



M0056473NC

National College of Art and Design

Faculty: Fashion and Textiles

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Irish Fertility Symbols in the Prechristian Period

by

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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and
Complimentary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of BDes.

1992

I particularly wish to acknowledge the assistance and co-operation of my tutor Niamh O'Sullivan and the library staff.

I also would like to express my gratitude to Miss Olivia Durdin-Robertson for aiding me with my research.

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I am she, that is the Natural Mother of all things,
Mistress and governess of all the elements,
the initial progeny of worlds,
chief of the powers divine,
queen of all that are in hell,
the principal of them that dwell in heaven,
manifested alone and under one form,
of all the Gods and Goddesses.

Lucius Apuleius.

Introduction

In this text, I wish to trace the various fertility symbols in Ireland before Christianity. The passage graves of the Neolithic period serves as a suitable starting point as they contain many symbols that obviously have a connection to fertility, as does some of the many grave goods found in association with these tombs.

An understanding of this period is circumscribed by the many different theories and opinions which exist with regards to the date and meaning of the artifacts discussed here. Many of the goods found are nonutilitarian and the symbolic art which is believed to be nonrepresentational leaves us to conclude that these had a meaning connected with the ritual involving their dead.

We know from various sources that prehistoric man believed in life after death, and that death marked the halfway point of their long life. Therefore the rituals that were conducted at death were believed to induce fertility so as the dead individual could be reborn.

There is evidence to prove that the burial goods from the many passage graves have been connected to the Neolithic era but there is no evidence to prove that the ashes found in these tombs are actually contemporary to the building itself, some in fact have been connected to the Iron Age. (15 pg 244).

The second part of my thesis will concentrate on the Iron Age, or the Celtic period. There are few artefacts in Ireland that have survived to support my theory but the concept of fertility is evidently very important in the lives of these people as mythology is full of reminders of the principle. The Celtic people had their own explanation for the meaning of Newgrange as the domain of the Gods, a place of perpetual festivities and a place where no-one ever dies. (5 pg 47)

Such a location is described as a 'Bru' in ancient literature and the Bru na Boinne or Newgrange is the most important of these. They believed that their Gods and Goddesses could enhance and improve the fertility of both mankind and the earth, as their feasts and rituals prove.

This thesis will concentrate on these two periods of the prechristian era and show the connection between their symbolism and the characteristics of fertility.

Part 1 - The Prehistoric Era

Chapter 1

Symbols



Decorated stone at the Junction
of the end recess and Chamber at
Newgrange.

Fig.1.1

This chapter will examine the possible relationship between the symbolic art of the passage graves of the Neolithic era and fertility. It will explore the possible meanings of the various symbols in relation to fertility, the meaning of the rituals and show that the principles of rebirth and fertility were very obviously to the forefront of the mind of Neolithic man.

The art of the Neolithic graves does not appear to have been simply ^{an} aesthetic element associated with architecture, which embellished the exterior or interior of a tomb. This purpose may have been served by a minority of stones, such as some orthostats in tombs which have pick-dressing. (Fig.1.2). In the main however, it seems more likely that the designs were a form of religious symbolism connected with a cult of the dead and having significance in that context, possibly in relation to the rebirth of the deceased.

This form of art is found in the Meath area and as such skill was required to do it, it must have been regarded with importance. Small traces of art appear in other tombs but is of poor quality.

Rough surfaces of limestone block would not have been suitable for decoration, such as those found at Carrowkeel and Carrowmore, but granite rock was commonly used. Although painting may have been used, the damp climate of Ireland would not have allowed it to be still visible.

The association of art with tombs clearly indicates that it is a funerary art which had meaning and significance. Some of the rayed motifs at Newgrange (c.3500 B.C.) resemble sundials, but it is unknown whether they served such a purpose. During the summer it takes the sun an hour and a half to pass from one ray to the next. It may of course be that these motifs have a symbolic meaning such as the representation of the sun. This may imply that these people worshipped the sun and looked upon it as the source of all life.

The presence of the entrance stone at Newgrange (Fig.1.3) suggests that the tomb was reopened and therefore had been used on different occasions. One may also conjecture that burial was a communal affair perhaps taking place at particular times of the year, possibly the summer and winter solstices.

In the Irish Mind (16, pg 49) Brendan Purcell discusses the idea that the earth is often symbolised as a four sided figure, as a square or as a lozenge. The four sides would represent the four quarters or points of the sun's most extreme movements over the earth at the midsummer and midwinter solstices and at the equinoxes. In support of the square as an earth symbol, Purcell discusses Mercea Eliades notion that in archaic rituals-

The founding of a new town repeats the creation of the world once the spot has been confirmed by ritual, a square or circle endosure is put around it, with four gates corresponding to the four points of the compass.

As towns are divided into four, in imitation of the cosmos, they are therefore a copy of the universe. We may conjecture from this that it is at least possible that the numerous squares and lozenges at Newgrange are earth, sun or moon symbols.

Three is an important number in Irish mythology as we shall see later, but it is also to be found in these Neolithic tombs where there are three recesses. This may represent the meeting of some configuration such as the heavens, earth and underworld.

Vertical rows of chevrons in the Ille-de-France caves, sloping alternately downwards (towards the underworld) and upwards (towards the heavens) are believed to symbolise the victory of life over death, which implies the notion of rebirth (16Pg 48), so as there are similiar chevrons in Newgrange, it is at least possible that these symbols may also be connected to fertility in this way.

The idea of a passage way and tomb is similiar to entering a uterus, with its womb-like darkness where the damp smell of the earth evokes an ancient memory of living inside the body of another. The idea of the cave was universally identified with the womb of the Mother Earth, and from the earliest times has been used as a place for symbolic rebirth (12, Pg 17).

The most common grouping of symbols at Newgrange is that of triangles (symbolising perhaps the three phases of the moon: birth, fullness, decline and eventually a lunar rebirth) and squares or lozenges. A possible variation on this theme is provided by the zig zag or snake-in-lozenge representations on KG7 and on C19 in Newgrange (16 Pg 50). This is a common Neolithic motif in which the snake has both a lunar and phallic significance of regeneration, and the lozenge represents both the earth and the vulva. Together they may possibly represent a cosmic marriage of heaven and earth. (16 Pg 50).

Throughout the world people have associated the moon with the female, for the moons monthly cycle is a reminder of the rythms of womanhood. The moon represents the ebb and flow of birth, growth and death, a pattern of perpetual renewal that is made visible in the three phases of the goddess as Maiden, Mother and Crone, as shall be discussed further in part two.



Example of Pick Dressing

Newgrange, Co. Meath

Fig. 1.2

We know from old Saxon and Norse sources that the sun and moon came to be regarded respectively as a goddess and a god

(4, Pg 51) and additional proof that our forebearers held such beliefs, can be found in the names of the first two days of the week - Sunday and Monday.

As in many archaic cultures the Boyne Valley people may have considered the earth as a Mother 'that is, as giving birth to living forms which it draws out of its own existence' (16Pg) The earth is alive first of all because it is fertile. Everything that comes from the earth is endowed with life and everything that goes back into the earth is given new life. Purcell refers to life and death as merely two different moments in the career of the earth mother as a whole: life is merely being detached from the earth's womb, death is returning home (16, Pg 48)

We can see in English manuscripts that and anglo saxon charms bear witness to native pagan belief in the earth mother...

Erce, Erce, erce, Mother of Earth,
Hail to thee, earth, Mother of Men,
Be fruitful in Gods embrace,
Filled with food for the use of men.

(4, Pg 50)

One was then required to take every kind of meal and have a loaf baked no bigger than the palm of one's hand, having kneaded it with milk and holy water and lay it under the first turned furrow. It is obvious that this charm has been obscured by Christian influences but provides proof that our ancestors worshipped and prayed to the fertile earth.

As the very existence of man depended upon a bounteous earth and a fertilizing sky, it is reasonable therefore to say that these two characteristics were the main concern of the celtic people, both in their religious rituals and in their symbolic art.

Footnotes.

1. Pickdressing - is the name given to the technique of carving the stone of the prehistoric era.
2. Mercea Eliades quote - From 'Myths, Dreams and Legends', Fontana, 1968.



Decorated Kerbstone at the entrance
to the Chamber tomb, Newgrange.

Fig. 1.3

Chapter 11

Burial Goods



Museum reconstruction of a tomb,
1st. Century B.C. London, British Museum.

Fig.2.1

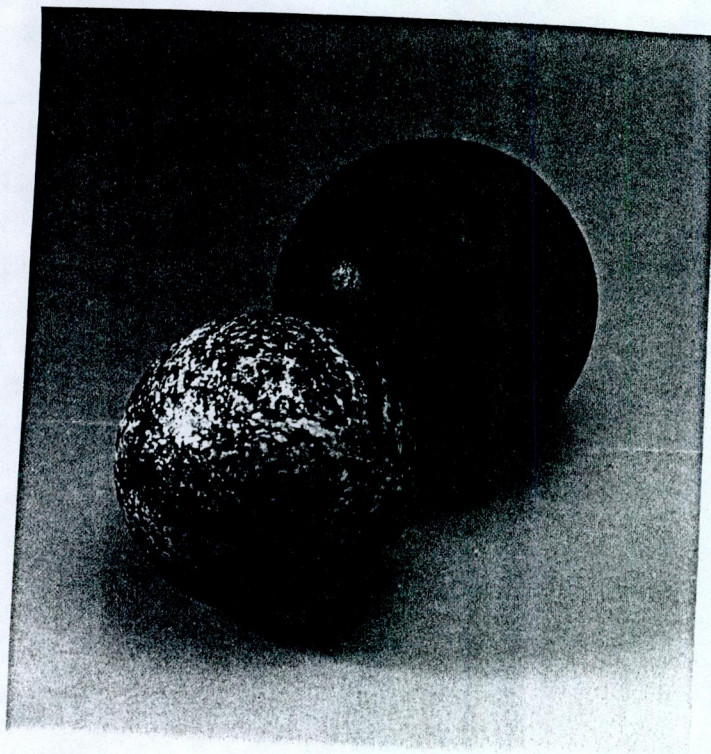
If we examine the burial goods of the graves of the Neolithic Period especially Newgrange, Knowth and Loughcrew, we can find much evidence of the importance of fertility to these people. Their belief in an afterlife and rebirth, leads us to conjecture that there were various rituals practiced at the time of death, to ensure the continuity of society and the rebirth of the individual.

It is not known whether these tombs were primarily monuments to the dead, as the pyramids were, honouring the deposits placed therein, or centres of a complex cult to which the remains of the dead were brought as offerings to a divinity.

However, common items found in graves are marbles or balls (Fig 2.2) usually made of chalk, although natural pebbles were found as well as examples in baked clay, bone, stone (limestone, basalt, ironstone, serpentine, quartzite and marble). The surface is often well rounded and smoothed. As such objects are apparently non-utilitarian they must have had a ritual value. About forty of these balls have been discovered in passage tombs (12, Pg 144). These have been described as eggs. There are also avoid granite stones found interspersed in the white quartz facing wall of both Newgrange and Knowth (12, Pg 150). Mercea Eliade's remarks on the cosmological significance of the egg, gives us a clue to the possible meaning of these egg-shaped symbolic objects (16, Pg 53)

The ritual power of the egg bears not so much on birth as upon "rebirth" modelled on the creation of the world, otherwise there could be no explanation for the important place eggs hold in the celebration of the New Year and the Feasts of the Dead (Easter eggs) At the New Year, when the world is recreated the dead feel themselves drawn towards the living and can hope to return to life. The basic idea is not that of ordinary birth, but rather the repeating of the archetypal birth of the Cosmos. (therefore it is) with good reason (that we see eggs) as emblems of immortality.
(16, Pg 53)

Purcell also discusses the notion of the eggs being found inside a spherical shape namely that of the passage grave tombs, which lends itself to the idea of being inside a space, or the eggs inside a womb.



Marble Balls, Loughcrew, Co.Meath.

Fig. 2.2

By far the most impressive ovoids or somewhat spherically shaped symbols are the three great mounds of Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth each of which, both from inside and outside may have represented the whole cosmos for the Boyne people. The very prodigality of microcosmic eggs of Newgrange and Knowth and seem to express a cosmic cheerfulness and trust in the accessibility to everyone of wholeness in the renewal of the whole.

(16, Pg)

No objects of everyday use are found in passage tombs, such as flint or stone implements or domestic pottery. On the other hand, these objects are well known from the court tombs and some portal and wedge tombs.

Vessels (Fig 2.3) served as a container for cremation burial. In other instances the pot stood beside the burial deposits possibly containing food for the deceased or some other substance. At Carrowkeel and at Kiltierney, Co. Sligo, the pottery occurred as sherds mixed through the burial deposits. In those cases, a pot was broken and its sherds were used as grave offerings. Either whole or deliberately broken the sherds were often deposited with material gathered up from scatters of domestic soil, where the sherds and flints would occur naturally, in other words, settlement rubbish (28, Pg. 137). A possible reason for depositions of this sort is that settlement rubbish or debris was associated, in the minds of Neolithic inhabitants, with the fertile soil, and its deposition would ensure recurring fertility.

The idea of rebirth extends also into the position of the remains. The folded and pressed arm position is typical of the dead buried in cemeteries of old Europe. Babies and children squeezed into egg-shaped 'pithoi' for burial, had arms tightly pressed to the body, a natural foetal position. A pithos was a womb as was the grave pit from which the child or adult could be born again (13, Pg 159). For this purpose miniature vessels filled with red colour were laid in graves. The colour of blood was considered as effective as the real blood necessary for the restoration of life.

Pots are believed to have also contained food and/or drink (Fig. 2.4) for the spirit of the deceased, although no conclusive evidence has survived to this effect. Pots average ten to sixteen centimetres in height and are strong, hard and well fired. A variety of shapes exist but there are two distinct predominating forms, the bowl and the vase, both are flat bottomed.



Food Vessels from Duncraigargh, Argull
and beakers from Aberdeenshire.

Fig.2.3

The bowl averages from eight to twelve centimetres in height. They were usually ornamented before firing and contain a series of raised zonal designs, in false relief. Running chevrons in false relief are common and decoration can also occur on the bevelled innerlip and on the base. The pots found in the excavated court tombs are round bottomed bowls with or without shoulders, some decorated some plain. Coarsely made flat-bottomed bucket-shaped vessels also occur (28, Pg 198).

From the earliest times people have been concerned with the idea of life and death, rebirth and fertility. From 3500 B.C. Goddess figurines formed from clay and ash have been found throughout Europe. Archaeologists have unearthed numerous amulets depicting aspects of the Goddess, such as breasts or vulva. These may not be early forms of pornography as many scholars once implied. The figures found over a wide range from France to Siberia, show a consistency of shape and theme: they depict woman's bodily capacity to give birth, to bleed and heel herself every moon, to nurture and suckle, and eventually to die and be reborn. The fetishes and voltive offerings of the Paleolithic Period were no doubt magical aids to people and community to ensure a good birth, a bountiful supply of milk and food, or may possibly have been part of a rite of passage into womanhood (28 Pg 206)

With this growing awareness of life comes an equally intense concern for death. Red ochre was often used in ancient rituals to adorn both the living and the dead and many of the Goddess figurines, including the "Venus of Willendorf" were covered with it (28 Pg 178). Red ochre is representative of the life-affirming qualities of blood. People bleed only while alive, and women bleed monthly and at childbirth. The red birth blood is the first colour that is seen as we are born, blood is sacred, and red ochre simulates the vital energy of life and renewal. It is possible that early humans thought that by covering and accompanying the deceased with red ochre they could draw the life force back into them.

The most common items found in tombs were items that could have been used for personal adornment or wear, particularly pendants, beads and pins. Some of these were found mixed through burial deposits and have been damaged by fire (12 Pg 140) therefore we can presume they were left on the deceased during cremation. In the 'Mound of the Hostages' at Tara (Fig 2.5) some one hundred and fifty items were found. This is the largest find for such a modest tomb. Mixed through the cremation burial in the pottery vessel were fifteen beads and pendants which formed a necklace when strung together, as well as a mushroom-headed bone-pin (12 Pg 140). This could have been a burial of an important female as she was accorded a single burial among what otherwise was largely communal deposits. Many bone and antler pins occur.



Grave group, Killicarney,
Co. Cavan.

Fig. 2.4

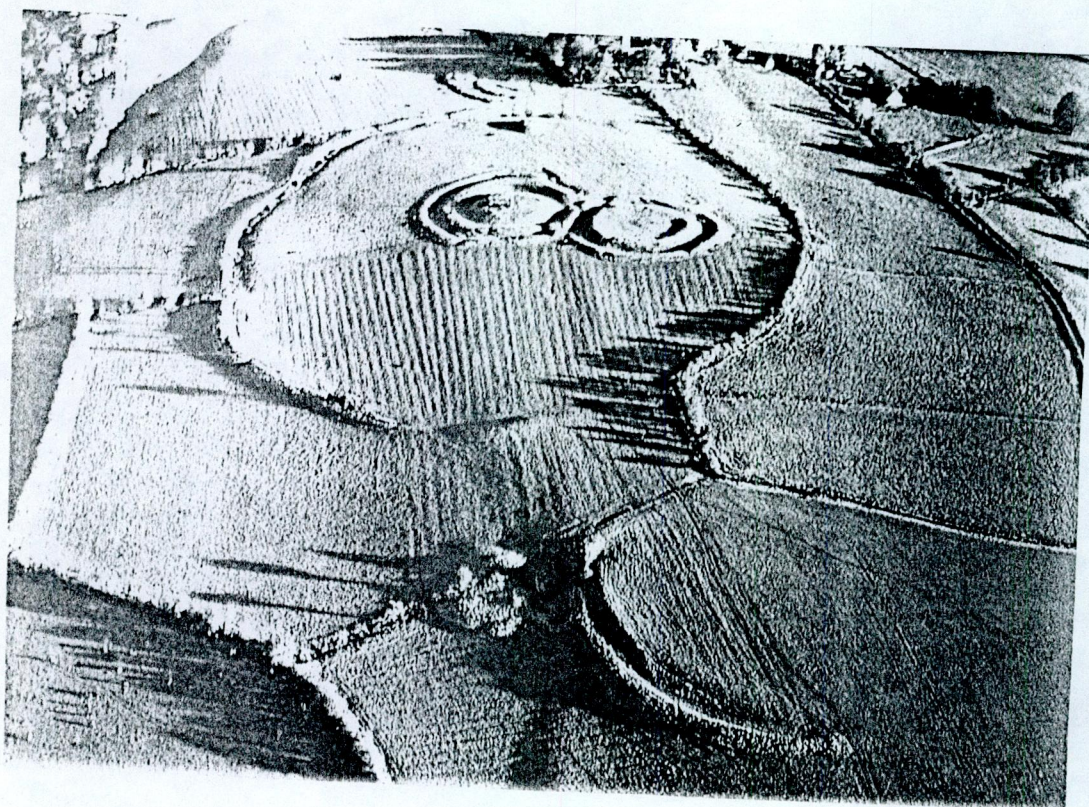
Some of them are very long and made from deer antler, the best known of which are the 'mushroom' and 'poppy-head' types. Others have a herring bone pattern carved on their shanks as at fourknocks and a very striking specimen from site 3 at Knowth has a helical u-shaped groove running from top to bottom, interrupted only by a vertical channel. (Fig 2.6). The trappings used in the ceremonies are not yet clearly established but it may be assumed that part of the ritual involved exotic items, notable amongst which would have been this conical stone and one also from Newgrange, both averaging twenty-five centimetres long. This may have been part of a fertility ritual that once may have played a large and important part in the burial ceremonies.

Both of the conical stones found at Newgrange and at Knowth were found near the entrances to the tomb. The Newgrange stone was found lying within the quartz-paved stone setting, which is rather similiar to some of the Knowth setting, while at Knowth the object was found in a small scoop in the old ground surface on the Northern side of the entrance of the western tomb. The Newgrange piece is plain but it's surface is polished. The Knowth object is highly decorated. Most of the body has a series of arched grooves which terminate to a channel which runs down from the top to the bottom, as previously mentioned.

In an area just below the unexpanded head there are three arcs. In decoration, and to some extent in form, this object is close to the decorated bone pin from Knowth, where it was associated with the burial. It is of interest that both the Knowth and Newgrange stone objects are phallus shaped and the rites therefore could have concerned fertility emphasising the continuity of society. This interpretation is strengthened if the stone balls found in the grave deposits of Tara and Newgrange are also taken as phallic ornaments and the placing of these with the antler pins may possibly represent a prayer for fertility.

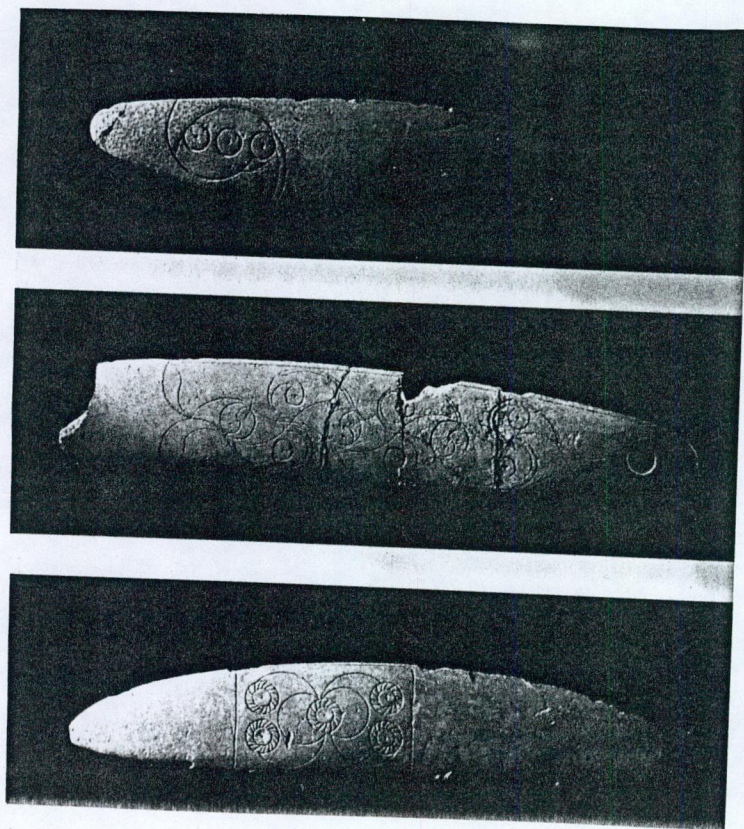
The amount of ornament found in proportion to cremated bone is noteworthy as it suggests that not everybody wore beads and pins. This may imply a social or sexual differenciation.

It is also evident that a certain amount of feasting was attached to the funerary rituals. We can see this from the unburnt meat bones found with the cremated humans in many tomb, white sea-shells found at inland sites as well as on the coast indicate the importance of this food in the diet and feast of the grave builders (15, Pg 170)



Aerial view of the site of Tara.

Fig.2.5



Oblong bone plaques with engraved compass -
drawn motifs - Loughcrew.

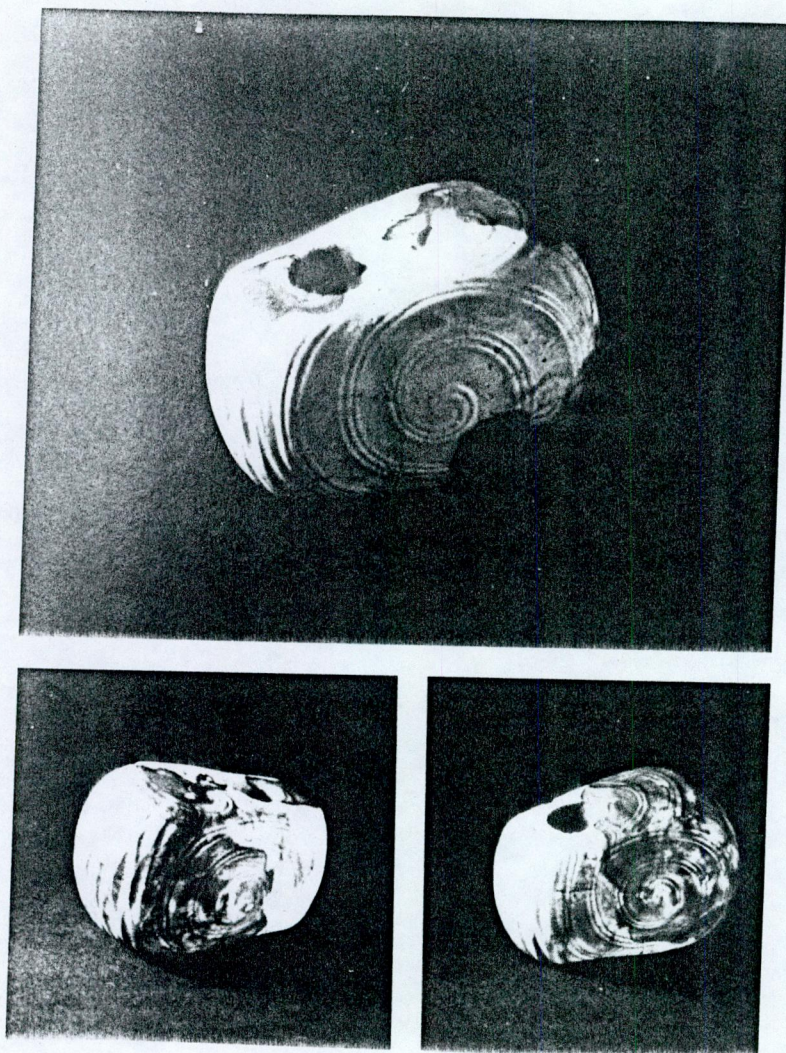
1st. - 2nd. Century A.D.

Fig.2.6

From all this information we can surmise that an anthropomorphic God and Goddess were worshipped in a religion which emphasises to the point of fetishism the principle of fertility in the house of the dead. The macehead from Knowth (Fig 2.7) is likely to have been a utilitarian object, used in the ceremonies for the dead.

It is enhanced by the use of spiral decoration and may represent a female deity.

Fertility is a strong, constant theme, probably represented in the phallii of Knowth and Newgrange and also in the stones which stood erect in the chambers of Newgrange and Carrowkeel cairn F. Phallic pins and paired ball ornaments in everyday wear are constant subliminal reminders of the principle of fertility in the house of the dead.



Decorated Flint Macehead from the
Chamber tomb at Knowth, Co. Meath.

Fig. 2.7

Part 11 - The Celtic Period

Chapter 1

Celtic Goddesses



Marble stele depicting Goddess Epana with
a pair of horses 2nd. Century B.C. Budapest.

Fig.3.2

The Celtic Goddesses were powerful female deities. They were concerned with the earth, with fertility of both crops and stock, with sexual pleasure, and with war in its magical aspects. The concept of the female deity in triadic form would seem to have been fundamental to pagan Celtic belief.

The basic iconographical form of the tribal mother was the group of three mother goddesses, the triple 'Matres' known from both the Gallo-Roman and the Romano-British world (29, pg 128). The maternal aspects of the tribal goddess being of supreme importance, it is not surprising to find that she was expressed in sculptural terms as a mother goddess nurturing her young, on her lap or playing with them in some way. The maternal and sexual concerns of the Celtic goddess were thus always very much in evidence.

Laurence Durdin-Robertson discusses the notion that the dominant religion of all races, at that time, was matriarchal polythesim. He defines this as a multitude of goddesses and gods who are dominated by a great Mother or Mothers. He sets out to prove this using a quote from The Great Mother by Grich Neumann.

Of the stone age sculpturers known to us there are fifty five female figures and only five male figures. The male figures, of youths are typical and poorly executed, hence it is certain that they had no significance for the cult. This fits in with the secondary character of the male godhead, who appeared only later in the history of religions and derived his divine rank from his mother the goddess.

It is evident from this that the goddess was a very important part of ancient belief. There is reason to believe that there was one goddess superior to the tribal gods and goddesses who was their mother and was responsible for nurturing and caring for the gods themselves (29, pg 126)

The Celtic goddesses then, throughout the pagan Celtic world, would seem to have been both a mother goddess, with all those sexual and maternal implications and a goddess of war, sometimes yielding weapons, sometimes using magic powers to bring about success. The goddess was also concerned with prognostication and with assimilating the shape of animals. Other goddess-like flidais, probably a woodland goddess, would seem to have been especially concerned with the mastery of the woodland beasts. They led the chase, drove their chariots through the untamed woodlands and protected and made prolific the flocks and the herds. Flidias was mated to the great hero Fergus Mac Roich (Fergus son of Great Horse) and only she could satisfy him sexually.

The celtic goddesses controlled the land and the seasons, they were sexually potent and maternally inclined. Many of them have clearly been taken over into folk-tradition where like the Irish Cailleach Bheara or the Gaelic Cailleach Beinne Bric, or the sinister sea-going Muilichearhach, they perform feats and influence spheres which are closely similar to those suggested by the iconography and the textual traditions of the older pagan world. (29 pg 129)

There are not many references to love in Irish mythology but there are many references to sexual experiences. The mythological role of love and sexuality is bound up primarily with the character of the Irish goddess as divine mother and personification of the land.

Most of our information about women in prehistoric Ireland, through to celtic times comes not from archaeology but from Irish mythology. From this source we can only surmise about the role of women in so far as it is reflected in that of legendary heroines and female deities who appear in early Irish literature. Mythology embraces a period in history in which goddesses have many names and many characteristics but basically their function is that of divine mother concerned with fertility, with the protection of flocks and herds (Fig 3.2) and with the security of land and its people. They were associated with natural features like hills, rivers, lakes and wells.

There is no doubt that the powerful roles played by female deities showed the high status they enjoyed in celtic times. In this period woman was perceived as the superior sex, in fact it seems likely that until men became aware of their power of fertilization, a woman was always regarded as the superior sex, which explains why the celts had such a strong belief in female deities.

Women studied medicine, poetry and practiced as physicians during the celtic era. They directed armies, incited soldiers into battle and assisted, by counsel and material aid, those who were to risk their lives in the field fighting. Therefore an honourable position was bestowed on women not only in the family or the tribe but in the state. Women also had legal rights and the rights to own and inherit property. Marriage as an institution was held in honour amongst the celts. It was the general custom to have only one wife, but there were exceptions, and a man could have a chief wife and a second wife. If a couple did not suit each other they could get a divorce without difficulty, by mutual consent (3 Pg 124). Since the goddesses of the celtic era had an obvious association with the fertile earth, so too had the Irish Celtic Goddess. The following chapter will explore this in relation to the most important female celtic goddesses in Ireland.



Head of Deity in stone.

2nd. - 1st. Century B.C. Prague.

Fig. 3.2

Footnotes:

1. Lawrence Durdin-Robertson
-Baron of Stratloch, Co. Carlow
and also a priest of Isis.

2. Erich Neumann - Quote from a lecture given by Lawrence
Durdin Robertson in Wexford on October
26 1974.
The Religion of the Goddess (Pg 5)
is the title given to the text of this
lecture.

Chapter 11

Irish Celtic Goddesses



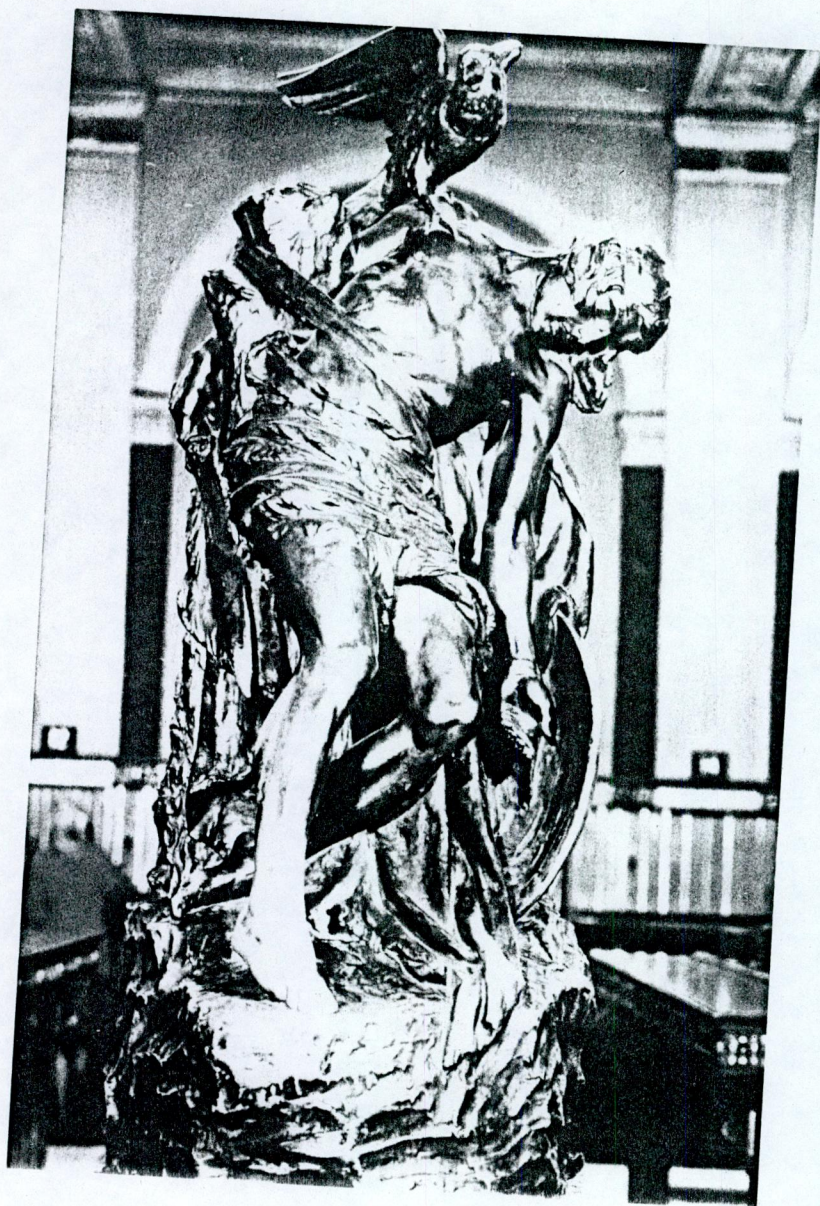
Wooden votive pilgrim statuettes.
1 century B.C. Dijon.

Fig. 4.1



Saniform stone head from Corleck,
Co.Cavan.

1st. - 5th.Century A.D.



Death of Cu Chulainn
General Post Office, Dublin.

Fig. 4.4

The Morrigan (great queen) was the most important Irish celtic goddess and was also known as the 'Raven war goddess'. Her father was Ernmas (iron death). She is identified with Anu 'the mother of the gods' and she-Morrighu, Badb and Macha are collectively known as the Morrigan, a triad of war/fertility sorceresses. She is essentially a mother goddess, a goddess of fertility but more than that, she is the inducer of fear and irrationality who can undermine men in times of crisis and sometimes delights in doing so. The goddess could be vengeful and was often associated with war. It is clear that the Morrigan is an amalgamation of the earth-goddess, the goddess of war and as the fertility goddess.

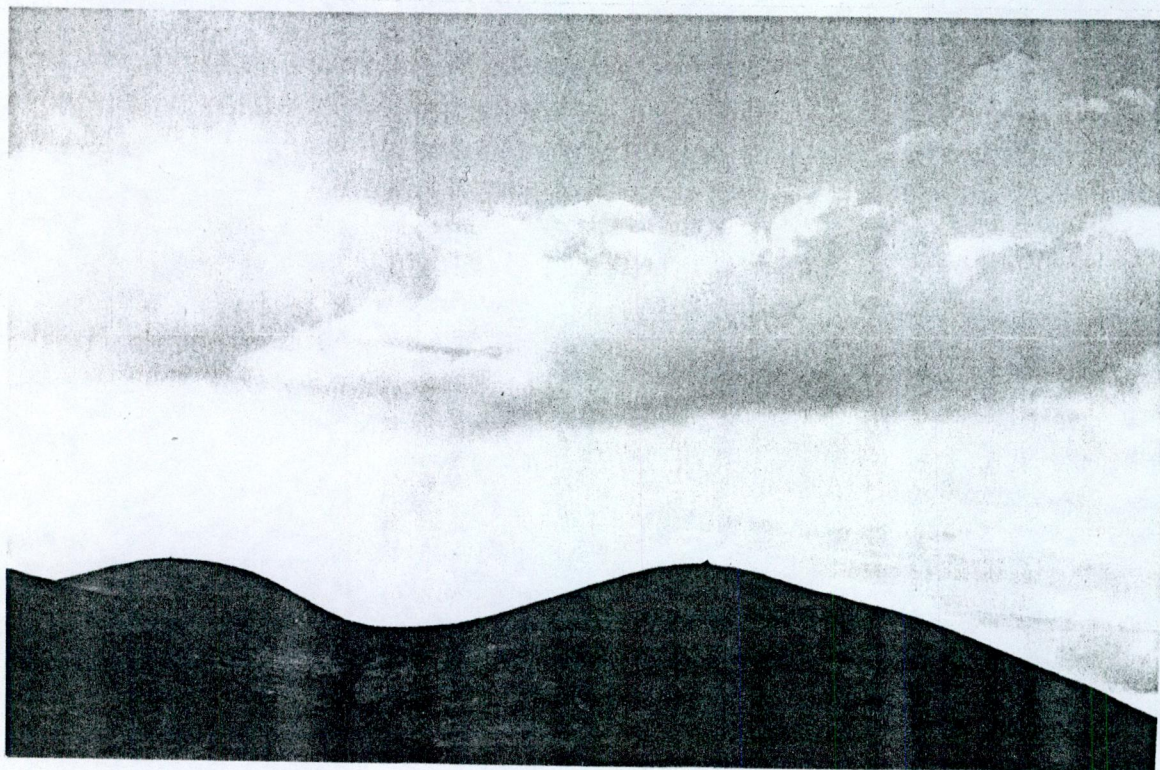
The Morrigan met the Dagda¹ (Fig 4.2) at the river Unius in Corann, Co. Sligo at the great feast of Samhain. She was washing herself 'one foot on the south bank, the other on the north' (10, pg 308). They conversed and then mated over the water, this being part of an ancient ritual. The mating of the Dagda with the Morrigan at the 'Bed of the Couple' (10, pg 308) was an assurance of fertility for the land over the coming winter.

The Morrigan's name is associated with several places. In the present Co. Louth there is a district known as 'Fort na Morriganu' or 'the Morrigan's field'. The Dagda is believed to have given her this field. 'Fulacht na Morrighana' near Slievenaman in Co. Tipperary, is an ancient 'cooking place' known as the 'Morrigan's Heart'. In the Boyne Valley near Newgrange there is the 'Mound of the Morrigan' or 'Mur na Morrigan' or otherwise known as 'dá chích na Morrigan' (10, pg 309).

The Morrigan's role was to influence the outcome of war, in favour of her side, not by engaging in battle but by magical means and by instilling terror and panic by her presence. She often appears in animal or bird guise as a crow or a raven, we can see many examples of this in The Táin.

A three headed statue from the Iron period found in Corleck, Co. Cavan (Fig 43) may represent the Morrigan (25 pg 214). It is usually interpreted as a male, but in my personal opinion it could just as easily represent a female triple deity.

We can see examples of the vengeful side of the Morrigan, where Cu Chulainn (Fig 4.4) ignores her sexual advances. Enraged and craving revenge she attempted to distract him while he was locked in single combat with Loch.



Twin hills known as the Paps of Anu near Killarney,
Co. Kerry.

Fig.4.5

So the Morrigan came there in the guise of a white red-eared heifer accompanied by fifty heifers..... Cu Chulainn made a cost at the Morrigan and shattered her eyes then the Morrigan appeared in the form of a slippery black eel, swimming downstream and went into the pod and coiled herself around Cu Chulainn's legs.....

Then the Morrigan came in the guise of a shaggy russet-coloured she-wolf....While Cu Chulainn was filled with rage and wounded him (Loch).....and pierced his heart in his breast.

A great weariness fell on Cu Chulainn. The Morrigan appeared to him in the shape of a squint-eyed old woman milking a cow with three teats. He asked her for a drink and she gave him milk from the first teat "Good Health to the Giver" Cu Chulainn said. "The blessing of God and man on you" and her head was healed and made whole. She gave him milk from the second teat and her eye was made whole, she gave him milk from the third teat and her legs were made whole.

"You said you would never heal me" the Morrigan said. If I had known- it was you I wouldn't have done it' Cu Chulainn said.

(17, Pg 137)

The Irish myth of the Morrigan harassing Cu Chulainn is a reminder that the celtic gods and goddesses had the power to transform themselves into animals.

The Tuatha de Danann² was the name given to the descendants of the Goddess Danu, known in Irish literature as Anu. She was the mother of the original three Danann gods, Brian, Lucharba, and Luchar and she is believed to have suckled them so well that her name came to signify 'plenty' (14 pg 370). She was worshipped in Munster as a goddess of plenty, a fertility goddess. Annu's identification with the earth is brought out even more explicitly in the name of a Kerry mountain 'The paps of Anu' ('dá cnoc Anann') (10 Pg 264) fig (4.5)

Anu or Morrígú was the leading person of the Trinity collectively known as the Morrigan. It is probable that this goddess was worshipped by the Celts, throughout Europe, for several river names, most notably the Danube, are based on her name (13 pg 327)

Anu is described as a goddess to whom the province of Munster owned its wealth, and regarded as a good-food provider. Anu, it seems, was more closely associated with the land than the rivers at least in Ireland.

Bóinn, another Irish celtic fertility goddess, was known as the 'white cow goddess' or 'illuminated cow'. Her name is derived from the primitive Irish word 'Bou-vinda' - 'Bo' meaning cow and 'vind' meaning the colour white, or, brightness and wisdom. The word 'Boinn' therefore has come to mean 'wisdom giving cow' (27 pg 49). Boinn was the wife of Nuadhu and they resided at Brugh na Boinn.

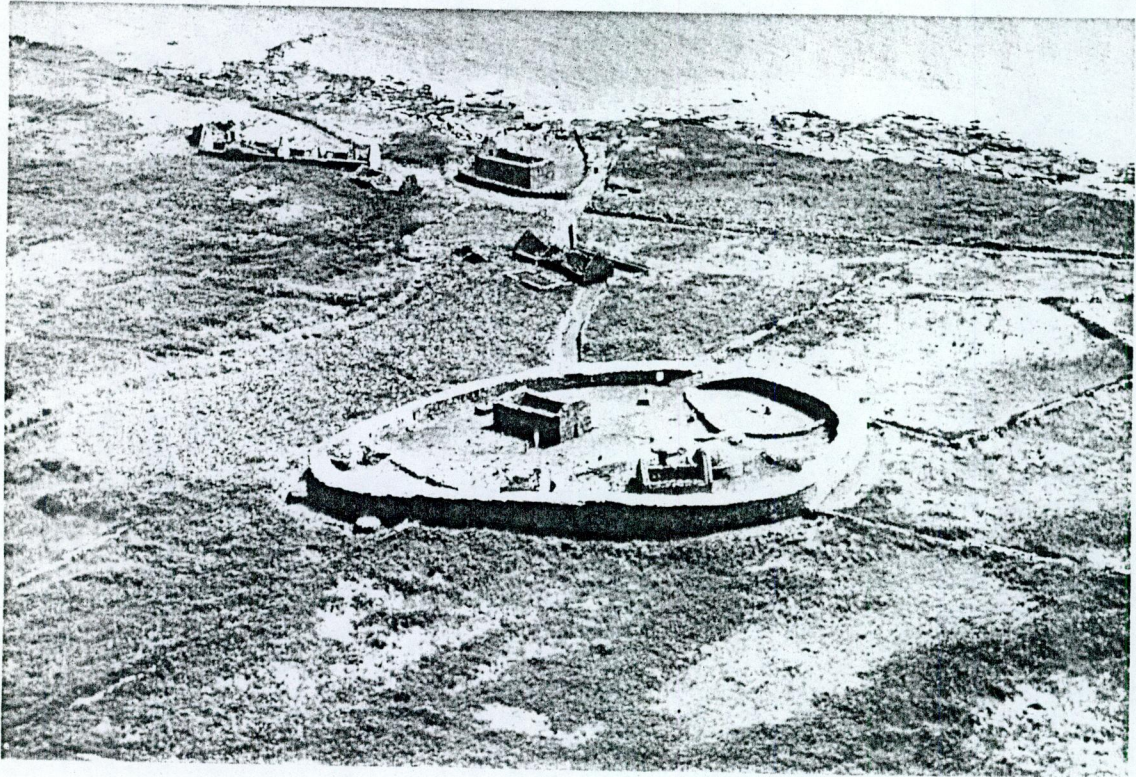
Myth has it that the dagda desired Bo and sent Nuadhu on a journey. By magic he made night disappear and banished thirst and hunger so that Nuadhu would not notice the passing of time and nine months later Boinn bore the dagda a son - Mac Og (Aongus). Aongus was reared by Midhir and when he grew older he found out that he was not the son of Midhir and went to seek the land that was his heritage, (Fig 4.6). The dagda told him to go to the Brugh na Boinne at Samhain to threaten Nuadhu there, and to demand possession of the Brugh for a day and a night. Then Aongus refused to leave. (27 Pg 39).

The source of the Boyne was believed to have been a well called the sídh (an 'otherworld dwelling') of Nechtan. Only Nechtan himself was believed to have been allowed to approach this well, and the eyes of anybody else who looked at its water, would burst. One day Boinn examined the well and three gushes came from it, injuring her foot and hand and blinding one of her eyes. She ran away, but the water rose up and followed her to the sea, thereby giving rise to the river Boyne (27 Pg 49). She was submerged in it, thus becoming the divinized river.

This fits in with the belief that supernatural beings have their dwellings below lakes and rivers, as will be discussed in the following chapter. Brugh na Boinne, the Boyne Valley region with all its hill forts, is called after her, and this area is noted for ancient pagan fertility rituals that occurred there during Samhain (7, Pg 65).

As the Irish goddesses were obviously identified with the earth and rivers as well as with reproduction, their connection, with fertility is evident.

Brigit or Brigantia was the mother in some legends of Brian, Luchar & Lucharba. In other traditions it was Danu who was the mother of these three 'Men of three Gods' (fí na trí ndea) (29 Pg 125). Research into these goddesses reveals that many scholars believed that Anu and Brigit were one and the same. It is possible that all these goddesses were collectively known as the mother goddess or earth mother each carrying her different characteristics.



Dry wall fort at Oghil on the island of Innishmore
1st.- 5th. Century A.D. near fort of Aongus.

Fig. 4.6

The name Brigit means 'exalted one'. She is a goddess of fertility, a mother goddess whose symbol is fire. She was associated with movement, a goddess of healing and her name, like the other goddesses, was connected to a river, in her case the Barrow in Leinster (30 Pg 72). Proinsias Mac Cana makes a reference in his book Celtic Mythology to a river named 'Brighit' which has associations with the goddess Brigit (20 Pg 34).

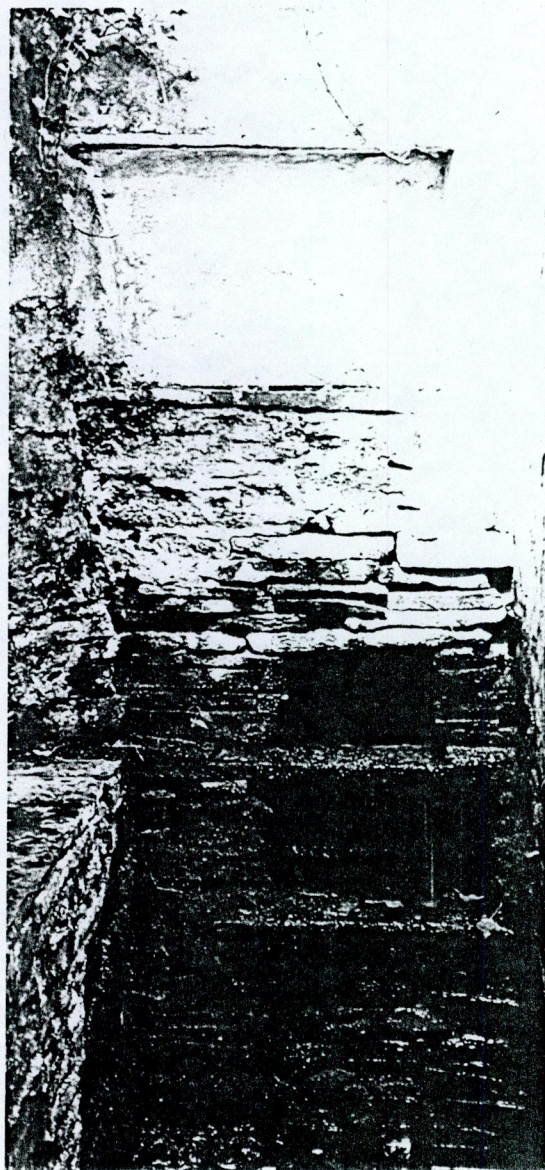
Brigit is referred to as a poetess and the daughter (in some cases the mother) of the dagda and some accounts say that she married a fomorian² named King Bress. A female sage, a woman of wisdom, Brigit was a goddess of poets.

Brigit was believed to have been born at sunrise, neither within or without a house, was fed from the milk of a white eared cow, and hung her wet cloaks on the rays of the sun, and the house appeared to be all ablaze (20 Pg 34).

Brigit owned two oxen called 'fea' and 'feimhean'. From them were named Maghfea (plain of the Barrow, Co. Carlow) and Mogh feimhin (plain in southeast Co. Tipperary). These animals used to cry out after rapine had been committed in Ireland (27 Pg 61), and this suggests that Brigit was a sort of guardian-goddess of domestic animals. She was also associated with healing, as previously mentioned and in Huntington Castle, Clonegal, Co. Carlow there is a sacred well in honour of Brigit. (Fig 4.7). It is situated in the crypt of the castle and presumably the castle was built over it in 1447. The well is believed to have special healing powers and anyone who drank its water was cured from their ailments.

Brigit's day or feast was the first of February, the same day as the feast of Imbolc, the old pagan festival of Spring. The meaning of the word is somewhat obscure, but it seems to have been connected with the 'coming into milk of the ewes' (18 Pg 92) and was, therefore, essentially a pastoral festival. This will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. In later Christian traditions St. Bridgits (Brigit is believed to have been christianized to St. Bridgit) association with sheep, with a pastoral economy and with fertility in general are noteworthy and would seem clearly to be a carry-over from her pagan predecessor's role.

St. Bridgit's cross is probably of Pre-Christian origin and is another adaptation of a custom which was so deeply rooted that it could not be eradicated by the early Christian missionaries and was taken over by them and given a Christian significance. The St. Bridgits cross is well authenticated as a sun symbol, many of which are found throughout the world. The related three arm symbol, the triskele, is probably a precursor of the four arm St. Bridgits cross of modern times.



Well to Brigit, Co. Sligo.

Fig. 4.7

The triskele is sometimes found in a circle as at Mullaghmast stone in Kildare. As the triskele has been found mainly over the door cattle sheds, Venceslas Kruta (18 Pg 93) concludes that their function was two fold - to protect the cattle and to increase their fertility.

This powerful goddess is found as Brigantia, patron deity of north Britain and dedications and names on the continent demonstrate her presence there too.

As late as the eighteenth century a festival took place in Coventry, England. This procession was headed by a man wearing a bulls mask and horns. He was dubbed 'Old Brazen Face' and the ceremony included two godivas, one dressed in white lace and the other stained entirely black. The goddess Brigit was also worshipped in England as Coventry was occupied by Brigantes, those who worshipped Brigantia, or Brigit. The white and black godivas were the two opposing aspects of the fertility goddess, Summer and Winter, sterility and abundance. The colour black is associated with death or sacrifice. The black godiva was not necessarily a sacrificial victim but it is probable that she represented the night side of the goddess. The colour reflected darkness, winter and death, the negative aspects of growth when light and warmth were withdrawn and offerings - perhaps blood offerings, were required for placation (29 Pg 48).

Brigit was worshipped throughout the Celtic world commonly in triple form, all three called Brigit. She was also referred to variously as Danu Anu or Black Annis who appears in folklore as a taloned child eating witch (24, pg 48) representing the dark side of her character.

In Scotland Brigit's symbol was the white swan. A Cornish invocation to the local Brigit triad was

Three ladies came from the east
one with fire, two with frost,
out with thee fire, and in with
thee frost.

(14 Pg 394)

This was a charm against a scald. One had to dip nine bramble leaves in spring water and then apply them to the scald. The charm was to be said three times to each leaf so as to be effective - fire represents the goddess of Summer and frost her two sisters.

It is interesting to note that three of Brigit's most common symbols, the vulture (or raven), serpent and cow, were also symbols of the goddess Isis. Isis was or is the Egyptian equivalent of the mother goddess or earth mother. Many of her qualities are similar to that of Brigit and it is possible that Brigit is the Irish equivalent of Isis.

As already mentioned, Brigit was the patroness of poets and in her honour the chief poet always carried a golden branch with tinkling bells. Brigit was also known as a midwife. This lends itself to the idea of rebirth or new birth and the new life of the land in spring. Her feast was the first day of spring which was the same as that of the Roman goddess Juno, who was the goddess of love and a midwife of ancient Rome. In the ancient Irish dictionary 'Cormac's Glossary' Brigit was known as

' A female poet, daughter of the dagda.
This Brigit is a poetess, or a woman of poetry
i.e. Brigit is a goddess whom poets worshipped
for very great and very noble was her
superintendence. Therefore, they called her
Goddess of Poets by this name, whose sisters
were bright, woman of healing, Brigit, woman of
smithwork i.e. goddess from whose names with
all Irishmen. Brigit, was called a goddess. Brigit
then i.e. "Breo-Saigit", a fiery arrow.

Imbolc was associated with breast feeding (the date of Brigid's feast). It is possible that part of the ritual celebrated on this feast was to do with the fluids of the womb, amniotic fluids, which were sacred in pagan times and druids held a ritual celebrating these waters.

January was considered to be a dead month and so on Imbolc the first day of the Celtic spring, Brigit was said to 'breathe life into the mouth of the dead winter' (8 Pg 76). According to one poem, Brigit was dearly a serpent and a symbol of regeneration.

Today is the day of the bride, the serpent
shall come from the hole, I will not molest
the serpent, nor will the serpent molest
me.

(8 Pg 79)

One of Brigid's symbols as a mother goddess, was the cow and many legends exist throughout Ireland about this cow. The milk of the sacred cow was one of the earliest sacred foods throughout the world and was seen as a form of nourishment and purity and believed to provide an antidote to the poison of weapons, and mother's milk was especially valuable and believed to have special curative powers (8 Pg 83). Martin Larson discusses the religion and rituals involved with the cult of Isis in his book The Religion of the Occident (Pg 22) and discussed that the Eucharist of Isis consisted of bread and also the 'milk that flowed from her bosom' and the chalice from which one drank this, was a cup formed in the shape of a woman's breast. This also highlights the similarities between the rituals to Brigit and those of goddess Isis.

The sacred cow also symbolised the sacredness of motherhood, and her milk provided a necessary life-force. She was not just the giver of milk but also protected offspring. Brigit as a mother goddess appears as the woman who mourns the fate of her children and who is outraged by plunder and rape, hence the story of her two cows.

Therefore it is evident that the cult of the earth mother was widespread in Ireland. Ireland a largely agricultural land identified with this goddess, who also saw to the fertility of the earth, animals and of mankind. The symbolism of the goddess has been one of the most persistent features in the thought and practice of religion throughout the world, from the stone age onwards, and Ireland has undoubtedly been no exception.

Footnotes.

1. Dagda - The leading male god, his name means "Good God" not that he was morally good but that he was good at everything. He was actually a sun god and lived in Bru na Boinne for a term.
2. Tuatha De Danann - were a confederation of tribes in which the kingship went by matrilinean succession. Some of whom involved Ireland from Britain in the Middle Bronze age. It is said that they have been driven northward from Greece as a result of an invasion from Syria and eventually reached Ireland by way of Denmark to which they gave their own name (Kingdom of the Dananns)
3. Fomarians - leading enemy tribe of Tuatha de Danann.

Chapter 3

Feasts, rituals and sacred places.

The feasts of the celtic calendar can be understood in their own right to be celebrations of fertility. Whether it was the beginning of Spring or Winter, each called for a ritual which was seen to be a prayer for fertility and the assurance of a good crop. Many of these rituals took place in woodland locations, and these 'sacred places' themselves became a celebration of fertility.

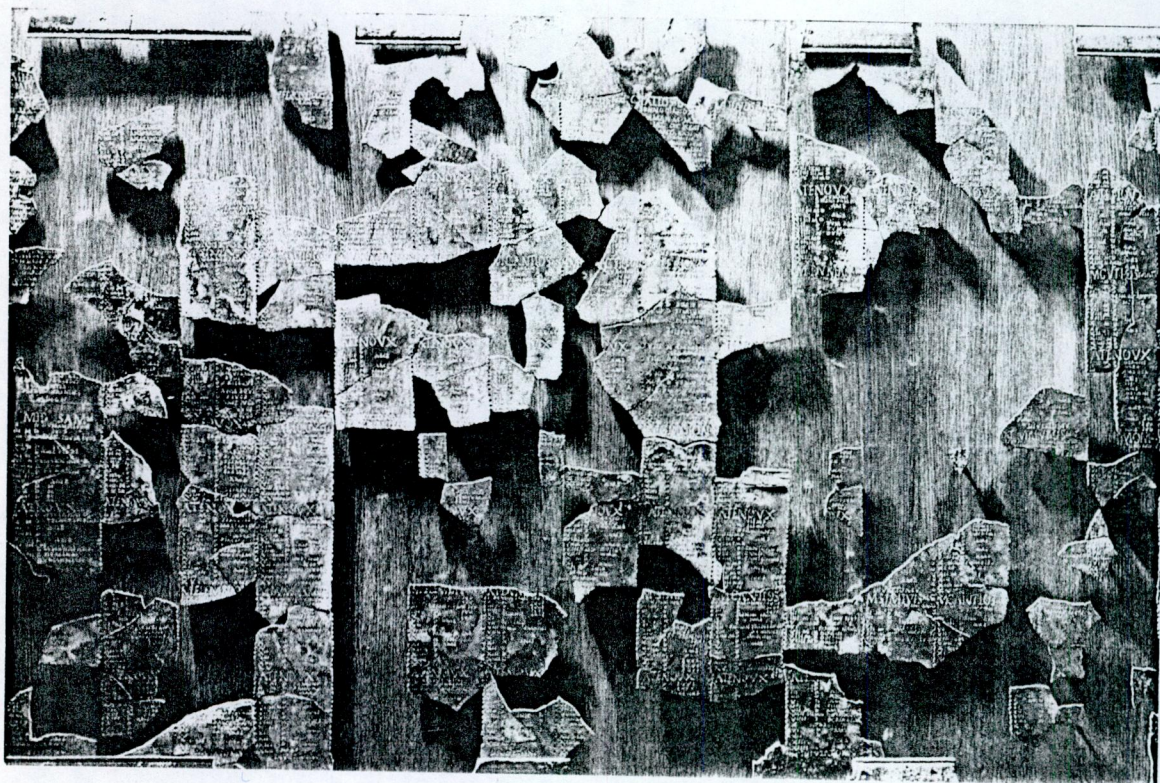
Imbolc is the first feast we encounter on the Celtic Calendar (Fig, 5.1). The word meaning 'belly' or 'bag' marked the beginning of the 'location of the ewes' (11 Pg 5657)

Imbolc was closely associated with the sacred flame that would purify the land and encourage fertility and the emergence of the sun from its winter sleep. On that day the rights of prognostication, a trial marriage would take place. Up until this century, young men and women would gather at Teltown in County Meath and then walk towards each other, kiss and be wed. Such weddings, which could be broken the following year by walking apart, were probably the final remnants of an ancient celtic custom in which the woman had equal rights with the man in the making or breaking of a marriage (30 Pg 18). This type of matchmaking ceremony is reminiscent of that which takes place in Lisdoonvarna each year.

The ceremony of the white stones in the fire (recorded in many parts of Ireland) involved the marking of the names or personal marks of all the young men on the stones that were placed in the great Imbolc fire. When it had died down and cooled enough to take out the stones, each person searched for his mark and as soon as he found it, would run as fast as possible from the spot. Failure to find your stone was originally a sign that the gods of the fire had bestowed supreme honour on you by choosing your life spirit to be sacrificed for the purification and continuing fertility and the general good of the whole tribe (30 Pg 18).

In christian times it was believed that there was a perpetual fire burning at Kildare, connected to St. Bridgid. Some scholars believe this was a survival of a pagan fire cult. Knockaulin, five miles from Kildare is identified with the royal site of Dun Ailinne. Evidence from recent excavations has prompted the suggestion that ceremonies involving fire and feasting took place there during the Iron Age (33 Pg 47).

The name Kildare, from the Irish 'cell dara' is a further indication of a pagan sanctuary, the name cell dara is thought to have derived from a sacred oak tree. The oak tree was a very significant pagan symbol.



Bronze Tablet with Gaulish Calendar
2nd.Century B.C. Lyon.

Fig. 5.1

The second feast on the celtic calendar was Beltane and was celebrated on the first day of May, as the great spring/summer fertility gathering symbolised by the lighting of the mayfires (30 pg 18). Beltane is thought to mean 'parturication' (8 Pg 62). On this feast sacrifices were made to Baol, a weather god. Sometimes depicted as a young warrior with springing bull's horns. Baol was a corruption of Belinus, a celtic pastoral god, Lord of Beltane. His duty was to impregnate the virgin earth. There was a penance of leaping through flames to mollify him (24 Pg 48). Druids also drove cattle between fire during this ceremony, and the dancing was a ritual enactment of the sun's movement through the skies. The Maypole dance and other folk rituals have their origin in the mad dance around the May fires as the whole tribe would celebrate the resurgence of life force and fertility.

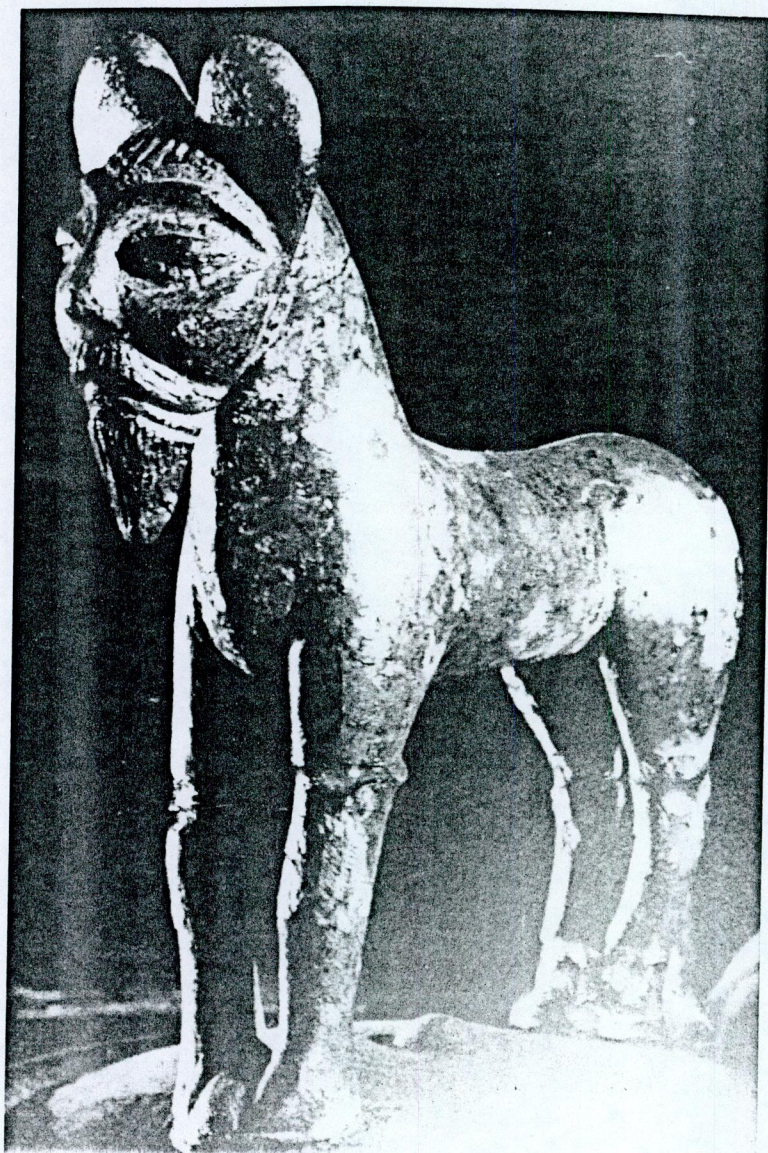
At this feast a ritual was enacted which concerned fire and horses (Fig 5.2). When the fire burned low the peasantry passed through it, and several children were thrown across the sparkling embers while a wooden frame at some eight feet long, with a horse's head fixed to one end and a large white sheet thrown over it, concealing the wood and the man on whose head it was carried, made its appearance. This was greeted with loud shouts as the 'white horse', and having been safely carried several times through the fire with a bold leap, it pursued the people, who ran screaming in every direction. The horse was meant to represent all cattle (Fig 5.3) This ceremony was aimed at stimulating growth and fertility among cattle and crops. (24, Pg 52-53)

This feast was celebrated well into Christian times, and was usually celebrated in May and June, the first to boast the growth of the green shoots and the latter to ensure a ripening towards harvest.

These ancient horse ceremonies contained sacrificial elements entraining the real or symbolic offering of naked victims to the Earth Mother. The element of nudity was of prime importance, for the bare hide of the horse was thought capable of transmitting its aura to the flesh of the rider (24, Pg 47)

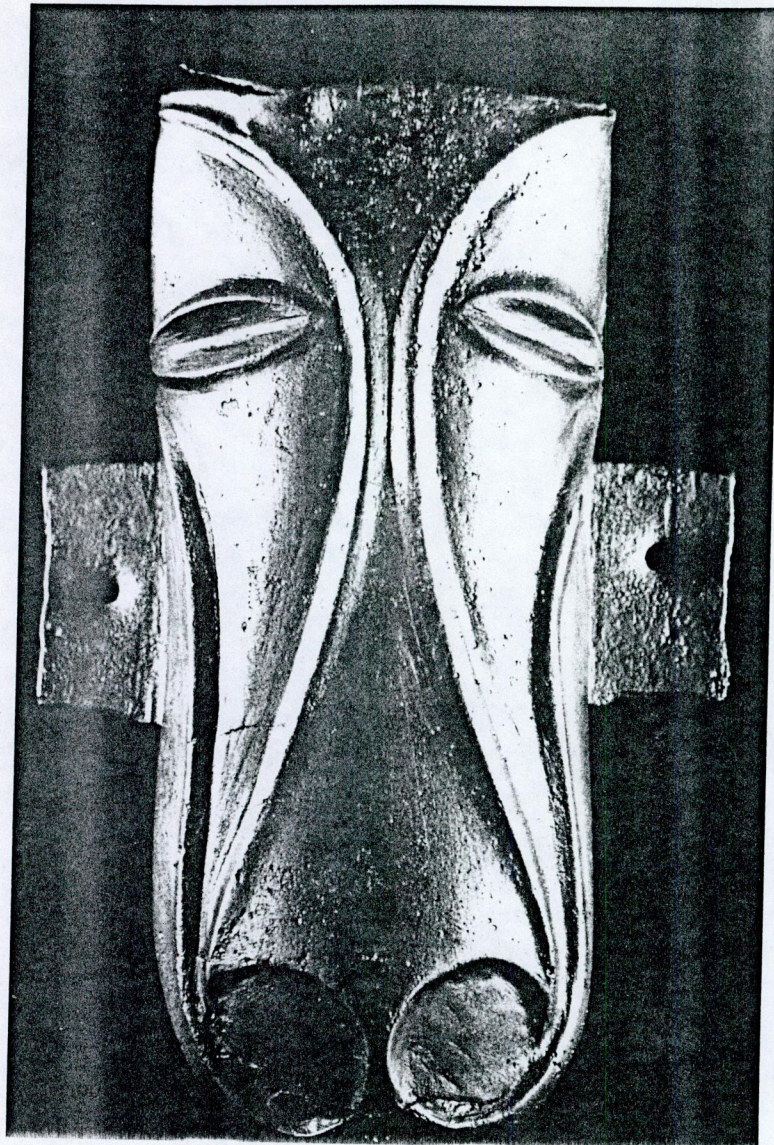
This was a time when people were extremely careful to protect their property and prosperity. It was believed to be extremely unlucky to give a neighbour the lend of salt on May eve as it was thought that certain greedy neighbours would attempt, by magic, to steal away one's good fortune.

One of the stories attached to this belief is told of a woman, regardless of how hard she worked at the churning, she could not make butter. Eventually she was advised to put a piece of red-hot iron into the churn-dash.



Bronze Horse Statuette from the lid of
a wine jug 5th century B.C. Saorland.

Fig.5.2



Bronze fitting in form of horse's head 1st. Century
B.C., British Museum, London.

Fig. 5.3

A neighbouring woman, who had put the harmful charm on the butter-milk, came screaming to the house, contorted in pain as if pierced by a hot iron, and could only get relief by taking a hand at the churning herself, and thereby undoing the charm. Another legend tells of how an old lady took the form of a hare and drank the milk from the neighbours cows until discovered.

The feast of Lughnasa, was the feast of Lugh, usually celebrated on the first Sunday in August. The celebration marked the ripening of corn and the weaning of calves and lambs. In Ireland, several great fairs coincided with this festival, known in modern times as the fair of Muff, Co. Cavan. Ballycastle in Co. Antrim, Ennistown in Co. Clare and Killorglin in Co. Kerry (27 Pg 403). Lughnasa is the celebration of the harvest and the fertility of the earth.

Samhain, the last feast on the Celtic Calendar meaning 'purification' (8. Pg 62) was held on November first. In the Celtic world of Ireland, the two aspects of the Dagda and the Morrigan were annually united for the common good. During samhain... the limbo period between the ending of one year and the beginning of the next, the spirits were loosed and the world was in chaos.

The word appears to mean 'a coming together' (9 Pg 53), on these occasions to whole tribe presumably assembled for feasting and to ensure, through sacrifice, the continued fertility of the crops and herds. In Celtic mythology Samhain was the time of reconciliation between the tribal god and the earth-mother in her tribal guise, when they came together for intercourse, the act ensuring that the balance of forces had been restored and that the fertility of the land and of the people was renewed. (9 Pg 55)

The fairy cave at Cruachain (síd ar cruachain) near Tulsk, Co. Roscommon is especially associated with Samhain. During this time of year popular belief had it that hosts of spirits leave this cave, led by the Morrigan or 'Great Queen' (31 Pg 68)

A síde was and still is known as fairy hills, where the bodies of the ancient were buried and within these walls the ancient ancestors were said to reside.

Samhain means the end of the summer 'Samh' referring to summer and 'fuin' meaning 'end'. It was a time of sacrifice and fertility, humans and animals usually the first-born, were sacrificed to the Earth -Mother. It was a time when the Dagda mated not only with the Morrigan but also Boand. Therefore it was a time when the fertility of the land and people was restored.

Samhain is the appropriate setting for myths which symbolise the dissolution of established order as a prelude to its recreation in a new period of time. Famous kings and heroes die at Samhain - Muircherfach, Crimhthann, Diarmad Mac Cerbhaill, Conaire Mor, Cu Chulainn and others (20 Pg 28)

In Loc gCarman, Co. Wexford an ancient festival was founded 2,500 years ago. The festival was founded by a lady called Carman who came originally from Athens with her three sons Dian, Dubh and Dothur. This place in Wexford was given her name and it is believed that Greek merchants traded at this fair of Carman. Lawrence Durdin Robertson quotes a poem the 'Dindshenchas' on this festival

Carmen site of generous fair,
 here is music - trumpet, horn,
 drum and pipe the pair adorn.
 Here is poetry - the bard
 seeks and gains his due reward,
 here romance - exhaustless theme,
 legends, vague as in a dream:
 here is wisdom - proverbs sage,
 satires, core of seer and mage.
 Here is history - tales of old,
 ever new, though often told.

Mr Durdin - Robertson believes this was doubtless the festival of a pastoral and agricultural people, designed to increase by magic and religious means the fertility of flocks, herds and fields.

Woodland locations were not the only settings for Celtic rituals. The countryside would have abounded with others; weird-shaped rocks, ancient gnarled trees, springs and bogs, the gods could be reached almost anywhere. There is extensive archaeological evidence of offerings made at rivers and springs, and an increasing body of new material is showing that contrary to the impression given by the ancient writers, the Celts also constructed permanent shrines of timber and rituals enclosures where the gods could be propitiated (9 Pg 63).

To the Celtic mind a particular sanctity was attached to springs, especially those of the source of a great river. Spring water had a special quality, usually curative, which could be enjoyed by man so long as he placated the deity who presided over the location (9, Pg 63). Since the water came from the earth it is believed to have come directly from the Earth Mother. The continuing strength of this pagan tradition continued down the centuries and indeed to the present day is shown by the way in which springs and wells were rapidly Christianized and were almost invariably associated with a female patron saint, for example St. Bernadette of Lourdes.

In pagan times people who wanted a cure threw coins and other items into the water as offerings to the deity.

The recognition of water as the first principal, and source of all life to those who depend on the land for food and sustenance, is reflected in the dedication of the main river sources of western Europe as sanctuaries to the Celtic fertility goddess such as the Danube as a sanctuary for the goddess Danu.

Every sacred spot had its guardian spirit who tended it, observed the daily rites with proper ceremonies and who could materialize as a cat, a bird, a fish or whatever form was most pleasing to the goddess, even as a hideous hag or beautiful being, depending upon the circumstance or disposition of an intruder or visitor (30, Pg 7).

Such places were womb-like openings of the Earth Mother who was invoked under many different names and aspects. The goddess is bountiful but also merciless. The moon with its strange power over tidal water and the regular flow of the menstrual blood, the centre of a universal set of symbols, presides over night rituals connected with such animals as the cat, the snake and a wolf. In Celtic legends, it is identified with the triple goddess who presides over birth, life and death: the triad of maiden, bride and crone - Morrighu (Anu), Macha and Badb (30, Pg 7)

Newgrange is often referred to as a 'sacred place' in that it is the site where many of the mythological heroes were born.

In the story of the 'Conception of Cu Chulainn' it is said that a flock of birds repeatedly grazed to the roots the plain of Emain Macha (Armagh). The warriors of Ulster gave chase to the birds and pursued them in nine chariots. Conchobar's daughter Dechtine, was serving as his charioteer. In the evening, three of the birds led the pursuers to the edge of Bruig na Baine, where night came upon the Ulstermen. It snowed heavily and the Ulstermen sought shelter. They found a new house where they were made welcome by a couple. The man of the house told them that his wife was in labour. Dechtine went to her and a boy was born. At that time a mare outside the house dropped two foals and these were given to the child. By morning the house and the birds had disappeared and all that remained with the Ulstermen at the edge of Bruig na Baine were the child and two foals. With these the warriors returned to Emain Macha. It was Lugh who had brought Dechtine to the Boyne as it was he who was the Lord of the Bruig na Baine at this time. He brought her there not on an errand of doom, but so that Setanta (Cu Chulainn) could be born (16, Pg 81).

Thus Bruig na Boinne is seen as the telluric womb from which emerges the hero of Ulster, and in its own right becomes a 'sacred place'.

It is evident therefore that fertility was celebrated throughout Ireland in many different forms. The four feasts of the celtic calendar were in themselves celebrations and prayers for fertility as was the rituals performed at these feasts. The actual places the feasts were held, together with places of worship were viewed as sacred places. These locations themselves were regarded as celebrations of fertility.

Footnotes.

1. It was believed that nine virgins kept constant watch at the sacred fires at St. Bridgits convent in Kildare.
2. Quote given at a lecture by Lawrence Durdin - Robertson in Wexford on Oct. 26th. 1974 and is cited in the manuscript of this lecture The religion of the Goddess (Pg 21)

Conclusion.

In this thesis I have set out to hypothesize a concern for fertility among societies in pagan Ireland. I have emphasised the highly complex ideologies of life and death, and their relationship with fertility, which is articulated by the symbolic systems of Neolithic passage graves and Celtic Mythology.

All discussion of prehistoric^{ORIC} material where it goes beyond the mere descriptive ventures into the unknown and the unverifiable. As Frederick Nieksche in his book The Will to Power states 'There are only facts - I would say; No facts are precisely what they are not - only interpretations. Therefore I have tried, given these circumstances, to evaluate possible meanings for the afterfacts which remain from the prehistoric period and which are related to this thesis.

As few afterfacts remain from the Celtic period that show a connection between their beliefs and fertility, I have turned to Celtic Mythology for information. Levi Strauss makes a point in 'Structural Anthropology' when he states that 'the kind of logic in mythical thought is quite as vigorous as that of modern science'. Therefore what we learn from mythology is not meaningless or confusion but an alternative order and organisation which I believe lends itself readily to my thesis.

I will conclude by saying the idea of fertility is still a predominate theme in the twentieth century, and it also has influenced my studio work greatly.

Appendices

Interviews with Olivia Durdin - Robertson, priestess of Isis
on December 15th. 1991. Huntington Castle, Clonegal, Co. Carlow.

Interview with Orla Sullivan, archaeologist involved in the
excavating of Knowth, Co. Meath. Telephone conversation, January
10th. 1992

Department of Folklore (Library), University College Dublin.

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