
The Celts

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Abstract*

The purpose of this paper is to describe the most relevant aspects of Celtic Culture. The choice of these aspects is based on some perceptions related to identity (Who were the Celts?), society (Social Structure), religion (Druidism), mythology (Myths and Deities), and art (Calendar and Art). The set of these topics can be considered significant to distinguish one folk culture from another.

Resumo

O objetivo deste trabalho é descrever os aspectos mais relevantes da cultura celta. A escolha desses aspectos foi baseada em algumas percepções relacionadas à identidade (Quem eram os Celtas?), sociedade (Estrutura Social), religião (Druidismo), mitologia (Mitos e Divindades) e arte (Calendário e Arte). A localização desses tópicos pode ser considerada significativa para distinguir uma cultura de outra.

1. Who were the Celts?

The word CELT is derived from 'Keltol', the name given to a people who the Greeks hit around 500-400 BC. Their term for these people was 'Galatai'. To the Romans, the Continental Celts were known as 'Galli', or 'Gauls', 'Celtae' and 'Galatae'; those in the British Isles were called 'Britanni'.

While textbooks emphasize the descent of

Europe from classical culture, a singular cultural group, a forceful, culturally diverse group of peoples known as the Celts dominated parts of Europe all through most of the historical period. For that reason, the Celts were a people who dominated much of western and central Europe in the 1st millenium BCE.

In the 4th century BC, the Celts invaded the Greco-Roman world, conquering northern Italy, Macedonia, and Thessaly. They even sacked Rome in 390 BC, invaded and sacked several Greek cities successfully in 279, and they penetrated Asia Minor, where they were known as Galatians. Thus, because of the various conquests, the Celts survived in western Europe, in Britain, Ireland, Wales, Scotland and Cornwall. They dominated Ireland until 1170 AD, and further dominated major parts of it until 1600 AD.

By the start of the Middle Ages, the Celts had been struck on two fronts by two very powerful cultures: Rome in the south, and the Germans, who were derived from Celtic culture, from the north. Through the period of classical Greece up to the first centuries AD, most of Europe was under the influence of this culture which, in its diverse forms, still represented an unified culture.

The period of Celtic dominance in Europe began to decline in the first centuries AD with the spread of Rome, the migrations of the Germans, and later the inflow of an Asia immigrant population, the Huns. Trough the time, Rome fell to Gothic invaders, the Celts had been pushed west and north, to England, Wales and Ireland and later

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to Scotland and the northern coast of France.¹

The earliest Celts, who were superior characters in the classical world, were called Gauls, who controlled an area extending from France to Switzerland. It was the Gauls who sacked Rome and later invaded Greece; it was also the Gauls that migrated to Asia Minor to find their own, independent culture in that place.

The earliest archaeological evidence associated with the Celts places them in what is now France and western Germany in the late Bronze Age, around 1200 BC. In the early Iron Age, they were associated with the Hallstatt culture (8th century to 6th century BC), named for an archeological site where is Oberösterreich today (Upper Austria). They probably began to settle in the British Isles during this period. Between the 5th and 1st centuries BC, their control extended from what is now Spain to the shores of the Black Sea.

The Celts were a people who originated in central Europe from Indo-European stock and became a unique people in the Iron Age. They were distinct from their predecessor people, archaeologically named the Urnfield cultures, mainly in their use of iron, their art style, the social stratification of their society, and the role of the horse in their lives because Celtic horses were smaller than today's animals and were raised and trained as draft animals for riding into battle, and as chariot horses. Chariots were an important part of Celtic warfare, a method that was very effective against the Romans.²

Opinions differ regarding whether the Irish Celts arrived from Britain, around Scotland directly to Ireland, or north from or around the Iberian peninsula. However, it seems evident that whatever route they took, the first true Irish Celts arrived during the early Hallstatt period, that is the archaeological time.

The Celts were a neat and clean people and are one of the cultures charged on inventing soap. They took great pride in themselves and their physical appearance. Moreover, obesity was considered disesteem and slick bodies were admired. They were larger in stature than the Romans and generally had gold or red blonde hair and ruddy appearance. The men commonly wore beards, moustaches and long flowing hair. The

women also wore their hair in a long way. The Celts were fond of bright colors and wore colorful clothing.³

As a culture, the Celts displayed counteracting tendencies: they seemed to be autonomous, anarchic, and concerned for native traditions, but a basic unitary character was manifested in their social organization and mythological histories. The Celtic pantheon is difficult to discern. The names of several hundred gods are known, but the majority appears to be local deities.⁴

The Celtic way of life, Celtic institutions, and the Celtic worldview were superimposed onto Germanic and classical culture. The later monolithic European culture is greatly influenced by these preexistent peoples. It has long been recognized that the Celtic languages are segments of the Indo-European group of languages. However, the early Celts had no written language and because of this the knowledge store of the community belonged to the Druids. They memorized magic formulas, ritual processes, medical knowledge, laws, folk history, and genealogies.

Early Celtic tribes lived in small settlements led by a local chieftain. Some of these tribes formed federations with other tribes, but the Celts never formed a common nation.

The various Celtic tribes were bound together by common speech, customs and religion. The lack of political unity contributed to the extinction of their way of life, making them defenseless to their enemies. Furthermore, their economy was pastoral and agricultural, and they had no real urban life. Each tribe was headed by a king and was divided by class into Druids, who were the priests; warrior nobles, men who fought on foot with swords and spears, and finally the commoners.

The Celts were a superstitious people. The supernatural pervaded every aspect of life; the spirits were everywhere: in ancient trees, weird rocks, rivers and bogs. No part of the daily routine could be carried out without some reminder of the gods. They were responsible for the seasons and they controlled the natural world of which man was just a part. Moreover, Celtic people measured time by nights followed by days and they had a calendar,

¹ <http://celts.net/celts/celtgenia/a.html>

² celts.net at www.greyhawkes.com

³ idem

⁴ <http://pantheon.org/mythical/aceras/celtic>

which was based on lunar motion rather than solar.¹

The Celts had numerous gods and goddesses. Some of the gods were recognized by a number of tribal groups by derivations of the same name. They could be also recognized as being the same god through their spheres of influence, although they might have held different names in different areas.

The Celts were skilled imitators and adapted techniques and methods that they learned from other people to suit their own aspirations. They practiced agriculture and were familiar with the advantages of crop rotation and fertilizing with manure. They were also businessmen and traders. Hence, Celtic trade between Normandy and southern Britain was common and trade with Mediterranean cultures was well established. Among themselves the principal basis of exchange was cattle, but the Celts used some gold and silver coinage when they dealt with other peoples.

Finally, Celtic art is considered the first great offering to European art made by non-Mediterranean peoples. Its roots go back to the artisans of the Urnfield culture and the Halstatt culture (8th – 6th century BC) at the beginning of the Iron Age. It increased in the period of the La Tène culture. Celtic art acquires distinctive characteristics. These are obvious in its major artifacts: weapons, vessels, and jewelry in bronze, gold, and occasionally in silver. Many of these objects were made for chieftains in southern Germany and France and were recovered from their tombs.

To sum up, most of what researchers know about Celtic life comes from Ireland. They only know about the largest and most extensive of the Celtic populations, the Gauls, through Roman sources and these sources are unfriendly to the Gauls.

Studies about the Celts are going on. It means future discoveries may alter or refine the present understanding of the people known as the Celts. Further knowledge about them and other early peoples can only improve the lives and knowledge of those researchers who are worried about history and make the effort to learn about ancient civilizations.

II. Celtic social structure

Brief history

It is known that the early Celtic societies were organized around warfare – this structure would recurrently distinguish cultures in the process of migration: the Celts, the Huns, and later the Germans. Although classical Greek and Roman writers considered the Celts to be violently insane, warfare was not an organized process of territorial conquest.

Moreover, among the Celts, "warfare seems to have mainly been a sport, focussing on raids and hunting. In Ireland, the institution of the *fianna* involved young, aristocratic warriors who left the tribal area for a time to conduct raids and to hunt. When the Celts came into contact with the Romans, they changed their manner of warfare to a more organized defense against a larger army. It was these groups that the classical writers encountered and considered insane. The Celtic method of warfare was to stand in front of the opposing army and scream and beat their spears and swords against their shields. They would then run headlong into the opposing army and screamed the entire way – this often had the effect of scaring the opposing soldiers who then broke into a run; fighting a fleeing army is relatively easy work. If the opposing army did not break ranks, the Celts would stop short of the army, return to their original position, and start the process over again".²

Celtic society was hierarchical and class-based. Kings led tribes, but political organizations were extraordinarily elastic. According to both Roman and Irish sources, Celtic society was divided into three groups: a warrior aristocracy, an intellectual class that included druids, poets and jurists and the class of the commoners.

The smallest unit in Celtic Society was the *FINE*, a close, extended family or a kinship group. The *Fine*, not the individual, was what was important. Legally, the individual did not exist, except as a member of the *Fine* and was responsible for set share of the *Fine's* property and obligations.

Society was tribal based on kinship; one's ethnic identity was largely derived from the larger tribal group, called the *TUATH* ('too-awth') in Irish

¹ <http://www.britain.mall.com/>

² <http://www.jocurians.com/whnrc/Jan7/614/engtwicc/celbucmss3.htm>

(meaning 'people'), but eventually based on the smallest kinship organizational unit, the *clan*, called the *CENEDL* (ke-na-dl), or "kindred", in Irish. The clan provided identity and protection – "disputes between individuals were always disputes between clans. Since it was the duty of the clan to protect individuals, crimes against an individual would be prosecuted against an entire clan".⁷ In other words, the *TUATH* was a group equivalent to the modern concept of tribe or clan. It could be made up of one or several *Fine* and was led by the *Ri* or *KING*.

Eligibility for leadership was based on blood relationship but was not directly hereditary. Any male member of the *ri*'s *DERBFINE*, a kinship group extended back five generations, was eligible to be chosen. The new *ri* would be selected by the members of the *Tuath* from among the eligible candidates. Exactly how such selections were made is not known for certain although there are some unsubstantiated opinions in this regard. We do know that the *Ri* was required to be physically unblemished and was expected to be generous in providing sumptuous feasts when hosting guests, and these expectations would doubtless have been taken into account by the warriors and elders when selecting a new *ri*.

The *Tuath* was ruled by the *ri*, but not as an ultimate judge or law giver. His role was principally in dealings outside the *Tuath* and as a war leader. His authority was held up and carried out by a council of nobles and assemblies of the freemen that would be held annually, frequently in conjunction with religious festivals. Treaties would be declared and discussed at these assemblies and the nobles would then see that they were adhered to.

Within the *Tuath*, society was basically divided into three classes:

1. THE NOBILITY, OR WARRIOR CLASS, composed of landowners and warriors. They were in control of most, if not all, of the land, herds, flocks, and most of the physical wealth of the *Tuath*. When not at war the noblemen spent their time conducting the business the day, playing board games, watching youths at field games, participating in contests of skill and strength, hunting, and feasting. Members of the nobility practiced fosterage, sending their young sons and daughters to the homes of other members of the nobility for their early training education. At times

this custom could also be used to cement alliances between *taths*, the children of the *ri* of one *tuath* being fostered in the home of the *ri* of another *tuath*, where they could also serve as hostages to prevent hostilities.

2. THE AES DANA, men of art (craftsmen), and included the druids. The Druids were members of the ancient Celtic religion called Druidism. They were considered teachers, judges, doctors, diviners, mystic in the Celtic world. They were very important to the tribes' continuation and welfare.

3. THE COMMONERS OR CHURLS, owned no land, but they were free, not slaves. Slavery was sometimes practiced by the Celts, but their slaves would have been war captives and other subjugated peoples. We know very little about the Commoners as a group. They were free but did not own the land and would generally have been farmers and animal husbandmen, and perhaps less skilled craftsmen.

Even though Celtic society was centered on a warrior aristocracy, the position of women was quite high in Celtic society. In the earliest periods, women participated both in warfare and in kingship. While the later Celts would adopt a strict patriarchal model, they still had a memory of women leaders and warriors.

Celtic society was based almost completely on pastoralism and the raising of cattle or sheep. Moreover, there was some agriculture in the Celtic world, but not much. The importance of cattle and the pastoral life created a unique institution in Celtic, particularly Irish, life: the cattle-raid. The stealing of another group's cattle was often the proving point of a group of young warriors. The greatest surviving Irish myth, "The Cattle Raid of Cooley", centers around one such mythically superior cattle-raid.

An important feature of Celtic society was when children entered fosterage at the age of seven, they were sent to the household of distinguished druid, chieftain, or, later, Christian monk. There, they received their education. They would live and study with them until they reached "the age of choice", which was seventeen for a boy, but fourteen for a girl. During the period of fosterage, they would be taught music, literature, poetry, the art of warfare, the virtue of single combat, and the high value of honour, and pursued such recreational pursuits as board games as well as team games. They were also taught to be efficient in the hunt.

⁷<http://www.brown.edu/Departments/English/people/jean/celts.html>

Considering the social life, there was no urbanization of any kind among the Celts until the advent of Roman rule. In Ireland, "urbanization did not occur until the Danish and Norwegian invasions. Society was not based on trade or commerce. Whatever trade took place, it was largely in the form of barter. Celtic economy was probably based on the economic principle of most tribal economies: reciprocity".⁸ In a reciprocal economy, goods and other services are not exchanged for other goods, but they are given by individuals to individuals based on mutual kinship relationships and obligations. (A family economy is typical of a reciprocal economy - parents and children give each other material goods and services not in trade but because they are part of a family).

Appearance, clothing, and cultural characteristics

As already mentioned, the Celts were larger in stature than the Romans and generally had gold or blonde hair and ruddy complexions. The dominance of light colored hair could be at least partially attributed to the bleaching effect of the lime they used as hair dressing. The men commonly wore beards and/or trailing mustaches and long flowing hair which was stiffened with lime for battle. The women also wore their hair long generally in one, two, or three braids, which were sometimes decorated with beads. Women warriors may have worn their hair loose into battle. They were fond of personal decoration and wore a lot of jewelry.

The torc or neck ring, usually made of gold, was an almost indispensable piece of jewelry for any self respecting Celt. Men almost always wore a belt and women would frequently wear girdles of chain.

The Celts were fond of bright colors and wore colorful clothing, often in stripes and frequently edged with fringes. Tunics were worn by both men and women, generally floor length for the women and shorter, to the knee, for men. BRACCAE, a trouser like garment, were also sometimes worn, but generally only by lower class, with the exception of seafarers and possibly charioteers. Even the noblemen who went to sea frequently wore braccæ for protection. It is possible that in extremely harsh weather women may have worn braccæ as well.

Trades and skills

Iron was readily available and household items like cooking utensils, and weapons would have been made of metal. The Celts were skilled metalworkers and fashioned the majority of goods themselves. In addition to iron, they worked bronze and precious metals. Bronze was rarer than iron, since in most areas its component metals were obtained by trade and therefore was used for decorative purposes, a weapon, and items which would receive less wear and tear. Gold and silver, even more rare, were used for jewelry. The Celts were adept woodworkers also. They practiced agriculture and were familiar with the benefits of crop rotation, letting fallow for a period of time, and fertilizing with manure.

Foodstuffs and animal husbandry

The Celts were well-known for their love of good food and drink. They made their own mead, beer, and ale and imported wine from Mediterranean people. Romans were offended by the Celts' practice of drinking their wine with water. The principal dish at least was meat, either boiled or roasted spit. The best warrior at a feast would be awarded the choicest joint prepared for the guests and often fights would erupt for that distinction.

Their principal grains were wheat, barley, oats, and rye. They may have domesticated bees as well.

III. Celtic religion - Druidism

Definition

Druidism is "the religious faith of ancient Celtic inhabitants of Gaul and the British Isles from the 2nd century BC until the 2nd century AD. This religion included belief in the immortality of the soul, which at death was believed to pass into the body of a newborn child". According to Julius Caesar, the Roman emperor, the Druids believed that they were descended from a Supreme Being. Unfortunately, most of the knowledge about Druids has come down through distortions of the Greek and Latin writers. Due to this, some historical registers about the Celts contain their outlook.

Druidism must be understood in the context

⁸ "CELTS", Microsoft (R) 98 Encyclopedia, (c) 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

⁹ "CELTS", Microsoft (R) 98 Encyclopedia, (c) 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

of the culture that created it. Only the Celtic people called their religious professionals Druids; other cultures had other names for their clergy, and expected different duties from them. Druids were not an ethnic or cultural group in themselves, but part of a larger society in which they participated. In the pre-Christian era of Celtic culture, the Druids were members of a proficient class in their culture, the Celtic Nations of Western Europe and the British Isles.

The Druids were well versed in astrology, and the mysterious powers of plants and animals. They held the oak tree and the mistletoe, especially when the latter grew on oak trees, in great reverence, and they customarily conducted their rituals in oak forests. Archaeologists believe that the Druids probably used as altars and temples the stone monuments known as dolmens that are found throughout the areas where Druidism grew.

It is interesting to observe that the mythologies records show that many Druids were women. In fact, Celtic women enjoyed more freedom and rights than women in any other culture of that time, including the rights to enter battle, own and inherit property, trace her kinship matrilineal (through her mother's family line), and choose and divorce her husband.

The Celts had male earth gods, female sun gods, female animal gods, female war gods, and male and female fertility gods. There are also female river gods, male and female sovereignty gods, and so on.

Origin of the word 'DRUID' and two special classes

The term 'druid' itself is probably derived from "dru - uid", and it means "highly wise" which might be the reason for why it was also as a catchier term for all the religious functions.

Besides the Druids, there were other two classes within ancient Druidism: prophets (Ovates), and Bards. The Prophets or Ovates worked with the processes of death and regeneration. They were the native healers of the Celts. They also were specialized in divination, conversing with the ancestors and prophesizing the future. It is not known whether female Druids were considered equal to their male counterparts, or whether they were restricted to special responsibilities. The Bards were known as the keepers of tradition, of the memory of the tribe - they were the custodians of the sacredness of the Word. This activity was very important because the ancient Druidism was an

oral tradition.

Some Druid's duties

The Druidic pursuit of knowledge and inspiration is more than an occult or esoteric exercise in weirdness. Druids were also required to be the professionals of their society. A Druid was expected to use the divination skills and the sight of otherworldly things for many essential and realistic purposes, such as: advising the tribe chiefs as they make policy, settling disputes and legal claims, and announcing the beginning of agricultural seasons such as planting, harvesting, and hunting.

Druids were involved in stage-of-life rituals such as childbirth, maturity, marriage, and death. In times of war, Druids' skills were needed to learn about the enemy's movements and plans, and also to call elemental powers to give support to the tribe. Besides that, the Druids could put an end to an unfair war (a power for which there is a great deal of evidence).

The druids not only presided at religious festivals, but also were important figures in the Celtic world. Druids held a position of exceptional power in Celtic society. The Druids formed the professional class in Celtic society and they filled the roles of judge, doctor, diviner, mystic, and clerical scholar. In other words, they were the 'Intelligentsia' of their culture. To conclude, a Druid was an inseparable part of a Celtic tribe's life and necessary for the tribe's continued survival and benefit.

How to become a Druid

In order to become a Druid, students assembled in large groups for instruction and training, for a period up to twenty years. "The mythologies describe Druids who were capable of many magical powers such as divination and prophesy, control of the weather, healing, and levitation. Their education was so rigorous that at the end of it they were virtually walking encyclopedias".¹

Moreover, the students' skill of memory was trained in order to preserve their history and culture. Because of this, they had to work hard to learn the methods of memorizing words and also revering them. So, Druids in training had to learn all the Bardic poetry.

¹<http://www.uoguelph.ca/~lmeyers/ck-main.html>

Considering the entire Druids' ability, maybe a good word for them would seem to be priests. However, it is not the right word because the Romans never used it, and because Druids didn't minister to congregations as priests do. Julius Caesar and his historians never referred to them as priests, but perhaps they could not recognize them as priests since the Roman priesthood, officiating over an essentially political religion, were primarily teachers and judges, with less emphasis on being seers or diviners, whereas the Druids appeared to have both legal and magical powers and responsibilities.

Human sacrifice

This is a very controversial point, and all the knowledge upon it is related to Roman and Greek writers. The Romans recorded that the Druids sacrificed condemned criminals. "Judicial executions were not different elsewhere in Europe, including Saxony. The Romans wrote that such victims were tied into huge wicker man-shaped effigies and burned alive".¹¹ However, there were also some forms of punishment in Celtic law supposed worse than death, such as banishment.

On the other hand, there was a conviction that describes one person's life being sacrificed so that a terminally ill noble would survive, thus indicating a belief in a cosmic balance of forces. The archeological record does reveal a number of sacrificial deaths. But, to the Celts, death was not frightening, and human sacrifice might not have been so immoral. Actually, it was a very special and powerful ritual, performed only in times of serious need.

However, this issue is being discussed. The written records of Druid sacrifices may have been nothing more than anti-Druid propaganda. It is essential to remember that Julius Caesar had good reasons to make the Druids look bad, because, after all, he was trying to conquer them. In addition, the Romans would have killed people in gladiatorial games, for the entertainment of the people. By contrast, the Druids, if they did sacrifice people, could claim religious sanction. "The archeological record is ambiguous if such sacrifice was judicial or ceremonial. Furthermore, there is no evidence of human sacrifice in Ireland's archeology, though

there is evidence of animal sacrifice there".¹³

Beliefs and Druidic poetry

An Irish Triad reads: Three candles that illuminate every darkness: Knowledge, Nature, Truth. This is one of hundreds of Triads that pass on wisdom for many aspects of life, both spiritual and mundane, but this one is the best choice for a simple description of the highest Good in Druidism. The Triad is a convention of Celtic poetry, and as it is through poetry that much Druidic wisdom was communicated.

The poetic tradition in Druidism is related to the oral-transmission method the Celts used to trace their lineage and history. The Druids' idea about writing was: "To write things down is to weaken the power of eidetic memory and to dishonor the thing written down"¹⁴. Moreover, poetic inspiration was an important spiritual practice. "In Irish myth, for example, there was a deity of poetry called Brigid. Perhaps it is possible to say that Druidism is 'a religion of poetry'.

The 'Otherworld'

Other Druids' feature was the concept of omnipresence of a spiritual Otherworld, which was particularly close at certain times of the year, like at Samhain (-1st November: pronounced SOW-win - the word literally means "end of summer"). Traditionally, it is called the Feast of the Dead, and the beginning of the New Year. In the Druidic cycle of life, Death came before Birth because, before new growth can occur, there must be space for it. On this day, it was thought that the boundary between this world and the Otherworld was weakest, and so passage between the worlds was smoother. It was a time to remember and respect all those who died during the year. Games, feasts, and bonfires were held in honor of the dead, and often the Faeries would hold revels of their own, and invite mortals to join them.

To the Druids and all the Celtic tribes, there was a great sense of connection and continuity between life and death, as that the ancient Celts did not fear death, but instead viewed it as a 'transition phase' in the course of a long, even eternal, life. There was also no division between an 'Underworld' and an 'Upper world'. Thus, the

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¹² <http://www.celtica.wales.com/danesta/celtind/jemma11/05.html>

¹³ <http://www.uoguelph.ca/~lmyers/dr-main.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.ellia.com/ancient/myth/celts/>

entities, which lived in the Otherworld, were neither good nor evil.

Reincarnation, or Rebirth in an otherworldly afterlife was probably their view of human destiny after death. So strong was the Druidic doctrine of the immortality of the soul that Celtic warriors would enter battle and fight without fear of death, a fact that confused not only Roman historians but also Roman military strategists.

The environment and the fire

Considering the environment, Celtic people believed the Celtic Gods were inseparable from it so much that it is difficult to classify them precisely into areas of particular concern. As the Druids looked upon nature and saw it populated with spirits, goddesses, and gods, it is safe to affirm that they regarded the nature as sacred and divine.

In view of the fire, Fire-worship was central to Celtic religion as well. Fire was a spiritual force, and it is not bound into a cosmology of four equally necessary elements, as the Greeks are known to have done. Fire possessed the magical properties of destructiveness and purification, bringing heat and energy and with it, civilization. It is a spiritual principle, because it is always reaching up to the sky. This may be why they built those hilltop fires. Poetic inspiration is said to be a fire in the head, so 'Brigid' is a fire-deity as well. The ritual 'need fire' demonstrated the high spiritual regard the Celts had for fire, which was their main source of energy.

To sum up, it is complex to write about Celtic religion because there are not many records about it. The archeological information in relation to this matter is still precarious and also insufficient. However, this work has tried to improve the understanding about this fascinating topic denominated Celtic religion - Druidism.

IV. Celtic deities and myths

Mythology is an essential subject that is part of a people's culture, and the Celtic mythology is a very interesting issue. "Although the early Celts were composed of a number of different races and tribes, and at the height of their power they spread across wide tracts of Europe, they did have a uniformity of religious idiom that enables historians to speak of a Celtic religion. They were linked by common origins and language (P-Celtic spoken in Gaul and Britain, and Q-Celtic spoken in Ireland), common

religious traditions, and a close similarity of laws".¹⁵

Some Celtic rituals and credences

The Celts were extremely ritualistic and religious. For instance, they elaborated burials, under a mound, in a wooden chamber usually made of oak, furnished with highly decorated weapons, food, drink, and personal ornaments point to powerful beliefs about the nature of life after death. The bodies of the wealthy dead were laid out, burnt or unburnt, on four-wheeled wagons in the earliest of Celtic peoples, and later in lighter, two wheeled wagons.

As already mentioned, the Celts used to believe in the Otherworld. The otherworld of Celtic belief was the place of gods and other supernatural beings. It was a place of feasting and joy. It was not a heaven, a recompense such as some modern religious believe in, but a magical counterpart of the natural world which every person, regardless of behavior in life, would enter after death. "The otherworld was as real to the Celts as the natural world, and although humans did not normally visit it prior to their death, stories of such visits to the natural world by otherworld folk, were accepted as valid".¹⁶

Celtic religion qualified many female deities such as mother goddesses and war goddesses. The Mother Goddess of the Celts was often imagined as a warrior, fighting with weapons and instructing the hero in superior secrets of combat. As Celtic deities were tribal by nature, each tribe or clan would have its own names for particular gods and goddesses. This accounts for the great diversity of names in Celtic mythology, there are over 300 different names recorded. The Celts also believed that it was dangerous to name a sacred thing by its correct name, the result being that sacred things are often referred to in an approximately way.

The origin of the knowledge about myth

The knowledge about the religion and mythologies of the Celtic people comes from three different areas in Europe. From Gaul, which is modern day France, Britain (most specifically Wales), and Ireland. Both Gaul and Britain were influenced by Greco Roman tradition before the

¹⁵ <http://pantheon.org/mythical/areas/celtic>

¹⁶ <http://www.av.qnet.com/~raven/myths2.html>

advent of Christianity. The Celts themselves did not commit their traditions to writings, regarding their laws, genealogies and spiritual disciplines as sacred, required to be handed down orally. The native wisdom of Wales and Ireland, the oldest outside of classical sources, is a great repository of pre-Christian myth and practices. Fragmentary texts transcribed during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries show ancient legends and heroic tales, influenced by the times of the scribes. Archaeological evidence illustrates more clues. The Celts of Ireland maintained their cultural integrity until close to 500 AD, and it is there where the pagan Celtic mythology has been best preserved.

The symbol of the animals

Animal symbolism found in Celtic myths included boars, birds, serpents, fish, horse and cattle. "Boars symbolise courage and strong warriors. Power and strength is attached to the bristles of the boar, which was held in high admiration by the Celts. There are many examples of supernatural boars and their adventures in the literary traditions of the Irish and the Welsh. The otherworld feast is supposed to be sustained by magical pigs that, no matter how many times they are cooked and eaten, are alive the next day to be cooked again".¹⁷

Fish, especially salmon are associated with knowledge and secrets. Serpents and dragons are portents of trouble, strife and infertility. Birds also may presage bad luck or bloodshed. Horse and cattle represent fertility, as do many occurrences of animals in Celtic legend. Foliate head images were central to Celtic cultures, also symbolizing fertility. Horns were a powerful symbol of virility and divine power.

The Celts were a fighting people and they not only gave their gods horns, but also improved their chances of success in battle by wearing horned helmets. In Celtic mythology powerful opponents may use the magic of shape shifting into different animal forms during battle. Considering the numbers, the number three, was sacred to the Celts, and deities were sometimes portrayed in groups of three, or as having three heads or faces. In mythological tales, the deities or semi-divine heroes are described as being one of three people of the same name, or as having been born three times in succession.

Myth and nature

In the Celt mythology, they had a lot of beliefs, and the things about nature had a special meaning:

a) Moon phases: "sowing and planting were always done at the waxing moon. The waning moon was considered good for ploughing, reaping, cutting peat. On the waning moon, hazel and willow were not cut for baskets, nor was wood cut for boats. Everyone once carried a 'peighinn pisich' (lucky penny), which was turned over three times in the pocket at the first sight of the new crescent".¹⁸

b) Water: the magic of water is widely known. Wells, pools, streams are reputed to have healing powers and life preserving properties. Springs are particularly beneficial, as they carry water from the heart of the Earth. At one time, there were over 600 holy wells all over Scotland; they were originally shrines of local water deities. Before drinking of the well water, somebody must circle the well three times and "silver" the water with a silver coin.

c) The sea: Much superstition surrounds this. Certain things must not be given their correct name at sea, even places, for fear of causing offence to the 'Good People'. Certain birds are either good or bad omens if seen at sea. A stranger must not walk over ropes, oars, etc. or this would bring bad luck. When rowing a boat a person must start from the right hand side. A child born on the ebbing tide was considered to be unlucky, and would probably grow up weak and sickly.

d) Trees: Certain trees are considered to be under the protection of the 'fairies', and to destroy a fairy tree is a very dangerous act. ROWAN is the supreme tree of protection, and is used for the churn staff, distaff, and the pin of the plough and in many other domestic and agricultural implements. It is common to plant a rowan near the front door of the house, or near the byre door. "The nuts are embodiments of wisdom and children born in the autumn could have the 'milk of the nut', said to be of great benefit. ELDER or the bourtree is also a protective tree and features a great deal in Folklore. WILLOW and ALDER are especially beloved of water spirits. Thorn trees are said to be sacred to the fairies, especially if three are found growing together. IVY is protective of milk. Ivy, woodbine and rowan are combined in wreaths and placed

¹⁷ <http://www.pantheon.org/mythic/gallery/thumbnails/celtic/>

¹⁸ <http://www.pantheon.org/mythic/gallery/thumbnails/celtic/>

over the lintels of cow houses. Many plants are said to have magical properties, such as Saint John's Wort, pearl wort, woodbine, foxglove and many others. Milk could be charmed from another's cows, but certain plants, such as 'pearl wort', could be used to neutralize this".¹⁹

e) Stones: Many standing stones are reputed to have healing powers. Stones with holes through them are especially good for 'curing' barren women. Small healing stones, sometimes shaped like different parts of the body, were used in the Highlands. The sick person would wash the affected part and then rub it with the appropriate stone. 'ELFBOLTS' – the name given to a small flint arrowheads, were also considered lucky if found. "Cattle were given water to drink in which an elf bolt had been dipped. 'THE KNOCKING STONE' – a large lump of stone, hollowed out, in which corn was bruised. It was closely associated with the daily bread and therefore with the 'luck of the house'. 'FAMILY CHARM STONES' – these were stones handed down through families that were said to have supernatural powers. The most famous charm stone was that of the Brahan Seer, Kenneth Mackenzie, who lived in the 17th century. It was a small white stone with a hole in the centre, when he looked through it he could 'see into the future'".²⁰

Celtic mythology is a subject that even nowadays incites discussions and reflections from many researchers from the whole world. It contains the beliefs of a people who had a particular importance in the world.

V. The coligny calendar

It is a Celtic solar/lunar ritual calendar. It counts the time by the number of nights, instead of by the number of days.

This calendar uses an ingenious mathematical arrangement to keep a normal 12-month calendar in sync with the moon. Basically the sync is kept by adding an extra month every 2 1/2 years. In order to completely reconstruct this calendar and make it practicable, a couple of important issues must be solved.

There is a doubtful question about upon which phase the Celts began their month. Some quotes speak to the issue. For instance, Julius

Caesar wrote in *The Gallic Wars*: "Gauls (mainland European Celts who made the Coligny calendar) compute the divisions of every season by the number of nights; they keep birthdays and the beginnings of months and years in such an order that the day follows the night"²¹. This tendency of the Celts to begin things with the dark half has been observed by many writers and historians and it seems to be what Caesar intended to express in the passage above.

Keeping the Coligny Calendar synchronized over long portions of time is another problem that exists making it practicable. After a period of a few decades, the calendar starts to diverge a bit. It's believed that the Celts have used some astronomically megaliths to make the necessary manual corrections every once in awhile, in order to keep the synchrony of their calendar.

Researchers, writers and historians, in search of a plausible solution, are still studying these doubts about this calendar.

Celtic months

To many peoples, certain trees held special significance as a fuel for heat, cooking, building materials and weaponry. In addition to this, many woods also provided a powerful spiritual presence. The Celts are among these peoples. Each of the thirteen Celtic lunar months is named after a tree.

The first of these, November, is the Birch. The silver Birch is the most common tree in much of Europe. It's one of the first trees to grow back in an area after a mature forest is cut; this is probably a large part of its symbolic connection with new beginnings and opportunities.

The Rowan, which presides over the month of December, played a central role in Druidic ceremonies. Sprigs of this tree were hung over the main door of the house, and often worn to ward off enchantment or "the evil eye". In Wales, Rowans were planted in churchyards to watch over the spirits of the dead.

The January tree, the Alder, has a water-resistant timber, and is often used for under water foundations. To the Druids it was considered a protective and oracular tree.

¹⁹ <http://pantheon.org/mythical/aereas/celtic>

²⁰ <http://pantheon.org/mythical/aereas/celtic>

²¹ <http://www.celtic-art.net/Frames/index1.htm>

The Willow, which rules the month of February, stands for the female and lunar rhythms of life and is sacred to the moon goddess. The Willow is also associated with death, birth and life.

The March tree is the Ash. In Celtic cosmology, this tree connects the three circles of existence, which sometimes are interpreted as the past, present and future.

The Hawthorn is the tree of April. It is associated to eternal beauty and youth.

The Oak was a central tree to the Druids, and is the king of the forest. The Modern English word "door" comes from the Gaelic word *dair* that means solidity, protection and the powerful Oak tree. The Oak is central because presides over the celebration of Beltane, the spring Fire Festival of fertility and renewed growth. The month of Oak is one of celebration, and the rebirth of life and living things.

The Holly is the June tree. It symbolizes paternity and the fight. It has always been regarded as a potent life symbol for his yearlong foliage and for his winter fruits.

The Hazel tree presides over the month of July and is associated with meditation, wisdom and mediation.

The Grapevine governs the month of August. It symbolizes fertility, inspiration and prosperity.

The Ivy oversees the month of September. It was considered to be a very powerful tree to the Celts for its ability to kill even the mightiest Oak tree. Thus Ivy represented the mysterious and the mystical. The Celts also associated Ivy with the ritual of opening of the portal to the Otherworld.

The Broom stands for the month of October. The Druids sweep their outside ritual areas with it to purify and protect. They believed that burning the blooms and shoots would calm the wind.

The Elder tree rules the thirteenth month of the Celtic calendar. The Druids used it to both bless and curse. Wands of this tree can be used to drive out evil spirits or thought forms. To the Celts, music on flutes of Elder has the same power as the wand.

Seasonal days of celebration

The Druids celebrated a series of fire festivals, on the first of each four months. Each would start at sunset and last for 3 days. The

Imbolc, on February the 1st, happened in the first day of spring and marked the "return of the light". This was the date when the first stirrings of life were noticeable.

The Beltaine was celebrated on May the 1st, when the year began its bright summer half. In a ritual, cattle were driven between the sacred bonfires to protect them from disease.

The Lúnasa, on August the 1st, was the Feast of the god *Lu'gh*. This festival was marked by rituals to ensure a successful harvest, pageants to commemorate the story of *Lu'gh* and various communal pastimes that brought together the scattered household and reinforced the identity of the tribe.

The Samhain represented the "end of warm season". November 1 marked and combined the Feast of the Dead and New Year's Day. Celts believed that it was a time when the veil between our reality and that of the world of the dead people was most easily penetrated. This festival was later adopted by the Christians as All Souls' Eve, and later became the holiday Halloween.

Origins of Halloween

The word itself, *Halloween*, actually has its origins in the Catholic Church. It comes from a contracted corruption of All Hallows Eve. All Hallows Day, or All Saint's Day, November the 1st is a Catholic day in honor of saints.

However it is known that, in the 5th century BC, in Celtic Ireland, October the 31st was a holiday called Samhain, considered the Celtic New Year and the official summer end. To the Celts, on that day, "the disembodied spirits of all those who had died throughout the preceding year would come back in search of living bodies to possess".²²

Obviously, the still living did not want to be possessed. So, on the night of October 31, villagers would extinguish the fires on their homes, to make them cold and undesirable. They would also dress up like ghoulish and noisily paraded around the neighborhood, in order to frighten away the spirits.

The thrust of the practices changed over time to become more ritualized. The practice of dressing up like hobgoblins, ghosts, and witches took on a more ceremonial role to peoples all over the world.

²² <http://www.gaelicbooks.com/fp140.htm>

While Irish immigrants brought the custom of Halloween to America in the 1840's, the custom of trick-or-treating is thought to have originated with a ninth-century European custom called 'souling'. According to this custom, on November 2, All Souls Day, early Christians would walk from village to village begging for cakes. The number of cakes the beggars would receive, would be the number of prayers they would say on behalf of the dead relatives of the donors.

The Jack-o-lantern custom is believed to come from Irish folklore. As the tale is told, a man named Jack, a drunkard and trickster, tricked Satan into climbing a tree. Jack then carved an image of a cross in the tree's trunk, trapping the devil up the tree. Jack made a deal with the devil that, if he never tempted him again, he would promise to let him down the tree.

After Jack died, he was denied entrance to Heaven because of his evil ways, but he was also denied access to Hell because he had tricked the devil. Instead, the devil gave him a single ember to light his way through the frigid darkness. To keep the light glowing longer, the ember was placed inside a hollowed-out turnip. When the immigrants came to America, they substituted the turnips for pumpkins.

VI. Celtic art

The term Celtic Art is commonly applied both to the art produced in Europe between the 5th century BC and the 1st century AD by Iron Age peoples who are usually labeled Celts and the art produced in Britain and Ireland between the 5th and the 12th centuries AD (Christian Era).

Celtic Art is considered the first great contribution to European art made by non-Mediterranean peoples. It has to be mentioned that Celtic Art is a term applied to art in a diversity of styles. Its most outstanding characteristic is eclecticism and variety. At various times Celtic Art has borrowed or adapted other elements from Classical, Greek, Oriental, Roman and Viking arts.

It is possible to specify 3 different periods of Celtic Art: the Hallstatt Culture (from 800 BC to 600-500 BC), La Tene Culture (from 600-500 BC to 50 BC), and The Christian Celtic Art (from 400 BC to 1200 AD).

The Hallstatt Culture is named after a site in western Austria, where a necropolis was found and more than 2000 grave sites. The grave-goods indicated a sophisticated and hierarchical society.

These people, superb iron-workers, owned and buried beautifully decorated vessels, ornamented weaponry and horse trappings, all of a standard much advanced upon the recorded from earlier Europe. Many archaeologists think that the Hallstatt Culture can be included in Celtic art. However, Celtic Art emerges clearly in the 5th century BC when it is found among peoples sharing elements defined as La Tene Culture.

La Tene Culture started in the 5th century BC and continued until around the time of Caesar's Conquest of Gaul in the 1st century BC. This style is helpful in defining what is Celtic.

Initially influenced by the Etruscan, Persian, Roman and Greek civilizations, this art developed regional variations through the centuries as Celts spread throughout much of Europe and elsewhere. La Tene art grew out of the native art of the Hallstatt Celts, who had involved their own tradition of geometric patterns and stylized animals, and evolved distinctive characteristics that are evident in its major artifacts.

During this period, the Celts acquired a considerable presence: they were wealthy, they had nobility, style, trade and power. That is why their artistic style spread widely through continental Europe. It appeared principally in objects of fine metalwork, weaponry and household ritual vessels.

For all this, the Celtic artist avoided the straight-line enjoyed curvilinear forms and in intertwining lines. They loved combining intricate, regular and balanced geometrical patterns. The Celts decorated their weapons and jewels with geometric motifs, spirals, circles, and typical solar symbols which embody a complex symbolism.

Celts were not interested in imitating nature, because it is repeated and symmetrical. They preferred stylized plant motifs and fantastic animals and gave a secondary role to the human figure. The most used colors were red, green, yellow and blue.

After the 2nd century AD, Celtic art died out in Britain. It was revived in the 5th century AD with the product of brooches, hanging bowls, and other objects. The revival was rapidly transmitted to Ireland, where some La Tene art may have survived.

The Christian faith was well established in Celtic Britain by the 4th century AD. In the 5th century AD, British missionaries founded a new church in Ireland, which then became the center of Celtic Christianity. Between the late 6th and the

early 8th centuries, Irish missionaries were active in christianizing the Germanic peoples that had conquered the Western Roman Empire, and they established numerous monasteries where today are placed France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy.

The objects decorated in the new Christian tradition are mainly ecclesiastical and include metal reliquaries, crosses, stone crosses, and gospel books. However, the artists of the Christian Celtic period produced a number of beautifully ornamented jewels.

VII. Conclusion

Considering all the information that was presented, Celtic Culture can be described as a unique culture in all its aspects. In terms of identity, the Celts were a superstitious, autonomous, and singular people in the Iron Age, very different from their predecessor.

Another thing that has to be considered is the Celtic religion. The Druids had an enormous power over the Celtic society. Their social and religious role was responsible for the tribe's benefit and for the tribe's life. They were essential to maintain the Celtic world.

In relation to Celtic mythology, it involved deeply these people and had influences over their customs and life. It is possible to mention that, up to a point, the numerous gods and goddesses reflect *their rich culture*.

In terms of art, Celtic people can be described as peculiar for its eclecticism and variety. Paradoxically, this characteristic is exactly what makes Celtic art original and unique. It stands out also for its mystery and symbolism. What can be said about Celtic calendar, which has a symbolic and mysterious character, is that it had a great importance in terms of determining the time to plant, to hunt and also to organize their society in the Celtic world.

In conclusion, it is relevant to mention the importance of the whole group, not the individual, in the Celtic society. For that reason, "a fight between individuals was always a fight between clans."

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