

ART. VI.—*The Folk-lore of Isis Parlis and the Luck of Edenhall.* By the REV. C. E. GOLLAND, M.A.

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THIS paper attempts to render some probable reasons for an etymology suggested for a Cumberland place-name; viz.:—ISAY (or Isis) PARLIS. This may represent the Celtic word *Aesidhe*, pronounced "Eeshea," and *Parlis*,* the meaning being "Jars of the Mound-folk." In popular speech an equivalent might be "the Fairies' Cups." This etymology would point to an old Celtic rite, once in special vogue in this locality. This rite would be connected with the religious use of a vessel of magical and talismanic virtue.†

The immediate surroundings contain for comparison the place-name "Honeypots," as well as the Luck at Edenhall and the well-known superstition so long associated with it.

Legendary tales and myths may linger on in the same locality for two thousand years or more, without suffering great alteration in form; this has been clearly demonstrated.‡ Thus it is quite conceivable that the legend which hangs round a Luck might yield its secret to investigation, and be recognisable as a surviving trace of

* Murray's *Dialect Dictionary* gives "Parrlie" (parli), Scotch, a small barrel. "There's a bit Parrlie o' the right Glenferrichan baith sides o' the beasties."

† Food for the dead—see the quotation given in Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, p. 5:—"Alle that take hede to dysmale days, or use nyce observaunces in the newe moon, or in the new Yere, as setting mete or drynke by night on the benche, to fede Alholde or Gobelyn;"—from Richard Pynson, *Dialogue of Dives and Pauper*, printed in 1493.

‡ See illustrations in *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* (Lawson). In Chapter ii., p. 254, the author speaks of certain "correspondences which attest the integrity of popular tradition for some two thousand years," and of other traditions "which faithfully record a superstition which dates from before Homer." The clue that led to the discovery in the "King's Mound" at Gokstad is a case of tradition lasting eight hundred years.

some Celtic rite once practised hereabout. What if that supposed rite had something to do with the "jars of the mound-folk?"

The mention of a mound suggests the worship of ancestral spirits; and the mention of a Luck suggests the object of worship, viz., to secure the fertility of the flocks and herds, of the tribal life, and of the year's increase. The breaking or removal of a Luck is always understood to be of ill omen for the possessors of it; and on the contrary, whilst it is safely guarded, we are always to understand that the tribe or clan or family to whom it belongs will flourish and prosper.

We find a clear parallel to this idea in the old mythic lore both of Wales and of the Irish tribes. The "Caldron of Bronwen" (Welsh *Mabinogion*) corresponds with the Luck; because while the Caldron has a magical power of renewing life, it also, when broken, brings disaster to the people who hold it—disaster which cannot be remedied. In Irish legend, the magic vessel is associated with the "Stone of fate" and the spear and sword of Lug. It was called the "Caldron of the Dagda," and had the property of yielding an inexhaustible supply of food and drink. Mr. Nutt (*Studies in the legend of the Holy Grail*) tells us that "the Dagda, or good god, seems to have been the head of the Irish Olympus. A legend anterior to the eleventh century, and belonging to the oldest stratum of Celtic myth, ascribes to him power over the earth; without his aid the sons of Miledh could get neither corn nor milk; it is therefore no wonder to find him possessor of the magic caldron, which may be looked upon as a symbol of fertility, and as such akin to similar symbols in the mythology of nearly every people" (p. 184). The "good god" was also called Brons or Bran (p. 211), who is identified (this writer remarks) by Professor Rhys with the old Celtic god Cernunnos, that Celtic Dis from whom the Gaul boasted his descent; and who, as god of the underworld,

was also god of knowledge and riches. Thus the Celtic vessel of legend was capable both of renewing life, and also of bestowing fertile seasons on the earth, and had connection with the underworld.

May we then infer from the local tale of a Luck treasure surviving to this day, that the old Celtic inhabitants believed that there was one of these magic vessels in the possession of their tribe? If so, why did these Celtic inhabitants also talk of the mound-folk and their jars, and locate these jars at "Isis Parlis"? Did they habitually offer jars of food to the mound-folk at some stated season? Was it that from which they dated the beginning of their year, since Bran* was also the god of beginnings and endings, like the Latin Janus? There is some evidence of it; and it is surely significant too that there was an ancient custom on the third Sunday in May of holding a rustic festival† exactly in the locality of our place-names (Honeypots,‡ etc.); it was called "Sugar and water Sunday," as described by Brand. What did it mean?

We may use Greek and Latin customs to throw light on the old Celtic rites, with due precaution. The popular

* Sir John Rhys, *Hibbert Lectures*, p. 94.

† Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, p. 521 (Wells and Fountains):—"In the North of England it has been a custom from time immemorial for the lads and lasses of adjoining villages to meet in a body at springs or rivers on a certain Sunday in May to drink sugar and water. . . . At the 'Giant's Cave,' near Eden Hall in Cumberland, a vast concourse of both sexes assembles for this purpose on the third Sunday in May."

For these Mid-Lent festivals, or "Mothering Sundays," see Brand, pp. 56-58:—"In the Lemuria, which was observed on the ninth of May, every other night for three times, to pacify the ghosts of the dead, the Romans threw beans on the fire of their altars to drive them out of their houses. Why we have substituted peas, 'carlings,' does not appear." The May concourse at Giant's Cave is thus analogous in aim and purpose to the feeding of spirits at New Year or new moon; the practice for some reason survived in this spot with a specially vigorous life.

‡ May not this be significant? See *Modern Greek Folklore, etc.*, p. 533, on the special portion of food sent to the grave from the house of mourning. "The most generally approved viand is a specially prepared flat cake spread with honey. Jars of honey were given to the dead Patroclus, and Aristophanes, *Lys* 599, mentions a 'honey cake' (*melitoutta*) in connection with a funeral. "From this it would appear that not only has the custom of providing food for the dead remained in force for nearly two thousand years, but even the kind of food has not changed. The honey cake, though now called the soul cake, is still prepared . . . according to a classical recipe and sweetness still gratifies the palate of the dead."

festival then of "Mothering Sunday" is parallel to the Parentalia, Feralia, and Anthesteria, or more exactly to the Lemuria. The purpose of all these classical customs was the same, to honour the dead with gifts of food and drink, and then to get quit of their presence in the upper world. They called the potions offered to ancestral spirits "Hermes,"* i.e., "Luck potion." It is not extravagant to suppose a similar observance and rite at Edenhall, for securing "Luck."

So we get a natural explanation. The mound-folk are the ghosts of departed ancestors; at the appropriate season the feast begins, their kindly help is won by gifts; the life and vegetation in nature around is understood to be bound up with the vigour no less than with the goodwill of the ghosts; in either case they require food. Jars of food, strictly taboo to the living, are set apart in or near the mound where the inurned ashes rest. In return they bestow fertility—the luck of the year. To break the Jar is naturally disastrous—whether the urn-jar or the food-jar. So to render due observance in due season brings the luck of the year.

Archæological remains offer a certain amount of support to this explanation. To put it very briefly, there seems ground for supposing that round some, though not all, urn-interments, a circle of stones or stumps was built, having for object the keeping of a record of the lapse of days and months. But why place it round the grave-cist? Also in the burial chamber itself there was often placed a vessel of unexplained purpose, called an incense cup,†; or

* The learned Patriarch Photius gave this definition of the word "Hermes" in his *Lexicon*:—"Hermes—a kind of drink which was the property of the good daimon and of Zeus Soter" (quoted with comments in Miss Harrison's *Themis*); i.e., the year-daimon on whom depended the year's fertility had a jar of some drink exclusively reserved for himself and the word denoting it conveys exactly our idea of "luck." The Greek exclamation *koinos Hermes* means "shares in your luck," and might originate very naturally out of the luck-vessel of the good daimon.

† Purpose unexplained, according to Canon Greenwell, *British Barrows*. Why may they not have been part of an appliance for feeding the ghostly

again an extra urn is inverted over the ashes in the principal urn ; or the ashes lie under an inverted urn. Why was this ? The readiest way of explaining the coexistence of these incidents of urn-burials seems to be that a " calendar ring " of stones determined some date of mystic import, and the extra vessels indicate the means by which the ancestor spirit was strengthened and persuaded to resume for another round of seasons his protective office (i.e., by gifts of food) ; perhaps he was supposed to be imprisoned afterwards in the chamber. As there are a number of circles of thirty stones (as estimated) enclosing in each case a smaller circle of eleven or twelve stones, various writers have suggested that some significance belongs to these numbers.

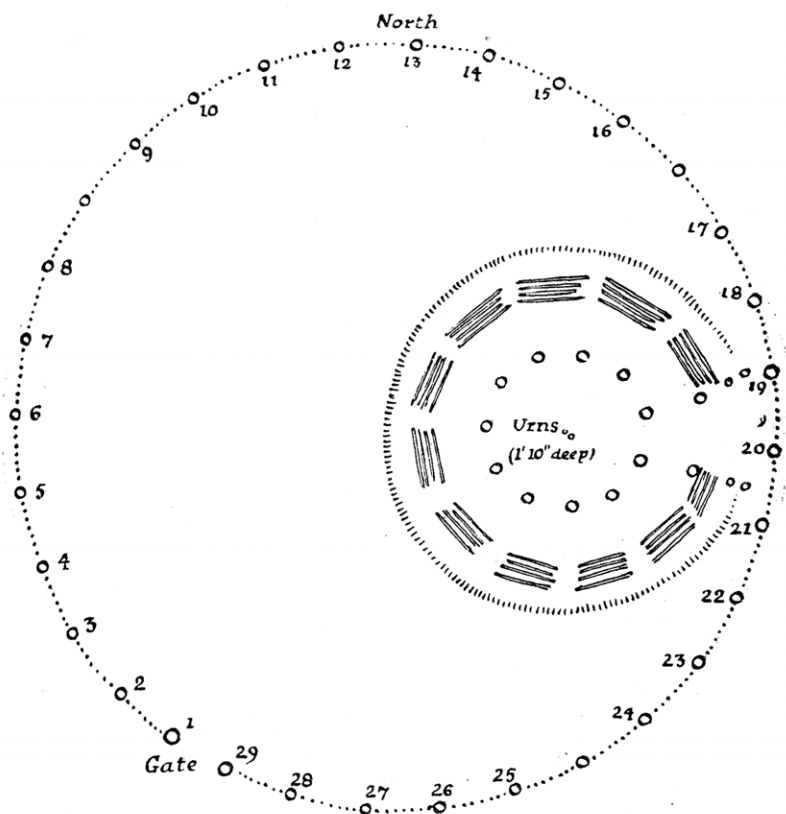
One perfect specimen of such a circle was discovered in the neighbourhood of Chipping, North Lancashire, in 1899. Near it occurs the place-name Parlick ; in which " Parli " perhaps can be identified—*Parl-locā*, i.e., " enclosure of the jar."* The arrangement of the urns found there suggests a practice of feeding ancestral spirits as described above. To one of later times looking down from higher ground, the outline of such a ring-circle would resemble the rings with a small gap used for fibulæ, or torques. Hence fancifully there might arise a myth

occupant of the Cist ? See note, *Early Age of Greece*, p. 510, on " the custom of pouring blood, wine or oil through a funnel " into the grave. This " doubtless renewed the faint vitality of the dead hero, who could thus more effectively watch over his people." What can be described as a " Caldron " was sometimes used (p. 429) ; " Above (the human ashes and charcoal in the urn) came a piece of sheet bronze, probably the remains of a Caldron, etc."

* *Transactions of the Lancashire & Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, vol. xvii., p. 254 ; xviii., p. 114. The diagram (p. 118) is based on the plan in the second of these papers, on " the Bleasdale Bronze Age interment," by the kind permission of the Council of the Lancs. and Ches. Ant. Soc., of Professor W. Boyd Dawkins, F.R.S., F.S.A., etc. the author of the paper, and of Mr. Sidney Wilson, the surveyor of the site ; a permission, however, which does not involve assent to the interpretation of the circle here attempted. Also *ibid.*, xxix., p. 19, where a different view of the circle is maintained. The writer of the last paper observed " throwing-stones " round the outer circle, and inside it : possibly these were used as counters.

Wyld and Hurst, *Lancashire Place-Names*, take Parlick to mean " Pear orchard." The rough, bleak aspect of the hill makes this seem unlikely.

about a wheel or ring belonging to the demi-god or hero in the precincts. Celtic sun-heroes have rings given to them by legend.* So also has Woden; but the ring of



THE CIRCLE NEAR PARLICK, LANCs.
(Bleasdale Bronze Age Interment).

Woden has a peculiarity which gives away the secret of such rings; for "it dropped eight rings every ninth night."

* See Sir John Rhys, *Celtic Heathendom*, p. 454, and *Hibbert Lectures*, p. 210. Note the mention of the *mog ruith*, slaves of the wheel. In what manner of ministrations were they occupied? Ring of Woden, *Draupnir*, *Celtic Heathendom*, p. 375. The Celtic week was eight days. See Ridgeway, *Early Age of Greece*, p. 536, note. "Odin is Mercurius," Chadwick, *Cult of Othin*, pp. 30, 35. Odin or Woden is therefore also Hermes, and so a *Psychopompos*, or guardian god of the underworld spirits.

Here we are entitled to see an unmistakeable allusion to the Celtic "nine-eight week." Apply that method of keeping tally of the days of a synodic month to the ring near Chipping. From the thirty-two spaces three will be dropped; but the Celts added a half-day* to the sum at the beginning of each month, thus we get the exact space of time from one new moon to the next—twenty-nine and a half days. This will hardly be a coincidence.

When twelve new moons have been observed, eleven days are still required to equate the resulting sum of 354 days with the 365 days of the solar year; and again it can hardly be a coincidence that there are eleven stumps in the smaller circle. They compare with the eleven shields which Numa had laid up in the temple of Mars, who was the god of the young year. Latin tradition made this king (Numa) fix the length of the year (*annus*, i.e., "ring") at 365 days. Not far from Isis Parlis there is a small circle of eleven stones, at Maughanby.

Admitting the significance of the facts, it may be asked—How can we explain the fact that the "Luck" vessels or other Luck objects (such as crystal balls or skulls†) are

* This seems the only logical construction to place on Caesar, *De Bell. Gall.*, vi., 18 (note that they began "the day" at sunset), "*Dies natales et mensium et annorum initia sic observant, ut noctem dies subsequatur*"; i.e., the last day of each month must have been reckoned to contain two nights, or thirty-six hours. But this must have been a purely formal reckoning; the addition (or diminution) of twelve hours being registered by some mechanical time-recorder. For it is surely impossible to suppose that a day, in the popular sense of the word and for practical purposes, could begin sometimes at dawn and sometimes at dusk. The occasional intercalation of whole days before the Kalends, etc., is another operation.

† Luck skulls are recorded at Wardley Hall, and Bettiscombe, Dorsetshire (Ingram, "Haunted Houses") and Roby. St. Magnus' Bicker, Kirkwall, is a sort of Luck. The Dialect Dictionary (Wright) pronounces the derivation of "luck" uncertain. Besides luck (success), there is "luka" (to shut up). If "lucken-booths" are stalls with doors or shutters, locked up after the market, may not luck-vessels be such as were enclosed or shut up in a tomb? La Sainte Ampoule at Rheims was always kept in the shrine of St. Remi, or close to it; very ancient ceremonies and institutions belonged to this holy vessel (Dom. Marlot, *Hist. de Reims*, vol. ii., x.). On the view taken in the paper, the ampoule might represent some old luck vessel of a Belgic tribe. The word has yet another meaning possibly derivative from the foregoing; for in Devon "to luck," was old dialect for to entice, to lure, to charm; while in the Shetlands "a luck" means a witch. Obviously the vessel which was at one season "enclosed," might at another be set out as "a lure" (at Honeypots?), to charm the fairies into goodwill.

so few? No doubt because of the strong suspicion of paganism. Or it may be objected—If the Lucks are so ancient, and really Celtic, then the actual heirlooms (the vessels, at any rate) seem far too modern. The explanation is that the old magic vessel of Celtic myth was kept in memory as a folk-tale; until, on the literary plane of expression, it emerged again in a Christian disguise as the Holy Grail, which minstrels described as a source of miraculous food (Nutt, *Studies, etc.*, p. 123). Soon after the story became popular in knightly hall and ladies' bower, the passion for relics, operating uncritically, would account for the "discovery" of the luck cups, which still survive.
