

MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY

*Celtic
Goddess
and
Irish Saint*

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CELTIC GODDESS AND IRISH SAINT

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.

Back through centuries the emerald isle endured a turbulent and anguished history, 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.

You still experience the warmth and generosity 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.

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.

BRIGID, THE GODDESS OF BECOMING AND BEING



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 guided becoming and being. She upheld the order of nature and worked equally in fire, water, air and earth. The fruits of the earth were offered at her feast. Wells and rivers were sacred to her, as was fire. You can still visit her sacred well and the Flame of Ireland at Kildare. It would later be dedicated to the Christian Saint Brigid and served by nuns and is now part of the Solas Bhríde centre for Celtic spirituality.

Brigid was an all-encompassing goddess, relating both to the cosmos and personally to every human. She was a unique kind of triple goddess known by the same name in her various functions. Her wisdom and knowledge were wide ranging, and she brought her fire energy to the Celts' three main areas of human activity – domestic, industrial-economic and sacred. From these came their love of nature and family, their forged weapons and wonderful decorative arts, and the arts of story, poetry and song.

Brigid maintained the integrity of these vital realms so that none dominated yet she enabled their interweaving. She was mutable and fluid while always holding true to the necessity of their essence in the outer world. She was never overwhelmed by external drifts and dislocations.

One secret of the longevity of the Celtic spirit is that through her authority the essence of her three '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 into the other areas. It is possible if we can access the source that was held by this goddess.

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 (then an Irish outpost). 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, 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 tragedy 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' (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.



Left: *The original form of sun-cross on a grave slab outside the Gallarus oratory on the Dingle Peninsula, County Kerry*
Right: *Early Celtic cross in the museum of the monastery of Clonmacnois, County Offaly, founded in 544*

It is enormously significant that the Christ impulse and Celtic spirituality drew close. The union would serve to counter a Roman 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.

AN ENTERPRISING IRISH SAINT

By the fifth century CE Brigid the goddess had moved from mythological realms into historical time. That is, she was mirrored in the living person of a powerful miracle-working saint. This woman even bore the name of the goddess, for she was Saint Brigid, also known as Bride. It was an affirmation of the feminine divine living on in Irish Christianity.

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.

Brigid survived as a beloved saint well beyond the demise of Celtic Christianity and the rise of Catholicism in Ireland. Today she still has a devoted following and many shrines to St Brigid are dotted across Ireland. Two are especially popular pilgrimage sites. One, with a holy well, is at her legendary birthplace on the Hill of Faughart near Dundalk. Another is the one at Kildare where she founded her first monastery in 470 beside an ancient oak tree. The monastery was quite democratic with nuns, monks and laypeople making up its community.

The waters of the sacred well at Kildare are known for their healing powers and stones mark a holy Way still walked on Brigid's saint day, 1st February. Marking the direct lineage back to the goddess Brigid, this is also the day of the Celtic feast of Imbolc and the goddess who welcomed in the light after the darkness of winter.

A sacred flame burns nearby. St Brigid's nuns kept the fire alight, continuing the tradition from those days when it was dedicated to the goddess and tended by priestesses. The fire was only extinguished during the sixteenth century suppression of the monasteries (in the reign of Henry VIII) but was rekindled in 1993 by Brigidine nuns. Thus, the fiery aura of Brigid lives on in this western isle.



St Brigid statue at her well holding aloft the sacred flame.

Who was she?

Saint Brigid was born around 450 and lived to 523. Tales of her miraculous deeds are numerous, but not so much is known about the real Brigid, with legends filling the gaps. As a child she is said to have made this extraordinary prophesy:

My garment shall be laid upon the Lord of the World ... the king of the elements himself shall lean upon my bosom. And I shall give him peace.

She became known as the foster mother of Christ, assisting the Virgin Mary with the holy babe. In Celtic society foster parents played vital and important roles – we have a faint echo today with the naming of godparents at infant baptisms. Then it was far from symbolic.

The story goes that Brigid-Bride was led by a white dove through a grove of rowan trees, the Celtic tree of life, to a place that was none other than the Holy Land and to a stable where she undertook to act as an aid woman to the mother of Jesus. She placed three drops of water on the infant's brow to unite him with the earth and sang special runes to the cows gathered around so they would give of their milk. She gave this to baby Jesus, deepening his connection with Mother Earth and all her children. Lastly, she wrapped her blue mantle about the child, claiming him as the Irish people's Lord of the Elements.

For this she was named Bride of the Calm, Bride of the Mantle and Bride of the Kine (cattle). Her mantle was believed to have gained magical powers.

Brigid's life story begins as the child of a slave woman Brocca and her owner, a man called Dubthach. But Dubthach sold Brocca to a Druid in whose service Brigid spent her early childhood. She was returned to her father around ten years of age. She worked hard without complaint. One characteristic got her into trouble and meant she was passed on to various owners. This was her charity. She gave away anything she could to people in need, so lavishly she reduced the wealth of households and farms.

Finally, her desperate father tried to sell her to the king of Leinster. As Brigid waited while negotiations were proceeding, she noticed a man begging. She also saw the King's jewel-encrusted sword, which she took and gave to the beggar so he could barter it for food for his family. Dubthach came back and realised what she had done. 'This is a disaster,' he raged. 'Don't you know the sword's value?' Brigid replied, 'Yes, that's why I gave it to the poor man.'

Her father must have dreaded the outcome, but the king, a Christian, was impressed. 'Leave her alone; her merit before God is greater than ours,' he said, and he freed her.

Thus, because of young Brigid the weapon of war became a means of sustenance, which harks back to the vision of the prophet Isaiah – the sword turned into the ploughshare – and the all-encompassing goddess redefined herself within Celtic Christianity through a new impulse of peace and the hope of its fruition.

Individual freedom of worship was a vital aspect of the Celtic church. Throughout the Celtic lands a lone individual or a small group would settle in wild places away from the affairs of the world, striving to discover the inner divine through an austere existence immersed in the spirit in nature that was so integral to this form of spirituality. St Kevin in constant communion with God beside the isolated lake of Glendalough, with birds and animals as his companions, and the small community on the lonely rock Skellig Michael off the stormy coast of Kerry are well-known examples.

Because one's personal spirituality was acknowledged, females were not excluded. This meant women had status. They helped celebrate the mass and in many monasteries men and women lived and worked together. There was also a tradition of 'soul friends', *amachara*, where two pilgrims of the way walked the spiritual path together as loving friends and helpers. Mutual alignment was the key through the soul meeting of male and female.

After dedicating herself to religious life Brigid established monasteries all over Ireland, including joint ones. Within them the busy saint promoted scholarship and the arts. The Irish church became a bastion of learning and culture at a time when a stultifying darkness was emerging from the Roman church on mainland Europe.

Her symbols



St Brigid's cross: The unusually dynamic shape of her cross may have its origin in the Bronze age sun wheel found in many ancient cultures, including the Celtic. Today it is made from rushes or straw and people hang it up on St Brigid's feast day – it is believed to keep fire, hunger and evil from the household. This cross became the saint's symbol from one of her legends. While ministering to an old chieftain, possibly her father, on his death bed, she took reeds from the floor and wove them into the distinctive pattern. Her rhythmic weaving action accompanied all the while by loving words calmed the old man's restless soul and he departed this world peacefully. This is a potent symbol of active spiritual work.

The anemone: it is also known as windflower, from the Greek *anemos* 'wind' for the way its colourful heads sway in the breeze. The anemone is found across temperate lands and in flower language symbolizes anticipation. As an early spring-blooming flower, it readily became associated with St Brigid and her goddess antecedent. One variety is named for her. In Christian lore the red flower represents the blood of Christ and anemones often appear in artworks depicting the grieving women at the crucifixion, such as on this page from a medieval manuscript, showing the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene.



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.

The legend of St Brigid at the holy child's birth as a helper in close association with the Virgin Mary, mystically links her through to the women's experience at Golgotha, which includes Mary Magdalene.

And the Magdalene through her experience of Golgotha, was united with Mother Mary on a soul level and spiritually with divine Sophia. This interweaving leads us into the mystery of the Holy Grail.

Mary Magdalene / St Brigid as Grail bearer.

In Portal Four I wrote about St Brigid's link with Glastonbury and the Holy Grail, which indicates that some people did recognize her soul's significant connection with Mary Magdalene. To recap. Brigid is said to have sojourned at Glastonbury. And in 2015 evidence of a Celtic Christian community was found dating to her time. Bride's Mound, a small hill with a view of the Tor, marks her pilgrimage site. It is where her chapel, originally dedicated to Mary Magdalene, once stood.

In further incarnations Mary's soul has brought an impulse into the world that would emerge as a soul picture for humans when the inner meaning of the Christ mystery was in real danger of being lost. It would reach its external expression in the Holy Grail stories of late twelfth century.

Yet the Grail is timeless, and the ongoing purpose of the Magdalene's enlightened soul has been to be a Grail bearer and messenger at specific times. In the fifth century this impulse was like a seed.

In the distinctive understanding of the Christ mystery which came to be known as 'Johannine' – with the Christ as both Lord of the elements and the destiny of individual souls – Mary Magdalene had been a key participant in initiation through Christ alongside the beloved disciple called John.

Hers is a purposeful story that continues. And I wonder whether those deeply perceptive Irish 'Johannine' Christians recognized the Magdalene soul reborn in Brigid their beloved saint.

And I wonder whether they perceived this soul helping to bring the mystery of the Holy Grail, not yet known by that name, into their world and into their souls in preparation for what was yet to awaken, like the anemone, the flower that represents 'anticipation'.

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, a group of Australians 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 with others from the music of the heart. Wherever we are, however we listen, we can allow her elemental song to resonate in our souls.

