CHAPTER I

Characteristic antiquities of this district of Aberdeenshire.—Circles, ogams, sculptures.—Uniqueness of the Circles.—Druids' Temples.—Importance of druidism.—The Magic Art.—Julius Cæsar's description of the Druids.—Human sacrifices.—Comparison with Welsh and Irish Druids.—The elder Pliny's account.—King Alfred's Druids.—Accounts by Tacitus.—Human sacrifice by Rhadagaisus.—By the Aztecs.—Zoroastrianism.

THE district of Aberdeenshire in which the great hill fort of Echt is situated has three special characteristics, each of which is redolent of antiquity. They are, (1) the presence of a large number of stone circles unique in type; (2) the presence of a number of examples of so-called Pictish sculptures on rude stones, apparently casual stones though possibly boundary or memorial stones; (3) the presence of two of the most important of the few ogam inscriptions found in Caledonia, and a third of less importance perhaps but not of less interest. In a class entirely by itself, quite unique, is the minuscule inscription which is found in connection with the longest of the ogam inscriptions, on a great stone now in the grounds of the Gordons of Newton by Insch.

The Aberdeenshire stone circles will occupy by far the largest part of our space. We have described them as unique, because, so far as we are informed, no one as yet has found and published any example elsewhere of a striking feature common to all of them. This is, a great Recumbent Stone, lying tangentially on the circumference of the circle, weighing many tons; with two high pillar stones standing on the circumference of the circle one at each end of the Recumbent Stone, as Flankers or supporters; not as props, not of necessity even in contact with the ends of the Recumbent Stone. It is evident, on the face of it, that this curious and striking feature presents a series of problems of great interest, and presumably of at least considerable importance. What race of men set them up? Where did they learn the plan? What was their purpose? How did they use the stones, when they had set them up? What sort of date can we assign to them? How did they fall into disuse? The sight of them tends to set the archaeologist imagination running riot.

It is natural to ask the question, why should there be this curious difference between the stone circles of this one district of Aberdeenshire and the circles of other parts of Pictish Caledonia?

One answer is, that there are other examples of curious differences in regard to the use and arrangement of rude stones in districts bordering upon one another. Thus the late Dr Tristram, in his *Land of Moab*, pages 300–302, speaks of "the three classes of primaeval monuments in Moab," the stone circles, the dolmens, and the cairns. They all exist, he says, in great abundance.

They exist in three different parts of the country, but never side by side. The cairns are exclusively in the east, on the spurs of the Arabian range; the stone circles south of the Callirrhoë; the dolmens north of that valley. His surmise is that this fact may indicate three neighbouring tribes, co-existent in the pre-historic period, each with different funeral or religious customs.

We find a curious parallel to this in Devon and Cornwall. Stone rows, called avenues, are common on Dartmoor and almost unknown in Cornwall. Cromlechs are common in West Cornwall and only one genuine example is mentioned on Dartmoor.

Similarly it is said that in the Morbihan while stone rows and cromlechs are common, and there are stone circles in connection with stone rows, circles independent of stone rows are all but unknown there.

But while that is so, the difference with which we are concerned is deeper and more subtle. It is a racial—or rather a tribal—difference, and that in regard to deep-seated feelings and views of the manner of approaching the gods of nature. The Aberdonians might fairly say that their predecessors, if not in blood at least in locality, were religious—or superstitious—beyond other Picts. Looked at more closely, we may say that the traditional division of Pictland into seven provinces, and the actual differences in the stone records of religious worship in adjoining parts of the same province, indicate the inherence in the race of disruptive tendencies, tendencies of isolation, of having no superiors, indeed of having no equals. This is shewn perhaps in its clearest and most recent development, the clan jealousies of the Highlanders, which came to a head in comparatively modern history when the ancient race of the Caledonian kings died out, and shewed itself fatally when their immediate descendants ceased to reign over North Britain and South Britain combined.

The Roman grammarian Festus, writing on the Latin word *sacellum* about A.D. 150, tells us that *sacella* are small places, consecrated to gods, without a roof. Hence the Latin dictionary gives as the meaning of *sacellum* (literally the diminutive of *sacrum* a shrine), "a small uncovered place consecrated to a divinity." That we may take to have been the original root idea of a stone circle; with the correlative idea of the exclusion of hostile powers from the area,—"without are dogs." This does not at all imply that there was a continuous fence all round. The twelve stones, or some such number, set on the circumference of the circle, were the adequate symbol of exclusion. Mystery can be stronger than a continuous wall of stones. Tacitus tells us (*Germania*, c. ix) that the Germans think it derogatory to the majesty of the heavenly beings to enclose them within walls.

We have said "the twelve stones or some such number." We find in the book of Joshua, chapter iv, two special mentions of twelve stones, as representing the twelve tribes of Israel. "Take you twelve men, out of every

tribe a man, and command them, Take you out of the midst of Jordan, where the priests' feet stand firm, twelve stones upon your shoulders, and carry them over Jordan. And they carried them over to the place where they lodged and laid them down there; and those twelve stones did Joshua pitch in Gilgal.... And Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of Jordan where the feet of the priests stood firm, and they are there to this day." Is it a mere coincidence that the only circles of those now under consideration which are complete, Sin Hinny and Auchorthies, have twelve stones each?

One result of rather careful enquiry on the spot and in such records as are available stands out clearly. It is impossible to laugh at traditions of Druids and Druidism, as some learned folk have been accustomed to laugh. As we shall see when we come to descriptions of the circles, the regular name for the circles of Aberdeenshire, recurring in parish after parish, was "Druids' Temples," in the great collection of parochial records and descriptions known as the Old Statistical Account of Scotland, published in and about 1794. It is out of the question to imagine that some one had set to work to invent the idea of "Druids' Temples," and had persuaded the common folk to create in a whole large district a new name for a very old and very prominent feature in their everyday life, which certainly had an old name of some kind among them. And this remark by no means applies only to the district under consideration. A short drive out of Inverness, the spot on which Broichan the arch-druid of the Pictish king Brude, and Saint Columba the arch-saint of the Lord and Saviour, fought out their stand-up fight, brings you to Glendruid. If you push on, you come to Druids' Temple Farm, and in a wood near by you find the Temple, three concentric rings of stones, respectively 12 ft., 43 ft., and 77 ft. in circumference. Not very far from that, about a mile from Ness Castle and near Cullaird, there is a curious little "Druids' Temple" of nine stones, about 22 ft. in diameter, with two large stones 6 ft. apart looking very like the Flankers of our Aberdeenshire Recumbent Stone but with no surviving indication of the presence of such a stone. At Clava, on the Nairn, there is a large group of Druids' Temples. Thus the designation "Druids' Temple" in the land of the northern Picts of Caledonia is far too general to have been a comparatively late invention. We must take it that the inhabitants have through the ages retained the true tradition that these were the sacred places of worship when Druidism, or art magic, was the national religion. It is not easy to imagine a later origin for this long series of "Temples." So long ago as 1692, Dr Gordon of Aberdeen wrote that the general tradition throughout the district was that they were used as places of worship in heathen times. As we shall see, "heathen worship" in those districts certainly meant Druidism, or by its other name the practice of magical art, "Druid" and "magician" being convertible terms.

We shall make a very great mistake if we ridicule or under-rate the power of the pagan priests whom our Christian predecessors found everywhere in possession. Classical mythology treats the gods of Greece and Rome as intensely important beings; and their priests were dominant. We must assign a like position to the gods and the priests of our pagan predecessors. When Apollo was consulted in Diocletian's presence (about A.D. 290), an answer was given in a hollow voice, not by the priest but by Apollo himself, that the oracles were restrained from answering truly; and the priests said this pointed to the Christians. And when the entrails of victims were examined in augury on another of Diocletian's expeditions, and found not to present the wonted marks, the chief soothsayer declared that the presence of Christians caused the failure. Just such scenes were enacted, with at least as much of tragic earnestness, when Patrick worsted the Druid Lochra in the hall of Tara, or when Columba baffled the devices of Broichan, the arch-druid of Brude the Pictish king.

We have a very curious and instructive use of the word *drui* in a prayer attributed to Columba at a critical turning-point of his life. "*My* drui," he is made to say in a very early account of his doings on a great occasion, "*My* drui is the Son of God." He evidently regarded the *drui* as meaning one that worked wonders. It is yet another argument that the system of druidism was in itself not only the development of astronomy and natural philosophy, but also a preparation for the acceptance of the loftiest idea of the one Supreme Almighty God.

It seems to be practically impossible to resist the conviction that a sacrificial altar was a main part of the religious worship of our pagan predecessors in this island. Nor can it be doubted that human sacrifices were the sacrifices most highly regarded by them. Nor again can it be doubted that human sacrifices were frequent. If a man felt seriously ill, or found himself in sudden danger in war, the recognised course of procedure was to sacrifice a human being, or if that could not be conveniently effected, to vow that a human sacrifice should be offered as soon as it could be arranged. Criminals were the natural victims; but if such could not be had, an innocent victim must be procured. Not only was this true of our predecessors in this island, but it was specially true of them. Cæsar, writing a generation before the birth of Christ, tells us that any one who wished really to study the magic art with its human sacrifices went to Britain to study it. The elder Pliny, writing two generations after the birth of Christ, tells us that the people of Britain carried the magic art and its human sacrifices so far and with so great ceremonial, that it might have been supposed that the Britons had taught its practice to the Persians, though it was well known that the Persians learned it from Zoroaster in prehistoric times. Cæsar and Pliny call the priests of these magic arts and sacrifices Druids.

To shew the full force of what these two very careful observers and recorders say, it will be well to give the whole of their record, including that which affects our special point, the practice of human sacrifice[1].

Julius Cæsar, *de Bello Gallico*, vi. 13, 14, 15.

Throughout Gaul there are two classes of persons of definite account and dignity.... One consists of Druids, the other of Knights.

The Druids are concerned with divine worship, the due performance of public and private sacrifices, and the interpretation of religious matters; a great number of young men gather about them for the sake of instruction and hold them in great honour. They decide in almost all disputes, public and private. If any crime has been committed, if murder has been done (*caedes facta*), if there is any dispute about succession or boundaries, they decide it. They determine rewards and penalties. If any individual person, or any body of people, will not abide by their decision, they interdict them from sacrifices: this is their heaviest penalty. Those who are under interdict are counted among the impious and profane. All men avoid them, flee their presence and discourse, lest they get harm from their contact. Neither justice nor honour is open to them.

Among the druids one is chief, who has the highest authority among them. At his death, if any be pre-eminent he succeeds. If there are several with equal claim, they strive for the position as chief, appealing to the votes of the druids, sometimes resorting to armed force.

At a certain time of the year the druids meet in the territory of the Carnutes, which is reckoned to be the centre of the whole of Gaul, and hold session in a consecrated spot. Thither assemble from all sides all that have disputes, and they abide by the decisions and judgments of the druids.

It is believed that their discipline was found in Britain and brought thence into Gaul, and to this day those who wish to go more fully into the matter for the most part go to Britain for information.

It is the custom of the druids to abstain from war, and they do not pay war-taxes (*tributa*) as others do. They are exempt from military service and all public duties. Tempted by these advantages, many young men join them of their own accord to receive their training, many are sent by parents and relatives. They are said to learn a great number of verses in their schools, and some are said to remain under instruction for twenty years. It is a duty not to commit to writing the things that are taught, though in most other matters, and in their public and private accounts (*rationibus*), they make use of Greek letters.

This rule of not committing their teaching to writing I think they have instituted for two reasons. They do not wish that their teaching should become common property, and they do not wish the learners to rely upon writing and so neglect the cultivation of the memory. It does in fact usually happen that the assistance of writing tends to relax the attention of the student and the action of the memory.

The main doctrine which they seek to teach is that souls do not die, but after death

[1] We quote the passages which include Britain in their reference. Diodorus tells of the horrid cruelty and the large scale of human sacrifice among the Gauls by the Saronidae (Chaldæans). Strabo gives further detail. Suetonius tells of horrid cruelties. Dion Chrysostom tells that the druid priests exercised royal authority and the Celtic kings were their servants.

pass from one to another. This belief they hold to be the greatest incentive to valour, as the fear of death is thereby cast aside.

Besides this, they have many discussions touching the stars and their motion, the size of the universe and of the earth, the nature of things, the force and power of the immortal gods; and these they hand on to the young men.

The whole nature of the Gauls is greatly devoted to religious observances. On this account, those who are smitten with grievous maladies or are engaged in the perils of battle, either offer human sacrifices, *homines immolant*, or vow that they will do so. They employ the druids as the ministers of these sacrifices, believing that unless for a man's life a man's life be paid, the majesty of the immortal gods may not be appeased; and like sacrifices of a public character are performed. Others have *simulacra* of immense size, whose members, woven with twigs, they fill with living men and set on fire, and the men perish in a sheet of flame. They believe that the execution of those who have been caught in the act of theft or robbery or some crime is more pleasing to the immortal gods; but when the supply of malefactors fails, they resort to the sacrifice of the innocent.

Julius Cæsar's account of the functions of the druids does not agree with what we know of the druids of Ireland and the druids of Wales. He tells us that there were only two classes of persons that really counted, druids and knights. The druids conducted public worship and public and private sacrifices, and interpreted religious matters. But that was very far from being their one function. They decided in almost all disputes, public and private. We cannot say whether Cæsar meant that they decided all disputes except those which went to the arbitration of war, or whether he was thinking of the rules of classical times, where the head of the state could settle cases which might arise, with a few special exceptions which went before a general council. On the whole the former of those two explanations seems the more probable. The penalty of disobedience to the decision of the druids was excommunication, "interdiction from sacrifices," a very telling idea, evidencing the primary importance of sacrifices in their religion.

Further, they were the repositories of bardic knowledge. Great numbers of verses were taught in their schools. These verses must not be committed to writing. They were so numerous that the full teaching sometimes occupied twenty years.

We might have supposed that the young men who desired not to rank among the warrior class and resorted to this instruction as an exemption from war tax and war service, would form a separate class. But it seems quite clear from Cæsar's account that this was not so. There was no such separate class. They all counted as druids.

This would appear not to have been the case in Wales and in Ireland. In Ireland there were druid priests and there were judges, brehons, as a separate class. In Wales there were druid priests and there were bards, apparently as a separate class.

On these points we may quote a passage from Mr J. W. Willis Bund's *The Celtic Church in Wales*[1]:

> "One instance of the difference between Wales and Ireland will be seen in the position of the Druids and Bards in Wales, as compared with the Druids and Brehons in Ireland, after the establishment of Christianity. In both Ireland and Wales the Druid and Brehon, or Druid and Bard, lost part of the power which the Christian priest acquired. But the Welsh Druid never took the place that the Irish Druid did after the establishment of Christianity. In Ireland, both Druid and Brehon continued for some time to exercise their restricted rights; the Brehon lingered on to a comparatively modern date. But in Wales, while the Bards continued, the Druid dropped at once into the position of a second rate magician, and gradually lost all power and influence."

Pliny's statement is contained in the 30th book of his Natural History, where he writes of religion and its connections with the art of medicine, with science, with magic. He appears to be chiefly concerned with magic. This art he says undoubtedly arose in Persia, derived from Zoroaster. The Roman historian Orosius says (*King Alfred's Books*, *Orosius*, page 96) that Ninus the king of Assyria began to reign one thousand three hundred years before the building of Rome, that is, 2053 years before Christ. Clinton's calculations give the date as 2182 B.C. As one of the great events of the reign of Ninus, Orosius relates that he slew Zoroaster the king of the Bactrians, who was reported to be the first discoverer of the magic art[2]. It may seem unnecessary to say that the historic Zoroaster is placed some fifteen or sixteen hundred years later, about the time of the prophet Daniel. We return to this on page 11.

In connection with our main contention regarding druidism, it is very interesting to find that King Alfred uses the Anglo-Saxon *dry* for sorcerer or magician. The *y* would be written in rune as a *u* enclosing an *i*. Thus the king uses the same word as *drui*, for *druidh*, to describe a magician. Later on in his "Orosius" the king uses *mid dry-cræftum* for "with sorceries."

Pliny proceeds to describe the spread of the art magic. He does not mention human sacrifices, but he suddenly names them as a matter of course, as if they were the pith and chief feature of the whole thing. 'At length, he says, in the 657th year of the City, the Senate made a decree "that there be no sacrifice of a man," *ne homo immolaretur*! It—apparently the magical art including human sacrifice—held the Galliae also, and that to our own time. For the reign of Tiberius did away with their Druids and that class of sooth-sayers and medicine men. It crossed the sea also, and at the present time Britain celebrates it with astonishing zeal, with so great ceremonies that Britain

[1] London, D. Nutt, 1897, page 137.

[2] *Magicae, ut ferunt, artis repertorem*, Or. I. 4. 3.

might seem to have taught it to the Persians. It is impossible to estimate how much is owed to the Romans, who destroyed the monstrous forms in which it was held a most religious act to slaughter men, and most salutary to be ordered.' These last words no doubt refer to Cæsar's remarks on the "figures" in which men were enclosed for slaughter, and to the custom of ordering a human sacrifice if you didn't feel well or were greatly afraid.

Julius Cæsar himself, by the way, violated the decree *ne homo immolaretur*, for we are told in Dio that he ordered two men to be slaughtered on the Campus Martius, as a religious ceremony.

Pliny has referred to the action of Tiberius. We learn from Tacitus[1] that in the time of Tiberius, A.D. 15–38, soothsayers and sorcerers had become a public danger. Libo Drusus, a member of an exalted family, was accused of encouraging Chaldæan soothsayers, the rites of the magicians, luxury, and lust. He put an end to himself. The Senate passed a decree for the expulsion of mathematicians (the astronomers and astrologers) and magicians from Italy. Two of the number were put to death, Lucius Pituanius being cast down from the rock, Publius Marcius being put to death "in the ancient manner" by the consuls at the Esquiline gate on sound of trumpet. Some years later, an illustrious man of great wealth was got rid of by a charge of magic arts; he put himself to death.

The late Dean Liddell set out the passages from Greek and Latin writers which speak of human sacrifices[2], and argued that they did not prove "that human sacrifices were in use among the Romans," "human sacrifices" meaning with him "innocent victims offered to appease the wrath of the gods." He took Pliny's statement that in 97 B.C. a decree was made by the Senate *ne homo immolaretur* to have reference to certain barbarous practices connected with the introduction of magic arts of foreign origin.

That explanation suits our general argument very well.

Of self-sacrifice among the Romans Suetonius (iv. 27) tells a quaint story. The Emperor Caligula was a general favourite on his accession. He had a serious illness, and his friends offered to expose their lives in the Arena for his recovery, while others of them vowed their lives to the infernal deities in exchange for the Emperor's life. Caligula recovered; and, being a stickler in such things, he compelled his friends to fulfil their vows.

Both in his *Annals* and in his *Histories* Tacitus[3] makes special mention of Druidae as the leaders of the people in war and in politics in Britain. The Roman governor Paulinus Suetonius, having had to deal in the east of Britain with an outraged British queen, had next to deal with very violent British women in the west. In each case the women were almost too much for him.

[1] Tacitus, *Annals*, ii. 27, ii. 32, xii. 59.
[2] *Archæologia*, xl. 242–256.
[3] Tacitus, *Annals*, xiv. 30, *Hist.* iv. 54.

Suetonius had found that the island Mona, which we English call by our own name Anglesey, was the resort of turbulent fugitives. He made preparations for attacking it. Ships landed his foot soldiers; his horsemen swam the straits. But Britons met them on the shore, excited to resistance by mænad women, Fury-like, rushing about among them with blazing torches, streaming hair, and vehement gestures and incantations, the Druidae, hands raised to heaven, uttering dire prayers. The Roman soldiery were arrested in their advance. The leader himself had to call upon them not to be afraid of a pack of women and fanatics. They nerved themselves to advance, bore down the resistance of the Britons, and burned them with their own torches. He did what he could to stamp out druidism, with its cruel superstitions, for its priests held it a sacred duty to offer sacrifice by pouring the blood of captives on their altars[1] and to seek omens from their gods on the entrails of men. This evidence of blood-stained druid altars must not be left out of our consideration. In the *Histories* we learn from Tacitus, who accompanied his father-in-law Agricola in his difficult task of governing Britain A.D. 78–84, a period which included the great invasion of Caledonia, that when news reached Britain of successes against Rome by various tribes, the Druidae, with their vain superstitions, chanted hymns of the coming time when the Transalpine peoples should possess the world. We find women druids in Ireland, the *ban-drui*.

We find also that in A.D. 373 the Roman emperor Valens committed great excesses at Antioch under the plea of suppressing magic art. It may safely be said that Paganism put all its strength in its conflict with Christianity into the claim of mysterious power of divination and command of the processes of nature. The struggle for dominance between Columba and Broichan was in little the real struggle between Christianity and Paganism.

We must not pass without notice the difficulties attaching to the idea of magic and magician. But, equally, we must not dwell upon them. It has been said by a recent writer that the problem of the definition of magic constitutes a veritable storm-centre in the anthropological literature of the present day[2]. That—with which we venture to agree—is a fair indication of the difficulties to which we have referred.

The word Magic comes of course from the Magi of the Persians, and it has been taken to refer to the religion, learning, and occult practices, of the sect of Zoroaster. Hence the word was from the first used in an unfavourable sense in the various languages in which we find it, and this unfavourable sense of witchcraft it has never lost in European languages. Bacon endeavoured to attach to it, as its natural meaning, the force of natural science in practical operation; and when in this present book we speak of magicians and medicine

[1] Thus the "altar" was not the "slaughter stone."

[2] R. R. Marett, in Hastings' Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics, under the heading *Magic*.

men, we are not really going beyond that idea, however much of imposture there may have been in their manner of working upon the ignorant minds of those who looked to them as their guides. A writer of the highest discretion and distinction[1] holding the view that the analogy between the magical and the scientific conception of the world is close, has developed the interesting summary that magic is next of kin to science but is a bastard sister. One of his humblest admirers is inclined to doubt the illegitimacy of origin, while allowing the fundamental differences between the sisters in their methods of operation. The further, and fascinating, question of the similarities and the dissimilarities of claim, as between the magician and the Christian priest, is clearly outside the modest aim of this book.

We have an appropriate example of the late continuance of human sacrifices in the *History of Orosius against the Pagans*. Orosius was writing of events in his own time and under his own observation in Rome. His *History* ended with A.D. 417. He is telling of the two brother-kings of the Goths, and of the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410. We may note that about the time of the conclusion of Orosius's *History*, Ninian was preparing his mission to that branch of the Southern Picts that was seated in the parts of Galloway; and we are not aware of any former mission that should have put an end to the worst features of their old established discipline of sacrifices. The same Roman commander who had fought against Alaric was the commander who invaded Caledonia and fought against the Northern Picts as recorded by his companion the poet Claudian[2]. This is what Orosius wrote[3]:—

Shortly afterwards, Alaric became a Christian. Rhadagaisus remained a heathen, and daily sacrificed to idols by slaying men; and he was always most pleased if they were Romans.

A curious and instructive development of the practice and meaning of human sacrifice is to be found in the remarkable manuscript and pictorial histories of the Aztecs which form part of Lord Cowdray's Mexican treasures, and are now being catalogued and indexed by Mr T. A. Joyce at the British Museum. Mr Joyce's book on Mexico is well known, but should be much better known. His clear and full knowledge was so kindly put at the disposal of this present writer that a few main facts can be simply stated.

The Aztec development was very late, about 1400 A.D. They were wandering hunters, and they came upon an agricultural people and took possession. They appear to have brought with them the cult of stellar deities; but the Sun God was the centre of their highly developed system of human sacrifice. The Sun God needed perpetual sacrifice of human heart and blood, to keep him strong enough to perform his daily labour of heating and fructifying the world.

[1] Sir J. G. Frazer.
[2] See page 128.
[3] vii. 37. See my *King Alfred's Books*, 1920, page 129.