

MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY

Brigid



*Goddess of Becoming
and Being*

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BRIGID, GODDESS OF BECOMING AND BEING

I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

—from *The Wind Among the Reeds* by William Butler Yeats

The Celts

Ireland, Celtic land of dreams and music: In rural pubs like the one I visited on the Dingle Peninsula no food is served. All evening it is Guinness and guitars, pipes, drums, bones and singers. When a new musician arrives, they have a drink or two and then join in, and room is made for beginners. Music fills the Irish soul.

Language itself is turned into music, even the English language becomes song in an Irish voice. For it is also a land of storytellers where everyone has stories and if they only have one, they tell it twice. They strive to delight their listeners: the taxi driver from the airport, your hostess in a B & B in Kerry or Clare, a student guide around Trinity College who makes the most serious visitor smile with droll secrets about famous former scholars and masters, or a passionate guide on a walking tour of Dublin, whose grandfather had been imprisoned during the Troubles.

Back through centuries the emerald isle endured a turbulent history of troubles, yet its magical spirit lived on beneath the pain. Then came the late nineteenth century Celtic revival. The intricate symbols were adapted to new uses, from wallpaper to rings. Old folk were recorded, those who remembered the legends and told the stories in Gaelic. Yeats, a driving literary force wrote: 'The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.' And of Ireland's precious heart and dreams poems were written, plays performed and songs sung.

Ireland has claimed Celtishness, and rightly. Celtic spirituality survived the longest there. Romans never got around to invading Ireland and for many centuries not even Vikings and the Catholic church could take hold.

The tribes known as Celts or Kelttoi came from central Europe. From about 1000 BCE they spread westward and reached as far as the British Isles, imposing their individualistic societal structures on indigenous people. Warrior leaders were elected as kings although real authority lay in the hands

of Druids, who had secret knowledge of the spiritual realms and acted as conduits to those other worlds. Their sacred meeting places were oak forests. Female druids, the *Bandrui*, had their own mystery schools. Then there were the poets, called *fili* and *banfili* (from 'to see'), They set timeless knowledge to words and music. And in a largely verbal culture Bards who memorised the songs and stories brought them to the people.

Celts were respectful of the existing spiritual traditions, an integral part of life since prehistoric times. They too worshipped gods and goddesses of rivers, lakes and hills, the divine in nature based on seasonal rhythms and the movement of the heavenly bodies, in particular moon and sun, behind which worked the power of divine beings. Through their high god they were attuned to the sun worship of their megalithic ancestors with their under-hill chambers and massive stone rows and circles, aligned to significant points in the sun's passage through the year.

The great goddess of the flame red hair

The feminine spirit was integral to Celtic life. This has not always been acknowledged by those who wrote the histories focused on tribal chiefs and kings. Their most important goddess Brigid was known under variants of the name throughout the Celtic lands. She was especially loved in the westernmost island then called Hibernia. She arrived there with her father the high god Dagda and the other Tuatha dé Danann ('children of Danu', the river goddess). They are deities who dwelt in the otherworld and passed between worlds via the passage monuments such as at Brú na Bóinne (Newgrange).

Brigid whose name derives from proto-Celtic *briganti* 'exalted one' (as do our 'bright' and 'bride') is goddess of the 'in-between' realm, of rosy hued dawn and the rising sun. Her hair is like the sun aura; her cloak is made of sunbeams. She is usually visualised as young although she is ageless. Her feast is Imbolc on February 1, when the sun promises to return, the ground begins to thaw, seeds are planted and in wombs new life quickens.

Radiant Brigid guides becoming and being. She upholds the order of nature and works equally in fire, water, air and earth. The fruits of the earth are offered at her feast. Wells and rivers are sacred to her, as is fire. You can still visit her sacred well and the Flame of Ireland at Kildare. Although now dedicated to the Christian Saint Brigid and served by nuns, there is a direct lineage back to the goddess and her priestesses.

She is an all-encompassing goddess, relating both to the cosmos and personally to every human. She is a unique kind of triple goddess and is known by the same name in her various functions. Her wisdom and knowledge are wide ranging, and she brings her fire energy and light to the Celts' three main areas of human activity.

Fire of the Hearth – she cherishes the home and oversees birth and rearing the young, both humans and animals. She teaches the healing wisdom of nature and the keening chants needed to guide a soul in death.

Fire of the Forge – she oversees industry and making. She guides the metalworking crafts so important to the Celts – the forging of strong weapons and the fashioning of richly symbolic ornaments depicting spirals and magical creatures. And she is goddess of building, especially sacred structures.

Fire of Poetry – she inspires poetry, song, epic stories, and the keeping of sacred history – the spiritual matters that draw humans into harmony with the heavens, the elements, and the whole of nature. Irish poets today still call on Brigid's inspiration.

Brigid maintains the integrity of these vital realms so that none dominates yet she enables their interweaving. She is mutable and fluid while always holding true to the necessity of their essence in the outer world. She is not overwhelmed by external drifts and dislocations.

One secret of the longevity of the Celtic spirit is that through her authority the essence of the three spirit Fires endures while expressions and manifestations in the world can change with the times. I am sure this kind of threefold culture is still important. Imagine our modern societies with a balance between the activity in the realm of nurturing, the 'domestic', in the realm of doing and making, the 'economic', and expression of the sacred and spiritual, knowledge of which feeds in to the other areas. It is possible if we can access the source in the goddess's wisdom and not become overwhelmed by the challenges.

Brigid's connection with a distinctive Christianity

The first Christian missionaries who came to Ireland found it already established. Legends are our main source for how Christianity emerged there.

There's the story concerning the Chief Druid on the sacred island of Iona. He had a vision of the goddess Brigid with the child Jesus cradled in her lap. As

well as being a triple goddess, Brigid was also mother in a divine family, a trinity, along with the father Dagda and Lugh or Beli her son who was god of light, a characteristic enabling ready association with the Christ.

Legends are external reflections of a deeper reality. Brigid, holding the mutable space of being and becoming, keeper of the sacred etheric flame, nurturer of the elemental realm where heaven and earth touch and mingle – it was this Irish goddess who opened her great heart to welcome the Christ spirit.

The Irish Druids knew that the mighty Sun Spirit was preparing to descend to earth. And in the first century, when the drama of Golgotha was taking place in Palestine, they beheld the events inwardly. As Jesus died on the cross his whole being was irradiated by the spiritual sun, the Logos, and the power of the Logos permeated the earth's spiritual atmosphere. The seers experienced the change in the etheric world as the Christ descended into it.

The extraordinary transformation taking place came to those druidic seers as a symbolic picture which they had the knowledge to interpret. They knew the Logos as Dagda the spirit of the sun, and they experienced it most strongly in the elements and seasonal rhythms in the care of Brigid.

That's why the Christ impulse as it came to expression in Ireland was imbued with a deep love of all nature and the divine feminine. You can see this in a prayer for strength and protection, called a 'breastplate' or lorica (anonymous, but later attributed to St Patrick). It's a long invocation of all the heavenly beings and Christ. And in this part, there is a typically 'Irish' connection with elemental forces, the four elements of fire, earth, air and water.

I arise today
Through strength of heaven –
Light of sun,
Radiance of moon,
Splendour of fire,
Speed of lightning,
Swiftness of wind,
Depth of sea,
Stability of earth,
Firmness of rock.

In Palestine the earliest followers of the Way experienced the Christ event as a radical shift from the restrictive legalism and patriarchy of both Judaic and Roman society. The individualistic Celts had always lived more by personal choices, and readily acknowledged the Christ spirit as available to each human being.

Christian communities began to form when people gathered to learn from a wise teacher. But as with druidic training, the teachings emphasized both the divine expressed in nature and the personal path to union with the divine. Spirit and the flesh, the heavens and the earth were experienced as the harmonious interplay of one reality. Men and women were equals in spirit and unlike in Catholicism, monasteries might consist of men and women living side by side.

The Celtic crosses that dot the land are images of the harmony between the ancient and new spirituality – combining the sun crossed by the four seasons and directions with Christian cross symbolism and imagery.



L) The original form of sun-cross on a grave slab outside the Gallarus oratory on the Dingle Peninsula, County Kerry; R) Early Celtic cross in the museum of the monastery of Clonmacnois, County Offaly, founded in 544

Mary Magdalene and the Celtic spirit

Although the Irish used an indigenous ogham script, Latin and Greek writings probably came early via merchants from the Mediterranean. This would include the gospels. The gospel of John especially resonated with the men and women initiated into the sacred way of old Ireland. The Christianity born in Ireland is often called Johannine. The heart of this gospel is the cosmic Christ that is also the mystical inner I AM, to be discovered as the core of self through knowledge and personal commitment.

This was Mary Magdalene's path. She recognized that in Christ there is neither male nor female, yet there is both. And when she came to the European continent, her experience and gnosis would open her to the all-encompassing Celtic goddess who weaves into the Christ spirit. Through the Magdalene's inspiration, the harmonious intertwining would continue, whether her soul was in incarnation or offering guidance in spirit.

By the fifth century the goddess Brigid had become the legendary miracle-working saint Brigid. Yet she kept many of the goddess's functions. St Brigid is patron saint of childbirth, midwives; infants, including those born out of wedlock; blacksmiths; metalworkers; cattle; dairymaids; poultry raisers; printing presses; fugitives; mariners; travellers, scholars; artists and poets.

I pick up this trail in more detail in *An Enterprising Irish Saint* and *The Wronged Queen* in portal six, leading from Saint Brigid to a ninth century queen and the enduring spirit of the Celtic goddess – disguised and hidden from the eagle-eyed gaze of Catholic church officials.

The Irish spirit penetrates Rome's domain

It is enormously significant that the Christ impulse and Celtic spirituality drew close. The union served to counter a church becoming legalistic and heavily structured – a contrast between God as an external rule maker, a kind of divine emperor, and personal dedication to working with the inner light.

Around 394 a man called Pelagius arrived in Rome with a message of a freely chosen and personal Christianity. Little is known about him except that he was probably Welsh or Irish, had prodigious learning and was an inspirational orator. He came into conflict with the eminent church father Augustine and Roman church authorities, was branded a heretic and hounded, even after his death when fraudulent versions of 'Pelagianism' were distributed and mocked. For a time, the official church settled back into its autocratic comfort zone.



Intricate Celtic design (called Insular) depicting the letter B – Book of Kells, c. 800; it was enormously influential, and the tradition continued as in this later French Psalter (book of Psalm music)

In 563 the Christian monk Columcille (Columba) arrived on Iona from Ireland and set up a community amicably alongside the druids. This Celtic outpost on the north-west edge of the earth became a major place of learning and produced beautiful artwork like the glorious Book of Kells now on display, two delicate pages at a time, in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin. The artistic tradition endured long after the teaching was suppressed.

From Iona Irish missionaries went out to spread unique Celtic Christianity. When they arrived in Europe, they found themselves in serious conflict with the Roman church. It's a story that spans many centuries. But Roman Catholicism would eventually rule, even across the British Isles.

Irish history has been one of struggle. Yet after all the dark history, you still experience the warmth and generosity and wonderful stories alive in the people right across this land. I fell in love with its ancient sites, the quiet winding roads, the cliffs and lakes and windy peat moors – all this is part of the haunting landscape that seeps in as a kind of knowing.

People still make pilgrimages to old sites and walk the paths from shrine to sacred place. There are Christian groups in these old Celtic lands across the British Isles that give voice to this spirituality and its nature traditions in their places of worship. And on the opposite side of the world amidst a

regenerated eucalyptus forest near Castlemaine in central Victoria, our Australian friends honour the land and the sacred feminine in their Johannine community. When I see this renewal, I'm enormously thankful.

And then we come home to the truth: as co-creator with the Logos light of the spiritual sun, the wisdom of the feminine may be hidden, has too often been ignored to the world's detriment, but has not been abandoned. The 'Celtic spirit' is, by definition, one that treasures the freedom to be who we are, that values Mother Earth and the living world in all its hues and voices, that lovingly seeks deep connection and longs to share this from the music of the heart. Wherever we are, however we listen, we can allow the elemental song of Brigid to resonate in our souls.