

# CHRISTIAN HEAD CULT?

THE CULT OF the human head has long been associated with the Celtic Iron Age cultures of Europe. In Ireland this would appear to be corroborated by the evidence of early literature. It has long been assumed that such a cult, or at the very least such a fascination, could have no place within the realms of Christianity. Yet archaeologically speaking there would appear to be greater evidence of a preoccupation with the human head in medieval Ireland than during any previous period.

There are few conclusive examples of human heads in stone, or in any other medium, datable to the Irish Iron Age. This contrasts with the many known representations of human heads from the medieval period, such as this example from Clonfert, Co. Galway. Are we to assume, therefore, that a cult of the human head existed in a Christian context? If not, do the

pre-Christian examples truly reflect such a cult, or—as Professor Rynne has suggested (in C. Thomas (ed.), *The Iron Age in the Irish Sea Province* (1972))—were they simply idols which represented pagan gods or deities?

Carved stone heads were quite a common feature of Irish churches of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and are frequently associated with later churches, abbeys and tower-houses. Interestingly, they are far more common in areas of Norman and

subsequent English settlement than in Gaelic areas. This may reflect Continental influence rather than native traditions echoing from the distant Celtic Irish past.

R.A.S. Macalister in 1928 (*The Archaeology of Ireland*) wrote that the skull was 'the seat of the nobler activities of the human personality—or, as we may venture to say boldly, of the soul'. Arguably, the concepts that linked the human head and soul became more highly developed within Greek and Roman philosophy than within Celtic religion, and continued to develop further within Christianity. Lest we forget, in late medieval and post-medieval Europe beheading was a ritual form of execution, the ultimate form of killing the soul. Was the so-called cult of the human head an integral part of pagan Irish religion and ceremony during the Celtic Iron Age, or was it a preoccupation more commonly found in the Christian society of medieval Europe?

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