

Irish Mythology

Irish mythology is the body of narratives in prose and verse which informed and reflected public and private belief and behaviour in pagan Ireland, not directly accessible to modern scrutiny, but reflected in the extant mythological literature that has survived in the manuscripts of monastic scribes and redactors. These remains, however rich and varied, are the product of editorial selection designed to accommodate the traditions of the native gods of the Tuatha Dé Danann within a Christian context and obviously cannot provide a comprehensive or wholly authentic reflection of the integrated mythology cultivated by the priestly and learned class in pre-Christian society. The manuscript survivals are, to some extent, complemented by other comparable material: Welsh/British literature, Classical comments on the Celts, and the iconography and epigraphy of Celtic and Romano-Celtic monuments in Britain and the Continent. The inevitably fragmentary nature of this material, and its inadequacy in reflecting pagan Celtic belief accentuate the apparent heterogeneity and disorganization of the tradition and disguise its underlying consistency. What survives is not primary mythology but *mythologie littérisée*, to use George Dumézil's term. The common perception of Irish, and Celtic, mythology as confused and chaotic is partly due to the inadequacies of the extant documentation, and still more to the fact that it does not present a pantheon of deities clearly demarcated by name and function. Yet, notwithstanding the multiplying of names and the overlapping of functions, the often complex and nuanced thematic structures that emerge from the extant texts presuppose the existence in an earlier period of a much more coherent and organized mythological system. Its hidden consistency and structure are attested by various universally significant features.

The god Lug is (*sam*)*ildánach* ['skilled in many arts together'] like his Gaulish counterpart, the 'inventor of all the arts' in Caesar's account — who gave his name to Lugudunum/Lyon, with Irish tradition preserving the legends that justify the name. The youthful conqueror of malevolent oppressors, his feast was celebrated throughout the Celtic lands, and to some extent still is in Ireland and Brittany in the *Lughnasa festival. As the divine archetype of sacral kingship he is closely associated with the goddesses identified with the integrity of the land under several aspects — fertility, protection and sovereignty — and their various embodiments dramatically represented as radiant queen, loathsome crone, or battle Fury. Because of her elective and validating function as goddess of sovereignty, she sometimes assumes an assertive persona which is variously reflected in the literary portrayals

of *Medb, Macha [see *Emain Macha] and even the very human Deirdre [see **Longes mac nUislenn*]. The sovereignty myth figured by the triad of *Eriu, Fódla, and Banba had at its core a ritual in which the new ruler accepted a drink from the goddess and subsequently mated with her. Its remarkably high frequency reflects its potential as political propaganda as well as the focal importance of kingship in traditional society. The aspectual diversity of the goddess is impressive. The fearsome trio of the Morrígan [‘Phantom Queen’], Bodb [‘Scald-crow’] and Nemain [‘Frenzy’] rejoice in conflict and slaughter. Macha is both battle-goddess and embodiment of quiet fruitfulness. *Brigit [‘The Exalted One’] is patron of poetry, healing, and craftsmanship, equivalent in name to Briganti/Brigantia, tutelary deity of the British tribe of the Brigantes, and in function similar to the Gaulish goddess called ‘Minerva’ by Caesar. Macha, in one of her theophanies, incarnates the Celtic horse-goddess known widely as Epona. Intrinsic to all is the concept of the mother-goddess, figure of fertility, ancestress of peoples, and member of the archetypal divine family of father, mother, and son. Boann, personification of the Boyne [see *Newgrange], the sacred river with its own prolific mythology, has the Dagda for her husband and Mac ind Oc/Oengus for her son, forming a triune family abundantly attested in the rest of the Celtic world as well as in universal mythology.

Kingship, the pivotal institution of early Irish society, has its own rich mythology woven into the legends of famous kings such as Conaire, *Cormac mac Airt and Niall Noígíallach, and embodying many reflexes of Indo-European ideology. Though part of the heroic tradition, the emphasis here is on wise leadership and good judgement, and on the physical and moral qualities that ensure or endanger the prosperity of land and society. In the mythology of the hero the stress is on martial prowess and the defeat of demonic opponents, as with *Cú Chulainn and the Fianna.

See Maria-Louise Sjeostedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, translated from the French by Myles Dillon (1949); Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (1961); Ann Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (1967); and Máire Mac Neill, *The Festival of Lughnasa* (1962).