

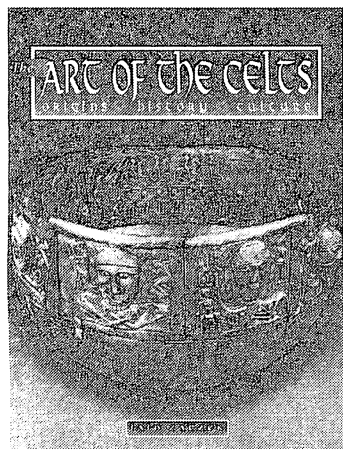
RITUAL ART of the Ancient Celts

by GEORGE FRANKLIN



Resources and Readings

Two beautiful books on Celtic art and culture have recently been published:



• *The Art of the Celts: Origins, History, Culture*, by Iain Zaczek, Parkgate Books, Ltd., London House, Great Eastern Wharf, Parkgate Road, London SW11 4NQ

• *The Art of the Celts*, by David Sandison, Laurel Glen Publishing, San Diego, CA, (800) 284-3580.

For more resources, see end of main article.

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The Celts — Fount of the mythology that animates many present-day pagan rituals. Fierce warriors who terrorized Europe for centuries prior to the Roman era. Creators of art that fascinates us today.

And most of all — cultural ancestors of the Western world. Separated from us by two millennia, Celtic culture still ripples through our lives.

In popular discourse, “Celtic” is often synonymous with “Irish,” since it is in Ireland that Celtic culture has had its most enduring impact. But the Celts once spanned Europe, and their contributions passed into the melting pot of that continent and hence to the rest of the world.

A year ago, Reclaiming Quarterly explored the “Sacred World of the Celts,” discussing the role of Druids, Vates and Bards in building and sustaining this culture over a thousand years (see Spring 1998). In this article, I want to look at the role of art in Celtic spirituality, and at what this art can (and can’t) tell us about that society.

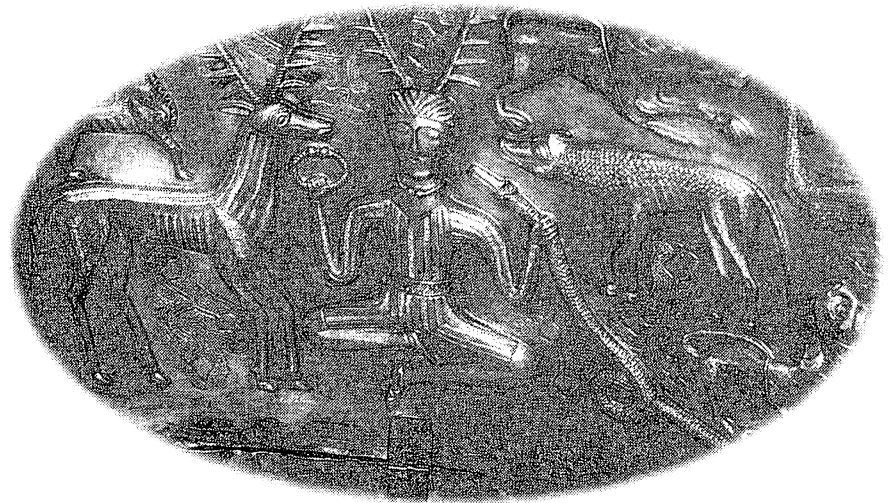
WHAT IS CELTIC ART?

That we even have to ask this question points to a particular problem in studying the ancient Celts. Art objects are a



Right: Christian-era chalice, 8th century CE.

Above: The Gundestrup cauldron, silver with gold plate, 1st century BCE.



Above: The Janus-headed being above may suggest the dual aspects of a Celtic deity, or may symbolize the tension between the past and the future which is aptly illustrated in the two works below.

Below: A 3rd or 2nd century BCE deity in geometric stylization faces a 1st century BCE statue believed to be of a Celtic War Goddess in classical Roman style.



Celtic forms persisted for many centuries. Compare the 1st century BCE image of the god Cernunnos, grasping a torc (neckband) in one hand and a charmed snake in another, with the page from the Book of Kells below (Ireland, c. 800 CE), where three of the four Christian gospel writers are represented as mythical beasts. This depiction of the Evangelists as token animals was not invented by the Irish — it enjoyed a European-wide vogue for centuries — but the two-dimensional Celtic forms lend an otherworldly urgency to the symbols. Celtic art lived on for centuries in Ireland, and was transmitted back to the continent by Irish Christian missionaries in the form of "illuminated pages" of medieval bibles.



primary source of knowledge of any ancient culture. But with the Celts, who had no written language, they are virtually our only direct window into their world.

We do have the writings of Greek and Roman authors (Polybius, Posidonius, Julius Caesar) who commented on the Celts. But these writers had little first-hand knowledge of this "foreign" culture, knowing it primarily through warfare or rumor. While their accounts are valuable, they cannot be unquestioned guides.

Many centuries later, Christian monks in Ireland collected

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El Salvador

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globalize the power of living simply, in beauty, with caring and tenderness respecting each other and nature, as our way to transform and create the society as we dream of it. We learn about spirituality and religion, and the role of sex and sexuality in living a meaningful life. We learn to discern, and to decide, to make alliances, to knock on doors. This is our practice of governance. We unite with others, we dream and practice as we do, just as we are here as bioneers, to create times and spaces to practice and share experiences, to celebrate life, to enhance the practice of tenderness and caring for each other and Mother Earth. To actually enjoy peace. Let us then go, understanding that "Sustainability is the key to celebration and affirmation of life and the enjoyment of durable peace."

Thanks to Megan Kratz, Cheryl Desmond and Sarah Campbell from MidAtlantic Community.

For Marta Benavides' bio — see opening paragraphs of this article. Contact her c/o the Circle of Love — see page 8.

Herbs & Digestion

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bottle with equal parts Dandelion, Hops, Catnip and Chamomile. Add a few droppers of **Wormwood** (*Artemisia absinthium*).

Over-use of antibiotics can deplete friendly bacteria, and excessive sugar can cause the proliferation of unfriendly bacteria. Fermented foods can be of assistance in maintaining balance.

HEALING AND REGENERATION

All of the herbs mentioned can help heal the digestive system, but if there has been a great deal of damage you may wish to work with herbs that specifically promote tissue repair. Many mild astringent herbs are used to heal ulceration or to tighten and tone tissue. Be cautious with astringents if there is a history of constipation.

Raspberry leaf and **Blackberry leaf** (*Rubus spp.*), and **Strawberry leaf** (*Fragaria spp.*) are a few of the many astringent herbs. **Calendula** (*Calendula officinalis*) is an incredible herb that is under-utilized. Use the flowers as a wound

healer, mild anti-inflammatory, and mild antiseptic. Dosage 1-2 cups a day or start with 2-3 droppers of tincture 2-3 times a day.

The most important thing to remember is that while herbs can help us heal, it is how we live that creates health.

Colette Gardiner is an herbalist and green witch who has been im-

mersed in the plant world for the last 20 years. She is a frequent contributor to We'Moon Almanac as well as other periodicals, and has recently published a booklet on the menstrual cycle. She offers classes, apprenticeships and consultations in Eugene, Oregon. In her spare time she works with Goddess Ritual Theatre Collective, reads tarot cards and gardens with her feline companions. She can be contacted at PO Box 10914, Eugene, OR 97440.

Celtic Art

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the remnants of Celtic lore into written mythologies. Beautiful as these accounts are — and they are virtually our only source for Celtic mythology — they were recorded 700-1000 years after Julius and Augustus Caesar and their successors put a violent end to autonomous Celtic culture in most of Europe. What relation these later myths bear to ancient spirituality is problematic, although they are helpful in fleshing out the hints that ancient art offers.

Exactly who the Celts were is even an open issue. They were not a homogenous ethnic group, but rather a diverse group of peoples who shared a common Iron Age culture. This culture was distinct from Mediterranean societies (e.g., Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Cretan and Semitic), and equally distinct from the somewhat later Norse and Germanic cultures of Northern Europe. When we speak of "Celtic ancestors," we are referring to this cultural heritage more than to a specific genetic pool.

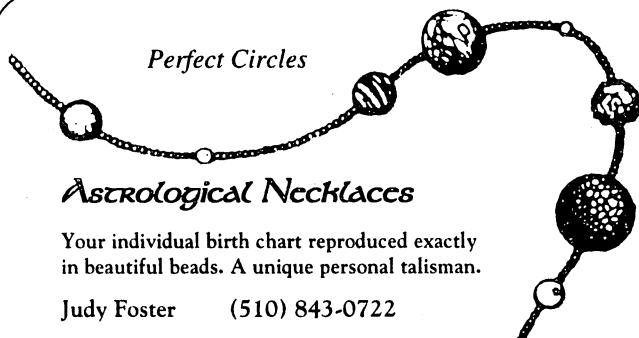
From around 1000 BCE until the first century of the Common Era, Celtic culture spread across Europe, from the present-day Balkans and Greece to Britain and Ireland.

The culture probably radiated out from southern Germany at the start of the Iron Age (c. 700 BCE). Roman historians record invasions and settlements of northern Italy by Celtic tribes after 400 BCE.

Celtic culture in Britain also dates from around 400 BCE. There is little evidence of an invasion or massive immigration, and it was probably more by cultural diffusion than conquest that Britain and Ireland became "Celtic."

The end of Celtic hegemony in Europe came when the Romans pushed northward. Julius Caesar conquered much of Gaul around 50 BCE (giving rise to a hybrid Romano-Celtic culture — see the goddess on page 27), and England was annexed around 40 CE.

Meanwhile, the Germanic tribes were pressing southward, and by 100 CE,

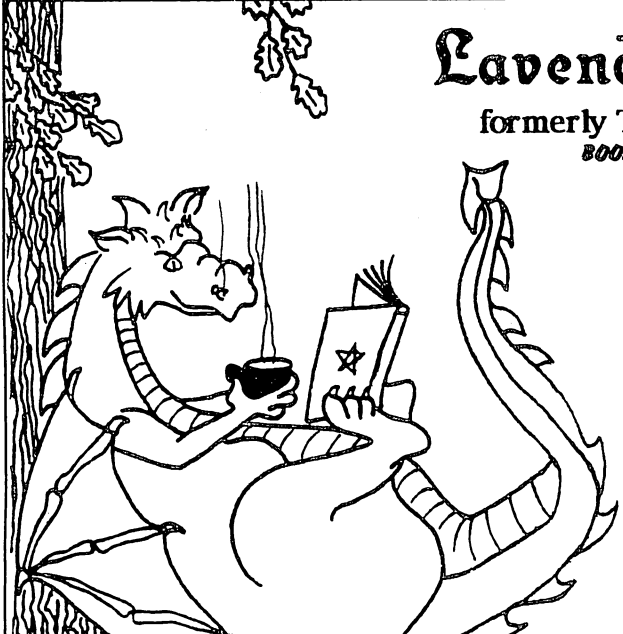


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only Ireland and Scotland remained under Celtic sway.

The term "Celtic art" thus describes not a single tradition, but rather the varied artistic production of the entire Celtic world. Many styles appear, as the handful of illustrations accompanying this article show. Still, certain commonalities can be seen: incessantly curving lines (contrast the rectilinear qualities of Greek and Roman architecture), scant interest in "realistic" reproduction of nature, and a focus on decorative rather than narrative art.

HOLY WELLS, SACRED WATERS

The vast majority of Celtic art comes from two sources: burial sites, and lakes and bogs. Discovering ancient Celtic art in burial sites is not surprising. Our knowledge of most ancient art — Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Cretan — comes from tombs. It is our good fortune that these cultures thought it important to bury objects both precious and mundane with their owners.

The burial of Celtic men and women with objects of art and utility suggests a belief in some sort of afterlife. Ancient Greek and Roman writers speak of the Celts' belief in an afterlife, although it is not clear from ancient sources whether this is to be viewed as an "Otherworld" or as some

form of reincarnation back into this world. It is from the much later Irish myths that we hear of the Isle of Apples and the sunless sea.

Much Celtic art which survives today has been found in or near bodies of water. The ancient Celts seem to have regarded water as a meeting place of the sacred and the secular. According to later myth, it was at a river that a god or goddess might take a mortal lover. And the Otherworld was reached by sailing over a dark sea.

Some of the key archaeological finds, including items of great value such as the silver cauldron on page 26, have been dredged from lakes, bogs, and especially from the sources of rivers. The Celts seem to have associated unique deities with each such site, and had shrines and altars at many of them. During the pre-Roman era, though, when older Celtic culture flourished, there is little evidence of buildings or temples at these sacred places.

With the coming of the Romans and their official state paganism, sacred sites were taken over and institutionalized, often as healing centers. Gods and goddesses were consolidated with their nearest Roman counterparts (Lugh with Mercury, for instance). Large temple complexes were built at some of them, and a virtual tourist industry developed, with votive figurines

sold to visitors.

At the source of the Seine river, hundreds of such wooden and stone figurines have been discovered, along with miniature replicas of body parts such as arms and torsos. These presumably were offered up with prayers to the goddess of the Source-de-la-Seine, Sequana. At other sites, hundreds and even thousands of coins (no commonplace item in those days) have been found, along with consecrated weapons and sacred objects.

Cauldrons played a special role in Celtic life, symbolizing prosperity and abundance. The tales later recorded by Christian monks (who happily did not entirely sanitize their stories) tell of cauldrons as cornucopias, providing endless food and drink in the halls of the Otherworld. And the bard Taliesin was said to have acquired the power of prophecy after drinking from a cauldron of inspiration.

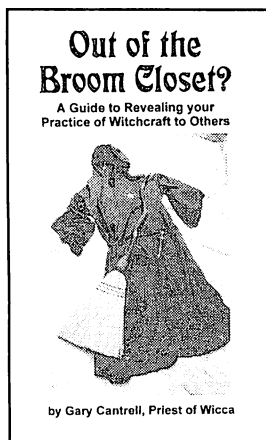
The Gundestrup cauldron, pictured on page 26, was found in a bog in northern Europe. It is made of solid silver, and was once covered with gold leaf. Depicted on the inside of this cauldron is a scene where a large figure (a god?) is dropping a man into a cauldron (visible on the back inside of the photo on page 26). To the side, a row of horsemen ride away. This suggests a belief in

continued on next page

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Celtic Art

continued from previous page

a "cauldron of regeneration." Later Welsh mythology tells of a such a magical cauldron possessed by King Matholwch which could restore slain warriors to life.

Cauldrons passed into Christian Celtic culture, both as the communion chalice (the lower example on page 26 was found buried in Ireland, apparently hidden from invading Vikings in the 8th century CE), and as the mythical "holy grail" of the Arthurian legends.

CELTIC DEITIES AND ART

Many works of art survive which appear to depict Celtic gods and goddesses. The difficulties arising from the absence of written sources become clear when we try to correlate these works of art with specific deities. Unlike Greek or Roman works, where inscriptions gives us clues as to what a certain type of sculpture represents, we are left largely with guesswork when it comes to the Celts.

Not that we lack divine names. Modern research has turned up the names of over 350 Celtic gods and goddesses. Most are known from only a single mention, and were probably local deities. Of the 60 or 70 who enjoyed wider renown, only a single god — Cernunnos, the horned God of the beasts

and of fertility — can be definitely linked by an inscription to a pre-Roman work of art.

Even such well-known goddesses as Macha (Ireland), Rhiannon (Britain), and Epona (Gaul) — goddesses associated with the horse — cannot be definitely linked to any pre-Roman work of art. In fact, whether these three were various names of the same goddess, or distinct regional deities, is unknown.

What of Lugh, known throughout the Celtic world (cities such as Leiden, Laon, and London are probably named after Lugh)? We have numerous tantalizing mentions by classical writers. Julius Caesar, who rose to power by warring against the Celts in Gaul, identified Lugh with the Roman god Mercury, who like Lugh was a master of many crafts. The Greeks identified Lugh with Apollo, the sun-god who was also a patron of crafts.

Sadly, not a single pre-Roman work can be definitely connected to Lugh. It is tempting to see his visage in the archaic sculpture on page 27, but this would be guesswork.

And Brigid? One modern author identifies the helmeted Roman-era goddess shown on page 27 as Brigid. But this is conjecture. The goose on her helmet (difficult to see in this reproduction) actually suggests a war-goddess, according to other authors.

CELTIC SPIRITUALITY REVEALED IN ART

Given the lack of Celtic written records, we are left ruminating over the archaeological evidence,

contemporary Greek and Roman authors, and later Christian writings, trying to fathom the mystery of this culture.

Nigel Pennick believes that, "The essential Celtic philosophy is that human beings are not separate from nature, but an aspect of it. The things that people make are also part of nature... The patterns and forms of Celtic art are a reflection of the Celtic recognition that the cosmos is composed of ever-changing forms that fade imperceptibly from one into another, yet always express the same essence."

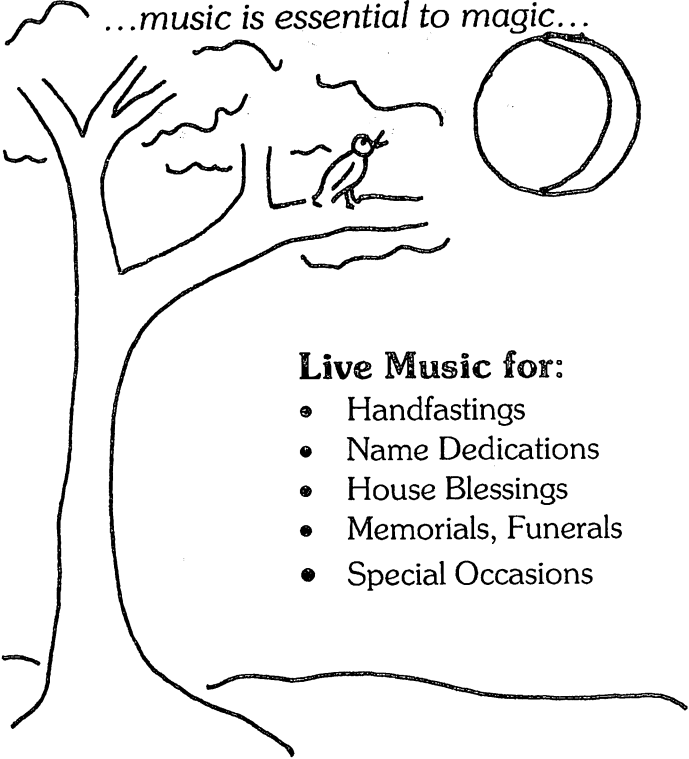
And Miranda Green opens her book "Celtic Goddesses" by saying, "A striking characteristic of Celtic religion — as presented both in archaeological evidence and in mythic literature — is the apparent closeness of the relationship between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the mundane, the supernatural and earthly worlds... Respect for animals and for the land is closely associated with the recognition that the supernatural is in control..."

These are pleasing interpretations to our modern ears, but they are basically informed conjecture. Based on the available evidence, what do we actually know?

That the natural world of the Celts was animated by spirits, many of whom are depicted on art-objects. That there was a belief in some sort of afterlife or rebirth, as discussed above. That there was some participatory aspect to spiritual practices, as attested by the thousands of votive figurines mentioned above.

The absence of temple complexes in the

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pre-Roman era suggests a more open-air practice, as would seemingly befit an Earth-based, agricultural society.

And maybe most of all — we know that the creation of objects of great beauty was an integral part of Celtic culture. From fine jewelry to decorated wagon fittings, from silver chalices to everyday pitchers and cauldrons, the patterns and fanciful figures that we know as Celtic art were a daily part of people's lives. And 2000 years later, they continue to fascinate and inspire us with visions of our distant cultural ancestors.

FURTHER READING

In addition to the two art books on page 26, "Art of the Celts" by Lloyd & Jennifer Laing (Thames & Hudson, 1992) focuses in more depth on the works of art. "Celtic Goddesses," by Miranda Green (G. Brazillier, 1995), is an excellent cultural overview from a feminist perspective. Nigel Pennick's "The Sacred World of the Celts" (Inner Traditions, 1997 — see review in RQ #70) surveys the roles of Druids, Bards and Vates. And "The Celts" by Gerhard Herm (St. Martin's, 1975) gives a detailed analysis of the origins, diffusion, and military history of the Celts.

George Franklin is an activist and journalist who helps publish Reclaiming Quarterly and GroundWork magazines.

A Witch in Ireland

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hill is also known as Sliabh Na Callaighe or The Hill of the Witch. From the tops of these mounds, set down in the middle of Ireland, you can see rolling hills and sheep dotting green pastures. Exploring these tumbled-down mounds, with caved-in roofs and 5,000-year-old rock carvings lying askew in the center, gave me chills.

A final piece of synchronicity occurred after Gavin and Janet went on their way. As I strode upon The Hill of the Witch, I saw a woman dressed in a dark blue knee-length shirt with a Goddess image upon it. She walked toward me across the grass. She asked me if I had a key to this mound. At first I thought she was some modern-day Fairy Queen, but I realized it was more mundane than that. In Ireland, mound entrances are gated to keep people from vandalizing the site. I said no; I hadn't been able to obtain the key. Then I asked her, "Are you a Witch?" She seemed a bit surprised, but said yes. At that, I pulled out my pentacle from under my

sweater. She laughed and told me her name was Patricia Monahan, author and Witch. She was on her way to the nuns at Kildeer who are priestessing for Bridhe. We chatted, exchanged e-mail addresses, and went our separate ways.

It seems when you go to Ireland, you just can't help tripping over Witches.

A BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE FARRARS' WORKS:

What Witches Do: A Modern Coven Revealed.

Eight Sabbats for Witches

The Witches' Way

The Witches' Bible: The Complete Witches' Handbook (Combines Eight Sabbats and The Witches' Way)

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