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The River-Goddess in Celtic Traditions: Mother, Healer and Wisdom Purveyor

To state the case in brief, water symbolizes the whole of potentiality: it is *fons* and *origo*, the source of all possible existence. [...] Principle of what is formless and potential, basis of every cosmic manifestation, container of all seeds, water symbolizes the primal substance from which all forms come and to which they will return either by their own regression or in a cataclysm.¹

As Mircea Eliade explains, water has always been regarded as a particularly sacred element of the landscape, venerated for its life-giving and generative force. Archaeology reveals that peoples increasingly settled along rivers and nearby lakes or bogs in the Bronze and Iron Ages.² The supply of water was a necessary and essential condition for the survival of the community, the irrigation of the crops and the raising of cattle. Water was also believed to possess curative virtues which could soothe and heal, and was an important means of transport facilitating cultural and trading contacts. While promoting life and fertility, water was also recognised as a capricious and dangerous natural phenomenon, which could instantly destroy habitations, flood crops and drown livestock. Its wrath was therefore much feared by the peoples who wanted to be granted clemency. This explains why water was held in high respect and became revered as a divine entity, worshipped for its beneficial and destructive dimensions. The numinous aspect of water also arose from the mystery of its origin: springs miraculously gushed forth from the ground where the divine world was believed to be situated and were thus interpreted as a gift from the gods. Indeed, many legends of Irish mythology recount that the Otherworld could be reached through water.³ The sea, a lake, a spring or a river was seen as a threshold or gateway to the divine world, water delimiting the boundary between the natural and the supernatural worlds.

The belief in a goddess embodying the river is illustrated in Irish myth by legends relating the drowning of divine ladies in rivers, who, from that moment on, inhabit, personify and protect the river bearing

¹ Eliade, 1958, p. 188.

² Cooney & Grogan, 1994, p. 153-156 ; O’Sullivan, 2007, p. 161-163.

³ Löffler, 1983, p. 82-111, 280-291.

their name. Such is the case of Bóinn, the goddess of the River Boyne, Sionann, the goddess of the River Shannon, Eithne, the goddess of the River Inny, Odras, the goddess of the River Odras, and Érne the goddess of the River Érne. In Gaul and Britain, epigraphy and archaeology demonstrate that the chief rivers were also deified: the River Seine was personified by the goddess Sequana, the River Saône by the goddess Souconna, the River Yonne by the goddess Icauna, the River Marne by the goddess Matrona and the River Wharfe by the goddess Verbeia. Who were those Irish and Gallo-British river-goddesses, were they similar in essence and what functions did they fulfil? After briefly analyzing the archaeological, hydronymic and literary data evidencing the worship of waters in Celtic times and illustrating the belief in a divine entity residing in water, Celtic river-goddess traditions in Ireland, Gaul and Britain will be studied from a linguistic, literary, epigraphic, iconographical and religious standpoint, and their functions of wisdom giver, healer and mother providing life and death will be analyzed.

1. The divinisation of water

1.1 The deposition of votive offerings in watery places

Several studies have demonstrated that the deposition of artifacts (weapons, tools, jewels, cauldrons, horse trappings and musical instruments) in ‘wet places’ - sites linked to water - was a particularly widespread custom in the Bronze and Iron Ages.⁴ The deposition of weaponry and personal ornaments in specific areas of rivers (e.g. at fords), lakes and bogs are clearly to be understood as votive offerings, belonging to a whole complex of religious rites fulfilled in honour of the deities residing in those watery places – they were not accidentally dropped or lost.⁵ This is all the more probable as many of the metal materials had been previously damaged or destroyed before being deposited. This ‘rite of passage’, aiming at honouring the gods by offering them unusable weapons, is known from Prehistoric and especially Celtic times.⁶ The war sanctuary of Gournay-sur-Aronde (Somme) is a good illustration of this.⁷

Examples of such deposits of offerings in lakes, bogs and rivers are multiple. In Gaul, a significant number of Late Bronze Age swords were discovered in the River Loire,⁸ and numerous 2nd-Iron Age spearheads and swords were recovered from the River Saône, more specifically at fords.⁹ From the River

⁴ O’Sullivan, 2007, p. 183-199; Cooney & Grogan, 1994; Eogan, 1983; Bradley, 1990.

⁵ Bradley, 1990; O’Sullivan, 2007, p. 182-190.

⁶ Bradley, 1982.

⁷ Brunaux, 1986, p. 126-128.

⁸ Briard, 1966, p. 185-192.

⁹ Dumont, 1997 & 2006.

Thames in Britain, spearheads, swords, pieces of armour and defensive weapons have been dredged since the 19th c (e.g. the two 3rd-century/1st-century BC Wandsworth shield bosses and the 1st-century BC horned helmet).¹⁰ Similarly, in Ireland, swords, dirks and rapiers dating from the Bronze and Iron Ages were found in the beds of the Rivers Shannon, Bann, Barrow and Érne at particular places.¹¹ Finds of great interest are the Bronze and Iron Age anthropomorphic wooden figures, possibly representing a deity, respectively dug up at the Bog of Ralaghan (Co. Cavan), in Lagore Lake (Co. Meath) and on trackways in Cloncreen Bog at Ballykilleen, at Kilberg (Co. Offaly) and at Corlea (Co. Longford).¹² Similarly, on the Continent, a large assemblage of weaponry, jewellery, tools and perishable organic materials, dating from the 3rd c. BC onwards, was retrieved from Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland.¹³ The archaeological discoveries of lake hoards lend support to the evidence from the accounts of the Greek geographer Strabo and the Roman historian Justinus, who relate that the Volcae Tectosages had flung a huge treasure composed of silver and gold into the Lake of Toulouse to appease the gods' wrath.¹⁴ This account evidences the sacred quality of lakes and exemplifies the tradition of depositing hoards and treasures in water to propitiate the gods.

As we shall see below in more detail, the deposition of votive offerings in water continued in Gallo-Roman and Romano-British times (jewels, epigraphic altars, representations of the pilgrims themselves, swaddled babies and protective deities in wood, stone, bronze, gold and iron) and is particularly attested at the sources of rivers, thermal springs and fountains, for these were believed to be the dwellings of gods and goddesses, who personified the water and exercised their curative and salutary virtues over the people.

1.2 Numinous rivers or springs: deva, divonna, bandae

While most ancient river names are mere 'generic names' involving no particular religious tradition and describe the appearance, nature and quality of the river or of the surroundings through which it flows - such as the River Doubs (the 'Black (Water))' in France,¹⁵ or *an Uinsinn* (the Unshin, 'the River of the

¹⁰ Kruta, 2000, p. 870-871; Adkins & Jackson, 1978.

¹¹ O'Sullivan, 2007, p. 185; Cooney & Grogan, 1994, p. 143.

¹² Coles, 1990; Cooney & Grogan, 1994, p. 155-156; Hencken, 1950-1951; Stanley, 2006 & 2007; McDermott, Moore, Murray & Stanley, 2003; Raftery, 1996.

¹³ Kruta, 2000, p. 837-838; Brunaux, 1986, p. 47.

¹⁴ Strabo, *The Geography*, Book IV.1.13 recounts the testimony of the Greek philosopher Poseidonius. Justinus, *Epitome*, XXXII. 3. 9-11. It is said that the Roman consul Quintus Servilius Caepio, who seized and plundered the city in 106 AD and fished up the gold in the sacred lake, was doomed to a tragic end. Cf. Boudartchouk & Gardes, 2007, p. 473-474. Bourgeois, 1991, p. 94-95 references the various studies which have been done on the origin, emplacement and authenticity of the gold of Toulouse.

¹⁵ Lambert, 1995, p. 37; Delamarre, 2003, p. 151-152. From a Gaulish root *dub-* (*dubu*, *dubi*), 'black'.

Ash Tree’) in Connacht¹⁶ -, many other hydronyms, which are based on *deva* - derived from an old IE root **deivo*, **deiva*, meaning ‘divine’ -, *divona* - a derived form of *deva*, probably signifying ‘divine spring’ -, or *bandae* (Modern Irish *Bandia*), composed of *ban* (‘woman’) and *dia* (‘deity’), i.e. ‘the Goddess’ -, are numinous names clearly reminiscent of the sanctity and divinisation of rivers in ancient times.¹⁷ Such is the case of all the Rivers Dee and Devon in Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland;¹⁸ the Rivers Dive, Divette, Divatte in Gaul;¹⁹ the two coastal rivers, called la Deba and la Deva, in the North West of Spain;²⁰ the Rivers Dievenbeke, Dieve and Dieversdelle in Belgium;²¹ and the rivers Bann (*an Bhanna*) in Ulster and in Co. Wicklow, Banna (*an Bhanna*) in North Antrim and Bandon (*an Bhandá*) at Kinsale in Co. Cork, in Ireland.²²

1.3 The lady in the water in Irish tradition

It is clear then that votive deposits in wet places and divine hydronyms in Ireland, Britain and Gaul indicate that water was regarded as sacred in ancient times and deified as a goddess residing in its bed. Interestingly, the concept of a divine lady inhabiting and embodying the water is significantly attested in Irish mythology. Many texts tell of underwater realms inhabited by beautiful divine maidens, such as *Tír fó Thuinn* (‘Land-Under-Waves’), which is reached by diving into the waters of the sea, a well, a lake or a river; *Tír na mBan* (‘Land of Women’), a subaquatic paradisiacal island inhabited by gorgeous women and concealed under the waves between Ireland and Lochlann;²³ and *Inis Fionnchuire* (‘the Island of Fianchaire’), situated underneath Muir Torraín, between Ireland and Britain, where three times fifty beautiful women were said to dwell.²⁴

¹⁶ Macalister, 1921, p. 291.

¹⁷ Delamarre, 2003, p. 142-143. The IE root **deivo*, **deiva*, gave the forms *devos* in Gaulish, *dia* in Old Irish, *duy* in Old Cornish and *duiu*, *duw*, *dwy* in Welsh.

¹⁸ Rivet & Smith, 1979, p. 336-338 ; Hogan, 1910, p. 338. In Ireland, the River Dee flows into the Irish Sea, north of Annagassan (Co. Louth); in England, into the Irish Sea in Cheshire; in Scotland, into the Irish Sea in Kirkcudbright (Dumfries and Galloway) and into the North Sea at Aberdeen (Aberdeenshire). The Welsh Rivers Afon Dwyfawr (‘Big Dee’) and Afon Dwyfach (‘Small Dee’) unite below the village of Llan Ystumdwy in the Lleyn Peninsula (Gwynedd). The River Devon is a tributary of the River Trent (Nottinghamshire, England).

¹⁹ e.g. La Dives, which flows into the English Channel in Dives-sur-Mer (Calvados); La Divatte, a tributary of the River Loire in La Varenne (Maine et Loire), etc. Cf. Nègre, 1990, p. 112, n°2106-2110 ; Pictet, 1873-1875, p. 2-5; Carnoy, 1951.

²⁰ De Vries, 1963, p. 124. La Deba is situated to the west of Saint-Sebastian and La Deva flows west of Santander.

²¹ Carnoy, 1951, p. 104. The Dievenbeke flows in Ingelmunster; the Dieve in Rotselaar (now the name of a fief) and the Dieversdelle in Uccle-lez-Bruxelles (today’s Diesdelle).

²² Hogan, 1910, p. 95; O’Rahilly, 1946, p. 6; Mac an Bhaird, 1991, p. 3.

²³ This place is uncertainly located, possibly corresponding to Scandinavia. In the 8th-century *Imram Curaig Maíle Dúin* [‘The Voyage of Máel Dúin’s Boat’] and in the 7th-century *Imram Bran* [‘The Voyage of Bran’], it is also visited by Máel Dúin and Bran on their respective voyages to the Otherworld. Cf. Meyer & Nutt, 1895-1897 ; Whitley, 1888 & 1889.

²⁴ In *Oidhe Chloinne Tuireann* [‘The Fate of the Children of Tuireann’], which is a late medieval text, Brian, Iuchair and Iucharba, the three sons of Tuireann, were asked by Lugh Lámfhota to retrieve the magic cooking-spit from this island. Cf. O’Duffy, 1888.

Moreover, other legends suggest that the sea was incarnated by a goddess. This belief is illustrated by an archaic poem, dating from the beginning of the 7th or 8th century, comprised in the third fragment of the *Annals of Tigernach* (489-766 AD)²⁵ and in the *Chronicon Scotorum* (622 AD),²⁶ which tells of the drowning of Conaing by a divine woman - who can be identified with the Mórrígain - inhabiting the sea: her fair hair metaphorically stands for the crested waves (*In bean rola a mong find*).²⁷ This motif is found in another 8th-century poem which relates a violent storm at sea, in which the waves are described as *mong mná Mananánn*, “the hair of the wife of Mananánn (the god of the sea)”.²⁸ In addition, two poems of the *Metrical Dindshenchas*, dating from the 10th and 11th centuries, relate that Clíona, daughter of Genann, was drowned at Cúan Dor (the Bay of Glandore, in Co. Cork) under a huge wave during a violent storm. Since then, she has inhabited this wave which is called after her: *Tonn Chlíona* (‘the Wave of Clíona’).²⁹ Similarly, a poem of the *Metrical Dindshenchas* recounts that Eba, the leech-woman accompanying Cessair in her journey to Ireland, was drowned under the waves when she was sleeping on a stretch of the coast of Co. Sligo, which now bears her name: *Tráig Eba* (‘the Beach of Eba’).³⁰ Significantly, this belief has also endured in oral tradition. Indeed, the legend known as “the Knife against the Wave”, 150 versions of which have been recorded in counties Donegal and Kerry, tells of a maiden from the sea who falls in love with a fisherman and turns herself into a huge wave to abduct him and bring him to her subaquatic realm. In order to thwart the curse, the fisherman sticks a knife with a black shaft into the supernatural wave and a terrible cry of pain comes out of it: the goddess is wounded, the knife stuck into her body.³¹

These legends about the sea clearly evidence the belief in a goddess residing in water and personifying this element. The maiden is generally transformed into the waters after being drowned. As will be analyzed in the second part of this paper, this pattern is well-known in Irish medieval literature and particularly applied to river-goddesses. In Gaul and Britain, the same concept can be found of a goddess bearing the name of the river and embodying its waters.

2. River-goddesses

The cult of river-goddesses is widely attested in Ireland, Britain and Gaul by ancient literary texts, epigraphic devices and votive offerings discovered at places of worship where the goddesses used to be

²⁵ Stokes, 1896, p. 175-176.

²⁶ Hennessy, 1866, p. 76-77.

²⁷ Beck, 2012, p. 242-251. The term *mong*, meaning ‘hair’, ‘locks’ or ‘mane’ in Irish, was a metaphor used in ancient Irish literature to designate the crested waves, cf. *LEIA*, M-63

²⁸ Jackson, 1935, p. 30-31, poem 32, strophe 8, vers 4, and notes p. 47-48.

²⁹ Gwynn, 1913, p. 207-215.

³⁰ Gwynn, 1924, p. 292-293, 453.

³¹ Ross, 1994, p. 83-85.

honoured - generally unearthed at the sources of the rivers. There is no doubt about their Celticity: their names, even though their origins sometimes remain obscure, are unmistakably Celtic. River deification is not limited to female figures: important river gods are known from inscriptions discovered in Gaul and Germany, such as Rhenos, the god of the Rhine, or Danuvios, the god of the Danube.³² Nevertheless, river-goddesses predominate, because rivers were regarded as mothers fertilizing the fields and nurturing the people.

2.1 Literary data in Ireland

The River Boyne, called *an Bhóinn* in Modern Irish (*Bóand* in Old Irish), which has its source at Newberry Hall, near Carbury (Co. Kildare), flows through Co. Meath and empties into the Irish Sea at Drogheda (Co. Louth). The earliest reference to the Boyne dates from the 2nd-century AD by Ptolemy, who calls the river *Buvinda*, the original form of which would have been **Bóu-vinda*, meaning ‘the Cow-White (Goddess)’ or ‘the Bovine Wise (Goddess)’, according to Thomas Francis O’Rahilly.³³ This etymology is however challenged by some modern scholars. Enrico Campanile has for instance suggested a new interpretation as ‘Who finds her cattle’ through comparison with the Vedic hapax *govindú-*.³⁴

The legend of the goddess Bóinn is recounted in two poems of the *Metrical Dindshenchas*. *Boand I*, the stratum of which predates the 10th century, relates that Nechtan, the husband of Bóinn, had a dangerous bewitched well in his homestead, known as the ‘Well of Nechtan’.³⁵ Although access to the well was reserved for Nechtan and his cupbearers, one day Bóinn decided to challenge its powers, but soon after she had approached it, the fountain rose and blemished parts of her body. She then ran towards the sea, pursued by the water of the well, and perished, drowned under the waves of the newly formed river, to which she gave her name:

[...] Nechtan son of bold Labraid whose wife was Bóand, I aver; a secret well there was in his stead, from which gushed forth every kind of mysterious evil. There was none that would look to its bottom but his two bright eyes would burst: if he should move to left or right, he would not come from it without blemish. Therefore none of them dared approach it save Nechtan and his cup-bearers: — these are their names, famed for brilliant deed, Flesc and Lam and Luam. Hither came on a day white Bóand (her noble pride

³² Rhenus: *CIL* XIII, 5255, 7790, 7791, 8810, 8811; *AE* 1969/1970, 434. Danuvios: *CIL* III, 3416, 5863, 10263, 10395, 11804. Diodorus Siculus, in his *Historical Library* (V, 25, 31), refers to the Danube as *Danoubios*.

³³ Ptolemy, *Geography*, II.2.7 ; Mac an Bhaird, 1991, p. 11; O’Rahilly, 1946, p. 2-3; Ó hÓgáin, 1994, p. 17, 21-22; Delamarre, 2003, p. 79-80. **Bóu-vinda* is a ‘co-ordinate’ or ‘co-referential’ compound, composed of *bó*, ‘cow’ and **vindā*, a word denoting whiteness, brightness and wisdom.

³⁴ Campanile, 1985a; Campanile, 1985b, p. 51-53 .

³⁵ Gwynn, 1913, p. 26-33, 480-481. It was written by Cuán ua Locháin, an Irish poet who died in 1024. This poem is identical to a legend entitled *Tochmarc Emire* [‘The Wooing of Emer’], in which Cú Chulainn tells Eimhear the story of the River Boyne. Cf. Van Hamel, 1933, p. 37-38.

uplifted her), to the well, without being thirsty to make trial of its power. As thrice she walked round about the well heedlessly, three waves burst from it, whence came the death of Bóand. They came each wave of them against a limb, they disfigured the soft-blooming woman; a wave against her foot, a wave against her perfect eye, the third wave shatters one hand. She rushed to the sea (it was better for her) to escape her blemish, so that none might see her mutilation; on herself fell her reproach. Every way the woman went the cold white water followed from the Síd to the sea (not weak it was), so that thence it is called Bóand. [...] ³⁶

This text is particularly interesting, for parts of the river are described as body-parts of the goddess: a portion of the river is her forearm and her calf, while another is her neck and another her marrow. This clearly illustrates the belief in a goddess embodying the river: her body *is* the river. *Boand II* differs slightly from the first poem.³⁷ It recounts that Bóinn, the wife of Nechtan, bore the Dagda a son, called Oengus. To cleanse herself of her betrayal and guilt, she decided to bathe in the well of Nechtan. Waves then burst from the enchanted spring and drowned her.

The River Shannon, *an tSionainn* in Modern Irish (*Sinann* and *Sinand* in Old Irish), rises at Tiltinbane in the Cuilcagh Mountain (Co. Cavan) and flows into the Atlantic Ocean in the Shannon Estuary. In the 2nd c. AD, Ptolemy gave the name *Sēnu* to the river, which O’Rahilly reads *Senā* and translates ‘the Ancient (Goddess)’.³⁸ Two similar versions of the legend of Sionann, dating from the late 10th c. and the early 11th c., are given in the *Metrical Dindshenchas*.³⁹ They explain that the River Shannon had its source at ‘Connla’s Well’ or the ‘Well of Segais’ in the Land of Promise - which is actually the source of the River Boyne -, around which nine crimson hazel trees of wisdom grew. Their magical nuts inspiring poets used to fall in the waters of the well and engender mystical bubbles. Sionann, the daughter of Lodan Luchair-glan of the Tuatha Dé Danann, spellbound by the bubbles, went into the river with the aim of catching them and drowned. Her name was then given to the river:

[...] Connla's well, loud was its sound, was beneath the blue-skirted ocean: six streams, unequal in fame, rise from it, the seventh was Sinann. The nine hazels of Crimall the sage drop their fruits yonder under the well: they stand by the power of magic spells under a darksome mist of wizardry. [...] From the juice of the nuts (no paltry matter) are formed the mystic bubbles; thence come momentarily the bubbles down the green-flowing streams. [...] The maiden [Sinann], - fair was her form, - came on a day to the river and saw - it was

³⁶ Gwynn, 1913, p. 29, 31.

³⁷ Gwynn, 1913, p. 34-39, 481-482. The poem is addressed to Maoilsheachlainn mac Domnaill, the Uí Néill High King of Ireland from 980, who was ousted from the kingship in 1002 by Brian Bóramha, the leader of the Dál gCais sept. It was composed before the death of Maoilsheachlainn mac Domnaill in 1022.

³⁸ Freeman, 2001, p. 74, 113; O’Rahilly, 1946, p. 4. It is based on Old Irish *sen*, ‘old’, ‘ancient’, cf. Delamarre, 2003, p. 270-271.

³⁹ Gwynn, 1913, p. 286-291, 529-530 (*Sinann I*); p. 293-297, 530 (*Sinann II*). As the story of Bóinn is older and as Cuán ua Locháin is the author of both *Boinn I* and *Sinann II*, it seems clear that the legend of Sionann is a derivative of the legend of Bóinn.

no paltry matter - the lovely mystic bubbles. The maiden goes on a lamentable venture after them into the green-flowing river: she is drowned yonder through her venture; so from her is Sinann named. [...] ⁴⁰

The pattern of the divine lady drowned in the river is found again in the story of the goddess Eithne, whose name is eponymous of the two rivers called Inny, *an Eithne* in Irish. The major one flows from Lough Sheelan and joins the River Shannon at Lough Ree (Co. Westmeath and Longford) and the smaller one flows in the peninsula of Iveragh (Co. Kerry). ⁴¹ A legend, contained in an early text in Old Irish, entitled *Ferchuitred Medba* [‘Medb’s Man-share’], recounts that Eithne drowned in the stream of Bearramhain while she was bearing the child of the mythical King Conchobhar mac Neasa. ⁴² Their son Furbaidhe was cut from her womb and the river was named after her. Another poem, entitled *Carn Furbaide* [‘The Carn of Furbaide’], contained in the *Metrical Dindshenchas*, offers a slightly different story. It tells that Eithne, the wife of Conchobhar, was drowned by Lugaid, while expecting Furbaidhe, in a river which now bears her name. ⁴³

Similarly, the goddess Érne, whose legend is related in a poem of the *Metrical Dindshenchas*, entitled *Loch Érne*, recounts that Érne, the chief of a peaceful group of maidens in Ráth Cruachan, took fright at the sight of the terrible Cruachu Olcai and ran into Lough Érne where she was drowned under its waters. ⁴⁴ Therefore, Érne gave her name to the River Érne, *an Éirne* in Modern Irish, which flows from Beaghy Lough (Co. Cavan), through Lough Gowna, Lough Oughter and Lough Érne (Co. Longford, Cavan, and Fermanagh) and into the Atlantic Ocean near Ballyshannon (Co. Donegal). ⁴⁵

Finally, the River Odras, *Odhras* in Modern Irish - which must correspond to today’s River Boyle (*an Bhúill* in Irish), flowing from Lough Garra, through the village of Boyle and into Lough Key (Co. Roscommon) - was also personified by its eponymous goddess. A poem, entitled *Odras*, in the *Metrical Dindshenchas*, explains that Odras, who was the wife of a cattle lord and a milkmaid, was transformed into a river by the powerful Mórrígain, because she had refused to let one of her cows mate with the bull of the Mórrígain. ⁴⁶ Here the pattern is different from the legends of Bóinn, Sionann, Eithne and Érne, since Odras is not drowned in the river, but the concept is identical. The river and the goddess are as one: the goddess is the personification of the river.

⁴⁰ Gwynn, 1913, p. 293, 295.

⁴¹ Hogan, 1910, p. 403-404.

⁴² Bergin, Best, Meyer & O’Keefe, 1913, p. 18, lines 17-22. The same tale is related in the early 10th-century *Cath Boinde* [‘The Battle of Boind’] and in the c. 13th-century *Cóir Anmann* [‘The Fitness of Names’]. Cf. O’Neill, 1905, p. 176-177 ; Stokes, 1897, p. 396.

⁴³ Gwynn, 1924, p. 30-31.

⁴⁴ Gwynn, 1913, p. 460-467.

⁴⁵ Hogan, 1910, p. 395.

⁴⁶ Gwynn, 1924, p. 196-201, 429.

2.2 *The archeological, epigraphic and iconographic data in Gaul and Britain*

The belief in a river-goddess was shared by all the Celtic peoples, for Gaulish and British votive epigraphy reveals that the rivers Seine, Marne, Saône and Yonne, in France, and Wharfe, in England, were incarnated by goddesses bearing their names: Sequana, Matrona, Souconna, Icauna and Verbeia.

2.2.1 *Sequana: goddess of the River Seine (France)*

Sequana is the name given by Julius Caesar in *De Bello Gallico* (Book I, 1) to the River Seine, which rises at the Sources-de-la-Seine, on the plateau of Langres, about thirty kilometres to the north-west of Dijon (Côte d'Or), and flows in the Paris Basin and on into the English Channel near Le Havre (Seine-Maritime). Sequana's name is undeniably Celtic, but its meaning remains obscure and uncertain. According to Edmond Jung, Sequana (**seik-ow-an-a*) might be a descriptive name meaning 'the river which is slowly flowing out' or 'the one which is dripping'.⁴⁷

Four seasons of excavations (1832-1836, 1926-1939, 1948-1953, 1963-1967), carried out at the Sources-de-la-Seine, revealed the existence of a huge Gallo-Roman water sanctuary, notably composed of a temple, rooms and baths. Nine inscriptions to the *Dea Sequana* engraved on various objects were also discovered: four altars, a stele depicting a pilgrim bearing two inscriptions in the Gaulish language and in Latin and Greek letterings, a gold ring, a red coarse ware jar containing bronze and silver plaques and Roman coins, a leg in stone and a plaque in bronze representing breasts.⁴⁸ It is significant that some of the dedicators are of Celtic origin, as the etymology of their names (Sinuella, daughter of Victius, Mariola, daughter of Maiumilus, Montiola, Dagolitus...) or their statute of peregrine prove. Also unearthed were a 1st-century AD stone statue of a seated goddess and a 1st-century AD bronze statue representing Sequana with a diadem, a *chiton* (Greek tunic) and a *pallium* (Greek mantle), standing on a boat with a duck-headed prow.⁴⁹ Finally, a considerable amount of votive offerings were excavated: 391 *ex-votos* in stone, 256 in metal and 278 in wood. Some of the votive offerings are personal ornaments, images of the pilgrims themselves or swaddled babies, while others are representations of body parts, such as legs, hands, breasts, pelvises, etc, which are known as anatomic *ex-votos*.

These discoveries indicate that Sequana was the personification of the River Seine and that her cult was prominent in Gallo-Roman times and undeniably goes back to Celtic times.

⁴⁷ from an IE root **sik*^w- or *seiku*-, meaning 'to drip', 'to pour' or 'to flow', 'to stream'. It may refer to the small rate of flow on the upper course of the River Seine. Cf. Jung, 1969, p. 434-461 ; Jung, 1973, p. 283-293.

⁴⁸ Le Bohec, 2003, p. 167-175 ; Deyts, 1994, p. 123-127; Green, 1999, p. 26-32 ; Beck, 2009, p. 441-448.

⁴⁹ Deyts, 1994, p. 9, 12, 129-130.

2.2.2 *Souconna: goddess of the River Saône (France)*

The River Saône, which has its source in Vioémnil, at the foot of the Monts Faucilles (Vosges), and flows into the river Rhône in Lyons (Rhône), had two different names in ancient times: *Arar* and *Souconna*, which was revealed by a late 1st-century AD inscription dedicated to the goddess of the river Saône, engraved on a limestone pedestal - originally associated with a statue representing the goddess -, excavated in Châlon-sur-Saône (Saône-et-Loire) in 1912.⁵⁰ It reads: *Aug(usto) sac(rum) deae Souconnae oppidani Cabilonnenses p(onendum) c(urauerunt)*, ‘Sacred to Augustus, to the goddess Souconna, the inhabitants of Châlon took care to build (this monument)’.⁵¹ The meaning of her name remains obscure. According to Garrett Olmsted, *Souconna* is derived from an IE root **sūk-* signifying ‘juice, sap, moisture, rain’, ‘to suck’ and means ‘the Suckler’, ‘the Flowing One’, but this etymology remains conjectural and uncertain.⁵²

A second inscription, engraved on a small stone pedestal, where only the naked feet of the goddess remain, was found near the spring of the stream Sagonin in the village of Sagonne (Cher) in 1899: *[N]um(ini) Aug(usti) D(eae) Souco[nae Di]vixtus Silani f(ilius)*, ‘To the divine power of Augustus, to the goddess Soucona, Divixtus, son of Silanus (offered this)’.⁵³ The fact that the dedicator and his father are peregrines and bear Gaulish names tends to prove that the cult of the goddess *Souconna* predates the Roman invasion.

2.2.3 *Icauna: goddess of the River Yonne (France)*

The ancient name of the River Yonne, which rises on Mont Préneley (Nièvre) and meets the River Seine at Montereau-Fault-Yonne (Seine-et-Marne), was revealed by a 2nd-century AD inscription dedicated to the goddess *Icauna*, discovered in Auxerre (Yonne) in 1721. The inscription, now lost, was engraved on a square altar and read: *Aug(usto) sac(rum) deae Icauni T(itus) Tetricius African(us) d(e) s(uo) d(edit) d(edicavit)*, ‘Sacred to Augustus, to the goddess *Icauna*, Titus Tetricus Africanus dedicated and offered (this stele) at his own expense’.⁵⁴ The significance of the name of *Icauna* is unknown. Jacques Lacroix proposes to break down her name as **(s)ic-auna*, i.e. ‘The One who gives Water’; the radical **(s)ic-* being possibly related to the radical *sec-* forming the name of Sequana (**Sec-u-ana*) and the radical *souc-*, a possible variant of *suk-*, found in the name of *Souconna*.⁵⁵ As for Pierre-Yves Lambert, he

⁵⁰ Roy-Chevrier, 1913, p. 8-43; Lacroix, 2007, p. 50-51. Greek and Latin authors, such as Caesar in *De Bello Gallico*, Book I, 12, refer to the River Saône as a calm river which they call *Arar*, *Araris* and *Araros*.

⁵¹ *AE* 1913, 161. It was found in re-employment in the 3rd or 4th-century wall of the city.

⁵² Olmsted, 1994, p. 367.

⁵³ *CIL* XIII, 11162 ; *AE* 1902, 255.

⁵⁴ *CIL* XIII, 2921. It was discovered in re-employment in the ancient wall of the city Auxerre (Yonne).

⁵⁵ Lacroix, 2007, p. 53-55. As for Delamarre, 2003, p. 187, he proposes **(s)(p)ico-*, ‘the green woodpecker’.

suggests to relate her name to Old Irish *icc*, meaning ‘to heal’, which would point to her function of healer.⁵⁶

Excavations carried out between 1980 and 1984 at the spring of the River Yonne, at Glux, in Morvant (Nièvre), revealed the ruins of two Gallo-Roman temples, situated about a hundred metres from the three springs of the river.⁵⁷ The archaeologists did not find any pipes channelling the waters of the river into the buildings, but the proximity of the monuments to the springs proves undeniably that they were erected in relation with it.

2.2.4 *Matrona: goddess of the River Marne (France)*

The River Marne, which rises on the plateau of Langres at Balesme-sur-Marne (Haute-Marne) and joins the River Seine at Charenton-le-Pont (Val-de-Marne), was called *Matrona* in ancient times, as Caesar mentions in *De Bello Gallico* (Book I, 1). *Matrona*’s name is undeniably Celtic. It is derived from the Gaulish *mātīr*, ‘mother’, cognate with Old Irish *máthair*, ‘mother’, gen. *máthar*, which all come from Indo-European **mātēr*, signifying ‘mother’.⁵⁸ *Matrona* (‘Divine Mother’) is the singular form of *Matronae* (‘Mother Goddesses’), honoured in multiple inscriptions from the Rhineland and Cisalpine Gaul.⁵⁹

The unique inscription dedicated to the goddess *Matrona*, dating from the 2nd c. AD, is engraved on an altar discovered in Balesmes-sur-Marne (Haute-Marne) in 1831. It reads: *Successus Natalis l(ibertus) maceriem caementiciam circa hoc templum de sua pecunia Matronae ex voto suscepto v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*, ‘Successus, freed from Natalis, had this outer wall in rubble stones built around this temple at his own expense in honour of *Matrona*, after making a vow, and paid his vow willingly and deservedly’.⁶⁰ This inscription is highly interesting, for it mentions a sanctuary erected in honour of the goddess. Thirty years earlier, excavations carried out at the spring of the river (in a place known as ‘La Marnotte’, five kilometres south-east of Langres, near Balesmes-sur-Marne) revealed ruins of early 1st-century AD buildings composed of twelve rooms - some of which were equipped with hot baths.⁶¹ The temple to *Matrona*, mentioned in the inscription, must have been part of this water complex.

⁵⁶ Lambert, December 2009 : personal communication.

⁵⁷ Pequinot & Picard, 1984, p. 40-43.

⁵⁸ Delamarre, 2003, p. 220; Lambert, 1995, p. 29, 61, 86, 168, 197.

⁵⁹ Beck, 2009, p. 44-129.

⁶⁰ *CIL* XIII, 5674; Le Bohec, 2003, p. 331-332.

⁶¹ Luquet, 1838-1839; Luquet, 1838, p. 137-150.

2.2.5 *Verbeia: goddess of the River Wharfe (England)*

The goddess Verbeia, who is honoured in a single inscription engraved on an altar, discovered before 1600 at a place known as Stubham Lodge, near Ilkley (Yorkshire, GB), is generally understood as being the personification of the River Wharfe, on which Ilkley is situated. The inscription reads: *Verbeiae sacrum Clodius Fronto praef(ectus) coh(ortis) II Lingon(um)*, ‘Sacred to Verbeia Clodius Fronto, prefect of the second Cohort of Lingonians (set this up)’.⁶² Heinrich Wagner suggests to relate her name to the Old Irish root *ferb*, ‘cattle’ and to translate her name as ‘She of the Cattle’, which would link her to other cow-shaped water-goddesses, such as Irish Bóinn, ‘the Cow-White (Goddess)’, Gaulish Damona, the ‘Cow (Goddess)’ and Borvoboendoa, ‘the Seething White Cow’.⁶³ This etymology remains however conjectural.

It is interesting to note that the belief in a female river-dwelling divinity has survived in the folklore of Ireland and France. A few legends, recorded in the *Irish Folklore Collection*⁶⁴ and in Paul Sébillot’s *Folklore de France*, recount that rivers are inhabited by beautiful mermaids to whom are attributed macabre and terrifying deeds. Sébillot relates that, in the *département* of Gers, river mermaids were seen at night singing and combing their long hair. It was believed that “they sucked the brain and the blood, and ate the heart, the liver and guts” of any poor wretch who passed by.⁶⁵ As mermaids are generally creatures of the sea, their presence in fresh water is not insignificant. The character of the river mermaid could be understood as an echo of the ancient cult of the river-goddess. The transformation of the supernatural river divinities into evil and damned souls is obviously due to Christian influence. After gathering the various data pertaining to river-goddesses, we now turn to analysing and defining the functions of these goddesses in order to understand their essence, role and place in the religious life of the various Celtic peoples.

3. Functions of the river-goddesses?

3.1 Imbas forosna, ‘Wisdom that illuminates’

In Ireland, textual evidence indicates that the river-goddess was clearly attached to the notions of esoteric knowledge, wisdom, poetry and foresight. First of all, the legends of Bóinn and Sionann mention the Well of Nechtan, which belongs to the *Sídh* (‘the Otherworld’) and possesses powerful magical powers, because its waters are imbued with all-encompassing knowledge contained in nuts

⁶² *RIB* 635.

⁶³ Wagner, 1981, p. 5-6; Lambert, 1995, p. 29; Delamarre, 2003, p. 79, 134-135, 425.

⁶⁴ *IFC* 733: 111-114 (Westmeath) ; *IFC* 233: 568 (Roscommon) and *IFC* 1307: 258-259 (Kerry). The IFC is located in the archives of the Irish Folklore Department of University College Dublin (Ireland).

⁶⁵ Sébillot, 2002, p. 619-620.

falling from nine hazel trees surrounding the spring. By attempting to catch the mystical bubbles or by challenging the enchanted well in trying to drink water from it or bathe into it, Sionann and Bóinn clearly wanted to gain access to the absolute seer-knowledge, i.e. *imbas forosna*, ‘wisdom that illuminates’, rather than acting out of mere curiosity. Maud Joynt explains that “the original legend perhaps foreshadowed the dangers which await those who seek the higher wisdom”, because absolute knowledge was believed to be perilous when not handled correctly and was not understandable to anybody: it was reserved for a select few.⁶⁶

These two legends exemplify that the source of wisdom resided in the fruits of the hazel but also in the body of water. An early Irish text, entitled *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* [‘The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel’], composed around the 8th or 9th c., also tells that *imbas [forosna]* could be acquired by drinking water from the River Bush (Co. Antrim) and the River Boyne at a specific moment of the year: [...] *7 imbas for Búais 7 Boind i medón in mís mithemon cacha bliadna* [...], “[...] and *imbas* on the Bush and the Boyne in the middle of the month of June each year [...]”.⁶⁷ The same mystical well, with its nine hazels and nuts dropping into the water, is described by Cormac mac Art when he goes to the Otherworld in *Echtra Cormaic i Tír Tairngiri* [*Cormac’s Adventure in the Land of Promise*]: “Then he sees in the garth a shining fountain, with five streams flowing out of it, and the hosts in turn a drinking its water. Nine hazels of Buan grow over the well. The purple hazels drop their nuts into the fountain, and the five salmon which are in the fountain sever them and their husks floating down the streams.” Manannan mac Ler explains to Cormac that “the fountain which [he saw], with the five streams out of it, is the Fountain of Knowledge, and the streams are the five senses through the which knowledge is obtained [?]”, which is why people drink its water.⁶⁸

Furthermore, the notion of mystical illumination could be contained in the very name of the goddess, provided that the etymology proposed by O’Rahilly is correct. Bóinn’s name indeed points to her bovine shape (*bó*) and to wisdom (**vinda*) at the same time. The two notions seem to be intermingled and to specifically characterize water-goddesses. As Dáithí Ó hÓgáin points out, the image of the cow is often used as a metaphor for river-goddesses in the Vedic *Rig Veda*, because the flow of the river is compared to the milk of cows, both of which gave esoteric knowledge to seers: “[...] the streams of the river being synonymous with the milk flowing from her shape as otherworld-cow. Just as the irrigating waters of the rivers make the countryside productive, so does the divine liquid give mystical inspiration to the Vedic poets.”⁶⁹ Significantly, the tradition of the archetypal warrior-seer Fionn mac Cumhaill - whose name

⁶⁶ Joynt, 1912, p. 193.

⁶⁷ Knott, 1936, p. 6.

⁶⁸ Stokes, 1891, p. 213, 216.

⁶⁹ Ó hÓgáin, 1994, p. 17-18. Cf. Ó hÓgáin, 1999, p. 112 and notes 38, 44 and 45, p. 234 for references.

Find is derived from the same root **vind-*, meaning ‘whiteness’, ‘brightness’, ‘wisdom’, and who has the gift of *imbas forosna* - is interwoven with the cult of the River Boyne.⁷⁰ The 9th or 10th-century text *Mac Gnimhartha Finn Mac Cumhaill* [‘The Boyish Exploits of Finn mac Cumhaill’] indeed relates how Deimne (the name of Fionn when he was young) acquired *imbas forosna* by burning his thumb on the ‘Salmon of Knowledge’ and thrusting it into his mouth. The salmon had been fished in the river Boyne by the seer Finnéigeas, from whom the boy was to learn poetry. From that time on, Deimne was called Fionn and each time he would chew his thumb, mystical knowledge and foresight would be granted to him:

[...] he goes forward to Finéces [who lived at the Boyne] to learn poetry. Seven years Finn-eges remained at the Boinn [Boyne] watching the salmon of Linn-Feic (i.e. the pool of Fec, a deep pool in the river Boyne, near Ferta fer fecc, the ancient name of the village of Slane, on this river) for it had been prophetised that he would eat the [sacred] salmon of Fec, and that he would be ignorant of nothing afterwards! He caught the salmon, and ordered [his pupil] Deimne to roast it, and the poet told him not to eat the salmon after cooking it. Hast thou eaten any part of the salmon, O young man? said the poet. “No”, replied the young man, but I burned my thumb, and put it into my mouth afterwards. What name is upon thee, O youth? said he. Deimne, replied the youth. “Finn is thy name, O youth”, said he, and it was to thee the salmon was [really] given, [in the prophesy] to be eaten [not to me], and thou art the Finn truly. The youth afterwards consumed the salmon, and it was from this the {preternatural} knowledge was given to Finn, i.e., when he used to put his thumb in his mouth, and not through Teinm Laegha [poetical incantation], whatever he had been ignorant of used to be revealed to him.⁷¹

The motif of the ‘Salmon of Knowledge’ is widely referred to in Irish tradition. By eating its flesh, enlightenment could be obtained, for the salmon had fed on the mystical nuts falling from the hazels into the source of the Boyne, as *Cormac’s Adventure in the Land of Promise* (quoted above) indicates. The Irish Salmon of Wisdom has its counterpart in the Welsh Salmon of Llyn Llyw, appearing in *Culhwch ac Olwen* [*Culhwch and Olwen*] in the *Mabinogion*, as one of the oldest animals on earth which has visionary powers.⁷²

The *imbas forosna* was much sought after by seers, druids and poets, because it gave mystical inspiration, illumination and wisdom, and was associated with the poetic arts; notions which are personified by the legendary character of Fionn mac Cumhaill.⁷³ *Sanais Chormaic* [‘Cormac’s Glossary’], dated c. 900, reveals that Irish *fili* chew “a piece of (the) flesh of a red pig, or of a dog or cat,

⁷⁰ Ó hÓgáin, 1994, p. 21, 25-28.

⁷¹ O’Donovan, 1859, p. 300-303.

⁷² Jones & Jones, 1976, 104. It is consulted by Culhwch and Arthur about the whereabouts of Mabon, the divine hunter.

⁷³ Ford, 1974, p. 67-74.

and put it afterwards on the flag behind the door, and pronounced an incantation on it, and offered it to idol-gods” before falling asleep.⁷⁴ It was during their sleep that esoteric knowledge was revealed to them. It is interesting to note that this custom of chewing to obtain *imbas forosna* could definitely echo Fionn Mac Cumhail’s chewing of the thumb. From this, it follows that Irish rivers such as the Boyne or the Shanonn were envisaged as divine figures to whom were attributed the gifts of poetical inspiration, mystical wisdom and all-encompassing knowledge. They transmitted the *imbas forosna* to those who drunk their waters, but this was to be done at certain times of the year and could be extremely dangerous, even lethal, to those who were not initiated into the mystical powers of poetic illumination.

3.2 Healing

In Gaul, river-goddesses are clearly associated with healing, as proven by the various water sanctuaries, anatomic ex-votos and other votive offerings excavated at the springs of the above mentioned rivers. Pilgrims came to springs to have their pains soothed, and prayed to the deity inhabiting and embodying the curative waters. It is interesting to note that the religious rites would have involved two stages. Sick pilgrims must first have come to the site to invoke and ‘sign a contract’ with the deity. A gift was generally made to the deity with the aim of earning its benevolence. The anatomic ex-votos were probably deposited on the first visit to the shrine. In leaving a representation of the diseased body part in the hand of the deity, the pilgrim was thought to be able to journey back free of pain or illness. Such votive offerings can be called ‘ex-dono’. They are different in nature from ex-votos, insomuch as ex-votos were offered once the vow had been fulfilled. To thank the deity, pilgrims would go back to the place of devotion and offer another gift to the deity: a jewel, coins, a vase or a dedication ending with the abbreviated votive formula *VSLM*, i.e. *v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*, ‘(the dedicator) paid his or her vow willingly and deservedly’. Votive offerings were thus either propitiatory or testimonies of gratitude, though it is not always possible to determine whether the offering was made before or after receiving divine grace.

The worship of healing springs and rivers is reflected in the folk tradition of the Christianized sacred springs called ‘holy wells’, which hold a significant place in the customs and legends of Wales, Cornwall, England, Ireland and France.⁷⁵ In Ireland, where about 3,000 wells have been recorded, almost every parish has its own blessed fountain.⁷⁶ Various studies have demonstrated that the Christian tradition of the holy wells follows directly from pagan practices and customs.⁷⁷ The fountains, wells and

⁷⁴ O’Donovan, 1868, p. 94.

⁷⁵ Jones, 1954; Quillier-Couch & Quillier-Couch, 1894 ; Hope, 1893 ; Logan, 1980; Gribben, 1992; Carroll, 1999.

⁷⁶ Ó Danachair, 1958, p. 35.

⁷⁷ Jones, 1954, p. 1-11; Gribben, 1992, p. 15-20; Carroll, 1999, p. 54-81.

springs, originally protected by indigenous deities, were progressively Christianized from Saint Patrick onwards and placed under the patronage of different saints renowned for their miracles. Well water was generally believed to be salutary and was specialized in the cure of a particular ailment: eyes, toothache, warts, etc. Some were visited on specific days, such as Feast Days or Patron Saint's Days, and the devotional practices generally consisted of reciting Catholic prayers, making 'rounds' – i.e. walking around the well clockwise (*deiseal*) on a fixed beaten path -, taking sips from the well, bathing the diseased members and rubbing the afflicted part with a shred of cloth dipped into the water and hung upon a nearby bush or tree. The sick person thus symbolically left his or her pain to the well. This ritual practice clearly reflects the Gallo-Roman custom which consisted in leaving one's illness to the water-goddess by offering her an image of one's diseased part after taking the waters.

Interestingly, the source of the River Boyne is still worshipped today by the local population: it is a holy well, called 'Trinity Well', where people gather to perform various religious and secular activities on Trinity Sunday.⁷⁸ The ritual generally consists of reciting the rosary and taking a drink of water from the well, which is followed by music, games and dancing. The well is believed to preserve health all the year round and bring good luck, and its water is said to contain a cure for eye-problems and even blindness. This holy well is not attributed to a patron saint and a folk legend recorded in the *Schools' Manuscript Collection* in 1938 recounts that the origin of Trinity Well is indigenous and was attributed to a pagan queen called Boyne or Bóinne, wife of King Cairbre, who was drowned under the waters of the well after making trial of Cairbre's bewitched well.⁷⁹ This oral account is the same as the early medieval legend recounting the origin of the River Boyne and its deification. This illustrates the long-lasting tradition of the legend of the goddess Bóinn, and the Christian holy well situated at the source of the river indicates a long-lasting belief in the sacred quality of the waters; one which goes back to Celtic times, when the waters seem to have been considered to provide wisdom as well as possessing curative powers.

Furthermore, it is significant that the appearance of a fish (a salmon, a trout or an eel) in the well's depths is associated with recovery and is believed to be a good omen and to bring wisdom and poetic inspiration to the person who sees it.⁸⁰ The fish-in-the-well folk motif clearly echoes the mythological salmon of the river Boyne, granting all-encompassing knowledge to seers and poets, and recalls the big

⁷⁸ Jackson, 1979-1980, p. 46-48, n° 7; T. O'Connor, *Ordnance Survey Letters, Kildare, 1837*, vol. 1, p. 93; Ó hÓgáin, 2006, p. 39.

⁷⁹ *Schools' Manuscript Collection* 771: 91-92 located in the archives of the Irish Folklore Department of University College Dublin (Ireland).

⁸⁰ Examples are St Brigid's Well, in the village of Liscannor (County Clare); Saint Brigid's Well or 'Tobar a' Leighis' in the parish of Killury (Co. Kerry); Tubrid Well in Millstreet Town (Co. Cork), etc.

black and white fish called ‘skolopidos’ of the River Saône, the head of which contained a tiny stone which could cure the quartan fever.⁸¹

3.3 *The mother-goddess: purveyor of life and death*

As the name of the goddess *Matrona* indicates, the river was envisaged as a mother figure who nurtured her people, for it had a significant life-giving and nourishing character inasmuch as its waters were full of fishes, and it irrigated and fertilized the soil. The latter ensured in turn the growth of crops, thus providing food for the cattle and the people living on its banks. The tradition of ‘mother-rivers’ was important in Gaul, since many river-names in France are derived from *matra*, *matrona*, ‘mother’, such as La Moder, a tributary of the Zorn in Drusenheim (Bas-Rhin) and the various names associated with Maromme, Maronne, Meyronne and Mayronne.⁸² The cult of the river as a mother-like deity is not a specifically Celtic tradition. Indeed, it is found in many other mythologies around the world. Rivers are for instance called *mâtaras*, ‘mothers’ in the Vedic glossary *Naighantu*; *matarô*, ‘mothers’ or *matarô gitayô*, ‘living mothers’ in the Iranian collection of sacred texts *Avesta*, and are given the epithet of *mâtṛitamâs* - the superlative form of *mâtâr* - ‘the mothers *par excellence*’ in the Vedic mystical text *Rigvêda*.⁸³

As mentioned above, the river simultaneously symbolizes life and death. The mother-river is the one who gives birth, brings fertility and maintains life thanks to her waters, but she is also the one who takes life back when she decides to flood inhabitants, crops and livestock: human beings metaphorically return to her womb, representing thus the eternal cycle of renewal. This concept is illustrated by various proto-historical ‘coffin-pirogues’ found in the beds of some rivers in Gaul. Those tomb-boats, called *Todtenbaum*, i.e. ‘Tree of Death’, by Xavier Boniface Saintine, a 19th-century French mythologist, consisted of a hollowed tree trunk serving as a boat where the corpse of the deceased was placed before abandoning it to the river’s current.⁸⁴ The most illustrious instance is the five-metre monoxylic oak pirogue, dated 3rd-1st century BC (La Tène II), found in the canal connecting the Marne to the Rhine at Chatenay-Mâcheron (Haute-Marne), a site some five kilometres from Balesmes-sur-Marne, where the river rises and the dedication to *Matrona* was discovered.⁸⁵ It is composed of two parts: a lid and a hollowed part which contained a human skeleton and three weapons (an iron sword in an ornamented

⁸¹ De Belloget, 1872, p. 131.

⁸² La Maromme, a tributary of the Seine in the valley of Cailly (Seine-Maritime); La Marronne, a tributary of the Dordogne (Corrèze); La Meyronne, a tributary of the Argens (Var), etc. Cf. Pictet, 1873-1875, p. 7-8; Nègre, 1990, p. 119-120, n°2178-2182; Carnoy, 1951, p. 105-106; Lacroix, 2007, p. 59-61, 168-171; Delamarre, 2003, p. 220. In Ireland and Britain, there are no recorded cases of river-names bearing the name of ‘mother’.

⁸³ Carnoy, 1951, p. 103.

⁸⁴ Saintine, 1862, p. 18-20.

⁸⁵ Cordier, 1963, p. 309; Lepage, 1975.

scabbard, an iron spear and an iron anthropoid hilted dagger) which tend to prove that the deceased was an honoured prince or warrior. Three similar pirogues, probably dating from the Late Bronze Age or La Tène period, containing skeletons wearing copper rings, and another one enclosing a human skull and two thighbones, were discovered on the bed of the River Orne, at Mondeville (Calvados), and in Caen, near the bridge of Vaucelles (Calvados).⁸⁶ Moreover, a four-metre hollowed oak tree containing a whole skeleton was dredged from the bed of the River Saône at Montseugny (Haute-Saône).⁸⁷

Those boat-sarcophagi point to a funerary rite which consisted in returning the deceased to the bosom of the mother-river who would ensure their rebirth in the afterlife. As Gaston Bachelard explains, the river and the tree are two powerful maternal symbols; the combination of the two elements thus enhances the funerary dimension:

Water, substance of life, is also the substance of death for ambivalent reverie. In order to interpret the Todtenbaum, the Death Tree, accurately, we must keep in mind with Carl Gustav Jung, that “the tree is, above all, a maternal symbol”; since water is also a maternal symbol, a strange image of the encasing of seeds may be grasped in the image of the Todtenbaum. By placing the dead person in the interior of a tree and entrusting the tree to the breast of the waters, one doubles the maternal powers; the myth of the doubly, Jung tells us, because we imagine that “the dead person is given back to his mother to be borne again.” Death in water will be, for this reverie, the most maternal of deaths. The desire of man, says Jung in another place, “is that somber waters of death may become the waters of life, that death and its cold embrace may be the maternal bosom [...]”.⁸⁸

This funerary practice is redolent of the belief in the voyage to the Beyond: the boat symbolically takes the deceased to the Otherworld, which was believed to be situated under the waters of rivers and lakes. This ancient belief has survived in the folklore of the west of France and Ireland in various forms. In the 6th c. AD, the Byzantine historian Procopius recorded a legend which recounts that fishermen and other inhabitants of Brittany were called at night by a knocking at their door to drive boats loaded with souls of dead people across the Channel.⁸⁹ In addition, Sébillot reports that, in the swamps of the province of Poitou, a mysterious boat covered with a white sheet resembling a pall, called *niole blanche* (‘white skiff’) or *la niole de l’angoisse* (‘the skiff of anguish’), steered by a ghost known as the *tousseux jaune* (‘the yellow coughing one’), was believed to bring death to any person catching sight of it.⁹⁰ In many

⁸⁶ Cordier, 1963, p. 307; Edeine, 1963, p. 346-350.

⁸⁷ Cordier, 1963, p. 310.

⁸⁸ Bachelard, 1983, p. 72-73.

⁸⁹ Sébillot, 2002, p. 474.

⁹⁰ Sébillot, 2002, p. 716.

coastal parts of Ireland, phantom ships are traditionally seen at sea before some sea-disaster or after a shipwreck and are sometimes lit up: they have come to take away souls of the drowned people.⁹¹

Those discoveries thus prove that the river-goddess, in addition to her virtues of fertility, healing and mystical inspiration, must have had a funerary function. As a mother, she protected her people both in life and in the afterlife, and ensured their voyage to the Otherworld.

Conclusion

Because of its vital aspect and its destructive force, water has been envisaged as a particularly sacred natural element since time immemorial. The prehistoric and proto-historic deposits of hoards of objects in rivers, lakes and bogs in the British Isles and on the Continent should be understood as votive gifts offered to water deities with the aim of earning their benevolence and ensuring the fertility of the land. In addition, the numerous *deva*, *divonna*, *bandae* (i.e. ‘goddess’) hydronyms attest to the sanctity of waters which were deified as goddesses. The idea of a lady inhabiting and personifying water is particularly well illustrated in Irish mythology: beautiful female divinities dwell in sumptuous subaquatic otherworldly realms; the wavy hair of goddesses, such as the Mórrígain or the wife of Mananánn, shapes the sea; rivers, such as the Boyne, are described as the body of their eponymous goddesses; and maidens, after drowning under the waters, become the river, the lake or the sea they inhabit and give their name to it. Thus, Clíona and Eba are turned into a sea wave, Bóinn into the River Boyne, Sionnan into the River Shannon, Eithne into the River Inny, Odras into the River Odras and Érne into the River Érne. In Gaul and Britain, the tradition of the divine lady embodying the river is attested by various archaeological discoveries. Water sanctuaries, votive offerings and inscriptions reveal that the Seine, the Marne, the Saône, the Yonne and the Wharfe were deified as goddesses bearing their names: Sequana, Matrona, Souconna, Icauna and Verbeia. Such a belief has survived in oral lore, as proven by the Irish folk story, “the Knife against the Wave”, and a number of French and Irish mermaid-in-the-river legends.

The Irish medieval texts indicate that river-goddesses incarnated wisdom, poetry and perceptiveness and were believed to bestow esoteric knowledge (*imbas forosna*) on those who drank their waters or, like the hero-seer Fionn Mac Cumhaill, ate the flesh of the ‘Salmon of Knowledge’, which inhabited its bed and fed on the mystical nuts falling from the nine magical hazels trees growing around the source of the Boyne. In Gaul and Britain, archaeological evidence indicates that river-goddesses were worshipped as healers, who brought relief to pilgrims through their salutary waters. The best-known example is the

⁹¹ Ó Suilleabháin, 1942, p.514. In the Irish-speaking parishes of An Rinn and An Seana-Phobal, on the coast near Dungarvan in County Waterford, people talk of a phantom ship called *Bád na Soilse*, literally ‘the Boat of Lights’, which is much feared. Ó hÓgáin, June 2008: personal communication.

goddess Sequana, who had an important sanctuary and complex of baths built at her source, where pilgrims would come to take the curative waters, invoke the goddess and deposit votive offerings to have their vows granted. It is significant that the Christianized holy wells of the British Isles and France recall such a function: their waters, placed under the tutelage of a patron saint, are believed to be therapeutic. It is noteworthy that, in folk tradition, healing virtues are attributed to the source of the Boyne, which has become a holy well known as 'Trinity Well'. Moreover, the appearance of a fish in the well is understood as a good omen and is thought to bring poetic inspiration and enlightenment to the person who catches a glimpse of it; a belief which clearly echoes the-Salmon-of-Knowledge motif of Irish mythology. Finally, the river-goddess played the same role as the land-goddess. Like a mother, she gave birth, fed and maintained her people. The goddess of the River Marne, *Matrona*, whose name literally means 'Mother', clearly illustrates that function: she is the matrix of life itself. The life-giving aspect of the water-goddess is counterbalanced by a funerary dimension which is inherent in the mother-water complex: the dead were given back to the bosom of the mother-river to ensure their voyage to the Otherworld and achieve rebirth in the afterlife. In Gaul, various proto-historic coffin-pirogues, made out of a single tree trunk where the body of the deceased was placed before yielding it to the flow of the river, exemplify this aspect. The death-boat-water pattern has survived in the folklore of western France and Ireland in various forms: supernatural boats, seen in rivers or at sea, generally during the night, were believed to take the souls of the dead away.

The gathering and analysis of the various sources, which differ from one country to another (literary data in Ireland dating from the 7th century onwards; proto-historic and Gallo-Roman/Romano-British archaeological data in Gaul and Britain), evidence that the tradition of river-goddesses was common to the various Celtic peoples of the British Isles and Gaul. It also emerges from this that the Celtic river-goddess was multi-functional and determined peoples' destiny: she offered them access to absolute knowledge possessed by the gods; soothed their pains and healed their illnesses. She also gave them life, sustained them and took them back into her womb to ensure their rebirth in the afterlife. With her ambivalent character as a mother, healer and wisdom purveyor, she clearly represents the eternal cycle of life, regeneration and renewal.

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Abbreviations

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