



PHILIP FREEMAN

CELTIC MYTHOLOGY

**TALES OF GODS,
GODDESSES,
AND HEROES**

CELTIC MYTHOLOGY

OTHER TITLES BY PHILIP FREEMAN

The World of Saint Patrick

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MYTHOLOGY

Tales of Gods, Goddesses, and Heroes

PHILIP FREEMAN

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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CIP data is on file at the Library of Congress
ISBN 978-0-19-046047-1

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

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INTRODUCTION: WHO WERE THE CELTS?

Over two thousand years ago, someone on the cold and windswept shores of the Atlantic Ocean sat down before a blazing fire and told a story. Long ago, this person said, there were two gods who were brothers, twins born together from the same womb of a great mother goddess of the sea. When these brothers grew up, they left the ocean behind and came to dwell among the people who lived near the sea.

There was much more to the story, but that is all that survives. The only reason we know even this bare outline is that the tale was passed on by word of mouth until a visitor from the Mediterranean world wrote it down. In time that document found its way to a Greek historian named Timaeus from the island of Sicily, who lived just after the age of Alexander the Great. He recorded the story as part of his monumental history of the world from legendary times until his own day. But all the volumes of Timaeus were lost over

the centuries, so that his words are preserved only in a few quotations by later classical writers whose works did survive. One of these writers was another Greek named Diodorus, who three hundred years later briefly summarized the story of the twin gods he had read in Timaeus.

And thus the oldest myth of the Celtic people of ancient Europe has been preserved for us today by the merest chance.

Everyone today knows about the gods and heroes of the ancient Greeks, such as Zeus, Hera, and Hercules, and most have read of the Norse gods Odin, Thor, and Freya, but how many people have heard of the Gaulish god Lugus, or the magical Welsh queen Rhiannon, or the great Irish warrior Cú Chulainn? We still thrill to the story of the Trojan War, but the epic battles of the Irish *Táin Bó Cuailnge* are known only to a few. And yet those who have read the stories of Celtic myth and legend—among them writers like J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis—have been deeply moved and influenced by these amazing tales, for there is nothing in the world quite like them. In these stories a mysterious and invisible realm of gods and spirits exists alongside and sometimes crosses over into our own human world, fierce women warriors battle with kings and heroes, and even the rules of time and space can be suspended.

But who were these Celts who told such tales, what sort of stories did they tell, and how have they survived? We know the Celts were one of the most feared and admired peoples of ancient Europe, inhabiting in Roman times the coastal lands from Spain, Britain, and Ireland across the continent to northern Italy and into eastern Europe and Asia Minor. They served as mercenary soldiers in the armies of Egyptian kings and fought for centuries against the expanding empire of Rome. Their druid priests taught of reincarnation and

sacrificed human captives by burning them alive in wicker cages; their poets sang hauntingly beautiful songs of praise and satire. They were never a single nation but, rather, a vast collection of tribes sharing similar languages, religion, and mythology.

We first hear of a people called the *Keltoi* from Greek merchants and explorers who sailed to the western shores of the Mediterranean and Atlantic around 500 B.C.E. But soon these same Celts who lived in Gaul (modern France) were crossing the Alps and invading Italy and Greece. Writers such as the Greek historian Xenophon and the philosopher Aristotle describe them as matchless warriors who feared nothing and plunged sword-first into battle with joyous abandon, sometimes naked except for the gold torques they wore around their necks.

The Celtic warriors of northern Italy sacked the young city of Rome in 390 B.C.E. and demanded a ransom of gold before leaving the smoldering ruins behind them. Their descendants ventured into the Balkans and invaded Greece a century later. Some of these Celtic tribes even crossed into what is now Turkey and established kingdoms that would last for centuries in the mountainous heart of Asia Minor, becoming the Galatians to whom St. Paul would address one of his New Testament letters.

A curious and brave Greek philosopher named Posidonius visited the wild interior of Gaul at the beginning of the first century B.C.E. and wrote about the Celtic warriors who were his hosts. He records that they were a proud and brave people who loved fighting, riddles, and feasting. He was appalled to see the preserved heads that decorated the halls of their tribal chieftains serving as trophies of valiant enemies they had slain. He spoke of their devotion to the

gods and their fondness for tales sung by their bards, though he preserved only a few hints of what these stories were.

Almost half a century after the visit of Posidonius, the Roman general Julius Caesar conquered the Celts of Gaul in a brutal war that left hundreds of thousands dead or enslaved. Caesar writes at length of his battles with the Gauls, but also briefly preserves some of our best descriptions of their gods and religion. And although the Romans took over Gaul and banned human sacrifice by the druids, they had little interest in changing native Celtic religion and culture. Bits and pieces of this religion and mythology survive in Greek and Roman stories, carved into stone monuments, or etched on lead tablets, though rarely anything that could be called a complete story. Sadly for us, the Celts of classical times did not record any of their own myths. Thus for the ancient Gauls, Galatians, and other Celtic peoples of continental Europe, we must be content with a few scattered references to their gods and a handful of short and possibly distorted myths that come to us from Greek and Roman visitors.

Caesar crossed the channel and attacked Britain twice during his first-century B.C.E. war in Gaul, but he left the conquest of the island to the Romans of the next century, beginning under the emperor Claudius. Years of bloody fighting by the legions pushed the Roman frontier all the way to Hadrian's Wall in northern Britain. The British Celts were eventually subdued and became a vital part of the empire, but their language, gods, and stories persisted under Roman rule until the Saxons and other Germanic tribes landed on their shores in the fifth century A.D. These new invaders were more thorough than the Romans. Celtic culture soon vanished from Britain except in the remote regions of Wales,

Cornwall, and for a time, in the native British kingdoms of the north. Others left Britain altogether and settled across the sea on the remote peninsula of Brittany in what is now northwestern France. But in all these Celtic enclaves, the ancient stories survived and evolved, most famously into the great Welsh tales of the Middle Ages, especially the collection known as the *Mabinogi*. The surviving medieval manuscripts in which these legends were written tell of magic and giants, of great kings such as the mighty Arthur, and of women and poets with supernatural powers. Although strongly influenced by European literature of the time, these Welsh stories are uniquely and wonderfully Celtic.

By the end of the fifth century A.D., only Ireland remained as a free land where the ancient ways of the Celts remained untouched by Rome. The classical world knew of Ireland only as a distant and savage island, supposedly full of cannibals and barbarians. In truth it was a rich and fertile land with an ancient and sophisticated culture. Kings, warriors, and druids formed an aristocracy that ruled over a land of prosperous farms where cattle were the measure of a family's wealth. Around these farms throughout the island were stone tombs and monuments far more ancient than the Celts that became a part of Irish mythology as entrances to the mysterious Otherworld.

Christianity reached Ireland by the early fifth century A.D., when Pope Celestine sent a bishop named Palladius to the distant island to minister to its people. A young Roman nobleman named Patrick, who had been captured in an Irish slave raid on Britain, escaped from captivity in Ireland during this time, but later returned as a missionary, bringing with him not only a new religion but also the art of writing, which could at last record ancient Irish myths

on parchment. The monks of Ireland soon became famous scribes who wrote down both Christian tales and native Irish stories.

And what stories they were—gods and goddesses battling for control of the island in epic wars, heroes engaged in endless combat to win undying glory, voyages across the sea to magical islands, divine women who with the gift of their sexuality could establish or destroy the power of kings. Even early Christian saints such as Patrick, Brigid, and Brendan became part of Irish mythology.

For centuries the Irish and Welsh, along with the Scots, Cornish, and Bretons, preserved their traditional tales in their own languages as the English and French, through war and campaigns of cultural assimilation, tried to force them to abandon their heritage. But fortunately for all of us they did not prevail, so that when we ask who the Celts were, we should really ask who they *are*—for the Celtic people with their unique languages and cultures still survive. On the west coast of Ireland, in Welsh towns and villages, in the hills and islands of western Scotland, and on the farms of Brittany, visitors today can still hear the ancient tales of the Celts told and sung in their native languages. In music and stories, the mythology of the Celts lives on for all of us.

In writing any book on mythology, an author first has to decide what a myth is. The ancient Greeks thought of a *mythos* simply as a spoken story. But ask a random person today what a myth is and they will probably say it's a story that isn't true. Even scholars of mythology can rarely agree on what exactly a myth is. My definition for this book is simple—a myth is a traditional tale about gods and heroes.

One problem about our written sources for Celtic mythology is that many of the authors who recorded them

were far removed from the original tales, if not plainly hostile to them. The Christian scribe who wrote down one version of the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* includes on the last page a warning to his readers:

I, however, who have copied this history—or more accurately this fable—give no credence to various incidents narrated here. Some things in this story are feats of devilish deception, others are poetic figments, a few are probable, others improbable, and even more invented for the delight of fools.

The earlier Greek and Roman authors who wrote about the Celts had their own prejudices that could distort the stories they were recording. To many of them the Celts were wild barbarians who threatened to destroy civilization; to others they were romantic figures of primal innocence. The later medieval stories, like the tales of Norse mythology, were all recorded by Christians who viewed an earlier pre-Christian world through the lens of their own beliefs and experiences. In many cases we can see beneath the classical and Christian biases to the original Celtic tale, but the recovery of a “pure” myth isn’t always possible or even desirable. The best mythology of every culture is a rich blend of many influences—and the remarkable stories of the Celts are no exception.

It has been my privilege to teach courses on Celtic literature and mythology to university and college students for many years. It’s always a thrill to stand before my students on the first day of class and talk about the stories we will be reading that semester. There’s such excitement among people young and old about the traditional stories of Ireland, Wales, and the rest of the Celtic world that I can’t imagine a

more enjoyable project than writing this book to introduce readers everywhere to these tales.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my own professors at Harvard University who patiently taught me the languages and myths of the Celts, but I also must thank the many friends in Ireland and Wales who have shared so many stories with me over the years and made the mythology of the Celts come alive before my eyes. I hope in my own small way I can do the same for everyone who reads this book.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

The ancient Celtic languages of Roman times are pronounced very much as they look (e.g., *E-po-na*), but the medieval languages of Ireland and Wales can confound even the most dedicated students of mythology. The following is a brief guide to a few of the more important features of the languages. A more extensive guide to the pronunciation of medieval Irish words and names is found in Carson, *The Táin*, xxvii–xxx. For Welsh, see Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, 195–196.

Gaulish

Anyone who has studied a little Latin in school will have no trouble with the ancient Celtic words and names recorded in Greek and Roman authors. Like Latin, almost all the consonants and vowels are pronounced as they appear on the page

and no letters are silent; *c* is always hard (*k*, not *s* or *ch*), as is *g* (as in *go*, never *j*). For example:

Lugus	<i>LU-gus</i>
Teutates	<i>teu-TA-tes</i>
Matrona	<i>ma-TRO-na</i>

Welsh

Medieval Welsh is related to Gaulish, but its spelling and pronunciation underwent radical changes in the early Middle Ages; *g* is always pronounced hard, *w* can be a consonant or a vowel (short as in *put* or long as in *tool*), *y* is a vowel (short as in *in* or long as in *screen*), *ch* as in German *ich* or Scottish *loch*, and *ll* (represented below by *LL*) is found in few other languages of the world—try pronouncing it by making a regular *l* sound without vibrating your throat:

Lleu	<i>LLai</i>
Pwyll	<i>pwiLL</i>
Culhwch	<i>KIL-huch</i>
Mabinogi	<i>mab-in-O-gee</i>

Irish

Like its linguistic cousin Welsh, medieval Irish evolved rapidly soon after the Roman era. Long vowels are marked by an accent (e.g., *cú*) and *ch* is pronounced in the back of the throat as in Welsh. Consonants standing between vowels are usually softened, so that for example *t* becomes *d* and *d*

becomes the sound of the final consonant in English *bathe* (shown below as *dh*):

Ailill	<i>A-lil</i>
Cathbad	<i>CATH-badh</i>
Cú Chulainn	ku CHU-lan
Medb	<i>medhv</i>
Táin Bó Cuailnge	<i>tan bow KUAL-nya</i>

CELTIC MYTHOLOGY

THE EARLIEST CELTIC GODS

THE GODS OF THE ANCIENT Celts are a mystery. Even when we know their names—and we know quite a few—we seldom can say for certain what their powers were, how they were worshiped, or what stories were told about them. Julius Caesar devotes one brief paragraph of the long history of his war in Gaul to the gods of that land, but that short description is by far the best written evidence we have of ancient Celtic religion. A few other Greek and Roman writers mention the gods of the Celts and many of their names are found in local inscriptions or in tribal names, but compared to what we know about the gods of Mount Olympus, our knowledge of Celtic divinities is sorely lacking.

We know that the greatest of the gods of ancient Gaul was Mercury—so says Caesar. But in his description of the deities of the people he conquered, Caesar substitutes the names of similar Roman gods rather than use their native Celtic names. Caesar adds that there were images of this Mercury throughout Gaul, that he was the inventor of all the arts, and that he was a guide for every journey, as well as the most influential god in trade and business.

The Roman Mercury was a god of movement, not only of goods and people but also of words and ideas. He guided the souls of mortals to the land of the dead and moved on the

boundaries of life in every aspect. It might seem strange that Caesar would choose him as the closest counterpart to the chief god among the Gauls instead of Jupiter, but his choice reveals something important about Celtic religion. The Celts were polytheists who believed in many gods, like the ancient Greeks and Romans, but their greatest god was not a white-bearded king of the heavens casting thunderbolts down to earth. The Celtic Mercury was a craftsman, an inventor, a traveler, and a guide for all in need.

Caesar's claim about the numerous images of this god are confirmed by archeologists who have unearthed many statues and sculptures of Mercury in Gaul. Usually he is portrayed as a young man in the classical mode, with his trademark caduceus staff, sometimes accompanied by a cornucopia-bearing goddess named Rosmerta. But nowhere in all of Gaul does an inscription tell us what the Celts themselves called Caesar's Mercury.

And yet we may be able to discover his true name. One clue comes from Caesar's own description of Gaulish Mercury as the inventor of all the arts. In medieval Ireland, there is a young and handsome god we will meet later who is described in Irish as *samildánach* ("skilled in all arts"). His name is Lug, which means "the shining one." He is the most honored and versatile of the Irish gods, and he is the divine father of Cú Chulainn, the greatest hero of Irish legend. Linguistics can tell us that if such a god existed among the Gauls, his name would be Lugus—and it happens that there is evidence for a god with this very name not only in Gaul but also throughout the ancient Celtic world. Numerous towns throughout western and eastern Europe were named for him, such as Lugudunum ("fortress of Lugus"), which became modern Lyon, France, as well as Luguvalium,

modern Carlisle in southern Scotland. By no coincidence, ancient Lyon celebrated a great annual festival for Lugus on August 1, the same day the Irish danced at their celebration of Lughnasa in honor of their god Lug.

The ancient god Lugus also appears in Celtic Spain on a dedication by a guild of shoemakers. Here, as in a similar inscription in Switzerland, his name is found in the plural as *Lugoves*—probably because Celtic gods from Gaul to Ireland often manifested themselves as one god in three parts, like the Christian Trinity. Intriguingly, the later Welsh version of Lugus is a magical character named *Lleu*, who in one story puts aside his noble rank and works as a humble maker of shoes. Another inscription carved in stone on a mountain-top in Spain honors Lugus as tribal god at what seems to be a place of pilgrimage.

Caesar next says that the Gauls worship Apollo, Mars, Jupiter, and Minerva, who rule over the same areas of human life and the world as they do in Roman religion. Apollo, he says, drives away disease, Mars is the god of war, Jupiter reigns over the sky, and Minerva is devoted to crafts. Again, we don't know for certain what the Gauls called these gods, but we can learn something about them from the descriptive names given to them, from their depiction in ancient Celtic art, and from similarities to characters in later Irish and Welsh mythology.

In classical mythology, Apollo is a young god of healing, prophesy, poetry, and music. Disease in the Greek world was often seen as the result of impurity, and so shrines of Apollo were centers of purification rituals. Likewise in Gaul, natural springs were cultic centers of this god who could heal all manner of infirmities. The Celtic Apollo has more than a dozen descriptive titles attached to his name in surviving

inscriptions, such as Belenus, Cunomaglus, and Grannus. Apollo Belenus is widely attested at therapeutic hot springs in Austria, northern Italy, and southern Gaul, as well as Britain. The root *bel-*, meaning “brilliant,” is found also in the Irish Mayday festival of Beltaine (“brilliant fire”). Apollo Cunomaglus (“hound lord”) appears in Britain as a young hunter god, while Apollo Grannus was such a well-known healing god that his cult spread beyond the Celtic world and was invoked by the Roman emperor Caracalla. Other of the many names and manifestations of Gaulish Apollo are Borvo (“the boiling one”—probably from his association with hot springs), accompanied by a consort Damona, and Maponos (“the divine youth”), invoked in a magical tablet unearthed in France that was written in the native Gaulish language in the first century A.D. Maponos was especially popular in northern Britain and survives in early Arthurian literature as Mabon son of Madron (“the divine mother”).

Caesar says that the war-loving Gauls would often dedicate the spoils of an upcoming battle to Mars—and, indeed, there is archeological evidence for this practice. If successful in war, Caesar says, they would sacrifice all living things captured in the battle to the god and gather together the material spoils into a sacred place in his honor. He says many tribes throughout Gaul had such sanctuaries that were rarely violated. Those who did so, if caught, faced unimaginable torture and punishment. The Celtic Mars overlaps in his duties with Apollo by also serving as a healing god, but his main functions were war and territorial protection. He bears many Celtic names, such as the guardian deity Mars Albiorix in southern Gaul, Mars Caturix (“king of fighting”) near Geneva, and the popular healing god Mars Lenus in Gaul and Britain. He is often pictured on stone carvings with

a goose, a sentry animal known for its aggressiveness. The god is also called Mars Teutates, which matches the name of a ferocious Gaulish deity described by the first-century A.D. Roman poet Lucan as “cruel Teutates satisfied only by human sacrifice.” Eight hundred years later a commentator on Lucan says that this Teutates was in fact the god Mars and that he was appeased by the drowning of his victims. It’s difficult to know if this is an accurate description of earlier Gaulish religion, but the god of the medieval commentary bears a striking resemblance to an image carved on an ancient cauldron found in a bog at Gundestrup in Denmark, in which a superhuman figure plunges a man upside down into a giant vat.

Caesar’s Jupiter often appears in Gaulish sculpture as a toga-clad ruler of the sky with a scepter in hand. In a few inscriptions he is expressly identified by the name Taranis, a Celtic word meaning “thunderer.” The previous passage of Lucan says that Taranis was as vicious as the Scythian goddess Diana, while Lucan’s medieval commentator claims that victims dedicated to Taranis were burned alive in wooden cages, a practice mentioned by Caesar himself. But Gaulish Jupiter bears many other names as well, such as Jupiter Brixianus in northern Italy, Jupiter Ladicus in Spain, and Jupiter Poeninus in the Alps. Whatever his name, the sky-god was worshiped widely across the Celtic world and is the subject of a remarkable set of a hundred columns found mostly along the Rhine River. These tall pillars are carved to resemble oak trees, confirming a passage in the writings of the second-century A.D. Greek writer Maximus of Tyre, in which he says the Celtic image of Zeus (the Greek name for Jupiter) was a lofty oak tree. Jupiter rides a horse at the top of these columns, sometimes with a wheel of the sun and

lightning in his hands, as he tramples a giant, serpent-legged monster beneath him. Zeus also fights giants and monsters in Greek mythology, but never from atop a horse, suggesting a distinctly Celtic story behind these carvings. We can only guess about the myth the columns represent, but it's possible there was an ancient and widespread Celtic tale about the god of the sky defeating the dark powers of the underworld with the blinding power of the sun and his mighty thunderbolts.

Caesar lists only one goddess among the Gauls—Minerva, who was the mistress of all arts, a description that closely matches her role in Greek and Roman mythology. But just as Roman Minerva (Greek Athena) was much more than a goddess of craft, it's likely that the Celtic goddess also had other areas of concern, such as victory in war and healing. A Roman writer of Gaulish origin named Pompeius Trogus who wrote during the time of the emperor Augustus tells the story of an attack on the city of Massalia (modern Marseilles, France) during which a goddess appeared to the besieging Celtic war leader in a dream and warned him to cease his assault. He entered the city peacefully and saw in a temple there a statue of Minerva, the very goddess who had appeared to him in his dream. The third-century geographer Solinus says that in Britain, Celtic Minerva was worshiped as Belisama (“brightest”) and had in her sanctuary a perpetual fire burning in her honor. She was also honored in Britain as the goddess Sulis at the famous thermal springs at Bath, known as *Aquae Sulis* (“the waters of Sulis”) throughout Roman times. Indeed, Celtic Minerva seems to have been one of the longest surviving of the Celtic gods. The Christian church fathers Salvianus of Marseilles and Gregory of Tours mention her active worship in Gaul during

the fifth and sixth centuries. As late as the seventh century, Bishop Eligius of Noyon in northern France was warning women of his diocese not to pray to Minerva when weaving and dyeing cloth.

Caesar includes one final god of the ancient Gauls after all the others. This is Dis, a Roman name for the Greek Hades, god of death and the dark underworld. He records that the Gauls all believed they were descended from Dis, as the druids taught. Because of this, they marked the beginning of each day with sunset, not sunrise. In early Celtic art Dis appears holding a scroll, sometimes accompanied by a maternal goddess named Aericula. It may seem strange that the Celts believed they were descended from the god of the dead, but the same belief is found in ancient India and other mythologies around the world. In later Irish stories, the god Donn (“the dark one”) appears as a kindly, paternal figure who lives on a rocky island in the western sea where the souls of the Irish journeyed after death.

There were many other ancient Celtic gods apart from those listed by Caesar, but again we know very little about them. One is Esus, who appears in the poem of Lucan as “dreadful Esus,” who demands human blood shed on savage altars. The medieval commentator says that victims of this god were suspended from trees—as were those of the Norse god Odin—after they had been fatally wounded. The only certain image we have of Esus is a pillar discovered in 1711 underneath the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. In this carving, dedicated by local sailors and dated to the first century A.D., the god is named in an inscription and appears as a muscular woodsman chopping at a tree. On the panel next to him is a bull with three cranes and the name Tarvos Trigaranus. The pillar is similar to an