

# CELTIC RELIGION AND SYSTEMS THEORY

Jürgen Zeidler

**1.1** Systems theory is one of the prevailing theoretical concepts in modern social studies and has also been applied to the history of religion. Although the theory poses some problems, as theories usually do, it provides a deep insight into the cultural context and some basic principles of religion. In this paper, I follow the approaches of Talcott Parsons and in particular Niklas Luhmann (1977; 1984; 2000) on the basis of Ludwig von Bertalanffy's *General Systems Theory* (1976). But I do not attach myself too much to it and prefer a 'loose' application instead of a 'tight' one. This attitude is open for conforming concepts from other strands of theoretical thinking, as well.

**1.2** According to Luhmann, society is a self-organising complex system, consisting of communicative acts as its elements. An important feature of each society is the definition of its border and, consequently, of its self. This is called the 'difference of system and environment'. A system can only be imagined as a unity of the system proper and its specific environment.

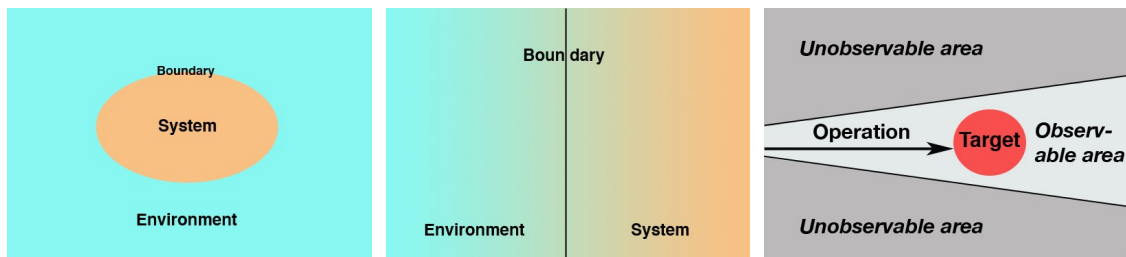


Fig. 1a (left): System and environment in a traditional elliptic scheme

1b (centre): System and environment in a rectangular scheme

1c (right): Observable and unobservable area

Each operation by which a system defines itself and sets boundaries produces two sides: the focus and the excluded area. Only the target of an operation is observable, while all the rest is not (fig. 1c).—Just imagine that you go into a room with your eyes closed, and then you throw one single glance at an arbitrary direction. You will see a small portion of the surrounding without being able to get an impression of the whole.—This

is just the way how initial operations in a system work. They are ‘blind’ for the unobservable. But a system may be aware of its ‘blindness’ and may reflect about it. And in reflecting, the difference between the observable (the target) and the unobservable (all the rest) ‘re-enters’ the observable part of the system.

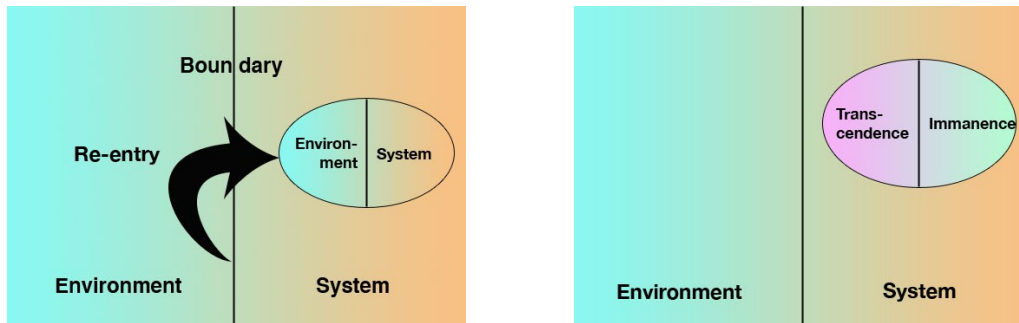


Fig. 2a (left): Re-entry of the difference environment-system into the system  
2b (right): The religious subsystem of society

**1.3** It is already here that religion comes into play: it is a form of re-entry. The reflection about the initial decisions is a reflection about meaning (*Sinn*), and religion is perhaps the most important form of meaning. However, not each reflection on meaning involves religion. This is but one ‘code’ of observation. Its binary structure is based on the difference of ‘transcendent’ and ‘immanent’ or sacred and profane. The same reflection may be expressed in different terms or codes such as profitable/non-profitable in economics, true/false in logic and so on. Transcendence and immanence may also be encoded in different ‘programmes’, e.g. religions, philosophies, and ideologies. With regard to archaic cultures, however, it is sufficient to consider religion the *universal form* of meaning.

**1.4** This introduction has shown that religion is central to the construction of meaning in early social systems. It has also indicated that meaning may be encoded in terms of religion or differently, only with a change in attitude. And in accordance with the conclusions drawn from the research in the past, religion can only be defined by society itself. The members of an ethnic group *decide for themselves* which thoughts, words, and deeds have a ‘religious’ significance to them. In early societies, the shift between religious and a non-religious intentions is easy

because there are but few specific forms, which tend to be multi-functional (cf. Luhmann 2000: 75).

**2.1** This has far-reaching implications for external observers like us, who describe Celtic religion with a distance of more than 2000 years. We are usually unable to assign a religious significance to a certain act.

**2.1.1** For example, the findings at Heidendor near Egesheim (fig. 3) in south-west Germany of fibulas, finger rings and pendants from the seventh to the third centuries BC have been called an “offering place”, where Celtic gods had been worshipped (Bauer/Kuhnen 1995). But the accumulation of metal objects may have been seen in a different light by the ancient performers. Offerings and rituals need not always imply gods. They may have been acts in memory of a real person or part of marriage customs and so forth. The participants may even have had different intentions in the course of time.



Fig. 3a (left): Heidendor near Egesheim (Lkr. Tuttlingen); fig. 3b (right): Fibulas, rings, and pendants from Heidendor (7<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> c. BC, from Bauer/Kuhnen 1995)

**2.1.2** R. Bradley (2005: 12–23) argued convincingly in favour of a possibly fluctuating character of prehistoric sites. The double *Viereckschanze* of Mšecké Žehrovice (Venclová 1998) was built on a site of iron working (fig. 4). It received a building with an ambulatory in the first phase (fig. 5), but was reshaped as a simple house in the second phase. Bradley concluded that only phase 1 may have been a ‘religious’ site in the strict sense of the term, but that there may have been a sacral aura in connection with the activity of smiths before the enclosure had been built. We know of the common Celtic god of craftsmen, Gobannos, and we find the high status of metal-workers for instance in Old Irish law.

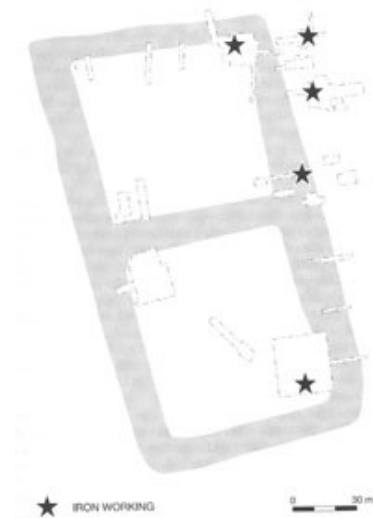
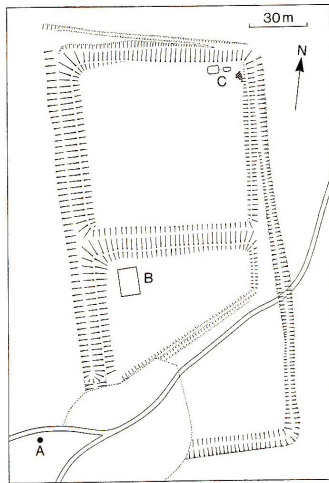


Fig. 4a (left): Double *Viereckschanze* of Mšecké Žehrovice  
 Fig. 4b (right): Iron working at Mšecké Žehrovice (after R. Bradley)



Fig. 5a (left): Plan and fig. 5b (right) reconstruction of 'Temple' B

A specific function can not be ascribed to *Viereckschanzen* and *enceintes quadrilaterales* in general. Enclosures served many different needs, sacred as well as profane ones. We see from buildings in early Mesopotamia and Middle Kingdom Egypt that temples had, in principle, the same ground plans as civilian houses. Their layout was multi-functional, and the same most probably applies to quadrangular enclosures in the Celtic world.

**2.2** As a result, the criteria for sacred sites in prehistory elaborated by C. Colpe (1970), J.-L. Brunaux (1989), and N. Venclová (1993; 1997), are only valid in the latest periods of prehistory (table 1). Features like 'repeated use (ritualisation)' and 'specific buildings' presuppose structures already *specialised* in religion, and this was only rarely the case in earlier prehistoric periods (probably e.g. neolithic circular enclosures).

Criteria by C. Colpe (1970)	Criteria by J.-L. Brunaux (1989)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Repeated use (ritualisation)</li> <li>– Remoteness from settlements/roads</li> <li>– Extraordinary character</li> <li>– (Offerings as an additional criterion)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Marking of the area</li> <li>– Cavities in the ground</li> <li>– Specific buildings</li> <li>– Orientation</li> <li>– Indications of ceremonies (offerings)</li> </ul>

Table 1: Archaeological criteria for the identification of sacred places

**3.1** A further characteristic of the construction of meaning is its peculiar relationship to language. The reason is that linguistic signs possess an actuality of their own, separate from the outside world. They create a ‘second reality’ with concepts of objects, time, and space in their own right. This includes the imagination of things or persons that do not really exist. According to Ulrich Oevermann, language is the very foundation of religion because it was in expressions of time that people were first confronted with the finiteness of human life and the universal questions of where we come from, where we go, and who we are (Oevermann 1995: 3–6). Even if one does not want to proceed so far, Oevermann’s proposal underlines that religion is the *first* functional system that develops in society (Seibert 2004: 125).

**3.2** In the history of Indo-European religion, terms for the difference of transcendent/immanent are not easy to find. The reason for this may be that religious concepts are generally more or less connected with notions from different areas of society, such as customs and law. Thus the meaning of a word can easily be transferred from one quarter to another. The scarcity and opaqueness of attestations, however, must not give rise to the assumption that such terms did not exist in the Indo-European proto-language. We can only draw conclusions from *positive* evidence, i.e. actually existing testimonies. *Negative* evidence, i.e. lacking attestations, can be due to the loss of cognate terms in all or most of the Indo-European languages as well as to the non-existence of such terms.<sup>1</sup>

**3.2.1** None of the suggested words for marking the boundary between the transcendent (sacred) and the immanent (profane) is widely distributed in Indo-European, none has a clear-cut meaning. The most probable

---

<sup>1</sup> On methodical principles, see Dunkel 1992; Campanile 1996; Schlerath 1998; Janda 2000; 2006; De Bernardo 2003; in general, Zimmer 1990.

candidates are *\*sak-ro-* ‘holy’, known from Hittite, Latin, and Celtic (1), *\*seup-/sup-* ‘pure/taboo’ in Umbrian and Hittite (2), and *\*noib<sup>h</sup>o-* ‘holy’ in Celtic and Iranian (3) (*EIEC* 493f.).

(1) IE. *\*sak-ro-* ‘holy’: Lat. *sacer*, Osc. *σαρογο*, Gaul. *sacro-* in compositions (*Sacro-vir*, *Sacro-bena* etc.), W. *hagr* ‘ugly’ (*IEW* 878; Stüber 2007), cf. Hitt. *šaklāi-* ‘rite, custom’;

(2) IE. *\*seup-/sup-* ‘pure, taboo’ (*\*seup-* ‘throw’, *LIV* 540; *IEW* 1049): Umbr. *supa-* and Hitt. *šuppa-* ‘viscera of sacrificed animal’;

(3) IE. *\*noiH-b<sup>h</sup>o-* ‘good; holy’: OPers. *naiba-*, (East) Gaul. *noe(i)bio-*, OIr. *noib* ‘holy’, from the verb *\*neiH-* ‘to be agile, emotional, to gleam’ (*IEW* 760).

Others seem to show a regional restriction, e.g. *\*k<sub>u</sub>en-to-* ‘sanctified, holy’ in the Baltic-Black Sea area and Iran (Germanic, Baltic, Slavic, and Iranian) (4). The root *\*ueik-* in the sense of ‘consecrate’ is restricted to Italic and Germanic (5), in the other branches the non-religious meaning ‘to select’ prevails as e.g. in Old Indic.

(4) IE. *\*k<sub>u</sub>en-to-* ‘sanctified, holy’: Av. *spānta-*, OCS. *svetŭ*, Lith. *šveñtas* ‘holy’, Goth. *hunsl* ‘sacrifice’, OE. *hūsl* ‘sacrament’ (*IEW* 630);

(5) IE. *\*ueik-* ‘consecrate’: Lat. *victima* ‘sacrificed animal’, Goth. *weihan*, ON. *vígja* ‘consecrate’, also Germanic *\*wikkan-* ‘wizard’—Old Indic root *vik-* in *vinak-ti* ‘selects’ (*LIV* 670 ‘to sieve’; *IEW* 1128 ‘to sort out’).

**3.2.2** It is only in the individual languages that more clearly defined terms are discernable. In Common Celtic, we have already mentioned *sakro-* and *noibo-* (1; 3). To these, we can add *nemeto-* ‘sacred precinct; privileged social class’ (6), present in numerous toponyms and some personal names in the Iberian peninsula, Britain, Gaul, and Galatia. Cognates in the other branches of Indo-European do not necessarily imply a religious meaning.

(6) Celt. *nemeto-* ‘sacred precinct, privileged social class’: OIr. *nemet* ‘sacred precinct/privileged social class’, OBret. *nemet* ‘silva’, Gallo-Lat. *nemetis*, *nimidās* ‘sacra silvarum’ (*IEW* 764; *DLG* 233 f.), from IE. *\*nem-* ‘to allot, attribute’ (De Bernardo 1999: 455 n. 59). Cf. Lat. *nemus* ‘(sacred) grove’, Gk *νέμος* ‘meadow’.

**3.3** The denotation of gods is perhaps a special case in Indo-European, but even there, the dualistic approach religious/non-religious is showing through in *\*diéus ph<sub>2</sub>tér* ‘Father Sky’ versus *\*diéus* ‘(bright day) sky’ (7)

and *\*h<sub>2</sub>ausōs* ‘Dawn’ as *\*diuós d<sup>h</sup>ugh<sub>2</sub>tēr* ‘Sky Daughter’ (8), although neither is attested as a deity in Celtic.

(7) IE. *\*diēus-ph<sub>2</sub>ter-* ‘Father Sky’: Hitt. *attaš Šiuš* (with a different word for ‘father’, *atta-*), OInd. *Dyaus pita*, Gk Ζεύς (gen. Διός) πατήρ, Lat. *Iū-piter*, Umbr. *Iū-pater*, Illyr. *Iou-pater*. In Celtic: *\*diu-* e.g. in W. *dyw* ‘day’ in *heddyw* ‘today’ (EIEC 230 f.; Dunkel 1992).

(8) IE. *\*h<sub>2</sub>aus-ōs* ‘dawn’: OInd. *Uṣás-*, Gk Ἑως (Aeolic Ἀῶως), Lat. *Aurōra* ‘dawn (goddess)’, OE. *Ēastre* ‘goddess of springtime’, OCS. *(za) ustra* ‘morning’, Lith. *Aušrinė* ‘goddess of the dawn’, *aušrà* ‘dawn’ (EIEC 231 f.; Janda 2006). In Celtic: *\*h<sub>2</sub>uōs-ri-* in Mlr. *fáir* ‘sunrise, east’, W. *gwawr* ‘dawn’ (Schrijver 1995: 446).

Thus, on the whole, there is only a little advantage in the linguistic cognitions over the insights from reflexes in the material culture.

**4.1** An important aspect of the sociological approach is the typology of the religious subsystem.<sup>2</sup> Luhmann (2000: 250–277) adopts the three types (or phases of development) which are commonplace in the sociology of religion (Kehrer 1988: 63–82): segmentary societies, stratified and functional societies. They all have different attitudes towards religion. Since Max Weber, it has been clearly shown that there is a close connection between dominion and religion.

It is agreed today that for the most part of human history, there have been societies without rulers (*akephale Gesellschaften*). Political and religious behaviour cannot be easily distinguished and most ceremonies show traits of both. Individuals gain authority because of their charisma, strength, or intelligence, but the power exercised by them is limited to those particular persons. A *big man* has to constantly prove his ‘bigness’ and justify his position, which tends to be unstable and short-lived.

**4.2** The situation is different in societies with a higher degree of complexity, which have strata based on the division of labour. Stratified societies go beyond kinship relations as the *only* form of social organization. The communities are inclined to establish dominion on a permanent basis, in chiefdoms and kingdoms. In this environment, persons wield

2 I use the neutral term *typology* instead of *evolution*, which is usually applied in this context, in order to avoid the common misunderstanding of a strict and cogent development in the *biological* sense of the term ‘evolution’. Social and cultural developments follow different lines and cannot be understood by a simple analogy.

power because of their status, which is usually inherited, not acquired. Thus the immediate perception of special personal skills, which is so essential to a *big man* system, is not possible or only temporarily observable. This lack is balanced by the use of religious elements. It is conspicuous that the dignity of a chief or a king almost always contains some moments of religion. Taboos, ritual acts, connections with supernatural beings, and descent from a mythical ancestor are examples of such phenomena.

**4.2.1** L. Annaeus Florus (1.33.14; 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD) tells us that the Celtiberian king Olyndicus, who stirred up a revolt in 143 BC, claimed prophetic skills and assured his fellow countrymen that a silver spear had been sent him from heaven (ed. Malcovati):

<p>... <i>Olyndicus, qui hastam argenteam quatiens quasi caelo missam vaticinanti similis omnium in se mentes converterat.</i></p>	<p>... Olyndicus, who had brandished a silver spear as if it were sent him from heaven and had drawn, like a prophet, the attention of all upon himself.</p>
--	--

**4.2.2** Celtic societies had inherited the stage of stratification from the late Indo-European and Common Celtic periods, i.e. certainly earlier than the eighth century BC when archaeologists usually start with the first ‘Celtic’ period in Hallstatt C (c. 750–620 BC). This is obvious from the common inherited vocabulary, I just mention here the term for the tribal unit, *teutā*, shared by many neighbours of the Celts in Europe (9). A ‘tribe’ is subdivided into ‘clans’, *ūeni-* (10). Head of a *teutā* is a *rīxs* or ‘(petty) king’ (11) and a *druid-* ‘priest’ is by his side (*DLG* 149 f.). Further common lexemes denote the *korios* ‘war-band’ (McCone 1987; *DLG* 125 f.), the freeman, *arios* (*DLG* 55), the servant, *ambaxtos* (12) etc. In the first century BC, classical writers refer to these strata, as well, most prominently Caesar in his *Comments on the Gaulish War* (6.13–15; *EIEC* 530–532; Karl 2004).

(9) Late IE. or western areal *\*teutā* ‘tribe, people’: Umbr. *tota*, Ven. *teuta*, Illyr. *Teutana*, Goth. *þiuda*, Lith. *tautà*, Gaul. *teuta*, *touta*, Clb. *tout(o)-*, *tot-*, Lusitano-Galaecian *touda/o-*, OIr. *túath*, W. *tud*; cf. perhaps Hitt. *tuzzi-* ‘host, army’.

(10) West IE. *\*ūen(i)-* ‘clan, family, lineage’: Lat. *vin-dex* ‘\*who represents the clan’,



Germ. *\*wendiz* ‘friend’ (ON. *vinr*), OIr. *fine*, OBret. *guen* ‘clan, family’ (DLG 313; cf. Charles-Edwards 1993).

(11) Ital./Celt. *\*rēg-s* ‘(petty) king’: Lat. *rēx*, Gaul. *rīx*, Clb. *-reikis*, *-res* (?), OIr. *rí*, W. *rhi*.

(12) Celt. *\*ambaktos* ‘servant’: Gaul. *ambaxtos* (DLG 40 f.), Hisp.-Celt. *Ambatus*, W. *amaeth*; cf. OIr. *imm-aig* (*\*ambi-ag-*) ‘to lead, guide’.

**4.3** The third type in the organisation of societies is the formation of states. Political functions are permanently specialised and divided among a number of positions. In economics, part of the surplus of production is absorbed, and goods and services are redistributed by the ruling class. In politics, the pressure for legitimisation is high because of the great distance between the societal strata. Thus politics almost always commits itself to religion in a permanent way. From about 600 BC on (c. 620–480 BC, Ha D), evidence suggests early state formations in the West Hallstatt zone (Arnold/Gibson 1995: 8). The acquisition of immense wealth and the organization of public work seems to plead for a redistributive system, even if on a very small scale (Karl 2005; Nortmann 2002).

The other side of the coin is a considerable influence of politics on religion. Cult specialists allow to be pocketed by the rulers. Religion assists the sovereign’s ambitions in controlling the society.

**4.3.1** The *exclusion from the offerings* by the druids, mentioned by Diodorus (5.31.4) and Caesar (6.13.6), is perhaps the strongest indication of a control mechanism (Zeidler 2007: 643 f.):

ἔθος δ’ αὐτοῖς ἐστὶ μηδένα θυσίαν ποιεῖν ἄνευ φιλοσόφου.	It is a custom among them that nobody performs an offering without a philosopher.
<i>si qui privatus aut populus eorum de- creto non stetit, sacrificiis interdicunt.</i>	If a citizen or a tribe does not abide by their decision, they exclude him from the offerings.
<i>haec poena apud eos est gravissima.</i>	This is the most severe punishment with them.

**4.3.2** A further expression of control is the *restriction of access* to the shrines. This can possibly already be observed in constructions with a deep double ditch as in Kösching-Erlachhof (6<sup>th</sup> c. BC, fig. 6a; Rieder 1992), in Vix, south of Mont Lassois (c. 500 BC, fig. 6b, Chaume 2000)<sup>3</sup>,

3 All the more so if there really was a dry stone wall on the inside of the ditch (Chaume/

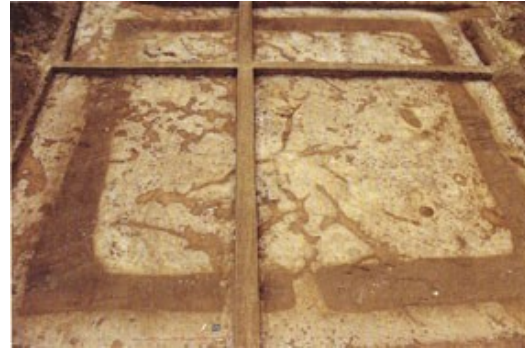


Fig. 6a (left): Double circular ditch (⊙ 30 m) in Kösching-Erlachhof (6<sup>th</sup> c. BC)

Fig. 6b (right): Quadrangular ditch (□ 23 m) in Vix, Mont Lassois (5<sup>th</sup> c. BC)



36 Kösching. Rekonstruktion des umfriedeten »Tempelbaus«.

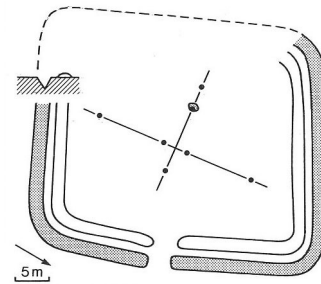


Fig. 7a (left): Kösching-Erlachhof: reconstruction of the 'shrine'

Fig. 7b (right): Gournay-sur-Arondes, phase 1: ground plan and section

and perhaps also in the so-called acropolis on the Závist near Prague (5<sup>th</sup> c. BC). It can surely be established in the erection of palisades and walls around enclosures from the fourth century BC onwards, e.g. in 'classic' sites as Gournay-sur-Arondes (phase 2, 4<sup>th</sup> c. BC) and more recent discoveries in Corrent (Auvergne), or shrines in *oppida* as in Manching (fig. 8b).

Walls work as total barriers, they prevent people outside not only from direct participation, but even from watching what is going on inside. Wide ditches, on the other hand, bar people from participating, but they allow at least watching the scene (fig. 7a–b). It may be that these different types of barriers reflect different strategies (or degrees) of exclusion.

**4.3.3** An expression of control by the rulers is also their interest in *granting subsidies* to the cult and *assigning privileges* to the priesthood, e.g. exemption from taxation and military service. This again is attested for the druids (Caesar, *BG* 6.14.1).

Reinhard 2002: 222).

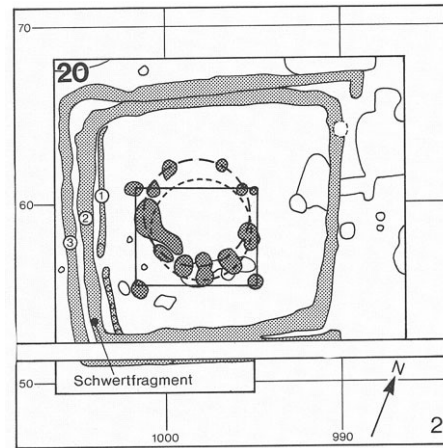
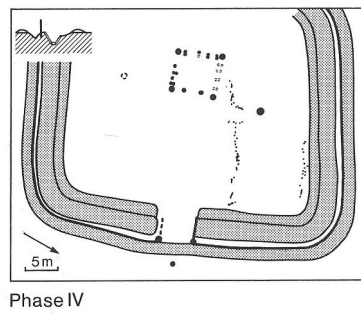


Fig. 8a (left): Gournay-sur-Arondes, phase 4: plan, reconstruction (3<sup>rd</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> c. BC)

Fig. 8b (right): Manching: central temple A, phase 3 (1<sup>st</sup> c. BC)

4.4 In connection with recurrent needs of legitimization, the priesthood is eventually systemizing the religion. As a result, more and more emphasis is placed on the anthropomorphic qualities of supernatural beings. Facets of human behaviour and social roles are being transferred to the divine sphere. And transcendental phenomena are gradually arranged in the form of a pantheon. Consequently, an institutional and elitist *organized religion* is created, which becomes opposed to the popular, traditional and unsystematic ‘*diffused*’ religion (fig. 9a–b; Luckmann 1967).

4.4.1 One may suspect that in our literary sources, and Caesar (*BG* 6. 17) in particular, it is the *organized* pantheon of Gaulish aristocratic informants that is given in outline. But this concept may differ considerably from popular beliefs. Roman *interpretatio* certainly continues this druidic pantheon to some degree, but in all probability, it shows also traits of the customs and convictions of the ordinary people. This may be the reason that Caesar’s presentation and the evidence from epigraphic and literary *interpretatio* seem to contradict each other in part.

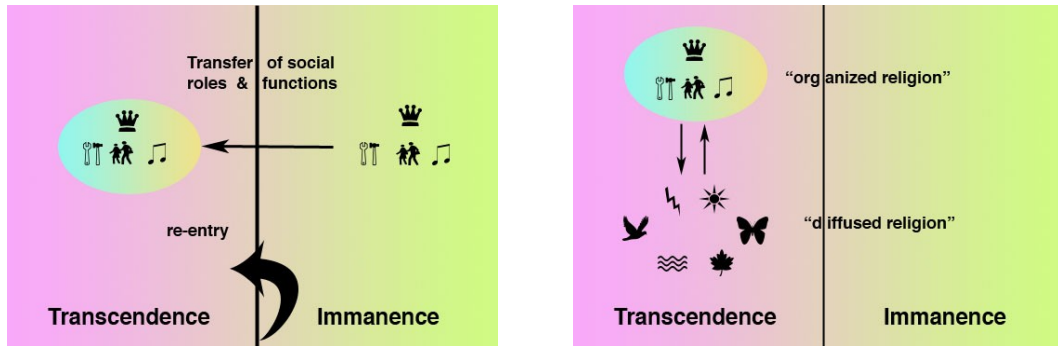


Fig. 9a (left) : The development of the ‘organized religion’;  
 9b (right): Opposition between ‘organized’ and ‘diffused religion’<sup>4</sup>

**4.4.2** Rudiments of the ‘*diffused*’ religion can still be seen in the worship of many local and lesser gods during the Roman empire. In particular, it is discernible in the belief in *anatia* ‘souls’ (13) and many kinds of spirits. ‘Souls’ are referred to in the Gaulish lead tablet from Larzac (1<sup>st</sup> c. AD; *RIG* L-98, line 1b12): *anatia nepi* ‘anybody’s soul(s)’, somehow in a negative statement in connection with the sorceresses mentioned in the text before. Unfortunately, the context is too badly understood to draw any conclusions (cf. B. Lang, *HrwG* 5.419–421, s.v. *Zwischenwesen*).

(13) Celtic *\*ana-tio-* ‘soul’: Gaul. *anatia* (pl.), W. *enaid*, besides *\*ana-tlo-* in OIr. *anál*, W. *anadl*, and *\*ana-mon-* in OIr. *anam* etc.; from *\*ana-* ‘breathe’, IE. *\*h<sub>2</sub>enh<sub>1</sub>-* (Schumacher 2004: 196 f.).

More significant is, in this regard, Plutarch’s reference to the belief of the inhabitants of the islands near Britain that ‘great souls’ (μεγάλοι ψυχαί) cause rain and thunderstorm when ‘the passing of someone of the mightier [ones] happens’ (τῶν κρείττονων τινὸς ἔκλειψις, *Obsolescence of oracles* 18 [*Moralia* 419 e–f]). This strongly reminds of the Old Indic *Maruts* or *Rudras* and the *Wild Hunt* among Celtic and Germanic peoples (Kershaw 2001; cf. Janda 2002/3: 36).

**4.4.3** We are slightly better informed about some spirits. There is the *dušios* in the first place, an aggressive satyr-like demon molesting women, which is mentioned by Augustine (*City of God* 15.23) and Isidor

4 The diagram should not imply that ‘natural’ concepts of the transcendence, such as stars, plants, and animals are in any way ‘genuine’ to the supernatural. They are, of course, also the result of a transfer of observable immanent phenomena. The difference to the ‘organized’ religion lies in the sporadic and incoherent use of analogies from the immanence.

(*Etymologies* 8) (14). Secondly, the *niskā* ‘water nymph’ is known from Roman inscriptions in Gaul and Britain (15).

(14) Celtic *duſios* ‘satyr’: as a personal name in Aquitaine, Bret. *diz*, Basque *tusuri* ‘devil’, from IE. *\*dʰus-jo-* (*\*dʰues-* ‘whirl, storm, blow’, *IEW* 268–271; ‘breathe in/out’ *LIV* 160), cf. Gk *θυῖαι* ‘maenads’, Lat. *furiae* ‘ghosts of revenge’, MHG. *getwās* ‘phantom’ (*DLG* 158).<sup>5</sup>

(15) Gaul., Britt. *niskā* ‘nymph’ in Amilie-les-bains (*Niscae*), Arles-sur-Tech (*Niscas*), river Hamble, Southampton (*Nisce*), cf. Basque *neska* ‘girl’.

A buck-shaped god or goblin, *\*bugo-* or *\*bukko-* (16) is well known throughout the Celtic countries from the Middle Ages onwards under the names *Púca* (Ireland), *Pwca* (Wales), *Bucca* (Cornwall), *Bòcan* (Scotland), and *Buggane* (Isle of Man). These forms, however, are re-imported from Germanic *\*bukka-* (*LEIA* P-16). The original Celto-Germanic words are present in Middle Irish *bocc*, *pocc* ‘he-goat, (kind of) soldier’, Welsh *bwch* ‘buck’, and Gaulish *bucco-* (in personal names, Forier 2001: 496). It is possibly attested as a theonym in Gaulish *Bugius*, a god in Tarquimpol (Moselle), and, together with *Nerius* ‘hero’, in Haegen (Bas-Rhin). It may be noted that the (internal) Irish derivative *bocánach* refers to “some kind of (?goat-like) supernatural being usually associated with battle or battle-field” (*DIL* B-130).

(16) Gaul. *bucco-* in names: *Bucco*, *Buccius*, *Bucconius*; *Bugius*, *Bugia*, *Adbugio*, *Dibugius* etc. from Spain, Gaul, Britain, North Italy, Austria (*ACS* 1.625 f.; 1.629; *DLG* 94); the Celtic and Germanic forms are hypokoristica from IE. *\*bʰuǵos* ‘buck, goat’, Av. *būza* ‘he-goat’, Arm. *buz* ‘lamb’ (*IEW* 174).

There may have been many more, e.g. the *\*abankos* ‘water being’ (17) or *\*alillis* ‘otherworld being’ (18), who are assumed to live outside human settlements in free nature, as indicated by many authors during the Roman Empire. The names incised on silver spoons in the Thetford treasure are unfortunately without further parallels and may in some cases be translations of classical terms, e.g. *Ausekos* ‘prick-ear’. An exception may be *Medugenos* ‘mead-begotten’ (Jackson in Johns/Potter 1983).

---

5 Almost unlikely *duſios* is derived from *\*dus-* ‘bad’, which is used as a prefix only.

(16) Celtic \**abankos* ‘water being’: OIr. *abacc*, W. *afanc* (and *addanc*) ‘beaver; dwarf or aquatic monster’ and possibly *afag* in *Afagddu* ‘black dwarf (?)’ (LEIA A-5), Swiss French *avañ* ‘osier’ (DLG 30).

(17) Insular Celtic \**a(l)illis* ‘otherworld being’: OIr. *Ailill*, W. *ellyll* ‘ghost’. It seems to derive from *alio-/allo-* ‘other’ and could be an old designation of an otherworldly being. The *Life of St Ceallach* (6<sup>th</sup> c. AD) mentions one *Alillus* (ACS 1.93). Cf. Gaul., Ogam *Al-atto-* ‘wild, savage’ (DLG 36).

**4.4.4** In the archaeological context, there are quite many representations of grimaces and faces with prick-ears or surrounded by foliage. But at the moment, it is difficult if not impossible to tell purely ‘decorative’ motives, real animals and ‘supernatural’ beings apart (see Frey 2002; 2004; 2007 on archaeological approaches to Celtic gods). Another feature of ‘popular’ religion, the belief in the impact of amulets, has been studied by L. Pauli (1975) but cannot be further pursued here.

**4.5** *The concept of the divine ancestor* and the construction of mythical pedigrees are used by tribal and state societies alike. In this concept, the descent of a person or a lineage of several generations is ‘elevated’ by the recourse to a supernatural being as progenitor. The regress can either refer to a single family or a clan, or to a whole tribe or a people. Both notions have different effects. Whereas in the second case, an origin myth (*origo gentis*) fixes the people’s position in the world and creates the self-consciousness of an entire society, in the first case only part of the society is affected. The ruling class establishes a close relationship to transcendent powers. They transfer the divine legitimation from the actual ruler to his predecessors. In doing so, they strengthen the impression of durability and thus they gain even more acceptance. This model is on the cusp of a permanent connection between politics and religion and enhances the persistent establishment of an ‘organized’ religion. From classical sources, we see that origin myths were widely known from the fourth century BC onwards (see 4.5.1).

An instructive example is given by Propertius (*Elegies* 4. 10.39–42) about the Insubrian leader Viridomarus, who was defeated by M. Claudius Marcellus at Clastidium in 222 BC:

*Claudius a Rheno traiectos arcuit hostis,*  
*Belgica cum vasti parma relata ducis*

Claudius inhibited the enemy, who had  
crossed the Rhine,  
when the Belgic shield of the huge leader

<i>Virdomari. genus hic Rheno iactabat ab ipso,</i>	was taken, Vir(i)domaros. <i>He used to derive his lineage</i>
<i>mobilis e rectis fundere gaesa rotis.</i>	<i>from the Rhine god himself,</i> versatile in throwing spears right from the
<i>illi virgatis iaculantis ab agmine braxis</i>	chariot. When he, in brindled trousers, throw the
<i>torquis ab incisa decedit unca gula.</i>	spear in front of the host, his bent torque fell from his throat that was cut through.

This looks like the personal view of a Celtic leader, but it could also be a trait of an origin myth referring to the whole tribe.

**4.5.1** Origin myths of entire Celtic peoples or tribes are known from several classical authors. They usually adopt an *interpretatio* of the native figures. One of the most renowned stories seems to have been the one about Hercules and Keltine, daughter of king Bretannos, which is told by Timagenes (*apud* Ammianus Marcellinus 15.9.2–6, 4<sup>th</sup> c. AD) and Parthenius of Nicaea (*About Keltine*, Περί Κελτίνης), both from the first century BC (Zeidler 2004: 15; Hofeneder 2005).

In Spain, a similar tale about Hercules and Pyrene, daughter of king Bebryx, who gave birth to a snake, was in circulation (Silius Italicus, *Punica* 3.415–441). Although the Bebrykes are held to be an Iberian people, their name clearly points to Celtic *\*bebru-* ‘beaver’, which is augmented here with the denominal suffix *-k-*. The word is well attested in names (19), certainly because the beaver was supposed to be a dangerous animal. Since the late prehistoric age, however, *\*bebru-* fell into oblivion. The insular languages replaced it by *\*abanko-* (see 4.4.3).

(19) Celtic *\*bebru-* e.g. in tribal names *Bibroci* south of London, Mlr. *Bibraige*, place names *Bibrax* in Gaul, personal names OIr. *Bibar*, etc. From IE. *\*b<sup>h</sup>eb<sup>h</sup>ru/os* ‘beaver’, cf. OInd. *babhrú-* ‘mongoose’, Av. *bawra-*, Lat. *fiber*, Germ. *\*bebruz* (Engl. *beaver*, Grm. *Biber*), Lith. *bēbrus*, *bēbras*, OCS. *\*bebrŭ* (IEW 136).

**4.5.2** A further comparison with the Scythians’ progenitor, Hercules, who met in a cave with Echidna, a creature half woman and half snake (Herodotus 4.9–10), shows a remarkable resemblance. In a variant version (Herodotus 4.5; Diodorus 4.43.3), the parents are Zeus and a daughter of the river Borysthenes (Dnieper, from Iranian *\*Dānu apara* ‘posterior river’). It has been argued that both legends are rather faithful renderings of a Scythian source (Ivantchik 2001).



**4.5.3** The wandering Celtic ancestor god behind Hercules has traits of an underworld god, which are clear from his identification with Dispater in Gaul (Caesar, *BG* 6.18.1) and from the further analogy with the Indo-Iranian tradition about the progenitor of mankind and god of the dead, Yama (20), son of Vivasvān (or Sūrya, the sun god) and Saranyū, a goddess associated with the earth, the dawn, and water (*Rgveda* 10.10: *apyā yoṣā*; 10.75 *Sindhu*).

(20) OInd. *Yamá-*, Av. *Yima-*, and probably ON. *Ymir* (from Germ. *\*yumiyaz* and IE. *\*im̥-iós*) derive from IE. *\*iem-os* ‘twin; androgyne’ (Lincoln 1981: 81–87; 1991).

The Gaulish Ogmios is also identified with Hercules by Lucian (*Prolalia Herakles*) and depicted as an extremely old man with black wrinkled skin. An early Irish counterpart seems to be Donn, the ‘Dark One’ (*\*d<sup>h</sup>us-no-*), who is the ancestor of mankind and at the same time the ruler of the dead. The equation of an ancestor god with Polyphemus is also suggestive of his grotesque appearance. Sometimes the mother is described as an aquatic being. Polyphemus’s spouse is the sea nymph Galatea, Pyrene the princess of the ‘Beavers’. Some others are described as princesses from overseas: the ‘Egyptian’ Scotta, Míl’s or Fénus’s wife in Irish pseudo-history, and the ‘Greek’ Innogen, Brutus’s wife in British origin stories. All these parallels may point to a mythical core inherited from the second millennium BC.

**4.5.3** A remote echo of these conceptions in medieval Britain and Ireland may be present in the motif of *king and goddess*, the *hieros gamos* between the king and a female personification of the land. Pivotal to the insular concept is an ugly old hag *who hinders* the heir to the throne *from scooping water* from a well unless he kisses her or sleeps with her. The successful candidate fulfills her desire whereupon she turns into the most beautiful woman (Maier 1991: 31–40).

*do luid in gilla d'iarraid uisce con-us-tarla dochum topair. ocus faghbus sentuinne oc coimet in topair. ... "in cedaigi damsa ní do'n uisce dobreith lim?" ol sé. "cedaigim" ol sí "acht co no-m-thi aen-phoc dom lechain duit."* (O'Grady 1892: 328)

The young man went to search water until he arrived at a well. And he found an old woman guarding the well. ... “Do you allow me to take some water with me?” he said. “Yes,” she said, “provided I get a kiss from you, I let you.”



Although we do not find a parallel in continental sources, the similarity of the motifs is conspicuous.

5. In a nutshell, it can be concluded that systems theory is a suitable means of analysing Celtic religion because it allows to put the fragmentary religious evidence available to us today into context with other cultural data. Vocabulary and terminology, onomastics, kinship and social hierarchy, dominion, settlement structures and material culture are all interrelated and interdependent, and systems theory is a methodical instrument to account for this situation (cf. Zeidler 2005).

In particular, the *concept of the boundary* (cf. Fichtl 2005) has proved substantial to the understanding of socio-religious relations such as inclusion in and exclusion from ceremonies. It has been argued that late iron age cult agents exercised a certain amount of control over the population by restricting access to sanctuaries and participation in sacrifices (§ 4.3).

An important characteristic of socio-religious interdependence is *religious legitimation* of political power and its implications on the development of dominion as well as religion. It has been shown that the priests' participation in political activities resulted in the reorganization of religious concepts and in systemizing religion (§ 4.4). The 'organized' religion (and priestly 'theology') eventually came into contrast with the traditional and unsystemized view of religious ideas, which then became a kind of 'diffused' religion. An attempt was made to discover some traits of 'diffused' popular beliefs. And it seems that non-systemized religion, concerned with spirits, souls, and demons, played an important yet hitherto neglected role in Celtic religion. It was the socio-religious approach, in the framework of systems theory, that made this distinction apparent.

Special attention was paid to strategies of religious legitimation, particularly the *claim to mythical ancestors*, which is of utmost importance for the identity of ethnic groups (§ 4.5). It has been suggested before (Zeidler 2004) that Celtic tribes and peoples developed rather similar ideas concerning their people's mythical ancestor. In support of this hypothesis, further evidence (Bebrykes) and parallels (Scythian Hercules) have been advanced in this paper. Most of this was inspired by Luhmann's theoretical framework and would hardly have been possible without it.

## References and abbreviations

- ACS = J.T. Holder. *Alt-celtischer Sprachschatz*. 3 vols. Leipzig 1896–1913.
- Arm. = Armenian.
- Arnold, B./ D. Blair Gibson (eds.). 1995. *Celtic chieftdom, Celtic state. The evolution of complex social systems in prehistoric Europe*. Cambridge.
- Av. = Avestic.
- Baitinger, H./ B. Pinsker (red.). 2002. *Glaube – Mythos – Wirklichkeit. Das Rätsel der Kelten vom Glauberg*. Stuttgart.
- Bauer, S./H.-P. Kuhnen. 1995. 'Ein «Starker Ort»: Der frühkeltische Opferplatz bei Egesheim, Lkr. Tuttlingen' in: Haffner 1995: 51–54.
- BG = *Bellum Gallicum* (ed. O. Seel. C. Iulii Caesaris Commentarii rerum gestarum 1: *Bellum Gallicum*. Leipzig 1961).
- Birkhan, H. (ed.). 2007. *Kelten-Einfälle an der Donau. Akten des Vierten Symposiums deutschsprachiger Keltologinnen und Keltologen*. Linz 2005. Vienna.
- Bradley, R. 2005. *Ritual and domestic life in prehistoric Europe*. London/ New York.
- Brunaux, J.-L. 1989. 'Les enceintes carrées sont-elles des lieux de culte?' in: O. Buchsenschutz/ L. Olivier. *Les Viereckschanzen et les enceintes quadrilatrales en Europe celtique*. Paris: 11–14.
- Campanile, E. 1996. 'Today, after Dumézil', in: E.C. Polomé (ed.). *Indo-European religion after Dumézil*. Washington: 131–146.
- Charles-Edwards, T. 1993. *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*. Oxford.
- Chaume, B. 2000. 'L'enclos hallstattien de Vix 'Les Herbues': un lieu culturel de type aristocratique?' in: *Mailhac et le Premier Age du Fer en Europe occidentale. Hommages à Odette et Jean Taffanel*. Lattes: 311–327.
- Chaume, B./W. Reinhard 2002. 'Das frühkeltische Heiligtum von Vix' in: Baitinger/Pinsker 2002: 221–222.
- Colpe, C. 1970. 'Theoretische Möglichkeiten zur Identifizierung von Heiligtümern und Interpretation von Opfern in ur- und parahistorischen Epochen' in: H. Jankuhn (ed.). *Vorgeschichtliche Heiligtümer und Opferplätze in Mittel- und Nordeuropa*. Göttingen: 18–39.
- De Bernardo Stempel, P. 1999. *Nominale Wortbildung des älteren Irischen. Stammbildung und Derivation*. Tübingen.
- . 2003. 'Die sprachliche Analyse keltischer Theonyme'. *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 53: 41–69.
- DIL = *Dictionary of the Irish language. Based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials*. (compact ed.). Dublin 1983 (repr. 1990).
- DLG = X. Delamarre. *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Paris 2001.
- Dunkel, G.E. 1992. 'Vater Himmels Gattin'. *Sprache* 34 (1988–1990): 1–26. Addendum: *Sprache* 35 (1991–1993): 1.
- EIEC = J.P. Mallory/D.Q. Adams (eds.). *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*. London/Chicago 1997.
- Fichtl, S. 2005. 'Murus et pomerium. Réflexions sur la fonction des remparts protohistoriques'. *Revue Archéologique du Centre de la France* 44: 55–72.
- Forier, S. 2001. 'Les anthroponymes formés sur des noms d'animaux en Gaule Narbonnaise et dans les provinces alpines' in: M. Dondin-Payre/ M.-Th. Raepsaet-Charlier. *Noms. Identités culturelles et romanisation sous le haut-empire*. Brussels: 473–535.
- Frey, O.-H. 2002. 'Frühe keltische Kunst – Dämonen und Götter' in: Baitinger/Pinsker 2002: 186–205.
- . 2004. 'The Celtic concept of the gods. some preliminary remarks' in: C. Hourihane (ed.). *Irish art historical studies in honour of Peter Harbison*. Dublin: 25–46.

- . 2007. *Keltische Kunst in vorrömischer Zeit*. Marburg.  
 Grm. = German.
- Haffner, A., (ed.) 1995. *Heiligtümer und Opferkulte der Kelten*. (Sonderheft *Archäologie in Deutschland*), Stuttgart.
- Hofeneder, A. 2005. *Die Religion der Kelten in den antiken literarischen Nachrichten*. vol. 1: *Von den Anfängen bis Caesar*. Vienna.
- HrwG = *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* Ed. by H. Cancik/ B. Gladigow/ M. Laubscher (vol. 1–2), K.-H. Kohl (vol. 3–5). 5 vol. Stuttgart 1988–2001.
- IE = Indo-European.
- IEW = J. Pokorny. *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*. 2 vols. Bern 1959/69.
- Ivantchik, A. 2001. 'La légende "grecque" sur l'origine des Scythes (Hérodote 4.8–10)' in: V. Fromentin/ S. Gotteland (eds.). *Origines gentium*, Bordeaux: 207–220.
- Janda, M. 2000. *Eleusis. Das indogermanische Erbe der Mysterien*. Innsbruck.
- . 2002/03. 'Die germanischen Götter Nerthus und Njörðr im Rahmen der indogermanischen Religionsgeschichte'. *Sprache* 43: 33–54.
- . 2006. 'Die indogermanische Göttin der Morgenröte als Namenspatronin'. *Beiträge zur Namenforschung* 41: 13–21.
- Johns, C./T. Potter. 1983. *The Thetford treasure. Roman jewellery and silver*. London.
- Karl, R. 2004. *Altkeltische Sozialstrukturen anhand archäologischer, historischer, sprachlicher und literarischer Quellen*. Vienna/Bangor. <http://ausgegraben.org>.
- . 2005. 'Warum nennen wir ihn nicht einfach Dietrich? Zum Streit um des dorfältesten Hochdorfer Sakralkönigs Bart' in: Karl/Leskovar 2005: 191–202.
- Karl, R./J. Leskovar (eds.). 2005. *Interpretierte Eisenzeiten – Interpreted Iron Ages. Tagungsbericht der 1. Linzer Gespräche zur interpretativen Eisenzeitararchäologie*. Linz.
- Kehrer, G. 1988. *Einführung in die Religionssoziologie*. Darmstadt.
- Kershaw, K. 2001. *The one-eyed god. Odin and the (Indo-)Germanic Männerbünde*. Washington.
- LEIA = J. Vendryes (ed.). *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien*. 7 vols. Dublin/Paris 1959–.
- Lincoln, B. 1981. *Priests, warriors, and cattle. A study in the ecology of religions*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London.
- . 1991. *Death, war, and sacrifice: studies in ideology and practice*. Chicago.
- LIV = H. Rix/M. Kümmel. *Lexikon der indogermanischen Verben*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Wiesbaden 2001.
- Luckmann, T. 1967. *The Invisible Religion*. New York.
- Luhmann, N. 1977. *Funktion der Religion*. Frankfurt/Main.
- . 1984. *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*. Frankfurt/Main.
- . 2000 (†). *Die Religion der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/Main.
- Maier, B. 1991. *König und Göttin. Die keltische Auffassung des Königtums und ihre orientalischen Parallelen*. Diss. Bonn.
- . 2001. *Die Religion der Kelten. Götter – Mythen – Weltbild*. Munich.
- McCone, K.R. 1987. 'Hund, Wolf und Krieger bei den Indogermanen' in: W. Meid (ed.), *Studien zum indogermanischen Wortschatz*. Innsbruck: 101–154.
- MIr. = Middle Irish.
- Nortmann, H. 2002. 'Modell eines Herrschaftssystems. Frühkeltische Prunkgräber der Hunsrück-Eifel-Kultur' in: Baitinger/Pinsker 2002: 33–46.
- O'Grady, S.H. 1892. *Silva Gadelica I–XXXI*. vol. 1. London/Edinburgh.
- OBret. = Old Breton.
- OCS. = Old Church Slavonic.
- OE. = Old English.
- OHG. = Old High German.
- OInd. = Old Indic (Vedic, Sanskrit).

- OIr. = Old Irish.  
 ON. = Old Norse.
- Oevermann, U. 1995. 'Partikularistische und universalistische Momente religiöser Systeme. Am Beispiel des Vergleichs polytheistischer und monotheistischer Religionen und der gegensätzlichen Folgen des puritanischen und islamischen Fundamentalismus', Ms. Frankfurt/Main. URL: <http://user.uni-frankfurt.de/~hermeneu/Fundamentalismus-1995.rtf>.
- Pauli, L. 1975. *Keltischer Volksglaube. Amulette und Sonderbestattungen am Dürrnberg bei Hallein und im eisenzeitlichen Mitteleuropa*. Munich.
- Rieder, K.H. 1992. 'Ein umfriedeter »Tempelbau« der älteren Eisenzeit beim Erlachhof'. *Das archäologische Jahr in Bayern* 1992: 74–77.
- RIG = P.-M. Duval (dir.). *Recueil des inscriptions gauloises*, Paris. vol. 2.2: P.-Y. Lambert, *Textes gallo-latins sur instrumentum*. 2002.
- Schlerath, B. 1998. 'Religion der Indogermanen' in: *Sprache und Kultur der Indogermanen, Akten der X. Fachtagung der Indogermanischen Gesellschaft*. Innsbruck 1996. Innsbruck: 87 ff.
- Schrijver, P. 1995. *Studies in British Celtic Historical Phonology*. Amsterdam/Atlanta.
- Schumacher, S. 2004. *Die keltischen Primärverben. Ein vergleichendes, etymologisches und morphologisches Lexikon*. Innsbruck.
- Seibert, L.H. 2004. Niklas Luhmanns Theorie der Religion. Ein interdisziplinärer Beitrag zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme. Nordhausen.
- Stüber, K. 2007. 'Der Beitrag der Namenkunde zur Erforschung von Lexikon und Grammatik des Gallischen' in: Birkhan 2007: 549–557.
- Venclová, N. 1993. 'Celtic shrines in central Europe: a sceptical approach'. *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 12: 55–66.
- . 1997. 'On enclosures, pots and trees in the forest'. *Journal of European Archaeology* 5/1: 131–150.
- Venclová, N. 1998. *Mšecké Žehrovice in Bohemia. Archaeological background to a Celtic hero*. Sceaux.
- Von Bertalanffy, L. 1976. *General systems theory. Foundations, development, applications*. New York (revised edition, first publ. 1968).
- W. = Welsh.
- Zeidler, J. 2004. 'Eigenständige keltische Ursprungsmythen? Ein analytisches Modell' in: E. Poppe. *Keltologie heute. Themen und Fragestellungen. Akten des 3. Deutschen Keltologensymposiums. Marburg 2001*. Münster: 13–30.
- . 2005. 'Cults of the "Celts". A new approach to the interpretation of the religion of iron age cultures' in: Karl/Leskovar 2005: 171–179.
- . 2007. 'Die Religion der Kelten. Ein interdisziplinärer Forschungsansatz' in: Birkhan 2007: 639–652.
- Zimmer, S. 1990. *Ursprache, Urvolk und Indogermanisierung. Zur Methode der Indogermanischen Altertumskunde*. Innsbruck. [Rev. J. Untermann, *Kratylos* 39 (1994): 68–70.]