

## The cult of Mercury in Roman Gaul and Roman Britain

Nadezhda S. SHIROKOVA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** *According to Julius Caesar, of all the gods Celts revered Mercury the most, regarding him as the inventor of all arts. The cult of Mercury became widespread not only in Roman Gaul, which was one of the most thoroughly Romanised provinces of the Empire, but also in Roman Britain — the farthest western area governed by the Roman Empire. In both provinces Mercury was worshipped as the patron of commerce, which befitted him as the Roman god of trade and profit. At the same time, in both Gaul and Britain Mercury was syncretized with the Celtic horned god of fertility. Archaeological findings from these regions also suggest that the Mercury worshipped in Britain and Gaul during the Roman rule was also the guardian of military affairs — a role absolutely untypical of the original Roman god, but necessary for the supreme god of Celts who was the divine warrior-patron of Celtic tribes. Besides, the magical-chthonic aspect of Celtic Mercury likened him to Hermes, the god of eschatological and mystical endeavour of humankind in the religion of the Ancient Mediterranean.*

**Rezumat.** *Potrivit lui Caesar, celții l-au venerat cel mai mult pe Mercur, acesta fiind considerat inventatorul tuturor meșteșugurilor. Cultul lui Mercur nu s-a răspândit doar în Gallia romană, care era una dintre provinciile profund romanizate ale Imperiului, ci și în Britannia — provincia cea mai vestică a Imperiului roman. Mercur era venerat în ambele provincii ca patron al comerțului, dar atât în Gallia, cât și în Britannia, a fost sincretizat cu zeul celt al fertilității. Descoperirile arheologice arată că Mercur era perceput în ambele provincii ca păzitor al armatei — un fapt absolut netipic pentru zeul roman, dar necesar pentru zeul suprem al celților — patron războinic al triburilor celtice. Aspectele magice ale cultului lui Mercur celtic îl leagă pe acesta de Hermes.*

**Keywords:** cult of Mercury; Roman Gaul; Roman Britain; religion.

The most clear and compelling written evidence on the religion of Ancient Celts provided by antique historiography is the famous writing by Caesar devoted to the great Gaulish gods (Caes. B. G., VI, 17). A distinctive feature of this text is that when Caesar enumerates the most prominent Gaulish deities, he gives them the names of the gods of the Graeco-Roman pantheon. Caesar writes that among other gods the Gauls most worship Mercury whom they declare the inventor of all arts. After him they set Apollo, Mars, Jupiter and Minerva. In Caesar's words, the Gauls have almost the same idea of these deities as all other nations,

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Petersburg State University; email: n.s.shirokova@yandex.ru.

“Apollo drives away diseases, Minerva supplies the first principles of arts and crafts, Jupiter holds the empire of heaven, Mars controls wars” (B. G., VI, 17).

Among scholars there are two primary objections to Caesar’s assertions. One of them is of a more general nature. It is expressed, for instance, by M.L. Sjoestedt in her excellent work “Gods and Heroes of the Celts” which is often referred to and cited by more recent scholars. She finds it difficult to admit the possibility that “the great Gods of the Celts would seem to correspond more or less exactly to the great Gods of the Romans”. She argues, “Such a coincidence is *a priori* surprising. In view of the profound divergence in mentality and social structure which we observe as between Romans and Celts, one must wonder at such a similarity of their religious ideas”<sup>2</sup>. The other objection is more specific. Celticists wonder why Caesar, while giving Roman names to Celtic gods, places Mercury above Jupiter, the supreme god of Romans.

Concerning the surprise Sjoestedt expresses over the fact that in Caesar’s writings Gaulish and Roman deities appear so similar as to make it possible to equate them to each other, one may argue that such equation is, in fact, perfectly natural. It signifies the beginning of the process of Romanisation of the Celtic religion under Roman influence. This process, once started, was accelerated further by the Roman conquests, when they seized Celtic lands, turning them into Roman provinces (first Gaul, then Britain). The phenomenon of Romanisation of local cults in the areas conquered by Romans is a sign of religious syncretism characteristic of ancient civilizations. “In general ancient religions were accommodating”<sup>3</sup>, as J. Ferguson points out.

This point of view is shared by J. Vendryes. He wrote, “All ancient nations deemed it beneficial to identify alien deities with the gods of their own land. The prestige that Ancient Greek civilization had enjoyed promoted the practice of identifying Minerva with Athena, Diana with Artemis, Venus with Aphrodite and Juno with Hera. Tacitus displays the same tendency when he mentions the cult of Castor and Pollux among a Germanic tribe that lived close to present-day Bohemia” (Tac. Germ., 43)<sup>4</sup>.

Incidentally, it was Tacitus who coined the phrase *interpretatio Romana* that is used in modern science to denote syncretic processes of equating Roman and local deities which took place in Romanised provinces. When describing the Germanic tribe of the Nahanarvali, Tacitus writes about the sacred grove where an ancient cult is practised. He goes on to say that, “Praesidet sacerdos muliebri ornatu, sed deos interpretatione Romana, Castorem Pollucemque memorant” (“A priest in female attire has the charge of it. But the deities (*who are worshipped in the sacred grove* — *N.Sh.*) are described in Roman language as Castor and Pollux”) (Tac. Germ., 43). M. Henig notes that *interpretaio Romana* was a dynamic concept. It

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<sup>2</sup> SJOESTEDT 1940, 20.

<sup>3</sup> FERGUSON 1970, 211.

<sup>4</sup> VENDRYES 1942, 262.

did not destroy the ancestral gods but it most certainly changed them. The rites and ceremonies performed in British temples of the Roman period closely resembled those held in shrines of pre-Roman Britain. So, “a line of continuity in worship and ritual links Romano-Celtic religion with its past. A Briton of the Flavian period must have felt he was venerating the gods of his fathers and grandfathers even though artists from the continent now gave them human (i.e. Graeco-Roman) faces”<sup>5</sup>.

The second objection—that in his writings Caesar names Mercury and not Jupiter as the head of the Celtic pantheon—can be easily countered if one bears in mind that in Caesar’s time the process of Romanisation of the religion was gaining traction in Gaul. Obviously, the god Celts revered the most was taking on the appearance of the Roman Mercury via *interpretatio Romana*, the two deities already having similar functions.

As is known, in Roman mythology Mercury was the god of trade and financial gain, the patron of merchants and travellers. Equating Mercury with Hermes leads to the increased complexity of the image of the Roman god. He becomes a psychopomp — the guide of departed souls to the underworld, the emissary of gods, the patron of heralds and ambassadors, the guardian of envoys’ immunity, an adept of magic and astrology. As is the case with Hermes, Mercury’s role as the patron of herdsmen who increases animal yield is secondary. One of Mercury’s attributes as the messenger of gods and patron of heralds was the caduceus — a staff entwined by two serpents that in ancient times was an emblem of messengers, heralds and envoys giving them immunity. When Mercury acted as the patron of trade and commercial success, his attribute was a purse or a money bag. As the intermediary between the worlds of the mortal and the divine, and the guide escorting deceased souls to the underworld he wore golden winged sandals which helped him to transfer swiftly between the worlds.

Caesar’s assertion that Mercury was the most venerated god among the Gaulish tribes is corroborated by a large number of written sources indicating the extents of his cult in Roman Gaul. Inscriptions (440), statues and reliefs (350), bronze statuettes (440), places of worship consecrated to Mercury are far more numerous than similar objects concerning any other god. Gaul accounts for two thirds of documents regarding Mercury that have been found in all the Roman provinces<sup>6</sup>. A gigantic statue of Mercury, one of the biggest in the ancient world, was erected in the centre of the province. The Arverni commissioned the statue to Nero’s sculptor Zenodorus who spent ten years working on it and received a huge fee (Plin. H. N., XXXIV, 18).

The cult of Mercury can also be traced through numerous toponyms. Some place names suggest that the veneration of the god was connected with heights — e.g., Mont Mercure in Barjon (the territory of the Lingones), Montmartre in Paris, the Merkur (mountain) near

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<sup>5</sup> HENIG 2005, 6.

<sup>6</sup> DUVAL 1976, 69.

Baden-Baden. The temple of Mercury erected at the summit of Pui de Dôme was widely known. Archaeological evidence suggests that the temple was notable for its splendour — the walls were faced with rare types of marble and the roof was made of lead. No less significant was the cult of Mercury on Mount Donon in the Vosges where the god was worshipped by the *Mediomatrici* and the *Leuci*<sup>7</sup>. In Roman Gaul Mercury was depicted with the attributes typical of this Roman deity — a caduceus, a purse, etc.

The cult of Mercury became widespread not only in Roman Gaul, which was one of the most thoroughly Romanised provinces and was situated in the centre of the Empire, but also in Roman Britain — the farthest western area governed by the Roman Empire. The archaeological excavations conducted in Uley, Gloucestershire in 1976-1979 resulted in the discovery of a Romano-Celtic temple dedicated to Mercury. Around the temple were living quarters of the priests officiating at the altar, guest accommodation and a bath complex<sup>8</sup>. The shrine in Uley yielded the biggest number of votive offerings that have been found in Britain during the excavation of temple sites of the Roman period<sup>9</sup>.

Soon after 380 AD, during the Theodosius period—when pagan temples were being destroyed and sacrifices forbidden—votive offerings were removed from the shrine and the north-eastern corner of the temple and the portico were demolished. Later, when the rubble was cleared away, a small stone building was erected over the remnants of the previous ones. When archaeologists excavated it, they discovered fragments of the Roman cult statue of Mercury carved in limestone—the head of the god and the torso of a ram (an animal associated with the deity)—hidden under the cobbled platforms surrounding the building. The body of a cockerel—another animal consecrated to Mercury—was incorporated in the foundation of a building dating back to the Theodosius period. It may be supposed that the fragments of the statue were carefully buried by the god's worshippers in the post-Roman period in an attempt to save at least these remnants left after the destruction Christians wrought<sup>10</sup>.

The head of Mercury (Figure 1) is notable for the highly accomplished manner it is created in. Although it is carved in local limestone, the harmony and symmetry of the features; the subtle modelling of the planes of the cheeks, set off spectacularly by a mass of tight curls; and finally, the expression of gentle goodwill on the face resemble the beautiful images sculpted by Praxiteles from semi-translucent Parian marble. The curly tresses suggest the use of the drill to achieve such rich texture, like in the youthful portraits of Marcus Aurelius. The outlining of the irises and pupils also indicates the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD as the time

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<sup>7</sup> VRIES 1961, 42.

<sup>8</sup> HENIG 2005, 151.

<sup>9</sup> ELLISON and HENIG 1981, 43.

<sup>10</sup> ELLISON and HENIG 1981, 43.

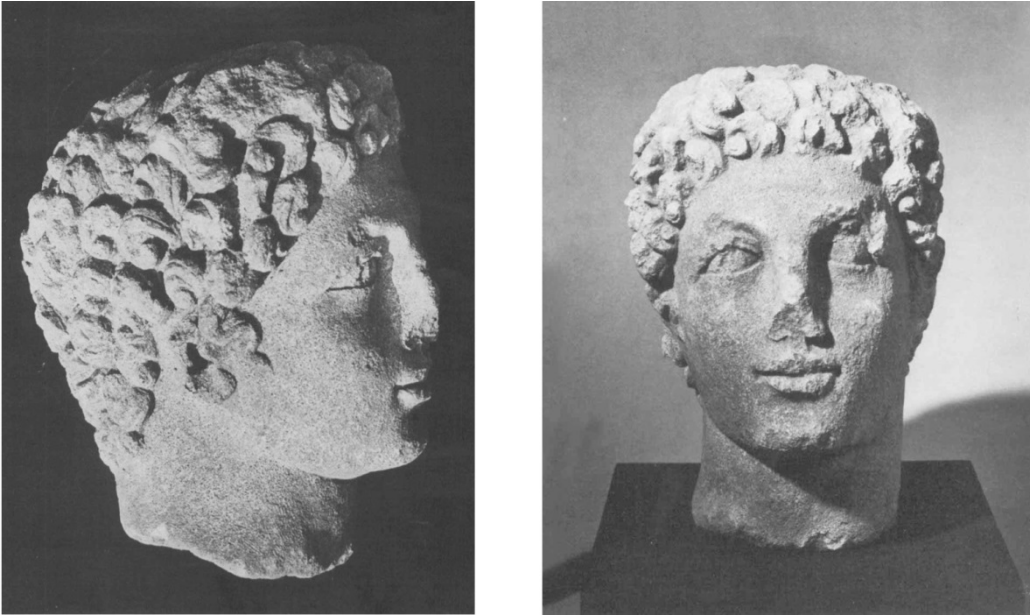


Figure 1. The head of the cult statue of Mercury. Limestone, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, Uley, Gloucestershire

when the statue was created, since it was in that period that such techniques were becoming frequently employed by Roman sculptors<sup>11</sup>.

It is believed that the cult statue of the shrine in Uley was made in Antonine times in a highly Romanised environment. The only non-classical element in it was the use of local limestone instead of costly marble. The extant fragments demonstrate a degree of craftsmanship which is astonishing for a sculpture carved in coarser-grained stone. That naturally leads to the question of the authorship of this excellent work. A. Ellison and M. Henig suggest that the statue might have been created by a certain Sulinus son of Brucetus [Sulinus Scultor Bruceti f(i)lius], of whom it is known that in Bath (*Aquae Sulis*) and Cirencester (*Corinium Dobunnorum*) he erected two altars dedicated to goddesses Suleviae (RIB 105, 151)<sup>12</sup>.

It is a well-known fact that starting from Hellenistic time the figure of so-called “itinerant artist” becomes quite common in the artistic life of classical antiquity. An artist (a painter or a sculptor) would move from town to town, from country to country taking along his pupils, his ideas, his techniques. It promoted closer cultural connections between certain artistic schools that existed in different Hellenistic states and enhanced cohesiveness of complex and

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<sup>11</sup> WALDHAEUER 1923, 72; BRITOVA 1956, 328.

<sup>12</sup> ELLISON and HENIG 1981, 44.

multifaceted Hellenistic culture<sup>13</sup>. In the Roman period that was how Classical Greek tradition found its way to Rome.

J. Toynbee who undertook rigorous research into the literary sources and inscriptions of the names of architects, sculptors and artists working in Rome in the late Republican period as well as the time of the empire arrived at the conclusion that the majority of them were foreigners—Greeks mostly—who introduced Greece’s cultural heritage to Rome. She notes that in the Roman period the Greek art of sculpture in eastern centres of the Roman world remained vibrantly alive and creative; it was first to use certain technical innovations which only later became part of that repertoire of tools Roman sculptors used. As an example J. Toynbee cites the use of the drill to deeply etch curls and eyes of portrait sculptures—the technique Roman sculptors started to employ only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, although it was known to their Greek counterparts in Aphrodisias—a small Hellenistic city located on the border of Phrygia and Caria in the time of Tiberius (1<sup>st</sup> century AD)<sup>14</sup>. As to “our” sculptor who created the cult statue of Mercury for the temple in Uley, A. Ellison and M. Henig advance a hypothesis that although the sculpture is made of local limestone the artisan might have come from a region in the Eastern Mediterranean much more distant than Romanised Gaul, from where numerous sculptors, painters and mosaicists arrived in Roman Britain to work for local clients<sup>15</sup>.

Mercury is also depicted on a relief on a small figured limestone altar which during the Theodosius period was used face down to pave the floor of the building erected over the ruins of the temple. The relief displays the god nude apart from a cloak draped over his left arm. He holds the money bag in his right hand and the caduceus in his left. On his head he probably had a wide-brimmed wayfarer’s hat—a *petasos*—with small wings of which only short stubs remain and which helped Mercury to transfer between worlds performing the same function as his winged sandals. The god is flanked by the ram (on the right) and the cockerel (on the left). Judging by the few slightly better preserved parts of the relief it was notable for its high artistic quality and so it is among the best examples of artworks from the Roman period discovered in Britain<sup>16</sup>. Also discovered in Uley were two bronze figurines of Mercury. The bigger one closely resembles the image of the god depicted on the relief on the altar. Again the god is represented as a naked ephebe with a drapery hanging over his left arm, the purse in his right hand and the caduceus in his left. The second figurine shows Mercury wearing a warm hooded cloak—a *paenula*—that travellers habitually wore. In both cases Mercury is

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<sup>13</sup> ROTENBERG 1956, 257.

<sup>14</sup> TOYNBEE 1951, 65.

<sup>15</sup> ELLISON 1978, 369.

<sup>16</sup> HENIG 1978, 370.

depicted in the Graeco-Roman manner, and both types seem to have been modelled after the classical statues of the god<sup>17</sup>.

During the excavations of the shrine a miscellany of small objects were discovered including coins, jewellery and inscriptions on bronze and lead which are considered of significant archaeological interest. There are more than a hundred lead tablets inscribed with a stilus in Roman Cursive. Some are tolerably well-preserved but the majority had been rolled and then flattened, although archaeologists hope to be able to unroll them. It is entirely likely that the tablets are curse tablet (*defixiones*), or pledges made to the god. Another group of votive offerings includes miniature spears, miniature votive pots and a vast array of broken bronze rings<sup>18</sup>.

Despite the pronounced “classical accent” obvious in the depictions of Mercury, his image and his cult incorporated non-Roman features. Miniature weapons can be regarded as such since classical Mercury had never performed military functions. M. Henig believes miniature rings to be stylized torcs that were a typical neck ornament worn by the Celts<sup>19</sup>.

According to Henig, in the Iron Age there was a shrine of some local Celtic deity on West Hill. Seeing *interpretatio Romana* as a living, active force, Henig paints a vivid and colourful picture of the way Romanisation of the local deity and cult practised by the Celts in Uley could have started. A Roman colonist owing land in the vicinity or a soldier of the Roman army stationed in Britain who is probably going on a hazardous expedition explores the neighbourhood. He comes upon a site which is clearly the dwelling of some Celtic god. He sees a hill surmounted by an ancient mound with a sacred grove in an enclosure. Wishing to venerate the unknown deity and secure his support the visitor asks the natives about the name of the god. He may not succeed at first, for names are powerful things and might give him power over the god of Uley.

Then the visitor tries to find in the Celtic shrine some features resembling the gods of his Roman pantheon well-known to him. The first thing that attracts his attention is the sacred grove which could be the preserve of Silvanus, originally the Roman deity of woods delighting in trees growing wild. In the time of the empire the god becomes the patron of the fields and flocks (Serv. Verg. Georg., I, 20), the protector of the house and estate, presiding over its boundaries; a grove is sacred to him (Horat. Ep., II, 21). Then the pilgrim sees weapons among the votive offerings given to the Celtic god worshipped in Uley, naturally, it reminds him of the Roman war god Mars. He is not surprised that the Celtic god incorporates the features of both Silvanus and Mars. Combining the images of both gods in one cult was not unknown in the Roman context. E.M. Shterman cites the inscription on the altar dedicated to Mars-

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<sup>17</sup> HENIG 1978, 369.

<sup>18</sup> ELLISON 1978, 370.

<sup>19</sup> HENIG 2005, 42.

Silvanus (CIL XI, 7602)<sup>20</sup>. In the temple in Uley among the curse tablets (*defixiones*) that are legible some are addressed to Mars-Silvanus<sup>21</sup>.

A Roman visiting a Celtic shrine understood that it was a site sacred to a great god. In the society of British Celts, as in any heroic-age society, a tribal god, whatever his own functions might be, occasionally manifested in the form of a warrior, patron of the tribe, leading the men in battles. He personified his people and set an example of fortitude and heroism for them to follow. It stands to reason that the Celts who were fiercely committed to warfare should be attracted by the cult of Mars, the god of war. When Roman conquerors brought to Britain, as to the other territories they subdued, the so-called *Pax Romana* (Roman peace), Mars—the god of war—appeared to be the natural counterpart of the divine warrior-patron of Celtic tribes.

However, starting from the time of Caesar, ancient authors were of the opinion it was the cult of Mercury that enjoyed the greatest popularity among Celtic tribes; so Mercury was considered the most venerated god of the Celts<sup>22</sup>. In Uley, a number of curse tablets (*defixiones*) are addressed to Mars-Mercury<sup>23</sup>. The question arises about the ratio of warlike features to peaceful ones in the image of the supreme god of the Celts<sup>24</sup>. The scholars who studied the material originating from Gaul noted that in Roman Gaul sometimes it had been hardly possible to differentiate between Mars and Mercury. As early as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century C. Jullian hazarded an observation that Mars and Mercury were but two interpretations of the main god of the Gauls. This hypothesis is similar to what P. Lambrechts suggested while arguing that in Gaul neither Mars nor Mercury had anything in common with their Roman homonyms and that both gods were often blended into one image<sup>25</sup>. But in this blend Mercury had the upper hand. J. de Vries, who was always careful to weigh his words, observed that the Gaulish god of trade had also military functions<sup>26</sup>. M.L. Sjoestedt and P.M. Duval further defined this ratio. In their opinion, in the world of Celtic gods the “commercial” element surpassed the military one<sup>27</sup>.

The conclusions made by the celticists working with the materials from Roman Gaul are corroborated by the set of artefacts coming from the shrine in Uley in Britain. Although several votive spears have been found at the site, the majority of the findings—*caducei*, coins, jewellery, bronze figurines, and altars—show that the deity venerated in the temple in the Roman period was considered to be Mercury. Finally, in Antonine times (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) a

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<sup>20</sup> SHTAERMAN 1967,66.

<sup>21</sup> HENIG 2005, 39.

<sup>22</sup> DUVAL 1976, 28.

<sup>23</sup> HENIG 2005, 39.

<sup>24</sup> JULLIAN 1908, 119.

<sup>25</sup> LAMBRECHTS 1941, 131, 145, 153.

<sup>26</sup> VRIES 1961, 44.

<sup>27</sup> SJOESTEDT 1940, 32; DUVAL 1976, 28.



limestone statue of Mercury accompanied by his cult animals—the ram and the cockerel—was presented to the temple. The sculptor who created this cult image was obviously influenced by Praxiteles. According to M. Henig, the statue replaced the simple herm-like wooden idol<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, in the British temple in Uley the classical Roman element in the cult of Mercury prevailed over the militaristic Celtic component represented by votive weapons.

Although the image of Mercury from the shrine in Uley was conspicuously classical in nature, British celticists generally warn against underestimating the important role that local Celtic religious traditions played in the formation of the new Roman-British religion, which formation was part of the process of Romanisation after the arrival of Romans in Britain<sup>29</sup>. M. Green suggests that “many lower class rural Celts, at any rate in North and West Britain, were probably not Latin speakers, particularly outside military areas, and one would expect their cults and beliefs to have been little altered by the presence of Rome”<sup>30</sup>.

For example, in Northern Britain, where Romans never wielded much influence, there was a widespread cult of the horned god of fertility — the concept “derived from beliefs and symbols current in Northern Europe and elsewhere in the proto-Celtic and Bronze Age phases of pre-history”<sup>31</sup>. A. Ross notes that the earliest evidence for this cult in a demonstrably Celtic context possibly dates back to the mid-fourth century BC and that the cult of the horned god was firmly entrenched in Britain of the Roman period<sup>32</sup>. Similar to the god venerated in the temple in Uley, via *interpretatio Romana* the horned god was equated at times to Silvanus, at times to Mars or Mercury<sup>33</sup>.

In the Roman period Mercury had a significant following in Northern Britain. He performed the function of the patron of herdsmen increasing animal yield, which likened him to the local Celtic horned god of fertility who had similar abilities. That was due to the economic aspects of the region. While people in the rural areas of Southern Britain were mainly engaged in crop farming, in the North a major role was assigned to animal agriculture, namely, sheep and cattle breeding<sup>34</sup>. S. Piggott notes that in the North of Britain the production of woollen fabrics and felt made of excellent local sheep wool was well developed. Then skilled craftsmen used the fabric to make warm cloaks. In his opinion such cloaks were similar to the ones found on the relief from Housesteads, Northumberland depicting the so-called *Genii Cucullati* — three females of very small stature wearing long hooded cloaks. Wool products from Northern Britain were prized on the European market as late as the 8<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>28</sup> HENIG 2005, 41.

<sup>29</sup> ROSS 1967, 383,384.

<sup>30</sup> GREEN 2011, 38.

<sup>31</sup> ROSS 1967, 127.

<sup>32</sup> ROSS 1967, 131, 132.

<sup>33</sup> ROSS 1967, 134.

<sup>34</sup> ROSS 1967, 355.

A.D.<sup>35</sup>. So the Mercury venerated in Northern Britain had another function that fit perfectly into the traditional picture of the god of trade and profit – he was the patron of local craftsmen and traders producing and selling these excellent woollen goods.

F. Benoit drawing on a large quantity of archaeological material discovered in the territory of France argued that in Roman Gaul it was not the commercial but rather the chthonic aspect of Mercury, the god of eschatological and mystical endeavour of humankind, that contributed to his becoming the greatest god of Gaul. While other gods of Roman Gaul were most often depicted in stylized, stiffly formal poses, Mercury underwent numerous transformations that made him positively unrecognizable, “gallicised” to such an extent that he appears now as a god holding a poppy flower in his hand, now a horned god or a squatting god; he is accompanied by a deer, or a dog, or a snake; he carries a ram (*Kriophoros*, i.e., ram-bearer), he is depicted wearing a hooded cloak (*cucullatus*), with a staff or cornucopia, a sickle, a bow or a plectrum. All of the above-mentioned objects are attributes of the god – the patron of the dead.

In folk religion the belief in the magic power of Mercury’s attributes was so strong that even the most common of the—the money bag and caduceus—are found among the symbols of death on intaglios showing the head of a dead person or a skeleton. Not without interest is the image of a skeleton sitting on an amphora with his feet on a wheel; the figure is surrounded by the attributes of Mercury and holds a cornucopia full of poppy flowers which are known as a symbol of sleep or death. Due to his magical-chthonic function Mercury was the divine patron of the dead, an adept of magic and the guide of departed souls. It is obvious that this feature makes him close to archaic Hermes of “primary” Mediterranean religion. And it is this feature that might be the key to the image of Gaulish Mercury<sup>36</sup>.

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The specific aspects of the cult of Mercury that was practised in Roman Gaul and Roman Britain can be explained by the hypothesis that this cult was an instance of the general syncretic processes which took place in those lands after the Roman conquest. The most telling evidence of this syncretism was cultural Romanisation which resulted not in the replacement of the local Celtic culture by the Roman culture but rather in the interpenetration of cultures which lead to their synthesis<sup>37</sup>.

As it has been demonstrated, the cult statue in the temple in Uley was an ideally beautiful image of the god created in the classical Graeco-Roman manner under discernible influence of Praxiteles’ style. In Gaul, however, there are statues of Mercury that significantly diverge

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<sup>35</sup> PIGGOTT 1952, 27.

<sup>36</sup> BENOIT 1959, 148.

<sup>37</sup> FRERE 1967, 303; HENIG 2005, 20.

from the canons of depicting this god in the art of classical antiquity. These are the images of Mercury as an elderly man with a beard, wearing a Gaulish cloak, with a staff in his hand<sup>38</sup>. The assortment of votive offerings discovered at the temple site in Uley (purse, coins, jewellery, caducei) show that there—just like in Rome—the main function of the god was to be the patron of commerce and financial gain, of merchants and travellers. In Northern Britain he was venerated as the patron of traders dealing in woollen goods. At the same time in Northern Britain and some regions of Gaul<sup>39</sup> Mercury was equated with the Celtic horned god of fertility whose cult had roots in religious beliefs existing in Northern Europe as early as in Bronze Age.

According to P.M. Duval, probably the most non-Roman feature of Mercury described by Caesar is that the god is called not only the patron of travelling and trade (which falls within the competence of the Roman Mercury as well) but also the inventor of all arts. This feature is neither of Greek nor of Roman origin, since in classical antiquity only two inventions were ever ascribed to Mercury — that of the lyre, which he fashioned from a tortoise shell, and of the balance for weighing and the measuring rod. In Duval's opinion, this role of Mercury as the inventor of arts was most pronounced when he was depicted together with a goddess. Most often this goddess is Rosmerta whose name contains the same root as one of Mercury's epithet, *Adsmertius*. *Rosmerta* means “she who provides (something)”, *Adsmertius* — “he who provides (something)”<sup>40</sup>. Not without interest is the case when Mercury on a relief, depicted with a beard according to local fashion, is placed beside Minerva who, in Caesar's words, supplied the first principles of arts and crafts in the world of Celtic gods.

Therefore, it is natural that the god who invented all these arts and crafts should become the most venerated deity of the Celts whose skills in various crafts were quite advanced. It is known that the Celts were excellent metalsmiths, accomplished shipbuilders and wainwrights, expert weavers and skilled carpenters. The progressive methods that diligent and inventive Gauls employed in cultivating the rich soils of their country also fell within the competence of Mercury as the patron of all peaceful activities. However, the Celts were also strongly committed to warfare and their supreme god had to be a war god. As has been demonstrated, the Mercury worshipped in Roman Gaul and Roman Britain had military functions as well, and thus was sometimes equated with Mars. Finally, the magical-chthonic functions of Mercury likened him to Hermes, the god of eschatological and mystical endeavour of humankind in the religion of the Ancient Mediterranean, which makes the syncretism typical of this god truly all-encompassing.

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<sup>38</sup> VRIES 1961, 44.

<sup>39</sup> BENOIT 1959, 154.

<sup>40</sup> DUVAL 1976, 70.

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