IAN ARMIT

HEADHUNTING AND THE BODY IN IRON AGE EUROPE

CAMBRIDGE

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Across Iron Age Europe, the human head carried symbolic associations with power, fertility, status, and gender. Evidence for the removal,

curation, and display of heads ranges from classical literaryreferences to iconography and skeletal remains. Traditionally, this material has been associated with a Europe-wide 'head cult' and used to support the idea of a unified Celtic culture in prehistory. This book demonstrates instead how headhunting and head veneration were practised across a range of diverse and fragmented Iron Age societies. Using case studies from France, Britain, and elsewhere, it explores the complex and sub-tle relation hips between power, religion, warfare, and violence in Iron Age Europe.

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For my son, James

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I never did manage to get back to Rum to check the photographs discussed in Chapter 3. Since I didn't have a book in mind (or a notebook in hand) when I first saw them, I hope my descriptions from memory bear at least some relationship to reality.

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Note: All AMS dates are quoted at two sigma. All translations are by the author except where otherwise indicated.

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CHAPTER 1

Detached fragments of humanity

The Berawan of Long Teru lost their stock of skulls in a disastrous fire that consumed the entire longhouse. It was an incident that was often recalled, and the poor woman, now elderly, whose kitchen fire started the blaze has never been allowed to forget it. But oddly enough, the loss of skulls was not lamented. Though it was claimed that the heads had the potential to bring benefits to the community, the service of them was considered onerous. The heads had to be 'fed', so it was said, with small offerings, and kept warm with a fire that never went out. Women had to avoid that part of the longhouse veranda, or pass by in a crouched position. Any contact with heads was dreaded, so that only old men, weary of life, would dare move them, whenever the house needed rebuilding.

Metcalf 1996, 251

And so they met and there was a hard battle, and not long ere Melbricta fell and his followers, and Sigurd caused the heads to be fastened to his horses' cruppers as a glory for himself. And then they rode home, and boasted of their victory. And when they were come on the way, then Sigurd wished to spur the horse with his foot, and he struck his calf against the tooth which stuck out of Melbricta's head and grazed it; and in that wound sprung up pain and swelling, and that led him to his death.

Orkneyinga Saga, 5, trans. Dasent, 1894

Introduction

Some of the best-preserved prehistoric buildings in Europe are to be found in the Western Isles of Scotland. Along the coastal fringes of islands such as Lewis and North Uist are the buried remnants of extraordinary structures, long since engulfed by sand. One wet spring, in the late 1980s, I was busy excavating a settlement in the small township of Cnip, on the west coast of Lewis (Ill. 1.1). People living nearby had noticed the remains of some stone buildings eroding onto the beach, and a rescue excavation had been hastily arranged. The settlement at Cnip turned out to be a remarkable site, spanning the first century BC to the second century AD. The original building was a wheelhouse, a type of drystone roundhouse dug down into the sand. Soaring drystone piers (the 'spokes' of the wheel) formed a circle of small cells around a central, communal space. The walls still stood above head height in places.

ILLUSTRATION 1.1. Main British sites discussed in Chapter 1. (Drawn by Rachael Kershaw)

This exceptional survival meant that the houses at Cnip could be dissected in great detail (Armit 2006a). When we began dismantling the walls, it soon became apparent that each stage in the life of the settlement had been marked in some way. In most cases, small deposits of carefully selected objects had been placed in pits, under thresholds, or behind the walls of the houses as they were built. Behind one wall, for example, were several

ILLUSTRATION 1.2. Votive deposit, comprising a cranium, a rounded stone, and some fragments of pottery and bone, placed in a pit below a small cell at the Cnip wheelhouse, Isle of Lewis, during the first century AD. (Photograph by author)

separate deposits: a complete pot, a length of articulated cattle vertebrae, and the head of a great auk, a now-extinct sea bird.

One of these deposits was particularly striking. Sometime during the first century AD the inhabitants of the wheelhouse had decided to create a small cell within the remains of a disused building. Before laying the foundations, someone scooped a hollow into the sand and placed in it a few objects, specially selected for the occasion (Ill. 1.2). Among these was the upper part of a human cranium, laid in the base of the hollow. Next to it was a smooth, rounded stone, which seemed to echo the shape of the cranial vault, and which was quite unlike the usual angular building stones found around the site. There was also a second cranial fragment, probably human but perhaps animal, and two scraps of pottery. Once placed in the hollow, this collection of broken and fragmentary remains was covered over with sand and buried beneath the slab floor of the new building (Armit 2006a, 244–8).

On one level this deposit fits rather neatly into the wider pattern of votive deposition at Cnip. Yet the deliberate incorporation of human remains marks it out and raises some important questions. Who was this person: perhaps an ancestor, or an enemy, or maybe a recently deceased inhabitant of the wheelhouse? Why was it judged appropriate to place human remains in this particular place and not in others? And why was only the head deposited?

The cranium itself yields few clues. It belonged to an adult, probably middle-aged. Its partial condition suggests that a significant period of time had elapsed between death and this ultimate burial. What had happened during that time? Was the head curated in some way by the inhabitants of Cnip, as a defleshed skull or cranium, or perhaps as a fleshed head, preserved by smoking or drying? Or had the cranium simply been retrieved from a grave, or some other location, with this votive deposit in mind? The smaller cranial fragment found next to it showed traces of gnaw marks, suggesting that it at least had been left exposed to animals, either within the settlement (where dogs and pigs were kept) or elsewhere.

The alkaline qualities of the Hebridean machair sands are ideal for the preservation of bone. Yet, although thousands of animal bones were recovered, the excavations at Cnip yielded only three other pieces of human bone. One was a fragment of tibia, or shin-bone, from a domestic midden. The others, found within the buildings, were, once again, pieces of cranium. One fragment from a young adult, found in wall packing, bore a series of cut marks, which were hard to interpret. Some of them could be the result of scalping, but this would not explain them all. Some may result from an unsuccessful attempt at trepanation (McSweeney 2006, 134–5), although they may equally have been made shortly after death. The third piece, from the cranium of a middle-aged adult, found at the entrance to a small cellular building, had unquestionably been modified after death, because a hole had been drilled from both inside and out (136). This may have been intended to allow the head, or cranium, to be suspended from a cord.

The small but intriguing assemblage of human bone from Cnip was plainly not randomly generated. Three of the four pieces (the only three found inside the houses) were cranial fragments, all from middle-aged or young adults. All had been modified and/or curated. For whatever reasons, the Iron Age inhabitants at Cnip had a strong interest in human heads. How might we interpret such material? With only four bones to work with, should we even bother to attempt interpretation at all?

The published literature reveals some intriguing parallels for the Cnip cranial fragments. One of the most dramatic was recovered by the Caithness landowner and antiquarian, Sir Francis Tress Barry, during his excavations at the complex Atlantic roundhouse of Hillhead (Anon. 1909). This calvarium, or skullcap, had been drilled through with three evenly spaced holes. These suggest that the skull, or fleshed head, like the drilled fragment from Cnip, might have been strung up for display (Ill. 1.3). Interestingly, this fragment was also found at an access point into a building, in this case on the floor of the entrance passage leading into the roundhouse (Tress Barry n.d., 7). Slightly further north, at Rennibister in Orkney, disarticulated bones representing six adults and at least 12 children were discovered in a rock-cut 'earth house', which probably dates to the early part of the Iron Age (Marwick 1927a; Armit and Ginn 2007). From the published records it appears that the

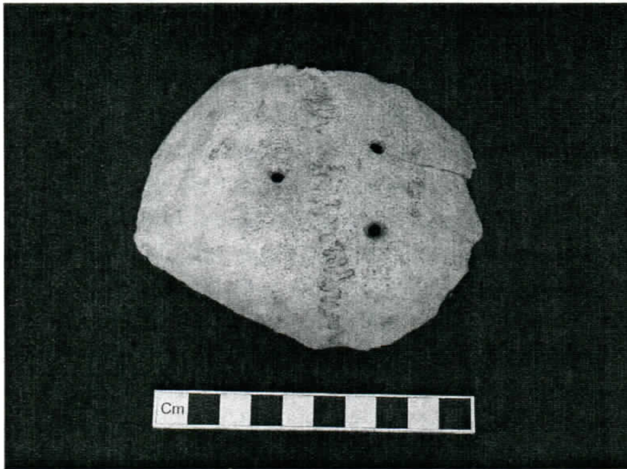

ILLUSTRATION 1.3. Perforated skullcap from Hillhead, Caithness. (Photograph by Fiona Shapland)

bodies had been carefully sorted after a considerable period of decomposition. Four of the skulls had been placed beside one of the pillars supporting the roof. In each case, the cranium had been inverted over a mandible (Marwick 1927b, 299).

Further instances come from the excavations at the complex roundhouse of Dun Vulan in South Uist, where the long sequence of occupation yielded numerous small fragments of human bone (Parker Pearson and Sharples 1999; Chamberlain 1999). These again included a wholly disproportionate number of cranial and mandible fragments, some of them in contexts suggestive of votive deposition. Radiocarbon dates suggest that some of these fragments were several centuries old at the time of deposition (Mulville et al. 2003). For instance, one piece of human mandible recovered from a stone-lined drain was radiocarbon dated to 110 BC – AD 130: yet the small rectangular building that this drain served was not itself built until some time during the third and fourth centuries AD. The excavators thus argue that this carefully curated fragment, some centuries old, was deliberately offered up as a foundation deposit when the later building was constructed (23–4). As at Cnip, human remains at Dun Vulan had apparently been curated for a significant period. Further skull remains from various contexts in the long-lived settlement of Howe of Howe in Orkney, although not as well-dated, hint at similar processes (Ballin Smith 1994; Armit and Ginn 2007). Indeed, the more closely one looks in the records of earlier excavations in Atlantic Scotland, the more of these apparently isolated and anomalous human bones one finds (Armit and Ginn 2007).

Midden bones

The situation is similar elsewhere in the British Iron Age, where fragments of human bone are often encountered in seemingly unlikely places. All Cannings Cross, in Wiltshire, for example, offers some parallels. This site, excavated between 1911 and 1922, dates to the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age. It comprised an extensive area of dark soils, apparently unenclosed, incorporating occasional laid floors,

hearths, pits, and even some post-built structures (Cunnington 1923). All Cannings Cross has been linked to other sites in and around the Vale of Pewsey, characterised by similar spreads of dark soil (Lawson 2000, 265). These have sometimes been described as middens, on the basis of their rich assemblages of discarded rubbish and their general lack of evidence for permanent occupation. They were, however, more than simple rubbish dumps. Instead, they seem to have been used for feasting and other activities associated with periodic gatherings of people – events that generated huge quantities of debris. David McOmish (1996, 75) has suggested that the term 'ceremonial feasting places' would be a better fit.

At All Cannings Cross, among the broken pottery, animal bone, and other debris, the excavators found more than 30 human cranial fragments, scattered and dispersed with no obvious pattern to their distribution. Aside from these, no other human remains were found. As in Atlantic Scotland, some of the All Cannings Cross fragments had been deliberately modified, apparently to be 'used for scraping or other purposes' (Cunnington 1923, 40). One had been worked into a small circular roundel, 'almost exactly the size of a penny-piece' and had a hole bored well off-centre (Keith 1923, 41, plate 26). Judging from the wear marks, it had apparently been carried or worn for some time, perhaps as a charm or amulet. A similar perforated roundel, made from the occipital bone 'of an old person', was found at Glastonbury lake village in Somerset (Bulleid and Gray 1917, 405). However, the Glastonbury piece is around 7cm in diameter with a central perforation, resembling a spindle whorl.

Another midden, at Potterne, some 10 km from All Cannings Cross, covers a larger area of around 3.5 hectares (Lawson 2000). Excavations of a small part of this site uncovered an enormous artefactual assemblage and around 134,000 animal bones (Locker 2000, 101). Compared to this, the human bone assemblage was tiny, with only 139 fragments recovered (J. McKinley 2000, 96). Yet, once again, these few bones raise many questions. Unlike the material from All Cannings Cross, the human bone at Potterne was not restricted to cranial fragments, though these did make up more than half the assemblage. Both sexes were represented as well as a range of age groups, including a child of around six (table 9). The absence of mandibles and cervical vertebrae suggests that it was defleshed crania, rather than heads, that were present on the site. Indeed, the virtual absence of facial bones may suggest that only calvaria, or cranial vaults, were present. The rest of the human bones had been equally selectively obtained. Most were long bones, with the femur predominating, while axial bones (such as vertebrae and ribs) were extremely rare. Small bones, such as those from the hands and feet were entirely missing. Selectivity was also marked in other ways. Among the leg bones, for example, there was a marked preference for right over left limbs; and, although numerous neonatal and foetal bones were present in the assemblage, there were no cranial remains from these individuals (99 and table 9).

None of the cranial fragments from Potterne seem to have been worked into objects, but at least two had a 'polished' or 'ivoried' appearance. Although the suggested causes of this condition included possible variations in the depositional environment, or 'some form of human manipulation' (J. McKinley 2000, 97), the same condition in the animal bone assemblage is interpreted, much less ambiguously, as being due to 'some cooking treatment, such as boiling' (Locker 2000, 103). Because there is no sign that any of the

human bones were butchered, boiling may have formed part of the preparation of heads for display rather than consumption.

Human remains were also found in small-scale excavations at East Chisenbury, another of these midden sites, which extends over nearly 4 hectares (McOmish 1996). Although only a tiny area was examined, the excavators once again found human remains including four skull fragments (David Field pers. comm.). One of these seemed to have been deliberately placed, since it was surrounded by broken sherds from a single vessel and a small block of stone (McOmish 1996, 73). Seven centuries and nearly 600 miles may separate them, but the resonances with the cranial deposits from Cnip are strong.

Trophies and offerings

A different sort of head deposit was encountered by Sir Mortimer Wheeler during his excavations at Stanwick, in North Yorkshire in the early 1950s. Stanwick is an enormous complex, with enclosures covering more than 250 hectares, and it seems to have been built at the end of the Iron Age, in the middle of the first century AD. It appears to have been an important stronghold of the Brigantes, the most powerful northern English tribe at the time of the Roman invasion (Wheeler 1954). Although Wheeler's excavations were restricted to a few short stretches of ditch and a tiny fraction of the interior, he did encounter some striking deposits. Wheeler's Site B examined a length of ditch adjacent to one of the gateways and probably dating to the second half of the first century AD. In the waterlogged ditch terminal were various objects, including an iron sword in a bronze-bound wooden scabbard and the cranium, mandible, and cervical vertebrae of a middle-aged man. The cranium bore traces of at least three severe wounds inflicted by a sword or axe at the time of death (Osman Hill 1954). It appeared that this was the head of a warrior killed in battle and subsequently decapitated. The association of the cranium, mandible, and vertebrae shows that it was a fleshed head that was originally deposited in the ditch.

Wheeler (1954, 53) suggested that both the sword and the severed head may have formed parts of a trophy, displayed over the gateway, which subsequently tumbled into the ditch terminal when the site was destroyed. There is no apparent indication, however, in Osman Hill's (1954) osteological report as to how the head might have been fixed to the gate structure, and we should not exclude the possibility that the head, and perhaps the sword and scabbard, were simply placed into the ditch terminals. Interestingly, although this particular head deposit is often cited (e.g., L. Laing, 1981, 115), there were other cranial fragments found at Stanwick. Two other ditch cuttings, one of them more than a kilometre away at the far south of the enclosure system, yielded a further four pieces of human skull, which were not described in any detail in Wheeler's report (Osman Hill 1954, 56). Compared to the overall extent of the ditches at Stanwick, Wheeler's excavations were minimal, making it all the more surprising that so many cranial fragments were recovered. We must, presumably, expect that many more skull fragments remain within the several kilometres of unexcavated ditch.

Several other Iron Age British sites seem to support Wheeler's suggestion that human heads were put on display. At Bredon Hill, in Gloucestershire, for example, three crania and six mandibles were found during a 1930s excavation, under the debris from the collapsed

gate. The excavator suggested that these were the remains of trophy heads, displayed above the gateway (Hencken 1938, 57). We should bear in mind, however, that many other human bones were found in the debris surrounding the entrance to this site, representing up to around 64 people, many of whom appear to have been subject to 'extensive mutilation ... possibly on ritualistic grounds' (55). In the early Iron Age levels of the hillfort of Dinorben, in northeast Wales, fragments of human crania were found in the floors of three houses, as well as in one of the guard chambers at the main entrance. A further mandible fragment, recovered from the ditch next to the entrance, was interpreted by the excavators as a fallen part of a decayed trophy head, formerly displayed over the gateway (Gardner and Savory 1964, 221). As at Bredon Hill, however, it should be noted that other postcranial fragments found in the Early Iron Age levels did not attract detailed discussion in the excavation report. Elsewhere, heads seem to have been associated with the construction of ramparts, as at the Breiddin hillfort in Powys, where the maxilla (facial bone) of an adult had been incorporated within the Late Bronze Age rampart (Musson 1991, 23).

The phenomenon of display is not restricted to hillforts. Numerous skull deposits are recorded from the early excavations at the Glastonbury lake village (Bulleid and Gray 1917), where they dominated a human bone assemblage otherwise largely restricted to two partial burnt skeletons and around 10 neonatal burials. Most of the material was fragmentary, but in at least two cases, crania and mandibles were found together (Coles and Minnitt 1995, 170–4), suggesting the deposition of fleshed heads. Both showed evidence for unhealed sword injuries, suggesting a rather violent death. At least one had suffered significant damage to the foramen magnum, suggesting they it had been displayed on a spear or stake (ibid.; Boyd-Dawkins 1917).

I could, of course, go on. This brief survey of the British evidence omits a host of intriguing assemblages; skull fragments displaying signs of perimortem trauma from the interior of Broxmouth hillfort in East Lothian (Armit and McKenzie in prep.); a severed head in the 'guard-chamber' at Rainsborough hillfort in Northamptonshire (Banks 1967); evidence of decapitation and ritual deposition in the grain pits at Danebury (Craig et al. 2005); the structured deposition of sometimes modified skull fragments from a range of Iron Age sites in the eastern counties of England, including Wardy Lane, Billingborough, Hurst Lane, and Stonea Camp (Evans 2003); and innumerable other examples (Wilson 1981). Nonetheless, the basic point is clear – that Iron Age communities across Britain engaged in a range of practices relating to the removal, curation, and display of the human head.

Interpretations

How should we interpret these strange and highly selective assemblages of human remains, these 'detached pieces of humanity' (Cunnington 1919, 25)? Writing her report on the excavations at All Cannings Cross, Maud Cunnington had little doubt that she had found evidence for Celtic headhunting, as described in the writings of the classical authors (Cunnington 1923, 40). Indeed, wherever human skull fragments have been found on Iron Age settlements, the Celtic 'cult of the head' has been a popular explanation (e.g., Whimster 1981, 189; Wait 1985, 120), drawing on a powerful blend of classical and medieval literature, as well as archaeological and iconographic material from across much of Europe. The Celts, it was thought, saw the head as the seat of the soul, and thus severed

heads could retain special powers after death. By cutting off and keeping the heads of their enemies, warriors could gain control over the spirits of the dead. By the same token, the heads of important individuals might be venerated after death. Identifications of 'head-hunting' or the 'veneration of the head' in the archaeological record have thus tended to be seen as indicating local adherence to a perceived pan-Celtic tradition, linking the islands of northern and western Scotland, and the chalklands of southern England, to the Mediterranean coasts of France and Spain.

Can we then understand the contents of the pit at Cnip, the cranial fragments from All Cannings Cross, and all the other instances discussed here as local expressions of some deep-rooted, distinctively Celtic, cosmological principle? This is doubtful. The concept of a culturally unified Celtic people in prehistory has been vigorously questioned in recent times (e.g., S. James 1999; Collis 2003), and there has been an increasing awareness of marked regional variations within the traditionally Celtic world of the European Iron Age. Iron Age communities of Atlantic Scotland were, in many ways, very different from their contemporaries in Wessex (e.g., Armit 2003; Cunliffe 2005), and neither need have had much in common with the continental communities described in the classical literary descriptions of the Celts. More fundamentally, however, special treatments of the head are present in chronologically disparate archaeological contexts in Europe, from Mesolithic 'skull nests', as at Ofnet (Orschiedt 2002, 2005) and Kaufertsberg in southwest Germany (Orschiedt 1998), to the relics of medieval Christian saints. In fact, similar practices can be documented from the earliest times through to recent centuries in most parts of the world (e.g., Chacon and Dye 2007). In such circumstances, it is difficult to explain headhunting, and head veneration, by reference to some Celtic cultural milieu.

It is also increasingly evident that, despite the high visibility of skull fragments at many Iron Age sites, other parts of the body were also subject to unusual treatments. We have already seen how the human bone assemblage at Potterne had a disproportionate representation of femurs, an under-representation of axial bones, and a bias towards right, as opposed to left, limbs. The Iron Age hillfort of Danebury, in Hampshire, has yielded considerable evidence for a special interest in heads (e.g., Walker 1984; Craig et al. 2005), yet, as Niall Sharples (1991, 81) has pointed out, numerous other body parts, including articulated limbs and pelvic girdles, were also deposited in pits around the interior of the hillfort. Nobody has yet argued the case for a 'Celtic cult of the pelvic girdle'. It is clear, however, that any attempt to understand the treatment of the human head in the Iron Age must also address wider attitudes to the human body.

Another issue, often overlooked, is the frequent association of human and animal bones. At Watchfield, in Oxfordshire, for example, a human cranium had been placed into a pit with a pig skull (Roberts and McKinley 2003), and at Hornish Point in South Uist, the remains of a young boy had been quartered and placed in four pits along with the butchered remains of young cattle, sheep, and pigs (Barber 2003). Neither of these instances is resonant of conventional rubbish disposal. Instead, the deliberate admixture of animal and human bodies seems to carry quite specific meanings. The killing, consumption, and deposition of animals may in some cases have substituted for the similar treatment of humans. In other cases, the deposition of particular animals, or animal parts, may have lent additional meaning to the human remains that accompanied them into the earth. Elsewhere we may be seeing a blurring of categories between animal and human (Hill 1995, 16).

In the following chapters, I want to re-examine the archaeological evidence for Iron Age headhunting, and associated practices, from a rather different perspective. Although the classical and early medieval literature dealing with the Celts remains essential, I try to develop new approaches using, primarily, anthropological studies of more recent headhunting societies and close contextual analyses of particular Iron Age communities. Anthropological literature on headhunting has been affected by the reluctance of recent generations of anthropologists to focus on aspects of non-Western cultures that might lend support to popular caricatures of the 'primitive'. Nonetheless, detailed case studies and synthetic works exist for certain areas, notably Southeast Asia (e.g., R. Rosaldo 1980; Hoskins 1996a) and Oceania (e.g., Aswani 2000a), as well as an enormous body of early ethnographic literature of highly variable quality. The insights that such studies might generate have been largely ignored in past studies of Iron Age Europe. In part, this is because the existing literature on the Celts has sometimes seemed to provide all the information we need. I do not suggest that the anthropological literature can provide ready-made templates that can simply be applied to the communities of Iron Age Europe. Yet it can potentially furnish us with fresh ideas and approaches, opening up new avenues for interpretation of the Iron Age material and revealing connections and meanings that were previously dormant.

Anthropological studies, as we will see in Chapter 3, reveal the centrality of headhunting within many non-Western cultures and the wide range of cultural and material expressions associated with the treatment of the human head. Headhunting, clearly, is far more than the collection of battle trophies. Heads may be taken from the out-group, through acts of group-sanctioned violence, or from the in-group, as a product of funerary practice. The head can be a potent symbol, with associations relating to power, fertility, coming of age, the acquisition of status, and gender. The control and deployment of this symbol can potentially tell us a great deal about wider social relationships and practices.

Ideas and practices associated with headhunting manifest themselves quite differently, even in neighbouring communities, and this idea of 'difference' will be important when we come to look again at the societies of Iron Age Europe. As will become clear in Chapter 2, I am not setting out to define a distinctively 'Celtic' belief system, applicable across the length and breadth of Iron Age Europe. I want instead to explore the nature of specific Iron Age communities, in particular historical circumstances. This requires a close analysis of the archaeological material within particular regions, rather than recourse to pan-Celtic explanations. Variations on the theme of headhunting, curation and display, can help us to reassess the social and cultural relationships between Iron Age societies without resorting to blanket attributions of shared Celtic ethnicity.

Some definitions

Headhunting

The anthropologist Janet Hoskins (1996b, 2) defines headhunting as 'an organised, coherent form of violence in which the severed head is given a specific ritual meaning and the act of head-taking is consecrated and commemorated in some form'. This is a useful

starting point, encompassing the taking of head trophies in war, as well as decapitation as a component of sacrifice. In either case, it could cover the removal of heads from members of either the in-group or the out-group.

Yet, Hoskins's definition does not necessarily encompass all of the categories of behaviour that I want to consider. The emphasis on consecration is probably valid in the specific region to which Hoskins's formula applies (Southeast Asia), but it implies a clear connection between headhunting and religion that we might want to question. It could be argued that a good deal of human trophy-taking, at other times and places, has had less to do with spiritual beliefs than with the brute demonstration of power and the dehumanisation of the enemy. The widespread decapitation of Japanese war dead to provide souvenirs for Allied soldiers during World War II could, for example, be interpreted in this way (S. Harrison 2006).

For the Berawan of Borneo, the act of decapitation was merely the first stage in an ongoing relationship between head-taker and victim. This relationship was one that could pass down the generations and involved long-term curation and 'nurturing' of the head, by feeding, sheltering, warming, and the showing of due deference (Metcalf 1996, 251). For the medieval Earls of Orkney, the taking of a head was a more straightforward business (*Orkneyinga Saga*, 5, trans. Dasent, 1894). Quite what Sigurd's intentions were with regard to the heads of Melbricta and his unfortunate followers is not entirely clear, but most likely they would have been discarded after a rather briefer and less reverential period of display than practised by the Berawan. Sigurd's motives, as related by a cultural insider, seem to have been primarily based around the display of power and the denigration of a despised enemy. The element of 'consecration' here is much less obvious, if it exists at all. Similarly, the frequency with which beheadings in combat were recorded in the medieval Irish annals, in a Christianised society, might suggest that the spiritual element was unnecessary for the maintenance of a headhunting culture. Individuals and groups within nominally Christian societies, however, retain all sorts of beliefs that might seem incompatible with modern scriptural interpretations, and it would be unwise to assume that these decapitations lacked any 'specific ritual meaning' in Hoskins's sense. Nonetheless, I want to keep the possibility open, at least for now, that headhunting, in its widest sense, need not have an overtly religious dimension.

There are other analogous practices relating to the treatment of the human head that do not fall strictly within Hoskins's definition, yet which are still clearly related to headhunting as she describes it. The early Irish literature, once again, describes how victorious warriors would remove the brains of their defeated opponents and mix them with lime to create a hard and durable 'brain ball', which could be shown off on suitable occasions (K. Jackson 1964, 20). Other forms of human trophy-taking, such as scalping, or the removal of ears or noses, could be taken as a shorthand for headhunting and may invite similar sorts of interpretation. We might also want to consider judicial beheadings in state societies like those of medieval Europe or modern-day Saudi Arabia, where severed heads may be displayed, in a ritualised fashion, after the event.

For present purposes, then, I define headhunting as a form of group-sanctioned, ritualised violence, in which the removal of the human head plays a central role. It commonly involves the curation, display, and representation of the head, often within a religious

context, but all of these elements need not be present in every case. The more specific term, 'predatory headhunting', is also used to describe the violent targeting of outsiders as a source of head trophies.

Head veneration

The pervasive interest in the human head, however, encompasses a still wider territory than even this expanded definition can accommodate. In a number of ethnographically documented contexts, certain communities retain, display, and venerate the heads of their own kin (e.g., Barth 1987). These are obtained not through violence but in the course of conventional funerary practices, even if only a small proportion of heads are retained. These may belong to particularly important, influential, or unusual individuals, whose particular life histories made them appropriate foci for communal ritual and memory, but equally they may be chosen quite arbitrarily. Among the Mountain Ok peoples of Inner New Guinea, for example, skulls were displayed in central 'ancestor houses' where they were painted, on certain occasions, in the colours of particular clans and played a central role in communal ceremonies (Barth 1987). Individual skulls might be used to symbolise the category of all ancestors, and the specific identity of the skull's original owner need not be especially important to its posthumous ritual life. Ideas of a similar kind underlie that importance attached to the relics of Christian saints in medieval Europe (Woodward 1993), although here the specific identity (real or imagined) of the original owner of the body part in question was, of course, crucial.

Headhunting and head veneration are by no means mutually exclusive. The Berawan obtained their collection of skulls through violence directed against outsiders, yet subsequently venerated them over many generations (Metcalf 1996). Elsewhere, for example, both the New Zealand Maori (Vayda 1960) and the North Indian Nagas (Jacobs 1990) curated the heads of both enemies and ancestors, though they were differently treated in each case. The practices and beliefs involved, as we shall see throughout the following chapters, are so intertwined that the attempt to define headhunting and head veneration as separate categories serves little useful purpose. For present purposes, the term 'head veneration' is restricted to contexts where no element of interpersonal violence is involved, for example, where heads are obtained exclusively as part of secondary funerary practices. This does not, of course, mean that an element of veneration is not present in many other contexts.

Cosmology, religion, ideology

Interpretations of headhunting in prehistoric societies, as in the ethnographic record, inevitably involve discussions of cosmology, religion, and ideology. Yet archaeologists have markedly divergent views over the relationships between these concepts. Insoll (2004, 23), for example, sees religion as an overarching structural principle that determines the ways in which other aspects of human life are organised. Although I agree with his view that the role of human mental life has been underplayed in archaeology, at the expense of (*inter alia*) technology, trade, and subsistence, I think that religion is too narrow a term

in this context. Instead I would conceptualise religion, cosmology, and ideology as an interlinked group of mental domains. None of these need have primacy, but each clearly has the capacity to influence the others, especially over a period of several generations or centuries. As these terms are used throughout the book, it is worth setting out what I mean by them.

Cosmology, at least in the context of premodern societies, relates to the ways in which people understand their world, its origins, and the place of humans within it. It includes 'mental geographies' such as the common understanding, in ancient times, of the world as a great circle centred on the Mediterranean, as, for example, in the maps of Anaximander and Hecataeus. This inner circle of civilisation was girdled by concentric zones of progressively less civilised, stranger, and more fantastical inhabitants (Piggott 1968, 80). Such ideas may sometimes be closely related to the concept of religion, but they could be argued to be rather more fundamental, in the sense that similar cosmologies, for example, might coexist with quite different religions. Cosmological understandings may operate at quite unconscious levels, governing the ways in which people categorise objects in the world around them, including various human (and what may be perceived to be subhuman or near-human) groups, animals, plants, and so on.

By religion, I mean a body of commonly held beliefs relating to the nature and workings of the supernatural. This body of belief need not be codified in any formal way, nor need the boundaries between individual 'religions' be clearly definable. I assume that the communities of Iron Age Europe all held beliefs that we would (if we had access to their long-vanished minds) characterise as religious. I also assume that beliefs in these nonliterate societies were highly fluid across both time and space. In other words, no single 'Celtic religion' ever existed.

The concept of ideology is clearly related to both cosmology and religion. For Marx and his followers, ideology was a means by which the dominant class legitimated its position through the promulgation of a system of ideas that enshrined a 'natural' social order. Such ideologies might be inextricably intertwined with religious ideas, in which the position of the ruling class is presented as divinely sanctioned (if the ruling class is not itself divine). Such ideologies are often envisaged as a form of concealment, in which the dominant elite pulls the wool over the eyes of a subservient populace. From an external perspective, this may be a valid reading of the situation, but it perhaps underplays the extent to which members of the dominant elite are themselves bound by their own ideological constructs. Ideology may indeed represent 'false consciousness' – in other words, a distorted perspective obscuring the real operations and exploitations within a society. Yet it need not be seen as a conscious trick, knowingly played by one privileged group over the lower orders.

The boundaries between these three domains are necessarily fluid (Ill. 1.4). Those with a Marxist bent, for example, would probably see religion as no more than a component of ideology, whereas others (e.g., Insoll 2004) would prefer to see both ideology and cosmology more or less subsumed within religion. I am not interested in establishing firm boundaries between what will always remain fuzzy concepts. What is important here is that the relationships between these conceptual domains are open to change over time and space. Equally, changes in one are very likely to lead to changes in the others, particularly in a preliterate context. For instance, a new elite group, emerging through

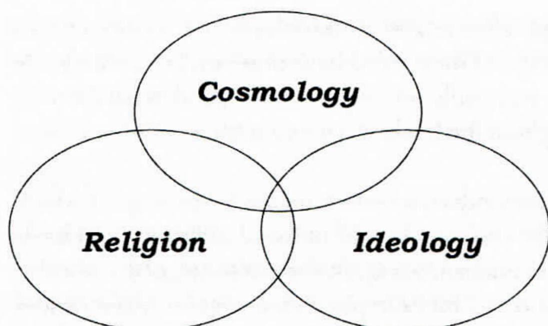

ILLUSTRATION 1.4. Religion, cosmology, and ideology.

economic or military preeminence, may rather quickly establish new ideologies to legitimate its privileged position (e.g., Earle 1997). It may well exert power or influence over religious structures that might shift or distort the content, or at least emphasis, of religious understandings. In time, this may affect the cosmological basis on which understandings of the world are founded, embedding a largely arbitrary social order within a stable 'natural' system. Cosmology, religion, and ideology are thus used here as heuristic devices to enable us to understand some of the different manifestations of the human head in Iron Age practice and belief.

Ritual violence

> Ritualisation is both a way of acting which reveals some of the dominant concerns of society, and a process by which certain parts of life are selected and provided with an added emphasis. (Bradley 2005, 34)

If headhunting is to be understood as a form of ritualised violence, then we need to consider what is meant by ritualisation. Richard Bradley (2005) has defined this as the process by which particular acts are given special emphasis, through the formality of their performance. Ritualised actions might simply elaborate on routine, day-to-day activities, or else they might be performances specifically created to achieve a particular purpose or express a particular idea or set of relationships. The kind of complex liturgical ritual that comes quickly to mind for modern westerners fits into this latter category, where the purpose is mediation with the supernatural. Ritualised actions might be repeated many times and may be seen as 'traditional' in character. Equally, they may represent creative variations on a set of commonly understood themes, such as we might see in the individualistic ritual performances of shamans (Jordan 2001, 100). In small-scale societies, lacking any central religious authority, we might expect a good deal of innovation and variety in ritual performances, especially where these are infrequent and initiated by part-time, rather than fully specialised, ritualists (e.g., Hill 1995, 116).

Perhaps the most important aspect of Bradley's concept of ritualisation is that it firmly separates ritual from religion; two concepts that are frequently confused. Ritual acts need not be religious in character. Though they may involve interactions with the supernatural,

rituals may also be essentially secular, centring on communication primarily between performers and the audience. But ritual acts do, I would suggest, necessarily relate to one or more of the triad of religion, cosmology, and ideology.

Decapitation, like other acts of violence, may be ritualised as a means of accommodating it within a religious, cosmological, or ideological framework. In this way, ritualisation can act to legitimize violence that might, from another perspective, be seen as motivated by a simple desire for personal power, slaves, land, or tribute. Yet, in other contexts, heads are taken primarily to fulfil religious or cosmological obligations. The ritual element here is not a post hoc rationalisation of violence: it is the prime motivating factor. These ideas will become clearer in Chapter 3 when we consider some actual case studies drawn from the anthropological literature. For now, what is important is that the ritualisation of violence can take many forms, and have many motivations.

For present purposes then, when I refer to ritualised violence, I mean violence as formalised action, or conscious performance, understood in relation to prevailing ideologies, religious beliefs, or cosmological structures.

From here on ...

In the following chapters, I examine the evidence for headhunting and related practices in Iron Age Europe in relation to these ideas. I do not set out to provide a new interpretation of the 'Celtic cult of the head'. In fact, I do not attempt to set up any pan-European explanatory scheme at all. Nor do I provide any sort of comprehensive survey of the relevant evidence, which is extremely common and diverse across much of Europe (e.g., Hartl 2005). Instead, the focus is on the role of headhunting, and ideas about the head, in specific Iron Age communities. I focus throughout on a single detailed case study; the Iron Age of southern France, where we have an unparalleled conjunction of literary, iconographic, palaeopathological, and archaeological evidence for the development of beliefs and practices associated with the human head. Within each chapter, however, I also draw on shorter case studies, dealing with particular sites or objects from elsewhere in Europe, especially northern Scotland, Ireland, Belgium, Iberia, and central and northern France, to explore related aspects of the treatment of the head.

In Chapter 2, I examine the origins and development of the conventional belief in a 'Celtic cult of the head'. There I discuss the various strands of evidence that have been combined, over many years, to define this phenomenon and examine the basis of its longevity as a Celtic trope. In particular, this involves a detailed consideration of the literary sources, predominantly from the classical world and from early medieval Ireland and Wales, which first laid the seeds of this idea. I also discuss the ways in which the value of this concept has been eroded in the face of new interpretations of Europe's prehistoric past. Then, in Chapter 3, I briefly examine the development of anthropological writing on headhunting. Here I consider, in particular, the potential of past ethnographic work to inform and focus our interpretations of prehistoric societies.

In Chapters 4–6, I consider the role of the human head in Iron Age cosmology, religion, and ideology. Chapter 4 introduces the major regional case study that forms the backbone of the rest of the book; the Iron Age of southern France. The wealth of evidence

for special treatment of the human head in this region takes the form of elaborate stone sculptures, skeletal remains suggesting the curation, display, and deposition of human heads on both domestic and religious sites, and a range of textual references. The core of Chapter 4 comprises a discussion of the earliest manifestations of this Iron Age interest in the head, through a close study of several important stone carvings that depict human heads grouped into elaborate and regular compositions. I argue that these carvings are analogous to other monuments concerned with the severed head found at other times and in other places, within societies that believed in an association between the human head and the fertility of people, animals, and crops. Against this background I then reconsider some other depictions of heads from Iron Age Europe, in stone, wood, and metal, and suggest that a widespread cosmological relationship may have existed here too between heads and fertility.

The focus shifts, in Chapter 5, towards the role of severed heads as liminal objects, caught between the mundane world of the living and the otherworld of the dead. Here the discussion moves from the realm of broad-scale cosmology to the more specific and localised religious beliefs and practices through which Iron Age communities engaged with the supernatural. Whereas the discussion in Chapter 4 considers Iron Age iconography with little reference to the locations in which it was displayed, Chapter 5 brings these special places to the fore. Again I concentrate on the evidence from the southern French Iron Age, where activity at sites such as Roquepertuse suggests the emergence of increasingly formalised religious practices, but I also consider a series of cave sites that highlight the persistence of related ideas in the later prehistory of northern Europe.

In Chapter 6, religion gives way to ideology, as I examine the distinctive and individualistic sculptures that emerge in the third century BC in southern France, and the human remains that testify to the reality of the practices they depict. These images graphically portray the importance of headhunting to the emerging elites of the region and place art, violence, and religion at the centre of the Iron Age political scene. Headhunting, I argue, plays a key role in the establishment and legitimisation of these new militaristic authorities, just as it did in a range of ethnographically documented societies of more recent times. The evidence is not restricted to the classic southern French oppida like Entremont but can be paralleled far to the north at central Gaulish sanctuaries such as Ribemont-sur-Ancre. Here, although we lack the contemporary iconography, the evidence from human bones themselves provides stark evidence of decapitation and display.

The focus in Chapter 7 shifts away from the head to consider other aspects of body treatment and deposition. In particular, I explore the deposits that combine human and animal body parts and the potential cosmological links between the two. Evidence from the more fragmented, small-scale societies of Atlantic Scotland is used to contrast with the more hierarchical social forms that emerged in southern France. Some of the actions and beliefs behind the deposition of human remains in various states and combinations are considered in relation to ideas of individuality, the self, and personhood in prehistory. These further dimensions to ritual violence and the body help place the head deposits within a broader context.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I draw together some of these themes and consider their broader implications. How might we interpret the nexus of ideas that seems to emerge in Iron

Age Europe surrounding the role and importance of the human head in the realms of cosmology, religion, and ideology? To what extent can the special treatment accorded to the human head be seen as a pan-European phenomenon? And how does the treatment of heads relate to wider attitudes to the human body? Last of all, I return to where I started, at the Cnip wheelhouse in Lewis, and explain whose head it was in that pit.