The Ancient Celts and Their Spirituality

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The Celts were the first true pan-European civilization

Per the late anthropologist Joseph Campbell

A collection of tribal groups with a similar culture

An Iron Age culture that was highly advanced in art, metalworking, farming, war & philosophy/spirituality.

Tribal in the way that Native American societies are.

Distinct tribes with but with similar beliefs, lifestyles, languages, art, etc.

Celtic culture originated in Austria/Switzerland ~800BCE then spread east and west.

By ~ 300BCE Celtic tribes dominated in lands in a band that stretched across Europe from Turkey to Ireland.

However, there was never a centrally ruled “Celtic empire” comparable to the Roman Empire.
Celtic economies and populations

Celtic societies were rural and highly mobile, with very few town or village centers, except hill forts used for defense.

“They are wont to change their abode on slight provocation, migrating in bands with all their battle array, or rather setting out with their households when displaced by a stronger enemy” - Strabo.

Aside from chieftains, druids and warriors, most Celts spent their lives on the land raising crops and livestock.

Population densities were still reported to be fairly large.

“. . . None of the country is untilled, except places where tilling is precluded by swamps and woods. Yet these parts too are thickly settled with people – more from the largeness of the population . . .” Strabo (1).

Recent estimates puts the population of iron age Britain at 2-3 million and Gaul (France) at 6-8 million.
CELTIC ART

Celtic art - highly skillful and abstract.

It differed from the less abstract Roman and Greek art.

Celtic art pieces were also much smaller than the large statues and monuments typical of Greece and Rome.

This smaller scale is consistent with the Celtic preference for a rural and highly mobile lifestyles.
CELTIC WOMEN

Women were not treated as equals but had much more freedom than Roman and Greek women.

Caesar commented that in Gaul the custom was for a husband and wife to pool resources.

When one died the survivor inherited everything.

Marriages for women were controlled, in part, by men.

Women were sent to marriages that offered the her clan political gain.

However, some Celtic women held major spiritual, political and military leadership positions.

Druidesses: Morgan (in Arthurian Cycle stories), Macha (in the Irish Ulster Cycle stories) and Rhionnon (in the Welch Mabinogi stories).

Warrior queens: Queen Boudica in Britain & Queen Maeve in Ireland.
Pre-Christian Celtic Spirituality

Pre-Christian Celtic spirituality – similarities to other spiritual traditions

Similarities to “nature religion” belief systems once widely held by indigenous peoples (Native Americans, Aborigines, African tribes, etc.).

1) A belief that the “Creator of the Universe” or “God” or “Allah” or “Great Spirit”, etc. and the entire universe it created (visible & invisible) are one.

We don’t exist separately from “God”, we (& everything else) are part of “God”.

“Salvation” or “spiritual growth” requires going within ourselves to discover or deepen our experience of the reality of our inherent unity with “God”.

Through meditations, spiritual ”journey” trances or group rituals, such as “sweat lodges”, etc.

Very different than Judeo-Christian concepts such as:

God and each human, as well as the rest of nature are separate things.
We can gain “salvation” or reunification with God after death by being predestined to be saved or by striving to be saved by faith or good works while we are on earth.

Nature was placed here by God for our use or exploitation.

2) Celtic spirituality involved a strong reverence for all of nature.

Nature, of which we are just a part, and God are One.

We should have reverence for all of nature because it is one with God.

Being part of God, all things in nature have spirits or divine life forces.

Thus, there are “tree spirits” or the “water spirits”, etc.

Such “spirits” are sometimes referred to as “gods” (with a small g).
Ancient Celtic spirituality was Shamanistic – again, similar to Native American and Aboriginal spiritual beliefs, values and practices.

The spiritual leaders of a native religion believing community are called shamans, or medicine men, or druids in the Celtic case

Shamans are those in a community who “journey” to the “other worlds” to seek advice or to seek aid with healing.

Other worlds are places where dead ancestors, powerful nature spirits (or totems), fairies or other regional or tribal gods and goddesses reside.

E.g. the Celtic goddess Brigit, the Norse god Thor

Celtic spirituality also had similarities to other “Eastern” religions (Hindus, Buddists).

Belief in reincarnation

Caesar commented that the Celts were so convinced about reincarnation that they would sometimes make contracts where Celts made commitments that they would deliver things in the next life in exchange for favors in this life.

The nature and quality of the reincarnated next life experience would depend on how well or poorly you lived in this life.
Celtic spirituality - beliefs and practices that were prominently buy not uniquely Celtic

An awareness of and involvement with fairies

Belief in and shamanistic involvement with three Celtic “Otherworlds”

The three Celtic “otherworlds” visited in “journeys” by Celtic Shamans (Druids, Wiccans, etc)

The Upper World - Gwynvd (Quid eve)

Not a Judeo-Christian “Heaven” where you become one with God.

God (AKA Prime Creator, All that Is, etc.) doesn’t dwell in Gwynvd

God’s core energy - too great for Gwynvd to contain

The upper world is the place where enlightened spirits dwell

Humans finished with their reincarnational journeys having attained enlightenment (AKA Ascended Masters)

The upper world is the place where angels and higher order fairies dwell
The Middle World

Called Abred (Abb read) in the Welsh mythology stories

Sometimes referred to as “the River of Time”

“Avalon” to some Celts, though to others “Avalon” refers to an actual sacred island located off the coast of Wales

The Middle World is a place of all life, all time and all purpose

A journey to the middle world can involve going back or forward in time in your life or even a journey to your past or future lives

Note that to the Celts time is circular, not linear.

Inhabitants of the Middle World

The place of humans now living

The place of humans between worlds (ghosts)
People journey to Abred for many reasons

To see the past and the future

In this life and others.

The appearance of Abed is as varied as the life experiences it contains.

Journeys in the Middle World can occur through deep meditation during which a boatman on the River of Time is summoned and ask for transportation to the place and time the journeyer wishes to visit.

The lower world

Called Annwn (Anoon) in the Welsh stories and the Tir na nOg in the Irish stories.

Not a place like the Christian hell or place of punishment.

A land of the every young, a place of joy and abundance.

A place of transition for human spirits immediately after death.

The dead in Annwn are busy reflecting on past experiences and planning future experiences in the Middle Kingdom.

Some say this transition process takes one year.
In Celtic spirituality Annwn or the Tir na nOg is also a place where fairies reside

Good fairies and some that are not all that kind and good.

People can “journey” to Annwn

With guidance from a Shaman or on their own

To consult and work with ancestors.

To consult and work with fairies and other spirits.

Annwn is not a single place

E.g.: Voyage of Irish St. Brendan to many “islands” where different experiences can be had.

Extensive descriptions of spirits and places in Annwn are found in “The Prince of Annwn”

One of the four major Welsh Mythology epics, collectively called “The Four Branches of the Mabinogi”.
CEREMONIES AND RITUALS

The Celtic Wheel of the Year

- Winter Solstice (Dec. 21st)
- Imbolc (Feb. 1st)
- Spring Equinox (March 20th)
- Beltane (May 1st)
- Summer Solstice (June 21st)
- Fall Equinox (Sept. 21st)
- Lugnasada (August 21st)
- Samhain (Oct. 31st)
The Celtic Wheel of the Year

Time to the Celts was circular rather than linear. Cycles of time repeated themselves annually.

The Celtic year was divided into eight major fire festivals and thirteen moon festivals.

Fire festivals were celebrated by a clan or tribe gathered around a bond fire.

Fires were started the evening before the celebration and continued for one or more days.

Important clan events and ceremonies were held at fire festivals.

Marriages (seven years), naming rites, bestowing honorary titles, rites “marrying” kings and chieftains to the land to the earth goddess or mother goddess they protected.
Eight Celtic Fire festivals

Samhain ~October 31st

The celebration of the Celtic new year

A time when the veil between this world (our part of the Middle kingdom) and other worlds, particularly the lower kingdom (Annwn) was very thin

Spirits, human and other, can readily move between these worlds at Samhain time

It is widely believed but unconfirmed that Celts placed the skulls of dead enemies around the dwelling to warn off evil fairies, dead enemies and other evil spirits from coming through the veil and harming the family or clan

Probably the origin of placing carved Halloween pumpkins outside the house.
Winter solstice – the birth of the sun – Yule – December 21\textsuperscript{st}

Celebrated in many ancient cultures, not just the Celts

Gods and heroes of many ancient cultures said to be born at this time

Horus, Helios, Mithras, Jesus

The sun goes into the earth, signaling a time of rebirth and regeneration and the earth is ruled by the Crone or Lady of Wisdom

Imbolc (or the goddess Brigid’s day) - February 1\textsuperscript{st}

The beginning of the end of winter – lambs are born and seeds begin to stir within the earth.

Mainly celebrated by women – a return to rule of the maiden aspect of the maiden, mother and crone triune goddess of femininity.
Spring Equinox – March 20th

Celebrated as a time of new planting and conception

A time for magical rites

Beltane – May 1st

Fertility celebration in honor of the Celtic fire god Bel which comes down to us today as May pole dancing rituals

Another time of year in which the veil between this world and the worlds of ancestors, fairies and other spirits is thin

People purified themselves by leaping through Beltane fires

Summer solstice – June 21st

The longest day and the sun’s highest point of year.

Bonfires were lit and flaming hoops were rolled through fields to bless the crops

The mother aspect of the earth goddess replaces the maiden
Lugnassa – August 21

The harvest celebration in honor of the god Lugh
god of war, crafts and many other talents

A time of thanksgiving and feasting to celebrate the harvest.

Fall Equinox – September 21st

A second harvest celebration time

A time for preparing for winter

Food preservation, making beer, storing fuel