

# **Ancient Celts and Their Environment**

*in*

## **'Earth Sea and Sky'**

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*This chapter looks at how the pre-Christian Celts interacted with the world around them. Their approach to daily life balanced a recognition that their survival depended on using the animals and plants around them with the knowledge that a respectful relationship with their environment was required to maintain prosperity.*

### **Forests and Farmland**

Use of iron in its various forms has revolutionized the world and profoundly affected the environment. The Celts, being predominantly farmers, needed arable land to grow crops and to provide for their domesticated animals. The ready availability of iron tools facilitated forest clearance for these purposes. Pollen analysis from bogs and lake sediments shows that such clearances did indeed occur during the Bronze and Iron Ages and that at least some of these events coincided with the emergence of Celtic culture.

Dense forests of oak, beech and hazel covered much of Europe during the early Bronze Age. Many were cleared during the following centuries to provide land for cultivation and for animal husbandry. Substantial tracts of forest remained when Celtic culture made its first appearance, but much had already disappeared by then. Fields and pastures were the norm for the emergent Celts. They and, later, the Romans continued to transform the landscape. The typical Celt engaged mostly in farming and trade, despite the depiction in the sagas of an heroic society of kings, queens and warriors. The aristocracy were indeed part of Celtic culture but all levels of society had a common need for food, shelter and warmth. The local environment provided that need. Woodlands had to be cleared for agriculture but they also had to be nurtured and protected for domestic uses such as building materials, firewood, healing remedies and dyestuffs. The Celts had to maintain a balance between the two needs.

It is not easy to assess just how much forest clearance was undertaken by mainland Celts because several other cultures also contributed to the process. Ireland was one of the few Celtic areas that remained free of dominance by other cultures until the twelfth century and it is there that we can find some indication of the Celtic attitude to clearance.

Irish sagas refer approvingly to individuals who cleared plains, thereby making the land suitable for agriculture. The importance placed by the early Irish on forest clearance is indicated by the frequency of placenames with components such as *Moy-*, (*Magh*), meaning 'plain' and *Clon-*, (*Cluain*) meaning 'meadow.' Examples are *Moytura* (*Magh Turaidh, the Plain of Turaidh*) and *Clontarf* (*Cluain tarbh, the Meadow of the Bull*). Apart from clearances for agricultural purposes,

trees were felled to make way for roadways. Creation of roads across plains and bogs is mentioned in an early Irish text, *Tochmarch Etain*, and the practice is supported by archaeological finds such as the Corlea Bog road, made from oak trees that were felled in 148 BCE. Additional evidence comes from the modern Irish word for path- and road-way, *slí*, from the earlier word *slige*, meaning 'clearance, felling.'

There seems little doubt then that, as on mainland Europe, Irish forests were cleared to facilitate agriculture and to make roadways. The annals give the impression that large areas of the country had been cleared of woodland by the end of the fourth century. This is supported not only by scientific evidence but by frequent references to tours of their territories by kings and their entourages. Such movements would not have been easy through dense woodland. Nevertheless, *Bede*, writing in the eighth century, remarked on the extent of Irish forests at that time and *Giraldus Cambrensis* (*Gerald of Wales*), who toured parts of Ireland shortly after the Normans arrived in the twelfth century, commented that "there are, here and there, some fine plains, but in comparison with the woods they are small indeed." It seems, then, that the Irish Celts cleared some woodlands for agriculture and ease of travel while deliberately preserving, maintaining and cultivating others. The importance of trees is recognized in an early Irish law tract that details the penalties imposed on individuals who felled or even damaged a tree on someone else's property.

The activities of the Celts and their Bronze Age forebears were not solely responsible for the reduction of European forest cover. Climate change, of which we are very much aware today, is not a new phenomenon. The earth's climate is constantly changing and was doing so long before human activity could have had any influence on its rate of change. Pollen records, dendrochronology and analysis of ice-cores all show evidence of marked swings in climatic conditions since the end of the last ice age about 10,000 years ago. The climate deteriorated dramatically during the first millennium BCE, when Celtic culture first appeared. This is now recognized as the culmination of a decline that had begun 2000 years earlier. Rainfall increased and average temperatures dropped, resulting in the expansion of bogs and reduction of forested areas. Thus, while there is no doubt that the Celts did engage in forest clearance, scientific evidence indicates that natural causes were also responsible. Despite this, we know from the numerous depictions of woodland animals in Celtic artwork that substantial forested areas must have still remained on mainland Europe during the Iron Age.

### Sacred Trees and Groves

Classical writers tell us that each mainland Celtic tribe maintained a sacred grove called *nemeton* by the Gauls. The goddess Nemetona was venerated in both Britain and Gaul, and Celtic tribes in general regarded certain trees as sacred. In popular writing, the oak is most closely associated with the Celts, and there is little doubt of its importance. *Pliny* writes that oak trees had especial significance for druids, and that they conducted their most sacred rituals in oak groves. However, geographical location seems to have dictated the variety of tree held sacred by each tribe. Those living in the Pyrenees, for example, dedicated altars to *Fagus*, the beech tree. Sacred trees in southern Gaul seem to have been

conifers. The names of some tribes were derived from Celtic names for trees. Examples include the *Eburones* and the *Lemovices* who were, respectively, the people of the yew and of the elm, indicating their regard for these specific trees. The concept of the "sacred tree" may have survived well into Christian times. The Annals of Ulster record that the Ulstermen felled the sacred trees at the royal inauguration site of a rival clan in the year 1111, nearly seven centuries after Christianity was introduced to Ireland.

Further indications of the Celtic reverence for trees are seen in the ogam alphabet and in the Old Irish tree-list. Each of the original twenty letters in the ogam alphabet is linked to a tree or shrub. Although the groupings in the tree-list seem to have been for economic reasons, they nevertheless provide some indication of the regard the medieval Irish had for each tree and shrub. They were classified as either the "nobles," "commoners," "lower divisions" or "bushes" of the wood. Not surprisingly, the "nobles" include oak, hazel, yew and ash. Among the "bushes" were bracken, furze and heather. Each tree, shrub and bush was valued for the benefit it provided, irrespective of its place in the hierarchy. Although some oaks were especially sacred to the Celts, the tree's main importance was for provision of acorns on which domesticated pigs could feed during the winter. Hazelnuts were a valuable source of protein and other nutrients for humans during the lean winter months. Other trees and shrubs were used to dye cloth, tan leather or for medicinal purposes.

### Wild Animals

Apart from their use as providers of building materials and other resources, woodlands were also home to wild animals such as deer and boar, game animals hunted by the Celts.

Irish texts provide some insight into methods employed by the Celts to hunt game. Deer were hunted using a number of techniques. They were chased by hounds, stalked on foot or driven towards waiting hunters who killed them with spears. They were also caught in deer-pits, impaled on hidden spikes or immobilized by leg traps. Mainland Celts hunted several species of deer and elk, but Ireland supported only red deer at the time.

The ancient Celts hunted forest animals for sport and for food. Celtic nobility reveled in the hunt as a way of demonstrating their prowess and for the sheer exhilaration of pitting man against beast. Irish, Welsh and Arthurian sagas describe chasing animals for the joy and challenge of the hunt, as well as for the feast afterwards. The story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example, has graphic descriptions of animal hunts. In an Irish story, *Diarmuid*, lover of *Gráinne*, was killed by a magical wild boar in the final stages of a hunt. This, and other stories of deer and boar hunts, is recounted in the Fionn Cycle. Deer and boar were not the only animals hunted, however. The Irish tale, "*The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*," describes how *Conaire* pursued great white-speckled birds until his horses were tired.

Wild boar are also forest animals. Unlike deer, which were hunted mainly for the thrill of the chase, wild pigs were sought for their meat. The boar hunt is glorified

in some sagas but it was a dangerous exercise. Boar are renowned for their ferocity when cornered and their tusks can easily disembowel hounds, horses and hunters. The sensible hunter did not dare to hunt them on horseback. Instead, he used hounds to drive them into a pit or trap. Boar are still found in the wild on the mainland but they became extinct in Britain and Ireland some time after the twelfth century because of over-hunting and loss of habitat.

There is some, although sparse, evidence that continental Celts may also have hunted bears. If they did, we have no records of hunting techniques or of the reasons for hunting them. Bears plundered farms and, if they were ever hunted, it was probably for this reason. There is no doubt about their significance to the early Celts, though, because bear figurines have been found throughout Celtic Europe. Perhaps most important is a bronze casting of a Gaulish goddess, identified by inscription as *Artio*. The goddess is seated and holds fruit, some of which she offers to a large bear facing her. However, it is not clear from the iconography if *Artio* (Gaulish name equating to 'bear') is protectress or hunter of bears. She may have filled both roles. The importance of bears to the Celts is further emphasized by the frequency of bear-related names. An early Irish tribe called itself *Artraige*, the bear-people, and one of the most famous Irish kings was *Cormac mac Airt* whose father was *Art Óenfer*. Curiously, bears had been extinct in Ireland for thousands of years before the arrival of the Celts, although they survived in Scotland until the second century and possibly as late as the tenth century.

Although domestic fowl provided eggs and meat, the Celts also hunted wild birds such as woodcock, snipe, duck and grouse for food. There are indications that swans and geese were hunted also and it is known that capercaillie, a large grouse, survived in Irish and Scottish woodlands until the eighteenth century. No doubt it was hunted too. Birds were either caught in nets or killed with slingshots. The Irish and Welsh had ambivalent feelings about raptors such as hawks and eagles. On the one hand, they appear as mythological figures like the *Irish Hawk of Achill* and *Lleu Llaw Gyfes* in the Welsh *Mabinogi*. On the other, farmers regarded hawks and eagles as vermin because of their depredations on young pigs and hens. There is no evidence that falconry was practiced in insular Europe until about the ninth century when it arrived in England from the mainland.

## Fish

Fishing is also mentioned in the texts, but the best known example is probably that of Fionn's capture of the *breadán feasa*, the salmon of knowledge. According to the legend, *Fionn Mac Cumhaill* was apprenticed to a druid who instructed him to keep watch for the fabled salmon that would impart the gift of foresight to the first person who tasted its flesh. Fionn caught the fish but, as he was cooking it, the heat of the fire blistered its skin. In fear of the druid's inevitable wrath, Fionn tried to puncture the blister and burned his thumb in the process. He put his thumb in his mouth to cool the burning, thereby inadvertently receiving the first taste. Thus he, and not the druid, was gifted with foresight. The druid was, understandably, a little peeved but he realised that Fionn was the one destined to receive the gift. Unfortunately, the legend doesn't give us much information

about the method used to catch the fish. We must rely on archaeological evidence for most of our information.

Salmon, trout and eels were the most important fish for the insular Celts, but sturgeon and carp species must have been equally important to those on the mainland close to large rivers such as the Danube. The Celts knew about natural cycles and must have understood that salmon and eels, being migratory fish, were most accessible during their annual passage through estuaries. Weirs and traps made of stone or wood were designed so that fish swimming into them would have difficulty finding the exit. Remains of many such structures built in medieval times have been found in estuaries and the technique is still in use today. More familiar fishing methods, such as hook and line were also used to catch fish but, as is still the practice, the net was the most commonly used device.

### Domestic Animals

Although they hunted animals, the Celts were primarily farmers who reared animals for food and clothing. Cattle, horses, sheep and pigs are mentioned most frequently in the annals and other texts. Bee-keeping was also important, as evidenced by an entire law tract, *Bechbretha* (bee-judgements), devoted to the topic.

Cattle were reared primarily for milk rather than for meat. The cow was the principal unit of currency according to Irish records; rents and legal fines were reckoned in "*cow-units*." It was customary to drive cattle and sheep to high ground in early summer, thereby freeing the lower, cleared, land for crop production. The animals were cared for on the high ground by younger members of the family until the beginning of winter when they were returned to the homestead and put to pasture in the harvested fields. The early Irish harvested just the ears of grain crops, leaving the stalks as grazing for over-wintering cattle. Some beasts were rendered by clients to lords as rent. Young bulls that could not be sustained by available fodder were slaughtered on their return to the homestead. A portion of the kill was consumed in a subsequent feast, and the remainder was salted for use until the following Spring. The beginning of Spring was the time when lambs were born and the ewes began to produce milk again. Ewe milk and its products were a welcome change for farmers and their lords after the dietary deprivations of the winter.

Horses were used by the early Celts for transport and as work animals. However, they are most frequently associated with the warrior aristocracy. Chariots, horse trappings and, in one case, a complete horse team have been found in royal graves. The degree of ornamentation on harness and chariot fittings shows that these items were status symbols. Two-wheeled chariots were used from the fourth century BCE onwards but there is some evidence that the very earliest mainland Celts used four-wheeled chariots. It is still not clear exactly how they were used in warfare. A Roman coin from c. 48 BCE shows a naked Celtic warrior holding a shield and poised spear standing in a two-wheeled chariot driven by his charioteer. *Julius Caesar* noted that the warrior was driven to battle and, upon arrival, cast his spear before dismounting to fight on foot. The charioteer retired to a safe distance and collected his warrior, whether victorious, wounded or

slain, after the battle. We know that use of chariots in warfare had ceased on mainland Europe by the end of the first century BCE but it continued until the third century CE in Britain and possibly even later in Ireland, where several High Crosses dating from the ninth and tenth centuries depict warriors in contemporary garb being carried in two-wheeled chariots drawn by pairs of horses.

Celtic aristocracy did not use horses just for warfare. Noblemen seem to have indulged in horse racing too. An *Ulster Cycle* episode describes how the goddess *Macha*, in the throes of childbirth, was forced to race against the king's horse. Another text, the "*Voyage of Maíle*," describes an actual horserace. Although the description is of an Otherworldly event, the cries and shouts of encouragement of the onlookers are exactly the same as those heard at any modern racecourse. Horseracing was important in the real world, too. An early Irish law text details the daily activities in which a king should engage. Friday was horseracing day. Horse races featured largely on occasions of public assembly, especially those held during the festival marking the beginning of harvest in early August.

Chariots and horse races were the prerogative of warriors and nobles. The lesser classes had more mundane uses for horses, most farmers owning just two. One was used as a work pony, while the other served as a steed. Both were small; the work pony was about the size of a present day Connemara pony while the riding horse was slightly larger. Horses and ponies of this size were the norm in Celtic Europe until Roman times when larger breeds were introduced. Farmers took special care of their horses because of their importance for transport and as work animals. Foals were not removed from mares until they had been weaned, unlike calves which were taken from their mothers for a few hours each day so the cow's milk could be collected for human use. Horses were stabled at night or confined to a sheltered corner of a field and, when grazing, were constrained by a spancel to prevent straying. Loads had to be evenly distributed on the horse's back and could not exceed a specified weight, equivalent to two bags of wheat in Irish texts. This load had to be reduced on stony ground to prevent damage to unshod hooves. Although horses were used to draw carts and light farm implements, oxen were used for heavier work such as ploughing.

We have already seen that the Celts hunted wild boar. Its frequent depiction in early Celtic artwork attests to great respect for its strength and ferocity. Archaeological evidence shows, however, that the domesticated pig was much more important than its wild counterpart in daily life. About thirty percent of identifiable animal remains found in some Iron Age sites are those of domesticated swine. Pigs were kept near the homestead until early August, unlike cattle and sheep which were moved to high ground in Spring. They were fed with left-overs from the kitchen and allowed forage for roots and other vegetation provided they did not damage crops. By August, young animals were strong enough to survive the winter in the wild and they, along with the rest of the herd, were driven to forests where they could feed on mast under the supervision of a swineherd. The term "*mast*" most often refers to acorns, the fruit of the oak, but beechnuts were also available on the forest floor. Since their owners did not provide any supplementary fodder, an adequate supply of mast

was essential for the well-being of swine during the winter. This, in turn, was determined by climatic conditions and proper husbandry of oak trees. In a good year, the crop from a single oak was sufficient to feed a pig for a year. A reliable indication of the importance of swine and oak to the Irish Celts is the high frequency with which the abundance or dearth of mast is mentioned in the Annals.

### Respect for the Land

Thus far in this chapter we have seen that the Celts used the land for survival and pleasure. They had to work with nature in order to survive and could only have done this by close observation of natural phenomena. There seems little doubt that such intimacy with their environment must have engendered tremendous respect for it.

Respect for their land and environment is very evident in the mythology of the Celts. Many deities are associated with natural features such as mountains and rivers, and with trees and animals. Some scholars suggest that deities "*dwelled in the landscape and presided over all human undertakings.*" Such capricious forces might manifest themselves in almost any form and therefor merited respect.

In the legends, humans who had special empathy with nature were sometimes given knowledge and power to control the forces of nature. One such human was *Amergen*, as related in *Lebor Gabála Érenn*. *Amergen* was the poet-druid of the *Milesians*, a mythical human race in Irish pseudo-history. After a long and arduous sea journey, the *Milesians* approached Irish shores but were driven off by a magical wind conjured by the *Túatha Dé Danann* who already occupied the land. The *Milesians* persevered and finally made shore, whereupon *Amergen* sought permission of *Erinn*, the Land, to disembark.

Fain we ask Erinn

Faring o'er ocean's

Motions to mountains . . .

Pray here to sail in,

Wailing maids royal!

Loyal chief leaders,

Pleaders blend pray'r in

So we seek Erinn.

It is clear that *Amergen* believed the Land was a living, potent entity that had a name and, therefore, deserved respect. The *Milesians* finally overcame the *Túatha*

*Dé Danann's* magic and beached their boats. Before any of his other companions could alight, *Amergen* set his right foot on the land of *Erinn* and recited his famous song:

I, the Wind at Sea,

I, the Rolling Billow

I, the roar of Ocean.

He continues to equate himself with other natural entities such as oxen, ospreys, sunlight, boar, salmon and flowers and this is sometimes interpreted as a statement of his ability to shapeshift. *Amergen* himself provides a more likely explanation to the meaning of his song:

Who can lead to falling waters?

Who can tell the white Moon's ages?

Who can draw the deep sea fishes?

Who can show the fire-top headlands?

He answers his own questions with:

I, the poet, prophet, pray'rful.

*Amergen* the poet addressed the "*land*" because he understood and respected its power. As a poet, his abilities to observe and understand nature were enhanced. He appreciated the notions of harmony and balance in nature, recognising that both are essential for the well-being of the land and its inhabitants. *Amergen*, as prophet, could predict "*Future fame in soaring story*" for his people because, as an observer of nature, he knew their abilities and strengths. They would excel in the new land provided they respected it but, as *Amergen* the "*pray'ful*," he knew the ultimate decision would be made by the land itself. His prayer for acceptance of his people was made to the land, the entity named *Erinn*.

### **Mythical Significance**

We cannot presume that all Celts shared *Amergen's* vision and perception of the land and environment. He was a poet whose special talents gave him insight that would not have been shared by others in his community. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that plants, animals and natural features had special significance for the Celts.



Trees and other plants were important, as we have seen already. Apart from their more mundane uses as sources of food, medicine, dye-stuffs and building materials, trees were also associated with fertility of the land because they are deep-rooted and draw their nourishment from deep within the earth. Abundance of crops was one of the criteria upon which the worthiness of a king was judged. An inadequate fall of mast, for example, was regarded as an indication that the Land, Sovereignty, may not have considered the king worthy to be her consort.

Animals were mythically important to the Celts too. Boar, deer and other animals have already been mentioned in connection with the hunt and farming. Even more importantly, the deities could transform themselves into animals, and the Celts often identified deities or their powers with animals. They never knew if the animal they hunted was a deity or not.

Boar were associated with war because of their ferocity and fearlessness. Some Celtic warriors wore boar-helmets to battle in the belief they would terrify their opponents. The effect seems to have been so potent that the boar symbol was adopted by a Roman legion stationed in Chester as a warning to its foes of its prowess. In Celtic art, boar are shown with enlarged ears and exaggerated spinal bristles, emphasizing their ferocity. They were also chthonic animals, linked to the underworld, because they were often responsible for the deaths of their hunters.

Deer, especially stags with their prominent antlers, are often linked in the myths to fertility and to the Otherworld. Stags bear exaggerated antlers in early continental Celtic art, much as the boar has enlarged ears and bristles. They lived in the forest where growth and shedding of antlers mirrored the annual cycle of the trees among which they lived. Antlers begin to bud at the same time as leaves. They grow and flourish during the summer and are shed in the autumn. Seeds lie dormant in the ground during the winter months until the warmth of spring induces them to awaken. At the same time, the fawn develops in the impregnated hind, its birth coinciding with the start of new growth in the forest. In Irish mythology, Fionn mac Cumhail was closely linked to Otherworld deer. Both his hunting hounds were his nephews in animal form and he himself could assume the shape of human, hound or deer-the hunter and the hunted. Although he didn't know it at the time, his first sexual encounter was with Sovereignty disguised as a deer whom he had hunted and who transformed herself into a human for the occasion. Their son was Oisín, which means "*little deer*."

The Fionn stories show that the deities could appear to humans in the form of deer but there are other instances of deities assuming other animal forms. The Morrígan, usually depicted as a raven, takes the shape of wolf, eel and heifer in rapid succession in the saga of the Táin Bó Cuailnge.

Although deities could assume the shape of animals, the Celts also believed that animals, or at least representations of animals, had special powers of their own or through their association with deities.

Dogs, or dogs' heads, often accompany Nodens, a British god of the Hunt, and Nehalennia, a continental goddess of seafarers. Cú Chulainn, originally Setanta,

was so named because he killed the hound of Culainn in self-defence and later offered to take the dog's place as protector of the homestead until Culainn could train a suitable replacement. The expression "*licking his wounds*" originated in the observation that dogs do, indeed, lick their wounds clean to aid healing. Dogs often "*nurse*" injured animals of other species, including humans. A healing water sanctuary dedicated to Nodens was built on the banks of the river Severn in England during the third century and all offerings to the god found to date are dog figurines, again linking dogs with healing.

Birds had special significance for the early Celts. Their ability to fly was akin to freeing the soul in death, symbolism often found in Celtic Christian iconography. Mythology contains many instances of birds as Otherworld beings or as messengers from the Otherworld. Waterfowl were especially revered because they were associated with air, land and water, often regarded as thresholds between this world and the Otherworld. Geese, for example, are noted for their aggressive, alert nature and as guardians and protectors of the home, but they are also water birds and thereby link their protective function to the Otherworld.

We have already seen that some Celtic tribes adopted the names of trees as their protective totem. Animal names were also adopted. Examples are the *Artraige* (bear-people), *Osraige* (deer-people), *Grecraige* (horse-people), and *Sordraige* (boar-people). It has been suggested that the name of one early Irish tribe, the *Bibraige*, means beaver-people. If this is correct, the tribe must have brought the name when it moved from the mainland because beavers were never indigenous to Ireland.

### Watery Places

Water and watery places had special importance judging by the frequency with which they were used as depositories for votive offerings. The huge deposit of weapons, jewelry and other goods found in Lake Neuchatel, Switzerland, is probably the most spectacular find so far but they are widespread throughout Europe. A major hoard was found at Duchcov in Bohemia, and a collection of Gallo-Roman wood carvings was discovered at the source of the Seine near Dijon in France. A deposit of high-quality metalwork was found at Llyn Cerrig Bach on Anglesey in Wales. The river Bann, in Ireland, has yielded ornate bronze scabbard plates, spear ferrules and horse-bits. These, and many other finds across Europe, show the importance of springs, lakes and rivers to the Celts. We can surmise that the offerings were made for favours from the gods, or as thanksgiving for favours received. The practice is still carried on today. How many of us have thrown a penny into a '*wishing*'well or fountain for luck? Springs had particular association with the underworld because they bubble up from the depths of the earth; the water is either warm or very cold and contains dissolved salts that were believed to have curative properties. Such springs have long since been Christianised as Holy Wells, usually dedicated to a saint, but the waters from most are still believed to have power to cure ailments.

Apart from their day-to-day uses for domestic purposes, waters, especially rivers, were intimately linked to the fertility of the soil. The annual inundation of the flood plain left rich deposits of silt that nourished the soil; it seems likely that, at

least in some cases, the offerings were pleas for future fertility and abundance or were tokens of gratitude for a successful harvest. Offerings to rivers were also made in gratitude for victory in battle.

Water had a sinister aspect too. It was uncontrollable and capricious and, as rain, could batter crops. The sea could wreck boats and drown seafarers, and flooding rivers could destroy farms and dwellings. Too little water resulted in drought, failure of crops and loss of cattle and other essential animals. Votive offerings could also, then, have been attempts to placate angry waters or pleadings for more water during times of drought.

We noted earlier in this chapter the marked climatic deterioration that occurred around the middle of the last millennium BCE and it may not be coincidence that votive offerings at watery places increased during that time.

### Placelore

While trees, animals and water featured largely in daily Celtic life, other aspects of their environment were important too. There is a large body of stories and lore dedicated solely to the names of places and it seems to have been essential that features of the landscape were named. Amergen addressed the entire land of Ireland by name, but individual components, rivers, hills and mountains, also had to be named. Early Irish scholars composed or transcribed stories, collectively known as Dindsenchas, that explain why or how each place got its name. Even in the Táin Bó Cuailnge, special effort seems to have been made to name places according to events that occurred there, irrespective of their relevance to the story. The reason for this compulsion to name places is best summed up by the old Irish saying: "*To be named is to exist.*"

### The Movement of the Heavens

Identity with place is an enduring feature of Celtic culture, but the early Celts did not confine their curiosity to just their local environment. According to Pomponius Mela (c. 40 CE) ". . . they [druids] claim to know the size of the earth and cosmos, the movements of the heavens and stars . . ." Some early Welsh manuscripts name constellations and individual stars. Of paramount importance, however, was the sun which provided light and warmth. Its importance was often reflected in Celtic art. Many cultures, including the Celts, adopted the symbols of the circle, spoked wheel, triskele and swastika to depict the passage of the sun across the sky. Triskeles and solar wheels were used on helmets, armour and weapons of Celtic warriors, suggesting the patterns may have had protective symbolism.

Strangely, the moon and stars seem not to have featured largely in Celtic imagery. Some artifacts from central Europe show the solar wheel linked to crescent shapes, presumably the moon. A sixth century BCE sheet gold bowl from Zurich has depictions of deer, the sun and the moon. The name Arianrhod, mother of Lleu in Welsh mythology, means "*Silver Wheel*," suggesting she may have been a moon goddess. Sirona was a healing goddess venerated on continental Europe. Her name, meaning "*Star*," links her with light penetrating

the darkness of night. The Gaulish Coligny calendar is based on solar and lunar configurations but, despite these examples, references to and depictions of moon and stars are scarce in Celtic art.

### Underworld and Otherworld

So far, we have looked at the physical environment and how the Celts perceived, developed and interacted with it. They were also aware of other environments over which they had no control but which were intimately linked to daily life. These were the underworld and the Otherworld.

The underworld was inhabited by the dead and the Otherworld by the deities. Although both worlds are separate, the distinction between them can be blurred. The myths show that living people occasionally visited both worlds, but traffic was more common in the other direction. The deities seem to have been able to enter the physical world at any time but the dead had to wait for liminal times when thresholds could be crossed. These coincided with a change from one state to another such as at dusk, when the new day began and, most especially, at the Celtic festival (Samhain in modern Irish) that marked the end of the old year and the start of the new.

Some classical writers record that the Celts believed in an afterlife. Strabo writes that

*. . . not only the druids, but others as well, have pronounced that men's souls and the universe are indestructible, although both fire and water will at some time or other prevail over them.*

Diodorus Siculus comments that: *"They [Gauls] do not fear death, but subscribe to the doctrine of Pythagoras that the human spirit is immortal and will enter a new body after a fixed number of years."*

According to Julius Caesar:

*The cardinal doctrine which they [druids] seek to teach is that souls do not die, but after death pass from one to another; and this belief, as the fear of death is thereby cast aside, they hold to be the greatest incentive to valour.*

Not only did souls not die but, according to Pomponius Mela, the Celts " . . . would defer business and payment of debts to the next life."

According to Classical writers, the Gauls believed that the underworld was on an unidentified island in the West. In Irish myth, the island is called Tech Duinn, the House of Donn which, on modern admiralty charts, is identified as Bull Rock, situated a few miles off the Beare peninsula in southwest Ireland. The island is a barren rock archway under which the tide flows with considerable force and behind which the sun sets. Donn was the Irish lord of the dead. According to the myths, he was with the group of Milesians from which the Irish are said to be descended and, if so, was therefore an ancestor deity. He was destined never set

foot on Ireland, however, and drowned near the island that bears his name. His name means 'dark' or 'black' and red and black were the two colours associated with the underworld. One of the Irish myths describes three horsemen dressed in red and riding red horses who announce: "*We ride the steeds of Donn Tetscorach [toothless Donn] from the fairy-mounds. Though we are alive we are dead.*" Some scholars have suggested the two colours represent the period between sunset and sunrise and between death and rebirth.

It seems then, that while the underworld was a place where normal activities such as bartering and payment of debts could continue, it also had sombre and dark overtones associated with the night. However, the prospect of rebirth shed some light into the gloom.

By contrast, the Otherworld was bright and cheerful with abundant food and drink. Time passed at a rate different to that of the ordinary world. Its inhabitants were ageless. As with the underworld, the Otherworld was across the sea but there were portals in certain places such as the burial mound at Newgrange or at the bottom of a lake. This apparent anomaly can be rationalized by assuming the Otherworld to be a wonderful existence parallel with, but on a different plane to, the ordinary world. Some of its attributes can be deduced from its names: Magh Meall, the sweet plain, Emhain Abhlach, the sacred place of apples, and Tír na nÓg, the land of the young.

Perhaps one of the best descriptions of the Otherworld appears in the Irish tale, the "*Voyage of Bran.*" A strange woman appears to Bran and his household and sings fifty quatrains about the Otherworld, which she calls "*Emne.*" She describes it as a distant isle upheld by four pillars of white bronze, a lovely land "*throughout the world's ages*" on which many blossoms drop. Hosts hold games on the plains and splendours of every colour glisten throughout them. Wailing and treachery are unknown and there is nothing harsh or rough but, on the contrary, sweet music strikes the ear. The world is without grief, sorrow or death, and without sickness or debility. Enigmatically, the stranger refers to her world as "*Many-shaped Emne by the sea, whether it be near, whether it be far....*"

The following day, Bran sets out on a voyage to discover this world, accompanied by "*three companions of nine.*" After two days and two nights, Bran sees a man coming over the sea towards him on a chariot. It is Manannán mac Lir, god of the sea. He explains to Bran that, while Bran on his plane is in his boat on the sea and sees waves, sea-horses and leaping salmon, Manannán in his chariot in the Otherworld sees a plain with a profusion of flowers, rivers pouring forth a stream of honey, and calves and coloured lambs. It seems apparent that the Otherworld overlapped very intimately with Bran's world.

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## **Earth Sea and Sky**

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