

Lady of the Land

by Linda Costello

Being married to the land in a sacred union is a theme that runs throughout ancient Celtic mythology. The goddess as Divine Mother and personification of the land is attested in Gaul and may even have preceded the arrival of the Celts in Ireland. The divine folk, the Tuatha Dé Danann, were said to have descended from the mother goddess Danu, sometimes referred to Anu, who was the goddess of prosperity, wealth, and fertility. Such a goddess would obviously represent the abundance and riches of the land.

Found in Irish tales throughout the centuries, such relationships implied that, with sacred offerings, these goddesses could make the crops to grow and the herds to multiply. It is clear that these often-dominant goddesses were worthy of respect and honor.

Different Types of Goddesses

The maternal aspect of the Celtic goddesses was significant; yet, according to Anne Ross in *Pagan Celtic Britain*, “Over and above this maternal aspect, many of the goddesses show marked regional or local characteristics, which give them some individuality other than that of mere mother figures. Some of these are known by name or by portrayal alone, while others are attested by several appearances in the iconography of a particular district.”ⁱ

For example, some goddesses were associated with fresh water, in the form of rivers or wells. Boann is the goddess of the river Boyne, which, within its valley, sits Tara, the seat of the High Kings of Ireland.

Hearth goddesses are known and worshipped to this day in Ireland and other countries. The Goddess, Brigid, is an example of both a healing goddess of the well, and a goddess of the hearthfire.

Sovereignty

The Celtic Goddesses are a powerful collection of rulers for fertility, wealth, sacredness, home, and sovereignty, all of which are inextricably entwined with the land in some way. Let’s examine the relationship of sovereignty in more detail.

The word, Sovereignty, comes from the Anglo-French word, Sovereynete, which means pre-eminence, authority, rule.ⁱⁱ It is further defined as: **1 a** : supreme power esp. over a body politic **b** : freedom from external control : AUTONOMY **2** : one that is sovereign; *especially* : an autonomous state.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sovereignty goddesses, therefore, are those goddesses who are strong, autonomous, free from external control, and have pre-eminence and/or authority over a defined area.

Sacral Kingship

The basic unit of territory in Ireland during the Iron Age was the *Tuath* (tribe). Each tuath was ruled by a king (*rí*), who could usually trace his lineage back to other kings and ancestral deities. The inauguration of the king included a sacred fertility rite wherein the king was wedded to Sovereignty (the Lady of the Land). This was known as *banais ríghi*.^{iv}

In addition to the kingships of the tuath, there was the High King (*Ard ri*) of the land, and his inauguration took place at Tara at a great feast around the time of Samhain, known as the *feis Temro*.^v The term “feis” basically means “sleeping with the goddess,” in this case, of Tara, the goddess of whom, in the 3rd century was Meadhbh Leathdhearg. Again we see the idea of a king united with the land.

Before mating with Sovereignty, however, a high king would have to prove himself. He would have several challenges placed before him to test his fitness as king: a royal chariot would reject him if he was unworthy, a royal mantle may prove to be too big for him to wear, two stones which would open for he who was acceptable, and the well-known Lia Fal, or Stone of Destiny, that would cry out when the rightful king came near.^{vi}

Another ceremony that occurred prior to the appointment of the new king was the *tarbhfhess*, or bull-feast, in which a bull was killed, and a druid was wrapped in the hide after a sacred meal of flesh and broth, and incantations were chanted, so he could have visions of the identity of new king.

There were also a series of prohibitions demanded of the potential king by the Goddess of the land which were known as *geissi*. These were thought to be magically binding, and if a potential king broke them, he would not reign.

A true and rightful king must possess certain qualities to ensure the peace of the kingdom, security of the borders, and prosperity of the land. A king who was blemished would bring about similar conditions to the land, and crops would not grow, nor would cattle multiply.

Once all tests were passed and a king was found worthy, the *banais ríghi* would be held. There were two primary elements; the first is that a draught would be offered to the King by his new Bride, and second was the consummation of the marriage, wherein he would sleep with his Queen in the dream state.

Once the true and rightful King had slept with his Queen, she and the land would become transformed from a barren, desolate state to one of life-giving beauty.

Common characteristics

The goddesses who have been known to be wed to the kings, either of the *tuatha* or the high king, have certain characteristics in common. For one, they are all known to have had many husbands. This would make sense, as each new king was wed to the goddess of the land when he was inaugurated.

The goddesses of sovereignty were all known to have lusty appetites; again they held an assurance of the fertility of the land. They were all shrewd, fierce and merciless, when needs be, which of course a sovereignty goddess would have to be, to ensure the value of her king.

In the legends, we learn of the power over men that Meadhbh Leathdhearg held such as that which took place in the Cattle Raid of Cooley. Her namesake, Meadhbh of Cruachain, was known as a great manipulator of men. *The Tain* tells of her appetites and the drama and intrigue that follow her.

In the county of Limerick in Munster, we have Aine, a Sovereignty goddess of the Eoghanacht sept, who married/slept with various rulers, and who still has a hill named after her, Knocainey (hill of Aine). It is said that she bargained with Eoghabhal to help him in battle in exchange for that hill.^{vii}

The Morrigan (and her triple aspects of Badb, Nemain, and Macha) was known as the goddess of war and death, and is also considered a Sovereignty goddess. She exhibits many of the characteristics of other Sovereignty goddesses with her lusty appetites, her ability to transform from hag to maiden, and to shapeshift and use magic.^{viii}

Other Irish sovereignty goddesses include Etainne, Grainne, Tailtiu, the three sisters, Eriu, Banba, and Fodla, and possibly Tlachtga. Continental sovereignty goddesses include Brigantia and Epona, The Welsh claim Riannon as a sovereignty goddess, as well as many other goddesses of place. There are many more, most of whom we will never know, as their names died as the tribes that worshipped them were conquered and absorbed by other cultures.

Practical Applications

We no longer live in *tuatha* nor have kings in America. The ruler of our land is a ruler (supposedly) elected by the people, and it is hoped that s/he will have the just and true qualities as the ancient kings. Sadly, this is often not the case. So why should we renew and honor this relationship with the land and how can we do so?

Renewing our relationship with the land is significant, especially at this time. Without going into the myriad examples of how our distance from the land has harmed us, I will simply name a few that I see. There has been an attitude of dominion over the land, rather than living with the land. As a result, resources are being depleted daily. Species of plants and animals are becoming extinct when their life cycles are disrupted. We are contracting diseases which, I believe, have much to do with our disconnection from nature, such as eating processed foods with little nutritional value, and living sedentary lives. Our disconnection from the land is mirrored in disconnected relationships with each other, where the values of respect and hospitality are forgotten.

What we can do

We can, first of all, claim Sovereignty of the sphere of our own influence, and as such, reunite with the land. To this end, every day I make an offering and say this prayer:

*May I be united with you, Lady of the Land,
Keeper of abundant blessings and bitter truths alike
Grant me bounty, and the lessons you bear,
As my ways find favor in your eyes.^{ix}*

In my claim for Sovereignty, I make a personal vow to be a fit ruler of my “kingdom.” This can take the form of caring for my body, mind, and spirit in healthy, mindful ways. I watch what I eat, and make sure I get regular exercise. I keep my mind active and strive to maintain good relationships with my own patron gods. To that end, I make a daily dedication to piety, to study, and to hospitality, as in the ways of old.

I am also mindful of my responsibilities to living respectfully toward the land. I do this by advocating and applying the principles and practices of sustainable living.

On a group level, as ordained clergy of FoDLA, I educate others in sustainable living practices, and help them to become more aware of their connection to all of life. In addition, I ceremonially renew this bond in ritual on each of the High Days. In order to uphold this sacred union with the land, we offer grain in a renewal of our pact with Her, so that any assembled folk can remember our shared responsibility of being environmentally aware and maintaining a good, healthy relationship with the land which we share.

ⁱ Ross, Anne; Pagan Celtic Britain, p. 271

ⁱⁱ "sovereignty." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Douglas Harper, Historian. 17 Oct. 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ "sovereignty." *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law*. Merriam-Webster, Inc. 17 Oct. 2007. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sovereignty>>

^{iv} Dillon, Miles and Chadwick, Nora, *The Celtic Realms*, p. 93

^v O hOgain, Daithi, *Myth, Legend & Romance, an Encyclopedia of the Irish Folk Tradition*, p. 401

^{vi} MacCana, Proinsias, *Celtic Mythology*, p. 119

^{vii} O hOgain, Daithi; *Myth, Legend & Romance, An Encyclopedia of the Irish Folk Tradition*, p. 21

^{viii} Ross, Anne, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 285

^{ix} Covert, Todd; *The Mystery of the Union with the Land*, article found at <http://fodla.org/pb/articles/land.html>