

# Trees in celtic culture and art: an analysis



## **The use of yew, rowan, birch and Scots pine trees in Scottish Celtic mythology, legend, symbolism, religion and literature**

### **Preface**

Celtic society was dominated by its links to nature and the spirituality of the world around it. Of these natural objects, trees represented the ultimate in spirituality and wisdom. This is not only due to the life giving properties of trees within the forest-strewn wilderness of Europe at the time, but also because of the supposed wisdom and power that trees offered people. Their longevity, practicality, power and importance within Druidism means that trees, and in particular yew trees, formed the basis for literature, religion, myth, legend and symbolism within Scottish Celtic culture.

### **Introduction**

Trees play an important role in Irish and Scottish Celtic traditions in terms of mysticism, legend, medicinal remedies and religion and literature. The most famous example of this is probably the Celtic notion of the Tree of Life, a tree that symbolizes the connection that links all the worlds in Celtic mythology. The Irish Celts often took this even further with each chieftain having their own specifically grown sacred tree that would allow the clan leader to stay in contact with the Otherworld and his ancestors (Conway, 2000, p. 69).

This essay will examine these concepts with particular emphasis on the importance of yew, rowan, birch and Scots pine trees in Scottish Celtic mythology, legend, symbolism, religion and literature. The first section will look at the history of trees within Celtic mythology and literature. Sections

two and three will then examine the importance of trees in Scottish Celtic myth, legend, symbolism, religion and literature.

## **History of Trees in Celtic Mythology and Literature**

The importance of trees in Celtic mythology is linked to their belief that all living things were spiritual and mystical beings. Whilst other cultures only saw animals as being spiritual, the Celts attached spiritual meaning to both animals and plants.

Trees were also initially important because they provided food, warmth and housing for people, and therefore were seen as a sort of sustainer of life. The Celtic landscape of Northern Europe was also one where thick forests dominated the landscape. All of this contributed to trees becoming extremely important in Celtic history.

Trees have also been used from the very early stages of Celtic existence as a type of alphabet and calendar known as Ogham. This intricate pattern of carved grooves has different trees representing different months (Matthews, 2001, pp. 6-8).

Trees played a part in helping the sick in a physical way as well as a spiritual way. The oils and barks of different trees were used to treat illnesses ranging from abscesses and bronchitis to general disinfectant. The trees were seen as having great wisdom and being linked to both this world and the Otherworld (Conway, 2000, pp. 39-41).

Trees were part of the magic of the time, and not just in Celtic culture.

Throughout Europe there were examples and symbols of trees as powerful

creatures. In Germany the rowan tree root could be formed into a humanlike image called an Alraun that could house a spirit and be communicated with (Greer, 2003, p. 19).

The birch and yew trees were also mentioned extensively within the old Germanic language as part of the runes within Anglo-Saxon culture (Greer, 2003, p. 63, 149).

It is clear that trees and plants have played an important part in language, culture and literature since the beginnings of the Scottish Celtic culture. In fact, the belief in the power and spirituality of plants can be traced right back to the Celtic religion and culture at its foundation. The very term Druidism is a testament to the Celtic worship of trees and plants. This is because Druid as a word is formed from a root DR. This root signifies a tree - in particular the oak - in several of the Aryan languages. Therefore, the very fabric of Celtic religion is based upon the sacred tree (Squire, 2003, p. 33).

The original word for church at the time, *kirk*, was in fact derived from *quercus* - a type of oak. This species of oak was particularly sacred, and therefore its name became the basis for the place of worship that has been transformed through language to the modern church of today's world (Thiselton-Dyer, 2004, p. 22).

Trees were also important for warding off evil spirits and protecting the land. They protected the land physically through their thick branches that provided wood, shelter and shade from the elements (Davidson, 1988, pp. 13-14). However, they also provided protection from the evil of witches and other demons. The yew tree was particularly painful and disliked by the

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witches - mainly because it had an association with churchyards and being planted in such places. This gave the tree such holy power that it could take away the abilities and evil of witches (Thiselton-Dyer, 2004, p. 44).

Trees could also be inhabited by spirits, which meant they were important vessels to link the current world with the spirit world. Trees were seen as a form that ghosts and spirits could take in order to contact the living, and this was something to be both worshipped and feared in equal measure. The trees were often seen as 'semi-tangible' objects that were not as vastly important as the highest gods, but they were symbolic of the demi-gods and along with animals were far more important than many of the other elements and objects around them (Macbain, 2003, p. 33, 37).

The other element that made trees so sacred and valued was their longevity. Trees could live hundreds or even thousands of years, which made the people of the time see them as something almost eternal. They were timeless and ageless in many ways, and their longevity also gave them supposed wisdom. Man would decay and crumble, but the trees would live on and gather knowledge throughout the centuries. This is another reason why they were revered and worshipped as sacred objects (Murray and Card, 1998, p. 8).

This section has outlined some of the background reasons and history as to why trees were sacred in the Celtic culture. The next section will look at specific examples of trees in Celtic myth, legend and symbolism.

## **Trees in Myth, Legend and Symbolism**

Perhaps the most important elements of tree symbolism, legend and myth within Celtic society are the calendar and alphabet of trees and the Tree of Life. The tree calendar has 13 of the 25 tree letters as names for months. For example, birch is the symbol for new starts and therefore represents November - the first month in the Celtic calendar (Murray and Card, 1998, pp. 8-9). The yew, rowan and ash trees were also included in this alphabet (Crews, 2005).

Each letter or tree symbol within the alphabet means something quite different and symbolizes a certain attribute within human existence. One famous poem and story shows the power of trees in Celtic myth and legend. 'Big MacVurich and the Monster' tells how the whelp of a monster is captured by MacVurich and in order to get it back the monster must build a house for MacVurich with timbers in the roof. The beast agrees, but will not use certain types of wood. Whilst the house is built and it seems that MacVurich has what he wants, the beast has in fact denied MacVurich fertility (wild fig), safe passage to the next life (yew) and protection against illness (white poplar) amongst others. The fact that these trees were left out of the construction is significant for it means that MacVurich would not have a good life - the monster was taking revenge through the power of trees (Murray and Card, 1998, pp. 19-20).

Trees were also symbolically important for culture and art at the time, as they were the surroundings and inspiration that gave rise to the art of the time. Celtic artists worked predominantly with metal, and their works focused on the animals and plants around them (Green, 1998, p. 1).

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Symbols such as this show how the tree binds the worlds together, from the living world to the Otherworld and beyond. The tree is the link to all worlds with its roots deep in the ground and its branches far into the sky (Green, 1992, p. 25). The tree of life is also a symbol for the fact that trees provided protection, food, shelter, fuel and warmth for people and animals throughout the forest-strewn landscape. The trees were the objects that gave people the greatest resources that could sustain them, and therefore practically they were a life force (Green, 1998, pp. 3-4).

Trees could also symbolize power and political force, as reported by the Romans in their fights with Druids. The Druids would use the forests to gather their clans together, communicate with each other using the branches and fight back. This is why the Romans, who did not specifically believe in the divine power of trees, cut down as many trees as possible to stop the Druids. This was both a practical and spiritual measure, given the significance of trees to the Druids (Heinz, 2008, pp. 139-140).

The yew tree has perhaps the greatest significant and myth surrounding it, and even today has an element of mysticism around it due to its old age and the dwindling numbers of yew trees in Europe. Yew trees are in fact poisonous, and so they were used as parts of weapons within Celtic times. They also symbolize the dream-state, as the poisonous vapours from a yew tree can make a person become light-headed or even hallucinate. The tree is in fact given thirty three different titles and meanings in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Book of Leinster (Heinz, 2008, p. 151). However, the most common meaning associated with the yew tree is death, rebirth and regeneration. As one of

the longest living trees it was a symbol for the continuation and renewal of life (LaFey, 1999).

The birch tree is also associated with birth or inception. The birch is the beginning of all things in the link between life and death and is used in the training of 'beginning' for Druids. The rowan tree is seen as a magical tree that grew food of the gods. The berries of the rowan tree were highly sacred and protected. The pine tree represents hardiness and continuation in life - a characteristic of the evergreen tree (LaFey, 1999).

All of these trees and many more played a vital role in the development of Celtic myth, legend and symbolism. The next section will move on to look at the importance of trees within the religion and literature of the Celtic tradition.

## **Trees in Religion and Literature**

As already discussed, trees were an important part of the Druid religion during the time of the Celts. Not only were trees the location for gatherings of Druids, but the trees themselves were part of the Druid religion. The birch was used to train those in the religion, and the carvings of the alphabet from trees were used for communication. Even the calendar that was observed by the Celtic Druids was based upon the tree alphabet. Much of the church of the Druids was based around the sacred importance of trees. Even special houses for religious and spiritual purposes were constructed out of vast quantities of wood to add a sacred element to the construction. Basic houses such as the Pimperne Down round-house used over 200 trees for



construction for both practicality and religious advantage (Green, 1996, pp. 195-197).

However, literature also contains a number of tree references and stories. In a practical sense, trees were obviously important in the physical creation of stories with wood and then eventually paper. However, before paper the use of trees for carving stories upon was commonplace. The tree alphabet characters were easy to inscribe and were carved upon wood, and such tree tablets served as early writing surfaces within Celtic society. The particular use of trees and the order of characters or letters often depended on when and where the particular trees shed or grew leaves and spread within a particular area. This is why certain areas put more emphasis on the importance of yew or rowan trees above birch or pine trees, and vice versa (Crews, 2005).

One of the most famous of these tree stories is the ' Battle of the Trees', reworked by Robert Graves. It shows the rise of the belief in trees and the rise of a class of people devoted to agriculture from those who were merely priests within the Bronze Age. The story shows trees and plants as not only being part of the ruling of the nations, but also spirits that contribute to the decision making of who is to lead. Trees are the wisdom behind the power that rules within Celtic society (Rosenfeld, 2005, pp. 196+).

There are references to all the various trees within texts and literature throughout Celtic culture. The rowan tree is mentioned extensively in the *Dindsenchas* or History of the Names of Places. This book tells of a female Druid called Dreco who wounded a man called Cethern (a word derived from

rowan) with a rowan spear. Incantations took place when the weapon was used, showing that the rowan was more of a magical weapon than just a physical weapon formed from the tree (Blamires, 1997, p. 77).

The birch tree can be used to call upon different beings such as the Daghdha. This rough looking man with unkempt appearance, long hair and a large belly can be used with the birch to help you understand the trees more effectively and communicate with the newly born and the Otherworld (Blamires, 1997, pp. 71-72).

The yew is written about more than any other tree and is worshipped as two of the five sacred trees within the Druid religion. It is used to prepare magical literature, wands and in divination. As the oldest of the trees it holds more wisdom than any other and is used for the most important tasks within Druidism. The yew has no special significance in the sense of being about one object or element - the yew simply is and always will be in the same way that God or other worshipped entities whose existence is merely enough to understand the greatness of their power (Blamires, 1997, p. 210).

The holiness of the trees and wood can also be seen with fines that had to be paid if you damaged trees such as the oak, yew, ash pine or apple tree. These 'lords' of the wood were sacred and could only be used for certain things. Any damage to these trees meant a fine and potentially replanting a tree to replace the one damaged. Rowan and birch were classed as lower trees within this system, and a lesser fine needed to be paid. However, all the trees were seen as precious commodities not only physically but

spiritually. This is why trees were the inspiration and object of worship for so many within Celtic society and culture (Delahunty, 2002, pp. 16-18).

## **Conclusion**

Trees have a long and rich history within Scottish Celtic society in a variety of areas. The reverence of trees came about because of the huge prevalence of trees within Europe at the time of the Celts. These trees provided the life force, shelter and sustenance for people to live their lives. As this developed along with the Druid religion, trees gained a spiritual significance along with the other elements of nature. Animals and weather are important within Celtic tradition, but trees are the basis of the Druid religion and Celtic myth. The concepts of the Tree of Life and the Ogham tree alphabet and calendar show how trees penetrate all areas of Celtic life.

Different trees have different meanings, with the rowan and birch trees symbolizing magic and birth respectively. However, the most important tree within the Celtic tradition is the yew tree. This tree represents the highest power of trees. Its longevity, poisonous properties and ghostly shape make it the most revered and feared of all trees whose existence is as important as any modern God. This fear and reverence of trees as a link between worlds inspired the art, literature, legends, symbolism and behavior of Scottish Celtic society.

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