



Ancient Celtic Myth, Magic, and Medicine
Jonathan Klemens

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The ancient Celts were an enchanting and mysterious pre-Christian people with a romantic and legendary history - a people of heroes, wizards, and fairies. These indomitable clans, identified by their language and culture, migrated from Central Europe and populated much of Western Europe, Britain, and Ireland until they were supplanted by the Romans, and later, Christianity. Julius Caesar stated that the Celts (Gauls) were "brave, but headstrong and impetuous."

The origins of the Celts in Britain are lost in remote antiquity, but many scholars now believe these mysterious tribes made their earliest appearance in Britain somewhere around 1500-1000 BC. Their migration to Britain occurred progressively over hundreds of years as they populated and ruled the modern day regions we know as England, Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, Brittany, the Isle of Man, and Wales. The Celtic languages today are split into two camps: P-Celtic is the old Britton, similar to Welsh, Cornish and Breton; Q-Celtic is Scots Gaelic, Irish, Manx, and the extinct Celtiberian of Spain.

The Celtic social structure was a mix of religious cosmology, animism, and democratic idealism with each tribe holding its own territory consisting of agricultural, forest, and wilderness lands. Other lands were worked in common for the chieftain, priests, the sick, and the poor. They were a fearless tribal people; both men and women were trained as warriors.

The various Celtic clans or tribes were unified by their common priesthood, the Druids. The word "Druid" is derived from "dru" meaning "truth" or "someone immersed in knowledge." The Greeks were the first to record the word "Druidae" dating back to the second century B.C.. The various clans had their own sacred tree, *crann bethadh*, or "Tree of Life" standing as a totem in the middle of their territory. These Druid priests, men and women, preserved religion, law, scholarship, and science and had paramount influence over all with their sacred authority. They managed the higher legal system and courts and it took up to twenty years of training before being initiated into the order. Bards (keepers of oral tradition) and Ovates (philosophers and keepers of prophecy and divination) were in turn instructed and trained by the respected and erudite Druids.

Celtic society in Britain perpetuated many of the shrines and feast days of the earlier megalithic times with the most important Celtic feast days being the four annual "Fire Festivals." Celtic beliefs were polytheistic and their pantheon consisted of as many as four hundred deities. They also believed that upon death the soul transmigrated to other humans,

and even other life forms. Later, with the advent the of Christianity, Druidism did not vanish, but merely transformed, and even when the historic St. Brigid converted to Christianity, she and her followers kept the sacred fire at Killdare.

Prior to the availability of Western alphabets, Celtic stories were largely passed on as oral tradition. The ancient storytellers of romantic myths fortunately preserved the beauty of Celtic culture. Interestingly, many of the mythical stories were not committed to paper for the first time until around 600-90 AD by predominately Christian monks.

The most famous Celtic legends are those of King Author and the wizard Merlin, the poet of Tweeddale. The true identity and origin of Author is obscure and controversial. Even though the Arthurian Tales were written in Welsh (Welsh, was also the language of southern and central Scotland in the 6th Century), many historians now believe, based on historical and geographical evidence, that some of the romantic and heroic adventures of King Author actually took place in Strathclyde, Scotland. Some historians further conclude that Author may have been Clinoch, the King of the Britons. The original location of Camelot is still very much obscure with several areas in England and Wales laying claim. Merlin, the famous advisor and mentor of Author, was a Druid wizard, prophet, bard, tutor, and keeper of arcane secrets. He was rumored to have been the son of an incubus (demon), and a mortal woman who was a princess and later a nun.

The ancient Druids were also Shamans (female: Shamankas) as well as clergy, and their costumes often included long white robes, headdresses, and feathered capes. They often carried a rowan wood scepter (slat) as a sign of their power and rank which could be used as a wand to perform magick (magic). Druid magic is dependent on a sound and healthy awareness of nature and the spirits and gods who live in nature. It is rooted strongly in the four natural elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Many spells correspond to one or more of these elements. The four compass points each had a significant corresponding color: North - black, South - white, East - red, and West - grey. Druid rituals intertwined the use of the four elements, direction, colors, magic stones, incense, and the lunar calendar.

Birds including the raven, swan, goose, owl, eagle, ouzel, and crane were considered sacred in the Celtic culture. Other divine animals included the dog, cat, wolf, bull, boar, stag, horse, bear, salmon, ram, serpent, and butterfly. These animals are often depicted in intricate knotted patterns. The number three was also sacred to the Druids and had

magical powers. This is exemplified in the Celtic triquetra, nonegram, trefoil, and the Triangle of Manifestation.

Many trees were also hallowed including the rowan, hazel, oak, and yew. The veneration or worship of the oak tree or oak-god was commonplace in Celtic and non-Celtic Europe; it could be used as food (acorns ground for flour) and to build shelter. Gatherings and festivals were often held in sacred oak groves.

The "little people" consisting of Dwarfs, Brownies, Elves, and Fairies are also a fascinating aspect of Celtic culture. These wee life-forms were deemed to be spiritual beings to whom the credulity of mankind has given an imaginary existence. The fairies, referred to as the "good neighbors," were beautiful miniatures of "the human divine form," in contrast to other less fortunate diminutive creatures. These prankish neighbors resided underground or in little green, rode upon milk-white steeds, and their clothing was most brilliant.

Leprechauns, a lucky and often imbibing type of male fairy, have become self-appointed guardians of ancient treasure (left by the Danes) burying it in crocks or pots. Their association with the rainbow and finding the "pot 'o gold" has forever ensconced the rainbow as a sign of prosperity.

The Gruagach (groo-gach) is a type of Brownie (Ulster House Brownie) that is believed to have traveled across the Atlantic with the sons and daughters of Ulster as they made new homes in the Colonies in the mid 1600s. They are still believed to exist to this day and are especially associated with the McKeen (Bann Valley) and McGregor families that landed in Boston harbor in 1718. All of these fascinating fantasy creatures are more readily seen by those gifted with "Second Sight," or the ability to see invisible objects, supernatural visions, and premonitions.

The esteemed Druids were the learned elite - the authority on just about everything including medicine. Their medical proficiency included the use of Medicated baths of herbs and milk, sweating-houses, trephining (drilling holes to relieve cranial pressure), sutures, probes, a crude stethoscope (made of a horn), healing oils, "healing stones" (still used in 17th C Scotland), and the use of rituals, spells, visions, and invocations. The Druid maxim for good health was, "cheerfulness, temperance, and exercise."

Healing magic might also involve invoking a deity of health and healing such as Airmid (Irish), Diancecht (Irish), Laeg (Irish), Meg the Healer (Scottish), Miach (Irish), Ariadne (Welsh/Cornish/Breton), or Clota

(Scottish). Airmid was the daughter of the God of Medicine, Diancecht. She was a magician and herbalist adept in all the healing arts.

Astronomy and astrology was also used to aid in medical diagnosis. They worshipped the sun and the moon and had a rudimentary conception and veneration of the closest planets in the solar system. Every celestial event was an omen.

Herbs are plants used for aromatic, savory or medicinal purposes and often had associations with specific Celtic deities. Druids were especially skilled in botany and the use of herbs and poisons. Dosage forms included teas, Tinctures, Fomentations, syrups, and salves, Commonly used herbs include: Anise, Blackthorn, Caraway, Chamomile, Dandelion, Dill, Elder, Eyebright, Foxglove, Wild Basil, Wild Garlic, Ginger, Hawthorn, Horse Radish, Ivy, Juniper (The berries were believed to have protective properties and were burned in the Scottish Highlands for purification), Lavender, Mint, Mistletoe (Favored by the Druids, and oaks sporting mistletoe, were most sacred. This herb was also seen as a sign from the Otherworld), Plantain, Rosemary, Rowan (Believed to avert the evil eye and very protective.), Skullcap, Sorrel, St. John's Wort, Valerian, and Yarrow (A sacred herb used as a love charm and one of the famous herbs of the "Lancashire Witches").

Other "cures" of a superstitious nature included: ingesting a fried or roasted mouse for smallpox or whopping cough, placing gold rings in the ears for sore eyes, swine's blood to remove warts, preserved serpent heads for treating snake bites, the healing power of used Baptismal water, and the use of amulets and talismans. The numerous sacred wells and lochs also offered healing powers for both body and mind.

Interest in the mysterious Druids has survived over many centuries. The Ancient Order of Druids was revived in 1781 in London and it is fascinating that Sir Winston Churchill was initiated into the Albion Lodge in 1908. Druidism also still exists in America with the two largest Druid Orders being Keltria and the *Ár nDraíocht Féin* (A.D.F.).

Fortunately, the history and beauty of Celtic culture have been preserved in customs and legends, art, music, literature, and antiquities for all to explore. When we realize that the simple eloquence of Celtic knotwork expresses the interconnection between destiny, the Three Worlds, and the human soul, we appreciate that it is not so simple, but beautiful, intricate, and intriguing. Through the continued study of the myth and magic of this legendary culture, we can better treasure the influence of the fascinating people called the Celts.



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