

# Celtic Cosmography

## Part 5

### Chapter II Animal Symbolism

“I am a stag of seven tines, I am a hawk on the cliff, I am a teardrop in the sun,  
I am a turning in a maze, I am a boar in valor, I am a salmon in a pool.”  
(Song of Amairgen)



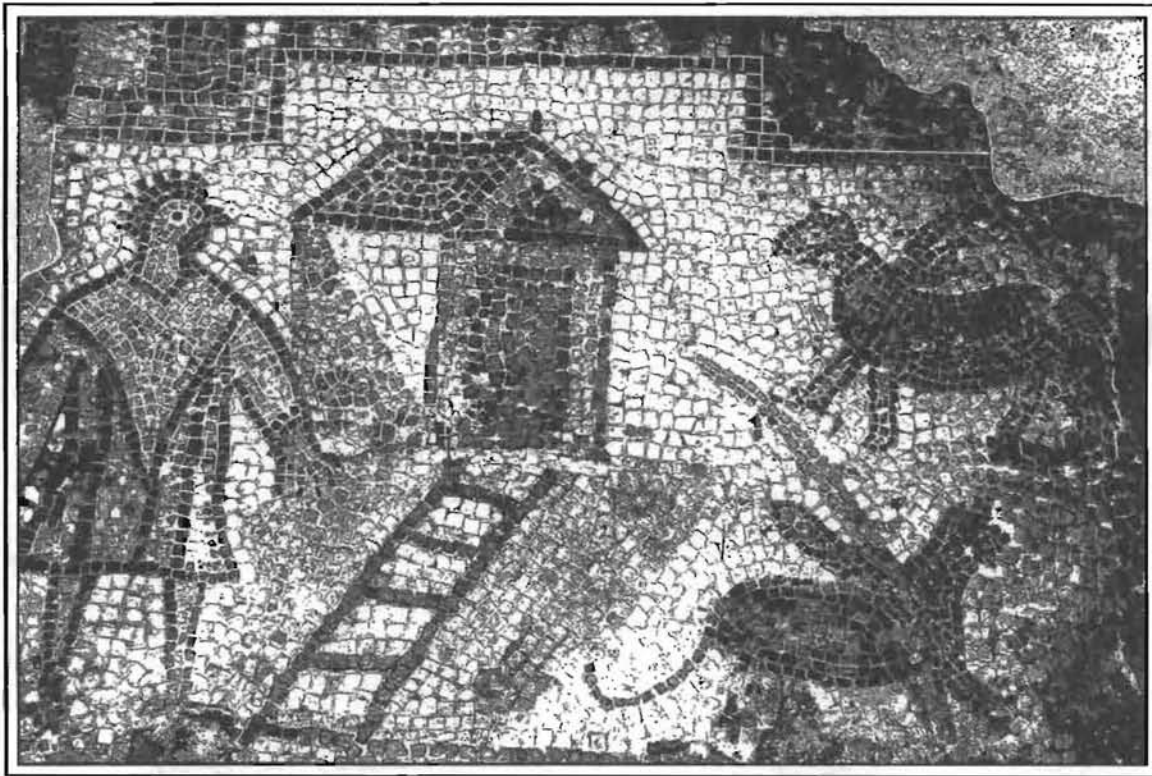
Detail from the Gundestrup Cauldron, showing the horned serpent-bearer god Cernunnos akin to the Greek Ophiuchus accompanied by zodiacal beasts. Author's drawing after a photo from the National Museum of Copenhagen by E. Lessing.  
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In the context of Indo-European and Celtic symbology, animals are generally associated with the stars of the Zodiac and the other constellations. Although they vary from culture to culture, these zodiacal symbols tend to agree for the most part. The most commonly shared were as follows: fishes, ram, bull, lion, or other large cats, and goat. But then again, there were stars and constellations assigned to animals which were exclusive to the Celts. These were: the boar for the Great Dipper, the crane for the Pleiades, and the wildcat for the Hyades. In classical astrology, the hen was assigned to the Pleiades. In other IE models, this star cluster was represented by a lion which should not be confused with Leo. The ancient Celts also maintained dual symbolism having both the boar and she-bear and her cub for the stars of the Septentrion. Other distinctive Old Celtic attributions were as

follows: porpoise for Capricorn, horse for Cancer, fawn for Leo, pigs for Gemini and deer for Libra.

If animals were an important theme in Celtic symbolism, birds had the major role.

The Celtic bird god or sky god was called Nemanach<sup>1</sup>, a hypostasis of the Irish Apollo called Oenghus mac Og<sup>2</sup>. Birds are quite active during the day, going about gathering food, and this as early as the Sun's rays light up the morning skies. Birds were regarded as the Sun god's messengers, always keeping him informed on world events. Not unlike Odhin, the Celtiberian Lugus was also accompanied by two ravens, the Lugoues, namely Brannos, and Dergoboduos. These Dioscures kept him informed on the coming daily events. Nightbirds and owls served to link Belenos' day world to Belisama's night world. Indeed, Morigena and Bodua both had birds that were capable of putting mortals to sleep and waking up the dead. Owls indicated important lunar events between solar stations. If the cock's crow announced the sun's triumphant rise, likewise, the cock-headed man found on the Brading mosaic in the Isle of Wight, called for illumination. Did he serve as a torchbearer for the neophyte initiate who had been kept in darkness...? Some experts believe it to be a caricature of Flavius Claudius Constantius Gallus Caesar (ca. 325 – 354 CE). Or was it a Romanized representation of the Celtic Donn, Lord of Death, retreating to Tech Duinn?



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Digital drawing by the author after a photo from the Museum of the Brading Roman Villa, Isle of Wight, Great Britain.

Along with the cock, the goose was also a timekeeper and was taken as an allegory of the sun's march. Apollo was usually represented holding a goose and draped with a sash hanging over his shoulder on which the Zodiac was embroidered. In Irish lore, the name of

Fand<sup>3</sup>, Manannan's wife, was also related to birds. In her case, it was the swallow. Monard believes that her earliest name, Uanda, coalesced with the Etruscan Venth, and the Hittite Wanda, both meaning "earth." Also, Manannan and his siblings were able to shapeshift into swans.



The *Des Bolards Stele* from the Gallo Roman period. Gallic deities from left to right: Belisama (Minerva), Belenos (Apollo), and Cernunnos as the triple-faced godhead. Animals figured on the stone: at the foot of the couple, a small viper, and below surrounding the world tree: a bull, a dog, a badger, a boar, and a stag. Author's drawing after a photo from the Musée municipal de Nuits-Saint-Georges, Burgundy France.

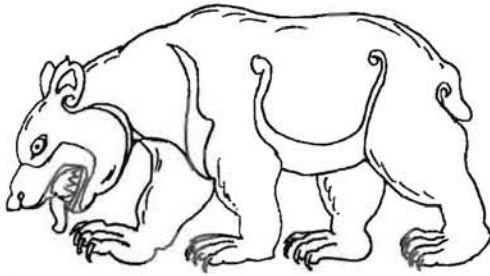
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## Celtic Animals

### The Badger or Hedgehog

The October full moon was called Gealach a' Bhruic, "moon of the Badger in Gaelic," and was taken as an indicator for the promise of good weather by the Irish Gaels. This was probably the reason why the hedgehog, or badger, is one of the five animals shown on the Gallo-Roman stela of Des Bolards found near Nuits-Saint-Georges and accompanying the horned god Cernunnos along with four other animals. Thus, the five animals depicted on the monument are as follows: a bull, for Taurus, a dog, or a wolf, for Sirius, or Lupus maybe, a hedgehog for alpha Librae maybe, and a boar for the Great Dipper, all represented at the foot of the World Tree. The Gaelic term bhruc is for "badger," and was broccios in Gaulish, both from the same Proto-Celtic root boccas, "protruding, sailiant." On the Des Bolards

stela, Cernunnos is shown triple-faced with a leather bag on his right foot and flanked to his left by the gods Belisama and Belenos, both shown holding cornucopias.



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### **Bear**

The bear was taken as an allegory of the higher royal function of power and was associated with the boar which represented the aristocratic warlike aspects of power. There were many mythological and legendary figures called Art<sup>4</sup> in Irish lore. The name of the high king of Ireland, Art, did stand for "bear." Math was another Irish mythonym for bear. Math Mac Mathghamhna, "son of the bear," first comes to mind. Art was the son of the legendary Conn of the Hundred Battles and was said to have ruled Ireland from the capital of Tara at around 220 to 250 CE. According to Irish myth, another Art won the love of the lovely Delbchaem who gave her a son called Cormac. Cormac Mac Art, grew up to become a great king and patron of the hero Fionn Mac Cumhail with his band of outcasts called the Fianna<sup>5</sup>. The bear chase was a very ancient practice of the early Indo-Europeans as it was the case in later Scandinavian rituals involving the famed Viking berserkers. J.P. Persigout saw this as second function warrior's spiritual quest for a test of will and personal empowerment. Apart from Art, there is Arthur who also appears in Irish myth as the son of the king of Britain. He takes off with Bran and Sceolan, Fionn Mac Cumhail's hounds and is pursued by the Fianna back to Britain in order to recapture them. In the Irish tales, Arthur is said to have sworn fealty to Fionn. The Arthurian cycles, a collection of British medieval legends, revolve around a legendary Roman-British general called Ambrosius Aurelianus. He bore the title of Artorius and later became known as Arthur. Arthur was also compared to the Gaulish god Artaios, "the bear-like." In Gallo-Roman epigraphy, Artaios carried the epithet of Mercurius, that is, "Mercury." There was also a goddess called Dea Artio, as well as a Dea Arduinna<sup>6</sup>, shown riding a large boar. In ancient astronomy, Artaios was the Celtic equivalent of Arcturus the "bear-watcher," while Andarta was identified to Ursa Major along with Artulla, Ursa Minor. In Gaul, Artaios was one of the names of Lugus, same as Lugh, in relation to this god's higher nature. And Andarta, also called Andrasta in Roman-Britain times, was the war goddess in whose honor were celebrated battle victories against foreign enemies. The Voconces people of Gaul maintained a cult to Andarta which resembled that of Andrasta who was invoked by Queen Bouddica before she fought the Roman legions. She was also the patroness of hunters, thus making her an equivalent of the Roman goddess Diana and Greek Artemis. Both were known to have command over the animals of the forest.

In strict symbolical terms, the bear is the all-knowing wild being of high places. He initiates mortal humans to the honey of the high-ones. He leads the all-embracing animal spirits who sweep the Nordic skies leaving light trails with their great claws in defiance to the mead



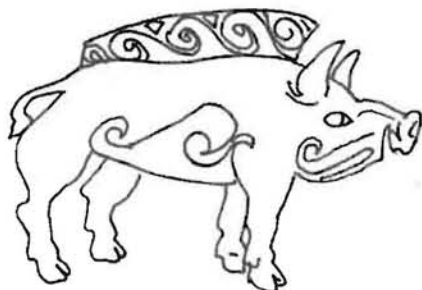
intoxicated gods. Of all the forest's animals, the bear is the only one who confronts men standing bipedal.

### **Beaver**

In Welsh lore, Afang Du<sup>7</sup>, the black beaver, was the third child of Tedig the Bald and the little witch Ceridwen. He was reputed to be the most disadvantaged of mortals, a condition which his witchy mother wished to remedy by preparing him a special potion. Afang Du was not only hideous but was also slow minded. Hideous in that beavers are river rodents and were, therefore, traditionally grouped with mice and rats. Afang Du also had a homely brother called Morfan, a warrior of Arthur. The cauldron of knowledge had to be fired for a year and a day and its contents needed to be reduced down to three drops in order to be effective. For this, Ceridwen hired Gwion Bach<sup>8</sup>, the "little wise one," that is, the "smart bee," to stir the pot while Morda, "the blind," gathered the firewood. As he was stirring the final brew, a few hot drops hit his hand, and in reaction, he put his finger to his mouth and is instantly infused with perfect innate wisdom. This theme recalls that of other IE myths involving mortals wanting to access the forbidden elixir of the gods.

### **Bee, Bumble-bee**

The bee was highly regarded by the ancient Indo-Europeans who saw it as a solar being associated to both solstices. Traditionally, in Old Brythonic cosmology, the stars of Camelopardalis were seen as a myriad of bees escaping from the celestial beehive which the Greeks called Cepheus, the constellation of "the head." Gwion Bach's name is also linked to the bee involving the bardic pun using becos, "little," and beccos, "bee." On the Irish side, it was King Ailill and Queen Medb who fell under the allegory of the hive. Was it not that Ailill meant "elf," a tiny being, and that Medb meant "drunkenness of mead?"

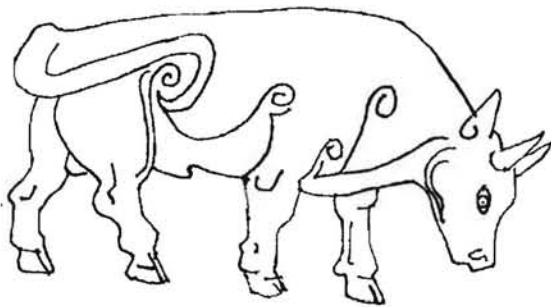


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### **Boar, Pig**

The boar was the symbol of true power, both spiritual and temporal. The name both puns with "yew" and "boar." As found in archaeology, at the earlier times of Gaulish independence, a crested boar sign topped the pole ensign of the national armies. The boar seems to have been the military symbol of loftiness and power, there expressing the higher ideals of the wild and free Celts. Pierre Lance, who founded *Revue L'Hespéride* in 1066, saw it as the third holy animal of the druidical totem, just after the stag and the ox. It is a known fact that the stag was widely featured in Scythian and Hittite art. Lance thought that it belonged to the hunter-gatherers' class of producers such as with the Fianna of Ireland. As for the ox, he suggested that it belonged to the pastoral communities, as featured in the *Táin*

*Bó Cúailnge* of the *Red Branch* cycle. He also proposed that the boar belonged to the creative class of thinkers and technicians, of the arts of smithing and warring, that of the Tuatha Dé Danann. This being said, it is rather more likely that the boar was the privileged symbol of the second social class of aristocratic warriors. This was the reason why the gods Lugus, Esus, and Arthur in the later Matter of Britain, are all found in association with the boar. In the story of *Culhwch and Olwen*, Arthur and his men, along with his hound Cavall, chase Twrch Trwyth, a formidable wild boar through the woods. Others suggest that the boar represents the priestly craft of Bards and Druids because of its cunning and lasting memory. Did not Caesar mention that the Gallic aristocracy entrusted its youth to the Druids for higher education? Henge schools were set in natural settings, and indeed, the boar does have the reputation of guarding woodland sanctuaries and remote orchards. Needless to add, that the gregarious Celt took very much liking to this resourceful, swift, and agile, but strong woodlander. To be honest, it can be said that it resumed all three of the basic functions into one. The boar fights, hunts, seeks, and finds the hidden truffle. What better symbol for Brigantia, nobility and moral elevation? It can also be said that the pig was the domestic equivalent of the boar as it represented the third functional class of producers and artisans. Irish myth has it that Manannan's swine herd was safely kept at Emain Ablach, the fabled island of the Blessed. In the Celtic mindset, pigs were never looked down upon as it was the case in Biblical culture. Let's add that the Indo-Europeans viewed elephants as giant boars. Finally, Eburos, the boar constellation, corresponds to the Big Dipper which in Celtic was also called Andarta, the she-bear.



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### **Bull, Cow**

Cattle are largely featured in Celtic symbology where they represent material might, and sovereignty. This being that for the ancient pastoral IE societies, much like the deer was for the hunter-gatherers, bovines were synonyms of wealth and prosperity. In Vedic literature, Indra seeks the sacrificial horse's head which is hidden in the mountain lake of Saryanavat where he is to find the secret name of Tvastr's cow of the House of the Moon where the secret of the making of honey Soma was guarded. The horse-head was said to rise up from the waters of the lake there granting various wishes for those who made the quest.

Afterward, it lay submerged for an entire Age. No doubt that this mythological motif had cosmographical or astronomical implications related to the Taurean Age.

In the *Tain Bô Cualgné*, it is Ailill who is in possession of the best bull, the great horned bull of Ai, which is highly coveted, even by his powerful wife. In all likelihood, it was three horned. The selenian Queen Medb has war declared with the state of Ulster hoping to acquire the Brown Bull of Cualgné. An acquisition by which she hopes will eclipse her

husband's dominance. This being that in Celtic society, the spouse who accumulated the most wealth also exercised more power. This is, therefore, a sign of great competition and struggle for wealth and power between competing royals. But then again, it could also be argued that cattle fell under the patronage of the goddess Bouenda, the "white cow." The Gaulish name for the Brown Bull of Cualgne was no doubt Donnotaruos, which was akin to the Gallic Taruos Trigaranos. Again, please note here the association of the crane with the triune mothers as an allegory for sovereignty and queenly power. Thus, when Queen Medb "asks Fedlem what future events she foresaw for her campaign, the confused pythoness answers, "I see not because of the line of trees before us." "Then we'll have them all cut down," replied Queen Medb... "And then make way for the plows."<sup>9</sup>



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### Cat

Of all of the forest's animals, wild cats were the animals that struck the most fear in the hearts of humans. This originates from the highly predatory nocturnal nature of cats. The bottom panel of the *Gundestrup Cauldron* shows a creeping cat lying beneath a crouching bull. In Old Celtic astronomy, the Hyades were identified to the Cat Star, one of the asterisms of the Bull constellation. When thinking of cats, the first image that comes to mind is that of black cats, bad luck and witchcraft. These are fairly recent superstitions. Unlike the Egyptians and the Romans, the ancient Celts did not keep house cats, only barn cats. Therefore, the cats of Celtic myth and legend were mostly wild ones. Not that lions went unknown, the wildcat of Europe (*felis sylvestris*), along with its larger cousin the lynx, was the better known and most celebrated.<sup>10</sup> Of all the animals of Northern Europe, lynxes, with their variegated multicolored coat and pointed spiky ears, were the most impressive and evil-looking. The lynx was thought to incarnate the dark forces of war, tyranny, and death. It is often, much like the battle crow equated to the horrors of the battlefields. A warrior was called Catacos, and many tribal warriors bore the name of "combat cat." Catu is found in the composition of many tribal and ethnic names such as the Catellauni, Latinized as Catuvellauni, for "best in combat," and the Caturiges, the "kings of combat." Unlike with the Christian scriptures where the cat is absent, in the Celtic legends, the cat is ever present. Heroes often encounter monstrous cats who seem to incarnate fall of fate and passing of time. In the Gaelic-Canadian tales, *Cornu's Cat Eats Twelve Cows*, the cat there represents the shortening of summer days. In the Irish cycles, it is Irusan of Knowth, who lived in a cave on the Boyne, which represents the fall of days. Irusan<sup>11</sup> seizes the poet Senchan in its jaws and ran off with him. A poetic name for the Cat was Luchtigern<sup>12</sup>. Diarmuid, a handsome youth who was a member of the Fianna, arrived late one night with his

companions to a woodland hut where an old man and young girl resided. They were keeping a wether sheep and a cat. The cat jumped on the table and not one of the Fianna could throw it off the table. They were told by the old man that the wether sheep represented the world and the cat death. In the Welsh tale of Cat Palug<sup>13</sup>, we have the ferocious giant speckled feline who terrorizes the surrounding countryside at night. It swam ashore on Ynys Mon and ate one hundred and eighty warriors. It was finally killed by Cei who fought with it. On Gaulish stelae, a cat the size of an ox is depicted holding in its sharp and powerful claws the heads of two wise men. I take it that the cat can be taken for fatality through personal geis<sup>14</sup>, or obligation, represented as the claws of death! Jérémie Benoît, in *Le paganisme indo-européen*, has very well defined the meaning of cat symbolism using the Dumézilian methodology key. The cat embodies the battle frenzy of the warrior's class, which was termed *ord* in Germanic, "holy furor," and *uico* in Celtic, meaning "combative fury," hence punning with *ueicos*, "home, settlement, and village." The warrior chieftain, in order to gain sovereignty over the land, must battle the tutelary or the chthonian spirit who possesses it. This feat cannot be accomplished by landowners of another social group. In the Arthurian cycles, while riding in the woods, the knight Ywain encounters a lion combatting a serpent. He assists the great cat by cutting off the snake's head with his sword. Thus, Ywain gains lordship over the wilderness. In Charles Perrault's recount of the folktale, *Le chat botté*, "Puss in Boots," the cat is instrumental in assisting the Marquis de Carabas to gain kingship over the land by killing the opposing ogre.<sup>15</sup> In this situation, the cat figure is more than just the allegory of death as it was explained to Diarmuid in the Finnian cycles.

### **Crane**

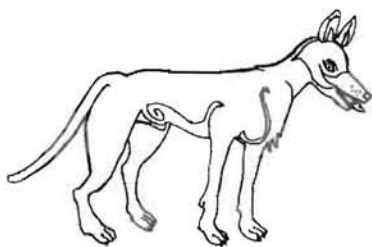
In Gaul, Maia was named Garana Trigaranai, along with her two sisters, who were collectively called the Trimatrai, or "three mothers." These were the fate fairies, who under the guise of three cranes, looked over the destinies of humans. The Old Celtic epithet Tries Garanai, "the three cranes," was the astronomical name for the Pleiades star cluster. The name garana could also imply a hag or a fairy. In the Irish myths, the crane was one of Aoife's totemic animals since it was believed that the crane bag or treasure bag of the Fianna was made from Aoife's skin after she had been bewitched. Aoife was a female warrior courted by Cuchulainn and with whom she had a son. The main Pleiadean fairy was also called Cailleach Beara, "the witch of Beara," who had two sisters, one called Cailleach Bolus, and the other, Cailleach Corca Duibne. Dechtire, Lugh's mortal wife, was most likely referred to as the Cailleach of Beara, when not Cailleach Buí. According to the *Book of Lecan*, she remained young for seven periods, had seven husbands, and fostered fifty youths who founded many families and tribes. Another god associated with cranes was Midir, a son of the Dagda. He opposed the nomination of Bodb Dearg for the leadership of the godly seat thus bringing about the demise of godly rulership over mortals. He dwelt in the Sidh of Bri Leigh which was guarded by three cranes. Midir's name is from the Old Celtic root Medurins for "stream of mead." In Gaul, he was called Toutatis Medurins, that is, "Midir the tribal father."

### **Cock, Hen**

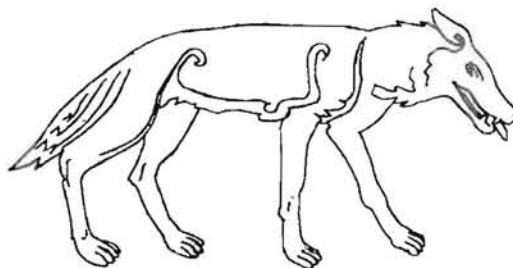
In the eyes of the Romans, the cock was the animal that best personified the Gauls, therefore they called them Galli. Some have argued that this was a mockery using the Latin word gallus for "cock," with gallos, "stranger," used by the Gauls to qualify themselves in Rome.



In all likelihood, they referred to themselves as Galatoi, the “gallant, or pugnacious” ones, and collectively as the Celtoi, “the lofty, or noble” ones. The colorful hairdos sported by the boastful Gallic warriors probably had more to inspire the Romans to see them as barnyard roosters. It was a fact that their cut hair was stiffened with limewater and left standing on ends. Julius Caesar was astonished to find the British Celts raising poultry and not eating the roosters. This interdiction seems to have been carried down to their modern descendants. Finely crafted in white clay, or steel and bronze, cock figurines were found in many Gaulish graves. These can be admired at the *Musée des Antiquités Nationales of St-Germain-en-Laye*. The Greeks also kept roosters, especially red-crested white Fermeest cocks, for their oracular ceremonies dedicated to Hermes. Was not Hermes, much like the Gallic Lugus, the patron of hidden mysteries? Hermes, together with the new Moon deities Demeter and Hephaistos are often named in relation to the dates of the first evening visibility of the new crescent. This having to do with adjusting calendar festivals. Hermes and Demeter do fit a gymnasium-context, but Hephaistos is odd since he was identified to the Egyptian god Ptah. Ptah’s capital was Memphis and his high-priest was called Lord of Mastercraftsman. Also interesting are the many onomatopoeias found in the IE languages imitating the cock’s crow. For example kuk-karta in Sanskrit, cocorico in French, chichirici in Italian, and cockadoodledoo in English. This is very close to the modern French and English words “coq” and “cock.” It was believed that it gave omens through its crows.<sup>16</sup> In Scandinavian myth, Fjalar the red rooster’s prophetic cries call the final Ragnarok, “the twilight of the gods.” The cock-rooster becomes the emblem of France only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, it is very unlikely that it was ever used as the national emblem of independent Gaul. What we do know, however, is that the cock traditionally had been a popular motif in Gallic art, in that it always been regarded as the mythological bringer of days. And in astrology, it was the zodiacal animal positioned at the start of the new cycle of Cantli Prinnios on the *Coligny Calendar*. The name gantulos, “capercaillie,” punned with and cantlos, “time of songs,” or “cycle’s settling.” The mystery surrounding this bird seems to have been widespread in the Brittonic world. In France, there are many legends involving a mythic bird called in the many dialects the cockatrice, coastris, cocatrix, caucatrix, or coquatrix. It figured in many manuscripts of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was seen as a chimeric coq-headed bull, when not a coq-headed reptile, or again, a red-crested dragon. Its symbolism was linked to the concept of rebirth and after-life. In France, during Catholic processions for the Rogations, coffin bearers were called “porteurs de coquatrix,” which translates as “Cockatrice bearers.” Rogations were religious observances held three days before Ascension Day as prayer days ensuring harvests.



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### **Dog, Hound, and Wolf**

Canines, both wild (wolf and fox) and domestic (hounds, mastiffs, work dogs and lapdogs), were ever-present in Celtic Art and mythology. Dogs represented the pastoral and tribal life of farming communities, while the wolf represented the bushwhackers and hunting bands such as the Irish Fianna. If the dog was in relation to summer and heat, the wolf was in relation to cold and winter and seen as a symbol of fertility and purification for the promise of spring. Dogs were always seen as the ideal companions of youths, hunters, travelers, and merchants. On the other hand, wolves are often the companion of seers, sorcerers, prostitutes, and tantric witches. This is how they were represented in the times of Antiquity. In the ancient world of Rome, Greece, Iberia, and Gaul, prostitutes were called "she-wolves."<sup>17</sup> The Fionna also kept wolf bitches who were made to couple with their best hounds and vice-versa. The Fianna had tantric witches who served to initiate young recruits into the arts of sex, gymnastics, and martial arts. As a pair, Cuchulainn and Ferdidad Mac Daman were sent to Scathach of Skye to receive this type of training. And besides, was not Cuchulainn, the greatest Celtic hero, not called the Dog of Culann? Again, in the Irish texts, apart from Cuchulainn, we have Saidhthe Suaraigne, "the bitch of evil," who was one of the hounds of Cromm Dubh, and Garbh Ogh.

It was also believed that dog spirits accompanied the soul of the deceased into the afterlife. In classical mythology, the Cerberus guarded the gates of the underworld. In Greek representation, the hound of Hades, the Kerberos, was a monstrous three-headed dog. A similar chimeric dog was also featured in Celtic myth and legend. Known as Ancu in Gaul, Cwn Annwn<sup>18</sup> by the Welsh, his Breton cognate was An Ki Du, "the black dog," who was said to accompany the ghosts of the damned. The Cwn Annwn are mentioned in the First Branch of the Mabinogi in the story where the hounds of Arawn are chased off of a deer by Pwyll. The hounds are later taken in by Gwyn ap Nudd. There are many other stories in Welsh and Breton lore describing spectral wolfish white canine creatures sporting pointy lynx-like red ears. Armorican tales speak of how, on dark stormy nights, wild dogs are seen racing through the countryside pursuing the souls of unbaptized children and impenitent adults.<sup>19</sup> Dogs here are symbolic of the immortal soul, while wolves represent the mortal self. In mythology, competing twins have pup companions where most often, of the two, one but survives. Wolves also come as twins. Of the many examples of twins<sup>20</sup> in Celtic lore, the first that comes to mind are the assessors of Lugus, the Lugoues. In Gaul, these were known as Momoros, "the swan," and Atepomaros, "the great rider," or Deuonnos, "the divine one," and Dinomogetimaros, "the brave prince." Other likely contenders were the siblings Belisama and Belenos, both names meaning "brilliant."

These entities were also linked to constellations, stars, and planets. According to the Dutch linguist Jan de Vries, dogs were mainly an attribute of the god Mars. In Celtic, as in Greek astronomy, the star Sirius, Canis Major and Minor, were all under the sign of dogs, Lupus, being the wolf star.

Let's also note that in pre-Christian times, dogs were seen as the faithful companions of men and heroes and guardians of the home, while in Semitic cultures, dogs were seen as impure. To conclude, a good horse made the nobleman while the good dog made the foot-soldier.



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### Ducks and Water Fowl

Ducks and other waterfowl are found in association to the god Lugh. In the story of the *Birth of Cuchulainn*, Dechtire, Lugh Lamfada's wife, along with her maidens, come to the plain of Emain Macha in the guise of birds as waterfowl. Following this episode, Conchobar and Fergus assist Dechtire during her birth pains who then gives birth to the hero Cuchulainn.

The Irish word lachu, for "duck," derives from the same root as loch, "lake."<sup>21</sup>

Another Gaelic name for the aquatic bird is tunnag.



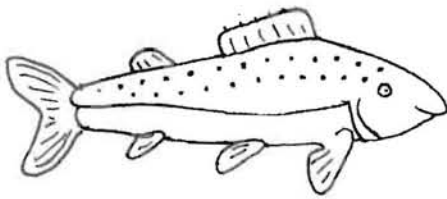
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### Eagle

From Greek, Hittite, Scythian, and Cimmerian art, we know that Altair, alpha Aquilae, the eagle star, played an important role as a marker in the summer triangle grouping along with Deneb and Vega. The eagle is identifiable to the mercurial god Lugh that was Odin or Wotan for the Germanic peoples. It was said that the hawk would perch on Odin's forehead. According to the Scandinavian sagas, Odin's eagle had a twin, a giant eagle who crouched in the northern skies and who was called in the Norse tradition "swallower of corpses." The Brythonic Celts have retained the old Indo-European designation for the constellation of Aquila, "the Eagle," with the Welsh *eryr*, Breton, *erer*, and Cornish, *êr*. All derive from the Old Celtic name *erur*. Let's add that the Gaelic name *Ochill*<sup>22</sup> was generally ascribed to the hawk.

## Elephant

The elephant was not unknown to the Celts. This is demonstrated in Celtic lore, and particularly in the art of the *Gudestrup Cauldron*. The Gaels have called it the oilpheid<sup>23</sup>, and in the other languages, it was simply called by its Latin name, elephantus: Welsh eliffant, and Breton olifant. History informs us that the Celtiberians, along with the Gauls, assisted Hannibal in crossing their territories with battle-elephants. The Galatians could also have encountered it in Asia Minor on the frontiers of Persia. Although there is no record of how it was called in ancient Celticity, all indicates that it was referred to as a great boar. The Old Celtic name for it could have been roturcos. In the eastern IE Vedic cultures, from the book of the *Mahabharata*, we have Airavata the elephant. Much like the boar, it too was seen a cosmic symbol. The elephant was said to be born of the primordial ocean of milk and only Indra could mount it. His twin then goes out in search of Agni, the firebrand, who had taken refuge inside a reed. Its other names were Abhra-Matanga, "the elephant of the clouds," Arkasodara, "the brother of the Sun," and Naga-Malla, "the fighting elephant." Airavata was the guardian of the rising sun.



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## Fish, Salmon, and Trout

The Gallic name for the Pisces, the fish constellation, was Ogroni Prinnios. There were also names for Fomalhaut and the constellation of the Southern Fish being Fintan in Gaelic, and Roue Pesketour, "the kingfisher," in Breton. Fintan, the prime-seer had the ability to metamorphize himself into different animal forms, especially salmon. Salmon was seen as primordial soul-being who swam through the great cosmic waters. The fabled *Salmon of Knowledge* was taken to be creation's wisest and oldest living thing.

According to the *Boyhood Deeds of Finn mac Cumhaill* found in the *Fenian Cycle*, it was while Finn was tanning deerskin in oak-water that he gained knowledge of the salmon's history.

Seven years Finneces had been on the Boyne, watching the salmon of Fee's Pool; for it had been prophesied of him that he would eat the salmon of Fee, after which nothing would remain unknown to him. The salmon was found, and Demne was then ordered to cook it, and the poet told him not to eat anything of the salmon. The youth brought him the salmon after cooking it. "Hast thou eaten any of the salmon, my lad?" said the poet.

"No," said the youth, "but I burned my thumb, and put it into my mouth afterwards."

"What is thy name, my lad?" said he.



“Demne,” said the youth. “Finn is thy name, my lad,” said he; “and to thee was the salmon given to be eaten, and indeed thou art the Finn.” Thereupon the youth ate the salmon. It is that which gave the knowledge to Finn, so that, whenever he put his thumb into his mouth and sang through teinm laida, then whatever he had been ignorant of would be revealed to him.

He learnt the three things that constitute a poet: teinm laida, imbas forosna, and dichetul dichennaib.<sup>24</sup>

Finn was then coached into the mysteries of druidism by the sorceress Bodball<sup>25</sup>, who was Fiacaill’s wife, and Finn’s foster mother. When Finn asked if he could see this pond, Bodmall explained to him that if someone wished to see it, one would have to be a great seer and that only the godly could gaze in the depths of its waters. She also told him that at the dawn of time, the shining ones came to look into it only to admire the bright wonder of their own indestructible beings and whenceforth departed content. And as Pierre Lance noted, poets can also access it, since guided by the shining stars. Fionn the great royal poet can be identified to the constellation of Orion. In many of the IE mythologies, lakes were found on the grounds of each of the four mythic cities. The pond mentioned in the Fenian tale most likely corresponds to that of Falias, a place of the northern realm where legendary cattle graze under the stars of the Milky Way.

### **Goat**

The goat seems to be a very ancient symbol for the stars of Capricorn, which in Latin literally means “goat horn.” It was much figured in early Hellenic, Cimmerian, Scythian, and Hittite Art. In Vedic literature, Capricorn was also under the sign of the goat where it was called Makara, “the billy-goat.” For the ancient Persians, this constellation, combined both the fish and the dolphin, into one sign as the goat-fish. The older Neolithic Danubian star chart probably had it as a horned sturgeon seen as a goatfish. The Old Celtic names for Capricorn were gabros, “goat,” and boccas, “billy-goat.” Names which can be verified using the Welsh bwch gafr, Breton bouc’h, Irish gobhar, all from the same Celtic roots.

### **Hare, Rabbit**

The hare or rabbit was a very common allegorical animal within Indo-European folklore. Seen as the embodiment of fertility and agility, the Greeks sacrificed rabbits to Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty. The rabbit was also represented in Gallo-Roman Art as it was found featured on pottery and bas-relief carvings. In Welsh literature, Gwyon Bach is described taking many forms in order to escape the wrath of the hag Ceridwen disguised as a hare. The ancient Britons probably called the constellation of Lepus, Ollouindas. Hence, the Welsh Neuadd Olwen, “Olwen’s palace,” or the Breton Kammed Olwen, “the all-white wheel rim,” there punning with oluena, “wheel,” as the designations for these stars.



The three Crones, detail from the *Gundestrup Cauldron*. Author's drawing after a photo from the National Museum of Copenhagen by E. Lessing.

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### **Hawk, Falcon**

The hawk star Achill, also spelled Ochill, was the usual Gaelic astronym for Aquila, the Eagle constellation. Along with the raven, it was one of the chief animals found in the company of Finn and was taken as a symbol of loftiness and moral elevation. And as Fintan boasts in the *Hawk of Achill*: "For fifty years I was an eagle, few the birds that could fill my place; a hundred years happily I was a fierce blue-eyed falcon. Till the Sun King (that is Oenghus mac Oc) thought it time to put me in my own shape. Where would I get anything worthier? And yet, I am aged still today."<sup>26</sup> In this poem, Achill, the hawk, admits to having, in the shape of a crow, taken Fintan's eye. He later explains how he picked over the remains of Fintan's sons, giving away his true identity as an avenger warbird. Was not Fintan the Irish equivalent of the Scandinavian god Odin and an alias of the high god Lugh? Like all messenger birds of the Celtic zodiacal system, the hawk was essentially astral and solar in nature.

### **Horse**

Horses have such an important place in a Celtic culture that there were a number of names to qualify them. For example, as Monard listed, among the many Gallic terms were: *caballos*, *cabo*, *epos*, *marcos*, *mannos*, from an earlier *manduos*, *uoredos*. Each of these names being an aspect of the generic name: *equos* (Gdl), or *epos* (Brt)." In Irish myth, spectral rudy colored horses appear at night from the Otherworld. And as Peter Berresford Ellis remarks, the goddess Etain Echraide, Midir's spouse, bears a name related to horses in that of Echraide, meaning "cavalry." This name also connects her to the Welsh horse goddess Rhiannon. Worshiped by the Brythonic aristocracy, her Gallic equivalent was Epona, "the horselike," whose cult, for lack of better, was later borrowed by the knights of the Roman cavalry.<sup>27</sup> Particularly honored in all of the IE, traditions, the horse was taken as

a royal godly symbol in relation to the red order of divinities. For the Vedic Aryans, these consisted of the hosts of Rudra, and for the Irish Celts, the clan Rudraide. They were sometimes called the Rudricans in the Irish myths. In Gaul, Rudiobos, “the red,” was the stallion god of the Orléans area. His horse had a three-pointed mane each symbolizing the moon's three phases. The color red was in relation to death and the otherworldly gods of power and destiny. This, underlining the role of the horse as a carrier of souls, especially those of noble birth. The Mother goddess of the earthly plain also takes the form of a horse as the grey-mare and was known as Macha in Ireland, Epona in Gaul, or Rhiannon in Britain. She is seen as taking the deceased on her powerful back, leaping across the great river away from the shore of the living on to the other shore of death. Indeed, much like their eastern cousins, the Scyths, the Celts were excellent horsemen. In fact, the horse was so important in their mind that elaborate rituals were performed in its honor. If the horse in found I the place of the crab, or crayfish, in the Gallic constellations, it was only because it seemed nobler as a symbol. This also, because it was a royal mount and the prime authoritative executor in the rite of turning deemed more sacred for the performance of ceremonial circumambulation. At the esoterical level, the opposition between light and dark formed the basis for the eschatological myth of soul migration with the revival of the morning sun.

### **Lion**

The European lion (*panthera leo europaea*) was never regarded as an import totemic animal in Celtic culture. The Eurasian lynx and wildcat (*felis sylvestris*) were much more prevalent in Celtic Art and legend. Common to the Scythians, Greeks, Hittites, Persians, and Indians, the lion makes its way into Celtic lore only after the Roman conquest, thus replacing the other native wildcats. Only later, did it become a popular motif in the medieval Arthurian lore of Britain, Wales, Cornwall, and Britany.

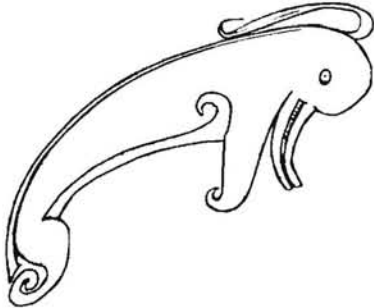
### **Otter**

The Goidelic name for the otter was dubrocu, Gaelic, dobhar-cù, which stood for “water dog.” The general Old Celtic name was udaros or uderos. Udaros also stands for “dark,” there connoting the more sinister aspects of the dog. In Irish myth, the otter is one of Cuchulainn’s totemic animals along with dogs and crows. In the stories involving the Ulsterite hero, the otter is found symbolically linked to blood and death. Upon Cuchulainn’s death, the otter is hurt by his sword and hence retreats to Lochan an Claiomh’, “lake of the sword.” This was in reference to Orion’s Sword, an old classical designation for a star cluster situated under Orion’s Belt. These stars are made up of the lesser stars of Orion, iota and theta, which included the nebula M42, also termed as the “lake of the sword.” The otter theme was probably remixed in the stories of Nimue, or Vivianne la Fay, the Lady of the Lake of the Arthurian tales.

### **Owl**

The owl and other nightbirds were seen as the godly messengers of the night in most Indo-European cultures. The hazel-eyed Greek and Roman goddess Athena / Minerva, of piercing sight, was represented by the olive tree and had the owl as an animal companion. The Old Celtic names for owl were: cauua, cauanna, cauata or cauoca, or again ulacos for the great horned owl. During an archaeological survey at the site of Batilly-en-Gâtinais, France, a bronze ornament for a wine jug representing an owl was unearthed at the site of a Gaulish

aristocratic residence dating back to the second century BCE. The Welsh god Llew, a cognate of the Gaulish Lugus and Irish Lugh, had a wife called Blodeuwedd, "the blossom faced," who was transformed into an owl by the sorcerer Gwydion. Fittingly, the Welsh name for the constellation of Berenice's Hair was Llyn Blodeuwedd, "Blodeuwedd's copse bush."

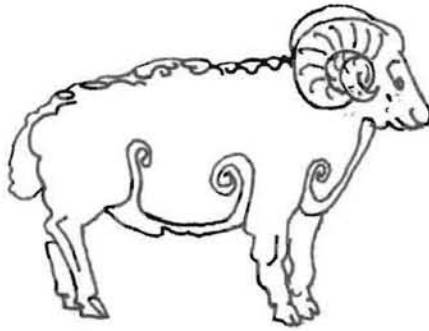


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### Porpoise or Dolphin

On the *Gundestrup Cauldron*, one finds the very curious image of a boy mounted on a dolphin. Curious because the dolphin is a warm water sea-mammal. The dolphin boy is a very familiar motif for those knowledgeable of Greek mythology. Dolphin is from the Greek *delphin-*, *delphis*; akin to *delphys* for "womb," the Sanskrit name for dolphin was *garbha*. The Celtic word was most likely some word starting with *mori-*, such as the French name *marsouin* for "porpoise" which derives from the Gaulish *morisuccos*, and akin to the Goidelic *morimoccos* also for "sea pig." The porpoise was the Celtic equivalent for the Greek dolphin. The dolphin expressed the sun's journey over the waters to the Blessed Isles<sup>28</sup>. In the Celtic sagas, there are a host of gods born of the sea. Muirgen and Morigena Morgan<sup>29</sup>, all stand for "born of the sea", were most likely mermaids, while Morrigu stands for "queen of the sea. Many scholars think that Myrddin<sup>30</sup> was a merman. Indeed, legend has it that Merlin descended to the underwater realm of the western sea. *Moriscos* and *Moritexs* were the Gaulish words for "sailor." The Irish name *Morfessa* also hints at this.<sup>31</sup> He was the mercurial sea god, who most probably was the one figured as the dolphin boy on the *Gundestrup Cauldron*. According to Jan de Vries, no less than twelve inscriptions of the Celtic "Neptune" were found with no fewer than forty representations of the god. Graphically, the god is represented with a full head of curls, holding a trident, and accompanied by a pet dolphin. Nothing keeps us from concluding that Manannan's swine herd comprised of sea mammals such as porpoises, if not mermaids. Mermaids and mermen abound in the folktales of Europe, especially those of Western France and Cornwall. The Breton folklorist Yves Le Diberder, the founder of *Revue Brittonia*, has collected in the Vannetais region a number of folktales on the subject between 1913 and 1916 and which he published in *Annales de Bretagne* in 1912. Much like in these stories from Brittany, Cornwall was also thought to be haunted by the chants of mermaids. And as Berresford Ellis remarked, Padstow, Seaton and the rock of Lamorna, were of those places rich in folktales surrounding this fabled creature. One of the more popular Cornish stories involves the Zennor mermaid who enchanted the ill-fated squire's son.<sup>32</sup> Originally the horned Sturgeon, or Goat-fish, then the Billy-goat represented the Sun's jump over the Earth's edge, while the Porpoise, its journey over the seas.





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### **Ram**

The ram zodiacal icon was not only known to the Greeks and Indians but was also used by the Celtic *Coligny Calendar* where it was called Cuti Prinnios for “constellation of the Ram.” An old man told Diarmuid, the Fianna champion, that the true meaning of the wether sheep and cat he saw meant the world and death. If the ram is to be taken as the world, and the cat, death. This implies that the snake symbol found in association to the ram represents life energy running through the World Pole. The Vedic texts qualify this as the rising of the vital-forces, or prana along the spine of the human body. “These forces are concentrated in centers, or chakra, like dynamos, ranged along the sushumnānādi and interconnected by it, wherein are stored the vital-forces or vital-fluids upon which all psycho-physical processes ultimately depend.”<sup>33</sup> The first chakra is said to be guarded by the goddess Kundalini. The ram forms, in conjunction with the snake, an astrological pair of great mystical importance. It is also found in Gallic Art as the allegorical representation of Segomo, the ram-headed snake. In Gallic astrology, Ogroni Prinnios, “constellation of cold-blooded animals,” Both signs, Pisces and Aries, are found side by side. Pisces, represents the cold portion before the spring equinox, while Aries is the warm part after the equinox.<sup>34</sup> Pierre Lance believes that the Ram was the fiery symbol of the “fire peoples” (= IE), to which the Celts belonged along with the Greeks, Hittites, and Aryans. “These people of the North eventually incorporated the Alpine peoples who had their peak during the Taurean Age around -6480 years ago. This is corroborated by the dual ox/deer imagery found in the cultural motifs of the Celts and which could well represent the merging of the Nordic and Alpine cultures into one people. Pierre Lance termed this as the Ram and Deer alliance of the Indo-European people with that of the Ox people of the Pre-Indo-Europeans.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Rat and Mouse**

A rat or a large mouse is featured in the pediment of a temple attributed to Cernunnos on a Gallo-Roman stone bas-relief from Reims, Marne, France. In British lore, the mouse star, called Llygoden in Welsh and Logosen in Cornish, was seen as Vega, the alpha star of Lyra.



Author's illustration  
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### **Raven, Crow**

Although not as bright in magnitude as the summer triangle consisting of Altair, Deneb, and Vega, the Celts seem to have had a special liking for *Corvus*, the Crow stars which formed a trapezoidal grouping. *The Book of Ballymote* gives *Fii*, from *Uii*<sup>36</sup> for Aquarius, which can also be taken for *fiach*, from *ueicos*, "raven." Ravens and crows are linked to the second social function of the warriors' class and recurrently pop into the sagas and legends.

According to Jean Markale, these semi-historic heroes by the name of Bran seem to mask a godly entity who was called Bran Vendiget in Welsh and Bran Mac Lir in Irish. It is very unlikely that he went under the Christianized name of "the blessed," he was most likely formerly known as Cados Brannos<sup>37</sup>. The name Bran derived from an older Brannos which punned with Brennos, "war chief, warlord, or victor." Therefore, the name Brennos hints at a military title carried by many legendary generals of Celtic Antiquity. The Romanized version of the name was Brennus. As reported by Roman historians, this Brennus was the warlord who led his troops into the battle of Allia only to conquer Rome in 390 BCE.

Another Brennus led his army into Macedonia, plundered and ravaged its way through Greece, and in 279 BCE at Delphi, sacked the Temple of the Oracle. Berresford Ellis noted that Bran was the British counterpart of the Dagda and who seemed to be the same as the Bran of the Irish seafaring tale, the *Immram Brain*. These tales describe the many voyages of Bran to the lands beyond the Ocean and are indicative of his mercurial nature similar to Manannan Mac Lir. Next is Fionn Mac Cumhail's nephew who turned into a hound, and who is also called Bran. Brandubh, "the black raven," was a board game played by heroes and gods. Another game called Branfad is said to resemble chess or draughts. The raven as the eagle, because of its character, was a celestial symbol of power and light as well as a token of darkness and mystery. This was probably because of its color and cry. The raven was found in association to the battle ram, or wether sheep, because of their martial symbolism. J.-P. Persigout noted that the raven was thought to possess the knowledge of unknown events both past and future, hence the Old Irish saying: "wise as the raven;" that is supreme knowledge. More terrible still, is the crow who feeds on the corpses of heroes fallen in battle. After the cat, no other animal inspires so much terror in the hearts of men. In

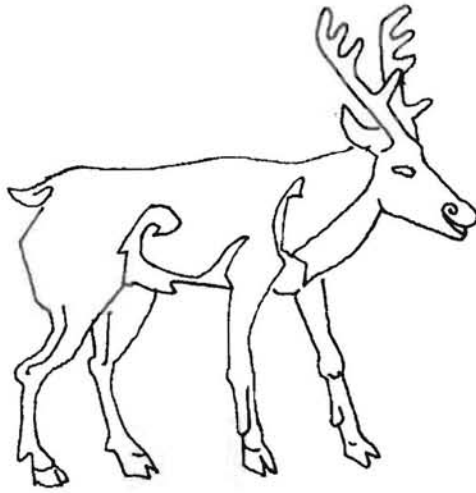
Gaul, the she-crow goddess was called Catu Bodua and Cassibodua, “the pleasant crow,” also known in Ireland as Badb Catha, “the battle crow.” Badb was the Irish triune war-goddess of battle frenzy. During the battle, she appears over battlegrounds shrieking over the bodies and heads of agonizing warriors. And it is in this shape that the Badb Catha appears to Cuchulainn with a shrieking sound that even has the “fearless hero” fall out of bed. She sealed his doom as she perched on his shoulder while an otter was drinking his blood. The Morrighu or Morigann takes the shape of a crow in order to incite the Brown of Cualngé into fighting. From a study of old manuscripts preserved in the library of Dublin’s Trinity College, Eugene O’Curry found that, from the chirping of a wren, many observations and auguries could be made. But of course, auguries were interpreted from many other bird cries. Crows and ravens were renowned for their wit and cunningness and thus seen as having foreknowledge. What follows is a quote from O’Curry’s book *Druids and Druidism in Ancient Ireland*:

If the Raven croaks over a closed bed within the house, this denotes that a distinguished guest, whether lay or clerical, is coming to you. But there is a difference between them. If he be a layman that is to come, it is “bacach! bacach!” the Raven says. But if it be a man in holy orders, it is “gradh! gradh!” it says; and it is far in the day that it croaks. If it be a soldier or a satirist that is coming, it is “grog! grog!” that it croaks; and it is behind you that it speaks, and it is from that direction the guests are to come. If it be in a small voice that the Raven speaks, “err! err!” or “ur! ur!,” there is sickness to come on some person in the house, or on some of its cattle. If it is the wolves that are to come to the sheep, it is from the sheep-pens, or else from beside the woman of the house, that he croaks, and what he says is “carna! carna!”, “grob! grob!”, “coin! coin!” (that is, wolves, wolves). If the Raven should accompany or precede you on an expedition, and that he is joyous, your journey will be prosperous. If it is to the left he goes, and croaks at you in front, it is at a coward he croaks in that manner, or his croaking denotes disgrace to someone of the party.<sup>38</sup>

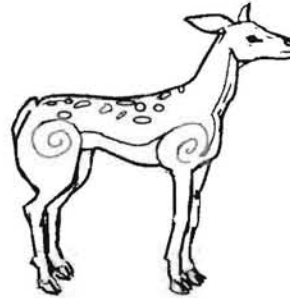
### **Snake, Adder**

The snake or adder is one of the most celebrated animals of Celtic Art and Symbolology. It seems to have served as the representation of cosmic time and annual cycles. It was featured on the *Gundestrup cauldron* where it is shown clutched by a youthful horned figure. This, certainly, is to be taken as the representation of the constellation Ophiuchus, or Serpentarius, “the serpent bearer.” The Irish name for these stars was Diancecht, “the brutal grip.” The Greek equivalent was known as Asclepios. The Welsh and Breton called the constellation Peredur, “the hesitant.” In Pictish Art, the snake is often represented coiled or biting its tail like the Greek Ouroboros. The snake, often associated with the underworld, is a powerful chthonian entity representing the passing seasons. There are no snakes in Ireland, so when Saint Patrick’s followers boasted to have chased them away, it was understood that the monks had eradicated paganism and the teachings of the Druids. In Celtic lore, serpents were often confused with dragons and described as guarding caves and mound entrances. In older Celtic myths, snakes possess gems referred to as serpent eggs. For medieval legend, it became the philosophical stone, the Grail Stone, the prize of the ultimate spiritual quest. It was believed that the serpent’s stone was found inside its tail. For this, the serpent must be conquered in order for it to shed its gem. In Vedic thought, the snake represented the spine and the gem, the main chakra, or spiritual center. The spinal cord is the main backbone

found in all of earth's evolved creatures. Snakes and serpents, therefore, represent man's spiritual foundation in the great cycles of time.



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### Stag, Deer, Doe, and Fawn

The deer image is widely used throughout the IE world, from Scandinavia to the steppes of Ukraine via the Alps. In no other place is it as recurrent as a graphic representation, if not in the Amerindian Rock Art. Deer stones were a favorite of the Scythians and many sites around the Caucasus and Ukraine testify to this penchant. In Celtic lore, roebucks, stags, or deer, are mentioned in many traditional sources. In the zodiacal accounts of the oldest animals, stags are always mentioned at the top of the list. In the Welsh saga of *Culhwch and Olwen*, the stag comes only second to the blackbird, followed by the eagle, and salmon. In *Taliesin*, we have the following ranking: the sow, the buck, the wild boar sow, and finally, the cat followed by a Druid. The Druid then metamorphosizes in a blue salmon, a dog, a stag, a roebuck, a spotted cock along his hens, a stallion, a bull, and a yellow buck. Finally, as John Matthews remarks in *Taliesin, The song of Amairgen* poem, we have the stag of seven points, the bull of seven fights, the hawk upon a cliff, the boar of boldness, the salmon in the pool. As with swans at times, in many of the tales, gods and goddesses shapeshift into deer, bucks, and fawns. In other stories, Oisín's mother, Sadb, is magically transformed into a doe. Then, there is the tale concerning the goddess Flidhais, queen of wild beasts, who keeps a herd of deer in a forest enclosure. Stags are often mentioned bearing seven tined antlers, this, probably in reference to their northern provenance linked to the stars of the Septentrion. But then again, in Celtic lore and art, bulls are described as three-horned, rarely stags. As we have previously mentioned, Pierre Lance, in *Bestiaire Sacré des Gaulois*, argued that the ox was symbolic of the sedentary peoples of Alpine stock, while deer were symbolic the transhumant Nordic European tribes. This led him to conclude that deer expressed the shamanic practices of the forest dwellers identified as the Fianna in Ireland.

### Swallow

Fand<sup>39</sup>, the "swallow," also referred to as the "pearl of beauty," was the estranged wife of Manannán Mac Lir, and was one of the names of the otherworldly crepuscular goddess. Cuchulainn encounters Fand, the banshee queen, on the "strand of the yew tree," or Trá



Eóchaille<sup>40</sup>, which can also be taken for a branch of the Milky Way where Betelgeuse, Orion's alpha star, is found. A bout of jealousy erupts between the goddesses Emer and Fand. Cuchulainn is promised to Emer, while Manannán, who was naturally irritated by this affair cuckolding him, shakes his cloak of invisibility between Fand and the Ulsterite hero. This cosmic mythological theme is identical to that of the Greek Orion. Thus, Manannán is identifiable to Apollo, and Cuchulainn to Orion, Emer plays the role of Meropea, one of the seven Pleiades. Fand, most likely, corresponds to Êos, the dawn goddess. In light of this, Fand was likely one of the Irish names for the planet Venus along with Riia.



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### Swan

In Indo-European representation, swans are found in the company of the sky-god, the god the father: Deiwos-peter, yielding the Sanskrit Dyaus-pitar, the Latin Jupiter, stemming from Diespiter, and the Greek Zeus pater. Swans can be taken to incarnate the triple aspects of the sky-god, either for ether, air, and water. It was from a swan hen that the cosmic egg was laid, henceforth creating a flow of universal life. In Irish mythology, the children of Lir were changed into swans by Lir's second wife Aoife. His first wife Aoife had a sister called Aobh, and another named Arbha. These were the three crone matrons, the fairy goddesses, seen as the allegory of Age, Destiny, and Sovereignty. Oenghus mac Oc (also spelled Aonghus mac Og) and his wife Caer Ibormeith, both spent part of their time in the guise of a swan. The swan motif belongs to the stars of the constellation Cygnus which lies on the plane of the Milky Way. Its brightest star Deneb forms one of the northern points of the summer triangle along with Vega and Altair to the south. The Breton name for this constellation was Alarc'h, "swan," which hints at the Celtic prototype Alarcos. Then again, the Bretons also called Deneb, Ahez, which derives from the old root Aisa, meaning "divine breath."

### Worm

The worm was taken for a sign of life and conception, and of death and decay. In the pre-Christian thought of the Druids, worms, not only cleaned rotting flesh but were also seen as the germs of life. Many tales relate of maidens accidentally eating a worm, when not a grain, then miraculously giving birth to a demi-god, Does not J. Williams Ab Ithel note in the *Barddas*<sup>41</sup>, that when a man dies, his soul enters the meanest worm in existence, then becomes better and ascends in the migration of Abred.<sup>42</sup> From this has arisen the saying: "Trample not on thy better," a command addressed to one who has trampled a worm voluntary and without cause. In a poem by Taliesin, entitled *The Three Fountains*, a worm-like monster seems to prophesize imminent cataclysmic events. The description of this creature is reminiscent of the Gaulish serpent-dragon of Tarascon. Thus, in Taliesin's own prosaic terms (*Llyfr Taliesin*, Peniarth MS 2. National Library of Wales):

There is an odious worm from Caer Satanas, and he rules between the deep and the shallow. His jaws are as wide as the mountains of Mynnau, death shall not overcome him, nor hand nor blade. He is as heavy as nine hundred stones, his two paws are covered with bristles, one eye is in his head as green as the green ice. There are three fountains in the back of his neck. The sea was stained by him, and, swimming through it, was the destruction of cattle.

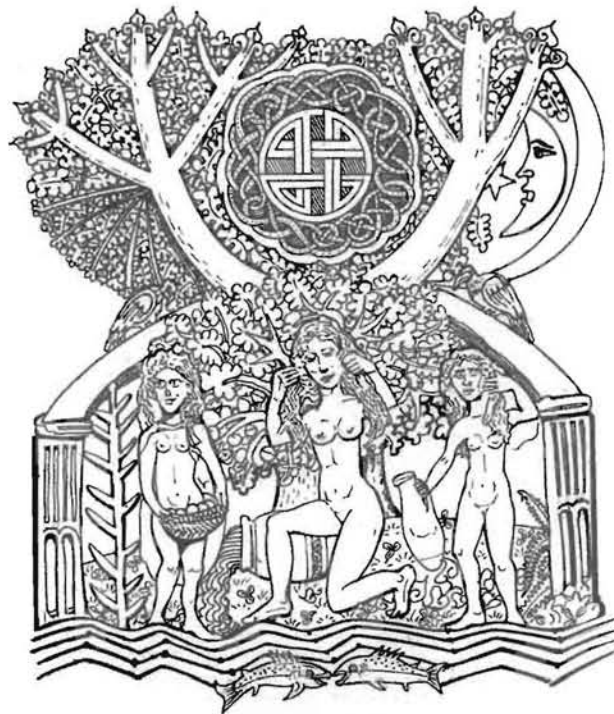
### **Wren**

The wren was familiarly called the druid-bird, dryw<sup>43</sup> in Welsh, and dreoilin<sup>44</sup> in Irish Gaelic. The Breton name laouenan<sup>45</sup>, which stood for “joyous,” puts it in the category of song-birds. These were seen as angels or godly messengers from the Otherworld. It was still a popular theme in western European folklore and it was featured in the *Book of Melusine* in a Breton song entitled *La mort du Roitelet*, “Death of the Wren.”<sup>46</sup> The French name roitelet literally means “little king.” Let’s add that the Welsh name for Thuban was dryw while it was Aedh “fiery,” in Irish. In Vedic literature, the *Brahmānda* and the *Vishnu Purana*, the ancient Polestar, the alpha star of Draco, was called Dhruva Nakshatra, which was under the patronage of the god Brahma. Interestingly, the Sanskrit name dhruva is of the same root as the Celtic druos for “firm and strong,” hence punning with druus, “oak,” and druuis, “druid.”

## **Chapter III**

# **Tree and Plant Symbolism**

Did my Creator create me?  
Of nine-formed faculties, Of the fruit of fruits,  
Of the fruit of the primordial God, of primroses and blossoms of time hill,  
of the flowers of trees and shrubs.  
Of earth, of an earthly course, when I was formed.  
Of the flower of nettles, of the water of the ninth wave.  
(*The Battle of the Trees*, The Four Ancient Books of Wales, The Book of Taliesin VIII.)



The fountain of Segais and the Tree of Knowledge. Author's drawing.  
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## The World Tree

The World-tree was an imaginary universal pole linking the inferior worlds to the higher spheres. Its roots stretched into the Underworld (Land of the Fomorii), the trunk through the Middle world (Land of the Living), and then branching into the Upperworld (Seat of the Gods). The World Pole or World-tree, according to the Scandinavians connects with nine worlds in all. In astrological terms, these worlds could correspond to the seven heavenly spheres, if we are to include the lunar nodes. To the nine planetary bodies, adding three more, could consist of the Earth, and "hidden," or occulted planets such as Uranus and Antiearth. The World Tree had its roots in the Earth's South Pole, its trunk, (South to North) extending to the Polar Star in the North. The World Pole was, in fact, the Earth's apex!

Does not Taliesin mention in *The Hostile Confederacy* that: "I know the regulator between heaven and earth?"

In many of the old tales, there is an eagle or a hawk perched in the highest tree in the branch tops.

The Irish had the Bile Medba, the Tree of Medua. In Norse mythology, it was Ask and Yggdrasils the mighty Ash tree who is the World-tree, while in Gaulish mythology, it is Onniona, the Ash-goddess who partook in its magic. The Ash tree is the tallest tree of the fields its long and straight trunk projects its umbrella-like canopy high above into the bright skies, thus making it the appropriate symbol for the cosmic axis. The Ash is under the protection of Nodons (Nuada) the silver handed king of Macha, the earthly plain. In *The Mabinogion* the World-tree is thus described:

Under this tree is a fountain, and by the side of the mountain is a marble slab, and on the marble slab a silver bowl, attached by a chain of silver, so that it may not be carried away. Take the bowl and throw a bowlful of water upon the slab, and thou wilt hear a mighty peal of thunder, so that thou wilt think that heaven and earth are trembling with its fury. With the thunder will come a shower so severe that it will be scarce possible for thee to endure it and live. And the shower will be of hailstones; and after the shower, the weather will become fair, but every leaf that was on the tree will have been carried away by the shower. Then a flight of birds will come and alight upon the tree, and in thine own country thou didst never hear a strain so sweet as that which they will sing.<sup>1</sup>

The *Maha-Bharata* with its 214 778 lines is much more explicit on the intricate cosmological order supported by the World Tree (Maha Bharata). Indeed, it is there called “Tree of Knowledge” and it is described as a conductor of vital energy circulating down from sky to earth, and vice-versa. This explains why it was called Yudhishitra, the “Tree of Life,” giving forth Adi-Parva, the fruits and seeds of life.

Likewise, Taliesin, in *The Hostile Confederacy* entertains a similar notion:

I know in nobody; who carried the measuring line in the presence of the Creator. What ladder had he when the heavens were lifted up; what was the fork set up from the earth to the sky?<sup>2</sup>

The trees belonging to the constellations of the Zodiac were solar in nature but some trees were given lunar symbolism. These were labeled *iphin* in Gaelic and could have included, among the spiny bushes, mistletoe (*amistrion* or *uidion*). “The great master of stars knows the mind of trees,” said Taliesin. Moon is Mind, thus “the mind of trees.” Each tree represents a constellation set in the *Tarabara*, the *Great Wheel of Time*, marked by a cusp. Its spokes radiate from the hub forming the yoke of each of the astral Houses. Added meaning is given to these tree constellations in their association to the planetary rulers of the zodiacal signs. Two of these sidereal tree signs, the White and Red Hazels were positioned at the buckling of the wheel as Chieftain Trees. Therefore, considered as solar since marking the solstices. The cosmic forest is made up of many types of trees. All are different, yet all are distinguishable. In this sacred grove of the gods, the best trees bear good fruits and fertile seeds. This is what is implied by the “battle of trees.”

### **The Forest and Valley Dwellers**

The Celts were a people of the valleys, hills, and forest, the farmers and woodlanders of Western Europe. Even though they had their backs turned to the sea, they nevertheless took great pride in challenging its wild fury as they also challenged the flowing rivers and its hinterlands. Ancient theonyms and mythonyms attest to the validity of this assertion. Take for example old Gallic names such as: *Arduinna*, “the hillside;” *Bergusia*, “mountaineer;” *Nantosuelta*, “valley jumper;” *Nemetona*, “of the sanctuary.” Or again, let's consider Gaelic names such as: *Ethné*, “the country;” *Fódla*, “the bedrock, the under-stone;” *Macha*, “the plain;” and *Tara*, “the mound.”



Also, numerous were the tribal names that were directly or indirectly linked to trees. The Bagiennoi, and Baginates, were the Beech people; the Betusioi, the Birch people; the Brancones, the people of the Briars; the Briniates, from Phriniates, the people of the plum-tree; the Carpesioi, Carpoi and Carpetsnos, the people of the Hornbeam or yoke-elm; the Darinoi, Deruacoi, the Oak people; the Eburones, Eburouices, the Yew people; the Lemouices and Lemouioi, the Elm people; the Lusitanoi, the people of the Mountain Ash; the Padinates, the people of the Pine; the Uerrocinoi, people of the Green Alder; and finally the Uiducasses or Uiducesioi were the forest dwellers. More indirectly associated to tree names are the Arebrignoi, for "the brushwood" and the Cancoi or Cancanoi for "the branch."

From the Bardic lore found in a medieval poem attributed to John of Kentchurch, we learn that:

Three years is the duration of the alder pole. Three times the duration of an alder pole is the life of a dog in the green woodland. And three times the age of the dog is the age of a good and active horse. Thrice the age of the horse is that of a man - a short existence! Thrice the age of man is that of the bounding hart. Thrice the age of the stag is that of the melodious blackbird. Thrice the age of the beautiful blackbird is that of the earth-grown oak. The age of the oak is judged to be that of Earth itself...<sup>3</sup>

### **The Tree Alphabet of the Ogham**

The *Auraicept Na n-Éces*, "the scholars' primer," is believed to be the work of VII<sup>th</sup> century Irish grammarians collected and copied by the scribe Longarad. The only remaining copy of the *Auraicept* is found in the *Book of Ballymote* compiled in 1390 by *Maghnus Ó Duibhgeánáin* of *County Sligo*, Ireland. Glossed over by clerics, however, most of the text material is much older, therefore preceding the Christian era. The *Auraicept Na n-Éces* is one of the three main medieval manuscript sources treating of Ogham and its writing system, the others being the *In Lebor Ogaim*, "In book of Ogham," and the *De dúilib feda na forfed*, "Of elements of fews ("letters") and over-fews (additional letters)." In the *Book of Ballymote*, a copy of the *In Lebor Ogaim* is found just before the *Auraincept* with its great variety of secret Oghams replacing the usual *Briatharogam Con Culainn* given in other copies. Also included in the list is the early Futhark referred to as *ogam lochlannach*, the "Ogham of the Scandinavian Norsemen."

The oldest examples of Goidelic literature are the Ogham inscriptions. These inscriptions dating mostly from the V<sup>th</sup>, VI<sup>th</sup> and VII<sup>th</sup> centuries, consist mainly of grave inscriptions from the Christian period. Nothing from the pre-Christian era was saved, so we have nothing from this period to go on. To give an example of what was recorded here are a few Ogham inscriptions:

MAQ CORRBRI MAQ AMMLLORATTA (after Macalister)

SAGRAMMI MAQI CUNOTAMI

MAQI DECEDDAS AVI TORANIAS

CUNANETTAS MAQI MUCOI NETTASEGAMONAS

TRIA MAQA MAILAGNI

Lines which roughly translate as (here lies) Son of So & So. These examples show that this language had a state of declensional inflection as high as Latin. Again, this also shows that the “Ogham language” was a preserved literary language with antique inflections. Compared to the contemporary spoken language of the Old Irish, the literary oghamic Goidelic was as about the same level as was Latin or Gaulish. As Sterckx pointed out, Old Irish was “vastly changed and decayed compared to Ogham Goidelic.” The literary language had archaic traits that predated by far the speech of Christian times. This process is similar to other medieval documents, despite it being glossed over by clerics, recovers content from the previous ages.

Although much was lost and garbled, it is nevertheless possible to access this old level underneath the clerical veneer and varnish. This about sums up the work of Belgian, Claude Sterckx, and French Celtic scholars, Christian-J Guyonvarc’h and Françoise Leroux, that is, digging under the overlays and putting the content back into context using the Classical and Vedic sources to uncover the common motifs. Ogham Goidelic hints at the existence of a druidical Sanskrit which can be termed as Celtica. According to Dr. Sterckx, a resident professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles:

It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that the language of the Oghams was a fixed archaic language exclusive to the druidical class and maintained as such, artificially, and this for centuries on, independently of the evolution of the vernacular speech.<sup>4</sup>

**The following is a long quote from the *Auraicept Na N-Éces* on the Ogham:**

What are the place, time, person, and cause of the invention of the Ogham (Ogam)? Not hard. It's place Hibernia Insula where we Irish live, in the time of Bres son of Elatha king of Ireland it was invented. Its person Ogma son of Elatha son of Delbaeth brother to Bres, for Bres, Ogma and Delbaeth are the three sons of Elatha son of Delbaeth there. Now Ogma, a man well skilled in speech and in poetry, invented the Ogham. The cause of its invention, as a proof of his ingenuity, and that this speech should belong to the learned apart, to the exclusion of rustics and herdsmen. Whence the Ogham got its name according to sound and matter, who are the father and the mother of the Ogham, what is the first name that was written by Ogham, in what letter it was written, and why “B” precedes every letter?

Ogham from Ogma was first invented in respect to its sound according to matter,

however, ogum is og-uaim, perfect alliteration, which the poets applied to poetry by means of it, for by letters Gaelic is measured by the poets; the father of Ogham is Ogma, the mother of Ogham is the hand or knife of Ogma.

This moreover is the first thing that was written by Ogham, >—TTTTTTTT i.e. (the birch) b was written, and to convey a warning to Lug son of Ethliu it was written respecting his wife lest she should be carried away from him into faeryland, to wit, seven *B*'s in one switch of birch: Thy wife will be seven times carried away from thee into fairyland or into another country, unless birch guard her. On that account, moreover, b, birch, takes precedence, for it is in birch that Ogham was first written.

How many divisions of Ogham are there, and what are they? Not hard. Four: *B* five, *H* five, *M* five, *A* five, besides diphthongs.

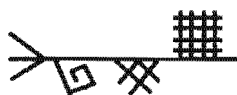
How many groups of Ogham? Not hard. Three, viz., eight chieftain trees, eight peasant trees, and eight shrub trees. Eight chieftain trees first: alder, oak, hazel, vine, ivy, sloe, furze, heath. Eight peasant trees, viz: birch, quicken tree, willow, ash, whitethorn, whin, apple tree. As to their letters all other shrubs are peasant trees.

Quot sunt genera [Whence is the origin] of the Ogham? Not hard. I shall speak firstly of the woods of the trees whence names have been put for the Ogham letters. Query, well then, whence are the Ogham vowels and consonants named? Not hard, it is from the school of Fenius Farsaidh, to wit, the school of poetry which Fenius sent throughout the world to learn the languages. There were five and twenty that were noblest of them so that it is their names that were put for the Bethe Luis Nin of the Ogham, both vowels and consonants; and there were four who were the noblest of these again, so that it is their names that were given to the seven principal vowels:



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And they added other three to them so that from these are named the other three diphthongs, wherefore are classified apart.



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Second of all, it is from the trees of the forest that names were given to the Ogham letters metaphorically. Moreover, Beithe, *B*, is from the birch of the forest for the first letter on the path of the Ogham alphabet. Luis, *L* that is rowan, or elm in the forests. Fern, *F*, that is, alder in the forest. Sail, *S* of the Ogham, that is, willow, again, in the forest. Nin, *N*, of the Ogham, to wit, maw of spear, or nettles in the woods. Uath, *H*, of the Ogham, that is,

test-tree or whitethorn, on account of its thorniness. Dur, *D*, of the Ogham is oak, again, in the forest. Tinne, *T*, of the Ogham, holly or elderberry in the forest. Coll, *C*, of the Ogham, hazel in the forest. Quert, *Q*, of the Ogham is holly in the forest, or quicken tree, or aspen. Muin, vine, *M*, mead [from it]. Gort, cornfield, *G*, fir. Getal, *Ng*, broom. Straif, *Str*, willowbrake in the forest. Onn, *O*, furze or ash. Ur, *U*, thorn. Edad, *E*, yew. Ida, *I*, service tree. Ebad, *Ea*, elecampane. Oir, *Oi*, spindle tree. Uilleann, *Ui*, ivy. Pin, *Io*, of the Ogham, pine, again, in the forest. Hence are named caera pinne, gooseberries; ifin, again is the name of that letter. Emancoll, witch hazel, *Ae*, again, *C* doubled according to fact or according to form, *C* across *C* in its form.<sup>5</sup>

The Classical authors, who historicized their myths, contrary to the Celts who mythicised their history, often describe Celtic Mythos as if it had really happened. This is the case for many things written about the Celts. So the oldest examples of Taliesin's *Tree Battle* come not from the Welsh manuscripts but from a Roman source. What follows is a quote from the Roman historian Livy (Book XXIII, 24) explaining the battle of the Cisalpine Gaulish battle of trees called Litana Uidua, or "broad forest."

In B.C. 216 it was a year of dire tribulations, L. Potumius, the chosen Consul perished with all of his troops on the Roman side of the Alps, in the Cisalpine region. In this area, there was a vast forest which the Gauls called Litana, and in which he was to lead his army. Here is my summary of the passage:

While busily occupied with these matters, intelligence arrived of a fresh disaster — fortune crowding into this year one calamity after another — that Lucius Posthumius, consul elect, himself with all his army was destroyed in Gaul.

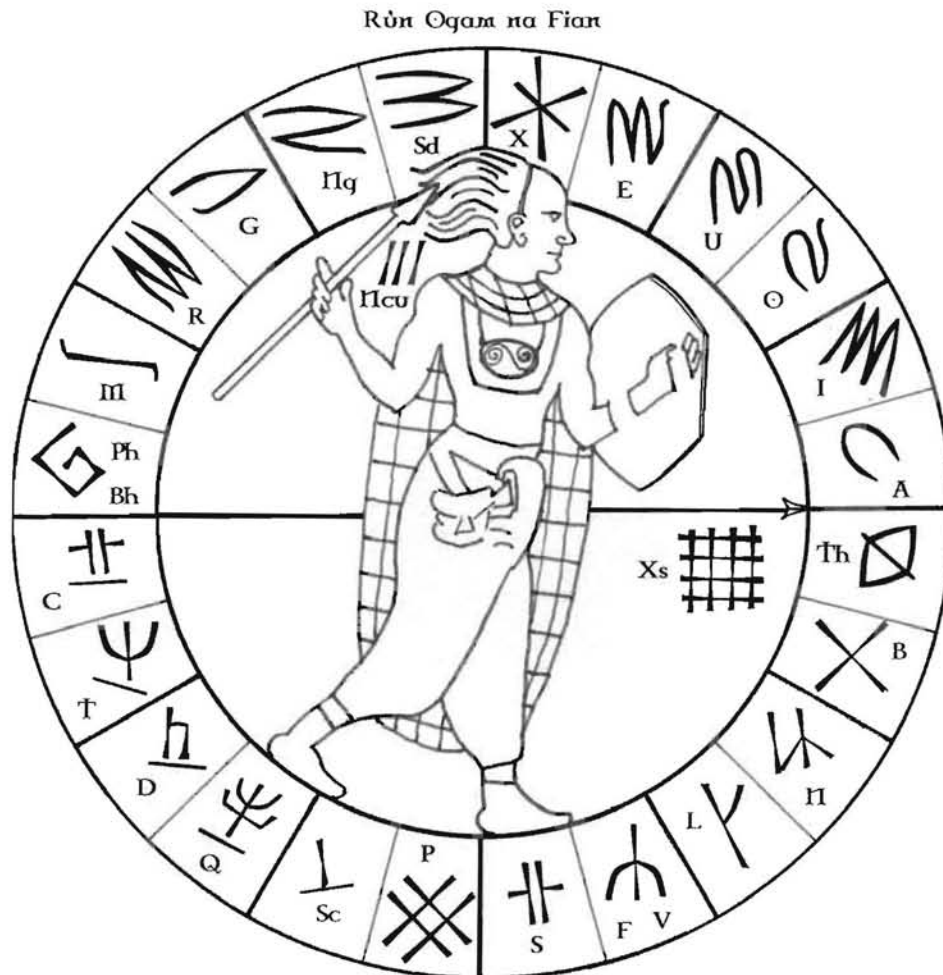
He was to march his troops through a vast wood, which the Gauls called Litana. On the right and left of his route, the natives had sawed the trees in such a manner that they continued standing upright but would fall when impelled by a slight force. Posthumius had with him two Roman legions, and besides had levied so great a number of allies along the Adriatic Sea, that he led into the enemy's country twenty-five thousand men.

As soon as this army entered the wood, the Gauls, who were posted around its extreme skirts, pushed down the outermost of the sawn trees, which falling on those next them, and these again on others, which of themselves stood tottering and scarcely maintained their position, crushed arms, men, and horses in an indiscriminate manner, so that scarcely ten men escaped.

For most of them being killed by the trunks and broken boughs of trees, the Gauls, who beset the wood on all sides in arms, killed the rest, panic-struck by so unexpected a disaster. A very small number, who attempted to escape by a bridge, were taken prisoners, being intercepted by the enemy who had taken possession of it before them. Here Posthumius fell, fighting with all his might to prevent his being taken. The Boii, having cut off his head, carried it and the spoils they stript off his body, in triumph into the most sacred temple they had. Afterward they cleansed the head according to their custom, and having covered the skull with chased gold, used it as a cup for

libations in their solemn festivals, and a drinking cup for their high priests and other ministers of the temple.

The spoils taken by the Gauls were not less than the victory. For though great numbers of the beasts were crushed by the falling trees, yet as nothing was scattered by flight, everything else was found strewed along the whole line of the prostrate band.<sup>6</sup>



Run-Og naFian < runa ogmon Ueinanos, “secret Ogham of Fiann, “the giant-warrior,” using the letter order from the Triaig sruth Fercertne < triagni sruto Uirocertni, “melee battle fraction of Fercetne, the artisan.” Author’s drawing after sigla 11 of the *Book of Ballymote*.

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