

# THE CULT OF THE HEAD

CHRIS RUDD

**F**or over 500 years, from the Black Sea to the Atlantic, the Celtic peoples of Europe were obsessed with the human head. They believed the head was the seat of the soul. They revered heads, cut off heads, collected heads, embalmed heads, stuck heads on poles, kept heads at home and even carried them on horseback.

Dr Anne Ross, commenting on Greek and Roman reports, says: "We are told that the heads of prized enemies were taken, impaled on spears or fastened to the saddles of horses and borne home in triumph. They were thereafter impaled on stakes about the houses and fortresses of the Celtic chiefs and placed in their temples. Livy describes enemy chieftains in a temple in 216 BC and their custom of decking skulls with gold and using them as cups ... Diodorus and Strabo refer to the Celtic custom of embalming heads of the most distinguished enemies in cedar oil.

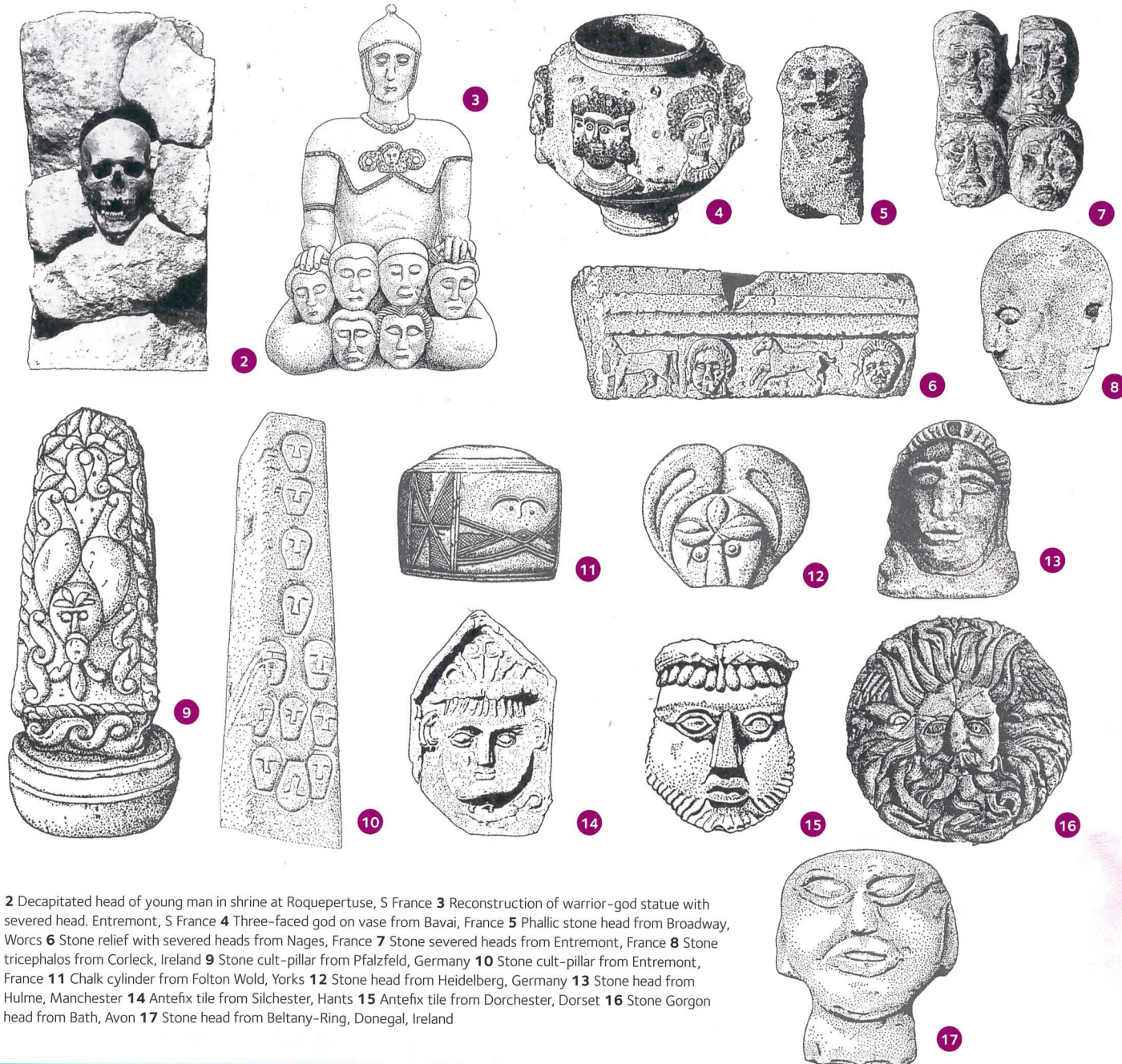
They were then preserved in a chest and exhibited to strangers with great pride as insignia of military prowess. Their owners often refused to part with them even for their weight in gold, so highly were they esteemed" (Pagan Celtic Britain, 1967, p.64-66).

Like Harry Bain, I believe in the power of pictures. So, rather than write about the Celtic cult of the head, I'll show you what the Celts themselves made of it 2000 years ago. ●



1 Celtic coins of Britain and Gaul which appear to show severed heads or skulls 18/19 Severed heads on silver phalerae found at Manerbio sul Mella, N Italy, 1927 20 Singing stone head from S France, ex Chris Rudd collection 21 Shouting head on bronze disc from Monastervin, Co. Kildare, E Ireland 22/23 Brigantes stone heads from Yorkshire. The British Museum, ex Chris Rudd collection 24 Stone head from Salkeld, Cumbria, ex Chris Rudd collection 25 Icen stone head from Thetford, Norfolk The British Museum, ex Chris Rudd collection 26 Stone head found at Appelby, Cumbria 27 Large stone head, 46 x 36cm, from Ballyartan, N Ireland. TimeLine Auctions, 25.2.20, lot 516, £27,500 28 Carvetii terracotta head with 'coin crown' from Cumberland 29 Dobunni stone head from Gloucester 30 Phallic stone head incised with 'chakra' circles, from Eype, Dorset 31 So-called 'Maponus' stone head from Corbridge, Northumberland





2 Decapitated head of young man in shrine at Roquepertuse, S France 3 Reconstruction of warrior-god statue with severed head. Entremont, S France 4 Three-faced god on vase from Bavai, France 5 Phallic stone head from Broadway, Worcs 6 Stone relief with severed heads from Nages, France 7 Stone severed heads from Entremont, France 8 Stone tricephalos from Corleck, Ireland 9 Stone cult-pillar from Pfalzfeld, Germany 10 Stone cult-pillar from Entremont, France 11 Chalk cylinder from Folton Wold, Yorks 12 Stone head from Heidelberg, Germany 13 Stone head from Hulme, Manchester 14 Antefix tile from Silchester, Hants 15 Antefix tile from Dorchester, Dorset 16 Stone Gorgon head from Bath, Avon 17 Stone head from Beltany-Ring, Donegal, Ireland

### Acknowledgements

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### PICTURE CREDITS

1 photos Chris Rudd/AGK Images/KHM/Delestrée & Tache; drawings F W Fairholt/E Hucher/D Allen 2 Musée Borély, Marseilles 3 Simon James, *Exploring the World of the Celts*, T&H, 1993 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 Richard Feachem for Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, R&KP, 1967 18, 19 Museo Civico dell'Età Romana, Brescia, photo Erich Lessing, AGK Images 20, 22, 23, 24, 25 Chris Rudd 21 © The British Museum 26, 28 Tullie House, Carlisle, photo Jessop Group Ltd 27 TimeLine Auctions 29 Gloucester City Museum and Art Gallery 30 Dorset County Museum 31 © English Heritage