

# EUROPEAN PAGANISM

The realities of cult from antiquity to the  
Middle Ages

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## FOREWORD

I was once invited to write forty pages on European paganism to a very tight deadline. This book has grown out of that experience in data-compression. I have always believed that smaller areas were best understood in larger contexts and in many ways the whole question of paganism in Europe requires the largest of views. The largest of views, however, takes more room and more time than one would ever imagine, and what started in the mind's eye as a short book giving a good representative sample of the range of pagan phenomena has grown into a larger book which still seems to leave so much out. I would like a lifetime to write the real, encyclopaedic version of this book. But it might stretch to a volume or two...

My aim was not to write a history of pagan Europe—that has been done with real commitment by Jones and Pennick (1995)—nor to write a history of the decline and fall of paganism to Christianity, which is just as well as Fletcher has now written a glorious book (1997) on just that subject. Rather, I wanted to show paganism in action, see what it looked and felt like, let the reader see the evidence and listen to the authors, even boring old Caesarius of Arles and grumpy Maximus of Turin.

There are clear problems of evidence and it is truer in this field than in others that it is the privileging of evidence and even its actual existence that drives writing on the subject. I did not want to be evidenced into a corner by treating each European culture separately—Greeks, Romans, Celts, Germans, Slavs, Balts. In few cases does anything like a representative range of evidence exist. The result could so easily be a patchy and inconsequential discussion of routine topics: Druids, ossuaries, lakes and gods of whom only their name is known for Celts; grand Wagnerian mythology for north Germans, with a bow to Tacitus for the south. Rather, I decided that topic by topic was the best way and most illuminating way. There are questions to be asked about springs and groves and time and temples and priests. They are interesting questions which can be illustrated from across the range of cultures, however thin the information from a particular culture.

As I have tried to focus on living paganism and the witness of the written word, I have been less interested but not uninterested in the deductions to be made from archaeology. I have cited archaeological

material where it helps the picture under discussion but not gone back to prehistory. This has also dictated the time period that I have allowed. Wherever there is a written account of some aspect of paganism, I have wanted to be able to include it. That has taken me from the beginnings of historical Greek civilisation to the end of European paganism in fifteenth-century Lithuania and on to some survivals. I have also had to make a choice: I could, and perhaps should, have done more to research recent archaeology, but I think that however unfashionably elderly some of my bibliography and many of my authors may be, there was a greater danger that their achievement and interest should be forgotten and lost. English-language readers have in a real sense not had access to this material and might never. Herodotos would understand.

I am a classicist by training, profession and mentality. I have not dealt with neopaganism at all, because, in a stern classical way, I am unconvinced of the security of the alleged links between ancient paganism and modern. I may tend to take Greek and Roman things for granted, but in a way I have tried to repress them. Thus Greek and Roman material is in principle used in those areas which are comparable with other European paganisms and not elsewhere. Thus I have made no room for mystery religions (Mithras, Isis...) or for philosophy and mysticism (Plato, Stoics, Pythagoreans, Orphics, Plotinus, Iamblichos and theurgy). I should probably have made room for oracles, but, I'm sorry, I haven't. And emperor cult has no parallel outside the old Roman Empire. On the other hand, classicists themselves should find here a wealth of evidence which may at times cast interesting light on their home cultures.

I am also a European, one who deplored the insularity of British politics and culture in the 1980s and early 1990s. But there is nothing mystical about Europe. It is a convenient area to think with, but a fuller and yet more impossible book could be written about the pagan phenomena I have isolated if one looked across the whole world—though it might tend to the inconsequentiality of Frazer, darting across the globe to cite yet another stultifying custom. Occasionally, if inadequately, I have allowed myself out to see the Near East or India. Nevertheless, there is some sense in restricting one's attention to Europe if there is significance in the Indo-European hypothesis, certainly one of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarship's finest achievements. The core of languages from Welsh to Sanskrit originates in a language once spoken, perhaps around 3500 BC, perhaps just north of the Black Sea. Though our Heisenbergian age has tried to sacrifice this hypothesis to the great god of Ambivalence, anyone who actually understands historical linguistics will realise that it is fundamentally unshaken and that it has cultural implications, even if the age has long since gone when we could envisage offensively Aryan warriors sweeping away



earlier populations. (Some reflection is occasioned by the discovery of a current inhabitant of Cheddar sharing the mitochondrial DNA of a man of millennia earlier.) Language and religion are both cultural manifestations and there is no obvious reason why one should move without the other. Both balance innovation with conservatism, migrants with substratum. In the pagan cultures which we examine there is at least some sense that we are looking at offshoots of a single culture, however refreshed by local encounters and population mixture. In that sense, however limited (and it is not shared by Basques, Hungarians, Finns or Estonians), there is some prospect of coherence in Europe. That this is so becomes chillingly clear in the last chapter.

It is certainly exhilarating, branching out into the whole of European culture. In so doing one quickly finds where the high standards prevail among authors. The Germans in particular have made some contributions of startling quality. I have been indebted to de Vries's account of German religion (1956) and to so much of the commentaries in the huge *Monumenta Germaniae historica*, but above all I have been overwhelmed by the stupendous erudition of Jacob Grimm (1875; 'Jacob Grimms meisterhaftes Monumentalwerk', Jente 1921:iii) and I hope I have learnt from his way of briefly dealing with fascinating topics and copiously showing the real evidence. Grimm started from the concept of 'god'. That is the one thing I have felt unable to do. In particular, I do not feel that the trivial discussions of lists of gods, which so often pass for the section on 'religion' in books on this or that culture, are at all satisfactory. Cult is what matters. If gods are to be handled, they are a very complicated ideological problem and need quite separate discussion, just as mythology does—cult and story-book rarely belong together and have only been forced together in order to deliver pseudo-bibles for non-credal cultures. So under 'gods' I have handled only a few themes which seemed to demand attention. I have made no attempt to list the gods of Europe.

The Christian authors seem important to me because it was they who had to confront paganism, even in its tired and degenerate folksy forms. We need to hear what they say and to understand the limitations of their vision. They were at times tiresome and self-righteous, unscientific and lacking in human understanding, but of most of them it must be said that they were men (rarely women) of principle. They also were the agents of the urban civilisation to which we are the heirs. They created the new Europe, in many ways repressive and regrettable, but history was against the pagans and that is why we have difficulty even understanding what they were and what they did. I hope that this book for all its shortcomings and omissions will give readers access to much more information and a much fuller view than they ever had before.

## FOREWORD

I particularly thank Jan Bremmer and Ronald Hutton, scholars of formidable erudition in their different fields who have been particularly generous with information, guidance and encouragement. Colleagues in various disciplines at Birmingham and around the country have graciously suffered inquisitions about such things as oak trees and Old High German orthography. Library staff, even in these curious times when any book written before 1980 is obsolete, have been helpful beyond the call of duty, particularly in the University of Birmingham and at the splendid Oxford libraries, as various as paganism itself. It may seem sycophantic to praise one's publisher, but I cannot pass over Richard Stoneman who has, as ever, been unfailingly helpful, constructive, imaginative and supportive, despite my repeated delays. And a final word of thanks to family—to Jayne for always finding another *oppidum* to march around, to Sophie for her magical control of her father's moods, and to James for insistent cross-examination and alarmingly well-informed suggestions for further study.

*Birmingham,  
All Souls' Day 1998*

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

There is a lot of chronology and geography in this book. To help with chronology, I have included a time-chart on pp. xx–xxi. For geography, there would be no solution short of a map of Europe. I have therefore tried to give a sense of the location of often rather obscure places so that the reader may more or less locate the place from easily obtainable good road atlases and within limits from the in principle ideal, but in practice rather thin, route-planning CD-ROMs. In the case of France I have usually specified the *département* and in other countries the nearest equivalent. I have also specified nearby towns you may hope to find in the index of an atlas.

The book is full of quotations, largely from ancient and medieval writers, sometimes from modern. My aim has been to show, as near as I can, at first hand the actual evidence for statements about pagan religions. I intend the book to have the virtues of a sourcebook without damaging its readability. The quoted texts, often referred to in footnotes in other books, are not always easy to find, much less to find in English. I have therefore included at the end of this book, within the bibliography, a section listing where you can find texts and translations of particular authors and also giving some basic details, mainly dates, for the many Christian writers. Translation is an area where I hope this book will be useful. The age has long since gone when, in the manner of Grimm, evidence could be heaped together with formidable erudition in whatever language. My undergraduate students, to whom I owe much, are some of the cleverest people of their generation in Britain, but French is a trial for them and other languages are usually off the map. An important function of this book, therefore, is to make accessible what has been written in Greek and Latin and other ancient languages and above all the material brought forward in modern works in the variety of languages that you may see in the bibliography. I have tried to keep as exactly as I can to the content of the original even if that leaves the translation rather wooden.

The algebra of the footnotes is required to record where evidence has been found and who said what where. There can be few things more maddening to writers or readers than not being able to recall or discover

the evidence for some interesting point. Given the variety of sources for the information in this book and the variety of interests that will lead readers to it, it is more than usually necessary to be meticulous about documentation. The algebra, however off-putting, can be decoded fairly simply. Author plus year (e.g., Leite de Vasconcellos 1905:ii.266) means that there is an entry in the bibliography which will tell you exactly which book is at issue; ii.266 means 'volume two, page 266'. The first part of the bibliography should help you find references to ancient and medieval authors, though in the nature of things you may well need a good university library to find them. When the reference is of the form 'Pausanias 8.7.2' it means that this is in the Greek author Pausanias (see bibliography, section 1) and comes from 'book 8, chapter 7, section 2'. If the work is a single-book work, e.g. 'Maximus of Turin, *Sermon* 63.1', then chapter (or in this case, sermon) number 63, section 1 is indicated. Numbering is usually the same no matter what edition you use, but there are exceptions and I have tried to make clear in the bibliography which edition I was using. A final bibliographical point: for some collections of texts, encyclopaedias and so on, I have used abbreviations, e.g. *PL* or *LPG*, which I have decoded at the top of the bibliography.

Where I am not sure what a passage means or whether it makes any sense at all, I have put (?) in the text. Where I am offering an explanation or comment during a translation, it is in square brackets: [i.e. Thursday]. Where I am presenting the meaning of a word quoted e.g. in Latin, or the actual Latin for the word so translated, it is in round parentheses: (*luxuria*); I also use parentheses to fill out the sense of a sentence: 'they did not dare to cut (the groves)'.

Quotations often bear on more than the point currently at issue. Should I repeat quotations? But that is so wasteful. Should I cite only those parts which bear on the current issue? But it is not always possible to detach only that part and even where possible it destroys our perception of the character of the source by fragmentation and means that one is forever setting the same passage in context. In the end I have chosen to let passages run on, so that the reader may indeed gauge their character, and to pick them up again later when they are needed, with a 'see also' cross-reference.

An asterisk is used: (a) in the case of individual words, to indicate that this word is hypothetical and is not directly evidenced, like, for instance, all Indo-European words (*\*treyes*, 'three') or the Germanic god *\*Tiwaz*; (b) in the case of books and articles, to indicate that I have been unable to consult this work, e.g. \*J.-G. Bulliot, 'Le culte des eaux sur les plateaux éduens', *Mémoires lus à la Sorbonne*, 1868. I have consulted all that are not so marked.

<...> Use of these angle brackets in an old text means that the editor of the text (or myself) does not believe that the text makes sense as it

stands, that there is something missing and that the text contained within the angle brackets should be added. Our manuscripts are nearly always copies rather than the author's original, and a number of errors are usually made in the copying process.

*Notes on navigation*

- Where the whole word 'Chapter' is used, it refers to a chapter *in this book of mine*, e.g. 'Helmold 2.108 (Chapter 7)' means: 'turn to Chapter 7 of this book and you find this passage discussed or quoted'. Otherwise I use 'ch.'
- Where the text says '(above)' or '(below)', this indicates earlier or later *in the same chapter*.

*Notes on languages*

OHG is *Old High German*, the ancestor of modern ('New High') German (rather than of Low German—Dutch, the dialects of North Germany that border on Dutch, English too).

MHG is *Middle High German*, the stage in-between OHG and Modern High German.

OE is *Old English* or 'Anglo-Saxon', the ancestor of today's English.

ON is *Old Norse*, the ancestor of the Scandinavian languages.

## APPROACHING PAGANISM

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What is ‘paganism’? Where did it exist in Europe and by what stages did it disappear? What do authors tell us about European paganism in its heyday? These are the questions which this introductory chapter addresses. We shall look later at the stylised views that Christian authors have of dying paganism, in Chapter 8.

### PAGANS, SO PRIMITIVE

Shortly before the Second World War, the editor of a translation of medieval books of penance began his introduction with the observation that these documents ‘were employed in administering a religious discipline to our forefathers during their transition from paganism to Christianity and from barbarism to civilization’.<sup>1</sup> Thus our forefathers had ready to hand convenient repressive codes, as hallmarks of their transition to civilisation, which told them how many days penance they must do if, due to overeating and overdrinking, they vomited up the holy wafer and, worse, failed to throw it on the fire (or, even worse again, a dog ate it), or if they committed acts of bestiality or sodomy or masturbated ‘with their own hand or someone else’s’, or burnt down a church, or, catastrophically, saved a soul from Hell that didn’t deserve to be saved, or found a cow that had fallen from a rock and wondered whether it was pious to eat it (answer: only if it has shed blood), or sought healing at springs, trees, stones or crossroads. We all have our ideas of what constitutes civilisation and it is perhaps best to be clear at

the outset that there is no uniform evolution of civilisation such that barbarity and paganism go hand in hand. To most classicists it will seem that the pagan Greek and Roman civilisations, for all their terrible errors, were at least as 'civilised' as much of the Christian Middle Ages and if it does not seem so, they had better learn another discipline.

Or take this:

In religion the savage is he who (while often in certain moods, conscious of a far higher moral faith) believes also in ancestral ghosts or spirits of woods and wells that were never ancestral; prays frequently by dint of magic; and sometimes adores inanimate objects, or even appeals to the beasts as supernatural protectors.

Lang 1913:i.34 n. 1

From this single sentence we can recognise Andrew Lang's *Myth, ritual and religion* as a product of the Victorian age, confidently rehearsing and implying views which would cause offence in our own age. Yet we should be careful that we do not ourselves slip into this type of view when thinking about our ancestors. Ancient Europeans were not at some primitive stage of intelligence because they practised pagan rites or focused their worship at stones and trees, nor were they superstitious slaves to ghosts, spirits and ancestors. Superstition is in the eye, and religious code, of the beholder. It is not a puzzle that these ancient peoples failed to be Christian and we should abandon the Christianocentric supposition that 'in certain moods' they sensed a 'far higher moral faith', viz. Christianity. It is true that in most modern religions, religious codes of conduct have taken the character of morals, but it is certainly not a necessary feature of religion as such to supply morals to a population—and without religion we are not therefore immoral.

Finally, it may indeed be characteristic of many modern religions, notably Christianity, to promote 'faith' to the extent that nowadays to be a religion is to be a 'faith', preferably a 'living faith'; but students of ancient religion are well aware that paganism did not promote 'faith'. Of course, ancient pagans believed certain things without adequate evidence, but whether they believed 'in' them (a peculiar piece of jargon which we derive from New Testament Greek)<sup>2</sup> is another question. Paganism was not credal, but a matter of observing systems of ritual. Ritual too is a language, one which involvingly defines the place of man in the world. It is no worse than credal or theological language in achieving that objective and in some ways escapes more easily the danger of asserting something which needs to be verified or died for. Paganism can accept the beliefs and practices of others much more

readily than more ideological religions. The persecution of the Christians by the Romans was not a matter of crusade or *jihad* and was caused by an unusual and special conflict in views of ritual and society.

'Paganism' is a misnomer. With its Latin first element (*paganus*, a 'villager') and Greek second (*-ism*, as though it were a system of belief), it is an impossible contradiction. The only pagans who held to systems of belief were, contingently, philosophers who happened also to be pagans and philosophised religion as they philosophised everything else. It was, however, characteristic of philosophy under the Roman Empire that it was drawn increasingly into the description and articulation of religion—the catalyst for the incorporation of theology *within* Christianity. *Paganismus*, a singular religious environment, is a word invented by the fourth-century Christians so that they can talk about 'it' in the same breath that they talk about Christianity and Judaism.<sup>3</sup>

Until the advent of neopaganism, paganism had always been a derogatory term denoting any non-Christian religion. As it is derogatory, it would be accurate but insulting to call the religious practices of Hindus 'pagan'. Because, however, our ancestors find no shelter under a multi-cultural umbrella, are protected by no legislation, will never have to be confronted face to face, and are remote enough to be gratuitously insulted, we have the freedom to call them 'pagans' and mentally to demean their cultures. Thus overwhelmingly 'paganism' refers intolerantly to the pre-Christian religious practices of Europe and that is what it was originally designed for. A *paganus* is a 'villager'; why this should come to mean 'pagan' is not clear. Zahn suggested in 1899 that it extended the sense 'local people, non-combatants' in reference to the 'soldiers' who fight the good fight in the metaphorical army of Christ.<sup>4</sup> More usually, the 'villager' has been seen as a backward country person, a yokel, who is still engaged in the rustic error of paganism. This would then go back to the difficulty which Christianity experienced in advancing from the towns of the Roman Empire into the countryside. The problem is that the word *pagani* applies as much to townspeople as to rural people. To solve this problem, Chuvin (1990:9) has proposed returning to an earlier interpretation that they 'are quite simply "people of the place," town or country, who preserved their local customs, whereas the *alieni*, the "people from elsewhere," were increasingly Christian'. Be that as it may, paganism did in fact last longest in the countryside and *rustici* ('country-people, rustics') becomes a term interchangeable with *pagani*.<sup>5</sup>

English, and the Germanic languages, have another word, 'heathen', which we owe to the Goth Ulfila (on whom more below). He used the word *báithnô* at Mark 7.26 to translate the Greek word *Hellenis*, 'Greek (female)' in the extended sense of non-Jew ('Gentile' in the Revised



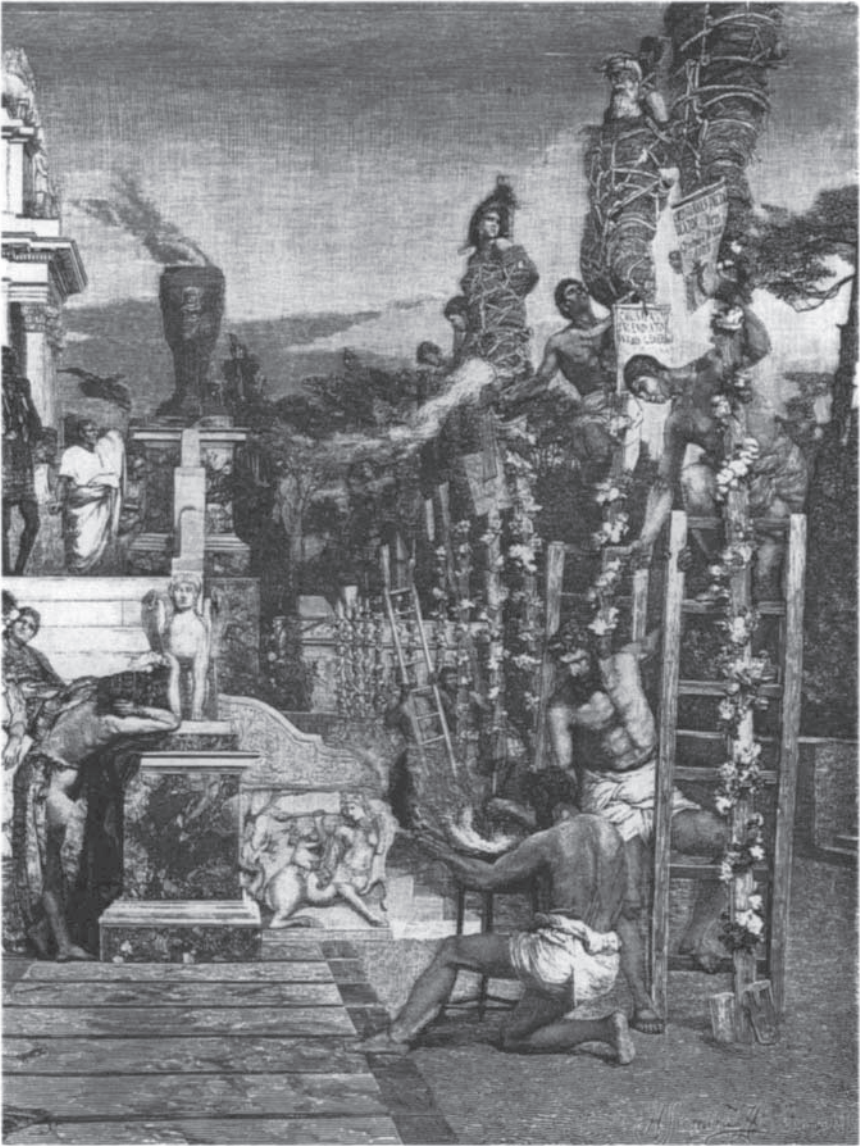
English Bible).<sup>6</sup> It looks from the perspective of the other Germanic languages as though it is their equivalent of the Latin *paganus* or *rusticus* and refers once again to those who live at a distance from perceived centres of culture: these inhabit open, rough land, *heaths* in fact. As a matter of fact, the word 'heath' does not turn up in Gothic, but, to be brutal, there is nothing else it can come from. Before it was taken up for use by Christians, I suspect this was a term of comparative civilisation, such as Goths conceived it, and denoted 'someone who lives in wild places'.<sup>7</sup>

Modern 'pagans' are naturally convinced that there is a continuity between ancient pagans and themselves, something which I doubt but am not particularly concerned to dispute.<sup>8</sup> Nor am I qualified to analyse spiritual conditions in late twentieth/early twenty-first-century liberal Europe. One cannot fail, however, to notice a problem of deracination and of disgust with certain aspects of the development of material culture and with established institutions that find it so hard to recognise sea-changes. Thus 'ecology', 'environment' and 'green' have become first buzzwords, then commonplace; and above all urban dwellers have increasingly felt a deep sympathy with the unpolluted landscape and its 'endangered' creatures. A special place is held in this recovery of a Golden Age by the term 'Celtic', a vector to the quasi-primeval inhabitants of the land (so very 'old'), their ancient songs and strange myths, and their mysterious magical powers in a revered landscape. This is a modern mythology, and like all myths works so well because it is not true.<sup>9</sup>

## CHRISTIAN ENDING

### **Roman government**

If paganism is simply the negative of Christianity, it follows that the history of the end of paganism is the history of the rise of Christianity. Thus the end of the pagan period is a matter of Christian rulers and councils and bishops stamping out the last vestiges of pagan practice. This naturally happened at different times in different parts of Europe: the arrival of Christianity, and with it the demise of paganism, is part of a wave of culture slowly sweeping across the continent. Barbarian kings may be viewed as signing up for membership of the European Union and entering into profitable communication with great powers by the act of adopting Christianity. One tale, however mythic, may stand as an icon of this religio-cultural influence, the story of how Vladimir, Prince of Rus', the embryonic Russia, convoked a council of boyars in 986/7 in order to decide which religion they should sign up for of those that were being pressed upon them—the Judaism of the



*Figure 1.1 Nero and the Christians, an enduring image*

Khazars,<sup>10</sup> the Islam of the Bulgars,<sup>11</sup> the Roman Christianity of the Germans, or the Greek orthodoxy of the Byzantines. It is reminiscent of choices offered to Third World countries during the Cold War and the interpretations of Marxism and of western democracy that resulted.

Popular culture hears much of how ‘the Romans’ persecuted the Christians, fed them to lions and so on, but in fact the Roman Empire was

the vehicle by which Christianity conquered Europe. The Great Persecution of Diocletian in 303–11 (in fact more of others who were driving his policy by then) was the last in the west: in 312 Constantine seized Rome and became its first Christian Emperor. Against all cynicism, there can be no doubt that Constantine, within his own understanding of it, was committed to Christianity and concerned to harmonise and harness it in the interests of the Empire. This was decisive, despite the reversion to paganism of the Emperor Julian ('the Apostate') in 360–3, despite some futile resistance by the tiny, if temporarily indulged, conservative establishment in the city of Rome under Symmachus (*praefectus urbi*, i.e. mayor, 384–5), and despite occasional relapses or concessions to paganism in the wake of the demoralisation caused by barbarian depredations of great urban centres (Trier 406, Rome 410, Bordeaux 414).<sup>12</sup>

Repression of pagans was more sustained than the persecutions of Christians had been. Almost every set of Emperors established their Christian credentials by issuing pompous, repetitive and not therefore wholly effective edicts.<sup>13</sup> In 341–2 sacrifices were banned, but temple buildings outside the walls of Rome were to be left to be the focus of plays and spectacles. In 346 sacrifices were banned on pain of death and temples closed. In 353–8 nocturnal sacrifices, then any sacrifices and any adoration of statues, were banned on pain of death and the temples were closed. In 381–5 sacrifices, day or night, were forbidden and so was divination. Emperors were particularly worried about divination, in whose efficacy they clearly believed: in a standard Roman sacrifice, you inspected the liver and entrails of the sacrificed animal for *signs* (banned 385) and traitors might look for signs of *when the Emperor might die*. Temples, however, might now be opened for meetings: statues were to be considered as mere art, museum stuff—too highbrow a view to last long. At the end of the century, in 389–92, pagan holidays were turned into workdays, sacrifices and visiting temples or sanctuaries at all were banned, as was 'raising eyes to statues', on pain of a hefty fine; even household cult was proscribed. Nor did it matter what class you belonged to. Sacrifices to inspect entrails were treason. And you should not decorate trees with fillets or make turf altars on pain of forfeiting your land and house. Even to connive at sacrifices, as public officials might, meant a fine. This was the period when the great sanctuary and temple of Sarapis at Alexandria, that centre of pilgrimage and devotion, was besieged and sacked.

While the Emperors Arcadius and Honorius were routinely banning sacrifice and entry to shrines and temples in 395, Alaric and his Goths sacked the sanctuary of Eleusis, a day's procession from Athens, where the Mysteries had offered pagans their highest form of religious experience, so they said. Christians built a small church next to the ruins of the great Telesterion and buried their dead in its once holy precinct.<sup>14</sup> Priests now had their historic privileges withdrawn, the state support that no-one seems

to have noticed before 396; this specifically included the ‘hierophants’ who displayed the holies to the *mystai* at Eleusis—so that was it for pagan mystic experience. A little later, in 407, we find temple income being diverted to soldiers, a more urgent need, and in 415 confiscation of sacred places and funds for religious bodies, like the Dendrophoroi—the ‘Tree-bearers’ who on 22 March each year bore the felled pine tree in a funeral cortège through the streets of Rome for the goddess Cybele and her consort Attis, ever dying young.<sup>15</sup>

As we see from their edicts, the Roman Emperors did not have the firm control of policy and its implementation that modern governments suppose they have. It was not the case that the Emperors decided for Christianity and the population of the whole Empire was suddenly automatically Christian. Though the Church had a new authority to back its cultural revolution, the hard work of conversion and the destruction of first urban, then rural culture remained. The sermons of Zeno of Verona (d. 380) focused on hard work in a world where ‘sacrifices in urban temples were regularly practised, *parentalia*, mainly domestic rites for the dead, were still being celebrated and *haruspices*, those experts in the symbolic meaning of the warm innards of sacrificial animals, were still consulted; the official pagan calendar was still being observed’ (Lizzi 1990:162). Christianity had been hitherto very much an urban phenomenon, where in any case official policy mattered more and bishops were generally efficient organisers and campaigners; the more difficult problem was the conversion of the countryside, often owned by powerful urban dwellers. In the sermons of both Zeno and, thirty to forty years later, Maximus of Turin we see a concern that landowners should do something to roll back paganism on their estates and stop in effect conniving at rural paganism centred on the *fana*, buildings too humble to be called temples.

At this point, Christians, you must ask whether your sacrifice can be accepted if you know every clod, pebble and furrow on neighbouring properties, but are uniquely ignorant of the *fana* that smoke everywhere on your estates—which, if one were to tell the truth, you are cunningly maintaining through an act of pretence. It doesn’t take much to prove it. Daily you are conducting actions to prevent people from taking away your [legal] right to temples (*iūs templorum*).

Zeno of Verona, *Sermon* 1.25.10

Apart from a few devout people, there is practically no-one whose lands are unpolluted by idols, practically no estate which can be considered free from the cult of demons. Everywhere the Christian eye is struck, everywhere the most

devout mind is lashed; wherever you turn you see altars of the devil or the profane divinations of the pagans or the heads of cattle fixed to doorways...Moreover, whatever master knowingly accepts this sort of gift from his rustics, which he knows is brought to him by polluted hands, what joy will he derive from their possession, whose first-fruits he suspects were tasted by demons before they were tasted by the master? Let us therefore take care equally for ourselves and for our people. And since holy Quadragesima is upon us, let us call pagans to Christianity and those in preparation (*catechumini*) to baptism!

Maximus of Turin (probably), *Sermon* 91.2

It would fit this attack on rural paganism if, as Lizzi thinks, the edict of 392 prescribed the same fines for *landowners* conniving at paganism as for the actual performers of the sacrifice.<sup>16</sup>

While Zeno was active in Verona, in the Touraine and its environs St Martin (c. 315–97) was confronting active paganism with its sacred trees and festivals, though perhaps other factors than the bravado of St Martin—for instance, recession and the failure of state support—hastened the decline of the Gaulish sanctuaries.<sup>17</sup> Martin's work was not in any case the end of the story. Fifth-century decrees in Rome proceeded to ban pagans from employment in the army, bureaucracy or legal system (416) and continued to declare penalties for paganism more generally.<sup>18</sup>

The laissez-faire attitude of landowners to their property continued sufficiently for a repeat decree in 451 and even, if one can believe him, into the time of Caesarius at Arles (d. 542):

So Christians should neither make vows at trees nor worship at springs if they wish through God's grace to be freed from eternal punishment. Accordingly, anyone who has trees or altars or any sort of *fana* on his land or in his villa or next to his villa where wretched men are accustomed to make any vows—if he does not destroy them and chop them down, he will be without doubt implicated in those sacrileges which take place there.

Caesarius, *Sermon* 54.5

### Germanic invaders

One might have thought that the migration of barbarian tribes into the Western Empire, which brought about its 'Fall', would have stopped Christianity in its tracks and returned Europe to paganism, but that is far from the truth. Despite their military strength, the invading peoples



*Figure 1.2* The Goths crossing the Alps into Italy

displayed cultural weakness in the face of urban civilisation and the lights of Empire were not switched off overnight.

If we watch the Goths crossing the Danube into the Empire in 376, we can see that, though they are by no means universally Christian, there is among them already a substantial Christian community with its very own Gothic bishop, Ulfila (c. 311–82). Ulfila was no pathfinding missionary, either, despite what is often said of him; if anything, he was a Moses, as the Emperor Constantius II called him.<sup>19</sup> There had already been a Christian infiltration, a seepage from the Empire, before they

crossed into it. Perhaps it began with Christian slaves. The most lasting Gothic kingdom was in Spain, where Euric, king of the Visigoths ('Western Goths'), had by 484 conquered the whole peninsula, except for Galicia, which remained under the control of the Suebi (Swabians). In addition he ruled a substantial part of southern and central France.<sup>20</sup> This did nothing to undermine Christianity, except for Ulfila's legacy—the thinking man's Gothic Arianism, which lasted till the 580s.<sup>21</sup> Arianism, if it helps, is the heresy of denying the consubstantiality of Father and Son.

Barbarians did not sweep aside former inhabitants or their systems of government and administration: new overlords stepped in above existing structures and institutions. The last of the Roman philosophers, Boethius, was consul in Rome in the impossibly late year of 510 and was a Christian who wrote on Catholic doctrine. If he was executed in 524 by the Ostrogothic ('East Gothic') king Theoderic it was not for being a Christian: Theoderic and his Ostrogoths had long been Christian, if, of course, Arians.

The Goths had Christianised early. More commonly, conversion of invading peoples was somewhat slower: 'Although most of the Germanic peoples were pagan when they entered the Roman world, nearly all were converted to the faith within a generation or two of their arrival' (Todd 1992:123). In 507 the Visigoths were heavily defeated at Vouillé near Poitiers by the (Germanic) Franks under Clovis who were now so to dominate France that they lent their name to it. But Clovis's wife, the Burgundian Clothilde, was a devout Christian and worked on her husband till finally, in an echo, probably not coincidental, of Constantine at the battle of the Milvian bridge (the defining moment at which he defeated his pagan adversary Maxentius and the Roman Empire became Christian), Clovis is said in his battle against the Alemans in 496 to have called upon 'Clothilde's god'. St Clothilde later retired to a monastery at Tours and her grandson would be St Cloud.

Characteristically, the one part of the Iberian peninsula not under Gothic control turns out to be the one with some evidence for pagan practice. Martin of Braga (c. 515–80) was fortunate still to find a certain amount of paganism surviving in Galicia among the Swabian peasants.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, in western Spain and Portugal Christian progress had in any case been slowed down by schism. A contemporary of Martin of Tours, Priscillian (c. 340–85), had in his enthusiasm embraced what appeared to be heretical, almost Manichaean, views. Martin of Tours perhaps sympathised with his activism and opposed his execution in vain; despite his death, and maybe, as Sulpicius Severus thought, because of it, Priscillian's brand of Christianity was an important vehicle of independent sentiment for almost two centuries.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 1.3 Clovis calls on the god of Clothilde

### Beyond the Roman pale

So, the public paganism of Greece and Rome and of the Celts of Spain, France and Britain had gone; only local customs remained. The paganism of the German tribes that immigrated into the Western Empire, excluding Britain, had now also gone. The surviving pagans were the peoples that lay beyond the historical Roman Empire and, in due course, beyond Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire.

These peoples include the invaders of Britain, the 'Angles, Saxons and Jutes', whose 'conversion' is associated with St Augustine of Canterbury (sent in 596; d. c. 605) and others in the seventh century as chronicled in Bede's *Ecclesiastical history* of 731. Back on the continent of Europe, the Frisians were slowly and waveringly converted by St Willibrord (archbishop of the Frisians 695) and Boniface in the years following 719 (murdered 754).<sup>24</sup> The Saxons were forcibly converted by the Frank Charlemagne (see Figure 1.4, p. 13): in a terrible atrocity he massacred 4500 of them in 782 in a grove at Sachsenhain ('Saxon-grove') bei Verden, as well as chopping down the revered pillar Irminsul (see Chapter 7). Revolts of the Saxons over the following century typically involved the ritual of return to paganism. The north Germans, that is, the Scandinavians, took longer. In northern France the Normans (Norsemen) arrived pagan after Charlemagne's death in 814 but were obliged to convert, if rather shallowly, in 911. Meanwhile, their invasion of Britain and the establishment of the



Danelaw in the 860s reintroduced paganism, and Christianity only recovered sole control with its adoption by Canute (1016–35). In Denmark and Norway Christianity made progress, sometimes brutally imposed, from the mid-tenth century to the mid-eleventh under such Christian heroes as Olaf Trygvesson (ruled 995–1000) and St Olaf (ruled 1015–28) —and the colony of Iceland was bribed into Christianity in 1000. The Swedes followed rather later, from the 1020s to the 1120s, and there remained some vigour in their paganism, centred on the great temple at Uppsala.

East of the Saxons were the Slavonic, Baltic and Finnic peoples. Several fell to Christianity in the later tenth century. Poland was converted in the period 962–92, the Czech bishopric of Prague dates from 973, and the official date for the conversion of the Hungarians is 997—though due to the reincorporation of a pagan enclave in 1236, paganism survived longer than one might expect.

Poland was, however, something of a Catholic island amid the west Slavs. It was harder, and took longer, to convert the Wends ('Sorbs' in their own language). Some of them lived between Poland and the Baltic in the region of Pomerania, now part of Poland, and the aristocracy there only adopted Christianity in 1128. To the west in Brandenburg, Slavs and some Saxons were still actively pagan in the middle of the century. The key success was that of King Waldemar of Denmark (1131–82), who in 1169 took the island of Rügen with its major sanctuary of the god Svantovit which we shall meet later in this book.

East of the Wends and Poles are the various Baltic peoples, a group affiliated to, but far from identical with, the Slavonic—the Prussians to the west around Gdansk and Kaliningrad (note: Prussians were *not* Germans), and the Latvians (or Letts) and Lithuanians to the east. Prussia was conquered in a long and brutal war with the Teutonic Knights, operating from their base at Riga, the modern capital of Latvia, between around 1226 and 1283. Lithuania developed a state paganism during the thirteenth century under King Mindaugas, who became a nominal Christian in 1251, and pursued an exemplary policy of religious tolerance; one area, Samogitia, did not become Christian until 1414. This late conversion, together with a persistent oral tradition, means that even today we can learn something of European paganism from Latvian folksong, the *dainas*.

Beyond the Balts lie a considerable variety of (non-Indo-European) Finno-Ugric peoples—the better known include the Estonians, the Finns and the Lapps. Even today, according to Jones and Pennick (1995:178), they are not all converted (perhaps their lands were less worth stealing) and the attempted conversion of Lapland between 1389 and 1603 resulted in a sort of compromise between paganism and Christianity.



*Figure 1.4* Charlemagne's method of converting the Saxons

### **Beyond the Byzantine pale**

The (Greek) Eastern Roman Empire survived, however vestigially, until the capture of Constantinople in 1453. This survival, and the fact that so much of the military opposition came from Turks already ideologically committed to Islam, meant that there was less impetus to rolling back paganism than there was in the Latin west, though in the end the (Turkic) Bulgars and the Russians attempted subscription to Byzantine civilisation and imperialism through conversion.

Slavs in Pannonia, the area reaching north from Zagreb well into Hungary, were probably converted early, around 700. But the great mass of Slav conversion, in a swathe of territory reaching from Croatia in the north down to Bulgaria in the south had to wait for the ninth century.<sup>25</sup> This was when Cyril and Methodius were at work. St Cyril in particular is well known for his invention of the Glagolitic alphabet, later modified to create the 'Cyrillic' alphabet: this Greek-based script was used to translate scriptures into an early form of Bulgarian known as Old Church Slavonic, repeating at a distance of 500 years the Gothic feat of Ulfila. So, for instance, the Bulgarians, after a false start with the conversion of King Kurt in 613, became



*Figure 1.5* Ulfila translating the Bible into Gothic

Christian in 864 thanks to Cyril. Cyril's brother Methodius lived longer but was affected by conflict with Germanic bishops in Moravia (part of the Czech Republic) and even today a dividing line can be seen in Europe between the Latin-alphabet west, e.g. Poland and Croatia, and the Cyrillic east, e.g. Russia, Bulgaria and Serbia. Russia would not fall to Christianity, as we have seen, till a century later when Prince Vladimir decided on it as a deliberate act of policy.

## EVIDENCE

**Latin and other languages**

There is no beginning of paganism. It has no founder, no holy book that, once written, defined it. Before Christianity by definition all societies were pagan. The only alternative would have been atheism, a lack of religion altogether. It is an interesting fact of human history that there is no evidence for atheist societies, something which encourages the view that religion is in origin a dimension of society. My interest in this book, however, is in paganism in action, in visible human history, rather than in the archaeology of paganism. I have focused on paganism as it emerges into history, not on its prehistory. This means that I have privileged the written record. Who then are the authors and what is their language?

First, Greek. Greek is the language of Greece itself, of Greek Asia Minor (the western coast of Turkey), of the Greek colonies, of the eastern Mediterranean following on the conquests of Alexander the Great, and ultimately of the eastern half of the Roman Empire, which survived, transmuted, to become the Byzantine Empire. Second, Latin. Latin is the language of Rome, Italy and the civilised west, progressively from the time of the Emperors. Inscriptions are written in Latin, scarcely ever in Gaulish and never in Brythonic (proto-Welsh), because inscriptions are an instrument of civilisation.<sup>26</sup> Greek and Roman writers, however, have their own way of viewing barbarian pagan practice, which we will look at in the next section.

Latin is also, as a result of the Roman Empire, the language of the Catholic Church (as Greek is of the Greek Orthodox Church) and of intellectuals throughout the Middle Ages and indeed through the Renaissance and beyond. Most of the Christian authors and law codes that I cite are written in this common, civilised language. Christian authors write with 'attitude' and to a large extent in clichés. It will be important as this book progresses to develop a feel for this 'attitude'.

Italian, French, Occitan (the language group of southern France), Catalan, Spanish, Galician and Portuguese are in origin mutated forms of Latin, the *Romance* languages, so called because their speakers speak *Roman*, not German and not quite Latin. They started to emerge as languages identifiably different from Latin around the time of Charlemagne, but they are not used to record the information we require. Latin was. Even German laws, where paganism is an issue, were on the whole written in Latin, because they are only written once German nations have entered the Latin-Christian cultural ambit. That is what makes the following law so utterly startling:

Whoever has broken into a shrine and removed any of the sacred objects, is led to the sea and, on the sand which the incoming tide covers, his ears are chopped off and he is castrated and sacrificed to the gods whose temples he has violated.

*Law of the Frisians, Additio, titulus xi (MG Leges 3.696 f.)*

Someone, misreading the politics of AD 802, appended this traditional law to an otherwise very Christian set, as after all Charlemagne had dictated, specifying civilised penalties, mainly fines. How was it that no-one noticed?<sup>27</sup> More satisfactorily Roman, and helpfully explicit, is a law of the Merovingian king Carloman:

We have decreed that in accordance with the canons each and every bishop shall take trouble in his parish, with the assistance of the Count who is the defender of the Church, that the people of God shall not perform pagan acts but shall cast aside and reject all the foul features of paganism, such as sacrifices for the dead, lot-casters or diviners, amulets (*phylacteria*) and auguries, incantations, sacrificial victims which foolish men sacrifice in the pagan way next to churches in the name of the holy martyrs or confessors, provoking God and his saints to anger, or those sacrilegious fires which they call *nied fyr* ('need fire')<sup>28</sup> —in sum all these practices of the pagans, whatever they are, should be energetically prohibited by them.

Capitulary of Carloman, *MG Leges* 1.17 (AD 742)

Similarly, Germanic authors, such as Bede or Adam of Bremen, are writing for an educated audience and write therefore in Latin.

There is no Celtic writing contemporary with Celtic paganism: we are not going to discover a *Lost books of the Druids*, apart from the forged *Barddas* of 'Iolo Morgannwg' (1747–1826).<sup>29</sup> The resources, however, of traditional literature may contain relics of paganism which we can use to add colour to our picture, though next to nothing on cult.<sup>30</sup> The Welsh *Mabinogion* regrettably contains little of substance for our purposes and will not be cited in this book.<sup>31</sup> Old Irish literature is a little more useful. Its oldest manuscripts, however, only go back to the twelfth century, long after the end of paganism; the texts are of limited usefulness and it is largely wishful thinking to suppose that much material earlier than the early Middle Ages has survived in this tradition: they may preserve some useful social detail, for instance testifying to the existence of druids and prophets, but considerably less on pagan religious attitudes.<sup>32</sup> In the Germanic languages the most notable evidence comes from the Norse Eddas and sagas, all however dating, at least in the form we have them, from Christian times.

The reason, we suppose, that these poems and sagas, Celtic and Norse, contain such pagan elements as they do is because they represent the oral literature, which was characteristic of these pagan cultures. In Gaul, quite apart from the class of *wateis* (bards), we hear of the association of druids with the preservation of sacred traditions:

[Trainee druids] are said to learn by heart a large number of verses. As a result, some of them spend twenty years learning. Nor do they consider it right to set this material down in writing, though they use the Greek alphabet for most other purposes, for public and private records...

The Gauls assert that they all descend from Father Dis [the Latin name of the god of the Underworld] and they say that this is handed down by the Druids.

Caesar, *Gallic war* 6.14.3 and 6.18.1

And though they lack the druid class, the south Germans too had such traditions:

They celebrate in ancient songs, which is the only mode of memory and of annals that they have, how the god Tuisto was born from the earth. To him they ascribe a son Mannus [evidently 'Man'], the originator and founder of their nation, and to Mannus three sons from whose names those next to the Ocean are called Ingaevones, those in the middle Herminones and the others Istaevones. Certain of them, using the licence that goes with antiquity, allege that more eponyms of the nation were born of the god—Marsi, Gambrivii, Suebi—and that these are genuine ancient names.

Tacitus, *Germania* 2.2–3

It is therefore tempting to think that a continuous oral tradition links, say, Old Irish literature with scenes out of Caesar. But we should remember, in using this evidence, that we conform to the romantic picture propagated by the brothers Grimm, that oral tradition perpetuates ancient myth, whereas there is a danger that supposedly oral works are better at conjuring up an impression of antiquity than its details.<sup>33</sup> We learn staggeringly little of the Bronze Age from Homer and maybe just as little of the Iron Age, certainly of its religion, from Irish literature. In fact, the oral tradition, and its last degenerate descendant, folklore, are frustrating and often unreliable sources. Folklore in particular is a surprisingly inventive medium. Nor can we be sure that Celtic culture was sufficiently uniform for Irish and Gaulish to be unhesitatingly merged.

Even among the Slavs, many of whom in the north remained pagan until the twelfth century, there are no pagan texts.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, pagan societies, with the (formidable) exceptions of Greece and Rome, are particularly accursed in never being literate at the point at which they are still pagan. In Europe there is a clear reason: the transition to a cultural type characterised by writing was made through subscription to the dominant model, that of Roman, and Greek, Christianity. So it is that our evidence for local pagan practices very often comes through their denunciation in Latin, the voice of the culture that destroyed them. A different but particularly poignant case is that of Gaul, where the native culture was developing its own distinctive urbanism, based on very substantial *oppida*, whose ruins should be trodden before dismissive statements are made, and a literacy was beginning using the Greek alphabet to write Gaulish, but only at the point at which it came under Roman control. So it was that Latin culture, powerfully developed already, crushed this embryonic literacy, ousted the druidic class and ritualised the subscription of Gaulish leaders to Roman power through the vehicle of the Emperor cult.

### **Greek and Roman windows on barbarian culture**

If we want to know about ancient Celts, the best known are those of Gaul, and we should turn to the best ancient authority on Gaul, the *Histories* of Poseidonios (c. 135–51 BC). Doubtless we would—if they had survived. However, later authors liberally helped themselves to his information, at times to the point of plagiarism, and so we may read instead, for instance, Diodoros of Sicily's *History* (of c. 30 BC) and Strabo's *Geography* (books 3–6 date from around AD 18). Book 23 of Poseidonios' *Histories* dealt with the Celts. From tatters of it we learn of a Celtic custom of duelling at a feast for the best portion (*FGH* 87F16)<sup>35</sup> and of the bards that were kept in the entourage of the prominent in order to sing their praises (F17). Book 30 dealt with Germans, a people maybe newly invented by Poseidonios himself;<sup>36</sup> certainly he described their habit of eating roast joints with milk and drinking, barbarously, undiluted wine (F22). So far Poseidonios might seem unduly interested in food, an impression which results from his being quoted by Athenaios, whose large surviving *Deipnosophists* ('Sophists at a dinner-party') is an anthology of ancient culture determined by how much of it one can eat. In fact Poseidonios had travelled for himself in Gaul and was well acquainted with the culture from personal observation. In a particularly engaging passage he mentioned the habit of Gauls of his day of nailing the heads of their dead enemies to their doorposts: 'I saw this sight everywhere. At first I found it revolting,<sup>37</sup> but afterwards I bore it calmly as I got used to it' (Poseidonios, reconstructed from *FGH* 87F55



*Figure 1.6* Priestesses and human sacrifice among the Cimbri

(Strabo 4.4.5)). So it looks as though he got beyond the Languedoc and Provence, though scholars debate how far.<sup>38</sup> Other fragments which it is harder to place in his output tell us about religion. For instance, he talks about the Cimbri, a tribe who despite their apparently Celtic name are said to be German<sup>39</sup> and who are best known for their invasion of Italy in 101 BC. Here, he seems to have mentioned ‘grey-haired divining priestesses dressed in white, with buckled cloaks of flax and a brass belt, but barefoot’:





*Figure 1.7* Sacrificial drowning, graphically depicted on the silver cauldron from Gundestrup (see p. 21). Photo: The National Museum of Denmark

sword in hand, they used to meet the prisoners in the camp and, putting garlands on them, lead them to a bronze vessel of about 20 amphoras' capacity. And they had steps which the priestess climbed so that from that height she could cut the throat of each one as he was held aloft. From the flow of blood into the vessel, they performed a certain divination, whilst other priestesses, splitting them open and examining the entrails, proclaimed victory for their own people.

Poseidonios, *FGH* 87F31 (Strabo 7.2.3)

This twenty-measure vessel is authentic and its use is illustrated on the first-century BC Gundestrup cauldron, where a giant godlike figure dangles a human head first into such a vessel.<sup>40</sup> A similar barrel (*cupa*, cf. our word 'cooper') appears among the Suebi at Bregenz (Austria) around AD 611, holding twenty-six measures of ale and used for sacrifices to Wodan, which would suggest human sacrifice; St Columban caused its metal rings to give way.<sup>41</sup> In another passage Poseidonios tells us about the Gauls and their sacred treasure at Toulouse. This was deemed by some writers, characteristically of their Greek-is-best culture, to have been the very same treasure which the invading Gauls had taken from Delphi back in 279, not, however, by the careful Poseidonios. In any case, it was now sacrilegiously taken by the Roman consul Servilius Caepio in 106—and misappropriated:

The valuables found at Toulouse weighed around 15,000 talents [c. 388,000 kg], some of it stored in enclosures, some in sacred lakes, not made into anything, but simply unworked gold and silver...the land [of Gaul] is rich in gold<sup>42</sup> and all over the Celtic land there were treasuries, given that the people are superstitious and do not have expensive lifestyles. In particular, lakes provided them with inviolable places and they dropped weights of silver or even gold into them...In Toulouse the shrine too was holy, much revered by the people in the vicinity, and it had a lot of valuables for this reason, as many made offerings and no-one dared to lay hands on it.

Poseidonios, *FGH* 87F33 (Strabo 4.1.13)

In a final passage (F116), whose existence we must deduce from suspicious similarity between later authors, Poseidonios presented three classes of person concerned with the sacred or with tradition in Gaulish society—bards, druids and *wateis*—all three of them Gaulish words. We shall return to this passage in Chapter 12.

Were there other Greek writers on western and northern Europe? Poseidonios' older contemporary, Metrodoros of Skepsis (killed 71 BC)

wrote on the characteristics and produce of lands, mentioning the River Po and also Germany and the Baltic 'island'.<sup>43</sup> Poseidonios' younger contemporary Timagenes of Alexandria, who was brought to Rome a prisoner in 55 BC and bought by Faustus Sulla, son of the brutal dictator, lived to write history under—and be extremely rude to—Augustus. He evidently gave a very thorough account, perhaps in a *Galatika* ('On Gaul' F13) of the various alleged origins, largely mythic, of the Gaulish people and he seems to have developed the bards-druids-wateis trinity in various ways, notably to view praise-poets (bards) as a step in the general evolution of music (*FGH* 88F2, F10). He also discussed the fate of the shrine-robber Servilius Caepio, in particular how his daughters were reduced to prostitution and he died in disgrace (F11). But it is evident that Spain,<sup>44</sup> Gaul and Germany were badly neglected by Greek writers, despite the colossal amount of papyrus expended on other areas of the Greek or Roman world, whose very tatters occupy thousands of pages in Jacoby's collection of the *Fragments der griechischen Historiker*.

All the areas that are barbarian, out of the way, minor, scattered —on these the [Greek] handbooks are neither reliable nor numerous. All things distant from Greeks increase their ignorance. Now, the Roman authors imitate the Greeks, but do not get very far: what they report they translate out of the Greeks and they do not contribute much of a spirit of scientific enquiry on their own account. So, whenever the Greeks leave a gap, the rest do not have much to fill it with, especially as the biggest names tend to be Greek.

These withering comments are those of Strabo (3.4.19).<sup>45</sup>

Gaul was of course conquered by Julius Caesar, one of the most intelligent and literate Romans of his day. He has also left us a work, the *Gallic war* of the 50s BC, which pauses briefly in the sixth book to tell us about the customs and religion of the Gauls. Nothing perhaps better illustrates the unscientific standards of antiquity and the value of Strabos' remarks than this passage. One cannot be sure that it contains any original or authentic observations by Caesar himself. It may well be that every detail is out of Poseidonios. Indeed, as de Vries (1961:18) acutely speculates, Caesar must have read up about Gaul before he set out, in Poseidonios and maybe others. This mentality is well exemplified by a passage of Vitruvius, a Roman writer on architecture who had served Caesar as an engineer:

Of these matters there are some which I have observed for myself, others which I have found written in Greek books. The following are the authors of these books: Theophrastos,

Timaios, Poseidonios, Hegesias, Herodotos, Aristides, Metrodoros. They wrote with great attention, and infinite pains, to the effect that the characteristics of areas, the quality of the water, the nature of regions as a result of the inclination of the heavens [i.e. the climate] are so distributed.

Vitruvius, *On architecture* 8.3.27 (Poseidonios, *FGH* 87T13)

To this one must add a Victorian confidence in their own culture, for which Greeks too were to blame, distinguishing the world into Greeks and ‘barbarians’ —‘blah-blahs’, because you can’t understand what they say. It is amusing but characteristic when Plutarch, talking of an instance of human sacrifice by Romans in the 220s BC, expresses surprise because the Romans aren’t really barbarians. Thus, surviving from antiquity there are no books about Gaul other than Caesar’s, one broad-brush book about Germany, Tacitus’ *Germania*, and no books about Britain or Spain. Druids occasionally catch the eye, because they are distinctive, are thought wrongly to correspond to a Platonic mirage of ‘philosophers in power’ and practise human sacrifice.

Not only are Greek and Roman writers uninterested in nations below their cultural *niveau*; even when they describe features of their civilisation, they filter those features through a mask constructed by their own culture, to an extent much greater even than we do now. Druids can be philosophers or priests or both. Foreign nations worship this god above all, and these other gods with their Greco-Roman names: so Gauls worship Mercury above all, and also Apollo, Mars, Jupiter and Minerva; Germans also worship Mercury above all, and also Hercules and Mars (Chapter 11). We can neither correlate these statements with such other evidence as we have, nor learn anything of substance from these translations into Roman, the so-called *interpretatio romana*. Why is Mercury the favoured god of the Gauls? We have little idea. Because he is the god of merchants? Do merchants spend their time on mountaintops, then? And why is Wodan made out to be the equivalent of Mercury (*mercredi*—*Wednesday*)? These are the products of historical accidents and tell us nothing essential: perhaps Poseidonios’ source first met ‘Mercury’ as a traveller’s god in a little shrine in the vicinity of Narbonne and then was stuck with the name; perhaps, once ‘Mercury’ ends up on every hilltop in Gaul, the Wodan of a Wodansberg has to be a Mercury too. This is then reinforced by the numerous points of comparison between Lug (Mercury) and Wodan.<sup>46</sup>

In imperial times Pliny the elder wrote a major twenty-book work on *Wars with Germany*. It is lost, but Pliny’s prodigious research energy must have produced a work which incorporated all Greek knowledge to date and which was doubtless of great use to Tacitus in his little monograph *On the origin and situation of the Germans*, which we call

the *Germania* for short—a book which has been described as ‘in parts astonishingly well informed in the areas of religion and, scarcely to be separated from it, law’.<sup>47</sup> Origins reflect Timagenes’ approach to the Gauls, situation the geography of Poseidonios or Strabo, miniaturism the urbane manner of Caesar. It is not clear, however, that any of this writing actually increased the information stock about Germany, though Pliny’s military service there might have helped, assuming he had a ‘spirit of scientific enquiry’. Perhaps, indeed, he, almost uniquely among Romans, may have had this spirit, judging by the younger Pliny’s account: as Vesuvius disgorged a large black cloud like a compressed tree, ‘being a very learned man, he thought it was important and that he should take a closer look’ (*Letters* 6.16.7). The following morning, bravely leading others to safety from the eruption, he had a heart attack and died.

And that is simply it. For the remainder of the Empire, no-one wrote at any length on Gaul, Spain or Germany. At first sight the pages of references to Gaulish culture that Burnand lists (1996:4–6) may seem impressive, but individually they deliver rather little and cumulatively they report only very patchily on Gaulish religion. It is arguable that it is beyond the evidence to write a comprehensive book on Gaulish religion, though, for instance, Brunaux (1996) has written what is possible on ‘the Gaulish religions’ and Duval (1976) has done what he can with ‘the gods of Gaul’. That is one reason why this book looks at individual phenomena of paganism in Europe rather than dealing exhaustively with a culture at a time. The first phenomenon we will look at is place.