

Cults of the ‘Celts’

A new approach to the interpretation of the religion of Iron Age cultures

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Abstract

This contribution develops a new model for the description of the religions of Iron Age cultures, which had a Celtic language and cultural traditions. „Celtic“ is understood as a linguistic term, which is well defined. The model is based on the application of systems theory developed by the sociologist Niklas Luhmann. In his approach it is possible to combine results of sociology, religious studies, cultural history and ethnology with the features recorded by the sub-disciplines of Celtic Studies (Linguistics, Philology, Onomastics, Archaeology, Art History, Numismatics etc.). To account for possible regional and temporal variability in the religious beliefs of different Iron Age societies, the model is initially designed to describe only a small area in a limited period of time, based on the limits set by the evidence. Sources from other areas or periods can only be taken into account if methodically justified (compare the „Wiener Ansatz zur kulturwissenschaftlichen Keltologie“).

In a case study of central and eastern Gaul between c. 120 BC and AD 150, the beliefs concerning the after-life are examined. This allows to consider historical records, Gaulish inscriptions and onomastic evidence, and archaeological records. The assessment of these sources results in a relatively homogenous picture, which will have to be examined in greater detail in the future. As a first important result it is established that the historical records of beliefs of transmigration of souls amongst the Celts cannot be seen as a Pythagorean belief in metempsychosis. Rather, it seems as if it was thought that the ‘soul’ (anati-) would be reborn in a human body in the otherworld. The ‘discarded’ old body thus could become the object of disintegrative rites (dissection, deposition in refuse pits: Manching). The deceased, reborn in the otherworld, continues to play a role in social relations in this world as well as the otherworld. Via oracles (e.g. sleeping on the tomb of an ancestor, Tertullian, De anima 57) it is possible to establish a contact. Hints at a belief in the existence of ‘undead’, on the other hand, have not been found.

Zusammenfassung

Das Ziel dieses Beitrages ist es, ein neues Modell für die Beschreibung von Religionen eisenzeitlicher Kulturen zu entwickeln, die eine keltische Sprache und kulturelle Tradition besitzen. „Keltisch“ bedeutet in diesem Zusammenhang immer „keltisch-sprachig“, ein Begriff, der linguistisch gut definiert ist. Ausgangspunkt dieses Modells ist die Systemtheorie in der Form, die der Soziologe Niklas Luhmann entwickelt hat. In diesem Konzept ist es möglich, Erkenntnisse der Gesellschaftswissenschaften, der Religions- und Kulturgeschichte sowie der Ethnologie mit den Befunden der keltologischen Einzeldisziplinen zu verbinden (Linguistik, Philologie, Onomastik, Archäologie, Kunstgeschichte, Numismatik usw.). Um der Vielfalt regionaler und zeitlicher Sonderentwicklungen Rechnung zu tragen, soll das Modell zunächst tendentiell ‚kleine‘ Räume während einer ‚kurzen‘ Zeit beschreiben, wobei das Material mehr oder weniger enge Grenzen setzt. Quellen, die nicht diesem Horizont angehören, dürfen nur in methodisch begründeten Fällen herangezogen werden (vgl. den „Wiener Ansatz zur kulturwissenschaftlichen Keltologie“).

In einem ersten konkreten Beispiel werden die Jenseitsvorstellungen in Zentral- und Ostgallien in der Zeit zwischen ca. 120 v. Chr. und ca. 150 n. Chr. untersucht. Dieser Rahmen gestattet es, literarische Zeugnisse antiker Schriftsteller, gallische Inschriften bzw. Namenmaterial und archäologische Befunde einzubeziehen. Die Auswertung ergibt ein ziemlich homogenes Bild, das freilich durch weitere Studien abgerundet werden muss. Als ein wesentliches Ergebnis darf vielleicht schon jetzt herausgestellt werden, dass die antiken Berichte einer „Seelenwanderung“ bei den Kelten nicht im Sinne pythagoräischer Vorstellungen gewertet werden dürfen. Es hat eher den Anschein, dass angenommen wurde, die ‚Seele‘ (anati-) würde im Jenseits in einem neuen, menschlichen Körper wiedergeboren. Der ‚abgelegte‘ alte Körper kann so zum Objekt von Desintegrationsriten gemacht werden (Zergliederung, Deponie in Abfallgruben: Manching). Der Wiedergeborene bleibt Bestandteil sozialer Bindungen zum Diesseits und innerhalb des Jenseits. Durch Traumorakel (Schlaf auf dem Grabhügel, Tertullian, *De anima* 57) kann beispielsweise ein Kontakt hergestellt werden. Anzeichen für die Vorstellung von „Untoten“ sind dagegen nicht zu finden.

0.

The main goal of this paper is a new descriptive model of the religion of Iron Age cultures with Celtic language and cultural heritage. ‘Celt(ic)’ will be used here in the sense of ‘Celtic-speaking’, which is a linguistically well defined term. The approach will make use of systems theory, in the form that has been developed in social sciences by Talcott Parsons and, in particular, by Niklas Luhmann (1977; †2000). In part one, I shall give a brief overview of previous approaches to prehistoric religions, part two will deal with some basic principles of Luhmann’s theory, and part three is dedicated to a first case study: the concepts of the hereafter in central and eastern Gaul from c. 120 BC to c. AD 150. Part four will sum up some results of this study.

1.

Previously, two analogical approaches have been pursued. Firstly, attempts were made to draw conclusions from the ‘ethnic’ or cultural designation. ‘Celts’ were usually equated with La Tène assemblages, without discussing the problem of identifying material and mental culture. A high degree of homogeneity between individual ‘Celtic’ cultures and a cultural continuity over long periods of time have been assumed without further substantiation. An extreme case was Olmsted’s (1976) attempt to interpret the representations on the Gundestrup cauldron by means of the Old Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (The cattle raid of Cooley). Approaches like this evoked, quite conceivably, a counter-movement with slogans like “Irish heroic tales: wrong!” (Cain, Rieckhoff 2001). The last decade produced a

large amount of deconstructions that try to withdraw a common address of cultures as ‘Celtic’ (e.g. Collis 2003; Jones 2001; James 1999; cf. Brunaux 1996; 2000). As a consequence of the *Celticity* debate (Sims-Williams 1998), the reliability of intercultural comparison was queried in Celtic philology as well (e.g. Maier 2001; Carney, Ó Corráin). These doubts also refer to *Interpretatio Romana* (Webster 1995a/b; Spickermann 2003).

Secondly, ethnographic comparisons of a more general kind have been made. Sophisticated examples are Kull (1997) and Dietler (2001). Although broader ethnic conclusions have a great potential, they are no less problematic because the range of explanations is very wide (Eggert 2001: 324). The analogies quoted are often arbitrary, or they peter out in a vague symbolism (Hodder 1982). Theoretical approaches to religion are amply reflected in Anglo-American research (e.g. Insoll 2004; Whitley, Keyser 2003; Gibson, Simpson 1998; Renfrew, Zubrow 1994; Merrifield 1988), but only recently more extensively in German-speaking countries (Biehl 2001; Müller 2002, Gladigow 1984; Colpe 1970).

2.

As Eggert has shown, a putative ‘theory free’ interpretation is, in the end, nothing but an explanation that obscures its theoretical premises. An implicit interpretation draws as much on analogical conclusions as explicit theories. No archaeology can dispense with the reflection about methodical principles and models of interpretation – unless it withdraws to Kossinna’s dictum of pure antiquarianism.

I should like to plead for a combined approach of Celtic studies and cultural history, starting from the assumption that we are dealing with Iron Age *societies*. As a basis, I choose systems theory as a means of description. An ecological variant of this has already been applied in processual archaeology (Clarke 1968), but in view of human activities, a theory of social systems is more advisable. An appropriate approach has been developed by N. Luhmann (1968–1998) on the basis of T. Parsons. In Luhmann’s concept, cognitions from the history of religion and other humanities have already been taken into account. This comprises facts from ethnology as well.

In principle, *all* issues of a society have to be considered, whether they are reflected in the material culture

or not. In the late Iron Age in particular, further records can be adduced, such as literary, linguistic, and onomastic evidence (self-reference) and classical reports (external reference). A salient feature of all these sources is that they are approximately contemporary. They can be assembled because they all refer to the same Iron Age society. A comparison over time and space, however, demands further proof because continuity and homogeneity cannot be taken for granted. This use of sources broadly corresponds to the “Vienna model in cultural Celtic studies” (Karl 2004a/b).

3.1

The suggested model will be presented here in outline and, above all, it will be illustrated by a case study. The subject will be the concepts of the hereafter in central and eastern Gaul in the centuries around the beginning of our era (c. 120 BC–c. AD 150). In the beginning, this limitation is deliberately a bit fuzzy in order to dispose of a large number of different sources. The scope can be narrowed and refined at a later stage of research. Concepts of the hereafter can easily be described within the theoretical framework. And archaeology is obviously in lack of an interpretation here, more than in the case of burial rites and mortuary practices. Concretely, the following questions have to be asked: Is it possible to draw conclusions from burial customs, as reflected in findings, to the concepts of the hereafter? Specifically, has the tomb furnishing to be interpreted as a hint at a life *post mortem*, or as the self-representation of the burying group, or as an expression of the esteem towards the buried individual, or are there different reasons?

First of all, I shall give some basics of the systems theory according to Luhmann. A system is an organised complex which produces a structure of its own. ‘Complex’ means that not everything which is possible in a system can be realised at once. Systems organise themselves and produce their own elements (*autopoiesis*). An important feature of a system is its boundary, which divides it from its environment. The difference to the environment is essential for a system (*System/Umwelt-Differenz*). Its basic elements are operations (communications), which are restricted to the interior: the system is closed with regard to operations. Information and resources, however, pass the system boundary in both directions: the system is open to the environment.

Besides operations, there is a second kind of actions within a system: observations. In observing, the difference between system and environment is copied into the system and is used as a scheme for observation and reflexion (re-entry, fig. 1). Communication is selective, i.e. there is always a choice between possibilities. The 'sender' decides what (s)he wishes to perceive as information, and what (s)he wants to communicate. The 'receiver' has the choice what (s)he acknowledges as an impartation. Thus communication is contingent, it does not have a predetermined order of events. In view of the wide range of selections, media play a significant role. They serve to channel expectations and to reduce contingency. The most important medium is language and its forms of expression. Further media are scripts and symbols, not only iconography, but also money and values such as truth, love etc. The universal medium for social and psychic systems is meaning (*Sinn*). It results from observation and is directed by codes, e.g. values and expectations (rules, aesthetic judgements etc.).

Religion is a functional subsystem of society. The discussion in the history of religion has shown that religion can be defined only from its interior, not from outside. That means, each religion must be viewed according to its own concepts and in its own terminology. Religion is particularly relevant for the construction of meaning, it is in itself a form of meaning. The fundamental difference between system and environment corresponds to the distinction between immanence and transcendence in religion. The latter need not imply something metaphysic. Tribal societies mark the difference by dividing (classifying) the visible reality. The distinction is only palpable by marking the boundary, e.g. divisions of time and space. Moreover, there is a need for mediation (e.g. temples, priests, rituals, fig. 2). "Markings as well as mediations serve to make the unfamiliar transcendental world appear within the familiar world" (Luhmann 2000: 83). With these basics in mind, a first concrete topic can be tackled.

3.2

One of the advantages of systems theory is that we can proceed from universal assumptions. We only need to ask *how* the distinction between immanence and transcendence was determined in Celtic religion(s), not *whether* it existed at all. Since the self-conception of re-

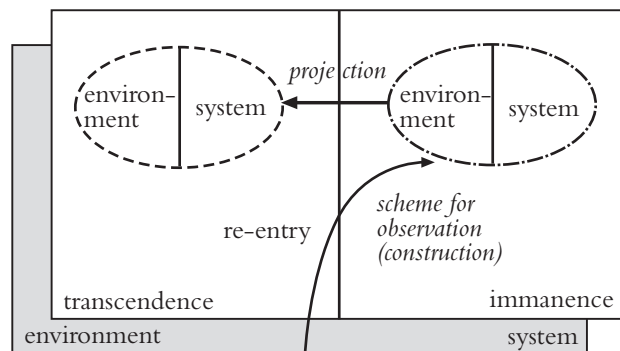


Fig. 1:
Re-entry of the system/environment-difference as a scheme for observation and reflexion ("thinking the system")

ligion is essential, the first question must be what basic terms and concepts existed in Gaulish. I start with markings of the boundary. We often find the word *sakros* 'consecrated, cursed', e.g. in *Sacro-viros* and *Sacro-bena* 'holy' man/ woman'. *Sakros* refers to the human act of marking the boundary (dedicating, sanctifying), like Latin *sacer*. Two further terms, *noibos* and *caddos* 'holy, saint', possibly denote an impetuous, flashing manifestation (Delamarre 2003: 96. 236). Two concrete markings are the sanctuary, *nemeton*, and the tomb, for which we do not have an unequivocal term (*loga?*). *Nemeton* seems to mean 'assignment' (Indo-European **nem-* 'assign, apportion') and refers to a demarcated area, originally a sacred grove. This already provides a link to an archaeological phenomenon, the enclosure by means of ditches, ramparts, walls, and fences.

As to the concept of transcendence, we see from cultic practices (e.g. Bourgeois 1992) and many names of deities that their abode was thought to be in nature,

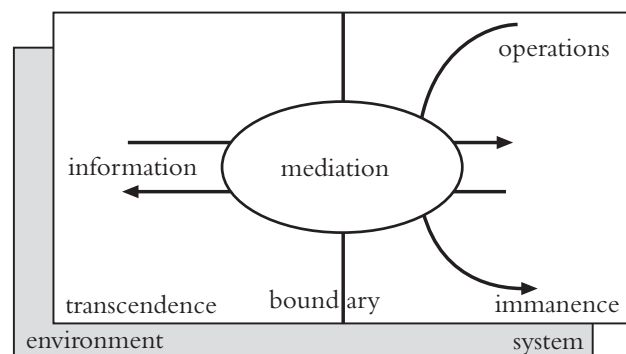


Fig. 2:
The basic elements of the religious subsystem

particularly on hills and in waters: *Tarvos Trigaranus* ‘the bull with the three cranes’, *Arduina* ‘Ardennes’, *Sequana* ‘Seine’ (Maier 2001: 81–83). The abode was further thought to be in the netherworld. The inscriptions from Chamalières and Larzac mention *brixtia anderon* ‘the magic of the underworld beings’ (*anderi*, cognate to Latin *inferi*); *dubnos/ dumnos*, too, seems to have an underworld reference. The third abode was thought to be heaven (Maier 2001: 57f. 71f.). Silius Italicus (*Punica* 3.340–343) mentions the belief that warriors who were killed in action were brought to heaven and to the supernatural beings (*caelo ... superisque referri*). This may also have a bearing on the exposition of corpses in the Belgic sanctuaries (Brunaux 1995). We also know of the divinities *Taranus/-is* ‘thunderer’ and *Caelestis Nemesis* (Lusitania), *Diana Nemesis* (Cologne), which may contain *nemos* ‘sky, heaven’ (Delamarre 2003: 234f.). Furthermore, *albios* ‘(the) white, clear (one)’ has been suggested to refer to heaven (cf. Welsh *elfydd*, Meid 1991: 46–50). Thus, on the one hand, we have terms for transcendence which denote the realms above and below the earth. On the other hand, we come across designations which simultaneously reflect the environment of the system. The most general pair of terms seems to be *nitios* ‘own’ – *allos* ‘other, foreign’ (*allo-brog* ‘foreigner’, Welsh *all-fro*). A connected concept of the savage seems to be present in *all-at-os*, ‘alien, wild?’ (cf. Irish *allaid*, Ogam *Alatto*–). Environmental designations even seem to prevail. This surely adds to the impression of a spatial limitation of Celtic gods. However, there are undoubtedly deities with a supra-regional distribution (e.g. *Belenos*, *Lugus*, *Matres*).

Once an impression of the concepts of transcendence has evolved, we can proceed a step farther to the supposed (constructed) human *post mortem* existence. In theory, this is a re-entry of the known into the unknown. Features of this world are transferred to the other world. The carrier of the personality after death appears to be the ‘soul’. This idea is quite familiar to us, but not self-evident as Bremmer (2002) has recently confirmed. In the sources, we find the term *anati* ‘soul’ (cf. Welsh *enaid*). It is recorded onomastically, in *Anati-lii*, (*Co*-)*su-anat-es* ‘the ones having a good soul (great vigour?)’. The *Plomb du Larzac* (line 1b12) has *anatia nepi* ‘soul(s) of somebody’. The word *ana-ti* is derived from Common Celtic **ana-* ‘breathe, rest’ (Schumacher 2004: 196f.), just like Insular Celtic **ana-*

tlo-, **ana-mon-* (Remmer 2002/03), cf. Latin *anima*. Thus etymology points to the common derivation of the soul from breath. In principle, it was probably a soul of vitality, and this is still the case in late healing charms (e.g. Poitiers: CIL 13.10026.86, 5.c.?, in Latin). Besides this, it may have taken the role of an external soul, which is released after death (fig. 3).

Concepts of the soul are also mentioned by Latin and Greek authors. Hints at a kind of psychic doctrine may already have been included in Pseudo-Aristotle’s *Magikós* of c. 200 BC. But we reach safe ground only with Posidonius’s book 23 (c. 85/ 60 BC). It refers to the state of affairs in the late second century BC in southern Gaul. Posidonius is indirectly handed down by Caesar (50 BC), Diodorus (40 BC), and Timagenes (20 BC, quoted in Ammianus Marcellinus, 4th c. AD). In our era, we have the accounts of Strabo (AD 20), Valerius Maximus (AD 20), Pomponius Mela (AD 44), Lucanus (AD 60/70), and the late commentaries on Lucanus. Most of these authors refer to entire Gaul or even beyond, Valerius includes Celtiberi and Cimbri as well. From this rich supply of information, we can discern the following common characteristics:

1. The human soul is immortal (all authors).
2. After death, the soul arrives at the netherworld and remains there for an indefinite space of time (Diodorus, Valerius, Mela, Lucanus and commentaries).
3. After this time, the soul is reborn in human shape (Caesar, Diodorus, Lucanus).
4. The rebirth depends on the previous behaviour on earth (bravery: Caesar, Valerius, Mela, Lucanus).

An interesting feature is that a connection to Pythagoras is made several times. Diodorus and Valerius do this explicitly, Caesar indirectly. But it is not found in Strabo and, more conspicuously, in Mela and Lucanus. The concept of rebirth or the transmigration of souls among the ancient Celts is now unanimously rejected among Celtic scholars, but it seems to come into fashion just again in prehistoric archaeology (Perrin 2002). It should be emphasised, however, that classical authors either adduce metempsychosis as an interpretation from their own culture, or as a catchword in order to give their readers a rough impression. A comparison with the Greek doctrine of transmigration shows clearly that Celtic concepts deviate from the Greek in the most pivotal motifs. The idea which is described in the classical texts is obviously not transmigration of souls in

the Greek sense of the term. But it cannot be called a shape-shifting (metamorphosis), either (Zander 1999: 158).

It looks rather like a quite corporeally conceived existence in the netherworld. Among the Celts, an idea of reincorporation in the otherworld seems to have been accepted. The easy change between different burial practices (inhumation, cremation, exposition) precludes a preservation of the 'old' body. It must involve the reincorporation into a 'new' body. Lucanus is most explicit in this regard (*Bellum Civile* 1.454–458):

According to your [the druids'] authority, the shadows do not strive for the silent abodes of the underworld and for the pale realm of the deep sovereign of the dead: The same spirit directs the limbs in a different region (orbe alio). If you sing an approved truth, death is the centre of a long life.

The 'different region' is, according to Lucanus's use of the word *orbis*, an area on the earth's surface (*Thesaurus linguae Latinae* 9.2.918). This is, in part, already an answer to the question about the abode of the dead. Moreover, in the sixth century Procopius (*Gothic Wars* 8.20.48–57) mentions an island in the sea. A similar idea is the Irish island of the dead, *Tech nDuinn*, the 'house of Donn' (9th century).

To sum up: The supposed *post mortem* existence is a 'full' corporeal existence. A 'new' body is equipped with the deceased's vital soul. The 'old' body has become an empty cocoon, which can be dismembered and annihilated. A drastic outcome of this concept seems to be the interment of bones in rubbish pits or road groundings in Manching in late La Tène.

A sojourn in the underworld is probably thought of as an intermediary stage between the incarnations. This may be linked to the *rite de passage* of burial practises. After the transfer, the dead is reintegrated into social relations (cf. Baudy 1980). Valerius Maximus (2.6.10–11) clearly indicates the human bonds persisting:

If you leave their [the Massiliots'] city walls behind you, you come across that old custom of the Gauls, who are recorded to be used to lend money, which would be returned to them among the people in the netherworld.

3.3

From the foregoing, some basic information about the concepts of the netherworld have become clear. From this, we can answer the initial question: Indeed, grave goods may be seen as a reflex of the concepts of the

otherworld. The supposed corporeal afterlife is consistent with burial offerings. People certainly desired to maintain their social status (and wealth) after death and to secure the food supply at least for the transitional period. Additional functions of the furnishings, representative as well as commemorative, remain unaffected of this. All three aspects mingle to some extent.

It is even possible to proceed some steps farther. In prehistoric archaeology, it is accepted that the rich grave furnishings of the late Hallstatt period are virtually reduced to poverty in the course of the La Tène period. This assumption, which is well in keeping with a superficial inspection of the findings, betrayed into criticising Caesar, who says that the Gauls' burials are splendid and expensive (*Bellum Gallicum* 6.19.4, cf. Clemency, Metzler *et al.* 1991). But splendour and expenses need not be reflected in the archaeological record. And there is a convincing testimony of this: the Lingon testament, the copy of a Roman inscription of the second century in a manuscript of the tenth century (Le Bohec 1991). It contains the regulation of a Lingon aristocrat with regard to his tomb and burial. In front of a tomb monument in Roman style, there is an exedra, but the enclosure also contains tomb gardens (*pomaria*) in La Tène tradition and a basin (*lacus*). The instructions for the tomb furnishing follow native concepts for the most part as well.

Moreover, I wish that all my equipment, which I acquired for hunting and fowling, shall be incinerated together with me, with the javelins, swords, and daggers, nets, meshes, and traps, canes, tents, and scarers, wash basins, portable beds, and arm chair, and all means and tools for this activity, as well as the reed boat, and the damask-like and lined clothes, whatever I shall leave behind.

This is fully in accordance with Caesar's statement, "they throw everything into the fire, that was, in their opinion, dear to the living" (similarly, Pomponius Mela 3.[3.]19). Two features change in the course of time: Firstly, the majority of grave goods are eliminated from the archaeological record, due to the changeover from inhumation to cremation – it would be no more than metal utensils and ceramics that remain of the rich Lingon furnishing. Secondly, there is a decrease of objects which are specifically produced for the tomb. As is well known, the development runs from special designs and prepared utensils in the Hallstatt period (non-functional golden snake fibulas, gold foil coverings in Hochdorf)

via ‘symbolic’ objects in the middle La Tène period (harness instead of complete chariot, e.g. in Wederath 1613) to unprepared everyday commodities in late La Tène. This is certainly a development, however, not from ‘rich’ to ‘poor’, but from ‘new’ to ‘used’ items. There are many possible reasons for this change, they need not be of a religious kind – to the contrary, texts imply suitable and favourite objects.

A popular interpretation in prehistory is the concept of the ‘undead’. This is variously used as an explanation for stone circles, stone packages, and amulets in graves. According to systems theory, the dead is resocialised in the otherworld, which implies a re-entry of system characteristics. If the prerequisites of resocialising are lacking, however, it can be assumed that the reintegration fails and the deceased becomes an ‘undead’; e.g., if he does not receive a proper burial ritual, he was thought to claim his right or to take revenge as an ‘undead’. But stone packages as part of a regular burial or amulets in typical sets of grave goods can hardly be explained this way. From a comparative point of view, ‘undead’ are most commonly associated with corpses that have been treated in an unusual way, particularly mutilated (cf. *Acy Romance*, Lambot 1998, but not in the context of ‘undead’). Premature death, especially of women in childbed, is said to be a reason for a prolonged *rite de passage*. But as to individual cases, an interpretation will always be difficult (cf. Johnston 1999).

Admittedly, an ‘interaction’ between the living and the dead is maintained in many ways different from the concept of ‘undead’. Both parties are supposed to communicate by means of letters (Pomponius Mela),

conjurations (lead tablets), and dream oracles on *tumuli* (Tertullian, *De Anima* 57; Maier 2001: 128–30; fig. 3). The initiative, however, is usually taken by the living. With its constructions of meaning, the Gaulish religion succeeded not only in reducing effectively the uncertainty of the ‘transcendence’, but even in providing the image of a desirable afterlife. The religious encoding seems to have been so convincing that the defiance of death as a result of this concept was felt by foreigners to be threatening.

Although we do not have clear indications of the concept of ‘undead’, in Gaulish mythology we do know of a kind of malicious demons. In the fifth century, St Augustine (*De civitate Dei* 15.23) reports of the *dusii* (**dhus-yo-*, Latin *Furia*, Greek *thuía*), which are fiends in the appearance of fauns. They are said to do harm and to harass women, but there is no hint at their being spirits of deceased. The faun- and satyr-like beings who appear on the sterling cutlery of the Thetford Treasure (Johns, Potter 1983) with Celtic names do not have a relation to the dead, either. *Ausekos* ‘long-ear’ and *Medugenos* ‘mead-born’ indicate the bizarre appearance of the fauns and the ecstatic context of the rural ceremonies near the Roman villa.

Furthermore, the problem remains whether the realm of the dead and the abode of the gods were thought to be identical or different. An association of both is suggested by the motif of a divine or heroic origin of mankind. Caesar confirms this when he says that all Gauls pride themselves on being descendants of Dis Pater. A similar type of god seems to be present in Ogmios and the Irish Donn (Zeidler 2004: 21f.).

4.

To sum up: how has our understanding of Celtic religion and the interpretation of Iron Age findings been improved? And what can systems theory contribute to these studies?

Like each theory, it helps to establish a classification and correlation of empirical facts. Thus it facilitates the comparison and contextualising of data. And the theory allows the recourse to more general cognitions as well: it puts universalities at our disposal. Luhmann’s theory of social systems has not yet been applied in archaeology. Hitherto, approaches prevailed that were oriented to ecology, as a result of White’s concept of culture in processual archaeology. Contrary to Bern-

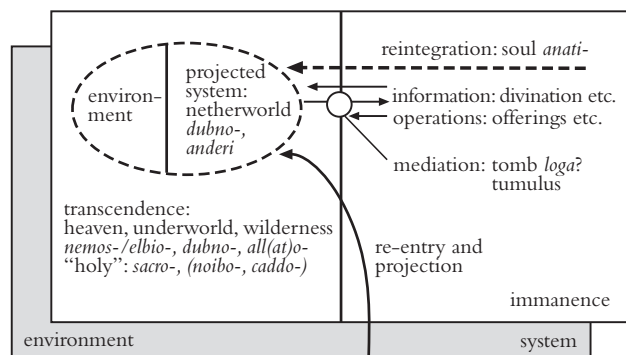


Fig. 3: The netherworld as a re-entry of the system projected into the transcendence

beck's (1997: 122 f.) objections it should be noted that, in Luhmann's model, it is possible to describe 'conflict' and 'evolution' in the framework of systems theory.

A combined approach of cultural studies is encouraged by the interdisciplinary character of systems theory. It has enriched our insight into Celtic concepts of the hereafter. In particular, it has led to the in-group terminology, which is so important for the study of religion. And future contributions have to account not only for the complexity and contextuality of religions, but also for the coexistence of different religions (Gladigow 2002), e.g. 'regional' or 'popular' against 'official/state' religion.

As to the interpretation of a religious significance of Iron Age findings, it is obvious that archaeology depends on external sources. A religious assessment of phenomena can only be made by members of the respective culture. Although repetitive ceremonies and their reflexes in material culture may point to religious activities, such statements are based on probability assumptions. As to the late prehistoric period, the state of affairs is much more favourable. Written sources open the possibility to revise and modify. But in spite of this, archaeology provides an indispensable contribution to the synthesis of a history of Celtic religion.

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