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Variety of Celtic Magical Texts

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to present the examples of Celtic magical texts in a cultural perspective and to show what they were intended for or what they reflect. Among them are lead tablets from Chamalières, Larzac and Lezoux in France, also from Bath in England, the texts from *The Book of Invasions*, as well as from *The Colloquy of the two Sages*, but also the famous calendar of Coligny, of which bronze elements were found in the French vineyard of Coliny. The last one is a special case and can be considered as a magical text under some conditions.

KEY WORDS

calendar, druids, literature, magic, *ogham*, poets, sacred spring, tablet

As John T. Koch noticed: “Though the ancient Celtic languages offer little in the way of «literature», as the term is usually understood,”¹ magical texts offer even less. However, we have Celtic texts that can be classified as magical. On the one hand, there have been inscriptions relevant to pagan cult practices uncovered, mostly on lead tablets, on the other hand – some of the oldest preserved Irish texts illuminating survivals of pagan beliefs, including magic.

The purpose of this article is to present the examples of Celtic magical texts in a cultural perspective and to show what they were intended for or

¹ *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. J. T. Koch in collaboration with J. Carey, Aberystwyth 2003, p. 1.

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what they reflect. Among them are lead tablets from Chamalières, Larzac and Lezoux in France, also from Bath in England, the texts from *The Book of Invasions*, as well as from *The Colloquy of the two Sages*, but also the famous calendar of Coligny, of which bronze elements were found in the French vineyard of Coligny. The last one is a special case and can be considered as a magical text under some conditions.

MAGIC AND MAGICIANS

Magic (in English) is a word that is written and sounds similarly in most European languages, for instance: German *Magie*, French *magie*, Spanish *magia*, Polish *magia*, Russian *магия*. The definitions of the word *magic* in European languages may vary slightly, there might not be an agreed detailed content of belief or behaviour, but there is a general consensus about the content, and at the core they mean the same. In the Cambridge Dictionary² the term *magic*, denoted as “imaginary power,” is understood as “the use of special powers to make things happen which would usually be impossible.” In the German Duden Dictionary³ the term *Magie* is explained as “secret art that tries to subject supernatural forces.”⁴ In the Polish Dictionary of Foreign Words⁵ under the term *magia* we read: “alleged power over supernatural forces, exercised with help of spells and other actions.” For John Middleton, magical actions are the acts by which people who perform them “intend to bring about certain events or conditions, whether in nature or among people, that they hold to be the consequences of these acts.” These acts usually comprise manipulation of objects and recitation of verbal formulas or spells. The definitions of magic in the European context may have no precise equivalent elsewhere. As Middleton noticed: “If Western terms and assumptions are used, the cause and effect relationship between the act and consequence is mystical, not scientifically validated.”⁶ It is believed that not everyone in a society may perform magic. It may be done only by a special person – a magician, who involves in his or her actions a variety of special objects.

² *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, ed. P. Procter, Cambridge 1995, p. 852.

³ *Duden. Deutsches Universalwörterbuch*, ed. G. Drosdowski, Mannheim 1989, p. 978.

⁴ All translations into English, if not stated otherwise, are made by the author of this article.

⁵ W. Kopaliński, *Słownik wyrazów obcych i zwrotów obcojęzycznych*, Warszawa 1994, p. 311.

⁶ J. Middleton, *Magic*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. L. Jones, Vol. 8, New York 2005, p. 5562.

These may be bundles, spells, incantations or potions, “which are thought to bring about, in some mysterious way, real changes in a person, object, or event.”⁷ On the one hand we have magical means that are said to be extra-natural or supernatural, and on the other hand – the objectives of magical intervention which are natural.

Among most of the Celtic tribes, the above mentioned magicians were called Druids, who were also described as “highly-honoured philosophers and theologians” (by Diodorus Siculus, who wrote c. 60–c. 30 BC). They were compared by ancient writers with the Persian Magi, Babylonian Chaldeans and Indian Gymnosophists and Brahmins. The word *druid* is actually a plural form of *druí* (in Old-Irish *druí*). There are many propositions for the meaning of the name ‘druid,’ but I am inclined to agree with the one that presents a druid as ‘the wisest master of knowledge,’ who has mystical power. Optionally it can be understood as a ‘very wise,’ ‘very knowledgeable’ person. This meaning comes from *uid* – ‘the one who knows,’ and *dru-* – an intensifying prefix.⁸ There was also another group of practitioners of mystical knowledge, among the Gauls called *vātis/vātes*, and in early Irish literature – *faithi* (later *filid* – sing *fili*). The name was used to denominate a ‘prophet.’ There was one more learned class in Celtic society, namely *bards* – poets. In Irish literature the names of these three groups are quite often used interchangeably. There are many examples of written evidence produced by ancient writers on druids. They are presented as a learned class that hold the highest position in Celtic society. Although they knew Greek and Latin, they did not write down their knowledge. As Julius Caesar (writing c. 50–44 BC) communicates in his *De Bello Gallico* (6.14):

[druids] are said to commit to memory a great number of verses. And they remain some 20 years in training. Nor do they judge it to be allowed to entrust these things to writing although in nearly the rest of their affairs, and public and private transactions, Greek letters are used. It seems to me there are two reasons this has been established: neither do they wish the common people to pride themselves in the training not those who learn to rely less on memory and thorough learning through the help of writing.⁹

⁷ D. R. Hill, *Magic: Magic in Indigenous Societies*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Religion*, op. cit., p. 5569.

⁸ J. Pokorny, *The Origin of Druidism*, “The Celtic Review” 1908, Vol. 5, No. 17, p. 3; D. Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend & Romance; An Encyclopædia of the Irish Folk Tradition*, New York 1991, p. 168.

⁹ In: *The Celtic Heroic Age*, op. cit., p. 21–22.

Diogenes Laertius (first half of the 3rd century AD) in his *Vitae* (Intro, 1) adds that “druids instruct by means of riddles, urging worship of the gods, abstinence from evil, and the practice of manly virtue.”¹⁰ The way of teaching in triads, a very common way of druidic teaching, could have been a kind of enchantment. About the direct involvement of druidic magical action wrote Tacitus (c. 55–c. 120 AD) in his *Annals* (14.30) while reporting on the Roman invasion of the druid sanctuary of Monā (present Anglesey, an island off the north-west of Wales): around the wild-haired women in black clothing were “the Druids, lifting their hands upwards towards the sky to make frightening curses.”¹¹

OGHAM WRITING

Druids were believed to have invented the *ogham* writing, hence the conviction that it must have been used for magical purpose. According to another version, the god Ogma (continental Ogmios) – the god of eloquence, *psychopompos* – was the inventor of this writing. Either of these versions would support the general view, mirrored in literature and folklore, that it was a form of writing with a quasi-magical significance. It is likely, writes Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, that this attitude “prevailed when some member of the learned caste devised this system to first commit words to visual form in Ireland.”¹² There are numerous references in the early literature to rhetorics and charms being written in *ogham* on timber, but no such evidence has been found so far. One might wonder, whether it is a pure poetic invention. It could be well true, but it is also possible that once such evidence existed, although it did not survive as timber is not durable material. In one of the legends about the greatest Irish hero Cú Chulainn (*The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn*) we read about a pillar stone that stood in the centre of a green hill. The stone:

bore graven writing to the effect that any man (if only he were one that carried arms) who should enter on this green, must hold it taboo to him to depart from it without challenging to single combat some of the dwellers in the stronghold. The little boy read the Ogam, threw his arms around the stone to start it and eventually pitched it [...] into the water close at hand.¹³

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 30.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 34.

¹² D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit., p. 349.

¹³ *Ancient Irish Tales*, eds. T. P. Cross, C. H. Slover, New York 1996, p. 147.

Here we have a stone with an *ogham* inscription that served as a border pillar. Bearing *ogham* inscriptions, it sanctified the border and was a guarantee of the sanctity of the land behind the border. The hero not only did not follow the instruction on the stone, but insulted it, which resulted in the fight with the protectors of the land, whose border was violated.

It is interesting to have the reference to the *ogham* inscription in a stone in the above example, as the evidence of *ogham* writing has survived solely in standing stones, which are found in many different parts of Ireland, especially in the south, but also in areas of Irish settlement in Scotland, the Isle of Man, and Wales. However, it would be in vain to look for any kind of magical text among them, as they bear only memorial inscriptions to the dead. The form of Irish used here is sometimes antique. It has to be remembered that Irish literature began in the 6th–7th century, so it was preceded by *ogham*, which is considered to be the earliest form of writing in Irish. Its use dates from the 4th or 5th century AD down to the 8th century. The writing consists of a system of notches and grooves grouped in 20 various combinations. Each combination represents a letter from the Latin alphabet. The notches were cut mostly on the edges of the stones. Ó hÓgáin writes that “[o]gham is in reality a borrowing of the Latin alphabet.”¹⁴

COLIGNY CALENDAR

Middleton, wrote that “many Western farmers insist on planting crops during a full moon or other point in the calendar, and consider this to be essentially a technical or scientifically effective act,”¹⁵ but other societies or people might consider it as a magical act. The calendar was indispensable for marking great religious festivals, but also for appointing propitious days for any kind of action, whether on a community or individual level. The only people, who had the knowledge, that was needed to construct such a calendar in Celtic society, were druids. This knowledge is attested by Caesar, who noticed (*De Bello Gallico* 6.14) that the druids “debate concerning the heavens and their movement, concerning the size of the universe and the earth, the working of the nature, the strength and power of the immortal gods.”¹⁶ It is highly probable that Pomponius Mela (wrote c. 69–c. 140 AD) in his work *De Situ Orbis* (3.2.18–19) repeated Caesar’s words, as we read there that “wise men called

¹⁴ D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit., p. 349.

¹⁵ J. Middleton, op. cit., p. 5562.

¹⁶ In: *The Celtic Heroic Age*, op. cit., p. 22.

Druids [...] claim to know the size of the earth and cosmos, the movements of the heavens and stars, and the will of the gods.”¹⁷ It has to be reminded that astrology was an integral part of astronomy till the 18th century, when they were separated. Hence the druids having the knowledge of astronomy, also had the knowledge of astrology. They always knew which days in the year were propitious and they were consulted on this matter. A very well known druid in Irish literature is Cathbad. One day when he was teaching his pupils, he was asked by one of them “as to what purpose that day was more especially favourable.” The druid “told him that any stripling who on that day should for the first time assume arms and armor, the name of such an one forever would surpass those of all Ireland’s youths besides. His life, however, must be fleeting, short.”¹⁸ Other example of indicating a propitious day comes from the greatest Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*), one narrative version of which is believed to have been committed to writing in the 7th century. Here a great army gathered from the four provinces of Ireland, led by the queen of the province of Connacht Medb, was delayed by “their sages and druids [...] for a fortnight waiting for a sign.”¹⁹ The army was held until the propitious day for starting the battle came. In the story *Immram Curaig Maile Dúin* (*The Voyage of Mael Dúin’s Boat*), which in preserved fragments is dated from the 10th century, although set in Christian times, we find a druid (Nuca), who advised Mael Dúin on which day he should begin to build his boat and then on which day he should set to the sea.²⁰

The best preserved example of a Celtic calendar (rather 153 pieces of it) was unearthed in a vineyard in Coligny in France (near Bourg and Lyon) in 1897.²¹ It is dated to the end of the 2nd century BC, as well as to the 1st century AD, but more probable it is from the 1st century BC. It is a Gaulish calendar engraved in a bronze tablet (148x90 centimetres). It belongs to one of the oldest and longest Celtic texts – 2021 lines. Although written with Latin letters and Latin orthography (with traces of Early Greek orthography) and Roman numbering, it is thoroughly Celtic. Mostly it is comprised of ab-

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 31.

¹⁸ *Ancient Irish Tales*, op. cit., p. 142–143.

¹⁹ *The Táin*, trans. T. Kinsella, Oxford 2002, p. 60.

²⁰ M. Dillon, *Early Irish Literature*, Blackrock 1994, p. 125; A. Rees, B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, London 1994, p. 319; *The Voyage of Mael Duin’s Boat*, trans. W. Stokes, [online], http://sejh.pagesperso-orange.fr/keltia/immrama/maeldun_en.html [retrieved: 11.12.2013].

²¹ Few smaller fragments of a similar calendar were uncovered also in France: some near a sanctuary in Morrans near the lake of Antre in 1807, an others – in 1967 in a nearby sanctuary Villards d’Héria.

breviations. There are about 60 words used in it, some of them are repeated even 100 times. Some 25 words can be deciphered with high probability. Garrett Olmsted²² is one of the researchers who faced the problem of the reconstruction of the Gaulish calendar. He employed here computer simulations and calculations. Eóin Mac Neill²³ is the other researcher who, before Olmsted, tried to solve the riddle of the calendar.

The calendar covers 5 years, which consist of 60 lunar months plus 2 intercalary months (adjustment to the solar cycle) – one placed at the beginning and the other one in the middle of the cycle. The whole cycle is inscribed in 16 columns. The months of the year are of two kinds: six of them had 30 days and are called MAT (*matus*, Ir. *maith*, Welsh *mad* – ‘good,’ ‘bringing happiness and good luck’); the other six had only 29 days and are inscribed ANM (*anmatus*, Welsh *anfad* – ‘bad luck,’ ‘unsuccessfulness,’ ‘not good’). The MAT months could be regarded as ‘full’ or ‘complete months,’ and the ANM months would be ‘hollow’ or ‘incomplete,’ thus ‘defective months,’²⁴ what actually means that they are ‘good’ and ‘not good’ respectively. There would not be anything special about this calendar, if we looked at it as an effect of scientific observation and measurement of the planets’ movement and position, but we have to look closely at marking the months as MAT and ANM. Such a division would mean that in the MAT months all days were good and in the ANM months – bad. We have to assume that there were some rituals that had to be performed in every month. We can also imagine that the rituals had to be carried out on good days; therefore, it was necessary to have good days in the ANM months. To obtain this, the druids had to place some days from good months into bad months. In fact this operation was of a threefold character: the days were shifted during the year-long period immediately following each intercalary month; exchanges took place between adjacent months; simple interchanges took place within the same month.²⁵ All days were marked, that it was exactly known which day was taken from which month and from which place it came. Because the good days (propitious days) were considered to be magical and the druids shifted them in the calendar in order to ensure a kind of balance of the good and bad days in each month, therefore I would argue for considering the Coligny calendar as a kind of magical text.

²² G. Olmsted, *The Gaulish Calendar*, Bonn 1992.

²³ See: E. Mac Neill, *On the Notation and Chronography of the Calendar of Coligny*, “Ériu” 1926, Vol. 10, p. 1–67.

²⁴ Cf. A. Rees, B. Rees, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

²⁵ On more detailed description see: G. Olmsted, *op. cit.*

MAGICAL TABLETS

It is hard to say, whether magical tablets with inscribed curses,²⁶ oaths or wishes, widely known in the Greco-Roman tradition, were also known in the Celtic tradition before these two came in contact, although it is not impossible. Very popular sites for the ritual deposition of such tablets were sacred springs, which had their protectors (*genii loci*), and these were very common in the Celtic world. Most of the discovered tablets are written in Greek, others in Latin, however, there are also some texts written in a Celtic language. One such inscription was discovered in a lead tablet, dated to circa 50 AD, placed in a sacred spring along with a great quantity of other ritual depositions, including about 5000 carved wooden figures and figurines, in Chamalières (near Clermont-Ferrand, France). The offerings are interpreted as a deposition for underworld gods. The tablet was of 6x4 centimetres, weighing around 30 grams. It probably had a kind of handle at the side. There was a text inscribed in a Roman cursive script that consisted of 336 letters. It is the second longest text in the Gaulish language. The text is interpreted as having been “written on behalf of a group of men seeking beneficial action from the gods” – either victory in battle or healing of medical ailments.²⁷ A magical act interpreted as a curse has also been suggested. Joseph F. Eska presumes that the text was a part of a ritual connected with an initiation oath. The tablet itself could have been used as a kind of a pendant. The text begins with an invocation to a divine Arvernian Maponos, then there is a request for the divine presence, and further there are listed persons belonging to the “initiated.” It is probable that the ceremony started with reading the text, followed by the proper ritual, and finally the candidate, who was in the initiation process, called upon the god before taking the oath. Eska believes that the tablet cannot be linked to the healing spell as the wish itself is missing, whereas being initiated means being healed, hence taking the oath near sacred water.²⁸ Koch gives the following tentative translation of the text from the tablet of Chamalières:

²⁶ A curse tablet is commonly known as a *defixio*, from the Latin verb *defigere*, which means “to fasten” and “to curse.”

²⁷ *The Celtic Heroic Age*, op. cit., p. 1.

²⁸ Basing on Eska’s paper (*A Gaulish ritual text*) held at the XI International Congress of Celtic Studies in Cork (Ireland) in 25–30.07.1999.

[‘The prayer’]

I beseech the very divine, the divine Maponos²⁹ Avernatis by means of the magic tablet: quicken (?) us, i.e. those (named below) by the magic of the underworld spirits [or infernal beings] (?):

[‘The list’]

C. Lucios, Floros Nigrinos the invoker, Aemilios Paterinos, Claudios Legitumos, Caelios Pelignos, Claudios Pelignos, Marcios Victorinos, Asiaticos son of Aθθedillos.

[‘The oath’]

And it is the destiny of the Victor to which they shall be destined (*or* and it is the oath of the Strong One that they shall swear); the centre – when he sows it – (it) shall be whole; (and) I right the wrong (:) blindly (;) thus (?) by means of this tablet (of incantation ?) I shall see what shall be. By Lugus I prepare them; by Lugus I prepare them; by Lugus I prepare them, by Lugus.³⁰

Another magical lead tablet was discovered in a woman’s grave, dated to circa 90 AD, in a Gaul-Roman cemetery in Larzac (near La Graufesenque, France). It is the longest Gaulish text, also written in a Roman cursive script. The text consist of about 1000 letters and over 160 words. The tablet was used as an urn lid. There are hypotheses that the text is a curse, although because of insufficient knowledge of the Gaulish language and many vague issues this is disputable. Koch believes that this inscription can be linked with the activities of a coven of sorceresses. He gives the following tentative translation of one of a total of four panels of the tablet:

Herein –:

- a magical incantation of women,
- their special infernal names,
- the magical incantation of a seeress who fashions this prophecy.

The goddess Adsagsona maintains Severa daughter of Tertiu in two cult offices, (as) their scribe (?) and offering maker.

Below, where they shall be impressed, the prophetic curse of these names of their is a magical incantation of a group of practitioners of underworld magic: Banona daughter of Flatucia, Paulla wife of Potitos, Aiiia daughter of Adiega, Pototios father of Paulla, Severa daughter of valens [and] wife of Paullos (?), Adiega mother of Aiiia, Potita wife of Primos daughter of Abesa.³¹

²⁹ The gods Maponos (“Great Youth,” “Divine Youth/Son”) and Lugus (Latin *lux* means *light*, and Celtic *lugio* means *an oth*) correspond to the Welsh Mabon and Irish Lug, Welsh Lleu (“Bright One”) respectively.

³⁰ *The Celtic Heroic Age*, op. cit., p. 2–3.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 1, 4.

A controversial Gaulish find – a lead lamella – dated to the 1st or 2nd century AD, was discovered in a cremation grave in Lezoux (southern France). The thin sheet of lead, 4x2 centimetres, with an about 20-word inscription was wrapped around a coin. The inscription is interpreted as a sort of protective or binding spell. As the sheet is perforated at two points, it is assumed that, together with the coin, it could have been worn as a pendant (an amulet), similarly like that one from Chamalières. Bernard Mees gives the following tentative translation of the inscription, which is described as a “prayer for justice”:

Lutura has dedicated
to the Secoli whoever
may have stolen *trientes*.
Whether by a free man,
or by a slave.
[he is given] to the Secoli.
May he thus be accursed.
May you revenge me.
May I bind this: his
affixing – the one (that)
I give. [the one who]
took this
property.³²

Such “prayers for justice” as the one above, in which a person, who was robbed of personal belongings, transfers the possession of these belongings to a god or goddess and appeals for revenge, are known from Bath in England. Here in the sacred spring of Celtic goddess Sulis,³³ whom Romans added (circa 44 AD) the name of Minerva, were found along with other votive offerings 130 curse tablets, some fragmentary. They are roughly dated to the 2nd–4th century AD. The inscriptions in the tablets refer usually to theft of small amounts of money or clothing that was stolen from their owners when they were taking a bath in the spring waters. The deity is requested to punish the perpetrator “by the denial of sleep, by causing normal bodily function to cease, or even by death.”³⁴ J. N. Adams proposing some new in-

³² B. Mees, *A Gaulish Prayer for Vengeance on a Lamella from Lezoux*, “Celtica” 2010, Vol. 26, p. 60.

³³ Her name means “opening,” “chink” or “eye.”

³⁴ *A Corpus of Writing-Tablets from Roman Britain*, 2000, [online], www.csad.ox.ac.uk/rib/ribiv/jp4.htm [retrieved: 27.08.2013].

terpretations to the Bath curse tablets suggests that not only the perpetrator was to be punished, but also he who “was implicated/a witness is done for.” In this case the culprit should be “accursed in blood and eyes and all his limbs, or even with all his intestines eaten away.”³⁵ This could be suspended only when the property was returned to the owner or disposed to the deity. Here are some examples of the Bath inscriptions:³⁶

May he who has stolen Vilbia become as liquid as water... who has stolen it (or her) Velvinna [... – here comes a list of women’s names].

Docilianus [son] of Brucertus to the most holy goddess Sulis. I curse him who has stolen my hooded cloak, whether man or women, whether slave or free, that ... the goddess Sulis inflict death upon ... and not allow him sleep or children now and in the future, until he has brought my hooded cloak to the temple of her divinity.

To Minerva the goddess Sulis I have given the thief who has stolen my hooded cloak, whether slave or free, whether woman or man. He is not to buy back this gift unless with his own blood.

I curse (him) who has stolen, who has robbed Deomiorix from his house. Whoever (stole his) property, the god is to find him. Let him buy it back with his own life.³⁷

MAGICAL TEXTS IN IRISH LITERATURE

There are numerous examples of magical texts incorporated in Irish literature. Because of the limited space in this article, I chose just a few, but ones which I think are remarkable. The first three come from *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (*The Book of Invasion*), the earliest Irish “history” of Ireland (alleged history of the land), compiled in the 11th century. The book is an attempt to combine indigenous mythology with Jewish and Christian Biblical tradition, as well as with medieval legends. The chronology of the text is modelled on Bible. The stories in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, as we know them, now belong rather to pseudo-history than to mythology. They describe the first settlers of Ireland. The

³⁵ J. N. Adams, *British Latin: The Text, Interpretation and Language of the Bath Curse Tablets*, “*Britannia*” 1992, Vol. 23, p. 9.

³⁶ For more detailed descriptions and more examples of tablets from Roman Britain see: F. O. Grew, M. W. C. Hassall, R. S. O. Tomlin, *Roman Britain in 1980*, “*Britannia*” 1981, Vol. 12, p. 313–396.

³⁷ *Curse tablets in the Roman Baths*, [online], www.romanbaths.co.uk [retrieved: 25.08.2013].

last group of immigrants were the sons of Mil, who had to face the Tuatha Dé Danann living already in Ireland. The latter ones wanted to trick the sons of Mil, so they asked them to leave the land for nine days and go to the sea over nine waves. When the sons of Mil were on the sea, the druids of the Tuatha Dé Danann cast druidic winds over the sea causing a great storm. Amergin, a poet (druid), one of the leaders of the sons of Mil, calmed the wind with the following chant:

I invoke the land of Ireland.
 Much-coursed be the fertile sea,
 Fertile be the fruit-strewn mountain,
 Fruit-strewn be the showery wood,
 Showery be the river of water-falls,
 Of water-falls be the lake of deep pools,
 Deep-pooled be the hill-top well,
 A well of tribes be the assembly,
 An assembly of the kings be Tara,
 Tara be the hill of the tribes,
 The tribes of the sons of Mil,
 Of Mil of the ships, the barks,
 Let the lofty bark be Ireland,
 Lofty Ireland, darkly sung,
 An incantation of great cunning;
 The great cunning of the wives of Bres,
 The wives of Bres of Buaigne;
 The great lady Ireland,
 Eremon hath conquered her.
 I invoke the land of Ireland.³⁸

Then, on putting his right foot on the land of Ireland Amergin spoke the famous rhapsody³⁹:

I am a wind on the sea,
 I am a wave of the ocean,
 I am the roar of the sea,
 I am a powerful ox,
 I am a hawk on a cliff,
 I am a dewdrop in the sunshine,

³⁸ *Ancient Irish Tales*, op. cit., s. 19.

³⁹ A very close parallel to it we find in an early Welsh poem, called *The Battle of the Tree*, attributed to the famous bard Taliesin. Other parallel is contained in the Irish *Book of Ballymote*.

I am a boar for valor,
 I am a salmon in pools,
 I am a lake in a plain,
 I am the strength of art,
 I am a spear with spoils that wages battle,
 I am a man that shapes fire for a head [...].⁴⁰

that is full of magic – creation powers that are bound up in Amairgen, which enabled him to penetrate the objects and creatures of the world.⁴¹ According to the brothers Rees, Amairgen embodies “the primeval unity of all things” and as such “he has the power to bring a new world into being, and his poems are in the nature of creation incantations,”⁴² as the one that was to increase fish in the creeks:

Fishful sea –
 Fertile land –
 Burst of fish –
 Fish under wave –
 With courses of birds –
 Rough sea –
 A white wall –
 With hundreds of salmon –
 Broad whale –
 A port song –
 A burst fish.⁴³

The next two examples of magical texts come from the legend *Cath Maige Tuired* (*The Second Battle of Mag Tured*), which was written down in the 8th century. The first one is the curse that Cairbre, a poet of the Tuatha Dé Dannan, who chanted it after being treated badly by the king Bres:

Without food quickly on a dish:
 Without a cow’s milk whereon a calf grows:
 Without a man’s abode in the gloom of night:
 Without paying a company of story-tellers, let that be Bres’s condition.
 Let there be no increase in Bres.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *Ancient Irish Tales*, op. cit., p. 21.

⁴¹ J. Streit, *Sonne und Kreuz*, Stuttgart 2001, p. 70.

⁴² A. Rees, B. Rees, op. cit., p. 99.

⁴³ *Ancient Irish Tales*, op. cit., p. 22.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

From this very moment, when the curse was uttered, Bres was doomed and was soon dethroned. The curse is considered to be the first satire that was ever composed in Ireland. The same Cairbre, before the battle of the Tuatha Dé Dannan with the Fomorians, promised to help his own tribe in the following way: “I will make a satire on them. And I will satirize them and shame them, so that through the spell of my art they will not resist warriors.”⁴⁵ We have many examples of efficacy of satires – from spoiling someone’s beauty, through bringing on someone illness, to death.

The last examples of magical texts are taken from *Immacallam in dá Thuarad* (or *Thuar*), commonly called *The Colloquy* (or *Dialogue*) of the two Sages. The language suggests that it was written in the 10th century. These two sages were Ferchertne and Néde. When Adnae, the chief-poet⁴⁶ of the province of Ulster, died, his official robe was conferred on Ferchertne, a famous elderly bard. Adnae’s young son, Néde (called the son of Dán – ‘Poetry’), was in Scotland at that time studying the craft of poetry. He heard a sound in the wave that was a kind of “a chant of wailing and sadness.” After casting a spell upon the wave, the reason for that sadness was revealed to him. He decided to go to Emain Macha, the seat of Ulster kings, to claim the robe and with it the honour of the chief-poet. Because Néde was told that Ferchertne was dead, he put the poet’s robe around him and sat down in the poet’s chair. Ferchertne, then, was told that his place – the ollaveship – had been taken by a young honourable man. Ferchertne came back to Emain Macha and confronting Néde began the colloquy with the question: “Who is this poet, a poet round whom lies the robe with its splendour, who would display himself after chanting poetry?”⁴⁷ After receiving the answer, he continued with the next question: “Whence hast thou come?”, to which Néde replied:

Not hard (to say): from the heel of a sage,
 from a confluence of wisdom,
 from perfections of goodness,
 from brightness of sunrise,
 from the hazels of poetic art,
 from circuits of splendour,
 out of which they measure truth according to excellences,
 in which righteousness is taught,

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 41.

⁴⁶ Called *ollave* (master) in science and poetry.

⁴⁷ W. Stokes, *The Colloquy of the two Sages*, “Revue Celtique” 1905, Vol. 26, p. 15.

in which falsehood sets,
in which colours are seen,
in which poems are freshened.⁴⁸

The same question was answered by Ferchertne, which is followed by a series of reciprocal questions and answers. One of the last questions: “Whom art thou son?”, Néde answered as follows:

I am son of Poetry,
Poetry son of Scrutiny,
Scrutiny son of Meditation,
Meditation son of Lore,
Lore son of Enquiry,
Enquiry son of Investigation,
Investigation son of Great-Knowledge,
Great-Knowledge son of Great-Sense,
Great-Sense son of Understanding,
Understanding son of Wisdom,
Wisdom, son of the three gods of Poetry.⁴⁹

Much in the same manner the answer was given by Ferchertne:

I am son of the man who has been and was not born:
he has been buried in his mother’s womb:
he has been baptized after death:
his first presence, death, betrothed him:
the first utterance of every living one:
the cry of every dead one:
lofty A is his name.⁵⁰

As can be seen above the answers are given in a form of evasive riddling – the form that was practiced by the druids, as noticed by Diogenes Laertius, quoted earlier. The colloquy is also in the form of a string of lines, like Scandinavian kennings – a kind of metaphors, usually built up of nouns. There is a series of metaphors involved, characteristic for an Irish poet’s life in the early Middle-Ages. The influence of Christianity can be seen in conflation of motifs from the new religion, especially in the last excerpt. The whole colloquy is led in the secret poetic language, therefore the meaning of

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 17–19.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 31.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 33.

the answers can often be guessed.⁵¹ The similar conversation, in which the words are “disguised,” that nobody except the persons engaged in it could understand it, was led by the hero Cú Chulainn with Emer, while he was wooing her. The secret poetic language was acquired by adepts along with other skills, e.g. in grammar, philosophy and divination, in special schools.⁵²

CONCLUSIONS

The variety of Celtic magical texts presented above proves richness and complexity of Celtic culture. On the Continent and in parts of Britain, strongly influenced by the Romans, it is displayed mostly in archaeological evidence, hence the examples of the magical texts brought in the article are inscribed in lead or bronze tablets. As I pointed out earlier, we cannot be sure whether the custom of offering the tablets found in the sacred springs or in the precinct of the cemeteries was known to Celtic people before they came in contact with the Greek-Roman world, especially that while talking about the Celts we have to consider the various tribes whose customs might have varied even more than we could think. The tablets with inscribed curses were very functional, very down-to-earth, reflecting the mundane problems and needs of ordinary people. The same can be said about the inscriptions containing requests for victory in battle or healing of ailments, even a protective or a binding spell is of the same category, whereas an initiation oath and the inscription linked with the activities of a coven of sorceresses can be classified as a higher level of magic, comparing to those of mundane character.

The Coligny calendar is an exceptional example of a magical text, as I have tried to explain. If the calendar was a simple reflection of pure scientific measures of the positions of planets, it would not be the case here, but, I would like to stress it again, that the shifting days, and the magical forces bound to them, in order to secure propitious days in the desired time in the months, can be classified as a manipulation of objects by which it was intended to bring about certain magical conditions favourable for people, as well as for nature.

Insular Irish Celtic culture flourished in indigenous literature, and although the texts of the earliest sagas are not earlier than the 8th century, and the survived manuscripts which contain them are much later, “they have evidently a long oral tradition behind them,” reflecting a pre-Christian so-

⁵¹ More on the work itself see: *ibidem*, p. 4–7.

⁵² More see: S. Czarnowski, *Dziela*, t. 4, Warszawa 1956, p. 205–206; Ch.-J. Guyonvarc’h, F. le Roux, *Die Druiden*, Engerda 1998, p. 66–69.

ciety.⁵³ The word carried magic and therefore had power to cause desirable effects, if used properly. The knowledge about the proper use of that magic apparently was possessed by druids, *fillid* (*vates*) and bards (poets).

The excerpts from Irish literature presented in the article show various applications of the magical word and the wording itself. The chant used by Amergin to calm the druidic wind is an invocation to Ireland – to the fruitful land and to her gods, especially goddess, who embodies Ireland. It is an homage paid to the land on which Amergin and his people were going to settle. To the nature, specifically to fish in waters, refers also the other chant of Amergin, which was to ensure their abundance. The chant is very simple in construction, nevertheless, carrying the power of creation. The famous rhapsody of Amergin, displaying his potential of creation, recalls a chain of metamorphosis which mythical figures gifted with a great knowledge underwent. This knowledge of the poet is phrased *expressis verbis* in the colloquy of two sages, especially in the genealogy of Néde. The numerous examples from Irish and Welsh literature show that the poetry contains magical power that was mastered by the poets, who during their long-year education (up to 12 years) gained appropriate knowledge, which was used in their compositions, among which even the most innocent rhyme could bring far-reaching consequences.

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