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Contents:

A Paper On Druidism in Ireland, and Bibliography.

A Paper On The Origin and Development of the Spiral as an Art Form
in Ireland, and Bibliography.

Illustrations.

Preface.

This submission consists of two papers. The first is about Druidism in Ireland, and was written as the text for a book which I am illustrating for the visual part of the Degree Project. The second paper traces the development of the Spiral Motif as an art form in Ireland. It is a chronological report, and runs parallel with the Celtic Druidic period in Ireland. The two papers complement each other, and for a fuller understanding of the background to the Spiral's development, I suggest that one first reads the paper on Druidism in Ireland.

Druidism in Ireland.

Introduction.

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Introduction.

Today there are many customs and traditions which have their roots in the Pagan Celtic Ireland of the Druids. In this paper, I hope to explain the origins of such traditions, and to explain what effect Christianity had on them, the Celts and their Druid leaders.

"The Pagan Celtic priests known as the Druids, have attained to a popularity which the evidence for their existence in no way justifies. This Cult has its origins in the antiquarian speculations of romantic writers of the seventeenth century onwards".

However:

"An actual source of potential evidence for the Druids are the comments of the Classical Writers".

Quotations taken from "Pagan Celtic Britian" by Anne Ross.

For this reason I have only taken information from, and quoted books published after the turn of this century. The only exceptions have been some quotes from classicists such as Pliny the Elder in his book "Natural History". Although I have mentioned books from the National Library in the bibliography which were published before the turn of this century, they were only read out of interest, and were not included in the text.

1. Origins of the Celts.

The Celts originated in lands north of the Alps, and along the Rhine in what are now known as Bavaria and Bohemia. Evidence for this is found in the relationship between place names and archaeological findings. This theory is offered by Hyles Dillon and Nora Chadwick in "The Celtic Realms". The name Rhine, they maintain, is a word of Celtic origin, and so are the names of all the Eastern tributaries of the Rhine; Neckar, Main and Ruhr for example. Celtic river and place names also occur in parts of France and Spain. Archaeological evidence of a race of people emerging towards the 14th century B.C, possibly the Celts, has been found in all these places. The evidence suggests that it is the same race in each case, as the burial customs and jewellery design and the weapons are the same. This is sufficient evidence for us to assume that the Celtic race emerged in central Europe, at the end of the 14th century B.C.

The Celts were a very aggressive race, and conquered much of Europe, in fact by 450 B.C, they were the most powerful in all Europe. Their kingdom stretched from Asia Minor to the Atlantic coast, Italy and Spain in the south, Scotland and Ireland in the North. The first Celts to invade Ireland did so from Scotland. There were two types of Celts who came here, the first from about 500 B.C. to 400 B.C. were called the Hallstatt Celts. The second and more important invasion was by the La Tène Celts, between 150 B.C. and 100 B.C.

The word La Tène is derived from a site in Switzerland where it was first documented in the fourth century B.C. and refers not only to the race, but also to the style of art used by this race. La Tène was inhabited during the late Iron Age period. The La Tène Celts had a rich and powerful culture, and began to expand and migrate by the 300 B.C. enforcing the Celtic language. The style of art which appeared on their weapons

and ornaments was abstract and curvilinear. Inevitably, when these Celts invaded Ireland, they brought this art style with them, and it was to have a profound influence on the on the Irish craftsmen of the time. For details on this La tène influence see the paper on the Spiral. The La Tène invaders drove chariots and seem to have resembled the heroes of the early Irish sagas. They were tall, wore their hair long, and dressed in finely woven tunics of linen, held in place with a belt around the waist, and an ornamental brooch. Their weapons were strong and made from iron, a metal as yet unknown in Ireland.

2. The Organisation of Irish Society in Celtic Times.

By about 600 B.C. the craft of ~~IRON~~working was sweeping Europe. Ireland, which prior to this was an exporter of large amounts of copper to Europe, found that this copper was no longer in demand. Due to this, when the Celts first came to Ireland, it was in a state of economic collapse. They brought with them this knowledge of iron working. With the help of new iron implements, farming and building became more efficient and Ireland was on the way to becoming a significant member of Europe again.

Ireland under the Celts was divided into five sub-kingdoms. (the provinces as we now know them). These were ruled by separate provincial kings, the provinces were divided into small tribes known as "Tuathas", there were 150 Tuathas in the whole country. Each Tuatha had a strict class system organised on a Feudal basis, at the top were the noblemen and landowners, below them were the Aes Dana or men of art. These were the metal workers, wood workers, poets, musicians and men of learning. A group called the "Filid" or wise men were also in this class, they related the tales of the Irish Heroes and thus preserved the country's traditions orally. They did not live in hamlets or farmsteads as did the rest of the population, but travelled freely through the country. As there were no large towns, and minimum communication between communities, the Filid were the only link between different tribes and as such, were very important. The lowest class in the Tuatha was that of free man or commoner, largely farming people, they made up most of the population.

Gerhard Herm in his book "The Celts" offers this interesting if unlikely theory as to how the chief of the Tuatha was elected:-

"Bulls would be slaughtered; a man would eat some of their flesh and be put to sleep with the help of the Druids. He would then be

asked who had appeared to him in his sleep as ruler of all. For prudence sake he had to name the most powerful; for the highest office of State could naturally only be given to members of great families"

As Ireland was very rural at this time, with no large towns or centralised government, most people lived in fortified farmsteads or "Raths" now known as ring forts or fairy forts. The Rath, built on a hill was enclosed by 3 or 4 circular walls which served as enclosures for livestock. The houses within the Rath were small thatched hovels made from wood. Farming was mixed, goats, cattle, sheep and pigs were herded and cereals such as barley were grown. The barley was used for bread, porridge and beer making.

Another form of homestead in Celtic times was the "Crannog"; a structure built of wood forming an artificial island in a lake. The word crannog meaning tree. The island was surrounded by a thick palisade made from piles driven into the ground. Inside this was another palisade of horizontal planks. There were usually two entrances to the Crannog, one with a quay. Little is known about the construction of the houses but evidence of hearths suggesting fires have been found. Crannogs are thought to have been the residences of the wealthier members of the community.

Stone, when available, was used for house building and the construction of defensive walls. The stone was cut into blocks and used without mortar. As the country was heavily forested in Celtic times, the trees provided an endless supply of timber for houses, fortifications, wattle and daub constructions and materials for carpenters, coopers, boat builders and wheel wrights. For more detailed information on land use and building construction see : "The Archaeology of Ireland" by Peter Harbison.

Kettleworkers were well respected in the community as the Celts were a vain race, and loved to adorn themselves with jewellery. This jewellery was finely wrought in gold, bronze and silver, taking the form of torcs, neckrings, broochs, anklets, bracelets and neck chains, decorated with spirals of the La Tène style. Iron working was usually reserved for the production of farm implements and strong weapons, although some iron brooches have been found.

Although the Roman Empire never reached Ireland, there were great trade links between Ireland and the Roman Empire. Ireland exported hides, cattle and Irish wolf hounds. She imported wine, oil, pottery and glass. However when the Roman Empire declined in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. the Irish traders became raiders and plundered Roman Britain for gold and slaves.

3. Origins of the Druids, and their place in Society.

Most early vernacular texts in old Irish, relating to the Druids represent written records of an oral tradition dating back to shortly before the fifth century A.D. These records bear little resemblance to the Roman and Greek records of the same time because Ireland was never under Roman domination. Roman Legions invaded Britain in 55 B.C. Ireland at this time was in a depressed state, as her farming land and weather were not as favourable as they were in Britain. Ireland was no serious military threat to Roman Britain as she was so poor and could not therefore have sustained a Roman Garrison.

However back to the Irish Druids. There is evidence to suggest that the Druids were originally travellers from the East, and India in particular. Here is what Gerhard Herm in his book "The Celts" has to say on the subject:

"The late Miles Dillon, formerly professor of Celtic studies at U.C.D. cites a whole series of astonishing parallels between the culture of Aryan Indians and that of the Irish Druids. His main contention is that in both cases there was a distinct class of scholars. The Brahmins in India, while in Ireland there were "The wise men of the Oak" Dillon reckons that the Brahmins and Druids should be equated because they carried out their professions, (teaching and study, poetry and law) in a similar way!"

This theory is born out by the fact that with regard to law, there are many parallels between the Irish and Indian Law Books. In each country the law consists of Canonical texts, credited with sacred origins and interpreted only by the Druid in Ireland and the Brahmin in India. In Ireland as in India, there were many forms of marriage, an other similarity, ten are recorded in the law tract in Ireland, and eight in India.

I feel that there is enough reliable evidence here to suggest that the first Druids to reach Ireland at the beginning of her Celtic era, were indeed travellers from India bringing with them many of their ways and customs. However there is another aspect of Druidic origin which is not so easy to prove, namely the Tuatha de Danaan. There are so many tales and legends surrounding the Tuatha de Danaan that it is impossible to separate fact from fiction, though I doubt that there is much fact. Legend has it though that they were a band of mystical warriors who travelled from abroad, (possibly Scandinavia) to Ireland. They were said to be "perfect in all the arts of divinity, Druidism and philosophy" and established themselves here as Druids at the start of the Celtic era.

The word Druid is derived from the Irish word "draoi" which is a compound of the words "dair" which means oak and "ai" which means learned or wise. The Druids belonged to the "Aes Dana" class in the tuatha. They were highly respected members of the tribe, as they not only presided over the religious practices of the people, but also administered punishments, and organised the calendar and festivals. Druids were above the law themselves, they never paid taxes and never went to war. In support of these statements is a quotation from "The Celts" by Gerhard Harn.

"They (the Druids) ruled over past and future, healing, the course of the seasons, and the secrets of nature; they were university, church and court of the Realm all in one. With all this in mind we may assume that the Druids were the authentic and most representatives of the Celtic people"

The training to be a Druid was very arduous and took roughly twenty years of intensive astronomy, herbal medicine, religious instruction and a detailed knowledge of the law. The teaching took place in inaccessible areas of the forests and caves in the mountains. The sacred knowledge was never written down but committed to memory.

4. Druidic Duties.

Maintenance of the Calender:

One of the many duties of the Druid was to maintain the calander, and organise the festivals, the dates of which were calculated by lunar observations, as the Druids were great astronomers. The most important date in the calender was November 1st, Samain. This marked the end of one yaer, and the start of the next. It was marked by ceremonies to renew the fertility of the Earth. Beltaine, May 1st marked the start of the second half of the year, and ceremonies were performed to honour the Celtic god Belen-nusar or Beal, the sun god. Beal fires were lighted on this night, to honour this God and give thanks to him. The fires were lit on the tops of hills by the Druids. Details of this ritual will be discussed later on in the text. August 1st marked another important Celtic festival, that of Lughnasa, in honour of the God Lug. Lug was an important Celtic God, and is depicted as the very essence of the noble warrior. He may possibly have been a fertility God as well.

Religious Teaching:

The Druids naturally supervised the worship of the community. Apart from the veneration the Celts had for inanimate objects (to be discussed in the next chapter) there was also a complex heirarchy of Deities which they worshiped. so much myth and confusion surrounds these Gods, that I will only discuss the most important ones.

"Beneath the confusing mass of detail about the Celtic supernatural which survives in Irish literature, a simple underlying theme emerges: The female Deities are in some way reflections of an Earth Mother Goddess, while the male Gods all have abilities appropriate to the tribal God!"

This quotation which was taken from "The Celtic World" by Barry Cunliff introduces my next point: The most important female deity was the Morrigan

or great queen. She appeared in triple form with Macha and Bodh, and was essentially a mother goddess, goddess of fertility and the introducer of fear and irrationality. The last two qualities representing uncertainty.

The Morrigan's male counterpoint was the Dagda or good god. He was the god on whom the tribal deities were based. The gods were conceived in much the same way that the tribe was organised, at the head was the Tribal God and all other gods were below him. The Dagda was attributed with great strength and carried a cauldron which was said to be inexhaustable and to have life giving and rejuvenative properties. So, in the relationship between Morrigan and Dagda (earth fertility and uncertainty relating to the tribal personification of all skills) all things could be explained, good and evil, bravery and fear. Life for the Celts resulted from the interplay of these two concepts personified as their chief god and goddess.

The theme of Druidism was immortality, this they hoped to achieve by reincarnation. They believed that the more religious a person in his present life, the more likely it was that he would be reincarnated as an important person such as a King or a Druid, however, if he indulged in evil living he was more likely to return as an insect or an inanimate object such as a tree or a stone. This belief in reincarnation is further evidence of foreign influence, possibly that of Buddhism, supporting the theory that the first Druids were travellers from the East.

The Druids as Judges:

The following quotation from "The Celts" by Gerhard Herm shows the interesting theory the Druids had for judging the people as harshly as they did:

"As Judges, they condemned murderers to death not because they had killed people, but because if a human life is not given for a human life the ruling Gods cannot be appeased. They were not taking human

life but merely redressing the balance. If a wrong doer escapes them they will even slaughter the innocent. Life for them was clearly something to be transferred from one vessel to another as soon as the complicated Earth-Heaven relationship had been disrupted"

This then backs up the earlier notion of reincarnation and shows what great respect the Druids had for the Gods. In fact, the world of the Gods seems to have been a fearsome one, contact was to have been avoided if possible, but if inevitable the right form of appeasement was essential, otherwise catastrophe might ensue!

5. Druidic Belief and Ritual Worship.

Sacred Groves:

Druids held many places sacred where they could worship their gods. There were Sacred Groves deep in the ancient forests where assemblies were held and sacrifices may have been carried out. As the trees were sacred, it was taboo to damage them in any way. Early Irish texts suggest that individual trees were particularly sacred, the ash "Tortu" and the yew "Eorosa" being examples. The names of trees seem also to have been incorporated into people's names, MacGuill for example, meaning Son of Hazel. One piece of evidence to support the theory that the Celts venerated trees is seen in many sculptures where gods are depicted with leaf crowns and sometimes set against forest backgrounds.

The Oak Tree:

The oak was an integral part of Druidic belief, it was held sacred partly because of the acorn which was the food of man in his savage state and, in its cup, represented the male and female principles. The wood of the oak was deemed healer of all ailments, especially barrenness in women and animals. Divining rods and omen sticks were made from it and it was host to the sacred plant mistletoe, much romantic speculation has been attached to the importance of this plant so let it suffice to say that it could only be cut in the sixth moon and only from a tree that was over thirty years old. It could only be cut by a Druid and only with a golden scickle, mistletoe was attributed with magical and healing powers the details of which, would lead me into pure speculation!

Well and River Worship:

Water was one of the most important elements for the Druids, all rivers, springs and wells were held sacred and water from them was

attributed with curative powers. Rivers were associated in Celtic tradition with fertility and with deities such as the Earth Mother, the river being the physical personification of the Goddess. The rivers Boyne and Shannon allegedly being named after the pagan goddesses Boand and Sinann. In reverence to the goddesses, votive offerings were made in springs and wells. In much the same way that the Druids offered the gods a human life in return for a person murdered, so votive offerings were made in return for curative waters from rivers, wells and springs. This practice seems to have been wide spread as items of jewelry, pottery, bone and metal work have been found not only in Ireland but also in Anglesey, all over Roman Britain and other parts of Europe.

The Serpent's Egg:

Perhaps the most interesting of all objects used by the Druids was the Serpent's Egg and many theories have been put forward as to its composition. Pliny the elder, in his extensive writings on Druids and Celts in his "Natural History", described it as an egg formed in the summer when a number of snakes coiled together. When they hissed, a mixture of saliva and a secretion from their bodies was thrown into the air, this substance was then to be caught in a cloth and carried away on horseback in case the serpents gave chase. The rider was safe when he had crossed a river as the serpents could no longer follow, the "Egg" was then sacred and ready for use in Druidic ritual. The "Egg" was worn by the Druid round his neck for all religious ceremonies and sacrifices. However, Pliny puts forward more likely theories as to the composition of the serpent's egg; especially in the Irish context where there were no snakes. He suggests that they may have been either shrivelled apples or balls made from scraps of leather.

It is a fallacy to suggest that Patrick banished snakes from Ireland, as climatic conditions have never been favourable for them here. This leads me to conclude that the Serpent's Egg phenomenon must have been an imported custom. It came possibly from Egypt where serpent worship was undoubtedly practiced.

Grave Rites:

Druidic monuments and burial places will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. Let it suffice to say here, that the burial places of the Celts were sites of ritual worship as well. The Druids practised that death was a stage in the progression of life, a theory discussed previously. This makes it natural for grave mounds and other burial sites to serve as focal points for ritual. Places where the link was made between this and the other world; places where communication with that other world and the Gods that inhabited it would be most likely.

The Cult of the Head:

The Cult of the Head, though an important feature of Celtic religious belief was in no way peculiar to the Celts alone. Many races before them had observed special rites in connection with the human head, however:

"The human head was regarded by the Celts as being symbolic of divinity and other-world powers. The motif of the severed head figures throughout the entire field of Celtic cult practice, temporally and geographically, and can be traced in both representational and literary contexts from the very beginning to the latter part of the tradition".

(Quote taken from "Pagan Celtic Britain". By Anne Ross.)

The head was regarded as the dwelling place of the soul, and thus it had both a divine and a protective aspect. To own the head of an enemy was to have taken over his power. We know from old Irish Sagas such as

"The Tain" that the heads of prized enemies were severed, impaled on spears and carried home in triumph. They were then placed on the stakes around the fortress of the Chief. Fragments of skulls possibly of Celtic origin, have been removed from various wells in Ireland, along with pieces of pottery. Although there is no evidence that the skulls were cast into the wells as sacrifices, they may have been placed there as votive offerings to placate the Gods.

Early Irish tales also contain references to multiple heads. These were three faced heads carved from stone and portraying three semi divine heroes born at a single birth. Evidence of such tricephaloes as they are called, have been found in Corleck Co. Cavan, and in Raphoe Co. Donegal The second of these being set into a stone wall. There are two more such heads in the Protestant cathedral in Armagh. One of these has obvious Iron Age features, the hair being defined by straight incised lines. There is also the suggestion of a beard. The mouth is small and straight and the eyes round and staring.

Sacrifices:

As sacrifices were perhaps the most significant form of placating the Gods they would have been the most important of ritual practices. As such they demand that the Druid be attired in the correct and sacred dress of his order. The Druid wore a garland of oak leaves on his head, he was clad in a white tunic reaching the ground and his hair and beard were long. He wore the controversial serpents egg around his neck. This detailed information about the Druids dress is taken from Pliny's Writings "Natural History", as he claimed to have had first hand knowledge of the Druids. The sacrifices consisted usually of Earth products such as grain, milk, fruit and farm animals. However when pressed by famine or war, human sacrifices were also offered. The humans used in sacrifices were usually warriors captured in battle. The most usual form of sacrifice was to tie the victims together and put them into an enormous wicker case built in the shape of a man, and standing about

thirty feet high. Hay bales were set at the base of the image and then it was set alight. During the ceremony, the Druid walked around the sacrifice keeping it always on his right hand side, thus following the apparent motion of the sun.

6. Druidic Monuments.

Undoubtedly, the most important Celtic meeting place was Tara, the chief college or seat of learning of the Druids. Tara is situated on a low hill overlooking the river Boyne. In Druidic times Tara was where the national convention of the "Tearmorian Fes" was held. The Tearmorian Fes or feast of Tara originally symbolised the marriage of the legendary Queen Meba (Meave) to king Ailill. Now however all that remains of Tara are a few circular elevations in the surrounding pasture land, beneath which archaeologists have found the remains of a passage grave of the second millennium B.C., Egyptian beads of the first millennium B.C., and traces of the legendary banquet hall mentioned in many old Irish Sagas. The Archaeological evidence proves that Tara was built long before Druidic times. Its exact origins however are unknown.

There is no proof that the Druids worshiped in covered temples. The reason being that the sun was an important Celtic God, and could be worshiped best outside. One example of such an uncovered temple is the "Siorcalteacht" temple form, possibly to the sun God Beal. It is constructed of twelve large pillar stones, or multiples of twelve, ranged in a circle.

Another Druidic monument was the Passage Grave. The finest example of passage graves in Ireland are at Newgrange in Co. Meath, and although they date back to pre-Druidic times, the spiral, lozenge, and chevron patterns carved on the stones at the entrance to the graves, are presumably of religious significance. Many people were buried inside each such passage grave. Their bodies were cremated and the remains were put into chambers in the grave, sometimes with beads pottery dishes and metal implements. These were presumably for use in the next life, thus backing up the theory of reincarnation.

Evidence has been found to suggest that the builders of Newgrange were an intelligent and sophisticated race of people capable of producing a structure which could calculate for them the shortest day of the year. The evidence is as follows: Since 1962, Professor Kelly of University College Cork, has been excavating at Newgrange. He discovered that

a few feet above the entrance to the first passage there was a stone which bore a decoration of crisscross rectangles. There was an open space below the design which formed a gap between the decorated stones and the cap stones. When the Professor restored the entrance to the passage, and replaced the cap stones to their original positions, he discovered that on December the 21st, when the sun rose above the eastern horizon, a narrow beam of light came through the gap above the cap stones. The ray of light shon briefly into the deepest recesses of the inner chamber. This was Megalithic man's ritual way of marking the shortest day of the year. An important day in the agrarian year, as the farmer could then calculate that it was almost time to sow his crops. For more detailed infomation on this subject, see "The Archaeology of Ireland" by Peter Harbison.

Another monument which the Druids probably used was the Dolmen, like Newgrange though, it was a Megalithic buriel place and pre-Druidic. The Dolmen is common throughout Ireland, with some notable examples examples in the Burren Co. Claire. It is usually composed of three upright stones with a cap stone on top. When built, a mound of stones or cairn may have covered the Dolmen, thus forming an enclosed chamber, suitable for burials.

The Dallen is an other Druidic monument, and probably genuinely so, having been built by the Celts themselves and not adapted from a previous culture. The Dallen is a large pillar stone, rising to between six and eight feet in hight. Sometimes two were erected beside each other with a flag stone laid in the ground between them. The Dallen was a focal point in Celtic society, marking the assembly point for markets and fairs. It was customary to swear by the Dallen, whilst placing ones hand on it. There is a large Dallen on the hill of "Usneach" in Co. Meath, where the first Bael fire is supposed to have been lit when Druids first came to Ireland.

Although all Druidic monuments were built of uncut stone, the Druids practiced a form of crude writing on stone called "Ogham". Each letter was represented by a series of combinations of five lines, engraved along the edge of the stone. The following quotation on the subject is taken from the "Celtic Realms" by Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick:

"The alphabet is based on the Latin alphabet and each letter is named from a tree or a plant having it as initial. Thus B is called "Beith" or birch. C is "Coll" or hazel and D is "Daur" or oak. This nomenclature and the division into groups, prompted the idea of a connection with the Runic alphabet; but it seems more probable that Ogham was invented in Ireland when the knowledge of writing first spread from Britain."

Ogham read from bottom to top, and was usually reserved for tomb stones. There is a fine example of an Ogham stone in Aglish Co. Kerry. Important though this form of writing may have been to the Celts, it was to die out with the coming of St. Patrick who introduced a crude form of Latin to Ireland.

7. St. Patrick and the effect of Christianity on the Druids.

By the beginning of the fourth century A.D. Christianity was spreading slowly westwards along the Mediterranean. The first converts to the faith were persecuted by the Romans, until Constantine the Great issued the Edict of Milan in 313. The Edict gave the church official recognition and encouragement, as a result the Celtic parts of Europe slowly became Christianised.

There were undoubtedly Christians in Ireland before St. Patrick because of Ireland's trade links with Roman Britain and Gaul. Patrick however is traditionally attributed with bringing Christianity to Ireland, and probably arrived here in about 432 A.D. Despite the wealth of legend and myth which surrounds him, he left behind two documents containing certain facts about his origins and his missionising, "Letters to Corcoricus" and the "Confessions". In the first of these documents he tells of his early life in Roman Britain. He lived in the village of Bannaum Tabernia (exact location unknown) and was the son of a man named Caepernius. Patrick was captured by a band of Irish raiders and sent to Ireland by Niall the Ard Ri, or High King of Ireland. He tended sheep in Ireland as a slave for about six years. When he turned to God in prayer, he received a message that a ship was ready for him, so he made his way to the coast and sailed back to England. On his return home however, he had another vision in which God told him that the Irish people needed him to convert them to Christianity. In Patrick's second manuscript he describes the vision:

"And thus did they cry out with one mouth: We ask thee boy, come and walk among us once more".

Taken from "The works of St. Patrick" by L. Bieler.

There is doubt as to where Patrick received his clerical training, but he became ordained, and returned to Ireland. His task of converting the Irish Celts to Christianity was made easier by the fact that there were many

similarities between the two religions. The Druids preached that there was an eternal life after death for example, and that there was a supreme God from whom all men were descended. The following quotation from O'Donaven's "Four Masters", supports this theory:

"Nothing is clearer than that Patrick engrafted Christianity onto Pagan superstitions so skillfully that he won the people over to the Christian religion before they understood the exact differences between them".

This is proven again and again, and is supported by substantial archaeological evidence. A good example of St. Patrick's "engrafting of Christianity onto Pagan superstitions" is seen in the change in function of the Holy Well. The practice of worshiping at wells and the belief in their curative powers is a practice much older than Christianity. The custom was probably brought to Ireland by Aryan tribes from the East migrating Westward. The reason I suggest this, is because well worship may have had more significance in the East where water is scarce.

Many Druidic remains in the vicinity of holy wells prove their Druidic association, and to further illustrate this point, Robert Jerome in his book "Irish History and Culture" says:

"The purpose of the Church was to take the feelings of veneration and awe that the people already possessed, and turn them towards the Christian god. The old festivals thus became patronal festivals or "Patterns".

Thus when St. Patrick began to dedicate the wells of the Pagan Druids to saints, the best way to get the Pagans to worship at them was to let them do so in their old Pagan way. This is a good example of the adaptation of religious sights, as the pagan way of worshiping at wells was for the pilgrims to always walk around the well from East to West, following the apparent motion of the sun. The Christian practice of leaving offerings to the Virgin Mary in return for favours is undoubtedly an adaptation of the Pagan practice of giving votive offerings to the Goddess of the source.

"Tober Kil na Greina", the Well of the Fountain of the Sun was discovered in Co. Cork about 100 years ago when a stone was taken by a local farmer from a marsh to build a trough for his cattle. The cows however grew sick, so he replaced the stone and discovered under it a holy well inside a Druidic circle of stones. The local people believed that it was originally a Druidic well, for which reason St. Patrick cursed it and turned the surrounding area into a marsh.

The origins of the Round Towers which are usually considered to be Christian are possibly Druidic, like the Holy Wells. One theory is that they were built by the Tuatha de Danann when they first came to Ireland, in order to worship the sun and the moon from them. As so much myth and speculation surrounds the Tuatha de Danann, I do not offer this theory as a proven one, but just as an interesting point. A theory to which I attach more importance however, is one relating to the high Crosses. These Crosses were built in market places and the centres of towns and villages to replace the Celtic Dallen, and were for many years sworn by, in the same way that the Dallen was.

St. Patrick made sure that all the Christian festivals coincided with Pagan ones so that the people would be unable to celebrate their Pagan festivals without some Christian meaning being forced upon them. The Pagan festival of Beltane was changed to May Day, and St. Walburga's Day. Lugnasad was made into Gule of August. Samhain, the first of November, was made into All Saints Day. Finally, Barrach on the first of February was changed to St. Brigid's Day. St. Brigid, one of Ireland's favourite Saints, was the daughter of a Pagan farmer. She was a cow herd, milking and making butter. She is said to have woven the first piece of cloth in Ireland, and on her conversion to Christianity she became the patron Saint of weavers and spinners. For many years, on St. Brigid's Day crosses were made from rushes and pinned onto the thatch of the house to protect it.

Another interesting parallel between Pagan and Christian beliefs is

seen in the comparison of the distribution of the Christian Eucharist with the ritual distribution of mistletoe branches by the Druid to his congregation. Christ can be compared with the mistletoe, as in early Christian manuscripts he was called a branch from the Tree of Jesse. (often depicted as an oak) In the same way that only the gold in the chalice can touch the host, so only the golden sickle can touch the mistletoe before its ritual distribution amongst the people .

Many wonderful tales have been passed down through the ages about how St. Patrick converted the Druids, and there are marvelous stories of the miracles he performed in contests with them. One such contest was supposed to have taken place at Tara, with St. Patrick directing the proceedings. A large wooden house was built, one half of green wood, and one half of dry wood. There was a Saint in the dry half, and a Druid in the green half. When the house was set alight the Druid in the green half was burned to death, and the Saint in the dry half was unscathed!

Another charming but doubtful tale of St. Patrick's ability appears in Dr. Andrew Boorde's book "The Fyrst Booke of the Introduction of Knowledge", written in the first half of the sixteenth century; he states:

"I have seen stones the whiche have the forme and shap of a snake and other venomous wormes. And the people of the countre sayth that suche stones were wormes, and they were turned into stones by the power of God and the prayers of Saynt Patryck".

There are some great deeds of the Saint about which we are more certain, for example his great encouragement of many men to become monks. In 490 A.D. St. Enna founded the first Irish Monastery on the Aran Islands, and in 510 A.D. St. Finian founded Clonard. In his prayer St. Finian says:

"We put our trust in St. Patrick, apostle of Ireland. He fought against the hard hearted Druids".

Another of St. Patrick's zealous followers was St. Columba. He was a noble man by birth, and turned down the chance to be a king, and became a monk

instead. He founded a monastery at Durrow and in 546 he founded one in Derry. Great though his achievements were, he wanted to be an exile for Christ, so in 563 he sailed with some companions to the Scottish island of Iona. Here St. Columba met a great challenge in the Pagan Picts of the province of Dal Riada, which was a strong Druidic outpost. After many contests and no doubt, much preaching, Columba converted the Pagans of Iona, and founded a monastery there. He died in 597 and was buried in Iona. As he was a poet himself he is remembered as protector of Irish poets.

The founding of monasteries in Ireland became widespread, and the monks and followers of St. Patrick found little opposition to their ideas in the Pagans and especially in their Druid leaders. In stead of resisting Christianity, the Druids seem to have turned it to their own advantage; to retain power and respect within the tribe, the Druids became the most zealous followers of Christianity. Their skills at oratory and crowd control were used and adapted by the missionaries. As a result of this, Ireland soon boasted monasteries all over the country, and when in 550 they were granted ownership of land, the monasteries became very wealthy and powerful establishments. They were self-sufficient as the monks fished and tilled the land. The monks also copied and illustrated manuscripts in Latin, as the Irish monasteries were great centres of learning, scholars coming from all over Europe to attend them.

The Church became the patron of the metalworkers, and new patterns and techniques of metalworking were learned including engraving, casting and filigree work. There were new trends in stone work too. The Pagan craftsmen had practiced an abstract art style, the spiral being a principle motif, and under Christianity these abstract styles were adapted, but continued to flourish.

The old Pagan tales of the Druids, the great Irish heroes, Chuhullan and Queen Meibh which had been passed down by word of mouth by the poets and

men of learning throughout Pagan times, were now being written down. The monks recorded these tales and kept them in the monasteries. It is thanks to them that we now have records of such tales.

The fact that Christianity took such a firm and lasting hold in Ireland suggests that Druidism and the old Celtic ways were wiped out. The Christians may have put an end to the barbaric sacrifices of the Pagans, but many of the Druidic customs were adapted and Christianised. So many in fact that there is evidence of them today. Examples being the use of mistletoe at Christmas and the dates of most Christian Saints days.

The development of Pagan customs within Christianity is a different subject and one I hope to explore. So far I have tried to give a wide picture of what life was like in Ireland in pre-Christian times, paying particular attention to the Druids. I attempted to separate facts from the plentiful legends of the time, and to back up all my statements with reliable evidence.

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The origin and development of the Spiral as an art form in Ireland.

Introduction.

1. The Spiral motif as first recorded in Ireland during the Megalithic period.
2. The continuation of the Spiral motif through the Bronze Age.
3. The Iron Age; revolution in the Spiral form with the La Tene Celts.
4. Christianisation of the Spiral in Ireland.

Conclusion.

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Introduction.

This paper is A chronological report on the development of the Spiral as an art form in Ireland. It starts with the spiral's origins in Egypt and traces its development up to Christian times. Running parallel with this period was the development in Ireland of the Celtic race under their Druid leaders. The other paper submitted with this one traces this development. It was submitted as the text for a book which I am illustrating for the visual part of the Degree project. For A fuller insight into this work on the spiral I suggest that one first reads the paper on the Celts and their Druid leaders, as the two papers are closely related and there are frequent cross references.

1. The Spiral motif as first recorded in Ireland during the Megalithic period.

"That the Irish system of ornamentation does actually find an analogy in Eastern countries is proved by the illustrations published by C. Knight in 'A small work on Egypt'. We find there are serpentine bands of the Irish ornaments appearing already in the oldest Egyptian and Ebytheopian manuscripts, and with A similarity of colour & combination truely astonishing."

(Quote from F. Keller in his introduction to A book by D. R. Hudson called "Keltic Metalwork And Manuscript Illumination".)

The earliest evidence for the use of the spiral motif as an art form in Ireland appears in the Megalithic tombs built around 2500B.C. The most spectacular examples to be seen are in Newgrange, A series of passage graves in the Boyne Valley Co. Meath. Newgrange is the most famous of about three hundred passage graves in Ireland. Their distribution is widespread except for areas in the extreme South & West.

In its most typical form, the passage grave has A simple burial chamber approached by A passage under A covering mound of stones. The origins of the builders of Newgrange, & of the spiral motifs which they carved there are obscure. However one theory as to the origin of the spiral in Ireland is as follows; it is taken from A book written at the turn of the century by George Coffey called "On Tumuli And Other Inscribed Stones At Newgrange"

The spiral, Coffey maintains, was A feature of early Egyptian art, though how far back it dates is unknown. It appeared incorporated with the lotus flower & scarab motifs. Lozenge triangle & chevron motifs were also used in Egypt. All these patterns can be seen in the Mycenaen civilisation in the Eastern Mediterranean about 1500 B.C. By 1400 B.C., trade links had been made between the Eastern Mediterranean & the Baltic coast, by which amber was exported to the Adriatic & Aegean areas. In the wake of such trade links, the use of the spiral motif spread to the Danube basin along the valley of the Elbe, & thus to the North Sea, where it supplied the Scandanavian population with their decorative designs.

Due to trade links between Scandanavia & Ireland, the spiral motif thus reached Ireland & was used in the building of Newgrange.

While I do not dispute the first part of Coffee's theory, (ie. that the spiral form originated in Egypt) I do reject the rest. The reason being that Newgrange was built in about 2500 B.C. & adorned with spirals, chevron & lozange designs. According to Coffee, the spiral had not even got to the Mycenaean culture at this stage, let alone to Ireland. I do not doubt the accuracy of the trade routes he describes nor that there were trade links between Scandanavia during the Bronze Age. It is just that in the light of new evidence, his spiral theory has been disproved.

An other theory to which I attach more importance however, is that offered by Michael Herity in his book "Irish Passage Graves". He compares the powerful spiral designs on the entrance stone at Newgrange with a tomb in Gavrinis in Brittany. The designs are similar in that the curves are dominant, and combinations of arcs are arranged in much the same way. There is also a curious vertical groove carved into the Newgrange entrance stone which appears in many of the stones in Garvinis. Not only in Newgrange are parallels with Brittany found; in Lough Crew, for example a series of shield designs have been discovered with strange fronds of hair at the edges, exactly like shield designs found carved in graves in L'Ile Longue, an island close to Gavrinis in Brittany. The techniques of stone work used in Brittany match those used in Ireland. I will discuss such techniques in detail later on. There is enough evidence here though to suggest that the builders of Newgrange did in deed come from Brittany, bringing with them the knowledge of the spiral motif.

I will now discuss the function of Newgrange. This will supply some clues as to the use of the spiral as the predominant art form there. It seems from the number of skeletons found in Newgrange that every member of the community was entitled to burial. The bodies were buried with jewellery such as necklaces and ornamental pins. Pottery and chalk balls were also found, the functions of which are unknown. Unburned animal bones and sea shells found among

the cremated human bones suggest that the mourners may have had a funeral feast before leaving the dead. The presence of ornaments and pots suggest the belief in an afterlife or reincarnation.

Megalithic man was possibly a sun worshipper as well. Evidence for this was discovered by Professor Kelly of University College Cork in 1962. He discovered that by restoring the capstones of Newgrange to their original positions, on December 21 st, (the shortest day) when the sun rose, a narrow beam of light came through the roof box and shone briefly, deep into the inner chamber of the tomb. In this way Megalithic man could calculate the shortest day of the year, an important date in the agrarian calendar. Due to this, the sun was probably attributed with life-giving and Earth-helping powers. Thus we see some semblance of a religion. The fact that Newgrange was a focus for religious activities, and the place where the dead were buried prior to reincarnation, leads me to assume that any carvings on the stones of the tomb must have had some religious significance. Unfortunately their exact meaning is unknown.

Of these carvings the spiral is the most predominant, and it appears in six different forms. To identify these, and the other patterns in Newgrange, see illustration number 1. The most impressive example of the spiral carvings can be seen on the entrance stone which consists mainly of double spirals formed of twin parallel raised bands. There five spirals on the stone, and the space not occupied by these spirals is taken up on the left by double band lozenges, and on the right by concentric arcs, a lozenge and some multi chevrons. The pattern is in relief, the areas in between having been picked away. This pick dressing stops at a horizontal line which represents the ground level obtained when the stone was set in position, proving that the design was applied after it was erected.

Such carvings are in such an excellent state of preservation, that we can actually examine the techniques by which the spirals were produced. The most commonly practiced of these techniques was that of plane picking. This technique was also used widely in

Brittany, and involved using the point of A harder stone such as flint to pick out the design. An other is that of false relief, the design remaining on the original surface of the stone, and the area surrounding it being picked away.

This brief description of the spiral and how it appeared first in Ireland, in Newgrange concludes the first part of its history. It can now be traced into the Bronze Age.

2. The Continuation Of The Spiral Motif Through The Bronze Age.

Apparently there is no gap between the end of the Neolithic period, and the transitional Copper to Bronze Age. Newgrange continued to be a place of burial and pilgrimage for the Beaker people of the early Bronze Age. However, with the realisation of bronze and goldsmithing in Ireland, the spiral form was no longer confined to the walls of Newgrange and similar tombs. Before discussing how the spiral form was used by the Bronze age Irish on metal, I will first discuss how the knowledge of metal working reached Ireland.

The knowledge of metal working started in the Middle East, and as the use of metal became more widespread, the demand for ore grew. As a result, parts of Europe were ransacked by prospectors. From Spain these prospectors went to France and then to Britain. Tin was then discovered in Cornwall. On realising that the combination of tin and copper produced bronze, the search for tin escalated. The prospectors reached Ireland about 3,800 years ago. By 1500 B.C, metal working was firmly established in Ireland. Bronze weapons and gold ornaments were produced in quantity. Ireland had copper of her own and enough gold to finance the importation of tin to make the highly valued bronze.

The earliest Bronze Age ornaments were simple neck rings, two thin pieces of metal being twisted together into a spiral. Gold was to become the more widely used metal for making ornaments at this time, and the most usual form they took was the neck torc or lunae. They were made from thin hammered sheet gold, the ends were decorated with incised geometric designs. However when Ireland and Scandinavia renewed their old trading link in 1200 B.C, Ireland became subjected to Scandinavian influences. For the next 200 years Ireland produced ornaments based on the Scandinavian twisted arm and neck ornaments. One such piece is the Waist

Torc from Tara. On this piece, there is the singularly Irish addition of a spiral. Variations on the spiral theme can be seen on other pieces of this era such as the Sunflower Pin Disc Head, illustration number 2. The surface is decorated with twenty two concentric circles surrounding a central conical boss. The concentric circles are reminiscent of the Newgrange spirals.

It is difficult to follow the progress of the spiral theme on gold pieces during the Bronze Age. However we know that the spiral was maintained, because we can see it carried into the Iron Age.

3. The Iron Age; Revolution of The Spiral Form Under The La Tène Celts.

To find out what an important effect the Iron Age had on Irish society of about 100 B.C., and how it revolutionised the agricultural methods and warfare, see chapter two of the paper on Druidism in Ireland. It is more relevant here though, to concentrate on the race of Celts who brought the knowledge of iron working to Ireland; to discuss their origins, and explain the effect they had on the spiral motif in Ireland.

The La Tène Celts originated from a sight in Switzerland called La Tène. They are thought to date back to the 4th century B.C. They had a rich and powerful culture, and began to expand and migrate by 300 B.C. They enforced the Celtic language and culture where ever they went. Their sturdy swords, bridle pieces and personal ornaments were designed in their own distinctive La Tène style. The style was possibly a fusion of three traditions, old native geometric art, animal art of the Steppes, and motifs from classical art. It was this distinctive La Tène style which so influenced the Irish craftsmen when these Celts arrived in Ireland between 150 and 100 B.C.

There had been little change in style or representation of the spiral form in Ireland during the Bronze Age, it remained much as it had done in Newgrange. Throughout the Bronze Age, pattern had been applied to the surface to fill a void. The La Tène style was such that the pattern and surface became integrated. A classical example of this is the Turoe stone, Turoe Co. Galway, see illustration number 3. The stone is four feet high with curvilinear motifs carved into it in low relief. Discs and foliage patterns are strung together in curved and spiral forms which make up a continuous pattern covering the whole stone.

The spiral as it appears in the La Tène style is however best studied in the metalwork of the period. There were few variations

in the style as it was rigid and geometrical, the same compositions appeared repeatedly; three curves arranged in a triskle fashion, combinations of non concentric circles, and finally circles or curves combined with the foliage motif. These designs were achieved with a compass. A good example of such compass work can be seen on the slips of bone from Lough Crew. The reason they are such good examples is because they are trial pieces, and the compass points are visible in the centre of the design.

Before going into detail about individual La Tène metal pieces, I will first discuss the various techniques the metal workers used. Colour was incorporated into many designs with the use of enamel, usually red. This technique is called "champlevé". A second technique used was called "repoussé", which represents the La Tène style in relief.

A good example of the spiral appearing on the metalwork is the design on the gold collar from Brougher Co. Derry. See illustration number 4. The collar is unfortunately broken in the middle, but its fine spiral and curvilinear pattern is easily seen. In true repoussé style, the surface of the collar has been made dull to excentuate the relief pattern.

While the spiral form flourished under the La Tène style in Ireland it also appeared frequently in England, Scotland, Wales, France, and other parts of Europe. The spiral was however ^{soon} to flourish in a new form, that of Christianity.

4. Christianisation Of The Spiral Form In Ireland.

"To the Greeks A spiral is A spiral and A face is A face, and it is always clear where one ends and the other begins, whereas the Celts see the face into the spiral; ambiguity is a characteristic of Celtic art."

(Quote taken from "Everyday Life Of The Pagan Celts." By Anne Ross)

For A detailed account of how Ireland was converted to Christianity by St. Patrick, and the change this wrought in Irish society, see the paper on Druidism in Ireland, chapter 7. All I need say about it here is that with the coming of Christianity monasteries flourished, producing A new demand on the art styles of the time.

Because Ireland was not under Roman domination in 400 A.D, when St. Patrick is reputed to have come to Ireland, she was not subjected to classical art trends or ways of thinking. Also Ireland had no reason to feel ashamed of her ancient culture, and so developed naturally, extracting from other cultures what ever artistic styles she chose. This was A feature typical of Irish artists for centuries before the early Christian period. Set against this background of self assurance St. Patrick's conversion of the Celts was so easy. It was characteristically A compromise, as many Pagan customs were adapted to fit the Christian purposes. See the paper on Druidism, chapter 7 for more details on this subject. It is because of this happy compromise, this blending of the old with the new, that Celtic art flourished under its new Christian directive.

The demand was now for books of study, manuscripts of A quality fit to instruct scholars from all parts of Europe and the British Isles coming to Ireland for Instruction. The demand was also for church and monestary furniture such as metal chalices, Bible holders and stone crosses. These pieces are so well documented that I shall just concentrate on the influences that entered the country, and how they helped to Christianise the spiral.

Irish monks began to travel on missions abroad in the sixth century. They brought back with them new artistic styles which they adapted, and combined with their own styles for use in the illumination of manuscripts. The new style that developed was very ornate, and tended towards the abstract. Animals were portrayed frequently though rarely realistically, and were usually combined with the spiral form. Interlacing of ribbon forms with the spiral also occurred. People when they appeared were subordinate to the design.

This new design can be divided into two groups, one derived from the Iron Age spiral, and the other of mixed Mediterranean and North European origin. As a result, the La Tène style trumpet patterns were elongated, and the spiral became a much more geometrically rigid and interlaced form, its coils being multiplied and entwined.

Having established how the spiral was adapted from its La Tène form, I will mention one of the manuscripts in which it appears. A good example is the "Cathac" which is traditionally attributed to St. Columba. For details on the life of this Irish saint, see the paper on Druidism, chapter 7. The Cathac is one of the earliest Irish manuscripts, and the spiral is widely featured in it. Some of the opening letters are built upon spirals and trumpet curves. Eastern Mediterranean influences can also be seen in the form of initials incorporating animals. There are many more impressive examples of manuscript illumination which I have not discussed here, but I feel that to do so would be unnecessary, as I have brought the spiral up to its Christianisation.

Conclusion.

Having traced the spiral form from its roots in Egypt, to Ireland in 2500 B.C, where it appeared in the passage graves of the Boyne Valley, I then discussed how the Irish translated it from stone on to metal during the Bronze Age. I then described how the spiral became a much more sophisticated art form during the La Tène period of the Iron Age. Finally I traced it to its Christianisation, and on to paper, when the written word first came to Ireland with St. Patrick.

What deep symbolic meaning can such a motif have? What has made it travel from the stone age, through Pagan religious practices to make it end up as a principle Christian ornament? Why was it such a prominent motif for so many thousands of years? It seems that the true meaning of the spiral is something buried deep in the Irish culture. It could be said to symbolise the high standard of design which carried Irish art to a peak in the form of the Golden Age during the early Christian period.

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Illustration number 1.



1. The spiral, common motif in the Irish Passage Graves. Shown here in their various forms.
2. Single multiple and rayed arcs.
3. Chevrons and serpentiform lines, single and multiple.
4. Various combinations of lozenges.

Illustration taken from "Irish Passage Graves" by Michael Herity.

Illustration number 1a.



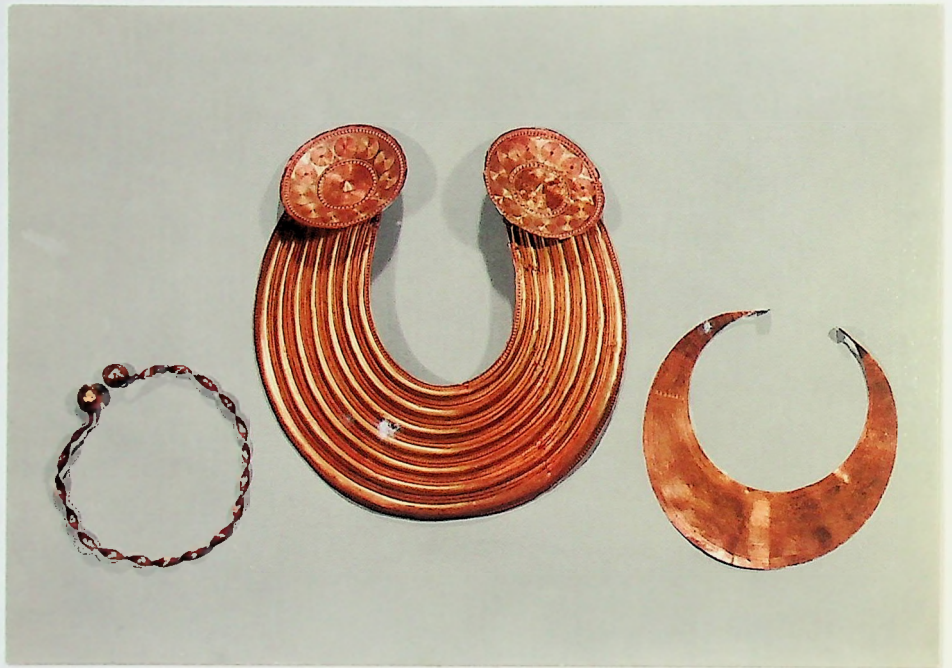
Triple spiral form, inner chamber of the Passage Grave at Newgrange, the Boyne Valley Co. Meath. This is a fine example of the spiral form as it appeared on stone during the Megalithic period.

Illustration number 3.



The Turroe Stone, Co Galway. A good example of the spiral motif as seen on stone in the La Tene period of the Iron Age.

Illustration number 2 .



Examples of gold pieces from the Bronze Age. Left, spiral twisted gold torc from Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly. Centre, collar from Gleninsheen, Co. Clare. Right, lunula from Ross Co. Westmeath.

Postcard from National Museum, Dublin.

Illustration number 4.



The Broighter Torc. A highly decorated hollow necklet of gold, found at Broighter, Co. Derry.

Postcard from the National Museum, Dublin.