

Section 8 – The Proliferation of Deity

The Celts and the Goddess

Celtic culture had many distinct expressions, myth cycles and deities. There was never one homogeneous Celtic religion but a multiplicity of different, related forms. This was probably a consequence of the fact that there was no one Celtic people, and all those who became Celtic brought with them their prior beliefs. These were broadly consistent, but had distinctive nuances. Then, the mythology was only partially written down, across widely separated territories, with hundreds of years between the versions. Since it was often recorded by people who were not Celts, the story of the Celtic Goddess is confused and confusing and following the thread of Celtic belief is no simple matter. However, there are many similarities with other goddess-cycles, especially those originating in Sumer.

Celtic belief comprised an array of nature-spirits, many of them local gods and spirits of place, and an overarching pantheon with the sky-god Dagda at its centre. By far the most revered deity was the Great Goddess.

Male deities fall into two categories. These are the gods of the hunt and the gods of the sky. Although sometimes male gods appear as chthonic deities, in every case they have been co-opted into this role, to supplant an earlier goddess, usually from the pantheon of sky-deities.¹

The best-known Celtic god of the hunt was Cernunnos, who was part man, part deer, and had a horned head. He represents a parallel to the Sumerian Enkidu, the wild man who sleeps and mates with the beasts. Enkidu is clearly a derivative of the hunter pantheon and is tamed, not by Gilgamesh directly, but by a priestess, Shamhat. Also cognate is the Greek god Pan, a deity of forests and shepherds. The parallels between Cernunnos, Enkidu, Pan and other Greek deities like Phanes/Protogonos, Dionysus and Eros all point to a common origin. Many scholars believe that this prototypical deity comes from an early Indo-European source though it may be even older. In other words, this deity probably has its origin in the pre-agrarian, hunter-gatherer phase.

These beast/man deities are strongly associated with the Goddess, and Cernunnos is no exception. He is not her consort but may be her son. This again suggests an origin in male hunter culture before the beginnings of the patriarchy because, in the era before marriage, patriliney and

¹ A fine example of this is Lucifer, the Bringer of Light, who was an angel, or minor sky-god in the Hebrew texts, who was cast down for disobedience and insurrection, and became syncretised into Satan, the evil god of the Underworld.

the patriarchy, men were known by who their mothers were. These hunter-gods do not possess women, though they often represent unbridled sexual passion. We have also seen this in the Greek mythological creature, the Satyr; half man, half goat, constantly in pursuit of sex with beautiful nymphs. These deities have been part of the popular model for the Christian devil, who represents a link between sexual desire and evil.

The Celtic male sky gods follow the pattern established in Sumer with Dagda, a sky father; Lugh, the sun god; Taranis, the god of thunder and lightning and many others. These are all cognate to deities we have already seen in earlier pantheons. This strongly suggests either a common origin for all of these mythologies or direct borrowing.

In most cases, through time all the elements of the pantheon, including the Great Mother, come to be placed under the control of the sky father, and in the monotheisms only he remains. The Celts do not appear to have done this. Instead, they kept the gods of the hunt alongside their local deities and a sky pantheon and retained the Goddess at the top of the hierarchy. This may not be unique, but it is unusual. It provides a fascinating contrast to the situation in city-based cultures in which the Goddess was progressively stripped of powers.

The most ancient deity on Celtic record was called Dana. She is found in the Irish *Lebor Gabala*, dated to about 1000 CE. Dana appears to have been identical with a number of similarly-named deities, such as Danaan, Danu, Anann, Dan, Don and Anu.² These variations probably reflect the disparate nature of Celtic culture. Dana was the Earth Mother and the goddess of wisdom. She suckled the other deities and, in the Irish tradition, was their mother. These other deities were known as the Tuatha de Danaan, the people of Dana. Dana did not need the intervention of a male to create them, so her position in the pantheon is reminiscent of Nammu's.³

Dana is the maiden aspect of a triple goddess, along with Badb, the mother, and Macha, the crone. In this, Dana is cognate with Morrigan. In some traditions she has a husband, Bile, but again this is not consistent between the various sources. As Morrigan, she is one of the three wives of Dagda the Celtic sky father, who was cognate to An, El, Zeus *et al.* In this role she sleeps with Dagda during the festival of Samhain, in early November, to assure the return of fertility in spring; this has parallels both to the Mesopotamian Sacred Marriage and to Persephone's symbolic marriage to Hades in the Eleusian Mysteries. However, Dana was also both the mother of the Dagda and his daughter.⁴

² Not to be confused with the Sumerian god of the same name.

³ This interpretation is supported by the appearance of the Hindu Goddess Danu in the Vedic story *The Churning of the Oceans*, where she is the goddess of the primordial waters of creation, exactly as Nammu is.

⁴ The genealogies of these Celtic deities have been described as 'chaotic'. We concur.

The Celts prized craft skill and especially that of the smith. One of the Dagda's daughters was Brigid (Brighid), goddess of smithing, among other things. Swords and jewellery were highly valued markers of both the social status of individuals and the standing of the culture. It is interesting that, along with clear evidence of human sacrifice in water, we find caches of the finest artefacts. It has long been held that these were sacrifices to Dana.

Dana was always associated with water, frequently rivers. Her name is given to the Danube in Europe and the many Don rivers from Russia to Scotland. Sacrifices to her were often made in bogs, pits, lakes and rivers. Water represents the Goddess' amniotic fluid, in which life grows and which is the medium that surrounds us when we are born.⁵

Archaeologists have identified Celtic drowning pits. Execution in this way seems to have been restricted to kings and other high-status individuals. For example, in 734 CE, Talorgan mac Congussa, the king of the Scots, who had been fighting the Picts, was betrayed by his brother and captured.⁶ The Picts drowned him⁷. Five years later, another Talorgan, son of Drostan, was also captured and drowned. Drowning, in the context of a culture that venerated the Goddess, may have been a sign of respect. It may have represented a passage back into the Goddess' womb, to await rebirth. Perhaps this was seen as speeding the passage of the prisoner from this life to the next.

As well as water, Dana is associated with the land and the Earth. She is also associated with light, the day and life, and this makes her a parallel to Inanna. In Irish mythology, her children, the Tuatha de Danaan, on arriving in Erin, first have to defeat the evil Fomorians, the children of the dark goddess Domnu, who is cognate to Ereshkigal as goddess of the Underworld. This interpretation makes Dana symbolic of order and Domnu of chaos.

Most likely, the Celts saw the expression of order as the technological advances the culture had made. Like the city-based cultures of the middle and near east, the Celts mastered nature through agriculture. However, instead of building mighty cities they retained a semi-sedentary lifestyle. This should not be taken to mean that they lacked the skills to build in stone; their achievements in jewellery and smithing make it clear that this was a very creative and technologically

⁵ Wells, like all sources of water, were sacred to Celts as symbols of the Goddess, and in France, many cathedrals and churches are built on the sites of Gaulish holy wells. An excellent example of this is the magnificent Romanesque cathedral at Tournus. Here, in the crypt, directly under the altar, is one such well, sitting inside a Gallo-Roman temple basilica with four rows of columns. The cathedral was built on top of this structure, which denotes the huge importance it had, even to the Christians. This suggests a powerful link between the Goddess and early Christianity. The theology that was a deeply-rooted part of Gaulish, and all Celtic life, was merged into the Marianist form of Catholicism that became dominant for centuries.

⁶ Anderson, Alan Orr. *Early Sources of Scottish History AD 500 to 1286, Volume One*. Reprinted, with corrections by Marjorie O. Anderson. Paul Watkins. 1990.

⁷ *Ibid.*

competent culture. Indeed, Pliny the Younger noted seeing combine harvesters pushed by oxen being used to harvest wheat in Gaul. The Gauls and other Celts knew perfectly well what cities were, for they had sacked Rome in 390 BCE under the charismatic leader Brennus.⁸ Furthermore, once they adopted monumental building, they quickly became amongst the most skilled masons in Europe.

So why did they not follow the common path of city-based civilisation? It may be because city culture depends on the notion of personal property. This was extended to cover women and slaves, who were regarded as property just as much as cattle or land. What we know of the Celts suggests that they never took this step. Although it is sometimes claimed that the Celts had slaves, in the main they did not. They did have a system of hostages, usually young men, who had been taken in formalised 'battles' between neighbouring clans, and who had to reside for five years with the victors. They were well-treated and often married into the host clan, forming peaceful bonds between them. They appear much more like envoys taken partly to ensure peace than slaves, as a Roman would have understood the word.

Furthermore, the Celts do not appear to have regarded women as property, anywhere. Some Celtic populations remained matrilineal, and it is likely that they all had been at one time.

⁸ This was the famous incident in which the Gauls agreed to leave the defeated city on payment of a ransom of 1000 pounds of gold (Livius, Titus. (Livy.) c. 59 BCE - 17CE. *History, Book 5*).