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Sacred kings of the Picts: the last cuckoos

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ABSTRACT

Sacred kings of Late Iron Age northern Britain are thought to have symbolised fertility and considered responsible for the wellbeing of the lands and people; components of a system of governance maintained by conservative religious beliefs and champions of a local goddess of sovereignty, also associated with the cuckoo and the planet Venus. Their regicide was undertaken by their successors with a sacred spear at cult-sites at eight-year intervals when Venus set at its evening extreme at *Samhain*. Titled after the cuckoo, the symbol of male fertility across Europe, they mimicked the cuckoo's polygynous behaviour. Others have suggested their exploits were based on myths about the cuckoo. They are recalled in Irish legends, Arthurian tales and the writings of contemporary authors, depicted on stones and confirmed in recent place-name and archaeoastronomy studies, but not previously recognised. This paper explores the evidence for, and significance of, British, Irish and continental European warrior-champions named after the cuckoo. The study strongly suggests a continuity of cosmological beliefs, celestial associations, myths and legends, religious symbolism, sacred kingship and governance of tribal societies from the Indo-European immigrants to Britain until the adoption of Christianity and its associated form of kingship by the Picts.

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Introduction

This is the fifth in a series of seven papers by this author, three of which previously appeared in this journal (Nance, 2019a, 2021a, 2021b). They developed from the investigations of a standing stone in Aberdeen City, Scotland, referred to locally as the Gouk Stone. Crucially for what follows, *gouk* is Old English for a bird, the common cuckoo. The conclusions and reasoning from the previous investigations are briefly summarised in this introduction to provide a background, before the specific aims of the present study – an enquiry into the phenomena, symbolisms, topographies and cultural dimensions of the so-called Pictish ‘sacred kings’ – are stated. The paper can be viewed as a contribution to understanding one element in the little-known geographies of Pictish, and possibly a

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wider early Indo-European, society: it is based upon archaeological and textual-folkloric research, both by the author and as synthesised from the works of other scholars.

Other standing stones similarly named after the cuckoo in Great Britain, as well as some cuckoo place-names without stones, are statistically significantly associated with the same geographic and cultural features. This indicates that certain topographies have been symbolically associated with the bird since the stones were erected, thought on indirect evidence to have been in the Early Bronze Age (Nance, 2019a), suggesting that the cuckoo had been considered significant in some way across all of Britain since that early period. If this hypothesis is true, then representations of the cuckoo should be found in the material record. The bird can be identified by its distinctive feet but has been previously misidentified or unrecognised by archaeologists and art historians. It is depicted on several widespread Iron Age European artefacts in association with female figures, putative goddesses (Nance, 2019b).

As there are no cuckoo nests, distinguishable females or eggs, as they mimic those of the host, it was believed that all cuckoos were male (Nance, 2019b) and that they mated directly with the host females (Gubernatis, 1872). Due to their conceived virility, libido and fecundity, the bird is associated in textual sources with four significant, widespread European fertility goddesses, also variously associated with mead, sovereignty and the planet Venus. These goddesses and others, unidentified but depicted with cuckoos on artefacts, occur in Portugal, Scandinavia, Belgium, Greece, the Balkans, Rome and the southern Baltic (Nance, 2019b): areas where Indo-European languages are spoken. They were similar to several Middle Eastern goddesses associated with Venus who had a mortal consort that died and was reborn; for example, the third millennium BC Inanna, almost identical in role and attributes to the Irish goddess of sovereignty Medb (Olmsted, 2019), and similar to several Greek Bronze-Age deities (Wolkenstein & Kramer, 1983). The implication is that these goddess-figures all descended from a proto-Indo-European or Neolithic ancestor (Nance, 2019b). If so, then there must have been such a goddess in Bronze Age northern Britain. One such deity is remembered in a myth associated with the Calanais Stones, a Late Neolithic, Early Bronze Age monument on the Isle of Lewis, one of the Scottish Outer Hebrides, and is commemorated by the erection of the east row orientated towards a common rising azimuth of the Pleiades, cosmically symbolising the cuckoo (Méchin, 2000), and a crossover of Venus in the 1670s BC (Nance, 2021a). At Hatton of Fintray, the village nearest the Gouk Stone in Aberdeenshire, the goddess appears to have been syncretised as the parish saint: Saint Meddan or Medan (Nance, 2021b).

Detailed analysis of the monuments around the Gouk Stone, using methods from archaeoastronomy, established that it is the geographically central component of a previously unrecognised ritual landscape. The area was identified and delineated by six intervisible, prehistoric monuments that act as horizon fore- and backsights for lunar and solar rising-and-setting maxima and minima. A local legend asserts that the stone was erected to commemorate a general of *the same name* who was slain there. An analogy with contemporary Irish sacral kings suggests that the legend describes a temporal series of sacred kings of the Picts and their ancestors. They arguably represented fertility and plausibly can be envisaged as champions of a local goddess of sovereignty, a descendent of the original Indo-European deity associated with Venus. The regicide and inauguration of Irish kings occurred after a fixed period of years during a feast held between 29 October and 4 November (Ginnell, 1894) on *Samhain* on 1 November (Dalton, 1970; Macalister, 1918; Maier, 1989). Over 80% of the evening setting maxima of

Venus during the last four millennia also occurred between the 29 October and 6 November (Šprajc, 2015). The horizon alignments of the Gouk Stone with both the setting extreme of Venus in the Early Bronze Age and the setting sun on *Samhain* defined the year and the date of the regicide; supported the analogy with Irish kings; suggested the periodicity coincided with the eight-year cycle of Venus; and provided a date for the erection of the stone and associated regicide (Nance, 2021b).

The legend stated that the ‘general’ was titled after the cuckoo. The association of significant warrior-champions in insular myth and legend with the folklore and conceived biology of the cuckoo was proposed over a century ago, only to be rejected due to imperialist and racist perspectives (as will be explained). Similarly, contemporary classical and later Irish sources that refer to such figures have been rejected as unreliable or as hyperbole, written to entertain or influence a home audience; consequently, these associations and sacred kings have remained unrecognised. Other warrior-heroes from the British Isles were also recorded in early medieval texts as killed against standing stones but the significance has not been explored. They include the Pictish Ciuthach (Watson, 1914), Cúchullain of Irish legend (Gregory, 1903, p. 341), Gronw Pebr in *Y Mabinogion*, the earliest Welsh prose stories (Ifans & Ifans, 1980), and a number of pre-Christian Irish sacred kings (Dalton, 1970; Maier, 1989).

This paper provides a supported inquiry demonstrating that the previously unrecognised beliefs and practices associated with sacred kings and their association with the cuckoo might indeed have been central to the cultural and political aspects of Pictish and, in a wider sense, earlier Indo-European societies. In addition, it reinforces the conclusions of the previous studies by indicating a continuity of cosmological beliefs and their associations with features in the landscape, celestial associations, myths and legends, religious symbolism, kingship including regicide, and governance of tribal societies from the Bronze Age Indo-European immigrants to Britain until the adoption of Christianity and its associated form of kingship by the Picts.

There are no indigenous written texts in northern Scotland until after the seventh century (Fraser, 2009); hence, virtually nothing is known directly regarding the religion and governance of the early medieval people who inhabited most of mainland northern Scotland and its isles between the third and tenth centuries AD. The information regarding the societies of their Iron and Bronze Age ancestors remains frustratingly opaque, and hence any inquiry such as the present one cannot but entertain a measure of conjecture and imagination. While prompting further research and raising new questions, the article invites critique for what the author readily acknowledges to be its potential limitations: any interpretations regarding an archeologically elusive people based, in part, on analogy and textual references by outsiders – not part of the time and place under scrutiny – must, to varying degrees, be speculative. However, the degree of speculation is correspondingly reduced if, as evidence accumulates, independent sources reach the same conclusions and predictive hypotheses are found to be plausible.

The aims here, therefore, are to determine if there is additional evidence for sacred kings in northern Scotland and in other areas of Britain and continental Europe. The more specific objectives are as follows: to examine the literature describing sacred kingship to determine the social implications of this form of leadership in Pictish society; to re-assess the earlier claims regarding the association between warrior chieftains and the folklore of the cuckoo, and to compare them with early textual sources, place-names and

the results of recent field archaeology studies; and to examine the evidence for other British, Irish and European warrior-champions named after the cuckoo, and to determine what other aspects of regicide can be inferred from these sources.

Literature review

Sacred kingship

Kingship in this study refers to the pre-Christian, pre-statehood institution in contrast with modern versions of monarchy. Sacred kingship was not, in principle, associated with power but was burdened with heavy responsibilities usually resulting in regicide through the ritual murder of its incumbent or his substitute (Scubla, 2005). Those responsibilities had two primary functions: a negative role as a scapegoat taking upon himself the ‘pollution’ of the people he represented, which began with the heinous act of regicide; however, to rid the people of that ‘pollution’, a king’s reign must also end in regicide (Scubla, 2005).

As a scapegoat, the king also exhibits a positive aspect in maintaining cosmic harmony through appeasement of the gods by observing ritual and thereby achieving his second function of ensuring fertility and abundance. The Irish texts stated that their early kings fulfilled these roles; they were the chosen ones of the local goddess of sovereignty and fertility and became her mortal lover responsible for maintaining the cosmic equilibrium to ensure the well-being of the land and waters, its people, crops and animals (Maier, 1989). In Celtic mythology, heroes are often described with similar characteristics to sacred kings, having a special relationship to the supernatural and serving as intermediaries between people and gods. They are often portrayed as demigods that also play an important role in insular Celtic mythology (Haeussler, 2010, p. 201). Cúchullainn, for example, was supposedly the son of the god Lug.

Cúchullain was the hero of the Irish epic the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, ‘Cattle Raid of Cooley’, who led the Ulstermen against Queen Medb of Connaught, a local goddess of sovereignty and fertility. The *Táin* is part of the Ulster Cycle which was recorded at the earliest by Christian scribes in the seventh century (Olmsted, 1992, p. 6). The events described are generally thought to have been earlier than those of the Fenian Cycle, mentioned below, in or before the first century AD.

Sacred kings did not rule but reigned, since political power, in Celtic Gaul, for example, was in the hands of a priesthood, the druids (Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 49; Crosby, 1946). The office of the early Irish kings also remained relatively unaltered from its pre-Christian form due to cultural conservatism from both geographical isolation (Maier, 1989) and its control by a similar class of ‘wise men’, the learned priests, the *filid*, that developed from the druids during Christianity and who preserved the old form of kingship (Mac Cana, 1979, p. 445). Sacred kings are hence generally portrayed as entrapped: hemmed-in by numerous restrictive taboos (Evans-Pritchard, 1962, p. 79). The Irish and British kings were constrained through similar restrictions: Gaelic *geas* and Brittonic *tyngned*. *Geasa* were often imposed by a female figure, often a goddess of fertility and/or sovereignty (MacKillop, 1998, p. 249). The insular tales recount instances of kings being placed in positions of conflicting *geasa*, again usually by female supernatural figures, resulting in their deaths.

It was the kingship itself that was sacral and the chosen individual was elevated to kingship through inauguration rituals (Scubla, 2005). Providing the Irish king did not break his *geasa*, reigned well, was not physically disfigured and no natural or anthropogenic disasters befell the land, then the king was safe for a fixed period after which he was ritually murdered, usually by his successor (Macalister, 1918, p. 326) using a sacred weapon (Dalton, 1970) with magical properties. A king therefore combined offices normally separated: the priest, the sacrificial victim and the executioner. While the regicide of a scapegoat released the community from its 'pollution'; the act of killing a sacred king also tainted the successor who was simultaneously elevated to kingship but condemned to death (Scubla, 2005).

Regicide and the succeeding inauguration of sacred kings also had a cosmic significance, usually with a *hieros gamos*, a cosmic wedding/mating. Hocart (1927) thought this was a union between sky and Earth. Venus is at its maximum height and is visible well before sunset on *Samhain* as part of an eight-year cycle and this phenomenon could represent the recreation of a cosmogenic (creation) myth, a *hieros gamos* of the setting sun and evening Venus. A similar *hieros gamos* has been demonstrated between the Sun and Venus in its morning phase at sunrise on the summer solstice every eight years at the Calanais Stones (Nance, 2021a). *Samhain* was the Pagan Celtic New Year (Frazer, 1922; Hutton, 1991) and the concurrent regicide and *hieros gamos* might have been considered both the end and rebirth of a new cosmic cycle, a liminal time, with the act of regicide a ritual re-enactment of a proto-Indo-European cosmogenic myth that brought fertility to the land (see Lincoln, 1975); a *hieros gamos* at *Samhain* and the on the summer solstice being examples of ritual-time that merged the past in the present (Bradley, 1991). The act of regicide would have been considered to cause cosmic discord until the new king was inaugurated and *Samhain* was considered such a time of chaos when the boundary between this world and the Otherworld, the realm of the gods and ancestors, could more easily be crossed (Haeussler, 2010; Maier, 1989).

It is not known whether the morning and evening aspects of Venus were recognised or regarded as the same object/deity by the northern tribes. Pythagoras was the first known to record they were the same object in the sixth century BC (Healy, 1991, pp. 15–16) but this does not preclude that knowledge in illiterate societies.

Cuckoo heroes

The warriors' link with the cuckoo was fecundity. The cuckoo symbolised male fertility from Denmark (Armstrong, 1958) to China, where it is the symbol of both deceit and fertility (Lai, 1988). Its association with goddesses of fertility suggest that as the chosen ones/champions of such goddesses, the kings were also titled after the bird and symbolised fertility.

This suggested association between other Late Iron Age and medieval warriors with the cuckoo has been proposed before. De Kay (1898, p. 53) thought some European hero and divine myths were based on the legends and folklore of the cuckoo. The eminent linguist and Irish language scholar Julius Pokorny (1909) recognised that the exploits of the legendary Irish and British heroes Cúchullain, Mongan, Finn, Gawain and Arthur were similar and were derived from one ancestral source. Loomis (1928) also thought Curoi, Gwri and Gawain were the same mythic figure and represented a

demi-god. Pokorny additionally proposed that these warriors' exploits were based on ancient legends of the cuckoo and referred to them as 'cuckoo heroes'. Pokorny's hypothesis was dismissed by Alfred Nutt and was subsequently forgotten. Nutt was an influential publisher who also researched and wrote about folklore and Celtic studies. Nutt's dismissal was not objective but the logical fallacy of personal incredulity, based on incorrect suppositions that resonated with contemporary racist and imperialist perspectives. It is an example of how the politics of the past both shaped and constrained subsequent pre-historic and 'Celtic' paradigms and narratives, as this extract demonstrates:

My initial and fundamental objection is psychological. The sagas discussed were the cherished possession of the foremost races of mankind [Germans and 'Celts'], of the races which have developed the whole of modern culture, to whom every advance in thought and art is due. At a certain stage of their development these races associated this saga with their wisest and mightiest chief, with their preeminent champion, with their eponymous hero ... I am quite willing to admit that the cuckoo may have possessed a mythical significance. I protest that it can only be a secondary one at the best, and that among no people can the cuckoo have played such a part as could by any possibility whatever have enabled stories connected with it to have developed into a heroic saga of the first rank ... Of course, the hypothetical cuckoo saga is, like Druidism and other characteristic traits of Celtic culture as known to us historically, taken over from the pre-Celtic inhabitants of Ireland. These were, in part, probably Finns. Dr. Pokorny has seen a photograph of an Esthonian peasant which reminded him strongly of a non-Aryan Irishman; in Esthonian saga the cuckoo, Kukkulind ['cukoobird'], plays a great part. (Nutt, 1910, p. 234)

Nutt (1910) described the cuckoo heroes' characteristics proposed by Pokorny. They included: mysterious parentage as, being a brood parasite, parents and offspring do not recognise one another; hence, the cuckoo inevitably weds his sister, as does Conchobar; or fights with his unknown son, as does Cúchullain. The heroes visit and return from the Otherworld as the cuckoo was thought to do (Gubernatis, 1872, p. 235). The heroes overcome huge odds in battle, akin to ousting nestlings; for example, Cúchullain overwhelms the 150 youths of the Ulster court, as the cuckoo gets the better of the other nestlings however many they may be. (The cuckoo hatchling ejects all host chicks and eggs from the nest.) Cúchullain is a great bird-hunter while the cuckoo is feared by smaller birds that mob it as it mimics the sparrowhawk in appearance. The Ulstermen in the *Táin*, due to a curse by another goddess of sovereignty, Macha, are overcome by the *couvade* (male sympathetic pregnancy), except Cúchullain. He supposedly would not be associated with a custom intended to strengthen the tie between father and son, although Cúchullain was not an Ulsterman but a Briton (discussed below) and therefore the malady would not affect him. Gawain and Cúchullain are pre-eminently 'ladies' men', while the cuckoo was described by Nutt as the 'Lothario' of the bird world: Gawain as a British counterpart of Cúchullain was considered a commonplace of Arthurian scholarship (Loomis, 1928). Cúchullain was also described as having seven bright pupils in each eye (Kinsella, 1969, p. 156) which could be a reference to the seven stars of the Pleiades that symbolised the cuckoo. In addition, Cúchullain was both born and killed at *Samhain* (Haeussler, 2010, p. 201) indicating a link with a Venus deity.

Gawain was the oldest, most primitive figure among Arthur's knights, whose title of the 'Maidens' Knight' was probably a survival of his original role as a champion of a goddess (Matthews, 1990; Petrović, 2000). Gawain's title of Gwalchmai, as he was known in the early Welsh Arthurian material, can be translated as the 'Hawk of May',

which Rhys (1901) identified as a description of the cuckoo, since the sparrowhawk, the cuckoo's mimic model, was thought to change into the cuckoo in spring. Many ethnic groups, including the Anglo-Saxons and tribes from the Baltic area, believed this to be the case (Gimbutas, 2001). The earliest references to the transformation of the sparrowhawk are found in Aristotle and Pliny who refer to the cuckoo as an immature hawk. As late as the thirteenth century, Albertus Magnus believed cuckoos were composites of the dove and the sparrowhawk (*De animalibus* 26. 6. 51–53; Scanlan, 1987).

The Ciuthach was a northern British warrior, pronounced 'kewach', phonetically almost identical to *cuthaig*, 'kewag', Gaelic for 'cuckoo', and is remembered in the place-names of the west coast of Scotland (Watson, 1926). The Cughtagh, 'kewtah', also appears in Manx legend (Gill, 1932, p. 248). Watson (1914, p. 209) described a Ciuthach:

In view of the fact that traces of the Ciuthach are found [in place-names] from Clyde to the Butt of Lewis, it is clear that at one time he played a great rôle in the traditions of the West. Among all the confusion of the traditions as they have come down to us, there may be, and probably is, an ultimate historical basis ... Throughout the references to him there runs the feeling that the Ciuthach was a hero, or the hero, of a race different from the Gael ... The conclusion suggested is that the Ciuthach was a hero of the Picts.

His vitality was also recalled in the Hebrides during the last century: 'At the present day in Lewis one expresses admiration of a young fellow's vigour by the expression "Bu tu fhéin an Ciuthach" ("it's yourself that's the Ciuthach")' (Watson, 1914, p. 193), indicating that Ciuthach was a title, not a personal name.

The Ciuthach is mentioned in several Irish tales of the Fenian Cycle set in the Hebrides. They were recorded through Christian scribal filters between the seventh and fourteenth centuries but thought to be set in the reign of Cormac mac Airt in the third century AD (Meyer, 1910). The *Marbhadh a' Chiuthaich*, 'the killing of the Ciuthach' is set on the north coast of the Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides (Watson, 1914). The Ciuthach is described as a great warrior that no man could overcome and, typically, could only be killed with a magical weapon, a sword, Mac an Luinn, possibly 'son of the spear', while his back was to Creag Ciuthach, a rock on Lewis (Watson, 1914, p. 195) (Lúin is described as a magic spear by Meyer (1906, p. 48).)

Diarmaid was a member of the Fianna, a landless war-band led by Fionn mac Cumhaill (Finn MacCool). In common with other warrior champions, he was a demigod, with a beauty spot on his face, the sight of which made him sexually irresistible. He was unconquered in battle and his death was facilitated by a bristle from a poisonous boar. In the legend of *Diarmaid and Grainne*, Grainne was the wife of Fionn who eloped with Diarmaid. During their pursuit by the Fianna, the couple took possession of the sea cave of the Ciuthach during his absence at sea. Grainne was intimate with the Ciuthach when he returned and Diarmad eventually killed him with a spear (Watson, 1914, p. 201). In the legend *Dàn Chiuthaich*, Emer, the wife of Ossian, was also unfaithful with a Ciuthach (Watson, 1914, p. 209). Both relationships indicated a link with the polygynous 'king' of the Hebrides, described by a post-600 AD interpolator of Solinus's *Polyhistor*, originally written in the third century AD: 'no woman is given to him in marriage; but he takes in turn her who pleases him at the moment' (Nansen, 1911, p. 160). This later insertion is probably not Roman but

a description of the situation in the Hebrides at the seventh century date of the interpolator's writing (Zimmer, 1889, p. 26). It is also the conceived virility and polygynous behaviour of the male cuckoo on which De Kay and Pokorny thought were the social practices of these warriors were modelled.

The Ciuthach was replaced by a similar figure in a version of *Diarmaid and Grainne* recorded in 1859, and named as Ciofach Mac a' Ghoil. Campbell (1890 vol. iii. p. 49) translates the name as 'Ciofach the son of the Stranger'; however, as *coimheach* is Gaelic 'stranger', this would translate as 'Stranger, son of Goll'. Goll mac Morna had killed Finn's father and taken over leadership of the Fianna. He was also slain on a rock known as Carraig Ghoill, 'Goll's Rock'. Nevertheless, Watson (1914) thought Ciofach was a variant of Ciuthach. As Ciuthach was a Gaelic title for a British warrior, perhaps Ciofach was the Brittonic title from which Ciuthach was translated (discussed below).

There are records of later cuckoo kings in England. Thomas Sheppard was recorded as the 'Cuckowe King' in the 1565 Churchwardens' Accounts of Mere, Wiltshire (Johnston, 1907, p. 340). Another is mentioned in a poem of 1689 (Disraeli, 1840, p. 262) who presided at a church ale, the precursor of a church fair, remnants of pre-Christian festivals (Dexter, 1932) which remained as fairs and parish feasts on the local saint's day, in some cases, directly linked with the pre-Christian deity synchronised as the local saint (Nance, 2021b). A related custom was retained until the nineteenth century among Shropshire colliers. They stopped work on hearing the first cuckoo; claimed the day as a holiday and went off to drink ale outside to welcome the bird. This custom was called 'Wetting the Cuckoo' or 'Cuckoo Foot-Ale' (Wright & Lones, 1936, p. 20), a reference to the cuckoo's unusual zygodactylic feet. The custom continued at Hoffleet Stow, Lincolnshire, until the 1930s (Sutton, 1997, p. 80).

Other descendants of 'cuckoo heroes' may still exist in Europe. In Bulgaria and Romania there are fertility mummers, the Kukeri (singular kuker) who are thought to be Thracian in origin (Köiva & Kuperjanov, 2011; Maudlin, 2004; Zlatovskaia, 1967). Despite the phonetic similarity to the Bulgarian and Romanian for cuckoos, kukuvitsi and cuci, the name was speculated to be related to a pre-Slavic divinity, Kuk (Zlatovskaia, 1967, p. 36), about which nothing is known, and ignoring that the Kukeri previously disguised themselves as cuckoos (Vulpesco, 1927, p. 137). An experienced kuker, the 'king', leads the Kukeri, in mock fights with other village groups, thought to have previously been a rite of passage into manhood for youths (Maudlin, 2004). Several other customs are now mixed in and much of the 'magical' elements forgotten (Zlatovskaia, 1967, p. 35); however, in association with 'welcoming of spring' customs, the king still performs fertility rituals: symbolically ploughing fields with a phallic red-tipped sword and performing mock copulations. In the Middle Ages the human sacrifice of a substitute 'king' of the Kukeri reputedly still took place (Zlatovskaia, 1967, p. 42) and, according to the *Life of the Martyr Dasius*, Roman soldiers garrisoned at Durostorum (modern Silistra, Bulgaria) in the third century AD recorded a festival acted each year when a 'king' was chosen who had the freedom to implement his 'lawless and shameful desires' for 30 days and was then killed with a sword: 'a sacrifice to nameless and unclean idols' (Cumont, 1897). McNeill (1956, p. 16) suggested a series where the initial sacrifice was of a totem animal, then progressively a king, a substitute of high rank, a volunteer who receives temporary royal power as at Durostorum, and then a criminal, as occurred in

Gaul according to Julius Caesar and Strabo. The runaway slaves who fought to be the Priest of Diana's sanctuary at Nemi, near Rome, would also fall into this category. A similar ritual reportedly occurred in Britain until recently when, using the *Samhain* fire as a means of selection, substitute sacrificial victims were chosen in Perthshire and Wales (Frazer, 1922).

Discussion

Cuckoo place-names

In addition to the Gouk Stone, many other cuckoo place-names do not appear to refer to the bird or its habitat directly, either in Britain (Nance, 2019a) or in southern Germany and Switzerland, where they refer to the bird in a 'mystic sense' (Grimm, 1883, p. 681). They might refer to sacred kings; for example, the locations named after the Ciuthach throughout western Scotland (Watson, 1914).

In *Marbhadh a' Chiuthaich*, when combat begins the Fianna are at 'weapon-play' on Cnoc na Cuthaig, 'Cuckoo Hill' (Watson, 1914) before they killed the Ciuthach. Conversely, the original name was Cnoc na Ciuthach, 'Hill of the Ciuthach', as the pronunciations are almost identical. It suggests that some cuckoo place-names are locations where combat took place. The propensity for single combat between champions, referred to in insular tales, occurring in fords could have taken place near standing stones associated with the cuckoo, as these stones are statistically significantly closer to running water when compared to a randomly selected sample of other standing stones ($p = 0.01$: Nance, 2019a). Cuckoo stones might also have been erected near running water as markers for these fords. Fords possess a liminal quality, they bridge the divide between the worlds of the sacred and the profane – neither land nor water – in waters that were themselves boundaries, like the parish boundary of the Blackburn below the Gouk Stone, not in one territory or the other. The possibility that other cuckoo place-names refer to warriors would explain why they have no obvious link to the bird or its habitat; for example, Carn-cwcw in Pembrokeshire would more probably refer to the burial cairn of a warrior rather than a bird.

If cuckoo stones do represent sites of ritual murder, there could have been one in each Bronze Age tribal territory. There are 25 known standing-stones named after the cuckoo listed in the Ordnance Survey gazetteer and there are another eight cuckoo place-names with a standing-stone nearby (Nance, 2019a; Figure 1). There were undoubtedly more; Creag Ciuthach, for example, where a Ciuthach was murdered. In a randomly selected sample of 100 standing stones in Great Britain, there were seven stones that had the surrounding topography of cuckoo place-names but there was no record of 'cuckoo' in the name. They were hypothesised to be possible 'lost' cuckoo stones; for example, the possibly significantly-named Battle Stone at the head of the deep valley of the Afon Ysgir, a kilometre from its confluence with the wide valley of the River Usk. There is a Flavian Roman fort at the confluence at Aberyscir (SO003296) built between AD 75–80 (Hankinson, 2009) in the territory of the Silures at the time of their conquest (Cuckoo place-names are statistically significantly closer to Roman roads and forts when compared to randomly selected locations ($p = 0.0001$: Nance, 2019a).) The fort is thought to be Cicucium, mentioned in the *Ravenna*

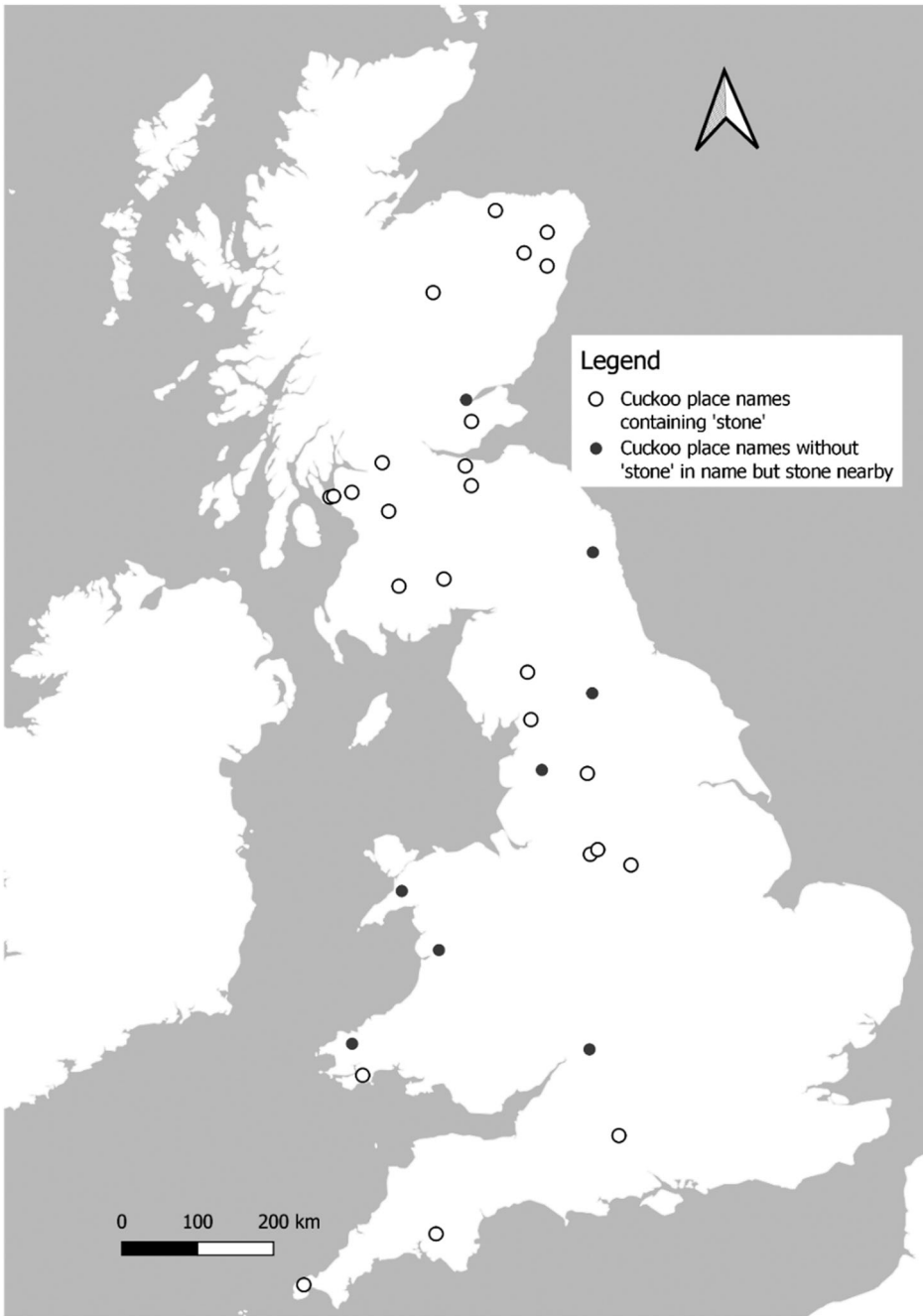


Figure 1. Distribution of cuckoo place-names in Great Britain containing the element 'stone' and others without 'stone' but with a standing stone nearby. Data from OSGB gazetteer adapted from Nance (2019a).

Cosmography compiled around AD 700. The autograph is lost and extant copies are riddled with spelling errors. Cucucium, 'place of the cuckoo', would appear to be a probable interpretation (Nance, 2019a).

While the data are limited, the distribution of cuckoo stones is not uniform across Great Britain but crudely approximates to that of stone circles, thought to have been constructed within the Early Bronze Age approximately between 2500 to and 1700 BC (Burl, 1995, p. 9). The Gouk Stone has a horizon alignment with the Sun setting behind the site of a stone circle at *Samhain* suggesting that the investigation of other alignments between cuckoo, and other, standing stones with stone circles could be informative.

Warriors

In the *Marbhadh a' Chiuthaich* the Ciuthach is not described as a king but as a powerful warrior who has to be goaded into combat for a week and can then only be killed with a magic weapon. He is depicted alone in all the Irish tales, never as part of a war band unlike his Irish adversaries. In contrast, the warrior remembered in the legend of the Gouk Stone was also named after the cuckoo but described as a general, implying the leader of a war band. These materials suggest that in the Hebrides at the time in which the Irish tales refer, or when first written after the sixth century, the Ciuthach was already an anachronism eclipsed by the adoption of kingship and/or Christianity, or a recluse, an expelled scapegoat shunned by his society or at least living apart from them in caves and, in the knowledge of his certain death by the hand of his successor, considered a dead-man-walking.

The Ciuthach's responsibilities might parallel those of the Irish kings: to maintain cosmic equilibrium, ensuring the well-being of the land and waters, its people, crops and animals. This included ensuring plentiful fish in river mouths (Maier, 1989, p. 20). In *Marbhadh a' Chiuthaich* the Ciuthach is described as fishing for flounders when approached by the Fianna (Watson, 1914) and is described as carrying a string of fish in *Diarmaid and Grainne* (MacRitchie, 1914). The significance, if any, is unknown but, considering the importance fishing had to the coastal island communities of the Hebrides, it might be reflected in a fertility ritual still enacted in the eighteenth century in the village of Barvas, also on the north coast of the Isle of Lewis. A man was sent to cross the Barvas River early on the first day of May while women and girls were prevented from crossing it first as it was thought that they would hinder the salmon from coming into the river all the year round (Martin, 1716, p. 7). The ritual suggests that the man could 'purify' the river while women 'polluted' it. It seems unlikely that it was the role of just any man or undertaken across only this river.

The polygynous behaviour of the Ciuthach, the king of the Hebrides, Gawain and Cúchullain appears to be based on the conceived behaviour of the cuckoo. Several Roman, Irish and medieval English authors stated that the indigenous Britons; the inhabitants of Thule; the northern tribes of the Maeatae, Caledones, Attacotti, the Irish Scotti and the later Picts had polyamorous societies. Matrimony was unknown to them: the men had their women 'in common' and they brought up their children communally. An aDNA study has recently confirmed that just such a society existed in Neolithic Britain (Fowler et al., 2021). The foregoing suggests that their polyamorous societies existed and were also based on the conceived behaviour of the cuckoo, as explored in the sixth paper of this series (Nance 2022, *An investigation of the polyamorous societies of the Picts and their ancestors*, in preparation (details available from the author)).

Names

In addition to ‘general’ Gouk, the Ciuthach would appear to be a title, an equivalent or derivative of *cuthaig*, Gaelic ‘cuckoo’. Ciuthach was the Gaelic term for the British warriors of the Scottish west-coast where these tales of the Fenian Cycle were set, probably when the Irish settled these Brittonic speaking areas: it was not their indigenous title.

The Brittonic for cuckoo is *cog* and might be incorporated in the name of an early king. Cogidubnus was the king of the Celtic Regneses tribe of southern Britain in the first century during the Roman conquest. Dubnus is from Old Celtic *dubno*, ‘world’, or possibly ‘otherworld’ (Delamarre, 2003), and was used in names: the Gaelic Domhnall, *dubno* + *val*, ‘world ruler’, and Gaulish Dumnorix (spelled Dubnoreix on coins), ‘king of the world’, a chieftain of the Aedui. Cogidubnus would be ‘cuckoo of the world’, perhaps that of an over-king or ‘chieftain of chieftains’.

There were British tribes settled in Ireland in the late Iron Age. The Damnonii of Connaught were considered by early-Irish scholars to be descended from the Britons (Watson, 1926, p. 24). Cúchullain was a Briton. He was raised as a child named Sétanta. According to Ptolemy, in the second century AD the Setantii were based around the mouth of the River Ribble in Lancashire. In one of his many single combats described in the *Táin* he was due to fight Ferdiad, a hero of the Damnonii, but Cúchullain was reticent and reminded Ferdiad that they were of the same peoples. Before his last battle, a satirist threatens to deride Cúchullain’s tribe but Cúchullain replies that notice of his shaming will not reach a land that he has never visited. Watson (1926, p. 25) considered that these examples clearly show that Cúchullain was a Briton.

Cúchullain grew up in the house of his foster parents on Muirthemne Plain (Kinsella, 1969, pp. 23–25). Conaille Muirthemne was a Cruithin kingdom in north Leinster, as is the peninsula of Cooley (Cúailnge), who paid homage to the over-kingdom of the Ulaid (Ulster). Cruithin is the Irish equivalent of Priteni, an ancient name for the Britons, and early Irish writers used Cruithin (modern Cruithne) to refer to both the Picts of Scotland and to a north-eastern Irish group (Ó Cróinín, 1995, p. 213) that probably spoke a Brittonic dialect. The later Cruithin tribal kings had Irish names but their king list begins in the seventh century – after they were absorbed into Irish culture, whilst the *Táin* probably relates to the first century AD. The purpose of the foregoing is to establish that Cúchullain was a British warrior, not a king but a champion of the Ulstermen, an equivalent of the Ciuthach.

The etiological legend of Cúchullain’s naming is that as the child Sétanta he killed the hound of Culann but promised a replacement and until then he would guard Culann’s house, hence he was renamed Cú Chulainn, ‘Culann’s Hound’ (O’Rahilly, 1967). The legend would appear to have been contrived after the fact by medieval scribes when the original meaning was forgotten. Pokorny (1909) thought the original name might have been Cuculind or ‘Cuckoo-dragon’. A protagonist of Cúchullain was a king, Cú Roí. It has been suggested that the cú, ‘dog’, element might have been emphasised to alliterate with that of his enemy in oral poetry, replacing the earlier cuckoo element. His main objective in the legend was to seduce Cú Roí’s wife Blathnat, ‘little flower’. The parallel with the legend of the Welsh warrior Gronw Pebr, also slain with a spear next to a stone and who also seduces a king’s wife, Bloduwedd, ‘face of flowers’, has previously been

noted (Monaghan, 2004). Both legends possibly refer to an earlier myth of attempts to gain favour with a goddess and consequent kingship.

'Little cuckoo' using the Welsh diminutive *bach* would be *cog fach*, where *g* usually lenites to zero as seen in the Latin loan words *corrigia*, 'lace', and *exiguous*, 'scanty', which lenite in Welsh to *carrai* and *eisieu* respectively (Morgan 1966). It might be thought that *cog fach* becomes *cofach* (Welsh *f* pronounced *v*) but as the *g* in *cog* is from an original *k* and as it has already lenited to *g*, it is not thought to do so again (Simon Rodway, pers. comm.), this assumes, of course, that rustic speakers are aware of this 'rule'. It was earlier postulated that *ciofach*, a variant of Ciuthach (Watson, 1914), is originally from Brittonic. Co(g)fach Mac a' Ghoil now translates as 'Little Cuckoo, Son of Goll'.

In addition to *bach*, the Welsh suffix *-yn* and is a synthetic diminutive or endearment (Roziak 2009) while *-an* can also possibly be found in P-Celtic personal names like the Pictish names Drost to Drostan, 'Little Drost'. The equivalent Irish suffix is *-ín* (Roziak 2009). The Old Irish word for puppy is *cuilén*, 'little dog', from *cú* + *ín* where *l* is used as a vowel separator, and it is supposedly a component of Cúchullain's name. The onomatopoeic form *cu-cú* exists in Irish Gaelic which does not undergo the same lenition that occurred in Welsh before the early sixth century AD (Morgan 1966); hence, *cwclwén* would mean 'little cuckoo' as a direct translation from the Brittonic, its meaning forgotten by the medieval scribes that recompiled the *Táin* from a number of sources and giving rise to the etiological legend.

Sacred kings

The practice of a human representative that dies and is replaced as the consort or champion of a goddess of sovereignty and fertility personifying the planet Venus is an ancient one. Extant hymns detail how in fourth millennium Sumer, the high priestess of the Venus deity Inanna chose a young man who represented her divine consort, Dumuzi, in a *hieros gamos* celebrated during the New Year ceremony at the spring equinox (Kramer, 1969, p. 49). Marcovich (1966, p. 49) thought that Dumuzi was not a life-death-rebirth deity, as postulated by Frazer, but a mortal who died each spring. Campbell (2013, p. 47) suggested such sacrifices might be linked to the eight-year cycle of the planet Venus. Sumer was also the original site of bronze technology (Lopez, 2009) with the first evidence of bronze known from around 3000 BC at Ur (Pollock, 1999) indicating that Inanna was known in the earlier chalcolithic period.

The sacred kings of northern Britain would appear to demonstrate a continuity of the ritual murder of champion/consort of a goddess associated with the cuckoo and Venus since the Neolithic. The evidence includes the existence of a deity associated with both the cuckoo and Venus at Calanais dated to the Early Bronze Age and the existence of several similar widespread European goddesses including Bronze Age Hera, associated with the cuckoo and Venus, and recorded in Mycenaean linear B tablets dating from 1450 to 1150 BC (O'Brien, 1993, p. 114).

The Gundestrup cauldron was found in Denmark but thought to have been fabricated in northern Gaul during the first century BC or first century AD (Hachmann, 1990; Olmsted, 1979; Rowlett, 1993). A plate on the cauldron depicts a goddess in triplicate, the central figure releasing the first cuckoo of spring. It is a belief that is remembered

in a myth from southern England (see Nance, 2019b). In addition, she is holding a recumbent man in the crook of her arm. He is depicted with one-arm terminating in an outsized four-digit claw that could be a representation of the cuckoo's characteristic foot which is also depicted on the birds on the plate (Nance, 2019b), suggesting that he depicts a sacrificed sacred king titled after the bird.

A number of British warriors named after the cuckoo and widespread cuckoo-stone distribution strongly suggest that sacred kings named after the bird occurred across Britain in the prehistoric period. Only those remaining in what was to become Pictavia existed into the early medieval era, while the Kukeri demonstrate that similar warriors named after the cuckoo existed in Europe. The foregoing strongly suggests that sacred kings associated with a Venus deity occurred in Bronze Age Britain, comprising a component of the ancestral Indo-European Bell Beaker community that emigrated to Britain around 2500 BC, largely replacing the Neolithic communities (Olalde et al., 2018).

At the end of the third millennium, Mesopotamian kings established their legitimacy by replacing Dumuzi in the temple. Hence, when societies with non-hereditary warrior chieftains, like the *Ciuthach*, adopted modern kingship, the kings might have assumed the position of the warriors as champion of the goddesses by claiming divine right as, for example, in Ireland into the medieval period with the ritual of a *banais righe* or sacred marriage of kingship with the land and its occupants (FitzPatrick, 2004, p. 107).

According to Cassius Dio (*Historia Romana* 77. 12; Cary, 1914), the northern tribes chose their boldest warriors as leaders, indicating non-hereditary chieftains. Nevertheless, a war-band leader might not have been the clan or tribal chieftain, the proto-king, but a separate position obtained through a series of tasks or ordeals including contests demonstrating bravery as both combat and ordeals are common themes of insular hero tales.

Rosemarkie man

Dalton (1970, p. 16) proposed that the evidence indicated that the outgoing Irish king was tied to a stone and despatched with a sacred weapon on the eve of *Samhain*. For example, Lugaid mac Con was weakened by wounding by a poisonous tooth and killed using a magical spear, the *ringcne*, while leaning against a standing stone. Suibhne Menn, like Cúchullain, was killed by a spear on *Samhain* with his back to a stone (Maier, 1989). A *Ciuthach* was despatched with his back to a stone by Fionn with a magic sword, 'son of the spear', and Diarmaid killed a *Ciuthach* with a spear.

In north-east Scotland a number of carved stones depict an armed man. The figures hold axes, or a spear with a sphere at the opposite end of the shaft to the point described as 'doorknob spearbutts' (Heald, 2001). The weapon was described by Dio (*Historia Romana* 76. 12 3; Cary, 1914) in the early third century when discussing the Maeatae and Caledones, tribes that lived on the border of the Antonine Wall, although they have since been found throughout the British Isles (Heald, 2001). As depictions of the human form are rare in prehistoric Britain, these monuments appear to be a late consequence of contact with the Romans. Consequently, it was proposed that the figures were carved in the late-Roman or immediate post-Roman period, fourth to sixth century (Hall et al., 2020). The same study proposed that the figures might have highlighted the martial prowess of the dead and offered other wide-ranging speculations that the figures

represented specific individuals; a more universal figure such as: a god or mythical/semi-mythical being; a generic hero; a leader; a lesser deity such as a royal guardian; or the Roman gods Mars or Mercury. The study concluded that it was probable that they ultimately underlined the status, power and ideology of an elite (Hall et al., 2020). The sacred kings described here would be a more definitive and supported candidate for these depictions: the Ciuthach, holding a sacred spear with which he had murdered his predecessor and by which instrument he too would be despatched.

Such a figure may exist in the material record. The skeleton of a man was found in 2016 buried in a sea cave near Rosemarkie in the former Pictish kingdom of Fortriu. He was aged about 30 when he died between 430 and 630 cal AD. There was no evidence of defensive wounds, suggesting he might have been executed whilst bound or drugged. He suffered several blows that broke his skull. His wounds were described by forensic anthropologist Professor Dame Sue Black:

The first impact was by a circular cross-section implement that broke his teeth on the right side. The second may have been the same implement, used like a fighting stick which broke his jaw on the left. The third resulted in fracturing to the back of his head as he fell from the blow to his jaw with a tremendous force possibly onto a hard object perhaps stone.

The fourth impact was intended to end his life as probably the same weapon was driven through his skull from one side and out the other as he lay on the ground. The fifth was not in keeping with the injuries caused in the other four where a hole, larger than that caused by the previous weapon, was made in the top of the skull. (Quoted in Hill, 2017, no pagination)

The description of the wounds does not contradict the hypothesis that they could have been inflicted with a knobbed spear, the fracturing to the back of his head not as he fell against a stone but as he was forced back while erect:

The pointed nature of your proposed weapon in relation to penetrative wounds, the 'stick' nature of the trauma to the mandible and a possible 'club' end of a weapon for the comminuted fracturing is a possibility. So, I cannot discount your proposed weapon as being possible but obviously it is utter speculation on my part. (S. Black, pers. comm. 31 January 2022)

Rosemarkie Man's remains indicated he was well-built, well-nourished and of high status. He was ritually buried in a sea cave weighted down with stones. In the legend of *Diarmid and Grainne* the Ciuthach is described living in a sea cave. Campbell (1862) cast the Cuithach in the Outer Hebrides as naked wild-men living in caves, while Watson (1914) claimed correspondents from Eigg also mention the Ciuthach living in a cave. The Manx Cughtagh also dwelled in a sea cave (Gill, 1932, p. 248).

The burial of a high-status individual in the back of a cave is unusual. Pictish mortuary practices included cremations and long cist burials – and even exposure and excarnation practices have been claimed (Spencer-Jones, 2014). However, from the fourth century onward in Pictavia, including the kingdom of Fortriu, square and circular burial monuments were constructed, often grouped in cemeteries, and are thought to commemorate the newly-emerged, post-Roman elite (Mitchell & Noble, 2019).

Caves, meanwhile, have been conceptualised as portals to the Otherworld or Underworld in many cultures (Tetlock, 1992, p. 173; Christenson, 2007, p. 108; Dowd, 2015). Rituals within caves represent a widespread perception of caves as a point of contact with the Otherworld (Skeates, 1991). Based on this evidence, it is reasonable to suggest that

Rosemarkie Man might have been a Ciuthach: both a scapegoat and a sacrificial victim/messenger to the deities of the Otherworld. The probable date of his death, between the early fifth and early seventh centuries, is contemporary with the proposed date for both the warrior stone carvings and the conversion to Christianity of the Pictish elite (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1991). Rosemarkie Man might well have been one of the last cuckoos.

Conclusions

The evidence strongly suggests that sacred kings persisted in northern Scotland from the Bronze Age, at least, until the late-Pictish period. They were the champions and consorts of a localised goddess of fertility and sovereignty that were held accountable for the well-being and fertility of the land and its inhabitants, animal and human. The goddesses were descendants of an Indo-European, possibly Neolithic, deity originating in the Middle East that deified the planet Venus and was associated with the cuckoo.

The kings were ritually sacrificed during a feast at the end of an eight-year cosmic cycle synchronised with the maximum evening setting of Venus that occurred around 30 days after the autumn equinox. The date became fixed as *Samhain*. Regicide occurred at specific locations in the landscape that were named ‘cuckoo’ not after the bird but after the sacred kings, undertaken with a sacred spear on a victim tied to a standing-stone. The spear and the kings may be depicted on Pictish period carved stelae of north-east Scotland. Evidence was provided of other warriors named after the cuckoo in Britain and in the Balkans. The foregoing strongly suggests that that the northern sacred kings were the direct descendants of a fertility ritual continuously practiced since the early Bronze Age at least.

The kings were titled *cogfach* or *cofach*, ‘little cuckoo’, in Brittonic and *cuithag*, ‘cuckoo’, or *cwawlén*, ‘little cuckoo’, in Gaelic. Their polygynous behaviour was arguably modelled on the conceived behaviour of the male cuckoo, a symbol of male virility and fertility throughout northern Europe. The findings are significant as there is no direct textual information on the pre-Christian religion of these societies or the role it played in governance. The hypothesis regarding the warriors’ behaviour being based on the folklore of the cuckoo had been proposed a century ago, as noted, but had been dismissed; however, both folklore and the classical authors have proved to be valuable corroborating resources, justifying a retrieval and reassessment of the older hypothesis.

From a broader perspective the evidence presented has indicated the continuity of a goddess associated with Venus and the cuckoo, other celestial associations, cosmological beliefs and their associations with features in the landscape, myths and legends, religious symbolism, sacred kingship including ritual murder, and governance of tribal societies from the Indo-European immigrants to Britain until the adoption of Christianity and its associated form of kingship. The earlier existence of, and in the case of the Kukeri, still extant, similar figures in Europe, together with the other evidence presented in this paper, suggests that sacred kings associated with a goddess personifying Venus were indeed a key feature of early Indo-European societies, including that of the Bell Beaker immigrants to Britain.

Future work will include: examination of the alignments of other cuckoo-stones and monuments at cuckoo place-name locations for orientations with Venus and with sunset at *Samhain*; and an investigation of the origin of the northern tribes and their

polyamorous societies proposed by contemporary authors and supported with aDNA data. In concert, this primary research, past and to come, allied with extensive archaeological and folkloric findings quarried from the writings of numerous other scholars, is suggesting new, and in some cases reworked, ways of understanding the geographies of Pictish and, perhaps, wider early Indo-European society.

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