related sculpture are known from one specific region or valley, suggesting that they all belong to a specific period or are the products of a group or school of carvers. In areas such as West Yorkshire this situation has been confused by the presence both of early Romano-British heads and later examples of heads in vernacular architecture and folk art which has confused their interpretation. Continuing traditions of carving survive strongly in northern England and Ireland, but are less apparent in the southwest and Wales. These zones in north Britain are plotted on Fig. 26 in Appendix 3.

5.2.1. Romano-British carved heads

Writing in 1967, Anne Ross noted that “a great density” of Celtic-style stone heads and sculpture had been recorded in Northern England. She wrote:

“...in the region of Hadrian’s Wall...forming an interesting and impressive group, exemplifying all the various ways in which Celtic heads can be depicted.”⁴

The significance of this clustering was further emphasised by the appearance of a series of fascicules listing Roman iconography from the Hadrian’s Wall region, published by the Oxford University Press, the *Corpus Signarium Imperii Romani*. In the fascicule listing sculpture from Hadrian’s Wall west and north of the Tyne, Coulston and Phillips describe so-called “Celtic heads” as being “a perennial problem for CSIR editors...in the past accepted examples have been proved to be medieval and fakes have been accepted as Roman.”⁵ Subsequent volumes listing Romano-Celtic sculpture in Wales, Scotland, Wessex and Yorkshire recorded further examples, the most important groupings of which are discussed below.

Ross’s study coincided with fieldwork by Sidney Jackson which resulted in the recording of

more than seven hundred heads, primarily from northern England, with concentrations in West Yorkshire in the Aire and Upper Calder valleys. In addition, fieldwork by Shelagh Lewis and Martin Petch of Manchester Museum recorded many more hitherto unknown examples in northwest England, an area which sometimes overlapped with that covered by Jackson. Petch notes that concentrations of stone heads and associated sculptures in the northwest of England became apparent during the survey at Greetland and Mytholmroyd in Calderdale, West Yorkshire, Maryport in Cumbria, the Bury area of Lancashire and the High Peak region of Derbyshire (see Fig. 26).⁶ All these areas were on the fringes of Roman influence during the first four centuries AD, and in some cases, as in South Wales and Hadrian's Wall, the style of the carvings themselves illustrate the merging of British and Roman religious symbolism. Before the Roman invasion, the native tribes lacked a developed tradition of carving in stone, and religious icons are presumed to have been fashioned in wood and thus have not survived, although high-status metalwork from the late Iron Age and early Roman period display the head as a religious symbol. It is suggested that the majority of "Celtic-style" stone heads were produced during the period of Roman occupation of Britain by artisans who were working in stone for the first time, and producing religious icons combining a range of British, Roman and exotic styles for a variety of purposes.

In general it can be concluded that Romano-Celtic stone heads, and the majority of those produced by the evolving tradition of carving heads apparent from folk art, are most common in the pastoral upland areas of the traditional "Highland Zone," a distinction recognised by Sir Cyril Fox in 1932.⁷ Using archaeological data Fox divided Britain into Highland and Lowland Zones, a division which roughly corresponded to the northwest and southwest of Britain. In the Highland Zone Fox included not only the traditional "Celtic fringe" regions of Wales and Scotland, but also Devon and Cornwall, the Peak District and the Pennines of northern England. Distribution of recorded stone heads reflects the continuing traditions in the more isolated and conservative upland regions of the Pennine foothills, where a pastoral economy was maintained relatively unchanged from the Bronze Age. In this region the impact of outside cultural influence was weaker and less marked than in the lowlands, as there was little or no "surplus wealth" which would be required to maintain trading contacts with Europe. James and Rigby note the changes in British society at the end of the Iron Age were largely confined to the rich, developed elite who controlled the tribes of the Lowland Zone which at this period were

already trading and involved in cultural exchange with Gaul and the Roman Empire before the invasion of the early first century AD. They write:

“The rest of the country was much less affected...like all societies, those of the North and West continued to evolve but more slowly, and older, small-scale patterns of life persisted.”⁸

The growing cultural divergence between the southeast and northwest continued after the Roman conquest. Developed nobilities did not exist in the northern Highland Zone and the advancing armies ground to a halt along the Brigantian frontier during the first two centuries AD. This led to the development of semi-autonomous Roman military zones south of a line marked by Hadrian's Wall where a large collection of stone carving has been recorded. It is suggested these examples were produced by native craftsmen who were stimulated by new techniques for carving in stone which had been introduced into southern England at the time of the Roman invasion.

5.2.2. Later medieval carved heads

The upland and lowland context must be taken into account when discussing trends in the distribution of heads produced within the folk art of Pennine valleys such as Longdendale, Calderdale, Airedale, the Tyne and Eden valleys and the Craven region of the Yorkshire dales. Billingsley suggests the most important factor in the distribution of heads in this region is the development of a vernacular building style in stone which produced the yeoman houses of West Yorkshire during the “great rebuilding” of the seventeenth century. More than one hundred stone heads have been recorded in the Upper Calder Valley by Billingsley, who claims the head motif does not occur with the same frequency in vernacular architecture in comparable contexts elsewhere in Britain, and is “relatively rare” in the Lowland Zone of southern England.⁹ Heads and associated traditions are found to a lesser extent in certain regions bordering the Lowland Zone, including Cheshire and Lincolnshire, but are markedly infrequent in occurrence, and heads of the Pennine tradition are virtually unknown in comparable contexts in southern England. Of singular importance here is the absence of the head motif in areas of eastern and southern England where buildings continued to be of predominantly timber construction. George Ewart Evans' study of traditional protective charms in East Anglian timber-framed

houses demonstrates the complete absence of a tradition of head carving within this region, which was influenced by a different set of socio-economic factors during the medieval period.¹⁰ Areas of Yorkshire east of Leeds and Bradford which have a longer tradition of wooden architecture also lack stone heads, but the possibility remains that examples may have been carved as frequently in wood but have not survived.

Even within the Pennine zone itself, there are regional anomalies in the distribution of carving clusters. There are concentrations of carvings in the Calder Valley and to a lesser degree in Airedale, but heads are notably absent in the neighbouring Pennine valleys of Holme and Rossendale which have comparable socio-economic contexts. It is estimated that in excess of a thousand stone built houses and barns were constructed in the West Yorkshire textile region during the seventeenth century, and Billingsley draws direct parallels between the distribution of these distinctive "Halifax Houses" and the archaic head motif which are associated with this particular style of vernacular architecture.¹¹ The popularity of the head carvings may therefore be directly related to the social and economic context of the houses and their builders in this particular geographical region which suggests:

*"...a strong recurrence of the archaic head motif in a population with a livelihood heavily dependent on hill-farming and with a long-established tenure of their land extending over generations."*¹²

The resurgence of the severed head motif appears at the time of growing affluence among the yeoman neo-gentry of the West Yorkshire valleys during the growth of the wool trade, in an area where economic wealth was dependent upon sheep. The long tenure of these families upon land which appears to have kept some degree of native British identity, as reflected in the remarkably late survival of the independent "Celtic" kingdom of Elmet, adds additional weight to the overall socio-economic background which provided fertile soil for the development of the head traditions in this area.

5.3. Survey of regional clusters of head carving traditions

The following section lists five geographical regions of the British Isles where concentrations of heads and related sculpture have been identified, including Hadrian's Wall, Ireland, Wales,

Wessex and Yorkshire. Regional styles and trends are discussed in this general survey, although important themes are cross-referenced where necessary to chapters elsewhere in this study where appropriate.

5.3.1 *Hadrian's Wall*

Construction of Hadrian's Wall began in AD 121. The project, which commandeered 120,000 acres of native territory has been described as the most important monument built by the Romans in Britain, and its impact upon the tribal culture of the native Brigantes, who occupied the north of England at the time of the Roman invasion, should not be underestimated. The presence of soldiers would have imposed military supervision upon the native tribes and restricted movement north and south. Although the wild nature of the territory surrounding the wall would have made control of the more remote districts difficult, the arrival of the troops would have brought considerable changes in settlement patterns, agriculture and the economy. Foreign soldiers also brought with them new and exotic religions such as the cult of Mithras, which merged with and influenced the native religious cults. The Romans were tolerant of native deities who were often equated with gods and goddesses in the imperial pantheon as part of a process known as *interpretatio romani*. In this frontier region, the majority of native deities appear to have been male, and were often depicted as horned warrior gods. The loose confederation of tribes known as the Brigantes, which occupied the region south of the wall, took their name from the tutelary goddess of the land, Brigantia (the High One). Often depicted in triple form, Brigantia is equated with the Roman Minerva and Victory on several altars from the Wall. She appears in iconography as guardian of sacred springs and wells, and has been directly associated with the severed head symbol in an Irish context.¹³

The importance of the human head in local beliefs is reflected by the finds at Coventina's Well beside the Roman wall fort of Brocolitia at Carrawburgh, where a human skull and a number of bronze masks were found a part of a large deposit of votive objects (see Chapter 3). The emphasis upon the human head is found repeatedly in religious iconography, both native, Roman and hybrids of both elsewhere along the Roman Wall. In particular, a significant number of carvings depicting horned heads have been unearthed during the last three hundred years. The best known is the "harsh and angular" head of a ram-horned warrior god found at the

outpost fort at Netherby, Cumbria, in 1794. Horned heads are also known from the forts at Carvoran, Chesters, Lemington and West Denton along the eastern section of the Wall, and it is possible some of these represented local gods and goddesses. A number of heads and associated sculpture are known from the fort at Maryport, on the coast of western Cumbria, a well preserved site which has the largest number of dedications to the horned god in the region (see Fig. 16). The fort was built on a headland above the River Ellen in the first century AD as a base for Agricola's planned attack on the Solway. Maryport was garrisoned for almost three hundred years by soldiers from three different European cohorts who left evidence of a thriving and wealthy culture. A large number of carvings depicting native Celtic, Roman and Eastern deities have been unearthed in the ruins and are on view in the Senhouse Roman Museum, the oldest private collection in Britain, which was first noted by Camden in 1599. Horns, human heads and phallic imagery are all present in the form of the extraordinary Serpent Stone, which the museum guide describes as combining "all the occult Celtic symbols of supernatural power with the phallus, a Roman symbol of good fortune."¹⁴ The stone, found in a funerary context in a late Roman cemetery, depicts a severed head with closed eyes and half-open mouth crowning a pillar-like stone, with a long sinuous phallic serpent biting an object, possibly an egg, on the reverse of the sculpture. Associated with the same site are a number of Celtic-style carved heads, a crude horned and phallic warrior figure, a radiate deity, altars dedicated to Setlocenia ("goddess of long life") a plaque depicting three naked goddesses, and a strange "shadow figure."¹⁵

5.3.2 *Ireland*

Historian Etienne Rynne's early survey of pagan Celtic sculpture in Ireland identified seven regions where carved heads of presumed early date and pagan stone idols were clustered, only one of which was outside Ulster; this was the Piltdown region of County Kerry. Rynne concluded there were also "a few isolated stone heads of apparently pagan Celtic type scattered widely in Ulster, Leinster and Shannon."¹⁶ In style, these carvings can be compared with Celtic sculpture in North Britain, suggesting cultural connections and influence across the "Irish Sea Province." The special difficulties inherent in the dating and classification of the Irish material were discussed in Chapter 3.

A separate regional study by Helen Hickey identified a concentration of archaic carvings at Boa Island on Lough Erne, County Fermanagh, and neighbouring areas of central County Cavan.¹⁷ One of the carvings she recorded was the janiform figure now in the Caldragh graveyard on Boa Island, which stands just over twenty eight inches in height, and is made up of two human busts set back to back, each with an oversized triangular head and crossed limbs. The two faces are similar, with large staring eyes surrounded by a ridge springing from the long nose. Each face has an upward-curling moustache, and around the disturbed base of the statue is what appears to be the remains of a wide belt. Between the two heads is a deep hollow, which may be either a socket for the insertion of an additional part of the idol or a receptacle for liquid offerings, a feature associated with other heads of presumed pagan Celtic date (see Chapter 4). The double-faced appearance of the carving is a common feature in Romano-Celtic stone sculpture, reflecting the belief in the power of twins, or the doubling of the power of the deity. Although the idol has been moved into a churchyard at some point, Hickey was of the opinion the carving was not an early Christian artefact. The Janus figure is just one of a collection of phallic-shaped stone pillars, "idol figures" and archaic carved heads found in Ulster, with Lough Erne and the Cathedral Hill at Armagh being the former monastic carving schools which produced them. Standing beside the Janus figure at Dreeneen is a second carved stone, slightly smaller in height, nicknamed "The Lusty Man," which was moved from a graveyard on Lustymore Island where it had been buried, possibly because its powers were still feared.¹⁸ This squatting figure has one circular-cut face and its left eye is incompletely carved, depicting a closed or blind eye. This feature is associated with a number of carvings from the Peak District and elsewhere, and is discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

In her survey of the complex sculpture of the geographically isolated Lough Erne basin region, Hickey writes of the "remarkable archaism" of the carving tradition, which retained pagan elements during its evolution from the early Christian and Romanesque periods to the present. In the same area of north central Ireland, across the border in County Cavan, is another centre of pagan Celtic cult significance. It was here that a famous three-faced pagan idol called the "Corleck God" was discovered in the middle of the nineteenth century in a township near Corleck Hill, at the base of a standing stone.¹⁹ The striking head, whose significance has been discussed fully in Chapters 3 and 4, is fashioned from a block of sandstone with the features cut in low relief, resembling Iron Age carvings from Europe. Local tradition tells how the Corleck

head was found along with another janiform stone head now at Corraghy, two miles away, in a place known as the 'Giant's Grave'.²⁰ This second head was combined back to back with that of a ram, a symbol of economic importance to a sheep-farming people. A similar stone carving, combining a human head with that of a ram, was discovered in a wall at Mirfield, West Yorkshire, in the 1960s, suggesting a common continuum of beliefs among the tribes who produced them, which Billingsley suggests reflects a people or tribe whose power was based upon long tenure of land and wealth based upon sheep (see Fig. 14).²¹ It is possible these Irish carvings were at one time stored in a native sanctuary on Corleck Hill, the site of an annual Lughnasa harvest festival until 1831, where people gathered at the beginning of August to collect bilberries and visit a holy well. The festival was held in honour of Ireland's three most powerful Christian saints, Patrick, Brigid and Columba, who were represented by three "graves or monuments" on the hill, itself a subtle reflection of the Celtic triple deity represented by the Corleck God.²²

5.3.3. *Wales*

In 1966 J.V.S Megaw, in an early survey of Romano-Celtic heads, noted three concentrations of sculpture, in South Wales, the adjacent West Country and Hadrian's Wall. Megaw referred to two Welsh examples as "exhibiting a common Celtic artistic and religious heritage which seems to have survived, outside Ireland, on the fringe of Roman occupied Britain."²³ R.J. Brewer's volume on Romano-Celtic sculpture in Wales includes a scattered grouping of fifteen "so-called 'Celtic heads.'"²⁴ Just two of these, one from a small domestic shrine at Caerwent (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4) and the second from excavations at the works depot of the Twentieth Legion in Holt, Clwyd, were recovered from reliable archaeological contexts and are Roman in date. The head from Holt is carved with typical Celtic features in relief on a rectangular block, and has been compared with the heads on clay antefixa which have been found at the fort at Caerleon (see Chapter 3).²⁵ Two others, from Caerhun and Carmarthen were found unstratified at sites which were occupied during both the Roman and in later periods, leaving a sizeable question mark over their age in the absence of a secure context. The crudely-carved head from Caerhun was found in the gravel courtyard of the Principia, but the proximity of a medieval church to the site could suggest it came from there. A comparable carving exists in the form of a

human-headed corbel from the medieval parish church at St Cwyfan, Tudweiliog, which was rebuilt in 1849.²⁶ Of the eleven remaining examples,

*"...none comes from a reliable archaeological context, and the very simplicity of carving defies any form of stylistic discussion and, hence, conclusion as to period or date."*²⁷

R.B. White lists twelve "Celtic" stone heads from Wales, of which four coincide with the securely dated examples noted by Brewer.²⁸ Of the remainder none, with the possible exception of a pillar-stone from Laugharne, near Carmarthen, are accepted as being pre-Roman. The Laugharne stone was used as a gatepost at the entrance to a brickworks until it was removed to the Carmarthen Museum. Megaw compares the stone, which has a circular face surrounding lentoid eyes, with another pillar stone from Port Talbot which he dates to the period of Roman occupation.²⁹ Ross suggests a date in the late Iron Age for both pieces which she classifies among a group of phallic monuments which feature heads carved upon the glans.³⁰ Alternatively, these two pillar-like stones could be compared with the Graeco-Roman custom of carving *herms*, or boundary stones, which overlapped "Celtic" tradition and was continued in folk art in north Britain within living memory.

Francis Lynch suggests a date in the late Iron Age for a head from Hendy Farm, Pwllgwyngyll, Anglesey, on the basis of style and resemblance to pillar stones from continental Europe. The roughly life-sized head has been cemented upon a garden wall for the past fifty years, and was "originally found somewhere on the farm."³¹ The head is carved from a triangular block of sandstone, with the face skillfully executed with a flat profile, protruding eyes with double lids and "a strange twisted smile, unusual in Celtic sculpture in which the faces are often rather expressionless."³² A small hole has been drilled into one side of the mouth, a feature associated with a number of heads of early date but which have been re-interpreted as indicative of a modern origin in recent years (see Chapter 4). The style and features of the Hendy head are used by Lynch to argue against the possibility of the carving being a medieval church corbel, although a number of churches on Anglesey contain heads which are even less sophisticated in style.³³

5.3.4. Wessex

The West Country and Cotswolds region were subject to extensive Romanisation following the invasion of Britain during the first century AD. Even before this time native culture had been influenced by trade contacts with the neighbouring tribes of the south and east. As a result a large collection of Romano-Celtic iconography and carving has survived in the context of forts, villa sites and temples such as *Aquae Sulis* at Bath. The important collection of sculpture from the Roman shrine at Bath included the important Gorgoneion head discussed in Chapter 3 and other artefacts such as the beaten tin mask found in the culvert of the baths in 1878 with its stylised representation of face, which was presumably used in religious ceremonies at the baths.³⁴ Barry Cunliffe's analysis of the surviving Romano-Celtic sculpture from Wessex includes a special category for "Celtic heads" of which he lists sixteen examples, of which four came from Dorset, four from Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, two from Somerset, five from Wiltshire and one from Sussex. After taking into account the accepted problems created by lack of secure provenance he concluded:

*"At best all that can be said is that of the heads listed some may be of Roman date, a few may be earlier, while some are quite likely to be post-Roman and perhaps even recent."*³⁵

Cunliffe's initial study has been augmented more recently by Copson and Legge who have begun a survey of "Celtic"-style stone heads from the Wessex region.³⁶ Copson has noted a small concentration of carvings featuring the head motif in Dorset and Somerset. A number of examples were displayed at an exhibition of Romano-Celtic sculpture in Dorset County Museum in 1996, including a recently discovered carving from Lamyatt Beacon. Three "Celtic"-style faces are carved into this strip of Roman brick dated to the fourth century AD, inviting comparisons with Continental temples like those at Entremont in Provence. Also among the collection are a rooftile antefix from Roman Dorchester depicting a human face, and a limestone head in "Celtic" style found in a stratified context from Roman building of the third century AD at Camerton, Somerset, discussed in Chapter 3. A continuing tradition of carving or secondary use of sculpture is suggested by the existence of guardian skull traditions in southern Dorset and the discovery of three heads from the wall of a demolished barn in Portesham.³⁷ These included an archaic-style head carved in the round from a block of limestone, and two faces cut in relief

upon stones, one of which appears to depict a horned god. Representations of the antlered god Cernunnos are known from a Cotswold region, carved upon a stone from Roman Cirencester and upon a silver coin dated to the second century AD.³⁸

5.3.5. *Yorkshire*

Hundreds of archaic carved stone heads are known from the Calder and Aire valleys of West Yorkshire. Some are carved on boulders and rock outcrops, others are incorporated into fieldwalls and farmhouses, barns and other buildings. Over one hundred heads are known from the Calder valley area alone, with eighteen recorded in fieldwalls and buildings around the foothill village of Mytholmroyd. The Upper Calder Valley was the subject of a special study by John Billingsley, who first noticed these strange crude sculptures built into the gable ends of farmhouses and barns when walking on hillside footpaths along the Calderdale Way in 1978. He wrote how:

*“...one day I took a walk near my home in the Calder Valley and found no less than five carved stone heads gazing out at me from old farmsteads...from this start came the discovery of others, and I decided to record the existence of this style of carving as it persisted in Calderdale until quite recently.”*³⁹

The oldest stone heads in the valley appear to be those which have been found in dry stone walls or dug out of topsoil; these could have functioned as portable “field gods” to promote fertility and watch over the flocks, and some may be of Iron Age or Roman origin. Those associated with buildings appear to have been carved by masons employed by wealthy yeoman farmers who grew rich from the wool trade. Stone heads appear on the earliest domestic stone secular buildings and churches in Calderdale, dating from the sixteenth century onwards, a century which coincides with a resurgence of the severed head motif during the English Civil War. Irrespective of their original meaning, the position of the carvings suggest they were deliberately placed to perform a “guardian” role as protective talismans for buildings and other structures. This tradition continued until the mid nineteenth century when heads were carved and positioned within the structure of a number of mill chimneys in the West Yorkshire valleys, where they presumably continued their protective function. Examples of this kind of carving are

discussed in Chapter 6. This suggests an active tradition of head carving surviving until recent times as part of the repertoire of stone masons in Calderdale and elsewhere in West Yorkshire.

Peter Brears, of Leeds Museum, in his book *North Country Folk Art*, concludes that heads such as these are found only in a limited number of architectural locations, including house gables, above doorways and windows on houses and medieval churches, and beside springs and wells which have connections with a Celtic tradition dating back to the Iron Age.⁴⁰ However, none of these examples can be securely dated to the Iron Age other than through style, a problem which has been discussed in Chapter 4.

Two tricephalic heads of possible Romano-Celtic origin were unearthed following a landslip at Hoults Lane, Greetland, in 1956, which followed a heavy rainstorm.⁴¹ The find spot was close to that of a Roman altar of third century AD date, dedicated to "Victoria Brigantia," found at Thick Hollins, now Bank Top, in 1597 and mentioned by Camden.⁴² The dedication pairs the tutelary goddess of the native tribes with Victoria or Minerva who was popular in the Yorkshire area. This suggests that both the altar and the heads could be associated with an early Roman veteran settlement two miles south of Halifax, but the ancient name of this site is lost. Historian Tony Ward has drawn comparisons between the tricephalic sculptures and the bases of Roman Jupiter columns which were similarly decorated with stylised heads. Both tricephalic heads are carved in yellow sandstone, each face having a distinctive "cigarette hole" in the corner of the mouth.⁴³ A third head was found in a garden after a landslide behind Hoults Lane, about half a mile from where the tricephalic heads were discovered. This carving is fourteen inches high and crudely carved in local sandstone, with a straight-sided nose, an upturned mouth and an unusually long neck.⁴⁴ A fourth head from the same area was presented to Sidney Jackson in 1966; this came from the site of Woodman Pottery at Blackley, Elland, and is a bull-necked, bald-headed carving used for many years a garden ornament.⁴⁵ Jackson notes the presence of an Iron Age site at Barkisland, west of Greetland, marked by wall foundations in a site now covered by a reservoir, and at Stainland across the valley a life-sized human face is cut upon the vertical surface of a block of millstone grit, "one of a line of boulders which form a rough wall of a type common in the West Riding and often dated to the Iron Age."⁴⁶

The concentration of heads in this area of Calderdale is interesting due to the proximity of the Roman altar to the presumed settlement which accompanied it and perhaps stimulated native carving in stone. Roman influence is also a factor associated with a cluster of Celtic-style

carvings found near the fort at Melandra in the Derbyshire High Peak. The Greetland heads are from an area which experienced some degree of Romanisation and historian Tony Ward has suggested that:

"...the relationship of the Greetland altar with the tricephalic heads from the same village and their relationship to the bases of the Jupiter pillars from Germany suggests the virtual merging of traditions in the first quarter of the third century AD in Brigantia."⁴⁷

The remarkable popularity of the head motif in the West Yorkshire valleys discussed above runs parallel with similar traditions from the Peak District of north Derbyshire, which are examined in detail in the case study which follows.

5.4. THE PEAK DISTRICT - Case Study

5.4.1. Background to case study

Of the limited number of regional case studies of "Celtic" stone heads produced to date none have discussed the collection of stone heads and related sculpture from the area of the English Midlands known as the Peak District. Both the Jackson and Petch surveys have listed examples from Derbyshire, Cheshire and South Yorkshire, and both have acknowledged the potential for further discoveries in this region without making any further comment. Their listings are useful as an empirical base, but lack any kind of useful analysis in terms of distribution, provenance or context and function of the heads which have been recorded from the Peak. These listings were used as a starting point for the present survey which concentrated on locating all known examples, recording previously unknown heads *in situ* and noting all surviving contextual information, including history, provenance and folk traditions which could help to date and categorise them. This approach has not been used by earlier surveys which listed stone heads with an emphasis upon style, while neglecting context and function.

A full description of the method used to collect source material for this case study was set out in Chapter 2. In summary, fieldwork in the Peak during the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in the collection of a series of rough notes listing roughly a dozen examples of carved heads, including those on display in museums and others *in situ* in the landscape. Initially a survey of

Sidney Jackson's index provided thirty-three entries for heads recorded within the counties of Derbyshire, South Yorkshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire which fell within the "Peak District" zone. Additional examples were provided by the Manchester Museum card index file which contained both Jackson's earlier listing and additional examples recorded by fieldworkers, primarily from the northwest boundary of the Peak around the Cheshire border. This data was complemented by additional examples recorded by local museums and county Sites and Monuments Indexes which were also consulted during the course of the research. Appeals in local newspapers and magazines, and information provided by informants, archaeologists and historians contributed significantly to the database and information continued to be collected until the completion of the research in 1998. Where possible all carvings were examined, photographed and approximate find-spots recorded with four figure grid references in the gazetteer which accompanies this research as Appendix 1. In total 107 stone heads were recorded from the Peak District and surrounding areas during the research which spanned an eight year period from 1990. Appendix 1 lists heads alphabetically by the name of the nearest town or village within four categories based upon approximate dating:

1. Celtic and Romano-British;
2. Medieval secular and modern;
3. Medieval ecclesiastical;
4. Miscellaneous.

The "Miscellaneous" category includes those heads which are noted by early surveys but have since disappeared from their recorded locations, or where this survey failed to locate them. The discussion which follows attempts to provide context for the three major categories listed above. One of the primary aims of the research was the collection of folklore and tradition which has accumulated around these carvings, which by their very nature attract attention and comment, especially when divorced from their original context by time or space. During the survey all extant information and stories surrounding heads was recorded by shorthand in notebooks which are listed in the Appendix 2. The traditions collected are discussed in detail in Chapter 6 in the context of broader folklore surrounding carved stone heads in Britain.

An associated tradition with close links with head carving is the use of human skulls as

protective talismans within the structure of buildings, and this motif is discussed in detail in Chapter 7. Four stories of this kind from the Peak District have been identified by the current research, three of them associated with the upland areas to the northwest corner of Derbyshire at Tunstead near Chapel-en-le-Frith, Flagg and Castleton. Two other hitherto unrecorded traditions relating to the use of skulls as protective amulets in Peakland buildings were collected during the research at Glossop and Rowarth, both falling within the same geographical region discussed below.

5.4.2. *Geographical context of the study*

The Peak District, designated as England's first National Park in 1951, is a geographically compact region which covers more than five hundred square miles and includes a wide range of archaeological landscapes which have been influenced by the region's distinctive geological contrasts.⁴⁸ The modern National Park boundaries overlap upon a number of modern county and Metropolitan authorities, but the vast majority of its area is contained within the northern part of the modern administrative county of Derbyshire. Substantial areas of South Yorkshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire also fall within the Park's boundaries, as do small areas of the Greater Manchester Metropolitan Authority district, and West Yorkshire. I chose the Peak District for the purposes of this case study due to its accessibility from my home in Sheffield, just five miles from the borders of the National Park.

The Peak District was known as *Peac-lond* as early as the second half of the seventh century AD when the name first appears in an Anglo-Saxon document which mentions the land occupied by an English tribe known as the *Pecsaete*, or "people of the Peak." At this time the region was:

*"...a relatively isolated, discrete but well-established entity surrounded on three sides by bleak gritstone uplands while uncleared woodland separated it from the Mercian heartlands to the south."*⁴⁹

However, the term "Peak" is a misnomer as there are few if any genuine mountain peaks within the region which could be compared to the Welsh mountains or those in the English lakes. The name is often used today in a general sense to describe the range of hills known as the Dark

Peak north of the village of Edale which includes the high plateaus of Kinder Scout and Bleaklow. Despite the implicit association of the Peak with the high moorland Pennine foothills to the north, the region is actually split into two distinct types of landscape. The southern and central area, known as the White Peak, is made up of rolling limestone valleys which are more closely related to the lowland Britain than the barren gritstone uplands known as the Dark Peak on either side and to the north. These two extremes of scenery interchange within a matter of miles in the central zone, giving the region a series of contrasts in geography, geology and settlement. The factors make the Peak an ideal place for a survey of the kind undertaken here, as the archaeology of the region has traditionally been divided into categories which reflect the different periods of prehistory and the peoples associated with them, from the very earliest times to the present. Different peoples and cultures have left unmistakable and distinct traces of settlement in the landscape, from the Bronze Age hut platforms on the eastern gritstone uplands, to the Iron Age hillforts and the numerous barrows known as *lows* which are evidence of Anglo-Saxon and earlier burials. With the arrival of Christianity in the seventh and eighth centuries AD and the appearance of the first documentary evidence, place names can be utilised to chart areas settled by English speaking peoples.

The geographical division of the British landscape identified by Fox used archaeological data to separate Britain into Highland and Lowland zones, a distinction which corresponded with northwest and southeast. Within this definition the Peak falls within the Highland Zone which includes the Pennine hills which stretch from the High Peak into Yorkshire (see Fig. 25).⁵⁰ It was in the upland regions he suggested that archaeology demonstrated a "continuity" of the human population from the Bronze Age into the Romano-British period. There is evidence, for example, in some areas of West Yorkshire and Northumberland that a substantial British or Celtic population survived long after areas further south had been settled and incorporated into Anglo-Saxon hegemony. In fact, a concentration of British place names and traditions in one area north of Leeds coincides with the region known as Elmet, which survived as an independent kingdom as late as the seventh century AD when it was swallowed up by the kingdom of Northumbria.⁵¹

A study of place name evidence from Derbyshire by Kenneth Cameron identified a broadly similar cluster of British or Celtic names in the northwest corner of the county, which coincides with the greatest concentration of stone heads and related sculpture (see below). Two examples

of the word Eccles, from the British *ecclesia* or “church” have been noted, one in the northwest near Chapel-en-le-Frith and the other near Hope, while a tentative third appears in the river name Ecclesbourne at Wirksworth. Remains of these early British centres have not been identified, but Cameron suggests they refer to “the existence of some sort of British population centre with organised Christian worship.”⁵² Cameron identified three other groups of British place names, including those of rivers and their tributaries, hills and areas of lead mining. He saw the distribution of these place names as significant in that:

“...by far the largest group, comprising almost half the total number, is in the extreme northwest corner of Derbyshire, near the Cheshire boundary, where there is a cluster of seven Celtic names.”⁵³

This he suggests, reflected the fact that this upland region would have offered few attractions to Anglian settlers, this being reflected in the rarity of English names ending in the element *tun*. Cameron’s conclusions have been disputed by Fyne who argues that all the “Celtic” place names he lists are likely to have English derivations, with five remaining examples “have, at best, only a possible Celtic origin.”⁵⁴ Arguments about the use of place name evidence as a basis from which to draw conclusions about the continuity of native British enclaves in northwestern Derbyshire are likely to remain inconclusive until further research can reach more definitive conclusions. Place names do not identify the “invisible” population of native stock who clearly continued to live within the areas of the south which had fallen under the control of Anglian hegemony.

5.4.3. Archaeology and settlement history

“Much of the Peak District landscape is a palimpsest of archaeological features of all periods, with traces of earlier features being identified through the greater detail of the later landscape...On the gritstone upland, whole ancient landscapes are preserved because of the lack of later intensive agriculture. Being an upland, the region has not suffered as much from the devastations of modern mechanised farming. Features of great antiquity are sometimes still in use today as part of a living landscape with farming roots going back into the distant past.”

The Iron Age saw great changes in the settlement pattern in the Peak district coinciding with deteriorating weather conditions. Pollen analysis has shown a decrease in trees during this period, which is thought to reflect the clearance of woodlands in the Derwent valley and Pennine foothills of the eastern Peak.⁵⁶ The Iron Age population of the region had by this stage developed into petty kingdoms and loose confederations of tribes, dominated by hereditary elites who controlled tenure of land and economic resources. At the time of the Roman invasion the Peak fell within the extensive territory of the Brigantes, but very little is known about the free Iron Age phase which preceded this period. The only visible remains from this time are the defensive hillforts, of which eight remain, but the vast majority of the population left few traces and it is possible they inhabited those areas of the upland valleys which have continued to be cultivated up to the present day. Radiocarbon dates from hut platforms within the hillfort at Mam Tor, near Castleton, have provided early occupation dates falling between the period 1700 BC to 1000 BC, and Barnatt and Smith argue that the lack of complex defensive earthworks suggest these sites had been largely abandoned before the Roman armies arrived.⁵⁷

Roman soldiers arrived in the Peak in the late 70s AD during Agricola's push northwards into the territory of the Brigantes. Forts were soon established at *Navio* (Brough), *Ardotalia* (Glossop) and possibly at *Aquae Arnementia* which was a native British cult site centred upon the thermal springs at Buxton. At this stage the Peak was of strategic and economic importance to the Romans as its occupation secured an east-west Pennine crossing and controlled indigenous resources of lead which the region was known to contain. Both *Navio* and *Ardotalia* had thriving civilian settlements or *vici* which appear to have stimulated trade and contact between natives and soldiers, and led to settled conditions and the production of stone carvings like those associated with Hadrian's Wall. As this discussion will highlight, the major concentrations of stone heads of Romano-Celtic date in the Peak are associated by geographical proximity to the sites of the Roman forts.

Roman occupation of the Peak continued until the middle of the fourth century, when the frontier forts were abandoned in the first half of the second century when troops pushed further north coinciding with the construction of Hadrian's Wall. *Navio* was rebuilt in the late second century AD following a Brigantian revolt, and continued to be a focal area for the native population of the region. *Ardotalia*, which commanded an important crossing of the river Etherow near Glossop, had a similar function due to its trade links with the larger fort at

Manchester to which it was linked in the west. All the surviving evidence suggests the Romano-British period was a peaceful and prosperous one for the majority of the native population, who it appears were occupied by farming and lead mining. Remains of Romano-British farming settlements have been identified at a number of locations in the Peak, comprising hamlets or farms with associated yards and gardens, which in turn are associated with larger fields divided by banks and stones into narrow strips. Around fifty such farms are known largely on the limestone plateau, but none of the recorded stone heads can be directly associated with their distribution. A number of heads recorded in the Peak originated from fieldwalls but records of the age and exact location of these walls has not survived.

The population history and archaeology of the region slips once again into relative obscurity between the fourth century AD and the arrival of the Anglo-Saxon settlers in the fifth or sixth centuries. The survival of place names like *eccles* at Hope and Chapel-en-le-Frith and the cluster of Celtic place names in the northwest around the Goyt and Etherow valleys identified by Cameron and discussed above suggests the presence of established post-Roman communities and it is to this period that a group of enigmatic carved stones from Glossop have been assigned by historians.⁵⁸ Large numbers of Anglian graves are concentrated upon the limestone plateau from the seventh century onwards, but Barnatt and Smith note how these avoid the Hope valley and northwest uplands.⁵⁹ The Grey Ditch at Bradwell and other undated earthworks could be seen as linear dykes separating the British and Anglian communities at this period, with the gradual absorption of the British enclave occurring later during the expansion of the kingdom of Mercia during the eighth century. At this time the land of the *Pecsaete* was assessed in the *Tribal Hidage* as supporting more than one thousand farming families, a relatively high population which would have included people of indigenous British stock in areas controlled by an Anglian elite. By the eighth century the population was focussed upon the limestone plateau around what were to become the towns of Bakewell, Matlock, Wirksworth and Ashbourne. Anglian settlement of the more inhospitable Dark Peak at the extreme north and northwest of the region occurred later, as evidenced to some extent by the place name evidence. The arrival of English peoples during this period gave the whole region its distinctive characteristics in the shape and names of its settlements which delineated the growth of the later medieval villages and towns.

5.4.4. *Distribution and context*

The distribution map (Fig. 27) illustrates the existence of distinct clusters of carved stone heads in the northern sector of the Peak District which coincide with the areas of presumed late British enclaves discussed above. The clustering of these early pieces of Celtic-influenced sculpture in the Glossop and Longdendale region of the northwest Peak District was noted by Clive Hart in his survey of North Derbyshire archaeology published in 1981. Hart noted a collection of eight stone heads from the High Peak, but noted: "all are from undated contexts and could therefore be of any period and unconnected with a cult."⁶⁰ Of this grouping, seven heads were from the area around Glossop which he said "might suggest a cult centre," with one outlier at Castleton. The Hope Valley examples may relate to the Roman presence in the region focussed around the fort at Brough, near Hope. This geographical trend could be distorted by the fact that the majority of heads known are from the upland regions where workable sandstone and gritstone is freely available as a source material for carving. Few examples are known from the limestone area known as the White Peak, as this kind of stone is more difficult to utilise as a material for carving and is less likely to survive weathering and other forms of erosion. In addition, the presence of wooden carvings would not survive in the archaeological record, although they could have been plentiful during the Iron Age and early Roman period. None have been identified by this research within the Peak District zone.

The appearance of head-related sculpture as part of the architecture of parish churches during the Romanesque period, from the eleventh century onwards, is another important factor influencing the distribution of stone heads in the Peak District. While some of these churches may incorporate carvings from earlier British shrines or churches, none of these can be identified with any certainty today. The dispersal of medieval stone heads from church sites such as Mottram, Old Glossop and Bakewell following nineteenth century restorations is another significant factor identified by this research. Stone heads from these sites turn up in a variety of secondary contexts, where they have been used for decorative purposes in walls and buildings. Many have ended their sojourns through the landscape as exhibits in museum collections.

No other significant geographical trends have been identified by this research. The discussion which follows relates to three distinct groups of sculpture which have been categorised by date of presumed origin. These categories include the majority of the heads recorded by this survey

which have been assigned dates either in the Romano-Celtic period or the later medieval centuries, either in a secular or ecclesiastical context. A full list of the examples recorded by this research in the Peak District appears in Appendix 1.

5.4.5. *Dating and context of Peak District heads*

The precise dating of carved stone heads remains the most insoluble problem in the study of their origin and subsequent context within architecture. The saga of the Hexham Heads in Northumberland, described in Chapter 6, underlines the need for caution which is required when attempts are made to date heads on stylistic grounds alone. As was made apparent in Chapter 4 a large number of heads which had previously been dated tentatively to the Celtic Iron Age and Romano-British periods have retrospectively been re-evaluated as being much more recent in date, many of them as products of folk art in the last three centuries. Furthermore, Billingsley's fieldwork in the Calder Valley established the fact that there was an important and influential resurgence in the use of the head as a symbol carved in stone upon houses, furniture and weaponry during the seventeenth century.⁶¹

In the account of Peak District heads which follows, examples are grouped within three categories for the purpose of discussion. As noted in Chapter 1 the Manchester Museum survey of stone heads in northwest England, which overlaps upon my own in the Peak District, reached a tentative conclusion that just one third of the total recorded appeared to originate from the Iron Age, Romano-British or early English period of history. This statement is supported by the findings of the present survey, which suggests that one third may in fact be an optimistic estimate of the actual numbers of early specimens. An additional proviso is that, of those with apparently firm Romano-Celtic credentials none can be securely dated by an ultimate method such as carbon dating, which has brought certainty to the study of organic objects such as human bone.

Many other Celtic or Romano-Celtic carvings have been destroyed, buried or stolen as a result of the changes in settlement and landscape over the last two millennia. During the course of the present survey it was found that a number of carvings both in West Yorkshire and the Midlands recorded as being *in situ* by Jackson during his survey in the 1960s have since disappeared. A later survey of Celtic sculpture in Derbyshire by Petch in 1989 recorded examples which had

disappeared during the three to four year interval when the present survey began.⁶² A number of these are listed under the category "Miscellaneous Heads" in Appendix 1. The disappearance of carvings can be explained by a number of factors. Prominent among these are the movement, storage, sale or re-use of heads as a result of alterations to buildings, walls and other structures. In other cases, carvings have been removed for safekeeping as a result of theft or vandalism, and for that reason many local historians are reluctant to divulge the locations of existing stone heads. This caution is underlined by historian Peter Naylor, who mentions a number of examples in his book on Derbyshire's Celtic heritage, but notes:

*"With reluctance, the exact locations are not divulged for fear of further damage due to vandalism. There are many more, being prized possessions of their owners."*⁶³

As "Celtic heads" receive more publicity and their value as collectors items or antiques grows, more are likely to be stolen for resale for profit driven motives. For instance one head reputedly of Romano-British origin from Mouselow in Glossop, Derbyshire, was sold privately for £2,500 in the late 1980s, but its owners have never allowed it to be examined or photographed by a museum.⁶⁴ Others are vulnerable to wanton damage of the kind inflicted upon the sculpture at Castleshaw, near Oldham (see Chapter 4).

The chance nature of discovery and subsequent recording of heads should also be borne in mind in respect of the representative sample of heads included in the present case study. The examples which have come to my attention have done so mainly purely by chance, and the present research makes no claim to comprehensive coverage. While a significant number have been donated or reported by their owners and/or finders to local museums, at least an equivalent number of specimens must lie undiscovered, particularly those in locations such as moorland fieldwalls. Many of these will continue to remain concealed until fieldwalking surveys are conducted in selected areas of the Peak District and elsewhere. The lack of awareness of their existence or importance as artefacts of material culture has contributed to the sparse recording which persists until the present day. Of the specimens which survive and are discussed below, roughly a third are currently preserved in museums and other private collections. A few remain *in situ*, both in secular and ecclesiastical architecture where they are in most instances safe from theft or vandalism.

As an example of material culture the Peak District heads provide a good example of evolving

folk art as they all conform to a basic template in their conception, but vary widely in style, context, choice of material and carving technique. Few if any have been excavated in a datable context and some have no recorded tradition relating to their original provenance or function, resulting in an overall impression that they could belong to virtually any period of history from the late Iron Age to the Victorian era. Often the only method of drawing conclusions about them is by looking for features which define the context to which they do not belong, or which can help to classify them as originating from a purely ecclesiastical rather than a secular folk tradition.

As Riddel notes in her survey of heads from the Hadrian's Wall region, an important point to bear in mind is the secondary usage of these sculptures in later buildings which has led to many of them arriving at museums badly recorded, with little accompanying information.⁶⁵ As an example of the difficulties involved in trying to locate exact provenances, she describes the history of one head from Lanchester, County Durham. This sculpture was found in 1965 when the cobbled floor of an outhouse was taken up, and was immediately interpreted as "Celtic," but could not be attributed to any "Celtic" site within the area. It was then assumed that the head had come from the Roman fort at Lanchester. However, before this discovery, the head had also been used as part of a fieldwall, which had been dismantled "near the fort" according to an old farm worker.⁶⁶ These problems are multiplied when the discussion is extended to heads of archaic style which have been re-used within later medieval church architecture. An additional factor which has sown confusion in the archaeological record has been the activities of a number of nineteenth and early twentieth century sculptors who produced stone heads for both decorative and traditional reasons.

Drawing definitive conclusions upon this basis becomes an extremely difficult task. With the current lack of a precise means of dating stone, and in the absence of a more comprehensive survey of buildings and landscape in the whole region, it is impossible to reach any more definitive conclusions about the dating and original context of the vast majority of these carvings at the present time.

5.4.6. Iron Age and Romano-British heads

Carved heads from the Peak District which have been tentatively dated to the Celtic Iron Age or

Romano-British period form a small but interesting group, displaying a variety of symbols described in the typologies listed in Chapter 4. They include a group of sculptured stones demonstrating native Celtic influence in their style, whose provenance links them with the Roman military base now known as Melandra Castle. This collection of stones form a distinctive geographical group with a number of outliers which cluster in the northwest corner of the High Peak, a distribution noticed by Hart in 1981.⁶⁷

5.4.6.1. *Melandra Castle grouping*

The river Etherow flows from the high moors of the Pennines towards the Mersey through Longdendale and meets the Glossop Brook in an area of low-lying ground west of Glossop at Woolley Bridge. It is here, on a slope above the river, that the Romans chose to build their fort defending the Cheshire plain when they arrived in Longdendale in the second half of the first century AD. The fort was called Melandra when it was first recorded in the late seventeenth century, but this name is regarded as an antiquarian invention.⁶⁸ The fort was known as *Ardotalia* in the second century AD *Ravenna Cosmography*, a name whose origin is lost.⁶⁹ It is thought the initial wooden fort was occupied intermittently from around AD 80 until the revolt of the Brigantes in the second century, when it was held by a cohort of Frisian troops until it was abandoned in the middle of the second century. It is from this date that the majority of the remaining stone walls are dated. After abandonment stone was removed and re-used by local people as building material, as worked stone was never wasted in this region. The last standing buildings were demolished as late as 1777, leaving just the footings for the walls. Large amounts of re-used Roman masonry are incorporated in the structures of Woolley Bridge Farm, Melandra Farm, and other nearby buildings, and a local historian suspected the “gunparts” which form part of the Gun Inn at Hollingworth are actually re-used column bases taken from the Roman fort itself.⁷⁰ This tradition of the re-use of stone extended to decorative elements of which sculpture would form one part; the carved stones, Imperial altars and heads being re-used later to adorn later buildings. It is suspected that this habit was extended to material from the two churches in the valley, at Mottram and Old Glossop, discussed later.

From Melandra the line of the Roman road ran westwards to Mottram-in-Longdendale, where there is a hilltop having signs of late Bronze Age and early Iron Age occupation.⁷¹ The road

crossed the river somewhere in the vicinity of Woolley Bridge, where a ford on a bridge is presumed to have existed. However, searches of the river bed by frogmen during an archaeological survey of the area in the 1960s failed to find any trace of masonry.⁷² One piece of powerfully executed sculpture depicting three faces carved on a concave sandstone block is directly associated with the site of this presumed Roman ford (see Fig.1).⁷³ The stone itself forms a quarter circle and features a central face and two profile faces, one on each side and facing each other. The central face is triangular, with a slit mouth, triangular nose and bulbous eyes, complete with faint incised pupils. Anne Ross has noted slight evidence of “water weeds” on the central face, and ram’s horns on the two profile heads which she compares with horned carvings found in the foundation wall of a Roman mansio in Wall, Staffordshire dated to the second century AD.⁷⁴ The stone is shaped so that its reverse slopes to make it narrower towards the bottom. The precise provenance of this stone is unknown. It was acquired by Manchester Museum in 1973 from a man whose wife brought it from her family home “in the Glossop area,” where it had been used as a garden ornament for many years. All he could say was that from its shape it had been used:

“...to form some exterior feature or decoration of the wall of a house or farm...as the lady clearly remembers old houses or farms which had and still have heads carved or let into the walls.”⁷⁵

Drawing on local traditions gathered after pictures of the stone appeared in the *Glossop Chronicle*, Ward said it appeared to have come from a well below the churchyard at St Michael’s Hill, Mottram.⁷⁶ However, a family tradition recorded by John Taylor Broadbent says the tricephalos “came from the river near Melandra, near the confluence with the Glossop Brook.”⁷⁷ Indeed, Mr Broadbent remembers as a child in the 1950s seeing the carving beside the river, so we can regard this testimony as the most reliable as to the provenance of this piece at that time. It is possible the tradition concerning the wellhead at Mottram may therefore refer to another carved stone, since lost.

Another carving associated by proximity to the Roman fort is an attractive squatting full-size figure from Mottram Moor which may depict a native hunting deity.⁷⁸ This figure is a half-life sized sculpture carved in one piece upon a low square plinth. Found near a spring, the figure once carried a bow which has since been lost, as at some stage the carving has been damaged

resulting in the loss of the left hand. Like the tricephalic springhead, the circumstances of its original discovery remain unclear but in local tradition the figure was known as "Robin Hood" and a public house near the find-spot took its name from the local traditions surrounding the figure.⁷⁹ While the tricephalic carving follows an archaic tradition in the depiction of three cojoined faces upon a single block of stone, the "squatting" figure is more enigmatic in style due to the rarity of Celtic depiction of the full human figure. The face shows typical "Celtic" features in respect of the small lentoid eyes and individual curls of hair carved upon the head in Graceo-Roman style, and wears a short tunic which can be compared with figures known from Gaul, of second century AD date.⁸⁰ Other comparable "hunting deities" are known from Brigantian contexts in Northumberland, Lancaster and South Yorkshire which suggest a date for this figure in the first three centuries AD. Tony Ward suggested the head of the figure had been reworked at some stage, perhaps to remove a hood or horns, with the curls added later. Ward wrote:

*"...the style is Gallo-Roman, as are many of the accepted Roman period Celtic icons and falls neatly into the pattern of Robin Hood legends along the rivers Etherow and Goyt. The figure should, I think, be regarded as a fairly late variation of the Cernunnos figures."*⁸¹

Inevitably, question marks must remain over precise dating of these two carvings, even though the style of both leaves little room for doubting their Romano-Celtic influence, if not direct origin. A larger question mark hangs over the origin and age of a broken carving discovered by workmen near the entrance of the Woodhead Tunnel in Longdendale, near Glossop, in the late nineteenth century, and later purchased by Manchester Museum.⁸² Again without a clear history, this sandstone carving could be of any date from the Romano-Celtic period to the nineteenth century when itinerant Irish labourers were employed to dig the tunnel. The curious sculpture depicts a phallic figure on a seat or throne, minus head, hands and legs, but with a prominent male organ. The flat reverse of the stone depicts three stylised "Celtic style" faces carved in relief, arranged in a triangular formation. The faces are pear shaped, with simple features including tiny elliptical eyes, and a simple nose springing from a prominent brow.

A fourth sculpture was excavated in situ from the collapsed wall of the second Roman fort at Melandra during Manchester University's excavations in 1973. This is classed as "a hardly distinguishable head supposed to represent the Horned God of the Brigantes" according to Petch,⁸³ and a question mark hangs over whether it can really be classified as a head or a

naturally shaped piece of Kinder Scout gritstone. However, its importance cannot be ruled out, bearing in mind the use of crudely-shaped natural stones whose shape approximates to that of a head as foundation deposits in other early structures. In this case the deep recessed eye sockets might have contained decorated pebbles which could have enhanced the fearsome appearance of the head.

A crudely-incised face cut upon a rectangular block of millstone grit from the Dinting area of Glossop should also be included in this general grouping as it also originates from the northwest edges of the Peak District. Reeve classifies this object as a whetstone of the kind discussed in Chapter 4. If correct this would suggest a dating within the first eight centuries of the first millennium AD.

5.4.6.2. Mouselow Hill grouping

A horned head, this time in the form of an incised outline cut upon the face of a rough rectangular block of sandstone, forms part of an enigmatic grouping of stones from the Glossop region of northwest Derbyshire (see Fig. 17).⁸⁴ The horns spring from the brow of the head, which in size is out of proportion to the torso of the figure, crudely cut almost as if an afterthought upon the lower part of the tapering stone. The carving has been compared with other depictions of horned deities which are widespread from Gaul to North Britain during the first four centuries AD, discussed in Chapter 4. In particular, the figure corresponds with the horned likeness of Mercury as a horned Celtic warrior found at the Roman fort at Maryport in Cumbria. In addition, Tony Ward has compared the "horns" on the Glossop figure to the puck-ears of the heads present in the walls and structure of the medieval Southwell Minster in Nottinghamshire, which was built above the remains of a Roman fort, and may suggest secondary re-use of decorative stone.⁸⁵ The depiction of horns or puck-shaped ears can also be compared with those found on a number of heads of presumed medieval date found in the porches of some early Derbyshire churches, including those at Hope and Brassington.

The horned head forms part of a group which do not appear to have direct links with the fort at Melandra but instead pieces have stylistic affinities to a later period of proto-history, after the departure of the Roman garrison had presumably led to a reversion to tribal conditions. The collection of which the incised horned carving forms one part consists of eight pieces stone of

varying shapes and sizes which are currently built into a wall above a doorway in Buxton Museum, Derbyshire. While some of the stones appear to be of late Roman date, one piece appears to be a fragment of a Mercian cross and others appear to have been casual finds from the Glossop area. At one time the collection included two carved stone heads of late medieval date, one of which has been separated from the the main grouping and is built into a wall in another part of the Museum. This head has been tentatively dated to the fourteenth century, and its style is consistent with the "Celtic tradition" in the depiction of prominent lentoid eyes set in a double "spectacle" frame, with a long nose sprouting from a prominent brow. Teeth are depicted by a line of tiny square holes, a feature found on a small number of stone heads. This stone displays evidence of being carved deliberately for incorporation in a niche, a feature associated with a number of other heads discussed in Chapter 4. The face protrudes from a larger block of sandstone which has clearly not suffered the same degree of weathering as the head itself, presumably because of its incorporation in a structure of some kind.

There is no accurate record of the provenance of each individual piece of stone forming part of this palimpsest of carvings, but local tradition suggests at least some of them were found by workmen during the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century in the area of Mouselow Hill, north of Old Glossop, when a new road was cut through a burial site above the hamlet of Little Hadfield.⁸⁶ Mouselow Hill or Castle is a natural hill which has traces of ramparts which have been dated by excavation to the Iron Age, overlying evidence of an earlier Bronze Age cemetery.⁸⁷ The cemetery, on the lower slopes of the hill, may have continued in use into the Roman period, and casual finds of Roman coins have been recorded from the same area.⁸⁸ In 1846 the Reverend George Marsden, a retired Wesleyan Minister, was given permission by the Howard family, who owned the hill, to remove stone from Mouselow. During the work, local tradition describes how he discovered "some curiously marked stones."⁸⁹ These were taken away and built, significantly, into the gable end of a cottage near the Spinner's Arms in Little Hadfield, according to local information,

"...following a tradition that they might ward off evil spirits, but in reality, so I am told, as a warning to his parishioners that he would not tolerate un-Christian activities."⁹⁰

The stones remained in the cottage until Lord Howard removed them at the turn of the century, and presented them to the Glossop Antiquarian Society. An account of 1905 describes how they

had been examined by experts who had concluded they were “early Anglo-Saxon” in origin, and that:

“...some of the symbols have been recognised as representing the river of life, the wind blowing from the four quarters of the earth, Thoth, one of their gods and other objects which they worshipped.”⁹¹

Tony Ward, who studied the collection of stones for more than twenty years concluded:

“Some of the stones have symbols which could be linked to some known Celtic icons, but it is impossible to relate them to a particular cult or to ascertain their original purpose, though the possibility that they were gravestones was considered. All that can be said is that the stones were not Roman, but that they have some affinity with the Celtic tradition of the area.”⁹²

A detailed discussion of the symbolism and date of the Mouselow stones is not appropriate within the present study, but the appearance of the horned face among the collection is interesting from the point of view of an evolving tradition surrounding re-used stones, specifically those containing symbols relating to the human head. Ward’s conclusion that some of the stones were grave *stelae*, in one case from the grave of a woman, is consistent with other carvings found in a Romano-British funerary context, for example the Serpent Stone from Maryport in Cumbria which is also dated to the late Roman period. Ward dates the Mouselow stones to a period between the late second century AD and the fifth century AD and notes the only comparable grouping comes from a Dark Age Christian shrine in Gaul.⁹³ It appears possible that the group was broken up and re-used at some point in the late medieval period, possibly to cancel or deride their pagan significance, as some of the stones display evidence of being split from larger groups. More definitive conclusions will not be forthcoming until more stones from the grouping come to light, which appears unlikely due to wide dispersal of material from the site over the last four centuries.

5.4.6.3. Miscellaneous Romano-Celtic heads

While not falling within the precise geographical area encompassed by this case study, a stone head discovered in a Roman context in Manchester during the nineteenth century should

nevertheless be described here because of its importance from the point of view of style. The head was one of three carvings found within gravel at a depth of six feet in 1821 by workmen sinking a drain in the township of Hulme, a few hundred yards southwest of the site of the fort at Castle Field but on the far side of the River Medlock.⁹⁴ The carvings include a full figure with crossed arms and flowing garment but lacking a head, a crudely-carved stone head and a third figure on a plaque. He has been identified as *Cautopates*, one of the accessories connected with the worship of the Persian god Mithras whose cult was popular with soldiers serving in the Roman army. A number of ruins from Mithraic temples have been identified near Roman forts in Britain, which is fortunate as Mithraic statues were systematically destroyed by early Christians who regarded the rituals employed by the followers of the Eastern cult as a mockery of the new religion. Unfortunately, although contemporary drawings exist, none of the three stones have survived, and archaeologists were not present at the time of their discovery to record whatever structures may have been associated with them. However, there can be little doubt about the Romano-British date of the head because of its association with the Mithraic sculpture. A contemporary account of the head, recorded by Bruton in 1909, describes it as:

“...rudely carved...[and] of large size and coarse features, with the hair turned backwards, standing on a very short pedestal.”⁹⁵

Jones and Grealey note that the stiff, brushed back hair depicted upon the head shows marked native British influence and is a feature found upon a number of other heads of presumed early date.⁹⁶ Hairstyle where present is a useful method of dating problematic stone heads, and this was a means employed by Sheffield Museum to give an approximate date to a gritstone head found buried in an unstratified context in the garden soil of a house on Ranmoor Hill, Hathersage, in the 1960s (see Fig. 9).⁹⁷ The features of this sculpture are sharply and realistically rendered, with an attempt to depict facial lines and hair, of a style which has been dated tentatively to the third century AD, a date which fits the latter period of Roman occupation in the Hope Valley. Fliegel notes how “the treatment of the eyes, commonly referred to as spectacle eyes due to the rendering of double lids...dominate the visage” and suggest native influence.⁹⁸ The elongated, almost bottle-shaped neck indicates that it was carved as a complete sculpture in itself, and was probably intended to be set into a larger design or structure, perhaps a Romano-British shrine. Hathersage is a short distance from the important Roman marching

fort at *Navio*, where traces of a Roman shrine and a number of altars have been discovered. Dr Pegge, an antiquarian from Chesterfield who visited the ruins in 1761, observed an oblong building with brick walls and a row of gritstone pillars. He also claimed he had also seen a bust of the god Apollo, which has since disappeared.⁹⁹ Altar stones recovered during an excavation in 1903 included dedications to the god Mars and the goddess *Arnomecta*, who is associated with the springs at Buxton which were linked to Brough by an important Roman road, Batham Gate.¹⁰⁰ The early fort was rebuilt in the middle of the second century AD during the Brigantian revolt, and was manned until the late fourth century which would provide a context for this singular head from Hathersage. A head with stylised hair and overall Roman-influence in its workmanship was recorded by Manchester Museum at Chinley, near Chapel-en-le-Frith, and is described in Chapter 6. Unfortunately, no history of this carving is known, and the original findspot has not been recorded.

The Romano-British style of the heads from Hulme and Hathersage can be compared with the stone head found in a private garden at Streetley, Sutton Coldfield, in the West Midlands, and recorded by Birmingham City Museum (see Fig. 7).¹⁰¹ This head is carved from local sandstone in the style of a "severed head," with prominent lentoid eyes, drooping mouth with slightly pointed lips, a wedge-shaped nose and hair depicted as if combed back stiffly from the fringe. The head has been dated by Ross to the first or second centuries AD on stylistic grounds, who felt it was "probably free-standing and that the sides and back had subsequently been roughly re-cut to make it fit into a stone wall."¹⁰²

Two stone heads currently in the Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, originate from fieldwalls, and display stylistic evidence of an early date in the Romano-British period. The first, from the parish of Bradfield, on the Peak District border with Sheffield, is powerfully carved on a large gritstone boulder found in the rockery at Thornseat House, Strines, in 1967 (see Fig. 10).¹⁰³ The face is carved in relief on the flat protruding end of the tapering stone which once formed part of the wall, although its original position does not appear to have been recorded. It has a prominent brow framing the deep-set eyes set close together and carved without pupils. A flat, wedge-shaped nose runs from the brow and merges with a drooping moustache which is complemented by a long, wavy beard. In its style of execution this carving displays all the hallmarks of being part of the Celtic tradition, but it is impossible to date the stone on this criterion alone.

A similar conclusion is reached about the stone head from Rose Cottage, Waterside, at Castleton (see Fig. 5).¹⁰⁴ This carving also takes the form of a face cut in relief upon a flat piece of irregularly-shaped sandstone. The features are well spaced and the sculpture is dominated by a prominent wedge-shaped nose which tapers to towards the flat brow. On either side of the brow are two large oval eyes formed entirely by a double lids, the left eye apparently deliberately carved so as to depict a closed or winking eye, a feature found elsewhere and discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. The head tapers towards the lower part of the stone, where a simple slit mouth has been carved with a slight resemblance of lips. The original provenance of this head has unfortunately not been accurately recorded, but when first noted in the late 1960s it was built into the lower part of a low stone garden boundary wall which overlooked the waters of the Russett Well, a natural underground spring which flows from the mouth of Peak Cavern in Castleton. The owners of the head told a fieldworker that the head had been in this position for as long as they could remember.¹⁰⁵

The carvings from Strines and Castleton are just two of eighteen heads recorded in my Peak District survey which originated from drystone walls. All but four of this collection came from the upland regions of the Dark Peak, including Longdendale, Glossop, the Hope and Derwent valleys. A particularly good example was recorded in the Jackson survey from a fieldwall at Baslow.¹⁰⁶ It is currently owned by a lady in Pilsley, whose father rescued it from a moorland boundary wall earlier this century; unfortunately the precise location of the wall is not known.¹⁰⁷

The skull-like face is cut in relief upon a roughly triangular block of sandstone, with prominent lentoid eyes framed by double eyelids. Indications of hair are visible on the reverse and a simple horizontal line forms the mouth. Other similar heads are known from fieldwalls at Baslow Bar, Repton, Glossop, Tintwistle and Hathersage and many more clearly await discovery in the future. A head at Baslow Bar once occupied a position in a wall by a grass verge near Ramsley Lodge, but was removed when a metalled footpath was laid earlier this century.¹⁰⁸ Writing in 1971 Edward Wrench described a tradition of leaving offerings for "good luck" associated with this head. He wrote:

*"...the origin of the wayside head is not known, but its position had its attractions to me as a boy as a spot where coins could be found, since passengers on the top of coaches often threw them down at the head. An uncle of mine when walking from Sheffield to Baslow used to clear the head of weeds, and he told me he had once found a penny in an eye socket."*¹⁰⁹

This roadside or fieldwall context for heads as lucky charms is also common in the Pennine valleys of West Yorkshire, where a number of crude carvings were recorded in moorland fieldwalls and subsequently dubbed "field gods" by Sidney Jackson. One of the first examples recorded by his survey came from the foot of an ancient fieldwall in Heaton Woods, near Bradford,¹¹⁰ while a series of others were recorded by a survey of walls in the Pennine foothill village of Walsden, near Todmorden.¹¹¹ In some instances he was able to ascertain walls dated back to ancient boundaries, for example a head from Prince of Wales Park in Bingley was found among stones in an ancient boulder wall believed to date to the Iron Age.¹¹²

Ascribing dates to the fieldwall heads recorded by the Peak District survey is fraught with difficulties. First and most important once again is the frequent lack of a secure original provenance, as so many examples have been subject to secondary use. For instance, one example recorded during fieldwork in 1997 was found in the rubble from a drystone boundary wall between a nineteenth century house and a farmer's field at Clay Cross, southern Derbyshire.¹¹³ The boundary wall dates from the enclosures of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, but it is impossible to draw any definitive conclusion about the date of the head, which could originate from this period or may have been re-used at that time from an earlier wall or structure.

A second problem is the activity of nineteenth century head carvers such as Samuel Swift from Cawthorne near Barnsley, who produced a number of examples which are now incorporated in fieldwalls at Taylor Hill in the village and neighbouring areas.¹¹⁴ Two grotesque-style carvings I recorded in a fieldwall near the village of Woolley, near Barnsley, in 1997, may be attributable to the work of Swift, while others appear to originate from the dispersal of stone from churches in the region. The two small heads at Woolley had been positioned halfway up the wall, facing a dangerous bend in the road, and had been painted blue at some point in recent history, although no extant local tradition was recorded relating to them.¹¹⁵ Another crude carving of a head upon a sandstone boulder at Saltersford, near Woodhead in Longdendale, northwest Derbyshire, is said to be a warning of a dangerous bend in the adjacent Woodhead Road,¹¹⁶ a symbol which can perhaps be compared with the well-known "skull and crossbones" traditionally used as a warning in another context. A number of other active stone carvers appear to have been at work in Peak District villages, in some cases using older examples as the template for their creations. One portrait-style head currently positioned above the entrance door at Birchover Post Office

was carved, according to an informant, by the village stonemason Bernard Wragg in 1969, following local style and tradition which suggested it should be placed above a doorway "for luck."¹¹⁷ Quarrymen also appear to have created a number of carvings, including an example from Bakewell now preserved in the Vernon Park Museum at Stockport in Greater Manchester.

5.4.7. Medieval heads in a secular architectural context

More than three quarters of the heads recorded during my fieldwork in the Peak District could be dated to a period between the Norman conquest and the present century, a figure which compares with the initial results of Manchester Museum's survey.¹¹⁸ Heads from an ecclesiastical context which fall within this approximate timespan are dealt with separately in a section which follows. Of the remaining total, examples can be divided into a number of categories and sub-groupings according to their context. The great majority of the surviving examples are incorporated into buildings or houses, while a related group are the stones associated with fieldwalls which have been discussed in a Romano-Celtic context previously. The majority of these examples probably originate in medieval or modern times as charms to promote fertility or deflect evil away from farmland and livestock, which represented a vital economic resource for the Peakland farmer. A small number of heads without any clear context are those which have been unearthed in fields or gardens where they have apparently been deliberately buried for unknown reasons at some period in the past. Of the carvings not associated with buildings or fieldwalls are a grouping associated with water either built into the masonry or bridges or associated with springs and wells, part of a tradition of some antiquity which is discussed in different contexts in chapters 3 and 6.

The following discussion is confined to a summary of the more interesting and distinctive examples of medieval and recent heads which fall into the following three categories: heads associated with buildings, heads associated with water and heads with an unknown context.

5.4.7.1. Heads associated with buildings

Carvings incorporated in the fabric of Peak District buildings form a varied and interesting group which follow the tradition of placement in protective locations noted elsewhere in Britain

and discussed in Chapter 6. Although the Peak District had no tradition of vernacular stone architecture such as that associated with the resurgence of the head motif in West Yorkshire, studied by Billingsley,¹¹⁹ nevertheless the majority of Derbyshire heads are associated with buildings dated to the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries.

Stone heads are recorded built into the inside walls of seventeenth century houses in Glossop and Chinley, near Chapel-en-le-Frith, while a head from Wortley, near Stocksbridge, was found built into the fireplace.¹²⁰ Another example in the "Celtic tradition" was found in the rubble of a demolished cottage at Wallet End in the village of Ecclesfield, near Sheffield (see Fig. 9).¹²¹ This may have acted as a lucky household charm, a function associated with broadly similar examples from contexts in Tyldesley, Greater Manchester¹²² and Gable Cottage at Crigglestone, West Yorkshire,¹²³ both structures being of seventeenth century date. At Lea, near Crich, a face is carved in relief upon a pear shaped stone incorporated into the rear wall of a cottage of eighteenth century date in Holt Lane.¹²⁴ A freestanding head from Chisworth, near Glossop, has been built into the structure of the house to which it was attached by local tradition within the last five years.¹²⁵

Heads or faces carved in relief on panels or blocks of stone are suggestive of an original structural function in a building, a tradition associated with a number of heads of Romano-Celtic dating. A panel head of this kind, which originated as a casual find from Macclesfield, Cheshire, is illustrated by Alan Garner (see Fig. 22).¹²⁶ The face is carved in low relief upon a square block which may have acted as a keystone of an arch in a medieval building. The face has archaic features and highly-stylised hair. A similar function as a keystone is suggested by Crowe for a head from the churchyard at Rostherne in Cheshire.¹²⁷

Favoured architectural locations for heads include gable ends of buildings in four Peak District examples. A crudely carved grotesque-style head from Bolsterstone, near Sheffield, is incorporated into the gable end of a building which contains stones from a former fortified manor house dating from the thirteenth century (see Fig. 19).¹²⁸ A baleful-looking face carved upon a rectangular block of stone protrudes from the gable apex of Padley Mill at Grindleford, part of an eighteenth century mill complex on a bridge over a stream near the entrance to the Trolley Tunnel. Of similar date is the crude head in the gable end of the Ship Inn public house at Danebridge in the Dane Valley on the border between Derbyshire and Cheshire, while a fifth example is cut into a triangular panel incorporated into the gable of a cottage on Lower Terrace

Road, Tideswell.¹²⁹ Two missing examples are recorded from the gable end of a row of terraced houses at Gamesley, near Glossop,¹³⁰ and on a barn at Langwith in southern Derbyshire.¹³¹ The tradition recorded at Glossop mentioned in a Romano-British context previously refers to a grouping of carvings deliberately incorporated into the gable end of a cottage in Little Hadfield as a method of protection against evil.¹³² This is similar to a tradition recorded during the present research from a hamlet near Glossop where skulls were built into the eaves of a new building to act as a protective and luck-bringing device.¹³³

Other locations favoured for heads in buildings are above windows, a location chosen for a head found in a stream at Stoney Middleton, which was moved to Tideswell and built into the wall of a house on Alma Road within living memory.¹³⁴ This powerfully-executed head, with an elaborate hairstyle, projects from a block of stone. According to local information the head was re-used as a decoration on a roadside wall before it was moved to Tideswell and was built into the wall of Ivy Cottage within the last thirty years. A similar tradition of re-use is associated with a weathered stone depicting a dragon and a human head originally from a ruined chapel at Carsington, which was subsequently built into a cottage wall at Hopton. The house, which dates from 1646, has other early stones incorporated into its structure, including a second weathered stone head above a window.¹³⁵

Doorways and entrances are frequently protected by heads in cottages of seventeenth and eighteenth century date. A very crudely carved and archaic-looking example stands upon a specially-made plinth above Yew Tree Cottage at Great Rowsley, near Bakewell,¹³⁶ and the eighteenth century folly tower at Mow Cop, Cheshire, has another crude specimen incorporated into a doorway jambstone. Two "Celtic-style" heads once stood sentinel upon a plinth above the porch entrance to a building on Canal Street, Whaley Bridge, Derbyshire, but these have since been sold into private ownership.¹³⁷ At Barlborough, a Celtic-style head carved upon the face of a concave boulder stands upon a plinth at the apex of an arch above the entrance to the seventeenth century stable block to the old hall, which has a haunting tradition.¹³⁸ At Mill Farm, Edale, a simple round face is carved upon the keystone above the entrance to a barn of eighteenth century date.¹³⁹ The face has a "happy smile" which the owners have interpreted as "a symbol of a happy harvest." Similar fertility connotations are suggested by the face depicted as part of a stylised Sheela-na-gig carved upon a block of stone above the entrance to a barn at Haddon Hall, near Bakewell, of possible eighteenth century origin.¹⁴⁰ Modern examples of folk

art performing a traditional protective function include a portrait-style head mounted above the entrance to the Post Office in Birchover, carved in 1969 by the village stonemason, described earlier. Also of recent date are two grotesque-style heads which function as gatepost entrance stones at Paddock Farm, below The Roaches, a rock escarpment in the western Moorlands of the Peak.¹⁴¹ Their protective function may be similar to the stylised heads carved upon two gateposts at the entrance to the Dower House, an eighteenth century building at Winstar, in Derbyshire. The two carvings depict archaic-style faces with serpentine greenery sprouting from their open mouths.

5.4.7.2. Heads associated with water

A small group of Peak District heads are associated with rivers, streams, wells and natural springs favoured as the sites of natural shrines by the Celtic tribes. Possibly the earliest example of a head with a direct watery association is the tricephalic springhead associated with a Romano-Celtic context at Melandra Castle near Glossop, where the carving protected a dangerous confluence of the River Etherow and the Glossop Brook (see Chapter 6). A second full figure sculpture from a related context at Mottram Moor was originally associated with a natural spring. A third head of possible Romano-British origin, from Castleton, is associated by proximity with Russett Well, an underground stream which emerges from the Peak Cavern. The Cavern has a diabolic reputation in local folklore and might have required a protective talisman. A head of possible early date, now built into a wall at Tideswell was, according to a local tradition, originally found lying in a stream at Stoney Middleton.¹⁴²

Natural springs are associated with heads at Old Glossop, where two archaic carvings act as springers to an arch inside the parish church directly above a blind spring identified in local tradition,¹⁴³ and at Chisworth and Chinley. At Joel Lane in Hyde, Greater Manchester, three heads are kept at a well fed by a natural spring which has traditional healing powers, beside a house of seventeenth century date. Jackson felt two of the heads were of Celtic style, the third resembling a medieval church corbel.¹⁴⁴ A crude carving depicting a bearded face upon a wall of outcrop rock above a natural spring at the Wizard's Well on Alderley Edge, Cheshire, was carved by stonemason Robert Garner in the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁵ Garner's great great grandson, writer Alan Garner, has identified a number of other stylised heads in an around the

Edge which he ascribes to Robert's handiwork, "all of them in odd or strange places."¹⁴⁶ Some of these were apparently commissioned by the Stanley family, who owned part of the land, as part of an attempt to attract visitors to the area during a Victorian "revival" of interest in antiquities.¹⁴⁷ I have recorded similar carvings on natural sandstone boulders in Lady Manners Wood, Bakewell, which local information suggests were carved before the beginning of the present century.¹⁴⁸ They include a crude tricephalic head and a human figure known locally as "Robin Hood." Also of presumed date within the last three centuries is a curious "Celtic-style" face carved upon a gritstone boulder directly above a stream which forms part of a tributary of the Abbey Brook, high on the Dark Peak moors at Featherbed Moss, Bradfield.¹⁴⁹ The figures "75" are carved in the rock to one side of the face, but it is not possible to say if these are contemporary with the sculpture which may have functioned as a marker for gamekeepers in this wild area of moorland. Of the heads associated with bridges, three crude examples are carved upon keystones above Marple locks, along the Peak Forest Canal, of eighteenth or early nineteenth century date.¹⁵⁰ At Strines, near Bradfield, a damaged head is built into the keystone of a packhorse bridge at Agden, above a stream running southeast from the Howden Moors. The head decorates one side of the bridge only, and looks upstream.¹⁵¹ Two neighbouring bridges of similar date do not have comparable heads built into their structures. A similar crude head is carved upon a packhorse bridge above a stream behind a private house in Nether Edge, Sheffield,¹⁵² another is carved upon a stone bridge above the Bridgewater Canal at Bollington, Cheshire,¹⁵³ while a missing example is associated by tradition with the Devil's Bridge at Hollingworth, near Glossop, with its obvious apotropaic connotations.¹⁵⁴

5.4.7.3. Heads with unknown context

This small group includes heads unearthed in subsoil or gardens without clear association or context, and freestanding heads without context or history which are stored in museum collections. A good example of the latter category is a "Celtic-style" head which has been in the Derby Museum for upwards of fifteen years without any record of its provenance being on record. Principal curator Richard Langley describes it as:

"...roughly dressed on the top, sides and base, with distinct marks from a quarter inch blade

arranged in V and W patterns, and also more random pecking on the sides. There is rough shaping around the chin, and the face is polished to a flat surface with lightly incised 'Celtic' features."¹⁵⁵

Other examples include a number of heads unearthed in the Longdendale Valley, where some appear to form part of a continuing tradition where carvings have been deliberately buried after being produced locally and used for purposes which remain unclear. Anne Ross describes a group of heads which were buried on a moor and unearthed annually for a surreptitious ritual involving the sacrifice of a lamb,¹⁵⁶ while Tony Ward records:

*"...two heads found and re-buried; one from Glossop and one from Mouselow, which I was shown but the owner would allow no photographs to be taken."*¹⁵⁷

This tradition of burying heads could be a result of a whole spectrum of factors, from a simple reaction to the gruesome appearance of a carving to the deliberate concealment which is known to be an influence in rural Ireland where idol heads were regarded as symbols of paganism during the middle ages. In Pennine and Peak tradition heads could also be buried as lucky talismans in the foundations of houses or roads, or as part of a deliberate attempt to neutralise baleful powers they had absorbed from use in an apotropaic context elsewhere. Examples of all these traditions are discussed more fully in Chapter 6.

Finally, a miscellaneous collection of human heads and faces are known which are carved upon the surface of living rock, a form of carving which has parallels in West Yorkshire and further afield. Examples of this tradition have already been mentioned at Alderley Edge and Bakewell. There are a number of other natural outcrops of rock in the Peak which provide ideal opportunities for this art style which cannot be securely dated, and examples such as a single crude face on Bosley Cloud near Leek and two archaic faces on Ramshaw Rocks, beside the Buxton to Leek road, appear to have been freshly carved in the modern era.¹⁵⁸ Of more interest is a face carved on the east-facing side of a pillar beside the Woodhead Road at Saltersford, on the watershed of the Etherow in Upper Longdendale Valley. Local tradition suggests the head was carved as "a warning" to travellers about a dangerous bend in the road as it approaches Dunford Bridge, but Tony Ward suspected it might have older origins as the stone marks the site of a medieval gibbet remembered in local tradition.¹⁵⁹ Unfortunately, the stone has suffered so

much damage that the carved face is barely distinguishable today. A number of natural stones bear simulacrum resemblance to human faces, including the Winking Eye, on Ramshaw Rocks at the eastern edge of The Roaches,¹⁶⁰ the Head Stone or Stump John at Hollow Meadows, near Sheffield, and the Man's Head Rock at Rivelin, near Sheffield.¹⁶¹ All these stones have names which reflect local knowledge of the faces which can be discerned in the natural formations when viewed at appropriate angles. A final category of heads are those associated with medieval parish churches in the Peak District which are the subject of a lengthy discussion which follows.

5.4.8. Heads in Peak District church architecture

"...In medieval times, the carvings on churches were the main road of development of the severed head motif, and were the route by which its customary relationship to ritual space continued to be observed..."

John Billingsley¹⁶²

Stone heads of the archaic style are a common feature in the architecture of parish churches in the Peak District, particularly in the northern part of the region where a carving tradition appears to have continued with a series of revivals as late as the Gothic revival of the nineteenth century. In Cheadle parish church, on the northeast Cheshire boundary with the Peak, there are fourteen separate carved heads incorporated within different parts of the church fabric, dating from the late fifteenth century. Guy Ragland Phillips found "Celtic-style" heads in a number of pre-Reformation parish churches in Yorkshire, and suggested these were performing a secondary function, especially upon sites where there was evidence of continuity from the Romano-British period onwards.¹⁶³ Jackson noted "primitive heads" built into the wall of the nave inside the parish church at Kirkby Malham in North Yorkshire, and noted:

*"...they are not the type of head one associates with church architecture and could well be Celtic."*¹⁶⁴

Phillips notes the heads were placed in the walls during a nineteenth century restoration "on the advice" of a local MP, Walter Morrison. He adds:

*“Presumably they had been located on the premises. Morrison also provided the church with a porch; and in this is the third Celtic head of an earlier and ruder type.”*¹⁶⁵

Heads of the plain, archaic style are common in the parish churches of the Pennine foothill regions which include the northern Peak District, and Billingsley suggests that they represent a purely protective purpose separate from the more developed symbolism of the human and animal heads associated with the Romanesque and Gothic revivals.¹⁶⁶ Carvings from the Romanesque period appear in the form of grotesques, gargoyles, foliate heads and associated sculpture which despite their pagan connotations were created within a thoroughly Christian context. Fine examples of carved human heads of Romanesque style are found at Adel Church in Leeds, West Yorkshire, and Clonfert Cathedral in County Galway, Ireland, which both have a series of carvings in spectacular triangular gable arrangements which suggest a merging of the decorative and protective functions during the Norman period. In church architecture, the archaic heads perform similar guardianship functions to those associated with secular buildings in their positioning, namely above doorways, on either side of window drip stones, and roof edges on the exterior of the building. Inside churches heads appear to protect the chancel arch, the inside of the tower and the entrance to the altar and choir space. Billingsley equates the large number of heads found at cathedrals and urban parish churches with the growing wealth of the period which enabled patrons to commission masons to produce more elaborate carvings.¹⁶⁷

Christopher Crowe recorded a number of carved heads during a study of early church dedications in northwest England. He concluded that “archaic style” heads were “so distinct from medieval gargoyle carving to be unmistakable” and found how:

*“...some heads appear to have been carved afresh in order to incorporate them into cornices and mouldings in later centuries .”*¹⁶⁸

Crowe’s study focussed upon churches connected with bath-house shrines of the Romano-British period, wells and springs with an early Christian dedication, and churches which had “Celtic-style” heads incorporated into their fabric or churchyards. The heads at Bakewell church were so primitive in style that Crowe concluded they could not possibly be mistaken for rustic carvings of the medieval period:

“...and must surely have a separate meaning from the usual fantasies and horrors of the gargoyle or the capital in the medieval church builder’s repertoire.”¹⁶⁹

Rather it seemed the heads functioned as “tutelary spirits” for the buildings, a relic of the lingering urge to dedicate a religious shrine with a head to confirm the dedication. In this respect, the primitive heads found in early churches:

“...are directly in the Celtic tradition, and are a feature of areas where there was a substantial Celtic element in the landowners and clergy among the Anglo-Saxon settlers.”¹⁷⁰

5.4.8.1 Gazetteer of Peak District churches featuring stone head sculpture

The following gazetteer lists thirteen parishes where church buildings feature archaic-style heads which fall within the geographical area of the Peak District encompassed by this case study. The distribution of those in High Peak is shown on the accompanying map (Fig. 27). The examples which follow are listed alphabetically by the name of the parish concerned, followed by the dedication of the church and a description of the overall context. While the list is not exhaustive, it includes the most important churches and associated sculpture where relevant to the general discussion of the head motif in an ecclesiastical context.

ALDERWASLEY. St Margaret.

The tiny chapel on the hillside above the village of Crich dates to the sixteenth century when it was a chapel-of-ease of Wirksworth parish, and functioned as a private chapel serving the Hurt family.¹⁷¹ The south wall of the building has good examples of medieval heads transferred to the exterior of the church after serving a structural purpose in an earlier building, presumably from the site of the sixteenth century church. Of the surviving examples there are grimacing heads with elaborate hair, and a stylised mouth-puller. One block currently positioned on the corner of the south wall is a Sheela-na-gig which is believed to dated from the eleventh or twelfth century.¹⁷² Its original position in the architecture of the earlier church is unknown.

BAKEWELL. All Saints.

The parish church is dramatically situated upon a knoll on the steep hillside overlooking the

River Wye as it runs through the town. The main structure visible today dates from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but nineteenth century restorations revealed fragments of stone belonging to an earlier Saxon and Norman structure, including a number of stone heads. Crowe associates the church with the conjectured site of a Roman bath-house beside the Wye at its confluence with the Burton Brook.¹⁷³ Some of the earliest stone sculpture in the church can be dated to the late seventh or early eighth century when Bakewell was part of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia, and a ninth century cross stands in the churchyard. Large numbers of gravestones, fragments of early crosses and decorated stones were found built into the walls and foundations during the nineteenth century restoration, and were apparently re-used in building new walls.¹⁷⁴ The carvings are associated with a Mercian school of sculpture which may have been based at an early administrative centre at Bakewell, possibly occupying the site of the earliest church. Examples include a group of stone heads which were haphazardly preserved in the south porch of the church, which dates from the mid-fifteenth century and has a "Celtic-style" head fixed outside as a gargoyle. Crowe also noted the presence of two heads carved in the wooden roof beams and a head unconnected with the fabric of the building among the collection of sculptural fragments.¹⁷⁵

A "king" head of clear ecclesiastical style is built over a window extension of a house in Aldern Way, Bakewell, and was recorded during fieldwork in 1994. The owner said the head came from his previous home in a cottage in the grounds of the parish church, from where it was obtained in 1960 and incorporated into the extension eight years later. This instance provides a good example of re-use of a decorative stone from an early church site. The reason given by the new owner for utilising the head in the structure of his new home was simple: "I liked it and brought it with me when I moved."¹⁷⁶

BIRCHOVER. St Michael and All Angels.

The building known as "Rowtor Church" was built by Thomas Eyre of Rowtor Hall as his own private chapel in the year 1700, according to local tradition as penance for his dabblings with "witchcraft" upon Rowtor Rocks above the church.¹⁷⁷ Built into the lower part of the wall outside the church porch is a collection of stones which are said to be remains from the first church or chapel in the village, built at Upper-town during the Norman period. The stones include a human head of plain archaic style and a Romanesque-style animal head. The guide

describes the fragments as “decorated stones with typical Norman chevrons...corbel heads and capitals of pillars...found in walls around the fields.”¹⁷⁸ Little is known about the earlier building, but a charter of 1300 mentions a chapel at Birchover.

BRASSINGTON. St James.

Much of this imposing church is of Norman origin, with the tower, parts of the porch and the south aisle being dated to the twelfth century. The external changes has obliterated most of the original structure, although the tower, parts of the porch and the south aisle are all Norman. A unique feature of the tower are the buttresses, which are each protected by four carved heads which have been individually carved. The guide states that these heads are of a later date than the tower itself, and may have been added to provide additional “protection.”¹⁷⁹ Two are framed by stonework; one of these is more clearly “Celtic” in style, while the second has a gaping mouth suggestive of a grotesque. A third head is more realistic in having clearly executed features, and incised pupils. The church porch, which is one of the oldest parts of the building, features other interesting carvings, including two stone heads. One much-weathered example, set into the wall, is of the Celtic tradition, with oval eyes and a prominent wedge-shaped nose which forms part of a T-shaped brow. The entrance arch of the church itself also features a male sexual exhibitionist carving of possible Norman date. A free-standing corbel-type head is stored inside the church itself. Also of interest are a full-size figure built into the wall of the tower which may be a Sheela-na-gig and is described as being “almost certainly older than the tower itself.”¹⁸⁰ The nearby dependent chapel of Ballidon contains a octagonal font featuring human and animal heads.

BUXTON.

A small number of carvings featuring human heads are associated with the Roman town, although none are connected with a specific church. The most impressive is a four-headed finial “from the Buxton area” donated to Manchester Museum’s collection (see Fig. 2).¹⁸¹ This carving is of unknown date and clearly formed part of a corbel or column of a medieval church in the area. The style of the faces is typical of the Celtic tradition, with deep, jutting brows, deeply-set stylised eyes, a slit-like, partially open mouth which gives an overall grim and fearsome expression. One of the faces has an elaborate medieval hairstyle. Also from Buxton

are a corbel head found on Torr Street, Buxton,¹⁸² and a series of grotesque-style human and animal heads re-used as decorations on the roof-edge of the Old Courthouse building in the town centre.¹⁸³

DARLEY DALE. St Helens.

The church is built alongside the river Derwent and is mentioned in the Domesday survey of 1086.¹⁸⁴ There are a number of carvings, including group of much-weathered human heads and an almost indistinguishable Sheela-type carving which is visible above the north door of the church tower. Inside the tower is a better-preserved carving which the guide described as a "demon," consisting of a grinning face with long whiskers and claws, partly covered by plaster.¹⁸⁵

HATHERSAGE. St Michael.

The mainly fourteenth century building was extensively restored in the mid-nineteenth century which may date the scattering of decorative fragments.¹⁸⁶ These include a carved head of Celtic style with an elaborate headdress or helmet and bulbous eyes projecting from a rectangular stone block which has been built into a gateway above the vicarage wall in the churchyard facing the tower. Two stone heads, of one archaic style, built into the garden walls of nearby Moorseats Hall may similarly have originated from the site of the medieval church. A series of elaborate grotesque heads are carved along the exterior roof-aisles of the church, and these appear to be of equivalent medieval date. All are individually styled, and including more examples of elaborate helmets and hairstyles, grinning faces and mouth-pulling faces.

HIGH BRADFIELD. St Nicholas.

The fine Gothic-style church stands on a hilltop in a moorland setting, and once formed an outlying chapelry of the parish of Ecclesfield, part of the Saxon manor of Hallam.¹⁸⁷ The structure dates from the fifteenth century, but stands upon the site of an earlier building of Norman date. The west tower is dated to the fourteenth century and this is also the suggested date for the origin of a series of gargoyles and grotesques which include a number of grotesque human faces. Inside the church there are a series of archaic-style heads, of a distinctly separate style, carved above the arches of the Sanctuary Chapel at the eastern end of the building.

HOPE. St Peter.

Hope is one of the largest parishes in England and one of the oldest places of Christian worship in the northern Peak District, as a church was mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086.¹⁸⁸ The present church dates largely from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, but it is believed to be built on the site of a former Saxon and Norman structure. The exterior walls are decorated by a series of individually-carved grotesques and gargoyles, the south wall featuring two impressive carvings. Of the gargoyles which act as water-spouts, one depicts a leering male sexual exhibitionist figure with one hand grasping a carved male organ, while alongside a horned face sprouts from the genital area of a full-sized mouth-pulling gargoyle. These carvings appear to date from the late fifteenth century. There are two interesting heads of different style and appearance carved onto the exterior building stone of the church tower. One weathered face can be seen halfway up the north side of the tower which dates the carving precisely to around the year 1400.¹⁸⁹ A second face is carved on an exterior west wall of the porch and appears to be of similar date. This head carved in relief has horns or puck-shaped ears sprouting from the brow of the head, following a tradition known elsewhere in this part of the Peak. A third grotesque-style head is positioned above the left arch of the main door inside the church porch. This carving has a baleful appearance with a wide open mouth and huge bulbous eyes. Writer Wayne Anthony has recorded a story connected with this carving, which follows:

“The head, according to the vicar, had only returned to the the church in recent years having spent several decades in another part of the country, taken there by a gentleman who was at one time a villager who had worked on the church in his youth, taken a shine to the head and removed it. At the time the head was lying idle and nobody seemed to want it, so he took it with him. As the years passed the gentleman concerned moved away from the village to another part of the country. The son of the gentleman concerned, having grown up travelled to the village of his father’s youth on a sightseeing holiday and whilst there reiterated to the vicar the story concerning the head. The vicar searched all records to see if there was any mention of the head but could find none. Both parties agreed that it would be best for the head to be returned to its original home and, after several months, the head was indeed returned and set into its new position where it can be seen today.”¹⁹⁰

MOTTRAM-IN-LONGDENDALE. St Michael.

Mottram is thought to derive from an Anglo-Saxon word denoting a meeting place, which in this case was situated on a crossroads at a hilltop dominating the lower Longdendale valley, at

one time almost entirely surrounded by moors. Evidence has been found for early occupation of the hill in the late Iron Age and Roman period, when it was linked to the fort at Melandra by a road and a ford across the river Etherow.¹⁹¹ Although an earlier wooden church may have stood here in the Saxon period, no trace remains and local tradition suggests the first church was built to commemorate the dead from a battle during the reign of Stephen and Matilda, from which War Hill takes its name. A church has stood on War Hill since the mid thirteenth century, but much of the present building dates from a period two hundred years later.¹⁹²

A large number of carved heads are associated with the church fabric, both external and internal, and a number appear to have been removed from the site during the Victorian restoration around 1870 and were subsequently dispersed and re-used as decorative stones in the neighbouring villages. Historian Tony Ward discovered how local builders who worked on the restoration took and sold a number of heads, several of which had hairstyles dating them to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. Ward traced the great grandson of one builder who confirmed the story and:

“...admitted he had sold or given away the Roman coins found in a hut foundation in a field to the south of the church.”¹⁹³

Nine heads from the church, seven of these medieval in date, were built into the interior wall of a house at the junction of Mottram Road and Mottram Old Road at nearby Stalybridge, and were subsequently removed in the late 1970s when the owner left the area, and have since been sold on through the antiques trade.¹⁹⁴ The heads which remain in situ today are preserved around the parapet of the south face of the church tower, the structure of which dates from the late fifteenth century. An engraving of the church made in 1794 shows three large stone heads on each face of the church tower, or at least on the south and east parapets which are visible.¹⁹⁵ The artist has depicted the heads as identical in appearance, but the surviving examples sold after the Victorian restoration show considerable individuality in their style. Of the heads on the south side of the tower, three prominent carvings survive. One is of crude Celtic-style but could simply be unfinished, while the other two have identical cheek markings. Ward suggests these could be survivors of the “look alike” heads shown in the 1794 engraving. He writes:

“...therefore the the “Celtic-style” head is either older from another source or a quickly

roughed-out replacement done at the time of the restoration of the church. The missing head, with cheek patches, was not among the nine heads now in private hands. ¹⁹⁶

Ward concludes the “block-shape” of the heads suggests they were intended, from the first, to be incorporated into the fabric of the building which dates them securely to the construction of the tower at the end of the fifteenth century. A line of small heads also present on the south tower all appear to have been cut to a roughly uniform pattern, which suggests they were carved during the restoration of the tower during the nineteenth century. The builders may however have been following a local tradition of protecting a church with stone heads which could have been present upon an earlier structure. Of the remaining heads, a group of archaic-style faces decorate the dripstones on either side of the windows on the north wall of the church, facing the bleak upper Longdendale valley. These may also date from the late fifteenth century, as money bequeathed by Sir Edmund Shaw to pay for the construction of the church tower was used to rebuild the outside walls with stone quarried from Tintwistle Knarr in the upper part of the valley.¹⁹⁷

Inside the church fabric “horned” faces are carved on the corbel ends of the West Arch in the North Aisle. The guidebook refers to these as “scare devil figureheads” presumably because of the use of curved ram’s horns to give the fleeting impression of a face.¹⁹⁸ Of the two surviving carvings one may be a later copy as it is more stylised, with the impression of horns missing. The older of the pair appears to display the “Celtic eyes” found on archaic heads, but these are formed by the spiralling horns. In style they follow the local tradition surrounding horned figures which is reflected in carvings like those from Mouselow and Melandra, discussed elsewhere.

OLD GLOSSOP. All Saints.

The parish church was subject to an extensive rebuilding programme in the 1830s which completely transformed the structure of an earlier medieval church which had become too small to cope with the increasing population as Glossop entered the Industrial Revolution. It is believed there was a parish church on the same site shortly after the Norman conquest, but few structural fragments remain and the guide states:

“...all that has materially survived from this period are the carved heads and a few other stones

*which now form part of the wall behind the new vicarage.*¹⁹⁹

Two heads survive in the vicarage wall where they were cemented during the 1950s by local builders who according to local information went to great pains to place them in a prominent position (see Chapter 6). Previously, they had performed a “guardian” function above a small ice house overlooking the Glossop Brook which runs just one hundred yards below the church.²⁰⁰ They are both carved to depict arms which are held aloft with hands pointing towards the flat brow of the head. The only discernible “Celtic features” are the stylised almond-shaped eyes and their prominent double eyelids. As Tony Ward concludes: “the carving style is rustic medieval rather than Celtic.”²⁰¹ The heads are carved upon blocks of stone which suggest they had a structural function in the early church and may have formed part of a lost memorial or even grave *stelae*. In this context the heads can be compared with the stylised faces carved upon a flat gravestone in the churchyard, dated by an inscription to the year 1721. The large slab features two archaic-style faces framed by angelic wings on the upper corners of the stone, possibly symbolising souls ascending to heaven. The stone marks the grave of one Martha Wagstaff of Glossop who died aged 56 years. In style, the cherub-like heads utilise features typical of the carved stone heads of a similar period which are associated with the guardianship of boundaries of which death was the most important threshold. Of equal interest are a pair of heads carved in the oldest part of the interior of the church, acting as springers to an arch in St Catherine’s Chapel, the oldest surviving architectural feature of the building. According to local tradition, the arch is built above a natural spring which rises in the church foundations.²⁰² This type of location would be appropriate for heads of the Celtic tradition, and both carvings display features which classify them as part of a continuing tradition.

A large number of corbel-type heads are known from locations in Old Glossop and surrounding settlements which appear to originate from the site of the parish church. Their dispersal for use in secondary contexts may date from the time of the renovation of the building in the mid-nineteenth century when a collection of carvings were sold or re-used in a process which is known to have occurred at neighbouring Mottram-in-Longdendale. One small head “from the old Post Office” recorded by Tony Ward is described as being “typical church work,”²⁰³ and two small heads built into the rear wall of a house on Fitzalan Street appear to have similar origins. A well-preserved head now cemented onto the garden wall of a house on Slatelands Road,

Glossop, has been dated by style to the thirteenth century and may originate from the site of the early medieval parish church.²⁰⁴ A stone head now incorporated into a garden boundary wall at Hallmeadow Close, Old Glossop, was one of four “found many years ago in a river bed” below the church according to an informant.²⁰⁵ While the other three heads are lost, the surviving example is carved upon an elongated sandstone block, which suggests it was intended to serve a structural purpose in a building, most probably associated with the early church. The features are typically “Celtic” in style, with oval eyes, drilled pupils, and a highly stylised brow which forms a complete feature with a wedge-shaped nose. The head has a slit for a mouth and a suggestion of stylised “rope-style” headdress or hair upon the brow, which has been subject to weathering at some point in its history.

TAXAL. St James.

A church is recorded serving this parish, on a slope above the River Goyt on the border between Derbyshire and Cheshire, in 1287. The present structure, excluding the tower, dates from 1889 and is the product of a number of restorations.²⁰⁶ Only the fine embattled tower remains from the earlier building and this may date from the late sixteenth century when the nave was rebuilt. Two carved stone heads are visible on the tower above the clock, framed by a piece of herringbone masonry which may be a structural feature of the early church. The heads are carved in the round with a curious cap or headdress which covers the forehead. The mouth is a deep gash and the eyes are oval and bulbous. These carvings probably date from the early medieval church.

WIRKSWORTH. St Mary the Virgin.

An early British church may once have existed at Wirksworth as the present church stands in the valley of Ecclesbourne from British *eccles*, a church.²⁰⁷ Local tradition suggests the area was christianised by the middle of the seventh century AD when the settlement became part of the kingdom of Mercia. The first church may have been an offshoot of the monastery at Repton, and the existence of a fine carved gravestone dating to the eighth century suggests the earliest church may date from this time. The current structure is the product of four distinctive periods of architecture, from the Early English period of the tower through to a massive Victorian period restoration which cleared much earlier material away. However, a large collection of carved

stones has survived from the earlier structure, and many of these were found beneath the pavement of the church during the restoration of 1870-74. The carvings, incorporated into the interior north wall, depict both human and animal heads, including those of a ram. A number are carved in Romanesque style and may date from the thirteenth century church. One example is a portrait-style head, the eyes carved with double-lids and with a neatly-trimmed beard sprouting from the chin, depicted by vertical lines. It is unclear whether all the carved stones now present in the church are from the original site or have been imported from outlying areas. Set into the west wall of the church is the carved figure of a lead-miner with his pick and kibble, found at the hamlet of Bonsall and moved to the church in 1876 and which is thought to date from the twelfth century.²⁰⁸ The carving is known as "T'Owd Man," a Peakland term which describes the spirits of old miners said to protect the underground workings.²⁰⁹ The exterior of the church also features examples of what the guide describes as "grotesque heads" on the northeast corner of the north choir aisle. These two heads are actually carved as a complete janiform sculpture with one head facing north and the other facing east, performing what the guide calls a "protective" function.

5.5. Summary and discussion of ecclesiastical heads in medieval art

"...The severed head is one of the most widespread and common motifs in the Gothic period. Grotesque heads are exceptionally numerous, as if the motif of the head with foliage coming from the mouth, or the human head mask embedded in greenery...The presence of so many heads in our churches - janiform, tricephalic, foliate and purely grotesque - over and above the straightforward portrait heads...would have the same ultimate significance, the protection of the dwelling from evil forces, and the embuing of it with everything lucky and desirable."

Anne Ross, *Grotesques and Gargoyles*.²¹⁰

The thirteen parish churches described in the gazetteer above provide examples of a range of head carvings in a wide variety of styles and dates. The sample is representative of heads found in church architecture in many other areas of the country, as C.J.P. Cave's 1948 survey of iconography carved upon medieval roof bosses alone concluded: "the subject of heads in an immense one."²¹¹ In the current case study, the earliest heads I have identified in an ecclesiastical context appear to date from the time of the Norman conquest when the first parish

churches are recorded in the Peak District. How many earlier Romano-Celtic examples have been subject to secondary re-use in later structures it is not possible to say, although early examples are known acting as both interior and exterior decorations at Hope, Old Glossop, Wirksworth and Bakewell. From the Norman period onward heads appear as part of the Romanesque art which spread to England from the Continent and frequently depicted grotesque human heads, a tradition which Henry and Zernecki suggests drew upon Roman and Celtic art and decoration.²¹² Grotesques and gargoyles, which are defined by their function as roof-edge waterspouts, became a feature of exterior church decoration in Gothic fashion which replaced the Romanesque style from the thirteenth century onwards, but continued to draw upon the motif of the human head. The fine examples found at High Bradfield, Hathersage, Hope and Mottram-in-Longdendale show an increasing stylisation far removed from the plain, archaic style of the earlier Celtic tradition but also display a level of continuity in terms of their apotropaic function and placement, protecting the weak spots of the building in their locations on roof edges, tower buttresses and window dripstones. Interpretation of the rich imagery and symbolism displayed by such a wide variety of carving style is difficult as there is no surviving documentary evidence which relate to this form of rustic carving which one nineteenth century writer referred to as "the slang of architecture."²¹³ Billingsley concludes that "personal response rather than meaning" is the clue to the interpretation of these images:

*"However they appear, and whatever their meaning, they take the onlooker into a surreal world, the world of the imagination, dream and supernature."*²¹⁴

Celtic-style carved heads, grotesques and gargoyles are just three examples of the manifestation of the human head within the architecture of the medieval church. The literature review in Chapter 1 described other stylised faces and heads of parallel date which have attracted much comment, the most common of which is the foliate head, which also have clear precursors in Celtic, Roman and Norse art. While the foliate head and related sculpture falls outside the scope of this study, it will prove useful to summarise the relationship between these carvings and the severed head motif as a whole.

5.5.1. *Foliate heads*

The foliate head has been described by Sheridan and Ross as “one of the most pagan and archaic concepts in the imagery of the christian church.”²¹⁵ The term has been defined as a face surrounded by or forming part of vegetation itself, a symbol which has precursors in early Celtic and Roman art. However, the term “foliate head” has been erroneously used to categorise a number of related forms, including the leaf-mask where the face or part of it is composed entirely of leaves, and the well-known “the Green Man,” a face from which vegetation emerges from the mouth, nose and other orifices. In an influential article published in *Folklore Journal* in 1939, Lady Raglan suggested the Green Man (a name she herself gave to these carvings) was a survival of a fertility god, and she drew parallels between the images carved in churches and the Jack-in-the-Green character who danced, disguised by foliage, in May Day processions.²¹⁶ She was inspired to coin the name after examining a fifteenth century corbel in St Jerome’s church at Llangwm in Monmouthshire. Recent research by Brandon Centerwall has suggested her inspired guess was correct, but her claims for the pagan origin of this particular variant of the foliate mask is not supported by good evidence.²¹⁷ In particular, claimed parallels between the medieval carvings and May Day folk customs are problematical in that the earliest variant of the Jack-in-the-Green documented originates in the mid-seventeenth century, five hundred years after the appearance of the foliate head in Romanesque art. This has led Roy Judge to conclude there was no evidence to suggest that the two were directly related as Lady Raglan had claimed.²¹⁸

The Green Man is an almost exclusively male image which appears to have originated in France in the twelfth century in Romanesque and Gothic art, and spread from there to England where it became popular in church architecture especially during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. One of the finest Romanesque examples is that from the Norman church at Kilpeck in Herefordshire. In England the most common foliage depicted in carvings is the oak, but other variants are known particularly at Southwell Minster in Nottinghamshire, where hawthorn, hemp, nettle, ivy, bryony, hop, maple, vine, buttercup, rose and mulberry are all present. The symbol has resurfaced many times in different contexts throughout history, and retained its popularity in modern times, most recently during the twentieth century revival of the image on pub signs, in novels, and latterly as a vibrant symbol of the twentieth century pagan movement,

many of whose followers worship the Green Man as a nature god.²¹⁹

In his original context the Green Man is half-man and half-tree; a disturbing, semi-demonic face which, like the other foliate variants, draws its power from the powerful motif of the severed human head. The carving is found hidden away in Christian churches, carved on roof bosses, capitals, rood screens and misericords. The oldest examples appear to date from the period after the Norman Conquest with a great upsurge in carving during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a date which coincides with the appearance of the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (see Chapter 3). The first in-depth study of the foliate head and Green Man was by Kathleen Basford, who said that her personal quest began when she saw a striking carving upon the apex of one of the tall windows at twelfth century Fountains Abbey in North Yorkshire (see Fig. 21).²²⁰ It was:

"...a head with vegetation coming from its mouth, coiled around its brow and twisted over its throat."

The stone attracts attention because of the lack of any other imagery or sculpture at Fountains Abbey. Basford saw the image of the Green Man not as a representative of May Day revels or Jack-in-the-Green, but as a symbol of human death and decay, "a thing of sorrow."²²¹ Her study showed that these heads are also found in French and Romanesque churches, and the ancient prototype for the carvings appeared to have been masks sprouting vegetation in Roman sites on Rhineland and Rome itself. Faces emerging from a leafy background also appear in Iron Age La Tene art and Jupiter columns of the Romano-British age.²²² Those found in medieval churches had a more "menacing" or "demonic" appearance than the more ancient examples, and one folklore authority notes:

*"...some of the better carved specimens have such a mysterious intensity of expression which makes it difficult to believe that they have no cult significance."*²²³

Fine examples of foliate heads can be found on the border of Derbyshire in Sherwood Forest itself at the fourteenth century chapter house at Southwell Minster, which was built on the site of a Roman villa. Here there are nine Green Men, each highly individual and depicting heads emerging, peeping out of, or merging with various sacred plants which are highly suggestive of

May Day and the Jack-in-the-Green.²²⁴ Similar foliate heads, with suggestions of the Jack-in-the-Green, can be found carved upon wooden roof bosses in many medieval English Cathedrals, including those at Exeter, Carlisle, Norwich and Canterbury. There are said to be 103 images of the Green Man in the fifteenth century Rosslyn Chapel near Edinburgh, which was founded by William Sinclair, an important member of the Knights Templar, a medieval order who were accused of the idol worship of skulls and preserved heads.²²⁵

Further examples of the Green Man in the border areas of the Peak District are found in Sheffield Cathedral where, in the medieval Lady Chapel, there is a intriguing suite of wooden carvings upon the wooden roof beams which are today embossed with gold paint. They date from the fifteenth century, and the centrepiece of the carvings is a female exhibitionist or Sheela-na-gig, which appears to sit upon tree roots which gush from the mouth of a head on the apex of the great stained-glass window. In total of seven carved bosses depicting the Green Man appear in the Lady Chapel, all arranged geometrically and surrounded by stylised foliage.²²⁶ Elsewhere, a highly stylised Green Man with foliage emerging from his mouth alongside a protruding tongue, appears among a series of carved wooden misericords, of medieval date, at Bakewell Parish Church. Two weathered stone carvings depicting heads with stylised foliage adorn the gates of medieval Dower House at Winster, of mid-eighteenth century date.

5.5.2. *Sheela-na-gigs*

These medieval carvings are found throughout the British Isles, but occur in particularly large numbers in medieval Ireland and, like the Green Man their origin lies in Romanesque church architecture, which spread to Britain from Europe during the twelfth century.²²⁷ They portray a hideous hag-like being, her features sometimes displaying a repulsive leer, with a naked body often in a crouched position whose most prominent feature is grossly exaggerated sexual organs pulled apart by the hands. Sheelas have become associated with the severed head motif for a number of reasons, not least the claim that they represent a pagan survival within the medieval church. Direct parallels with the stone heads of north Britain include the deliberate crude carving style, the exaggerated proportion in the size of the head, and their presumed protective or evil-averting function in positions high on walls, above doorways and overlooking boundaries. The term Sheela-na-gig has been related to the Irish *Sighe na gCioch* or "old hag of the paps," a

name first recorded in the nineteenth century.²²⁸ Traces of oral tradition surrounding the figures suggest that Sheela is drawn from the word *sile*, meaning hag or fairy woman, or *suil*, a term for the evil eye, which is appropriate for their evil-averting function suggested by their positioning in buildings such as castles and round-towers. The oldest known examples date from Norman times, and a recent survey recorded 140 Sheela-na-gigs in Britain and Ireland, eighty of which appear to be occupying their original locations.²²⁹ Although widely assumed to have been fertility symbols, they are found in contexts which suggest apotropaic functions, above doorways, windows and entrances to early medieval churches, abbeys and castles. Traditions collected during the nineteenth century suggest that the display of female genitalia was one archaic method of averting evil and also of facing down enemies, which would perform an effective method of providing protection for structures.²³⁰ Jorgen Anderson noted their common occurrence on the quoins, or large stones at the corner of buildings which tie together adjoining walls of Irish castles, and at other points of structural weakness.²³¹

Jerman and Weir in *Images of Lust* have ascribed a Romanesque origin for all carvings classified as Sheela-na-gigs, which they regard as just one variation of a variety of male and female sexual exhibitionist figures carved by pilgrims on the European pilgrim routes during the Middle Ages.²³² They argue that the vast majority of medieval sexual carvings were vehicles for Christian teachings on the evils of lust, temptation and the sins of the flesh, rather than depictions of pagan gods or spirits. However, the barbaric and primitive image of the Sheela-na-gig has led some writers to suggest earlier pagan Celtic precursors for the image in Ireland. Anne Ross has suggested that,

*"...in their earliest iconographic form they portray the territorial or war goddess in her hag-like aspect, with all the strongly sexual characteristics which accompany this guise in the tales."*²³³

Irish historian Etienne Rynne has argued that prototype Sheelas existed in the pagan Celtic Iron Age and he suggests that when the Romanesque form reached Ireland in the twelfth century AD "it found a prepared and fertile soil." He writes:

*"The Irish merely adapted their [traditional images] to the newly introduced motif and then forged ahead with renewed enthusiasm...producing more and better Sheelas than anyone else."*²³⁴

The great majority of Sheela-na-gigs in Ireland are found in those areas most influenced by Anglo-Norman culture, and can be dated securely to the period between 1300 and 1500. A smaller number of examples are known from Britain. In the Peak District, there is a Romanesque-style Sheela at St Margaret's Chapel, Alderwasley, and a fifteenth century wooden carving exists upon a roof-boss in Sheffield Cathedral, formerly the parish church. A highly stylised Sheela is carved upon a block of stone above the entrance to the stables at medieval Haddon Hall, near Bakewell. This carving is classed by Jerman and Weir as a modern copy,²³⁵ but its positioning is fully consistent with the evil-averting function shared with the severed head motif.

5.6. Summary

This chapter has examined the geographical context of the carved stone head motif both in the context of its regional variations within Britain and Ireland, and as a microcosm in the form of a case study of one region where all forms and variations of the symbol occur. In the Peak District stone heads are found in a wide variety of styles and contexts consistent with the occurrence of the motif elsewhere in Britain. A few examples are known which can be ascribed to the period of Roman occupation, which appears to have stimulated indigenous carving traditions in stone for the first time. The vast majority of carvings from the Peak can be attributed to the Christian medieval and modern periods, by which time the pagan significance of the severed head motif had been lost. These carvings are the product of a fluid period of revival and resurgence of the head symbol in the context of folk art. Belief and tradition which surround them are examined in the chapter which follows, but the evidence collected during this research suggests that they were carved specifically as protective amulets, both to deflect evil and bring luck to the home or the sacred place.

This research has demonstrated the importance of the symbol from its original occurrence in pagan Celtic and Roman times, through to its resurgence and slow evolution into the medieval period where a number of new variants appeared within a thoroughly Christian context. Although devoid of its earlier pagan religious context, the symbol of the head as a protective device continued in use as part of the architecture of the medieval church in a number of forms, including Romanesque art in the form of grotesques and foliate heads, which were carved

alongside the traditional archaic-style sculpture, but performed a broadly similar function.

The chapter which follows will examine the oral traditions associated with carved stone heads collected during fieldwork for the present research in the north of England.

- ¹Quoted in Gordon Staniforth, *The Peak: Past and present* (London: Constable, 1998), p.1.
- ²See appendix to Billingsley, 'Archaic head carving in West Yorkshire,' pp. 102-15.
- ³Sidney Jackson card index number 141; personal communication from the current owner of the head, Mrs Elizabeth Edge, of Pilsley, Derbyshire, 1993.
- ⁴Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 106.
- ⁵Coulston and Phillips, p. xvii.
- ⁶Petch, 'Celtic Stone Heads.'
- ⁷Sir Cyril Fox, *The Personality of Britain: Its influence on inhabitant and invader in prehistory* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1952), pp. 14-15.
- ⁸James and Rigby, p. 75.
- ⁹Billingsley, 'Archaic head carving in West Yorkshire,' pp.5-6.
- ¹⁰George Ewart Evans, *The Pattern under the Plough* (London: Faber, 1966), chapter 4.
- ¹¹See Billingsley, 'Archaic head carving in West Yorkshire,' pp. 40-54.
- ¹²Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p. 43.
- ¹³See Coe, 34-5; Nora Joliffe, 'Dea Brigantia,' *Archaeological Journal*, XCVII (1942), 36-61.
- ¹⁴Brian Ashmole, *Senhouse Roman Museum* (Carlisle: Colophon Press, 1991), p.12.
- ¹⁵Ibid.
- ¹⁶Rynne, 'Celtic stone idols in Ireland,' 80.
- ¹⁷Hickey, *Images of Stone*, p. 33.
- ¹⁸Ibid., pp. 33-36.
- ¹⁹Ibid., p. 24.
- ²⁰Ibid., p. 26.
- ²¹Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, p. 31; Sidney Jackson card index number 108. Item in private possession.
- ²²Hickey, p. 20.
- ²³Megaw, 'A Celtic cult head from Port Talbot,' 97.
- ²⁴Brewer, *Wales*, p. xvii.
- ²⁵See Green, 'Celtic Symbolism at Caerleon.'
- ²⁶Brewer, *Wales*, p. 37.
- ²⁷Ibid., p. xvii.
- ²⁸R.B. White, 'A Celtic head from Llangeinwen, Anglesey,' *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 128 (1979), 158.
- ²⁹Megaw, 'A further note on Celtic cult heads,' 193.
- ³⁰Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 127.
- ³¹Francis Lynch, *Prehistoric Anglesey* (Llangefni: Anglesey Antiquarian Society, 1991), pp. 280-82.
- ³²Ibid., p. 281.
- ³³See Hulbert-Powell, 19-48.
- ³⁴For a summary of the Bath material see I.A. Richmond and J.M.C. Toynbee, 'The Temple of Sulis-Minerva at Bath,' *Journal of Roman Studies*, XLV (1955), 97-105.
- ³⁵Cunliffe, *Bath and the rest of Wessex*, p. xiv.
- ³⁶See Knowsley, 'Bloody trail of headhunters carved in stone.'
- ³⁷Private communications from Chris Copson, 20 May, 1998.
- ³⁸Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 107.
- ³⁹Billingsley, 'Archaic head carvings in West Yorkshire,' p. 39.
- ⁴⁰Brears, p. 43.
- ⁴¹Jackson, 'Tricephalic Heads from Greetland,' 314.
- ⁴²Tufi, p. 20.
- ⁴³Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, July, 1994.

- ⁴⁴ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, p. 11; Sidney Jackson card index number 101. Owned by Amy Ambler of 6 Hoults Lane and known affectionately as "Clarence."
- ⁴⁵ Sidney Jackson card index number 61. Cartwright Hall Museum, Bradford.
- ⁴⁶ Jackson, 'Tricephalic Heads from Greetland,' 315.
- ⁴⁷ Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 23 August 1988.
- ⁴⁸ See Roland Smith, *First and Last: The Peak National Park in words and pictures* (Bakewell: Peak Park Planning Board, 1978).
- ⁴⁹ John Barnatt and Ken Smith, *The Peak District: Landscapes through time* (London: Batsford/English Heritage, 1997), p. 14.
- ⁵⁰ Fox, p.15.
- ⁵¹ See R. Geraint Gruffydd, 'In Search of Elmet,' *Studia Celtica*, 37 (1994), 63-79.
- ⁵² Kenneth Cameron, *The Place-names of Derbyshire* Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p.xxi.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. xxii.
- ⁵⁴ John Fyne, letter to *Peak and Pennine* magazine, December, 1997, unpublished.
- ⁵⁵ Barnatt and Smith, p. 18.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- ⁵⁸ Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 12 July, 1994.
- ⁵⁹ Barnatt and Smith, p. 53.
- ⁶⁰ Clive Hart, *The North Derbyshire Archaeological Survey* (Sheffield: North Derbyshire Archaeological Trust, 1981), p. 105.
- ⁶¹ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, pp. 68-71.
- ⁶² Martin Petch, *A list of Celtic heads and associated sculpture in Derbyshire* (unpublished manuscript, Manchester Museum, 1989).
- ⁶³ Peter Naylor, *Celtic Derbyshire* (Derby: J.H. Hall, 1983), p. 12.
- ⁶⁴ See Appendix 1, P102.
- ⁶⁵ Riddel, pp. 40-41.
- ⁶⁶ See Dodds, 'Two Celtic Heads from County Durham.'
- ⁶⁷ Hart, p. 105.
- ⁶⁸ See John J. Anderson, *Roman Derbyshire* (Derby: J.H.Hall, 1985), pp. 37-39.
- ⁶⁹ Cameron, *The Place-names of Derbyshire*, pp. 69-70.
- ⁷⁰ Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 3 September 1993.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷² Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 20 October 1993.
- ⁷³ See Appendix 1, P7. Sidney Jackson card index number 563. Manchester Museum collection accession reference 1974.45.
- ⁷⁴ See Ross, 'A pagan Celtic Shrine at Wall, Staffordshire.'
- ⁷⁵ Letter in Sidney Jackson correspondence file, dated 10 August 1972.
- ⁷⁶ Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 20 October 1993.
- ⁷⁷ Personal communication from John Taylor Broadbent, Old Glossop, 17 May 1996.
- ⁷⁸ See Appendix 1, p8. Sidney Jackson card index number 586. Manchester Museum collection accession number, 1974.46.
- ⁷⁹ Oral tradition collected from Pat Ellison, Hollingworth, 12 November 1993 and John Taylor Broadbent, Old Glossop, Derbyshire, 14 August, 1996.
- ⁸⁰ Petch, *Celtic Stone Sculptures*, p. 34.
- ⁸¹ Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 20 October 1993.
- ⁸² See Appendix 1, P10. Displayed at the Lindow Man exhibition, 1991.
- ⁸³ See Appendix 1, P6.

- ⁸⁴ See Appendix 1, P5. Glynis Reeve, *The Mouselow Stones* (unpublished manuscript, Derbyshire County Council Archaeology Unit, 1985).
- ⁸⁵ Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 20 August 1988.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid.
- ⁸⁷ Reeve, *The Mouselow Stones* .
- ⁸⁸ Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 20 August 1988.
- ⁸⁹ Reeve, *The Mouselow Stones*.
- ⁹⁰ Personal communication from Glynis Reeve, 24 August 1991.
- ⁹¹ Quoted in Reeve, *The Mouselow Stones* , p. 6.
- ⁹² Anthony Myers Ward, 'Placing the Stones,' *Glossop Reporter* , 29 April 1993.
- ⁹³ Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 20 August 1988.
- ⁹⁴ Bruton, pp. 34-37; Jones and Grealey, p. 16.
- ⁹⁵ Bruton, p. 36.
- ⁹⁶ Jones and Grealey, p. 16.
- ⁹⁷ See Appendix 1, P4. Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, accession number 1986.301.
- ⁹⁸ Fliegel, 93.
- ⁹⁹ Anderson, *Roman Derbyshire* , p. 35.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid.
- ¹⁰¹ Birmingham City Museum accession number 1974 A 45; *Art in the Roman West Midlands* , guide to an exhibition at Birmingham City Museum, April 1979, p. 2.
- ¹⁰² Quoted in personal communication from David Symons, Curator, Archaeological Department, Birmingham City Museum, 7 April 1998.
- ¹⁰³ See Appendix 1, P9. Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, accession number 1967.444.
- ¹⁰⁴ See Appendix 1, P1. Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, accession number 1976. Z 392; on extended loan from owner, Peter Harrison.
- ¹⁰⁵ Personal communication from Shelagh Lewis, June 1998.
- ¹⁰⁶ See Appendix 1, P14. Sidney Jackson card index number 141.
- ¹⁰⁷ Illustrated in Naylor, p. 12.
- ¹⁰⁸ See Appendix 1, P15. Sidney Jackson card index number 447.
- ¹⁰⁹ Letter in Sidney Jackson correspondence file dated 13 January 1971.
- ¹¹⁰ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* , p. 124; Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads* , p. 13; Sidney Jackson card index number 4. Anne Ross, 'Note on a stone head from Heaton Woods, Bradford, and a possible dating,' unpublished note in Sidney Jackson correspondence file, dated 20 July 1965.
- ¹¹¹ Sidney Jackson, 'Astonishing head finds at Todmorden,' *Archaeology Group Bulletin*, Vol. 12, 1 (1967), 14-17; Sidney Jackson card index numbers 76, 82, 83, 85.
- ¹¹² Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads* , p. 18; Sidney Jackson card index number 14.
- ¹¹³ See Appendix 1, P23. Personal communication from Andrew Myers, Derbyshire County Council Archaeology Unit, 29 November 1997; item owned by Moira Jean, 10 Mill Lane, Clay Cross, Derbyshire.
- ¹¹⁴ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads* , p.4.
- ¹¹⁵ See Appendix 1, P65. Personal communication from R. Weston, Brierley, Barnsley, 2 January 1997.
- ¹¹⁶ See Appendix 1, P55.
- ¹¹⁷ See Appendix 1, P91. Sidney Jackson card index number 424; oral tradition collected in Birchover, 29 and 30 June, 1991.
- ¹¹⁸ See Keys, 1988.
- ¹¹⁹ See Billingsley, 'Archaic head carving in West Yorkshire,' appendix 1.
- ¹²⁰ See Appendix 1, P66. Manchester Museum card index. Item in private possession, now in Chorlton, Greater Manchester.

- ¹²¹ Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, accession number 1966.963.
- ¹²² Saddleworth Museum, Uppermill, Greater Manchester.
- ¹²³ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, p. 5; Sidney Jackson card index number 360; Wakefield Museum.
- ¹²⁴ See Appendix 1, P40. Personal communication from Peter Naylor, Matlock, 22 September 1989.
- ¹²⁵ See Appendix 1, P21. Oral tradition collected from Ken Whiting, Chisworth, 6 February 1993.
- ¹²⁶ See Appendix 1, P84. Alan Garner, *The Guizer* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), cover illustration.
- ¹²⁷ Christopher Crowe, 'A note on a 'Celtic' head in the churchyard at Rostherne,' *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Archaeological Society*, 81 (1982), 131-32.
- ¹²⁸ See Appendix 1, P17. Sidney Jackson card index number 401.
- ¹²⁹ See Appendix 1, P59.
- ¹³⁰ See Appendix 1, P95. Petch, *A list of Celtic heads and associated sculpture in Derbyshire*.
- ¹³¹ See Appendix 1, P99. Sidney Jackson card index number 426.
- ¹³² Reeve, *The Mouselow Stones*.
- ¹³³ See Chapter 8, pp. 450-51.
- ¹³⁴ See Appendix 1, P58. Personal communication from J.E. Robinson, Stoney Middleton, 29 July 1990.
- ¹³⁵ Frank Rodgers, *Curiosities of the Peak District* (Asbourne: Moorland Publishing, 1979), p. 55; Sidney Jackson card index number 335.
- ¹³⁶ See Appendix 1, P38. Oral tradition collected in Great Rowsley, Derbyshire, 10 July 1997.
- ¹³⁷ See Appendix 1, P61. Petch, *A list of Celtic heads and associated sculpture in Derbyshire*.
- ¹³⁸ See Appendix 1, P11.
- ¹³⁹ See Appendix 1, P38. Oral tradition collected in Hope, Derbyshire, 4 April 1993.
- ¹⁴⁰ See Appendix 1, P35. Jerman and Weir, p. 116.
- ¹⁴¹ See Appendix 1, P60. Chris Fletcher, *Northern Earth Mysteries* 47 (1991), 28.
- ¹⁴² Personal communication from J.E. Robinson, 29 July 1990.
- ¹⁴³ See Appendix 1, P83. Oral tradition collected from John Taylor Broadbent, Old Glossop, Derbyshire, 24 August 1996.
- ¹⁴⁴ See Appendix 1, P98. Sidney Jackson card index numbers 596, 597 and 603.
- ¹⁴⁵ See Appendix 1, P89. Alan Garner, *The Voice that Thunders* (London: Harvill Press, 1997), p.77. The cover illustration depicts a carved stone head of archaic style on another part of the rock outcrop at Alderley Edge. The caption reads: "...rock carving on Alderley Edge, Cheshire, by Robert Garner, the author's great-great-grandfather, c. 1840."
- ¹⁴⁶ Oral tradition collected from Alan Garner, Holmes Chapel, Cheshire, April 1996.
- ¹⁴⁷ Garner, *The Voice that Thunders*, p. 77.
- ¹⁴⁸ See Appendix 1, P90. Personal communication from Gerry Smith, Bakewell, 10 May, 1993.
- ¹⁴⁹ See Appendix 1, P18. Information from Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, April 1993.
- ¹⁵⁰ See Appendix 1, P42. Manchester Museum card index.
- ¹⁵¹ See Appendix 1, P57. Personal communication from Andy Roberts, Brighouse, 10 December 1992.
- ¹⁵² See Appendix 1, P50. Sidney Jackson card index number 243; Brears, p.35.
- ¹⁵³ See Appendix 1, P16. Manchester Museum card index.
- ¹⁵⁴ See Appendix P97. Manchester Museum card index.
- ¹⁵⁵ See Appendix 1, P26. Personal communication from Richard Langley, Principal Curator, Derby Museum and Art Gallery, 8 January 1998.
- ¹⁵⁶ Ross, 'A Pagan Celtic Shrine at Wall, Staffordshire,' 4-5.
- ¹⁵⁷ Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 10 May 1995.

- ¹⁵⁸ See Appendix 1, P92, P103. Personal communication from Doug Pickford, Macclesfield, 17 September 1995.
- ¹⁵⁹ See Appendix 1, P55. Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 10 May 1995.
- ¹⁶⁰ Rodgers, p. 148.
- ¹⁶¹ See Clarke, *Strange South Yorkshire* , pp. 14-17.
- ¹⁶² Billingsley, *Stony Gaze* , p. 92.
- ¹⁶³ Guy Ragland Phillips, *Brigantia : A Mysteriography* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), pp. 153-56.
- ¹⁶⁴ Sidney Jackson, *Archaeology Group Bulletin* , Vol. 12, 3 (March 1967), 22-23.
- ¹⁶⁵ Phillips, *Brigantia* , p.154.
- ¹⁶⁶ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze* , pp. 92-95.
- ¹⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁶⁸ Christopher Crowe, 'Stone Heads: a survival of Celtic beliefs?' *Popular Archaeology* , Vol. 2, 2 (1981), 31-33.
- ¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 32.
- ¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 33.
- ¹⁷¹ See Appendix 1, P67. Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 10 May 1995.
- ¹⁷² Ibid.
- ¹⁷³ Crowe, 'Celtic Stone Heads,' 31.
- ¹⁷⁴ See Appendix 1, P68. Laurence Knighton, *Bakewell Church* (Derby: Derbyshire Countryside, 1985), p. 5.
- ¹⁷⁵ Crowe, 'Stone heads,' 32.
- ¹⁷⁶ Oral tradition collected in Bakewell, Derbyshire, 28 June 1994.
- ¹⁷⁷ See Appendix 1, P69.
- ¹⁷⁸ J. Clee Heathcote, *Birchover Church* (Bakewell: privately published pamphlet, 1950), p.2.
- ¹⁷⁹ See Appendix 1, P70, P71. *St James, Brassington* , undated church guide, p.2.
- ¹⁸⁰ Ibid.
- ¹⁸¹ See Appendix 1, P20.
- ¹⁸² See Appendix 1, P73.
- ¹⁸³ See Appendix 1, P72. Petch, *A list of Celtic heads and associated sculpture in Derbyshire* .
- ¹⁸⁴ Rex Bellamy, *The Peak District Companion* (Newton Abbot and London: David and Charles, 1981), pp. 128-29.
- ¹⁸⁵ Information collected during visit to the church, 2 August 1990.
- ¹⁸⁶ See Appendix 1, P76. John J. Anderson, *Churches of Derbyshire* (Derby: J.H. Hall, 1984), pp. 28-30.
- ¹⁸⁷ John C. Wilson, *Bradfield Parish Church* (Sheffield: privately published, 1969).
- ¹⁸⁸ See Appendix 1, P77. *The Parish Church of St Peter, Hope: A Short Guide* , undated church guide, p.2.
- ¹⁸⁹ See Appendix 1, P78. Sidney Jackson card index number 429.
- ¹⁹⁰ See Appendix 1, P80. Wayne Anthony, *Haunted Derbyshire* (Derby: Breedon Books, 1997), p.63.
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- ¹⁹⁴ Ross and Feachem, 'Head Baleful and Benign,' 343-45.
- ¹⁹⁵ Price, p.3.
- ¹⁹⁶ Ward, *ibid.*
- ¹⁹⁷ Price, p.22.
- ¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.23.

- ¹⁹⁹ Paul Bush, *Neath Ancient Moss* (Glossop: undated church guide), p.1.
- ²⁰⁰ See Appendix 1, P53.
- ²⁰¹ Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 10 May 1995.
- ²⁰² Personal communication from John Taylor Broadbent, 24 August 1996.
- ²⁰³ Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 10 May 1995.
- ²⁰⁴ Petch, *A list of Celtic heads and associated sculpture in Derbyshire* .
- ²⁰⁵ Personal communication from Jack Wrigley, Glossop, 3 March 1993; letter and photograph from Jack Wrigley in Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, archives, dated 4 August 1987.
- ²⁰⁶ See Appendix 1, P84. J.A.Davies, *A short history of the church of St James, parish of Taxal and Fernilee* (Hayfield: Crescent Press, 1972), pp. 3-5.
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- ²¹⁰ Sheridan and Ross, *Grotesques and Gargoyles*, p. 15.
- ²¹¹ Cave, p.61.
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- ²¹⁵ Sheridan and Ross, p.12.
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- ²¹⁸ Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green*.
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- ²²⁸ Stella Cherry, *A Guide to Sheela-na-Gigs* (Dublin: National Museum of Ireland, 1992), p.1.
- ²²⁹ Jack Roberts, *The Sheela-na-Gigs of Britain and Ireland: An illustrated guide* (Skibbereen, County Cork: Key Books Publishing, 1993), p.3-4.
- ²³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7; See also Andersen, *The Witch on the Wall* , pp. 22-31.
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- ²³⁴ Etienne Rynne, 'A Pagan Celtic Background for Sheela-na-Gigs?' in *Figures from the Past* , (ed.) by Etienne Rynne (Dublin: Glendale Press, 1987), p.199.
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