

# Water and Celtic Mythology

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## INTRODUCTION

### Who were the Celts?

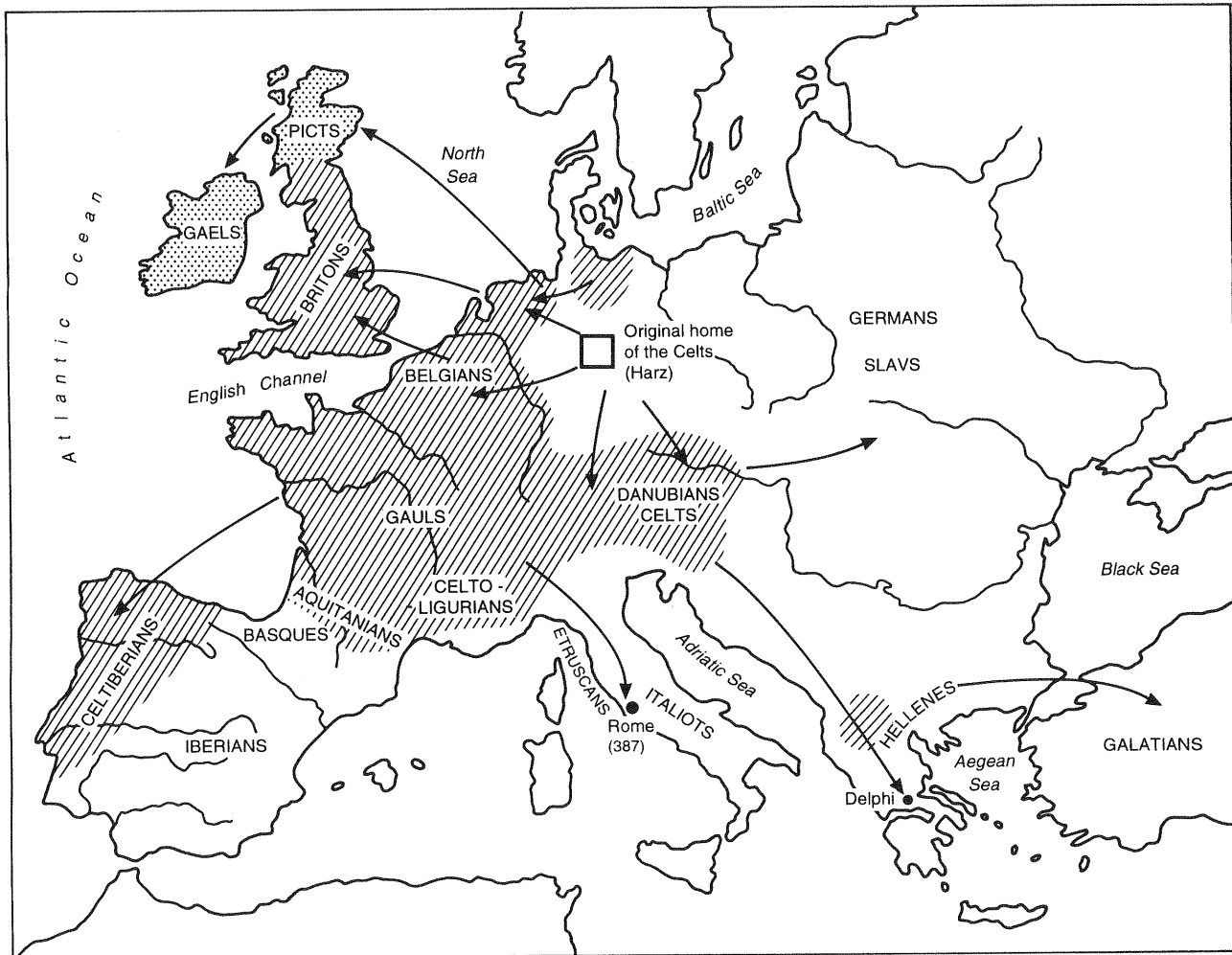
For the purposes of this discussion it is sufficient to define the Celts as a distinct Indo-European group who are the ancestors of two linguistic groups: (a) the Irish, the Scots and the peoples of the Isle of Man, and (b) the Welsh, the Cornish and the Bretons. Sometime between the beginning of the 3rd millennium B.C. and the beginning of the 1st millennium B.C. there developed on the continent of Europe and subsequently on the islands of Britain and Ireland societies that became both culturally and linguistically Celtic (Ross 1986). Around 500 B.C. there was a movement of the Celts from their original home in North/Central Europe to a wide area of continental Europe and to the peripheral islands. Around 300 B.C. there were further movements of the Celts culminating in the sack of Delphi. These movements in the first millennium B.C. are shown on Figure 1 (Markale 1978).

It is interesting for hydrologists to note that these movements of the Celts have been attributed by some writers to the impact of climate change. Thus Markale (1976) in his work on Celtic Civilisation writes:

"At the end of the Bronze Age after the first Halstatt period, i.e. about 530 B.C., the lake villages were hastily abandoned by their occupants, western Europe became suddenly cold and wet again. The Scandinavian bogs indicate that new formations of peat followed a period of comparative drought. The North Sea and Baltic coastlines became areas of inundated marshland"

and goes on to link this climate change to this major migration of the Celts.

"Archaeological evidence indicates vast southward migrations of people escaping the flooded regions. The first and most important migrations of Britons to Great Britain can be dated



Movement of the Celts after the Hallstatt period

from this period and these movements were echoed in the strange Welsh traditions that followed at a much later date".

The traditions referred to by Markale were the mythological stories of buried cities such as those of Ys in Brittany, Lough Neagh in Ireland as well as the legend of Gyddno Garanhir in Wales. Issar (1990, p.170) links this movement of Celtic peoples with a widespread mini-glacial period characterized in the fertile Crescent by t80 depletion in the isotope record of Galilee and the emergence of the Nabatean nation in the desert area around Petra.

Even though the descendants of the Celts are now largely confined to the western periphery of Europe, the signs of their former habitation and of their close affinity with water is more widespread. Throughout the wide area shown on Figure 1, the names of rivers are still traceable to their original Celtic names when they played a significant role in the culture of the local inhabitants.

### **Water and Civilisation**

Water is strongly connected not only with the emergence of life but also with the emergence of civilisation. This topic in the past has only attracted the attention of scholars in individual disciplines but the time is now ripe for an interdisciplinary approach to the question. Accordingly the initiative of UNESCO in proposing a project on Water and Civilisation involving both hydrologists and archaeologists, and covering such topics as the rise of civilisations and water as a cause of war throughout the ages, is to be welcomed and supported.

Individual studies on aspects of this question give us a headline on which to base regional studies. Wittfogel (1957) studied what he termed the hydraulic societies of Asia in which large - scale irrigation gave rise to a bureaucratic political system. While his more sweeping generalisations have been modified by subsequent experts, particularly in relation to Latin America, there is much of interest in his approach. Our knowledge of classical times has been reviewed by Garbrecht (1987), while Issar (1990) has written on the links between hydrology and climate and tradition in the lands of the Bible.

### **Water and Religion**

Throughout the world and in all civilisations, water has occupied a significant place in religious thought and practice. Thus, Brennerman and Brennerman (1995, pp. 15-16) in dealing with the nature of sacred water write:

"Water is spoken of as the source, the healer and the essence of plant life. The regenerative ability of water, its power to fertilise and bring about new birth, is the pattern of life itself".

They go on to refer to the cyclic nature of many water phenomena and the relation between the form of water and its container in the words:

"The pattern of the tides, governed by the moon, is imitative of the cycles of the earth: sowing and harvesting, living and dying. The water itself cannot be formed except as it gives itself to a stream, river, bog, pond or well, coming as a flood, rainstorm mist or snow".

This special significance of water is found in all religions throughout the world.

The importance of water in religion was particularly strong in the case of the Celts. Thus Ross (1967, p.20) introduced her discussion of sanctuaries linked to water in the words:

"Springs, wells and rivers are of first and enduring importance as a focal point of Celtic cult practice and ritual. Rivers are important in themselves, being associated in Celtic tradition with fertility and with deities such as the divine mothers and the sacred bulls, concerned with this fundamental aspect of life".

Since all aspects of the subject cannot be dealt with in a single account, attention will be concentrated in what follows on the Celtic concept of the Otherworld as a source of wisdom, and on the mythical treatment of topics relating to the hydrological cycle, and on the recycling of the myths throughout the Christian era to the present day.

## **THE CELTIC OTHERWORLD**

### **The source of Wisdom**

The Celtic Otherworld was always connected with a body of water either beneath the surface of the sea or a lake or beneath the surface of the ground. As emphasised by O'Rahilly (1946, p. 318):

"In Celtic belief the Otherworld was the source of all wisdom, and especially of that occult wisdom to which humanity could not (except in a very limited degree) attain. One of the characteristics of the god of the Otherworld was his omniscience".

O'Rahilly (1946, p. 318) goes on to speak of the polymorphic nature of the Otherworld deity:

"He was often regarded as possessing, or assuming, animal shape, e.g. as a horse, a bull or a wolf. As he could fly through the air, he might be conceived as a great bird (an eagle or a swan)".

For hydrologists, however, more interesting is the persistent identification of the god with the salmon and the salmon with wisdom.

### **Links with the Otherworld**

The leakage of wisdom from the Otherworld to our human world is described in many accounts of Celtic mythology. One attractive version is the description of the hazel nuts of Knowledge, the salmon of Wisdom and the bubbles of Mystic Inspiration in the *Dindsenchas* which records the mythic origins of place names. The English version of the rhymed version (Gwynn 1913, pp. 292-295) in dealing with origin of the Sinann (Shannon) flowing from Connla's Well reads as follows:

"The nine hazels of Crimall the sage  
drop their fruits yonder under the well!  
they stand by the power of magic spells  
under a darksome mist of wizardry

Together grow, in unwonted fashion,  
their leaves and their flowers: -  
a wonder is this, though a noble quality  
and a wonder their ripening all in a moment".

The poem goes on to describe the link with the salmon and the bubbles:

"When the cluster of nuts is ripe  
they fall down into the well:  
they scatter below on the bottom,  
and the salmon eat them.  
From the juice of the nuts (no paltry matter)  
they form the mystic bubbles;  
thence come momentarily the bubbles  
down the green-flowing streams".

The remaining verses describe how the maiden Sinan attempted to drink the mystic bubbles and was drowned "so from her is Sinan named".

### **The Wisdom of Finn**

Of those who succeeded in acquiring supernatural knowledge and wisdom, the best known is Finn Mac Cumhail, hero of the Fenian Cycle. Two different groups of stories survive to explain his unusual wisdom, both agreeing in ascribing his thumb as the seat of his special powers. O'Rahilly (1946, pp. 326-330) gives several versions of these stories. One version from the first group of explanations was as follows (O'Rahilly 1946, p. 328):

"One account of this says that Finn encountered in the doorway a woman of the *sid*, [underground cave under a mound] who had in her hand a dripping vessel from which she had just distributed drink. The woman closed the door against him, and Finn's finger got jammed between the door and the door post. He put his finger into his mouth (to ease the pain) and then found that he had acquired the illumination of *imbas* [i.e. occult wisdom]".

According to a literary version of the second set of stories Finn acquired his wisdom as a youth when learning from Finn Eces who caught the salmon of wisdom in the River Boyne and gave it to Finn Mac Cumhaill to cook with a strict warning not to eat any of it but bring it directly to him. During the cooking Finn accidentally touched the salmon and scalded his thumb. He instinctively put his thumb into his mouth to ease the pain and ever afterwards was able to acquire *fis* (knowledge, wisdom) by putting his thumb into his mouth.

## ORIGINS OF LAKES AND RIVERS

### Bodies of water

Reference has already been made to the influence on the history of the Celts of the apparent climate change in the first millennium B.C. The Book of Invasions (Leabhar Gabhala Erenn), which is the earliest history of Ireland, describes a number of lake-bursts, i.e. the sudden appearance of a new lake, usually on the occasion of the burying of a hero. This account states that "Parthalon found not in Ireland before him more than three lakes and nine rivers" (Macalister 1937, p. 17) and that there were "seven lake-bursts over the lands of Ireland in the time of Parthalon" (Macalister 1937, p.15) over a period of 25 years. In the same book it is recorded that in the next invasion "there were four lake-bursts in Ireland in the time of Nemed" (Macalister 1937, p. 121).

The traditions of submerged towns due to either inundation from the sea or lake overflows are present in all the Celtic traditions. Earlier reference is made to the possible origin of these stories in climate change. There would be scope for interesting cooperation between Celtic scholars, paleoclimatologists and hydrologists in seeking to understand the reality underlying these mythical accounts.

### Origin of the River Boyne

We return to the Dindsenchas for a typical Celtic description of the origin of a river. The versions that survive to us have been adapted for Christian purposes and like other written versions of Celtic legends have tones of anti-feminism that contrast with the dedication of water sites exclusively to local goddesses in earlier times.

The following is the prose account of the drowning of Boann, the goddess of the River Boyne, in her own sacred waters (Clark pp. 136-137):

"Boann wife of Nechtan son of Labraid went to the secret well which was in the green of the fairy-mound of Nechtan. No one who went to it could come away from it without his two eyes bursting, except Nechtan himself and his three cup-bearers, whose names were Flesc and Lam and Luam".

The moral tone of the Christian literary version is clear in the continuation of the account:

"Once upon a time Boann went through pride to test the well's power, and declared that it had no secret force which could shatter her form, and thrice she walked from right to left round the well. Whereupon three waves from the well broke over her and deprived her of a thigh and one of her hands and one of her eyes. Then, she, fleeing her shame, turned seaward, with the water behind her as far as Boyne-mouth where she was drowned".

The longer metrical version (Gwynn 1913, p. 26-33; Dooge 1991 p.7) opens with a linking of the Boand river with other rivers of the world (Severn, Tiber, Jordan, Euphrates, Tigris) in accordance with the classical concept of the hydrological cycle. The metrical version is most pleasing as exemplified by the verse describing Boann's final flight:

"Every way the woman went  
the cold white water followed  
from the Sid to the sea (not weak it was)  
so that thence it is called Boand"

with its poetical echoes of the meandering river and the reducing velocity. Many of the recurrent concepts in relation to river goddesses among the Celts are paralleled in the Hindu Tradition. The intense sense of locality is echoed in the fact that the national anthem of modern India "is a litany of the great place-names of her sacred geography" (Eck 1984, p. 172). Many other parallels are to be found between the two traditions in the expert literature e.g. Dillon (1973,1974) and Eck (1984).

### **Origin of the 12 rivers**

The alternative view of the hydrological cycle with precipitation rather than groundwater as the origin of springs and rivers is also represented in Irish mythology. This links the two sacred sites of Celtic culture: the hill and the spring. As remarked by Rees and Rees (1961, p. 160):

"In diverse cosmologies the mountain in the centre of the earth is the source of the world's rivers. the centre is symbolised not only by a mountain, a pillar, a

fire-altar and a tree, but also by the well of life. There is more than a suggestion of this in the derivation of twelve chief rivers from a mythological event which occurred at Uisneach. It was during an assembly held there on the occasion of Diarmait son of Cerball that a great hail-storm fell upon the gathering. Such was its greatness that the one shower left twelve chief streams in Ireland for ever".

This story was later christianised in a form that attributed to Saint Ciaran the miraculous ending of a drought by causing twelve rivers to radiate from Uisneach (Dooge 1991, p.10).

## **CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

### **The pagan cult site**

The continuity from Neolithic times to the present day in relation to folk practices at well sites in Celtic regions is one of the most remarkable examples of persistence known in anthropology (Ross 1967, p. 5-7). In every Celtic country, and in many areas no longer Celtic, the recovered votive offerings from local cult sites at wells can be dated over an enormous stretch of time with a degree of continuity unknown in any other religious phenomena (Eliade 1963, p.p. 200-201). It is interesting to note that one of the most noted finds of Celtic material was that of the source of the Seine (Sequana) and that this was also the location of the historically important first comparison of rainfall and runoff by Pierre Perrault in 1674 (Dooge 1959).

As noted by Brennerman and Brennerman (1995, p.15) certain practices have also survived:

"In addition to votive offerings, other practices that are ongoing at the springs include drinking the water for cures and grace; placing objects into the well; personifying wells that evolve from a cult god to the name of a saint; putting twigs, egg stores, or berries in or near the water, associating a flagstone, a tree with a particular spring; and presenting for a cure the cloth fragments or clouties that signify disease".

All of these practices are to be found at many of the 500 holy wells still identifiable in Ireland today.

Many of the pagan practices are only known through an oral tradition and our knowledge of them is patchy. It would be gratifying to know more about the ancient assemblies in particular. The information we have on Aonach Tailten which lasted as a fair until around the year 1800 A.D. only whets our appetite. The accounts by O'Donovan (1836),



Wilde (1849) and Conwell (1864) of the trial marriages based only on the woman's hand thrust through a hole in a wooden fence refer to the site of the vale of marriage as being near an artificial body of water and the two earthen mounds of separation as being nearby (McNeill 1962, p. 311-338).

### **From Pagan to Christian**

The surviving wells linked to folk customs in Ireland bear the names of Christian saints but continue to be a focus for the highly developed sense of locality that is typically Celtic. This fascinating transition from pagan to christian custom is described by Brennerman and Brennerman (1995) in Chapter 4 on 'The coming of Patrick'. The following is part of that account:

"There were certain symbols at the wells that had a common grounding in both Christian and Celtic traditions and that made possible the syncretion that occurred between them. The holy wells provide us with the crucible for that syncretion. It was at the well that Celt and Christian met, and there that the intentional relationship was established that resulted in the hybrid called Celtic Christianity, which later became a thorn in the side of Rome".

In connection with the last remark, it is interesting to note that a recent book on Celtic Christianity (Toulson 1987) asserted that:

"The Celts felt strongly that adherence to the Will of God could be equated with obedience to the rhythms and harmonies of the natural environments. If these were carelessly or deliberately flouted, disaster was bound to result"

so that study of our Celtic heritage may have relevance to the current debate on sustainable development.

### **Recycling the myths**

The transition from Paganism to Christianity was by no means the final transition of old customs. The poetry in Irish contains many echoes of the old beliefs and symbols and style of composition. Thus, there is a striking resemblance between the topographic poem on the Shannon and its tributaries written by O'Braonain (1994) and the rhymed Dindshenchas quoted earlier in relation to the Shannon and the Boyne.

The ancient myths were used as a source of inspiration by the leading writers of the Irish Literary Revival. Because of the intense academic interest in the poetry of W. B. Yeats, detailed studies of his manuscripts enable us to follow his sources and extensive revisions. A typical example is the study by Sidnell, Mayhew and Clark (1972) on the writing of the

Shadowy Waters. The authors refer to a correspondence in 1898 between Yeats and Mrs. Dorothea Hunter a fellow-member of the Order of the Golden Dawn (Sidnell et al. 1972, p. 22) in which he wrote in reference to Connla's well:

"I have had a number of visions on the way home, greatly extending the symbolism we got tonight. The souls of ordinary people remain after death in the waters and these waters become an organised world if you gather up the flames that come from the waters of the well when the berries fall upon it, and make them into a flaming heart, and explore the waters with this as a lamp. They are the waters of emotion and passion, in which all but purified souls are entangled, and have the same relation to our plan of fixed material form as the divine World of fluid fire has to the heroic world of fixed intellectual form" .

This exploration of myth to explore romantic national consciousness is typical of Yeats' early years.

James Joyce's approach to literature differs in many respects from that of Yeats, but he too was concerned with the symbolism of water. The more one explores his work the more complex this becomes (Timoczko 1994, Hagana 1994). Of particular interest to scholars are such myths as that of Finn and the Salmon of Wisdom (Cumpiano 1977) and that of drowned cities (Day 1992) remains a subject of great importance and interest to the Celts.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the Celtic tradition of concern with water should be more for hydrologists than a dilettante interest in the rives of our ancestors. The present gathering of Celtic hydrologists gives us an opportunity to discuss what we can do in our generation. Obviously, we can serve that tradition by doing our jobs as hydrologists as diligently and as well as we can. In addition, I would make a few small suggestions. Firstly, I would suggest that in our respective Celtic regions we should in the publication of our hydrometric data include the ancient Celtic name of the rivers in brackets after the modern name. Secondly, I would suggest that in our respective regions some of us should discuss the possibility of joint projects with anthropologists, archaeologists, paleoclimatologists and experts in Celtic Studies. Thirdly, I would suggest those of us in a position to do so should support vigorously the UNESCO project on Water and Civilisation and make a Celtic contribution to it.

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