

Roots & Bones No. 3

The Celtic Roots of Witchcraft, Part 1

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What role did the Celts play in the development of Witchcraft and in the survival of Pagan beliefs and practices after the beginning of the Christian era?

The Celtic People and Their Religion

In the light of the romanticism surrounding the Celts in popular publications, many readers are left with a simplified or exaggerated account. The word “Celtic” itself is misleading, for as a shorthand term it creates a convenient though inaccurate perception of a unified culture instead of the diverse group of tribes that had similarities in social structure, languages, and spiritual expressions. “The Celts” were named by the Greeks, who called the barbarians of the north “Keltoi.” The “Keltoi” had no writing and their beliefs and knowledge were transmitted orally. All that we have to go on are the Roman and Greek texts, sometimes confirmed by archeology, and the medieval Christian literature of Ireland and Wales. Also at our disposal are the various folk tales encompassing the Faerie Faith in the British Isles. With only a fragment of material to shed any clues on the nature of Celtic Paganism, we must proceed carefully to illuminate this aspect of our roots.

From Ireland to the fringe of Asia Minor, the Celtic tribes roamed and settled. The names and deeds of their warrior elite were praised by the poets as the movement of horse and cattle rocked the earth beneath them. In Gaul, Britain, and Ireland, kings and chieftains consulted seers who were custodians of the tribal law and doctors of natural philosophy and medicine: Druids, as they were called. The Druids were annihilated by the imperial persecution during the Roman conquests of the first and second centuries CE. We can only speculate what religious delegates filled these empty niches.

The beliefs of the Celtic religion are obscure; only parts remain from different time periods over vast geographic areas, leaving only a glimpse of the faith these people of the mists left behind.

Water, Fire, and Earth

In deciphering the key elements of the Celtic religion, one sees the relationship woven between the natural and supernatural realms—spirits and deities live in the landscape where humanity may come into contact with them and commune. Trees, hilltops, rivers, lakes, and wells are the spaces where these observances were held.

Water was a numinous force of life and death. Wells and springs were centers for healing where pilgrims could come to make votive offerings to the resident goddess in order to procure her curative aid. Coventina and Sulis from Britain are two such spring guardians.

Rivers were believed to be goddesses to whom propitiatory gifts were given. Boann was a river spirit who gave the name to the river Boyne. Healing, regeneration, and fertility all play a part in the attributes found in the maternal deities associated with water. Today in Europe, rivers such as the Seine and Danube still bear the names of Celtic goddesses.

Very different in cosmology from modern pagans, the Celts saw the sun as female. Grian is a feminine noun in Gaelic for sun. Dia Greine was the Scottish name for the sun goddess. It

needs to be stated that Scotland was founded by Irish pirates call “Scotti” who raided and settled the coasts of “Pictland and Caledonia,” replaced the Brythonic Celtic languages of the area with Gaelic.

Sulis was also a sun goddess who combined terrestrial and celestial qualities. Anu, or Aine, was the sun deity of the County of Munster in Ireland. She later became known as the Fairy Queen in local tales and is reminiscent of many Celtic deities who survived into the Christian periods. Her name contains in its meaning delight, harmony, brightness, glow, radiance, and glory. Croc Aine is the hill sanctuary of Aine near the lake of Lough Gur thought to be sacred. Ceremonies were held on the Summer Solstice via hybrid Christianized practices, and villagers climbed Croc Aine bearing torches in her honor. Faeries were also believed to attend the procession. Aine was thought to be the wife of Manannan Mac Lir, the god whose bed she rose from at dawn.

Evidence to support a solar dimension in association with the cult of a Mother-Goddess can be found during the Romano-Gallic period in Brittany and Gaul. Clay “venus” figurines, portrayed naked with a solar wheel and circles adorning their bodies, were discovered in domestic settings, healing springs, shrines, and graves. The sun goddess aided in matters of health and fertility and gave protection after death.

Fire was a vital force and retained a primary importance in observing the holidays of the year. Fire ceremonies were enacted as a type of sympathetic magic to aid the sun on her daily and yearly course. Beltine (pronounced in Gaelic “beyaltinah”), meaning bright or goodly fire, is an example of one fire festival surviving in the British Isles as May Day. At Lughnasa, another important fire holiday, effigies were burned to commemorate the passing of the harvest and to ward off the woes of the year.

Brigid (pronounced Bree-ed) was Celtic goddess associated with fire and solar symbolism; i.e., the Celtic cross an archaic sun symbol, fire was lit in her honor on Imbolc, the Gaelic seasonal festival on February 1. Fire was seen as inspiration, the source of poetic arts, smithcraft, and the healing power of the home hearth where peat fires were burned constantly in honor of Brede. In Kildare Ireland, a fire was once kept aflame perpetually, in reverence for the Christian saint who replaced the former goddess as a cult figure in the countryside. Many traditions of Celtic origin including the sanctity of fire and its ritual use survived Christianity through assimilation and hybrid forms of vernacular practice among rural people.

Mountains and hills were also seen as an extension of the divine feminine. Many mountains in Ireland and Scotland bear the name “Cailleach,” meaning “of the old woman.” High ground linked humanity with the heavens. Many fire ceremonies took place on the hilltops where the sacred flames were lit to properly honor the seasonal tide. The hill of Tara, where Irish kings were inaugurated and performed the sacred marriage to the goddess of sovereignty who personified the land, and also the Paps of Anu in County Kerry Ireland, are both revered places.

Trees were particularly venerated in Celtic religions. They form bridges among the worlds: a tree's roots furrow deeply into the underworld; its trunk represents this world; and its branches spread high and wide, reaching heavenward. Deciduous trees represented the cyclical quality of life and symbolized continuity. Many tribes were named after certain trees; two examples from the Gaulish Celts are the Eburones, or the “Yew Tribe,” and the Lemovices, or the “People of the Elm.”

As commented on by classical writers from Rome, the Celts sometimes worshipped in groves, which in Ireland were called Fidnemed, and in Britain and Gaul, Nemeton. In the Fionn cycle from the Irish tales, Finn eats the Salmon of Knowledge who feeds on the nuts of the hazel trees surrounding the well of wisdom. Trees in general are sacred in

Irish myths, but especially believed to be holy and sacred sources of wisdom were the hazel, oak, yew, and ash. Honoring trees has survived into Christian times and well into the modern era, via the folk practices of dressing trees with ribbons on seasonal celebrations.

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