

CELTIC MYTHOLOGY

Who were the Celts?

Megalithic Peoples, bronze-age builders of dolmens and cromlechs (stone circles) entered Europe through Spain. "Solar boat" motifs (including at Newgrange) suggest an origin in Egypt

1200 B.C. Lowland Celts (farmers, artisans, etc.) entered Gaul (central Europe) from the Danube area. Peacefully settled in between Megalithic settlements

750 - 400 B.C. Hallstatt Culture -- necropolis discovered near Salzburg Austria in 1846 contained Baltic amber, Oriental gold leaf, Phoenician glass

La Tene Culture -- site discovered at northeast end of Lac Neuchatel in 1868. Pioneer work in enameled bronze, naturalistic themes based on Greek -- curves and spirals

500 B.C. Mountain Celts (warriors, scholars, military aristocracy) crossed the Rhine from the Balkans and Carpathians. Conquered Spain from the Carthaginians, breaking their monopoly on the tin trade from Britain, and silver trade from Spain. Secured route to British Isles through France.

400 B.C. Celts at height of power; conquer Northern Italy from Etruscans

391 B.C. First encounter Romans at battle of Clusium; the Romans' diplomatic mistreatment of them leads to:

390 B.C. Sack of Rome. Celts rule the city for a year.

334 B.C. Alexander the Great makes compact with Ionian Celts to hold Greece while he sets off on military campaign.

300 B.C. Celts begin to lose political cohesion and common purpose. First mention of Germans, likely a subject people. Massacred by Romans in battles in 295 and 283.

273 B.C. Celts turn against their old allies, the Greeks, and sack the shrine at Delphi.

Celts settle in Asia Minor (Galatia), where a state survives until approx 300 C.E.

Gradual in-fighting, eventually only Gaul and the British Isles remained, by the beginning of the Christian Era had fallen under Roman domination.

Ireland maintained independence until 1200-1400 C.E.

Irish Invasion Myths:

Indigenous people were the Fomorians; according to the myth, these were the embodiment of evil; huge, malformed, violent and cruel.

Ireland was subsequently invaded by:

1. Partholarians who arrived from the West (the Land of the Living, i.e. the Happy Dead) at Beltane. They changed the physical face of Ireland, and drove the Fomorians to the seas, to a life of piracy, oppression, and taxation. Eventually the Partholarians died of pestilence, except for Tuan mac Carell, who survived each of the following invasions by subsequent transformations as a deer, a boar, an eagle, and a salmon, which was eaten by Carell's wife. Tuan was reborn as a human, and told his tale to Christian monks.

2. Nemedians. Decimated by plague, the survivors were tyrannized by the Fomorians. Each Samhain, they had to give up 2/3 of the children born in the last year, and 2/3 of their corn and milk. The Nemedians revolted by attacking a Fomorian stronghold at Tory Island, and were

massacred. By later accounts, only 30 survived, making up three families. One group sailed to Britain, the others figured in the following two invasions.

3. Firbolgs "Men of the Bags" arrived at Lammas. They had escaped Greek captivity by making boats from leather bags they used to carry soil. Depicted as dull and ignorant in relation to:

4. Tuatha de Danaan: "People of the God whose mother is Dana" arrived on a cloud, bringing with them the Four Treasures: The Spear of Lugh from the city of Gorias (associated with Leinster, East); the Sword of Nuada from Fin(d)ias (associated with Munster, South); the Cauldron of the Dagda from Muriias (associated with Connacht, West); and the Lia Fail, "the stone of destiny" from Falias (associated with Ulster, North). The Danaans are generally believed to be gods, embodying science, poetry, art, and Light.

The Firbolgs and the Danaans could not agree to divide Ireland between them, leading to the first Battle of Moytura (Mag Tuireadh, Plain of the Towers). Firbolgs were defeated, and allotted Connacht.

5. Milesians "sons of Miled" (who also arrived from "Spain" at Beltane), humans led by the poet/Druid Amergin. The Milesians may be a Christian era addition to the myth, to replace the godlike Danaans with humans. The Danaans were eventually defeated, and separated their "spiritual" Ireland from the physical one. They retreated to the sidhe, the hollow hills; to Tir na Nog, the Land of Youth; to Mag Mell, the field of happiness, in the islands in the west; and Tir fo Thuinn, the land beneath the sea.

Fomorians:

BALOR of the Evil Eye: A one-eyed giant, his gaze could kill his enemies like a thunderbolt, and his eyelid was so large it took men with ropes and pulleys to lift it. A shapechanger. Killed by Lugh, his grandson.

Danaans (and a few others):

THE DAGDA: "The Good God"; father and head of the Tuatha de Danaan. A giant with a vast appetite, a magician, musician, and mighty warrior. Possessed a cauldron named Undry which could feed many. Could kill nine men at once or restore them to life. When the Danaans passed following their defeat by the Milesians, he portioned out spiritual Ireland among them. His wife was Boann, the river Boyne; he also associated with the Morrigan.

DANA/DANU: Mother goddess; a goddess of fertility and blessing. Daughter of the Dagda. Identical to Brigit/Brigid/ Brigantia, goddess of poetry, healing, and smithcraft, who is depicted as a triple goddess, and associated with Imbolg.

AIFA: The greatest warrior woman in the world, rival of Skatha. Tricked and defeated by Cuchulain, they later became lovers.

AINE: Fertility goddess, patroness of Munster; inspired mortals to passion. Worshipped at midsummer. Was raped by a king of Munster, and killed him with her arts. Once planted all Knockainey with peas in a single night.

ANGUS OG/AENGUS MAC OG: "the Young". God of fertility; son of the Dagda. Had a palace at Newgrange, on the Boyne. Four birds, his kisses in physical form, flew about his head; their singing brought love into the hearts of youths and maidens.

BRICCRIU OF THE POISONED TONGUE: A lord of Ulster; a trickster who enjoyed fomenting strife. Hosted a banquet for the great heroes Cuchulain, Connall of the Victories, and Laery the Triumphant, setting them (and their wives) against themselves to determine the championship of Erin. Cuchulain won each contest, yet Bricriu denied each victory, until Cu Roi settled it. Fomented similar trouble on the occasion of the carving of mac Datho's boar.

CUCHULAIN/CU CHULAIND/CU CHULAINN: "The hound of Cullan". Son of Lugh; greatest hero in Irish legend. Ordinarily slight, but with a terrifying berserker aspect when the battle-frenzy was upon him. Would sometimes leave the site of a battle to go womanizing.

DIANCECHT: Healer, made the silver hand for Nuada. His son, Miach, surpassed him by fashioning a real hand, enabling Nuada to rule as king.

CU ROI: King of Munster; in the tale of Bricriu's Feast; he confirms Cuchulain's championship when the other contenders shy from his "beheading game". Later killed by Cuchulain when Cu Roi's wife, Blandid, lusted after him. His son, Lugaid, ultimately killed Cuchulain.

GOBAN/GOIBNIU: Smith god, armourer and artificer. Three blows of his hammer could make a sword or spear. With Credne the artificer and Luchta the carpenter, made weapons for Danaans at Second Battle of Moytura against Fomorians.

LUGH Lamfada ("of the Long Arm"): Sun god of the Danaans. Grandson of Balor, and father of Cuchulain. Fostered by Goban as a child. Master of all arts, called Ildanach "all-craftsman". Possessed a living, fiery spear. By killing Balor, secured the victory of Light over Darkness.

MACHA: Danaan demi-goddess; queen of Ulster. In her warrior aspect, was "red all over. terrible and hideous as war itself, but with bright and flashing eyes". With the spearpoint of her brooch, she marked out the perimeter of Emain Macha. In another version, in her aspect of mother-goddess, she became the object of a boast made by one of her husbands, and forced to run a race against a pair of horses near the end of her pregnancy. She won, delivered a pair of twins, and as she died, cursed the men of Ulster for nine generations to suffer the pains of childbirth at their time of greatest need.

MAEVE/MAEV/MEDB: Human queen of Connacht, where she reigned for 88 years. Tall, blonde, strong-willed, promiscuous, and a fierce warrior.. Her desire to steal the Brown Bull of Cuailgne (Cooley) from Ulster, and the resulting war, forms the basis of Tain Bo Culaigne, "The Cattle Raid of Culaigne", the greatest of Irish Celtic epics.

MANANAN: God of the sea, son of Lir (probably an older sea god). Since the Land of Youth was said to lie beneath the sea, he was also a psychopomp. Master of tricks and illusions, possessed a ship which obeyed the thoughts of those sailing it without oar or sail, a horse that could run on sea or land, and a sword that could penetrate all armour. His magical pigs could be eaten in the evening, and be whole again the next day. Wore a many-coloured cloak; the Isle of Man was his throne. His wife was Fand, the Pearl of Beauty (she, too, lusted after Cuchulain, but all ended peacefully).

THE MORRIGAN: Goddess of War, Death, and Destruction; enjoyed fomenting war, and often fought in the battles. A shapechanger, often appeared as a crow. One of her forms was a long-legged hag with her mouth twisted to one side; another, a maiden in a many-coloured mantle. Offered her love to Cuchulain, but was rebuffed; she persecuted him for most of his life, though eventually they reconciled.

NUADA of the Silver Hand: Early leader of the Danaans against the Firbolgs; killed by Balor.

SKATHA/SCATHACH: A warrior goddess of Skye, from the Land of Shadows, who apprenticed Cuchulain in her arts for a year and a day. Possessed the Gae Bolg, a spear (thrown with the foot) that filled the victim's body with its barbs.

WELSH PANTHEON

AMATHEON: A god of agriculture; could plow, sow, and reap a vast hill in a single day.

ARAWN: Lord of Annwn, the land of the dead. Exchanged places with Pwyll for a year.

ARIANRHOD: "Silver Circle"; mother of Dylan and Llew Llaw Gyffes. Associated with the constellation Corona Borealis, "the spiral castle of rebirth".

BLODEUEDD: "Flower-face"; a beautiful bride created by Math and Gwydion from blossoms of oak, broom, and meadowsweet when Llew was prohibited by Arianrhod from having any human wife. Fell in love with another man, and nearly succeeded in killing Llew in the process.

BRAN the Blessed: King of the Isle of the Mighty (Britain). Brother of Manawyddan. A giant who possessed a cauldron (from Ireland) which revived the dead, only they could not speak. After his death, his head lived for 87 years, entertaining the men of his court.

BRANWEN: Sister of Bran, offered in marriage to Matholwch, king of Ireland.

CERIDWEN: A shape-changing Goddess; she brewed a cauldron of inspiration and science to make her son wise, but after a year and a day, the three precious drops were consumed by Gwion (later Taliesin).

CREIDDYLAD: Daughter of Lludd; goddess of the flowery and fertile earth. Betrothed to Gwythur ap Greidawl (Victor, son of Scorcher), she was abducted by her brother, Gwyn ap Nudd. Every Beltane, the two rivals battle over her.

DON: Welsh mother-goddess, equivalent of Dana. Her descendants are the Children of Light.

DYLAN: Son of Arianrhod; he was a god of the sea, who could swim as soon as he was born. Later killed by his uncle, Govannon.

EVNISSYEN: Malicious brother of Bran and Branwen; mutilated Matholwch's horses out of spite at his wedding; later killed 200 of Matholwch's men as they hung in mealbags in intended ambush, as well as Branwen's son, Gwern. As the warriors were revived by the cauldron, in remorse he hid among them, and broke the cauldron into four pieces as he died when placed within it.

GOVANNON: Smith-god; Welsh equivalent of Goban.

GWAWL: Otherworld suitor to Rhiannon, he came as a supplicant to her wedding. Pwyll had offered any boon to all guests, and Gwawl asked for her hand. Forced to keep his bargain, Pwyll postponed the wedding for a year and a day. Coming disguised as a supplicant to that wedding, Pwyll tricked Gwawl to climb into a bag, where they kicked him in the game of "Badger in the Bag". Later plotted revenge against Pryderi.

GWYDION: Son of Don. A bard and magician; father by Arianrhod of Dylan and Llew. When his brother Gilvaethwy wanted Goewin, Math's footmaiden, Gwydion tricked Pryderi into starting a war with Math, which was resolved by Gwydion slaying Pryderi. Math took Goewin as wife, and made the brothers endure a year each as a mated pair of deer, swine, and wolves, before restoring them.

GWYN AP NUDD: Lord of the Wild Hunt, and of the Dead, although also a lord of Light. (Equivalent of Cernunnos?).

LLYR: Welsh god of the sea; equivalent to Lir.

LLEW LLAW GYFFES: "Llew of the Skilful Hand". Rejected son of Arianrhod, raised by Gwydion. Under his mother's geas that he would have no name or weapons unless she gave them to him, or bride of any human race, he was able to obtain all three with Gwydion's help. Equivalent of Lugh. (See also Blodeuedd.)

MANAWYDDAN: Welsh god of the sea, equivalent to Mananan. Married Rhiannon after Pwyll's death, and became close friends with Pryderi. An unparalleled craftsman of saddles, shields, and shoes.

MATH: Brother of Don, he was unable to live unless his feet were in the lap of a maiden, except in time of war. Could hear everything that was said, once the winds got hold of it.

NISSYEN: A peacemaking youth of gentle nature. Brother of Ebnissyen.

NUDD/LLUDD: A solar deity, Roman Nodens. Also equivalent to Nuada.

PRYDERI: ("Trouble") Son of Pwyll and Rhiannon. Stolen at birth by a creature with a monstrous claw. Later Lord of Dyfed; he and Rhiannon were trapped in the otherworld by Gwawl in revenge for the insult he endured at Pwyll and Rhiannon's wedding.

PWYLL: Prince of Dyfed; exchanged places with Arawn for a year; took Rhiannon for his wife.

RHIANNON: Daughter of Hevydd Hen ("the Old"), a Lord of the otherworld. Escaped Gwawl to marry Pwyll. Blamed for Pryderi's death, she was forced to carry all visitors to the court on her back, telling them her tale, until Pryderi returned.

TALIESIN: "Radiant brow". Prime bard of Wales and Britain; Welsh equivalent of Amergin. As Gwion, he had a shape-changing battle with Ceridwen. When he was a grain and she a hen; she ate him, and he was reborn. She cast him into the sea in a leather bag, where he was recovered and renamed.