
Celtic Cosmography

Part 4

Chapter VIII The Elements

“I thank my Father, my God, for my strengthener, who infused through my head a soul to direct me, who has made for me in perception, my seven faculties, of fire and earth, and water and air, and mist and flowers, and southerly wind.”

(Llyfr Taliesin LV, Kanu y Byt Mawr - Book of Taliesin LV, Song of the Great World)



Author's drawing

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The Elements in Indo-European Celtic Reasoning

Elements named by the bard Taliesin included four major elements: Fire, Earth, Water, and Air. These included four other subtle elements of nature, namely: flower, mist, wind and trees. In a poem of Hersart de Villemarqué entitled *The Song of Series, or The Druid and the Child*, of the *Barzaz Breiz* collection, eight elements are named.¹ These are the eight elements of Taliesin, including “the flour of the air.” So traditionally, the old Britons counted four elements: the four coarse ones and the four subtle ones. We are indeed very much familiar with the classical four, being of course: Water, Earth, Wind, and Fire, when not including Ether or Quintessence. Then what are we to make of the flour of the air?

From an Irish Christian text based in part on a late Medieval Latin version of a work by Messahalal and entitled, *An Irish Astronomica Tract, The four elements, and their positions as the Creator ordained them*, we have this classical outlook on the elements:

The following is a description of those four elements— Description of fire—A warm, dry, burning, light, liquid, movable body, beneath which is the air. Description of air —A warm, wet, liquid, movable body, heavy in comparison with fire, and light in comparison with water. Description of water—A cold, wet, liquid, movable body, beneath which is the earth, heavy in comparison with air and light in comparison with the earth. Description of earth—A cold, dry, heavy immovable body that is beneath the whole of creation, and thus the earth comes before the water and the water before the air and the air before the fire and the fire before the firmament, because the firmament is the outermost of them, as this figure below shows.²

However rich in detail, this description of the elements owes more to the Mediterranean mindset than to true Celtic cosmology. A good source would be *The Auraicept na n-Éces*, “the scholar's primer,” which identifies five elements in relation to the first sounds of the Ogham. These are found in the forfheda, the top five letters of the Ogham, namely ail, “stone;” teine, “fire;” uisce, “water;” aur, “air;” and neam, “heaven.”³

Interestingly, the Old Greek term *stoicheion* designated one in a series, an element in a row, hence an alphabetical symbol, or a letter per se, seen as elements of language and of reason. In short, the basic syllables that make up words. The elements named in the *Barzaz Breiz* are justly listed in the poem entitled “Series.” And this is exactly what we have with the Ogham script, a series of word elements.

According to Plato, the concept of the elements had a pre-Socratic origin and started at the time when Empedocles (circa 450 BCE) identified the basic states of matter. This being that the notion was much older and was floating around in earlier Indo-European thought. The Vedic scheme was almost identical to the Greek one. As can be expected, the Sino-Tibetan Chinese had a different series which had wood and metal included in the list: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. In Sanskrit, the coarse elements were called *pancha mahabhuta* and the *tanmatra* were the subtle elements. The *tanmatras* were also five in number: *shabda*, “sound,” *sparsha*, “touch,” *rûpa*, “form,” *rasa*, “taste,” and *gnadha*, “smell.” The *apajcikrta* were the five subtle elements, and the five gross elements were called *sthulabhuta* for: *prithvi* or *bhumi*, “earth,” *ap* or *jala*, water, *anil*, “air,” or *vayu* “wind,” *agni* or *tejas*, “fire,” and *akasha*, “aether.”⁴

The nomenclature was also related, to wit:

Vayu, from the PIE root * *aWentu-s*, “wind,” yielded *Auentos* in Old Celtic. An equivalent of *Aeolus*, son of *Poseidon* or *Zeus*, was the Greek god of the winds.

And in a nutshell, the five elements were explained according to Aristotelian philosophy as follows:

- Air is primarily warm and dry and secondarily cool and damp;
- Fire is primarily hot and secondarily dry;
- Earth is primarily hard and dry and secondarily damp and cold; and
- Water is mostly fresh and essentially wet.

Let's not forget that the Indo-European mindset was cosmologically based and to characterize any one of its daughter cultures as “earth-based” is greatly erroneous. Since matter was thought to be animated by unseen abstract principles, the elemental aspects of nature were seen as conditions of mind and spirit. Accordingly, the godly nature of the elements in the final Proto-Indo-European pantheon went as follows: Earth and Water, identified with the triple goddesses of sovereignty, Wind, and Fire, under the patronage of the war and sky gods.

The Fire Ritual

The fire element was the central element in Indo-European devotional and ritual practice. In ancient sanctuaries, alter stones were laid out according to the sun motions. As masters of the elements, the Druids carefully prepared ceremonial fires and funeral pyres. As it was believed, service tree wood was never considered an appropriate fuel because of its sinister qualities. Rowan wood was favored since it was said to please the gods.

In the story of the *Siege of Knocklong*, there is a long description of the correct application for the preparations of druidical fires:

Then Mogh Roith said to Ceann Mór: “Light and prepare the kindling for the fire.” Ceann Mór arose and built up the firewood like a churn but having three sides and three corners and seven doors, while the northern fire had only three doors. Moreover, it was not properly sited or arranged...

Ceann Mór said, “this is ready except to set it alight.” Mogh Roith struck his fire-flint then. At this stage the northern fire was ready. All were seized with fear and haste then, and Mogh Roith said to the Men of Munster: “Be quick, all of you cut off shavings from the shafts of your spears.” They cut off the shavings and gave them to him. He mixed them together in a large bundle and set fire to it. It burst into flames as he chanted a spell:

I knead a fire, powerful, strong; it will level the wood, it will dry up grass; an angry flame, great its speed; it will rush up, to the heavens above; it will destroy forests, the forests of the earth, it will subdue in battle the people of Conn.

Hastily, then, he set the firewood alight and it burst into flames with a mighty roar, as he chanted a rhetoric: God of druids, my god above every god, he is the god of the ancient druids.

It will blow (the wind), may it blow a low flame (to burn) the young vegetation, a high flame for the old (vegetation), a quick burning of the old, a quick burning of the new, sharp smoke of the rowan-tree, gentle smoke of the rowan-tree, I practise druidic arts, I subdue Cormac's power, Céacht, Crotha, Cith Rua – I turn them into stones.⁵

One of the first symbolic moves Saint Patrick made when he confronted King Laeghaire's druids was to light a fire on Easter before the Beltain bonfires were lit.

Patrick went thereafter to Ferta Fer Feicc. Fire is kindled by him at that place on the eve of Easter. Loegaire is enraged when he sees the fire. For that was a prohibition of Tara which the Gael had, and no one would dare kindle a fire in Ireland on that day until it had been kindled first at Tara at the solemnity. And the wizards (druids) said: “unless that fire be quenched before this night, he whose fire it is shall have the kingdom of Ireland forever.”⁶

The Gaelic fire ritual was called *tine iobairth*⁷. We have no other Celtic equivalent for it and we are not too sure what the Celtic name for the fire agent was. Nonetheless, from the Irish mythonym *Ingcél Cáech* it is possible to guess such a name. Its etymology is from *Agnile Cextis*, “flame grabber,” and does suggest that this was more than a personal name and that it was most likely an agent's qualifier deriving from the Old Celtic *agnileceto* for “flame-making or fire craft.” Monard was successful in restoring these

names from the Common Celtic nomenclature: *tepnodatla and/or *urdatla, for “fire assembly.”

In former times, fire recovered from lightning was held most sacred, especially brand fuming from the oak. Related Gaulish terms such as tannos, “fiery, ardent,” also for “holm oak,” and tarannos, for “thunder,” and “holm-oak again, is indicative of this association. The same observation can be made for the common Indo-European root: *Perkwunos, “the amazing one.” It derives from the PIE root *perkw- meaning, “a deciduous tree, and an oak.” As for the Gallic term Taranis, it has another PIE etymon better explained by *tenhros, “thunderer.” Other daughter cognates are found with the Teutonic Thorr, from *Tunraz, and the Hittite Tahrunt- and Tarunna-. In ancient mythology, the Storm God was imagined striking at the clouds with a bolt there producing lightning flashes. Lightning was seen as the harbinger of terrible omens. The Romans said that if Jupiter threw his thunderbolt during daytime, it was a “fulgur dium” and if it was at night, it was a “fulgur summanum.” Under the advice of the twelve accomplice gods called consente or consiliani, Jupiter threw a second resounding shot. This clash of thunder, called “quo terror incutitur” struck terror in the hearts of the superstitious and the innocents. And if that was not enough, again advised by his secret conclave of sky gods, the “dei superiores et inuoluti,” he would give a third throw. This was the “genus quod urit,” the destructive heavenly fire which sealed the fate of societies and of states. It was believed that the peremptory fire of the fulmen peremptorium had the power of death over mortals. It was kept in the keeping of the superiors, a secret divine assembly whose composition and number was kept secret. Descriptions of the Greek Zeus also show him jolting bolts from the blackened stormy skies. Finally, the Etruscan prince Arruns was said to gather firebrands scattered by lightning and would bury them in dedicated places whispering dark formulas. To wit, the Latin text reading: *Arruns dispersos fulminis ignes colligit et terrae maeto cum murmure condit datque locis numen.*⁸

The Circular Fire	The Square Fire
Tepnoliccianom > tenlach, “flagstone fire space,” consisting of an axial round stone construction.	Adbertotepnia, the offertory fire on, or by, the altar called carno, “cairn, altar,” with offerings to the fire god.
Deities invoked: Aedus > Aedh, “the morning sun,” the fiery sky god, cf. Sanskrit Agni; Brigindo / Brigantia > Brigid / Brigit, “lofty, moral elevation,” patroness of the hearth and lustrations; Latin cognates: Aedes Vestae or Ignis Vestae, the fire of Vesta, maiden goddess of the hearth.	Deities invoked: Agnile Cextis, “taking the flame,” or/and Tannos Taranios, “the fire of the Thunderer.” Vedic equivalents: the mahavedi, the “high altar,” the uttaravedi, the fire altar of agnyayatana, the sacrifice performed at the north, north-east area.

Ether and Sky

Ether is the least known of the druidical elements. Sometimes described as a mist, sometimes called “flour of the air,” its most familiar name was eventually recorded in the

Barddas as *nev*, or *nwf*, the Welsh name for sky and ether. As attested in Gaulish, it derived from *nemos*, “sky, and firmament.” An exegesis of the Ogham suggests a different name on the basis of the Xs-Ae bigramm taken from *ux-os/-a/-on* meaning, “high, above;” *uxsisamos* “very high, extreme.” *Uxon*, or *uxsisamon*, at the neutral case, is for the element as such, and it is possible, because of the sanctified neuter, that this was the correct rendering.

The Elements in the Barddas

According to Edward Williams’s *Barddas*, there were five elements in the bardic tradition where the quintessential element is called *nwyvre*.

There are five elements: earth; water; firmament; fire; and *nwyvre*. From the *nwyvre* are all life and power; from the fire is all affection; from the firmament is all motion; from the earth is all corporeity; and from the water are all growth, form, and habit.⁹

Note that *calas* is here referred to as earth, wherein the next quote from the *Barddas* *calas* is followed by fluidity.

There are five materials of every existence and life: *calas*; fluidity; air; sun; and *nwyvre*. They are thus variously arranged: *Cala*, fluidity, and *nwyvre*; and the *uvel* unites with the *nwyvre*, the air unites with the *uvel*, the water, or fluidity, unites with the air, and the *calas* unites with fluidity.¹⁰

This list can be confusing since *calas* means hardness and not fluidity.

Definitions and etymologies of the Welsh terminology:

1. *Enyvel* < *nyvel* / *uddel* > *uvel*, “animation, soul” < *andecenetlos*, “will-o’-the-wisp;”
2. *Calas* < *caled* < *caletia*, “hardness.”
3. *Gwar* < *crouos* “blood, bloody,” taken to mean “flow, flowing” / *gwlyb*, *gwlybwr* < *ulipo*, *uliporos*, “wet,” other related ancient terms: *malacnon*, *arnos*, *renu*, all for “fluid flow;”
4. *Awel* < *auela*, “breeze,” *auelo*, “breath;” also *Gwynt* < *uentos* < *auentos*, “wind,” and *auentia*, “moral elevation, inspiration.”
4. *Uvel* < *uddel* < *aedis*, *aedu* < *Aidu*, “ardent, fiery, fire;”
5. *Nwyvre* / *nwyf* / *nwf* / *nev* < *nemos* / *namos*, “sky, firmament, ether,” pl.: *nevoedd* < *nemate*, gen. sing. *Nemosos*, *nemossos*, “heavenly.”

The fifth element is not made of matter, but of heaven. *Namos* or *nemos* in Old Celtic defined not only the heavens, the sky, but also the ether, therefore quintessence.

He the following quote from the *Barddas* gives the Welsh basics for the elements found in man:

The Materials of Man - Composed by Taliesin - From the Book of Llanrwst.

There are eight parts in man: the first is the earth, which is inert and heavy, and from it proceeds the flesh; the second are stones, which are hard, and are the substance of the bones; the third is the water, which is moist and cold, and is the substance of the blood; the fourth is the salt, which is briny and sharp, and from it are the nerves, and the temperament of feeling, as regards bodily sense and faculty; the fifth is the firmament, or wind, out of which precedes breathing; the sixth is the sun, which is clear and fair, and from it proceed the fire, or bodily heat, the light, and color; the seventh is the Holy Ghost, from Whom issue the soul and life; and the eighth is Christ, that is, the intellect, wisdom, and the soul and life.¹¹

Much of the above follows what the Greek philosophers professed in the time of Antiquity. However, in this passage attributed to the bard Taliesin, the interference of the Holy Ghost and Christ, are but late additions. We know from the Classical writers that Mind and Spirit were seen as attributes of the moon and sun and deified as gods. In Greek mythology, Séléné was the moon goddess and the sister of Helios, the sun god.¹²

The Elements in the Ogham

According to the *Auraicept na n'Éces*, there is nothing in relation to Latin as to the meaning of words, letters, or even forfedhas and elements that match the Gaelic expressions: grus, lumps, coarse grain; cloch, stone, lind, and water.

1. X (Ch) – Ea, eadha < idato, “aspen tree”, eabhadh < esados, “poplar” / Coad < cotia < coitia, “woods, forest;” acsis, axsis, axsa, “stonely;” or calio < caliauos, “stone, pebble;” caletis, “stone hard;” caletia “hardness;” cloca / cloga, “phonolith, bell stone;” xdonios “chthonic.”

Th- Oi / Oir < iura, iuria, iuris, “mountain forest,” feorusoir < uorosorios, “spindle tree;” ur, “fire” / Tharan < Taranos, Torannos < Tanaros, Tonaros, “thunder with lightning;” for tepnia > teine, “fire.”

3. P- Ui / Peith, pethbol < petios, “guelder rose;” uinllean < uillo, “honeysuckle;” (p)idsca > uisce, also apia < aba / apa > aua, “water.”

4. Ph- Ia, io, ifin < iphin < spiðna, “gooseberry” / Phagos, phogos < bagos, “beech tree;” uetos, “air, breath, breeze;” auer > aur / athar, “air;” auella / auentos, “wind.”

5. Xs- Ae / Xi –Mor < xi-maros, “great X,” amancholl < uanocoslos, “mountain ash;” uxo, “high;” uxdulon, “high element;” namos / nemos > nemh / neam, “heaven;” or athar, late Irish term borrowed from Latin aether, the subtle air of the ether, the atmosphere
Herewith is another passage from George Calder’s translation of the *Auraicept na n'Éces*:

Query, what is esse, essence, of the seven by which Gaelic is measured? Not hard. Esse, essence, feda, of the letter, first: that is the fragment of cutoff of air which the vowel takes in composing a word, unde poeta dixit: Esse feda, the essence of a vowel, it is to be studied. Better for you to have the knowledge of it, the fragment cut off of air which it possesses in composing a word.¹³

Let’s bear in mind that the basic components of sound as elements of ancient grammar and poetry were subject to bardic wordplay.

In the previous chapter, we touched much on sacred space and the four fabled cities of the Danann gods, but little on the associated elements. What follows, is a step by step explanation of the cosmographical and mythological rundown of the four basic elements.

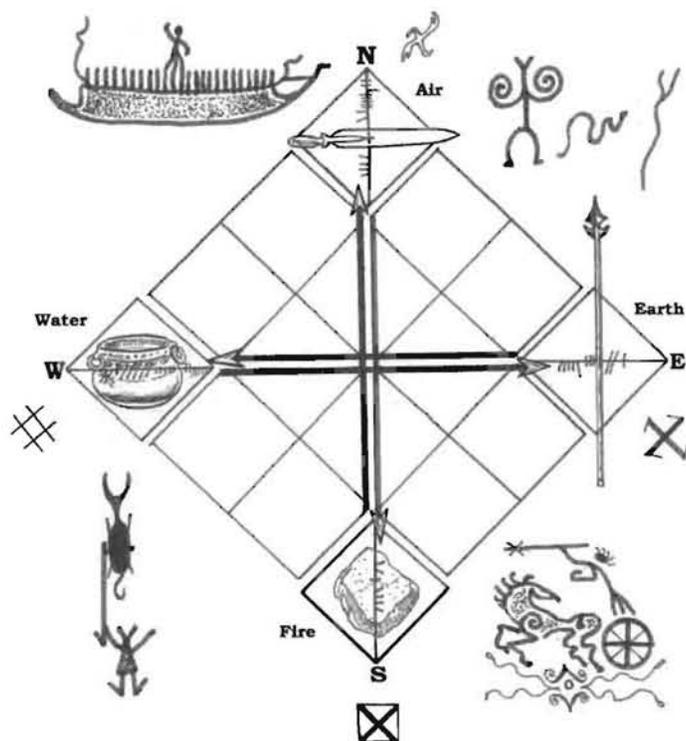
The Elemental Spirits of Mythology

The Giants as with other classical mythological characters, such as Cyclops, Telchines and Titans, represent the violent catastrophic forces of nature as demonstrated by earthquakes, volcanoes, wind and thunderstorms, tidal waves and the raging sea. They are seen reshaping topography, erecting mountains, hurtling boulders, spewing forth rivers and creating lakes. The primordial gods and demiurges are almost always depicted as giants. According to the Indo-European archetypal mth, at the beginning of time, the gods tear apart the body of the cosmic giant, that is, the primordial man, and extract from it the building material for the creation of the Cosmos. As we see, Greek mythology was more specific as to the identity of these beings. The mythical Gallic giant was known as Garganos, "the gruff," and was given as Gargantua by the French Renaissance writer Rabelais. The continent is marked with toponyms bearing names such Mont Gargan in the Massif Central of France, and Monte Gargano in Italy.

In Old Irish, the name fomóir¹⁴, Anglicized as Fomorian, was seen as a "giant." In Welsh, it was called cawr or gawr, plural cewri, and in Breton, it was caour or kaour, both from the old root cauaros, for "giant." Again, the Brythonic Cauaroi were the equivalents of the Greek Titans while the Greek Telchines and were identifiable to the Goidelic Uomorioi. In the story of Culhwch and Olwen, which is included in the *Mabinogion* collection, Yspaddaden¹⁵ is the Pencawr¹⁶, the head of giants and legendary heroes.

The Body Parts of the Primordial Giant with their Corresponding Elements:

Anail < anatla, "spirit, a breath of life"	Gaeth < goita / gata, "wind"
Imradud < ambirateia, "thought, reflection"	Nel < neblós, "cloud"
Drech < dricsma, "face"	Grian < greina, "sun"
Fuil < ulasnos, "blood"	Muir < mori, "sea"
Colaind < colanis, "body"	Talamh < talamu, "earth"
Cnaimh < cnama, "bones"	Cloch < clocca, "stone"



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The elements, symbols, and orientation. Author's drawing.

The Earth deified

Tailtiu¹⁷ is the Mother Goddess of Ireland par excellence. Tailtiu, Lugh's mother, is celebrated on the calends of August at the Lughnasadh festival. During this festival, Carmán¹⁸ was also commemorated at this festival. A pre-Danann goddess, she incarnated the sinister warlike aspects of the goddess Tailtiu. Another name for the sovereign goddess was Macha, "the plain." In Old Celtic cosmography, Magosia could have been considered as a parallel mystical plane in the Other World. The earth goddess presided over the fate fairies of the Sidh where the gods took residence. Therefore, the earth mother has a dark side as the tutelary deity of the underworld and a bright side as the mother of gods and mortals. This old chthonic goddess was also named Domnu, the "dark world," while the Mother Goddess was referred to as Danu or Anu. In prosaic terms, the Kerry Mountains, referred to as the "paps of Anu," or "Anu's tits," was Danu's dedicated toponym. When the Milesians of Iberia set foot in Ireland, they first had to pay homage and sacrifice to the triple goddess who went by the names of Banba, Fotla, and Eriu. These were the traditional poetic names of the island of Ireland. Etain, the goddess of poetry, came in pairs as mother and daughter. Other doublets for the Mother Goddess

were: Ethniu or Ethlinn and Birog.¹⁹

The Water Goddesses

Water was traditionally associated with the goddess of medicine called Minerva by the Romans and Suliuia by the Celts. Therapeutic waters from healing wells played an important role in Druidic medicine. In Antiquity, healing centers such as Bath in southwest England and Vichy in southeast France attracted many for their curative waters.

Icouellauna, literally “the best water,” was the Gallic deity of fresh water. The name stems from Iscitta / Iscittos for “freshwater.” The Gallo-Roman god river Lenus²⁰ was associated to Mars by the Romans.

The Ocean’s waves batter the shores as a cavalcade of steeds belonging to the god Manannan. Enchanted by the beauty of Clidhna, Manannan swept her away westerly to his blessed kingdom on the crest of a high wave. Since that very time, the biggest wave to hit the coast of Ireland was now known as Cliodhna’s wave. This ninth wave had the magical powers of insight and foreknowledge. The etymology of Clidhna is better explained through cleitona, “the curvy one,” that is, having curvy shapes. Beauty, love, health, and medicine were the attributes of the sovereign goddess. The Irish Lir and Welsh Llyr²¹ was the father of both Manannan and Manawydan, the sea god. This tends to show that he was recognized by both Celtic linguistic groups. In the Irish texts, Uscias²², whose name meant “water,” was one of the four master-druids from the fabled godly cities of the Tuatha Dé Danann.

In Gaul and Brittain she was known as Matrona, the matron. The Matronai were déified rivers such as the Marne, Meyronne, and Moder.²³ Her many other names were those of the major rivers such as Abona, the Avon, Bouenda, the Boyne, Danubia, the Danube, Samara, the Somme, Sequana, the Seine, Sionna, the Shannon, and Tamesa, the Thames among others. The Irish demiurge Nechtan, a god of water, guarded a sacred well called Segais. This spring was located at Sidh Nechtain, a Hill in present-day Carbery, Co. Kildare. It was said to be sheltered by large hazelnut trees, which fruits communicated infused science. According to legend, the Boyne River sprang from this source after Nechtan’s wife, the water goddess Boand, made it overflow. The River Boyne took its source at the well of Segais which sprung from the foot of the goddess Boand. In the Bourbonnais region of the Massif Central region of France, is found another sacred well dedicated to the god Boruo.

Apart from these telluric chthonian or aquatic entities, other examples of elementals found in Celtic myths were the air spirits and water nymphs. From Gallic epigraphy we have many references to naiads such as Nexalennia, “stream of naiads,” and Xuxenexai, “naiads of the summit,” nexa, nixa and nisca, meaning “naiad.” At Hoeghe in Flanders, a renowned fountain was guarded by the Cuxinexai naiads.

The Irish equivalent to the Vedic Soma goddess Mâdhavi was Medb, both names deriving from “mead,” and who was also the principal Indo-European moon goddess.

Air and Wind Spirits

In Ireland, the Bánánach, or Bóccanach²⁴, were noisy spirits found in the company of the war goddess Bodb. Bóccanach puns with bucibos, or bugibos, for “pixie or gnome.” Its

related terms are buca, bucis, and puca, meaning, “sprite one, imp, devil, pixie,” and connoting boccas, “screaming one.”

Aueranos and Circios, French Cers, “wind,” were the names for the Gallic god of air. Nabelcos, an alias of Mars, “the nebulous,” was the cloud god. In Ireland, the god of meteorology was known as Manannan mac Lir, and in Britain as Manawyddan Fab Llyr, the Manx. That is, he was not only a sea god but also an agrarian weather deity characterized by maritime winds. The poetic muse Awen²⁵ of the Barddas was formerly called Auentia, a goddess of the arts comparable to the Hellenic Athena. Her name is eponymous with the Gallic city of Auenticon (Latin, Aventicum, thus the Swiss-French Avenches). Awen was the daughter of Tydain Tad Awen, and in bardic poetry, awen is breath and inspiration, hence Awen, seen by the Welsh bards as the muse of poetic inspiration. The old Welsh term awenydd was taken for both “poet,” and “inspired.”

The Fire God

The Gallic name for the morning sun, Aedus, had many medieval cognates such as the Old Irish names Aed, Aeda, Aedan and later, Aedh and Aodh. These variants appear in Irish literature as personal names for kings, heroes and warriors, and in the Welsh triads as Aedd Mawr²⁶. It is also etymologically related to the name of the Gallic tribe of Eduens¹⁶. In Irish literature there are at least five mentions, mainly: Aed Ruad, “the fiery red,” Aed Abrat, “the fiery pupil, or the red eye,” Aed mac Morna, “the ardent son of the desired,” Aed mac Aġnine, “the ardent son of the fire,” and Aed mac Ammere, “the ardent son of the waterfront.” The ancient Indo-European fire god was most likely named *Egnis since we find its derivatives in the Vedic Agni, the Lithuanian Ugnis, and the Slavic Ogon. In Vedic myths, Agni had several brothers, that were, Vaishvānara, the fire of inner self, Grhapati, the fire of the hearth, Yavishtha, the little flame, Pavaka, the purifier, the fire of lightning, Sahasruta, the son of power, and Saucika, the sharp one. On the British side, the name Trystan²⁷ was from the Old Celtic root Drustannos, for “heat, fire energy, raging fire.”

According to the myth, Trysin, son of Erbal²⁸, elopes with Essylt²⁹, the wife of March ap Meirchion³⁰, to the secrecy of Celyddon³¹ forest in the company of his servant Bach Bychan³² and Essylt’s maid, Golwg Hafddydd³³. King Arthur, hoping to reconcile the two parties, sends his emissary Gwalchmei³⁴ to reason Trystan. Trystan’s request is that he remain with Essylt as long as there are leaves on the trees. Arthur, therefore, decides that Essylt is with each lover for half a year, with March in winter and with Trystan in summer. But Essylt argues that holly, yew and ivy trees remain green throughout the year and that she should stay with Trystan all year round. The tale of Tristan and Isolde is comparable to the Irish story of Darmmuid and Gráinne.

The Elements in Cosmology

The Four Ritual Objects and the Elements

We have seen how the sacred objects from the four fabled cities of the people of the Goddess Danu were linked to sacred space, in turn, to each of these was associated an element.

The Spear for Earth

The spear is not only directional, indicating the east-west trajectory of the sun's rays, but also associated to the mercurial high god Lugh. It was taken from Gorias, formerly Gortia, "the hot." Abaris, the Hyperborean ambassador to Greece, had received a spear from Apollo on which he could travel back to his land to the northeast.

Stone of Might for Fire

Fotla was one of the three names of the tutelary goddess of Ireland, that is, Uotala, "the undertone." This is Lia Fail, the stone of might, heated by the sun's rays from the southeast. Kept at Tara, the capital, it resounded as a bell-stone when a new king was enthroned.

The Cauldron for Water

Much like the womb, the cauldron brought from Murias, the land of the sea, was the vessel of physical and spiritual gestation. The Dagda's cauldron even had the power to restore the battle fatigues of valiant warriors.

The Sword for Wind

The sword of Nuada brought from Findias, the white, was as cold and cutting as the boreal north wind. This is the reason why nobody escaped it when it was drawn from its sheath.

The Druids as Masters of the Elements

The Druids, as masters of the elements, draw their power from the elements of nature. Not only do they offer sacrifice to the sanctuary fires, but they also control the winds, mist, and rain. The Druid Ferchertne draws before him flows of water and satirizes as they swell and rush forth there creating streams and lakes.

The druidic wind has the power to trick the senses and influence ongoing events. In the midst of fire and brimstone, these gusts create confusion on the battlefield as the Druids cast their spells with incantations.

In *The Book of the Taking of Ireland* this unique look into pre-Christian beliefs is found:

They came southward from Temair as far as Inber Feile and Inber Scene, for it is there that their ships were. Then went they out, past nine waves. The druids of Ireland and the poets sang spells behind them, and that they were carried far from Ireland, and were in distress by reason of the sea. A wind of wizards is this! said Eber Donn; look ye whether it - the wind - be over the mast. And it was not. Patience! said Airech, steersman of the ship of Donn, till Amorgen come (Airech was the fosterling of Amorgen). They all went forward, till they were in one place. Said Donn, the eldest, this is a disgrace for our men of cunning, said he. 'Tis no disgrace! said Amorgen, and he spake and a calming of the wind came to them forthwith.³⁵

This magical operation operated by the Milesian Druids is reminiscent of the Vedic Ashvins who also have power over the winds. From the West comes Vāyuvega; from the Northwest comes Vāyubala; from the North comes Vāyuhà; from the Northeast comes Vāyumandala; from the East comes Vāyujuala; from the Southeast comes Vāyuretas; from the South comes the soft breeze and from the Southwest comes Vāyuçakra.

Table of the gods and sacred space according to the Irish Texts

East (water)

Blath < blatis, “sweet, pleasant;” isca, “fresh water,” water is called lymphatic and soothing.

Bruigh na Boinne: Dagda and Oenghus mac Oc;

Bruigh na Boinne, “the palace Boinne,” that is, Newgrange in County Meath, on the Boinne river flowing from west to east in the Irish Sea. A river associated with the goddess Boann, wife of the god Nechtan³⁶ who also resided there. A neolithic megalithic fortress built there over 5000 years and which predates the pyramids of Egypt.

South (Fire)

Seis < segisu, “force;” seluos, “gain advantage;” senmo, “music,” said the fire is consuming and unstable and is considered blood and angry.

Sídhe Airceltraí: Ogmia Ogmios

West (Land)

Fis < uidtos, “acquired knowledge;” uesus, “gay, light-hearted,” the earth is seen as phlegmatic and quiet.

Sídhe Rodrubai: Lugh Lugus

North (Air)

Cath < catus, catu, “fight, battle;” catus, “wise;” the air is said to be nervous and agitated.

Sídhe Fionnachaidh < Sidos Uindo Acattu, “the Sidhe of the splendid surroundings;”

Tutelary deity: Lir < Lero, “the flow;”

Dunfanaghy (Dún Fionnachaidh), County Donegal in northwest Ireland; Fionn < Uindos, “splendid, white, bright,” + achaidh (singular genitive achadh, “field, plain, wheat field,” derived from the etymon * acattu, “surroundings, neighborhood, close by”). Dún Fionnachaidh, a site mentioned since antiquity by the Alexandrian cartographer Ptolemy.

The Winds in Old Celtic, Irish Gaelic, and Breton Databases:

East: Areteros, Ariteros

Auentos Cutii, “wind of the brazen;” Irish, gaoth an ear, “east wind;”
--

South: Dexsiuos

Semiuisonios, “flighty breeze;” Irish, gaoth deas, “south wind;”
--

South-east: Aredexsius
Auentos Giamonii, "wind of sprouts," or Gobacios, "the biting, (wind) of the dogfish;" Breton, Geuret, Gevred, "south-easterly wind;"
South-west: Eridexsius
Auentos Elembiui, "wind of fawns, or plaintive wind;" Breton, Merùuent, Merùéant, "south-westerly wind;"
West: Celtic Uodolos, Eria / Eriu
Auentos Aedrinii, "wind of the hot flux;" gaoth an iar, "west wind;" Breton, Cornog, or Kornog;"
North: Toustos
Auentos Uocleti, "wind of the north;" uocledios, "north wind;" gaoth aduaid or gaoth tuath, "north wind;"
North-east: Aretoustos
Auentos Anagantii, "inactive wind;" Anacantios, "calamitous;" Cantos "circle, circumference;" Suisdacios / Uuiddacios, > Feadag, "whistling wind or plover wind;"
North-west: Eritoustos
Argestes, "north-westerly wind with snow;" Ualarnos, Breton Gwalarn, French Galerne, "north-west wind;" Circios, "spiraling cold wind," Breton, Kerneweg, French, Cers < Cornouicos, "horned wind;" Gollarngornoc, Kornog-uhel, "west-north-west."

Chapter IX

The cosmology of the Arthurian Cycles

The student of the stars knows their substance.

Marca mercedus, Ola olimus, Luna lafurus, Jubiter venerus,
from the sun freely flowing the moon fetches light. (Taliesin, Song to the Wind
Book of Taliesin XVII)



Author's drawing

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The Cosmic Conclusion

It would be a pity to end this section without mentioning the most intriguing mythologizing of medieval literature concerning some prophetic end of the world pronounced by the young Merlin to King Vortigern of Britain. The following passage is found in *The prophecies of Merlin*, labeled *The Cosmic Conclusion* by Norma Lorre Goodrich, and taken from the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, or "*History of the Kings of Britain*" by Geoffrey of Monmouth.

The following version of Monmouth's text is my rewriting using Lorre Goodrich's text and the French translation of Laurence Mathey-Maille.¹

The heavenly bodies will turn their faces on them (i.e. the humans) and will leave their usual tracks in the sky.

Because of this wrath, crops will wither as the rains will be retained up above.

Roots and branches will be inverted, and this novelty will seem like a miracle.

The brightness of the sun will be eclipsed by the amber light of Mercury and this sight will terrify all those who witness it.
Stilbon of Arcadia will exchange its shield for the helmet of Mars² calling out Venus and there casting its shadow. Mercury's fury will be out of bounds.
The ironclad constellation of Orion will draw its sword from the scabbard.
The oceanic Phebus will whip up the ocean's clouds.
Jupiter will escape its straight path as Venus will abandon its customary trajectory.
Capricious Saturn will stumble forth there mowing mortals with its curved scythe.
The twelve houses of the planets will deplore their hosts' departure.
The Twins will cease to hug themselves as they normally do, and will disturb Aquarius in the springs.
The scales of Libra will swing freely only to be stopped by Aries's horns.
Scorpio's tail will project lightning as the Crab will compete with the Sun.
The Maiden will ride on Sagittarius's back and will be deflowered.
The chariot of the moon will disturb the Zodiac and the Pleiades will collapse into tears. No orb will find its way, except for Adriana (Andrasta?) who will find refuge behind its closed door.
The waters will rise from the choc of the ray and the dust of time will reappear.
The winds will blast mightily and will noisily resound in the asters.
And when Merlin had dispelled his prophecies with others more, he left his audience dumbfounded by the ambiguity of his words...



Comments on Merlin's Prophecy

It is with the last prophecy of Merlin that we conclude this study. De Monmouth's document offers us an unprecedented look into the symbolical mindset of the Romanized British Celts and their mythological vision of the macrocosmic world order. What permeates through Merlin's terrible prophecy is the fall of the British kingdom to the hands of the invading Saxons. Reading what follows in the prophecy makes it clear that King Vortigern grasps the message very well. After having left his audience dumfounded, Merlin engaged in a short conversation with Vortigern.

...Most surprised of all was Vortigern who praised the young man's intelligence and predictions. Indeed, this age had no more produced someone who could express himself that well before a king. Vortigern was also curious to gain insight into his own death. Therefore, Vortigern asks the youth if he has knowledge of this. And Merlin answered: "If you have power, then flee the wrath of the sons of Constantine. At this very moment, they are rigging their ships and are now about to set sail across the channel from the coast of Armorica. They will land on the isle of Brittain and they will attack and submit the unpious Saxon nation, but before, they will burn you trapped in your tower. This for the shame of having invited them to the island and being treasonous to their father. You invited them for your protection but their presence will spell your downfall. Two kinds of violent deaths threaten you, and not easy it is to guess which one you will escape first. On one front, the Saxons ravage your kingdom and have you executed. And on the other, the brothers Aurelius and Uther land their ships on Brittain and seek vengeance for their father's death. Flee if you can, for tomorrow they will take the beach of Totnais. The Saxons' faces will redden with Hengist killed, and Aurelius Ambrosius will be crowned. He will pacify the nations, restore the churches, but will die poisoned. His brother Uther will succeed, but his days also will be shortened through poison. Your descendants will partake of this unprecedented treason but will be devoured by the boar of Cornwall.³

As we see, the fall of Brittain is likened to a cataclysm of cosmic proportions. Dire events indeed which follow Hermes's motto: *As above, so below!*

And then again, if we are to take Merlin's predictions literally, the events triggered by Vortigern's bad politics inevitably affected the divine and temporal order of the entire kingdom, both in time and in space. The question that remains is to whether the catastrophe described by Merlin truly predicts future events. That is, how can we interpret these cosmic events described in these predictions?

For this, let's analyze the "Merlin prophecy" verse by verse:

1. The heavenly bodies will turn their faces on them (i.e. the humans) and will leave their usual tracks in the sky.

Using today's looking glass, the logical reasoning for this statement is that of a reversal of the poles. However, such an event could not occur in such a spontaneous way. According to modern science, a complete reversal of the geomagnetic field would take several thousands of years to occur since measurable on a cycle of approximately 400,000 years. In addition, such a phenomenon has never been observed by science. For a complete reversal to occur so abruptly, there needs to pass a highly charged comet close to the earth's stratosphere. A disaster of such magnitude would cause the mass extinction of most earthly plant and animal species. The last time the earth was hit by a giant meteorite, the extinction of the dinosaur occurred.

2. Because of this wrath, crops will wither as the rains will be retained above. Roots and branches will be inverted, and this novelty will seem like a miracle.

Could the impact of a meteorite or a comet cause a global drought? According to the experts, such an event did happen. It has been postulated that in 536 CE, atmospheric clouding caused years without summer, a nuclear winter, on the continent of Eurasia. Indeed, scientists such as Dr. Tim Newfield, of Princeton University, now know from tree-ring dating that the years 535, 536, and 541 CE, were the coldest growing seasons over a two thousand years span. The effects of such a disaster during medieval times would have caused an increase in frost in summer, causing a devastating famine followed by an illness known as the *Justinian plague*. Several Mediterranean chroniclers, such as Cassiodorus, of the sixth-century mention atmospheric changes describing the dimming of the sun, falling temperatures, thick fogs, or dry mists of dust, causing poor harvests. This was also recorded from China to Western Europe.⁴

A passage from The Letters of Cassiodorus mentions something very similar to what De Monmouth had Merlin predict:

The Sun, first of stars, seems to have lost his wonted light and appears of a bluish color. We marvel to see no shadows of our bodies at noon, to feel the might vigor wasted into feebleness, and the phenomena which accompany a transitory eclipse prolonged through a whole year. The Moon too, even when her orb is full, is empty of her natural splendor. Strange has been the course of the year thus far. We have had a winter without storms, a spring without mildness, and a summer without heat. Whence can we look for harvest since the months which should have been maturing the corn have been chilled? ...The seasons seem to be all jumbled up together, and the fruits, which were wont to be formed by gentle showers, cannot be looked for from the parched earth... The apples harden when they grow ripe, souring the old age of the grape-cluster.⁵

From Merlin's perspective, the object dimming sunlight in the proximity of the sun had a diameter similar to that of Mercury. Therefore, if the sun had a bluish hue, then the asteroid could have seemed amber colored.

3. The brightness of the sun will be eclipsed by the amber light of Mercury and this sight will terrify all those who witness it.

The ancient Greek name for planet Mercury was Stilbon, “the gleaming one.” In the following stanza, Mercury is called “Stilbon of Arcadia,” Arcadia being an old pastoral province of Greece. The god Mars was often depicted nude carrying a spear and wearing but a helmet. As for Mercury, the Greek Hermes, his main attributes were the Caduceus staff and the cutting sword. Perseus uses this sword along with Athena’s reflective shield to cut off the head of the Gorgon Medusa. And of course, this mirror-like shield was also called the “shield of Pallas,” and most evidently, is a solar symbol.

4. Stilbon of Arcadia will exchange its shield for the helmet of Mars calling out Venus there casting its shadow. Mercury’s fury will be out of bounds.

This theme of Perseus holding the Medusa’s head alludes to the constellations of Perseus and Caput Medusae. It also hints to the Perseids meteor showers occurring annually in mid-July. The alignment of Mars and Venus occurs in mid-summer in conjunction with the Perseids as they dip following the sun below the horizon. “Mercury out of bounds” probably refers to an incoming comet the size of Mercury. The event described in this passage can only happen at dawn or dusk in the dim lit skies as the sun is observable along with planets. The planets Mercury and Mars are in conjunction as they share their attributes, Mercury becoming warlike and Mars more mobile. Venus is also in the same region of the sky, but at a certain distance. This is probably the reason why she is described as being called out. The shadow cast by the helmet of Mars may be in reference to a partial eclipse.

5. The ironclad constellation of Orion will draw its sword from the scabbard. The oceanic Phebus will whip up the ocean’s clouds.

Phebus, the Latinized version of the Greek Phoibos, “the radiant,” was one of Apollo’s pseudonyms. As for the Celts with Belenos Moritasgos, and Manannan or Manawydan, the oceanic Apollo was a god of meteorology. The sword here represents the north winds. This explains why Phebus can command the ocean’s clouds. Orion had mastery over the icy northern winds, in his epiphanies to earth, he brings cold weather. Henceforth, the appearance of the Constellation of Orion was taken as an indication of cooler nights.

6. Jupiter will escape its straight path as Venus will abandon its customary trajectory. Capricious Saturn will stumble forth there mowing mortals with its curved scythe.

The prophecy is telling us that planets Jupiter and Venus will be knocked out of their orbits and that Saturn will no longer retrograde. It will then move forward and its rings, compared to a scythe, will cause mortality on earth. Of course, this could only happen if some exterior body would enter the solar system and catapult these planets from out of their orbits.

7. The twelve houses of the planets will deplore their hosts’ departure. The Twins will cease to hug themselves as they normally do, and will disturb Aquarius in the

springs.

In this chaos caused by Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, changing courses, all of the twelve planetary rulers will be disturbed and thus leave their ascribed zodiacal houses. Even the order of the opposing signs seem disrupted since Gemini is usually found facing Sagittarius and not Aquarius. Indeed, on the zodiacal wheel, it is Leo that is found opposing Aquarius.

8. The scales of Libra will swing freely only to be stopped by Aries's horns. Scorpio's tail will project lightning as the Crab will compete with the Sun.

This implies that Aries, the Ram, will jump forward in order to stop the scales of Libra from rocking about. Aries is here seen in its correct position opposing Libra. According to Greek mythology, Mars, which is Aries, much like Zeus, was imagined throwing lightning rods that ignited earthly fires. In another myth, Orion was accidentally killed by one of Artemis's arrows while trying to escape from a giant scorpion. Very saddened to have missed the scorpion and hit Orion, she carries him in her chariot (Auriga) to his eponymous place in the stars next to Taurus. There, Orion eternally pursues the scorpion as the constellation Orion rises while Scorpio sets. Antares, Scorpio's alpha star, literally means "against Aries." Cancer competing with the sun's radiance is an oxymoron since it is the dimmest of the twelve or thirteen constellations of the zodiacal belt.

9. The Maiden will ride on Sagittarius's back and will be deflowered. The chariot of the moon will disturb the Zodiac and the Pleiades will collapse into tears. No orb will find its way, except for Adriana (Andrasta?) who will find refuge behind its closed door.

Again, we are told of the cataclysmic cosmic disorder. Once Libra and Scorpio are out of line, Virgo finds itself in the vicinity of Sagittarius. The sun god Apollo moves in a lunar chariot usually driven by Venus. Apollo Helios's chariot was drawn by a flock of white swans on the way north to the land of Hyperborea where he stays for one year. The chariot ignited as the sun god traversed the ecliptic passing through each of the astrological signs. According to Greek myths, Phaethon, the illegitimate son of Apollo Helios, goes one day looking for his father. Helios in recognition of Phaeton grants him permission to drive the sun chariot. But the unexperienced Phaeton could not control the chariot sent racing through the constellations there throwing fireballs onto the earthly domains. Following the complaints of the Earth goddess Gaia, Zeus throws his lightning rod at Phaeton thus causing him to make a fatal fall. Usually, it was the Hyades who cried and not their sisters, the Pleiades. This verse concerning Adriana is in itself interesting since it is the only probable mention of a Celtic deity in Monmouth's prophecies. Indeed, Adriana is most likely the Latinized version of the Brythonic goddess Andrasta Icena, literally meaning the "keen demoness." But then again, Adriana can also be in reference to the celestial goddess Arianrod. In Taliesin's book, *Caer Arianrod*⁶, "the Circle of Arianrod," was the poetical name for the Northern Crown.

10. The waters will rise from the choc of the ray and the dust of time will reappear.
The winds will blast mightily and will noisily resound in the asters.

As previously mentioned, from the scorpion's tail will be projected rays of lightning, and this will stir up the dust of times passed. Blasts of wind will roar as thunder will resound throughout the skies. In short, Merlin was a prophet of gloom!

To Conclude on this First Half Concerning the Subject of Cosmology

Without reasonable doubt, it should now be clear to us that on the subject of cosmology, the ancient Celts shared the same views as those of their neighbors, the Teutonic nations to the north, along with the Romans and Greeks to the south. Also of interest was their eastern influences to the contact of the Baltic Daco-Thracians and Steppes Scythians. Our study, although exhaustive, is only the beginning, the first insight into this vast and complex subject. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Celtic material remains heavily impregnated with an underlying PIE tradition that was basically much more detailed and diversified. The classical authors were right when saying that of all of the ancient sages, the Druids surpassed all other masters in the field of natural sciences, astronomy, and divination.

Part Two Symbology

Chapter I The Cosmic Symbology of the Celts

I have been in a multitude of shapes before I assumed a consistent form.
I have been a sword, narrow, variegated, I will believe when it is apparent.
I have been a tear in the air, I have been the dullest of stars.
(The Battle of the Trees, Book of Taliesin VIII.)



The Druids and solar symbolism. Author's drawing.

Boutet_39

Symbols in Celtic culture

If symbology was high on the agenda of the Indo-European teachers, it can be argued without much exaggeration that for the Druids, symbols and allegories were part of some of their major obsession. Therefore at the level of Old Celtic, areuidia, or ateuidia, the science of symbols, was an important subject of study in the druidical curriculum. In Old Celtic the philosophical concept of form, appearance, representation, and image, was termed delua, dolua, delba. And, a culturally accepted image was referred to as comdelua oe condelua. In this repertoire of symbols was the labaron insignia which was represented as a spoked wheel. The floral emblem called scota was also prevalent and a floral ornament was named crumbo. Did not Hippolytus, in his *Philosophumena*, write that:

The druids of the Celts have assiduously studied the philosophy of Pythagoras cited for this study by Zalmoxis, the slave of Pythagoras and Thracian by birth, who came to these countries after Pythagoras' death thus furnishing them the opportunity to study the philosophical study. And the Celts believe in their druids as seers and as prophets because they can predict certain events through the (same) calculus and arithmetic (as that) of the Pythagoreans. We will not keep silent the origins of their doctrine since many have discerned among them many schools of philosophy. In effect, the druids also practice many graphic arts.¹

Indeed, much of the highly complex and geometric art of the Celts was executed using simple drafting instruments such as compasses and rulers. The careful mathematics involved in these designs shows an obsession for numbers akin only to those the Pythagoreans.

It can also be argued that the Pythagoreans were influenced by the Druids, as Clement of Alexandria, noted in his *Stromata*:

Alexander, in his book on Pythagorean symbols, explains that Pythagoras was a student of the Assyrian Nazaratus, and thus pretends, that Pythagoras was an auditor of the Galatian Druids and of the (Sindian) Brahmans.²

Indeed, the Old Irish term *fodla*, for “learned,” was derived from the Celtic root *uetolon*, for “symbol.” In the *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland*, a certain king named Ollamh Fodhla is mentioned. Ollam stands for “doctor,” and Fodla, “learned,” and puns with *fotla*, a derivative of the Old Celtic word *uotala*, “under-stone.”

The Age of the World, 3922. Ollamh Fodhla, after having been forty years in the sovereignty of Ireland, died at his own *mur* [house] at Teamhair. He was the first king by whom the Feis-Teamhrach was established, and it was by him Mur-Ollamhan was erected at Teamhair. It was he also that appointed a chieftain over every cantred, and a Brughaidh over every townland, who were all to serve the King of Ireland. Eochaidh was the first name of Ollamh Fodhlar, and he was called Ollarnh [Fodhla] because he had been first a learned Ollamh, and afterward king of [Fodhla, i. e. of] Ireland.³

What we are to understand by this, is that learning and symbology were intimately linked to the practice of sovereignty and to the respect of the rule of the land.

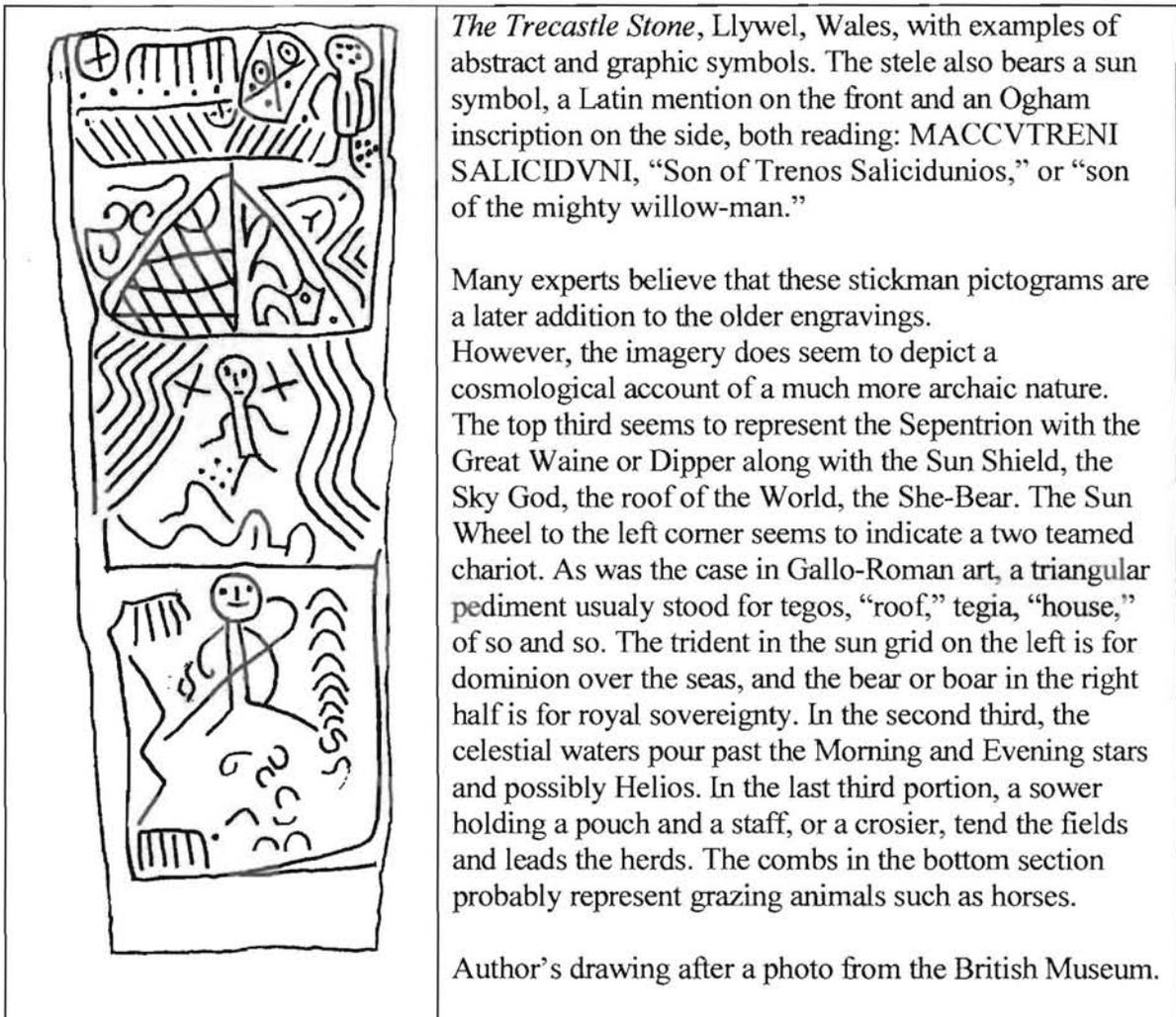
In order to grasp the hidden significance of symbols in Celtic culture, it is essential that we address each of these separately. The following list, although not exhaustive, constitutes the basic lexicon of the druidical visual language.

Abstract forms

Abstract and geometrical signs and symbols appear early on in western European Rock Art. These have generally been interpreted as products of the prehistoric Stone Age shamans. In final agreement, we can only speculate on their interpretation and meaning. The discussion, however, is not over since we at least know what many of these symbols meant in Antiquity on to the Medieval Ages.

Art historians and archaeologists trace these abstract forms back to the Azilian Art culture of the Magdalenian Mesolithic period of northern Spain, France, and Switzerland.

These so-called cryptic signs include dots, crosses or exes, hash marks, esses, rakes, asterisms, spirals, goose feet, or turkey tracks, tridents, crescents, squares, circles, orbs, triangles, and labyrinths.



Boutet_40

In Antique Celtic symbology, the square represented fire and solar heat, while circles were seen as orbs of heavenly bodies such as the luminaries. Exes could either be taken for stars or for the four directional corners of the earth. The four corners cross can also be drawn inside a square, a diamond or a circle. Combs, as seen with the Alpine Val Camonica examples, illustrate four-legged animals. Spirals are wind movements or vortexes, while repeated curved zigzags depict waves and angular ones, mountain peaks.



Drawing by

Boutet_41

The Tribann

Tribann is a Welsh word stemming from from the Old Celtic Tribantis/-es, for “three-pointed.” The Tribann’s authenticity is generally contested by trained scholars who see it as one the inventions of the hoaxter Edward Williams, alias Iolo Morganwg, writer, and co-founder of modern Neodruidism. Are they right, or is this just a sceptic’s false assumption? Edward Williams did indeed expose it in his opus the *Barddas*, published in 1862 by the Welsh manuscript Society, but the symbol does show up elsewhere, here and there, in older sources. One of these earlier representations of it is from 1390, in the *Book of Ballymote* where it is given for the astral symbol of the sun. Strokes of three are again found depicted in Rock Art emanating from circles and orbs. It can also be argued that triple marks and tridents found in ancient Celtic Art also represent solar rays. This being said, the Tribann was only clearly officialized at the start of the XIXth century as a symbol for the Welsh Gorsedd. However, as we have seen, the concept of trinity far precedes Medieval Christian doctrine and has its roots in the social ideological tripartition of the Indo-Europeans, as Georges Dumézil handsomely demonstrated.

The Triskelion

Triskelion, from the Greek, “three-legged,” was a spiral symbol prized by the Celts as it appears frequently in their visual arts. The Old Celtic name for it was Tricoris for “three circles.” The stars of Triangulum were also called by this name, when not tricernaca, yielding trichearnag in Scots Gaelic. However, this is a distinct trinity symbol and should not be confused with the trefoil.

A Word on the Pentagram

The mystical pentagram was the secret sign of the Pythagorean order to which the Druids were also associated. Although pentagrams do occasionally appear in Gallic art, it is not clear whether this graphic representation was not borrowed from the Greeks. This five-pointed symbol echoes the human hand with its digits, which was allegorically represented by the goddess Dechtire, “the right-handed.” The pentagram was also seen as a representation of the matrix of life in that it is found at the core of an apple or in the shape of a starfish or as Leonardo DaVinci demonstrated, even the human body with its head and limbs. This said, the pentagram was the astral symbol for Venus, the Morning and Evening Star, as a planet.



The flame crested Celtic Sky God bearing ax and shield. Digitally enhanced drawing after a photo by Luca Giarelli from the Valcamonica site, Parco archeologico comunale di Seradina-Bedolina, Capo di Ponte.

Boutet_42

The Ax

The ax is one of the oldest of the Indo-European tool symbols found in Rock Art. The hatchet or adze is also often found in Pictish art where it is seen as a symbol of authority, justice, and power. It is found in the Rock Art of the Alps at Val Camonica and Mont Bego and in Gaulish bas-reliefs such as the Pilier des Nautes monument. The ax is often confused with the hammer, although similar as striking tools have different attributions. As an attribute of the Godhead at the old level of the Indo-European mindset, the ax is of the second royal function, while the hammer is of the first priestly function. The Scandinavian Thor, an equivalent to the Germanic Donar and the Gaulish Taranis, holds both the hammer and the ax. In Gallo-Roman representation, *Pillar of the Parisi Seine Boatmen*, first century BCE, the high god Esus, or Asus / Aisus, fells a tree, probably an oak, with the ax.

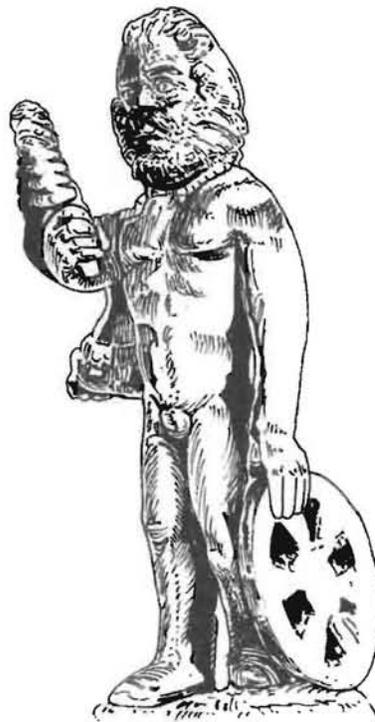
The Indo-European root for ax, Latin *ascia* "carpenters' ax," *gu^si*, *aksī*, puns with *aisk-* for "bright, shining."⁴ The Gaelic term *tua*, is from *touga*, "ax, and hatchet;" the other Old Celtic names being: *lamis*, *serro*, *blidlon* or *bitlon*. The battle ax was called *catubeialis* or *catua*. The names for adze were *altina*, *eltina*, and *nedama*. The importance of the tool or weapon in its representations was in relation to the ancient royal ethic order. According to Ovid, metals were given by the Olympian gods under successive reigns which corresponded to the great Ages: gold came under the rule of Kronos, silver under Zeus, bronze under Athena, and iron under Mercury. All of this in agreement with the basic ideological social tripartition: sacramental, royal, artisanal, and multifunctional.

The Sickle

Although the sickle was one of the ancient Druids' ritual objects, through the ages it was rarely depicted in the arts. One example found in Gaulish Art is that of the stone statue from La Celle-Mont-Saint-Jean from, Sarthe, representing a hunter god holding one in his left hand. The sole mention of it comes from Pliny the Elder who in *Natural History* describes it thus:

...clad in a white robe, the priest ascends the tree, and cuts the mistletoe with a golden sickle, which is received by others in a white cloak.”⁵

It is highly improbable that anyone could cut mistletoe atop a tree with much success using a golden sickle. Gold is too soft a metal for cutting, let alone branches and stems. In all probability, a harder bronze instrument was used for such rituals.

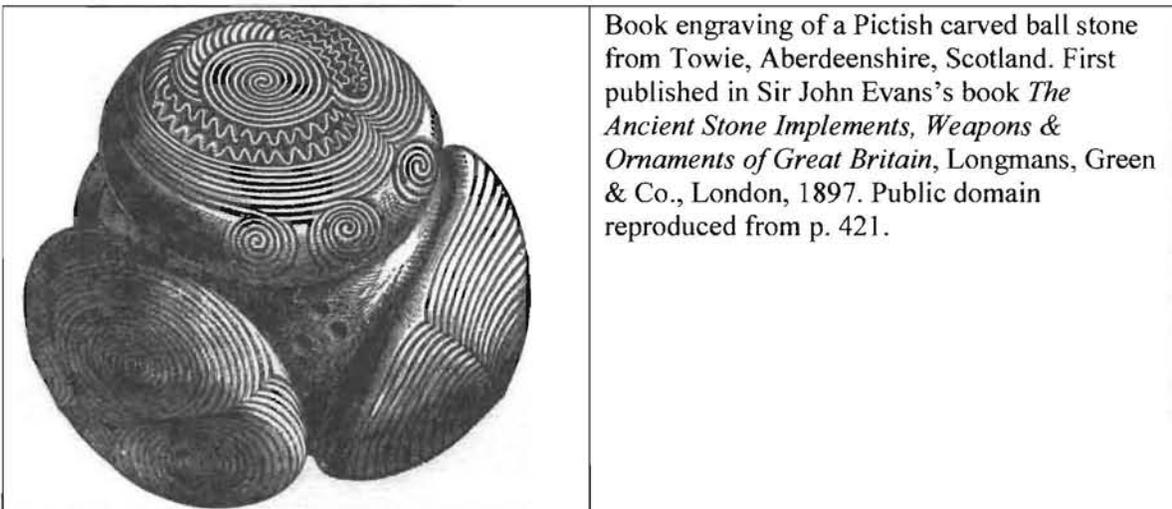


Gaulish statuette of Taranis holding a thunderbolt and a Sun Wheel from Le Châtelet-Gourzon, Haute-Marne, France. Drawing by the author after a photo from the Musée d'archéologie nationale. Boutet_43

Thunderbolts of the Sky God

Lightning bolts are the attributes of the major sky god of the Indo-European pantheon. This god, Perkwunos, is at the root of theonyms such as the Baltic Perkunas, old Slavic Perunu, Scandinavian Fjörgynn, an epithet of Thor, and Vedic Parjanya. These are from the PIE root *perk-, *perg-, meaning “to strike.” This god was a thunderer, thus, a striker. In Greek mythology, thunderbolts were retrieved from Gaia by the Cyclops and given to the sky god Zeus who used it to strike the mighty oak. The Celts called him Taranis or Toranis, “the Thunderer,” a name related to the Scandinavian Thor. The Gallic Taranis was

probably called Tuireann in Irish, and implies the Celtic root Torindos “anvil spark, metal flash, spark,” there punning with tharan, from taranos, an equivalent of the Brythonic tannos, both for “holly oak, or holm oak.” Tharan, *Th*, was one of the dual names for the *Oir* forfeda of the Ogham script. And then again, the Brythonic tannos puns with tannos, “ignescent, blazing, and fiery.” This only to show how much thunder, lightning, fire, and oak, were symbolically linked. The spear of Lugh, along with arrows and bolts, were symbols of the royal sovereignty of Ireland. Lugaid, a hypostasis of Lugh, and a son of Ailill mac Máta was also in possession of a terrible spear. The name Lugaid is from the Old Celtic term leucetos for “thunder and lightning.” From the same root are found other names such as leuces, leucotie, leuceto, loucents, louxseta, and louxseto, all meaning “lightning.”



Boutet_44

The Cosmic Egg

Pliny the Elder, in *Natural History*, chapter twelve, speaks of a serpent’s egg held in high esteem by the Celtic Druids. This egg, in the cosmology of Antiquity, was explained as a parabol for the creation of the Universe. As he explains, in the Gallic provinces during summer, numbers of snakes mingle into a knotwork pattern to secrete a viscous substance known as anguinum. He goes on to add that the Druids maintained that hissing serpents eject these eggs into the air and that a rider needed to hastefully seize the flying object on horseback in a cloak before it hit the ground if he wanted to gain rulership. The snakes will then be sure to pursue the rider before he crosses a river ford to safety. Although set in gold, and to test its genuineness, the egg must float against the current of a stream. The Druids, although vague, as they were eloquent and crafty mystifiers, pretended that the eggs must be only taken on a certain day of the moon. Pliny, showing himself skeptical to these claims, goes on to explain that he himself had personally seen one these eggs, which he describes as round, and about the mass of a moderately sized apple. The shell was made of a cartilaginous substance surrounded with numerous cupules resembling the tentacles found on the arms of a polypus. According to the Druids, those in possession of it were protected against prosecutions, arrests, and that they were thereby guaranteed the hospitality of princes. This protection, as it seems, was not granted by the Romans. A native Vocontii cavalier of the Roman army wore one of these tokens on his chest to his trial, and for that

only reason, was slain by the Emperor Tiberius. Needless to add that Pliny there confused myth with reality, and that, through conceit, blamed his gullibility upon the connivery of the Druids.

The Eye of the Sun - The Crystal Halo

When the sun rises on the horizon during the winter days it passes through an icy crystal veil, not only does it show forth a halo, but also replicates its image. This phenomenon of light projection was called perihelion in Greek and is due to the reflection of sunlight on a cloud surface of ice crystals.⁶ The English expression for this kind of mirage is “sun dog.” And, as Donald Cyr suspected, the phenomenon could very well be at the origin of the myth of the Dioscuri. On occasion it takes the shape of an eye which the Ancients called Sulis, the “eye.” This being that it could also appear as a large and radiant and colorful iris. In this case, for the Gauls, this was the sure presence of the all seeing eye of Suliuia, the daughter of Grannos the Sun god. The Roman Church called it the *Eye of Providence* and it can be seen represented on the American dollar bill. In Christian belief, Divine Providence saw over all things and matters. Was it not the eye of the Sun that had oversight on all of the world’s daily activities?



Author’s rendition of a Celtic patinated bronze mirror (back side).

Boutet_45

The Mirror of the Moon – The Moon Halo

The moon-shaped mirror was the divinatory instrument for communicating with the dead and otherworldly spirits. In Antiquity, its reflections were believed to project thought. It was also seen as a moon beam projector since this luminry was the vehicle of both mind and emotion. The Sun representing the spirit. Accordingly, the Moon has four phases, one for each of its quarters; Full Moon, Half Moons, and New Moon. The four-part lunar mansion was called Bri Leith in Irish. The fortress of Bri Leith occupies the Mediomagos or “central plain.” It was ruled by Medb, whose name refers to the sweet intoxication of fermented drinks. A known fact is that fermented drinks affect the mind, and that moon and mind are of the watery element.



Boutet_46

The Torc

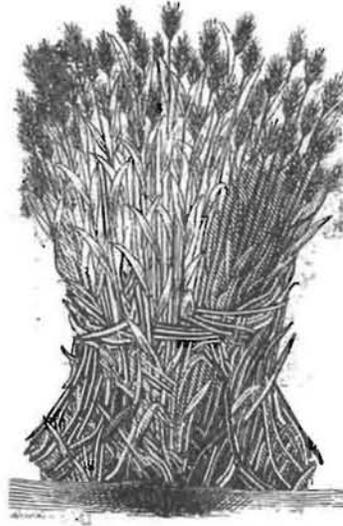
Torcs were not only objects of great value, but also prized as symbols of social and religious preeminence for the noble Celt. And as Georges Dottin remarked following the Greek historian Polybius (ca. 203-120 BCE), that the golden twisted necklaces worn by the Galatians were called *manikès*. Dottin also notes that at the battle of Telamon fought by the Roman Republic against a coalition of Cisalpine Celts in 225 BCE, that the tribes of the Gaesati battled nude wearing only but their golden collars and arm rings, while the Insabres and the Boii wore breaches and light cloaks.⁷ The Celtic names for necklace were *muince* in Irish and *myncei* in Welsh, both from the Old Celtic root **maniacis* or **moniccia*, and rendered in Greek by Polybos as *manikès*.

Floral Symbols

Floral motifs most often appear in the gaps of knotwork patterns. The floral emblem, called *Scota* in Gaulish, evolved into what became known as the fleur-de-lis emblem. As the French historian Georges Duby (b. 1919 – d. 1996) argued, the three petals represent the three orders of Gallo-Roman society: the patricians, the equites, and the plebe. In Medieval times, it became a heraldic symbol for the French dynasties and then seen as the lily associated to Mary. In later Irish myths, *Scota* was said to be a daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh Cingris, the wife of Niul and mother of Goidel, the prime ancestor of the insular Gaels. In other versions, she is claimed to be the daughter of the Pharaoh Nectanebus and wife of Milesius, also called *Míle Espain*. With this Iberian king *Míl*, *Míle*, or Milesius, she has four sons: Eber, Amaigen, Ir, and Colpa. It can also be taken for *Blodeuwedd*, the Welsh flower maiden.

The Trefoil, or Clover

Trefoil, or Latin *trifolium*, also called clover and club, is a three-leafed symbol. This is a very common motif of Celtic art and appears as far back as the Hallstatt period, and on the *Gundestrup cauldron* in particular. The constellation of the triangle was called *Trifelan*, or *Feillionen*, in Welsh, and the name was derived from the Latin *Trifolium*.



Boutet_47

A sheaf of Corn, Wheat Grain

The sheaf of wheat, or corn, was called *grendion* or *bosca* in Old Celtic, and the modern Irish names are *punann chruithneachta*, for “sheaf of wheat,” and *punann arbhair* for “sheaf of corn.” As with the worm, grains and seeds have the power to impregnate women. This being that cereals and wheat stems are found in association with the goddess of fertility and love. In sedentary, *Spica*, the stalk of corn, the alpha star of Virgo, was called *Cerridwen* in Welsh. The name stems from the Celtic *Gerradunia* for “little lady.” Did she not fall pregnant hoping for Taliesin after having swallowed a grain of wheat? Her Breton name was *Gowenn* or *Goewin*, “the virgin,” and her Irish name was *Conda*, “the smart, the confluence of wisdom.”

Tartans

Checked patterns and tartans are linked to the rays of the sun and the prism of the rainbow. Grids and hash marks measure the sun’s progression over time and space. The Celtic languages had many names for this pattern: *brith* in Welsh, *breachan* in Gaelic, and *Breicanos* in Gallic, from the Celtic roots *breccos*, *briccos*, and *brictos*, all meaning striped or checkered. The words *bracanos*, “checkered outfit,” *briccanos* “checkered cloth,” and *brictilo / mrictilo*, “speckled trout,” are also related. Trouts and salmon were well arrayed! George Dottin, in *Manuel pour servir à l’étude de l’antiquité celtique (Manual for the Study of Celtic Antiquity)*, wrote that “the Celts liked to clothe with striking colors: the chiefs wore gold threaded dyed clothing, and their embroidered striped garments caught the attention of the ancients. According to Pliny, the Gauls were the inventors of checkered cloths. They knew how to extract from lingonberry a crimson red, from hyacinth scarlet, and they drew from plants many other colors.”⁸

Color Symbolism

In ancient Indo-European mindset, color was linked to the qualities of the sky, white for daylight, red for dawn and dusk, and black for night. And each social class had its associated color: white for the elite such as priests and doctors, red for kings and warriors and then

green, brown or dark and variegated colors for the working people. The Celts roughly upheld the same concept with the distinction that certain colors were confused into one such as the pale hues or green and blue. The color Red also plays an important part in Celtic lore as related in *The Ulster Cycles*, the great heroic cycle of Irish mythology comparable to Greek Homeric tales. It also present in other tales as such that of *Da Derga's Hostel*. This tale sets the action for the *Red Riders* or *Ridire Ruadh*⁹ in Irish Gaelic. These three red horsemen riding on red horses appeared to Conaire Mor while he was on his way to Da Derga's Hostel. In Gaul Rudiobos was the reddening one, there punning with "the rude one." His red steed had a three-pointed mane which most likely stood for the auroral three moon phases. The following colors are given in both Old Irish and Welsh.

Black, dark, black, dubh / du < dubis, for wisdom, depth, application, and purpose.

Blue, gorm < gormos, dark-blue / glas < glastos, "blue-grey, blue-green," for gleaming, pimpy, wise shrewd.

Green, úanne < uagnos, "green hue," / gwyrdd < uiridos, "grassy green," garris, glastos, tannos, "greenish," for uros, not ripe, fresh, young.

Grey, liath / llwydd < leitos, "grey, pale," for age, old, tarnished, wet.

Red, crimson, ox-blood, derg < dergos, rúad / rhudd < roudos / coch < coccus, crocnos, ulasnos, "ruddy, blood-red," for war strife, conflict, and shame.

Rust colored, erc < ercos, "perch red or rufus red," for weathering, the passing of time, and spiritual or hidden truths and treasures.

Variegated, patched, piebald, spotted, speckled, striped, variegated, markings, mbracht < mrectos / brectos, and/or alad < latos, "piebald or spotted, in appearance wild, savage, and rustic."

Ultra-white, Old Irish irfind¹⁰, in Welsh the concept of metallic white was rendered as arian < argantos, "brilliant, silver."

White, finn / gwyn < uindos, "white, splendid;" Gaulish, candos, ballos, "bright white, white coated, this color was reserved for the priestly caste of the first social function and therefore stood for pure, lofty, and wise.

Yellow, golden, brightly colored, bui < bodios / melyn < melinos, "yellow, honey-yellow," eluos, itos, for sweet, royal, rich and precious.

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