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Chapter · January 2004

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# “Celtic Shamanism”: Pagan Celtic Spirituality

Tina Fields, Ph.D.



Published in *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture* (Vol. 1, 469-477). Mariko Walter and Eva Fridman, Eds. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2005. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

The Celts in general and the druids in particular were averse to committing their own important lore to writing, and their formal memorized oral transmission was broken long ago. We therefore know very little about the pagan religions of the ancient Celtic tribes. In any case, it could not be strictly accurate to speak of ‘Celtic Shamanism’, as the words ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanic’ properly refer only to the Tungus people of Siberia. However, magico-religious elements which can be recognized as ‘shamanistic’ or reminiscent of shamanism, and which are furthermore common to many cultures, can indeed be found in the pagan Celtic spiritual traditions. Celts occupied a great deal of Europe by the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E., but only in the British Isles did any substantial body of literature survive. This entry will therefore mainly focus on that area.

We do know that the Celts had a complete system of magic, one which was highly respected by the ancient world. Diodorus and Clement of Alexandria said the Celtic priests of Gaul trained with Pythagorus in mystical philosophy. In the 1<sup>st</sup>-century A.D., Dio Chrysostom equated the Celtic Druids with the Persian Magi, Indian Brahmins, and Egyptian priests.

What we currently know about Celtic spirituality and magical practice is based on Greek and Roman descriptions, a few works by the early Celts themselves (mainly from Wales, Ireland, and Scotland), folksongs and fairy tales, and a great deal of imaginative invention. These sources prove troublesome due to their limitations. The Greek and Roman texts are mainly observations by invading armies from political encounters with the tribes of southern Gaul. Folktales may become changed by each storyteller. Some details of 'Celtic spirituality' as represented in numerous contemporary popular books were originally recovered through analepsis (spontaneous ancestral memory) by more modern writers such as Iolo Morgannwg and Robert Graves. Finally, the historical story cycles and poetry originating with the Celts were recorded years later by Christian monks, who may well have felt hostility towards - or at least discomfort with - the pagan worldview.

Despite these difficulties, however, shamanistic elements can be easily discerned in the sources we have. These elements include descriptions of practitioners and patterns of magical initiation; magical practices such as spiritual healing, harming, and warfare; uncanny abilities such as enchantment, soul flight, distance viewing, shapeshifting, animal transmogrification, and understanding the speech of birds and animals; the employment of wise judgment through insights gained by trance, divination, and prophesy; the use of magical tools; the experience of deep mystical inspiration and understanding; and a pervasive theme of deep relational connection to all beings and the processes which tie them together.

### **Celtic Magic and Spirituality**

Pagan Celtic spirituality perceived that the supernatural otherworlds lie so close to this one that the borders often cross, and that the magical numinous was present in every aspect of their lives and surroundings. Nature was keenly observed by the pagan Celts to obtain understanding of her deepest secrets in both the physical and metaphysical sense, without the aspect of torture, violence, penetration or dismemberment in order to get to it that we find in later western inquiries.

The land itself was considered animate and conscious, quite aware of human activity but of course quite 'other' in its needs and nature. The ceremony for investing a new Ard Ri or Irish High King involved marriage of mystical dimensions with the land as goddess, thus binding the people to the place through kinship. Should this relationship be betrayed – for example, through disrespectful tribal behavior towards the land, trees, water, etc., or lack of personal honor in such qualities as generosity, bravery, or beauty – he could no longer serve as king.

Folk stories collected between the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries abound in which nothing is merely as it seems to the physical eye. Woods, wells, rivers, and trees all were sacred places that might house gateways into the otherworld, both glorious and dangerous. On an ordinary walk home, a person might fall into a fairy mound and spend years there which feel like mere hours. Stones speak; a stranger or a bird might be God in disguise; music has the power to kill or maim. The greatest knowledge in the world is held by a fish. The fairies or 'good folk,' leprechauns, and brownies are neighbors; and the latter, if treated well, might do your housework.

There is an intense practicality to the Celtic mystical worldview. Things tend to go better in faery encounters for those who are generous with their labor, time, and material goods, and for good musicians. Irish scholar Jeffrey Gantz (1981, 1) observes that all Celtic art is characterized by a "tension between reality and fantasy." It is "romantic, idealistic, stylized and yet vividly, even appallingly, concrete." Further, there are no distinctions made between the transcendent and the immanent in their potential for holding divine wonders. These tales clearly suggest a shamanistic worldview, with no separation between the physical and the metaphysical aspects of life.

We can turn to indigenous Celtic languages for clues to their speakers' thoughts about their magical arts. The noun used to describe a spell or spoken word of magic in both Scots and Irish Gaelic is bricht, which is related to the Icelandic bragr, 'poetry or magical rhyme'. The word eolas, 'knowledge', is used to describe magical ability. And a Gaelic term for any sort of sorcery or magical act is druidheachd. From these words, we can glean that Celtic magic was practiced by Druids, that 'knowledge' implied something much more than factual data, and that poetic inspiration/expression through the voice was commonly employed as a magical tool.

## **Pre-Celtic Works**

It is easy for a casual observer to confuse Celtic with pre-Celtic artifacts. Although the druids may have used the great megaliths such as Stonehenge, Dol, and Carnac, and the tumuli at Newgrange and Gavr'inis, they did not build them. Standing stones were the work of peoples who inhabited these regions long before the first Iron Age Celts arrived around 500 B.C.E.

However, if we take the patterns of later immigrations as an example, some pre-Celtic spiritual knowledge may have been passed down to, or appropriated by, subsequently arriving peoples. The Irish Book of Invasions describes a much later wave of 'indigenous druids' struggling with a newer tribe's chief druid over the right to kindle a fire that was ceremonially important to both.

Many prehistoric sites are found lined up in rows. Five or more sites in a row are known as a 'ley,' and are believed by some to mark a natural earth meridian or channel of energy, similar to the ch'i-filled 'dragon currents' the Chinese recognize in feng shui. Modern mappers of these pathways, or 'ley hunters,' believe that certain special places where two or more ley lines cross are full of power which can be drawn upon in magical practice. Some researchers speculate that one such line colloquially known as the 'Old Straight Track' was a road map to be used from the air during soul flight. Others believe that the leys reflect zodiacal patterns, as elements of passage-grave construction posit strong evidence that recurring astronomical phenomena were emphasized in the spiritual practices of Bronze Age Ireland and Britain. A third hypothesis is that the sites lie over hidden underground springs of water, and that the particular spiral flow of these aquastats may serve as a healing force. Spirals do appear with extreme frequency in early Celtic art.

## **Spiritual Practitioners**

The Roman historian Strabo lists three classes of learned Gaulish spiritual practitioners. The druids are described as philosopher/theologians concerned with both the immortality of the soul and with natural phenomena. Bards were poets, storytellers, musicians and singers who chanted histories, eulogies and satires. And manteis or vates were naturalists and experts in divination through auguries and sacrifices.

Before the first millennium B.C.E., however, all of these abilities were attributed to druids, as the separation between these specialized functions was not so absolute. For

example, in the Tain bo Cuailnge it is noted that the bards or 'sweet-mouthed harpers' of Cain Bile were also druids of great knowledge. And in the Welsh tale of Gwion Bach as told in the Mabinogion, the witch Cerridwen is described as being a master of all three of the great arts: magic (the province of the druidic class overall), enchantment (a later specialty of bards), and divination (assigned to the manteis). Her facility in all three sub-branches of learned spiritual practice points to the fluidity of those categories. Some speculate that the separation into specialized functions occurred for political reasons involving the overall strength of the druidic class.

Despite the common portrayal of a druid with a flowing white beard, references to both male and female adepts can be found. Women were accepted in pagan Celtic cultures as military leaders, as queens in their own right, and as magical practitioners. Tradition refers to 'sunset isles of women' where groups of female druids lived apart from their families for parts of a year. Examples include the Ile de Sein off the coast of Brittany where a sisterhood of nine miracle-working healers worked, and the Isle of Avalon, which gained fame in the Arthurian saga as a training ground for sorceresses and healers.

Most scholars today agree with Pliny the Elder, who regarded the Old Irish name druid as originating with the Greek word for oak-tree, drus, combined with the Indo-European root word wid-, to know (Piggott 1985, 103). Druids held their spiritual ceremonies in open groves of oak, preferring these natural cathedrals to any human-built structure. Place names involving the Gallo-Britonic word nemeton, which means both a clearing in a wood and shrine/sanctuary, were very likely once the sites of druidic practice and education.

At one time, a network of formal schools for generations of druids crossed the Celtic lands, the most important of which was located on the Isle of Mona (modern Anglesey). According to Julius Caesar, a druidic education – which could easily take twenty years – encompassed science, law, practical religion, philosophy, and history. Because writing was mistrusted for storage and transmission of important information, all of this had to be memorized. Details of such education have unfortunately been lost, and we do not know how, or if, magical initiation was formally conferred.

Instead, we repeatedly find very human tales of somebody making an innocent blunder which turns out to have tremendous magical repercussions. The ordinary and the numinous sides of the world are so close together that they can shift places in a moment, and one small deed can catalyze great change. In the biographical tales of both the Welsh chief bard/seer

Taliesin and the Irish tribal leader/warrior chief Fionn MacCumhaill, shamanistic initiation was not sought but came upon the recipient through terrifying serendipitous accident. Very little in the Celtic magical world seems to take place as planned through human volition.

### **Druidic and Bardic Powers of Enchantment**

Inspired poetry, regarded as a vital skill of the pagan Celtic seer, fits in with the shamanistic tenet that one must bring back any information gained from the Otherworlds to benefit the people. One challenge to this is that visions wildly pouring forth while in deep trance can easily be forgotten during the return to ordinary waking consciousness. They are much more likely to be retained and recalled for later use when placed in some sort of pattern which the cognitive mind can hold onto. Through the uses of rhyme, alliteration, meter, repetition and tune to this end, the crafts of music and poetry became intimately connected with magical practice and otherworldly power and knowledge in the Celtic world.

Besides voicing deep and otherwise hidden wisdom gained while in an altered state, bards used sound to harm, heal, and alter moods and probability. Poetry and music were not considered beaux-arts to the pagan Celts, but tools of raw magical power. Scorching satirical poetry known as the briarmon smetrach was intended to 'puncture' and to publicly destroy reputations. Well-aimed, the poetic form known as glam dicin was used to drive out rats and to disfigure or even kill an opponent. The Irish cattle-rustling epic Tain bo Cualgne describes the bardic warfare employed by Queen Medb against her enemy Fer Diad:

Then Medb sent the Druids and satirists and harsh bards for Fer Diad, that they might make against him three satires to stay him and three lampoons, and that they might raise on his face three blisters, shame, blemish and disgrace, so that he might die before the end of nine days if he did not succumb at once (Kinsella 1969).

Bardic incantations could also be used to end hostilities Diodorus Siculus observed this magical use of sound in the late 1<sup>st</sup>-century B.C.E.

Frequently when armies confront one another in line of battle with swords drawn and spears thrust forward, these men intervene and cause them to stop, just as though they were holding some wild animal spellbound with their chanting. (Diodorus Siculus 31, 2-5, as cited in Ireland, p. 181).

Tacitus describes the effect of this weaving of enchantment against Roman invaders on the Isle of Mona in 60 A.D.:

On the shore stood the opposing army with its dense array of armed warriors, while between the ranks dashed women in black attire round the Druids, lifting up their

hands to heaven and pouring forth dreadful imprecations, scared our soldiers by the unfamiliar sight so that, as if their limbs were paralysed, they stood motionless and exposed to wounds. (Tacitus, Annals XIV, 30)

Finally, bardic powers could also be used to heal – as when a master harper restored speech to the dumb prince Maon through his music. The small harp was often employed by bards as a magical tool. Part of the Celtic harper's toolkit was working knowledge of the Adbhan Trireach or 'Three Noble Strains,' attributed to the chants for childbirth sung by the god/spirit Dagda's harp Uaithne. Each Strain was not only entertainment but a form of enchantment: Sorrow- or Lament-Strain, which could reduce listeners to tears; Joy-Strain, which could turn tears to laughter; and Sleep-Strain, which could soothe listeners' hearts into deep sleep. Gaining songs of power from spirits is a common element occurring in many shamanistic cultures.

### **Shapeshifting, Glamour, and Invisibility**

Trickery achieved through enchantment, or the shifting of seeming reality, is a theme commonly found in literature detailing observations about indigenous magical practitioners of the Americas. It is also replete throughout Irish texts and British/Gaulish Arthurian literature.

The magical manipulation of weather by druids appears prominently in Irish sagas, often employed as one weapon in the arsenal for ordinary tribal warfare. Strong winds and tempests were raised by the Tuatha de Danaan people to keep the first Milesian invaders from landing on shore, and the druid Mog Ruath sent storm-spells and magic fire against King Cormac and his druids in order to drive them out of the area. Weather could also be called up in order to conceal people or to get their enemies lost and confused. Heavy snowfalls, thick mists, dense fog, thundershowers, and sudden darkness were all employed.

Another commonly found druidic practice is the manipulation of events through magical impersonation. For example, the Irish warrior Cuchulainn was once deceived by a sorceress who took the form of a trusted lady in order to get near him and goad him onto the field of battle. Sexual themes are quite common. In the Arthurian cycle, the wizard Merlin enchanted Uther Pendragon so that he seemed to be the husband of Igraine so that she would gladly sleep with him. Merlin knew through augury that this mating would conceive the child who would later become King Arthur. One tool for accomplishing such shapeshifting was the spell known as fith-fath, used to transform one object into another and also to confer



invisibility. Remnants of this are still with us in the shamanistic childrens' story of Jack and the Beanstalk: "Fee-fi-fo-fum."

A classic motif in Irish folktales is the nonhuman Fair Folk 'casting glamour' upon an unwitting passer-by, who thinks he is being invited into a grand home to enjoy a fabulous feast, a gift of gold, and a night of love with a beautiful woman. Instead, in the morning when he wakes, he finds himself lying in an open field with the dew on his coat and a pocketful of yellow leaves, holding a rotting corpse in his arms. Such tales could be seen as illustrating spontaneous and shamanistic soul flight with otherworldly aspects of travel, uncanny beauties and terrors, encounters with strange beings, the element of later finding one's body elsewhere, and great time discrepancies.

### **Animal Transmogrification**

Ties with other animals are extremely strong in ancient Celtic tradition. The deepest wisdom in the world is held by the ancient 'Salmon of Knowledge'. The appearance of crows forewarns the coming of the war goddesses Morrigan or Badbh. Gwyrhryr 'Interpreter of Tongues' exhibits the ability to communicate with wild animals.

We further find this shamanistic motif of mediating between human and other animal forms not only by observing them from the outside, but by transforming into them. The druid Uath was said to change himself into any form he wished. In a conversation with the ancient Hawk of Achill, Fintan describes his history of transformations into an eagle, a hawk, and a salmon. And instead of dying, Tuan MacCairell repeatedly finds himself alive and vibrant in a new young animal form. In the last days of his final human life, he relates the entire history of Ireland as witnessed through his many different eyes, most of them non-human, to the Milesian invaders.

These mystical biographies, and those of the bards Taliesin pen Beirdd, Oisín, and Amergin, comprise some of the most powerful examples of shamanistic elements in the Celtic world. Each changed into animals and other forms (waves, winds, a spear, a seed...), lived significant amounts of time in each form, then came back to the people with useful knowledge gleaned from their time spent in non-ordinary reality. Through dismemberment of the ordinary human form, the poet-seer gets to understand divine nature through many lenses, learns to wield natural forces, and becomes unafraid of death.

If we can take the oldest extant mythological cycles as evidence of worldview, practitioners were also considered to be able to change the shapes of others. The story of the Children of Lir describes their cruel transformation into swans by their jealous and magically adept stepmother. Beings in the Welsh Mabinogion such as the hunted boar Twrc Trwyth who was once a human king, and the lady Blodeuwedd who is actually an enchanted owl combined with flowers, were similarly changed without consent.

The Celts also live closely with beings who belong to both the human and other-than-human realms. Legends of seal-people or selchies abound in the outer islands such as the Hebrides. It is said that at certain times of the year such as the Solstices, these seals shed their skins and go dancing on the rocks as human beings. Some of them are captured or captivated by "real" humans and mate with them. There are families in these islands who deem themselves to be part seal-blood, from just such pairings. One benefit of this lineage is that these people seem to have better luck with the fishing and the waves: they have an intuitive "knowing" of where the fish will be, or when and how a storm will come. Their relatives below will also help them by herding fish towards their boats. Selchie legends comprise one of the most palpable variations of the shamanistic theme of transformation: both the human and seal people learn of another perspective, and mediate between the worlds of land and sea, by literally and metaphorically living in the other's skin.

A personal connection through lineage could also determine behavior. Conary was forbidden to hunt birds since his father came to his mother Messbuachalla through the window as a great bird, who threw off his plumage to make love to her. Ossian was forbidden to eat venison, as his mother Saar gave birth to him while transformed into deer-shape. Cuchulainn, whose name literally means the 'Hound of Culainn', was under a geis or tabu against eating dogflesh.

Such relational protection is a common thread in Irish tales, and may connect back to earlier tribal totems. There is clearly a tie with other animals that far exceeds romantic sentimentality or meat-thinking: this is an animistic view about one's relatives. Early Celtic tribes were named after these connections: Epidii (Horse People), Cornavii (People of the Horn), Brannovices (Raven Clan), Taurisci (Bull Folk). In early Celtic culture, the shamanistic elements do not generally center around individual human psychology as they tend to in modern neo-shamanism; instead, they illustrate the tribal relational stance with a magical, completely alive and sentient, world of nonhuman and spirit equals.

## **Mantic Powers of Divination & Soul Flight**

Divination and prophesy were integral parts of the pagan Celtic druids' or manteis' repertoire. They divined to see deeply or travel into the 'other nature' of seemingly ordinary things. This could be done through ecstatic poetic trance, observation of natural forces for correspondences, or soul flight to other realms.

Giraldus Cambrensis describes the Welsh magical poetry specialists known as awenyddion ('people inspired') going into deep ecstatic inspirational trance with the body in frenzied paroxysms, chanting wildly. Cambrensis says that when the information came upon them, they roared mightily and that the listeners had to pick out the useful bits from the mass of unintelligible gibberish around it. Both the Welsh awenyddion and the Irish poet/seers had to be violently shaken awake after their forays into this other state of consciousness. Cambrensis reports that the awenyddion felt as though they had sweet milk, honey, or writing poured onto their lips from the spirits.

The greatest-known magical practitioner from the Arthurian saga, the wizard Merlin, was so accustomed to soul journeys into non-ordinary realms where space and time are different that he was reputed to 'live backwards in time'. It is said that he could prophesy easily because for him, this was not a matter of divination but of simply remembering the future.

Celtic prophesy was undertaken for practical purposes. In Irish sagas, we find the druids or manteis called upon to augur whether a particular day is auspicious for some important undertaking, such as births or battles. Mothers would sometimes artificially hold off delivery of their babies until a day the druids found would foster greatness in the child. The Irish druid Cathbad prophesied that whoever would take up arms on a particular day would have a short life with eternal fame. The young boy Cuchulainn seized the moment, and later went on to become hero of an entire cycle of Irish sagas.

The druids may have used a detailed divinatory calendar. Bronze calendar fragments found at Coligny in France form the oldest extensive document in a Celtic language, having been dated between the late first century B.C.E. to the early first century C.E.. Thought to be a product of the Gaulish druids, it uses Roman lettering but its content is distinctly different from the Roman calendar. Each month in it is marked by either the abbreviations MAT (good) or ANM (not good). Similar methods were used in Babylonian and Jewish calendrics, and can still be found today in Indonesia, where healer/seers and even everyday folk use them to plan events around particular days and even certain hours, due to their attributed characteristics.

## **Divination through Nature**

Druids and manteis observed the patterns in nature for clues to the patterns surrounding human events. Fedelm in the Tain practiced crystal-gazing. Scottish Highland seers discovered meaning by throwing the scapula bones of sheep. The 1st-century historian Strabo reported that periodically, in earlier times, a particularly chosen human being was stabbed in the back with a dagger, to foretell the future from his convulsions. Smoke rising from a fire, the placement of the stars, the auspiciousness (or not) of particular days and hours, the placement and shapes of clouds - all could be looked to for advice. Asking non-human beings and the spirits of the beloved dead for help is, of course, a classic aspect of shamanic inspiration and practice.

Animal allies figured especially prominently in pagan Celtic divination. Parts of the bull could be eaten or worn to invoke divinatory aid. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E., the Iceni warrior queen Boadicea used a hare for foretelling and to help ensure her tribe's victory against the invading Romans. The direction in which the hare ran off foretold to the assembled people whether or not the battle would go well. Many animals and birds were watched closely for clues, for it was deemed quite possible that some were actually humans or deities temporarily taking on that form.

Cave paintings by Bronze & Iron Age Celts which portray ravens speaking to humans were found in the Camonica Valley of northern Italy. Augury by ravens appears commonly in the British Isles. The system is remarkably like that found in contemporary Tibet. Ravens are watched for omens of luck, approaching visitors, and the like. Oral poetry collected in the 19th century Carmina Gadelica still includes tales in which approaching ravens are taken as an omen of impending death. Observation of both the raven and wren involved their various cries, direction flying, and bodily position in the sky relative to the questioner. Diodorus Siculus observed that the early Christian saint Columba differed from his Druidic teachers in that he paid no heed to the voices of birds. The Welsh word for wren is drui-en, which means 'druid bird,' clearly alluding to its role as magical helper.

## **Journeys into the Otherworld**

The definitive shamanistic act in many cultures is 'soul flight.' The shaman deliberately goes into trance, her soul temporarily leaving her body, in order to gain deeper knowledge and understanding. The Celtic literature which has been translated to date describes other lands

which are clearly not part of ordinary reality, seeing at a distance through both space and time, and details of methods used to leave the body.

The Vision of Rhonabwy describes seeking inspiration by going alone to a remote place and wrapping oneself up in a bull's hide at night. The Gaelic name for such a bull-hide wrap was taghairm, which literally means 'an echo,' a response from a distance - in this case, perhaps from the otherworld. Lacking bull-hide cloaks, later generations similarly wrapped their plaids about their heads to cover their eyes in the dark, in order to see better. The imbas-forosnai or 'divination by holding the cheeks' involved the seer eating the flesh of a white bull and then going to sleep holding onto his cheeks, with four druids continually chanting over him. In one imbas-forosnai, the dreamer had a vision of the man who was to be made king. He saw where the man was and what he was doing at that exact moment. This seems to be an example of distance viewing and prophesy, through the mechanism of soul-flight.

The historical/mythological cycles are richly embellished with episodes of shamanistic trance. A scene in the Red Branch cycle describes the druid MacRuith rising up with the fire into the air of the skies, dressed in his magical garb of a bullhide cloak and enchennach or bird-dress, and soaring above the heads of the opposing army to scout their position. A tugen or feathered cloak has also been mentioned as worn by certain Irish poet/seers. The wearing of feathers is common in many peoples' shamanistic costumes intended to further soul flight, spiritual power, and magical insight or inspiration.

Tales involving travel into non-ordinary realms abound in the British Isles, such as Pwyll's meeting with Arawn in the underworld; the surreal voyages of Brendan, Peredur, and Maelduin; Ossian's return from Tir na n'Og after spending three centuries there; and Lancelot's crossing of the Sword Bridge in search of the abducted Guinevere. Other classic shamanistic elements in the latter include Lancelot's forgetting who he is and being confused as to whether he is alive or dead, his deliberate removal of his armor to cross the swords and his subsequently being cut up by them, and finally, the sudden disappearance of the fearsome leonine guardians he'd perceived guarding the far banks.

Shamanistic portals to other realms appear in Celtic tradition as they do in other cultures. Lancelot's 'sword bridge' is a good example of an object which holds meaning in both ordinary and non-ordinary reality, and can serve as a literal bridge between the two. Descriptions of narrow bridges which initially defy the promised passage to a magical place also recur in Irish literature.

Trees, which appear worldwide in shamanistic practices as a means of reaching other spiritual realms, are of central importance to druidic magical practice. Pliny observed that the druids “perform no rites without the foliage of the oak,” and that they revere the mistletoe because “anything growing on oaks ... is a sign that the tree has been chosen by the god himself.” (Pliny, *Natural History XVI*, 249-251, quoted in Ireland, p.183). Perhaps the presence of the mistletoe designated a particular tree as a gateway into the gods’ realms.

Certain hills in the British Isles are considered to be hollow inside, containing or leading to nonordinary realms called ‘Faerie.’ Such realms have their own rules of time and space, their own unique weather patterns and natural laws. The perception that both space and time work differently in non-ordinary reality is well documented cross-culturally. As in the case of Thomas the Rhymer, a traveler returning home from a journey of a day or two spent in the hollow hills of Faerie can find that in this reality, years have passed: their house has gone to rot, loved ones seen a few days ago as children have now long been dead, and nobody is left who knows him. In the Irish tale of Oisín who spent years in the ‘Land of Youth,’ the journeyer's body has also been preserved in its original youthful state, but upon touching the mortal ground of this world, it suddenly ages to catch up with the years here, or even turns to dust.

Folk stories of adventures in Faerie give clues to avoiding dangers when journeying to the Otherworlds or accidentally coming upon spirits in this world. One should behave as befits a good guest: not stealing objects found in their homes; not intruding upon private dances or ceremonies; not playing bad music at their parties. It’s best to avoid accepting food or drink in the Otherworld, as this could mean becoming their prisoner. The Queen of Faerie has a reputation for stealing away mortals she finds beautiful, interesting, or useful. Brave attempts to retrieve beloved human souls from this thief involve trials by fire, shapeshifting terrors, riddles and other trickery, and the threat of dismemberment – all classic shamanistic elements.

Besides trees and hills, the Irish were also known to view certain waterways as entry portals to the Otherworlds. The Dinnshenchas describe many rivers being under the watchful care of particular female spirits or deities. Thermal springs in modern Buxton were once called Aquae Arnemetiae; the connection with the Brythonic word nemeton showing that these waters were once an important site of Druidic practice. Evans-Wentz recorded that the faerie realms could be reached by entering through a well:

It was by passing under the waters of a well that the S'dh, that is, the abode of the spirits called Sdhe, in the tumulus or natural hill, as the case might be, was reached (Evans-Wentz 1911, 431).

Wells were widely known to be sacred places, each inhabited by - or being itself - a spirit. Many Christian shrines found in Celtic lands today, including the great cathedral of Chartres, were built on the sites of druidic wells.

### **Influence on Celtic Christianity**

Christianity entering the Celtic lands became heavily informed by the animistic spirituality and Druidic practices which preceded it.

Some argue that Christianity came in so easily because the tenets of Christ were the same as those already held by the Druids. Themes common to both Druidry and Christendom include the saints' exhibition of healing abilities, the building of most churches over wells and facing east to greet the sun, the creation of monastic centers of learning, and the long teacher-student relationship in these monasteries. Monkish manuscripts like the exquisite illuminated gospels of Echternach and Durrow, which portray the four great Evangelists as animals (a bull, a lion, an eagle, and a man), reflect a deep syncretic correspondence between Ezekiel's Biblical vision and Irish animism.

Druidism also left its unique mark on the incoming religion. Some of the earliest Irish Christian saints, such as the well-loved warrior/monk Columba, were trained by Druids in magical practice. Druidic themes incorporated into the Celtic Christian Church include the sense of filial intimacy between humans, other beings, nature, and the Divine; the emphasis on the Trinity, the uses of poetry and song, the zoomorphic and knotwork illustrations on their illuminated scrolls, the snakes found curling on the end of early croziers, and a sense of the sacred as immanent in all things. A lingering animistic sensibility can be seen in the distinctly non-Christian ornamentation found on many old Irish churches. These include images of the 'Green Man', whose beard and hair are made up of rich leafy foliage, and the 'Sheela-na-Gig', a grinning, naked, bald female figure gleefully holding open her huge vulva. Finally, the people have a pragmatic relationship with Jesus, God, Mary, the Holy Spirit, the angels, and the saints; and turn to them for practical aid with problems in their lives, just as they had done with previously known spirits.

As a result of this syncretism, Celtic Christianity differed significantly from the forms found in Rome and other places on the mainland. Ireland in particular remains unique, as it was the only part of the Celtic world which was never invaded by the Roman Empire.

### **Modern Movements**

Many people across Europe and America still perform a vestige of pagan Celtic ritual every year through the celebration of Hallowe'en. The autumn fire-festival Samhain was considered a time when the veils between the worlds are thinner than usual, and spirits, including those of the dead, could move freely amongst the living.

The principles of modern Druidism were set down in the early 1700s, counting amongst its disciples one William Blake. It was then that groups of practitioners began the work of unearthing and reconstructing the tenets of Druidic practices and spirituality. These new groups, known as 'groves,' conferred a romanticist tinge to Druidry which can still be seen today.

Following in their footsteps, many contemporary Pagan, Wiccan and Celtic Reconstructionist groups are experimenting with a creative fusion of ancient and modern elements to create a spirituality that can work for people today. These vary widely in depth, intent, and authenticity; with creative output ranging from tarot decks with a Celtic slant to research into the possible uses of standing stones. Some serious ritual groups exhort learning Gaelic languages and planting trees as an integral part of their spiritual practice.

The Gaelic traits of 'high imagination' and of conscious relationship with the spirit and non-human worlds persist in these movements. Like the druids before them, many practitioners are now taking on the vital responsibility of serving as ecological mediators and spokespeople. As such, they are fulfilling a primary role of shamanic practitioners worldwide – to help their people, and the other-than-human world they depend upon and are kin to, continue to live.

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**Illustration** -- *An inner plate of the Gundestrup Cauldron, located at the National Museum in Copenhagen. This image shows "Cernunnos", a shapeshifting human male figure who sports antlers and holds a serpent and a torc in his hands.*