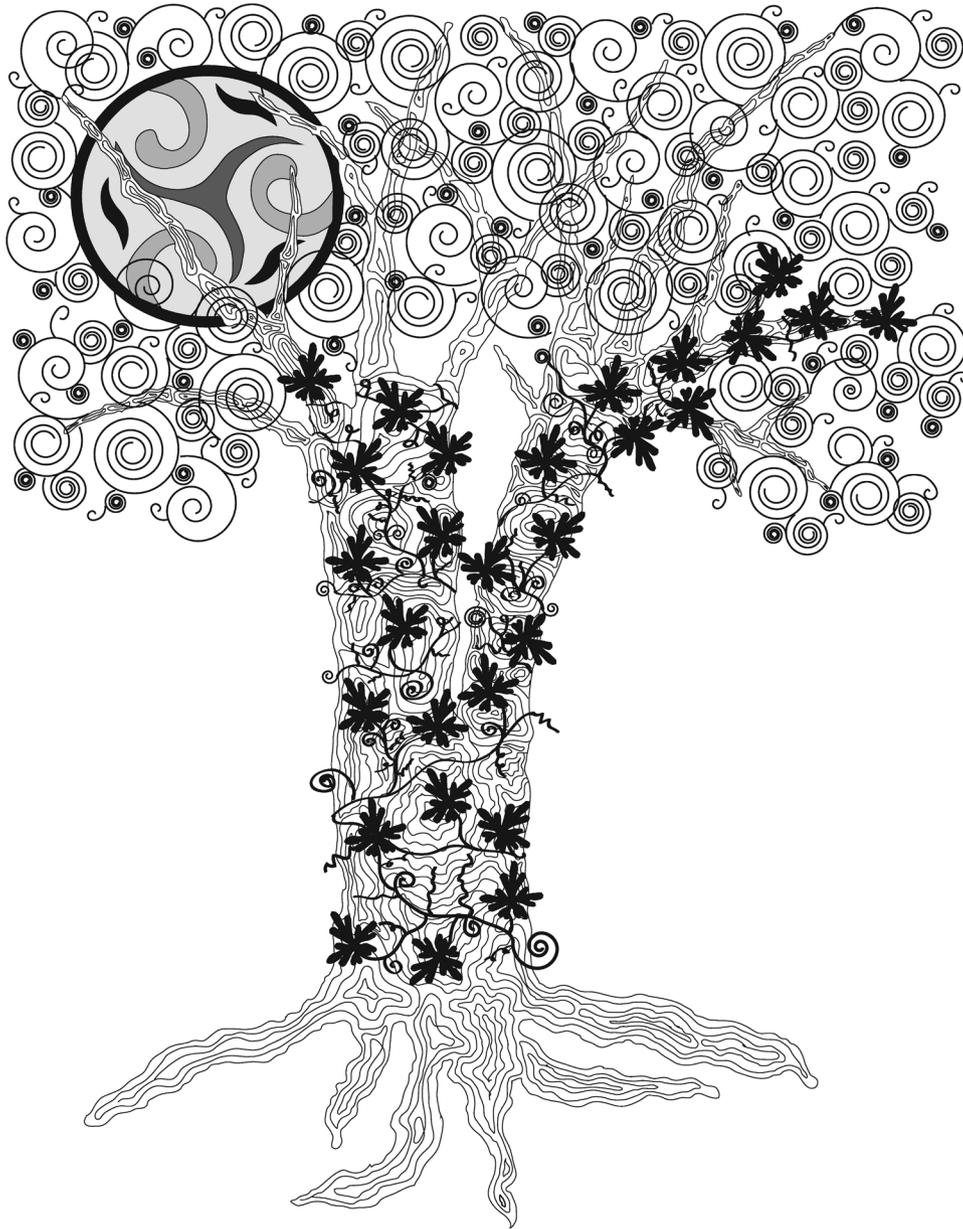




PART I

*Knock Wood and Light the Pumpkin
Your Ancient Ancestors Are Closer
Than You Think*



**Part I: Knock Wood and Light the Pumpkin: Your Ancient
Ancestors Are Closer Than You Think**

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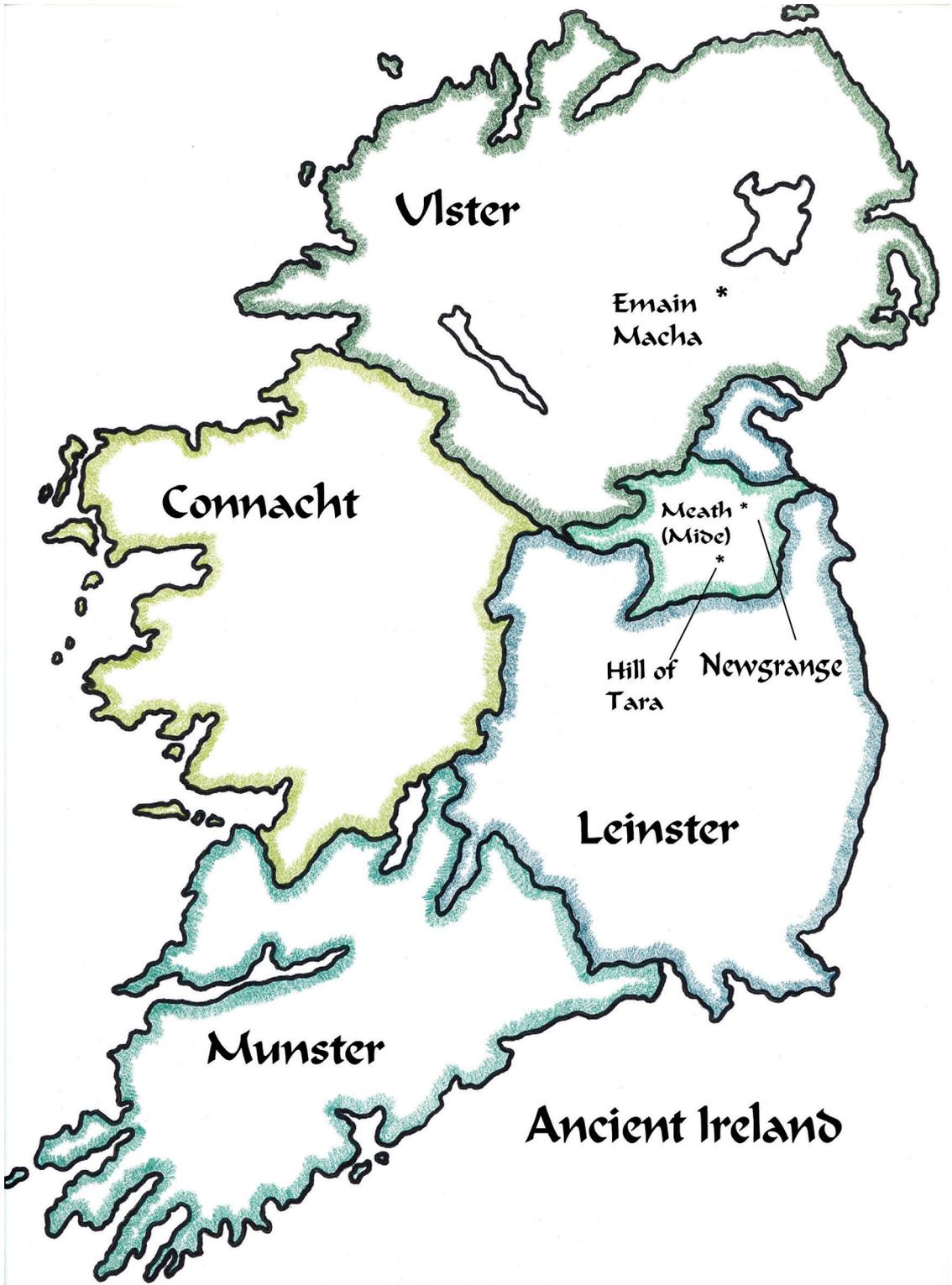
Prehistoric Ireland: Megaliths and Mystery

Ancient of Days

People were living in Ireland as early as 6800 B.C., dwelling on a heavily forested island inhabited by wild horses, wolves, and giant deer with twelve-foot antler racks. These early folk used stone tools, farmed, hunted, and gathered. They lived in villages with both circular and rectangular houses. Before 3000 B.C.—earlier than the Great Pyramid Builders of Egypt—they were erecting massive stone structures to honor their dead and celebrate the cosmos. More than four thousand dolmens (stone arbors or doorways) and megaliths are evidence of a complex civilization that understood science, astronomy, history, and architecture. But who were they? Where did they come from and when? How did they garner their great body of knowledge? Were they the people now known as Celts? The truth is, we simply don't know. They are our most ancient ancestors but they are shrouded in mystery.



Along the Boyne River Valley in County Meath, Ireland, they left us numerous passage graves, graves cut deep into the earth via long tunnels; most astonishing are Newgrange, Knowth, and Dowth. At Newgrange, a long, low passage leads to a central chamber roofed by a corbeled ceiling so perfectly constructed that no rain leaks into the chamber, even after 5,000 years. For generations, the ashes



of the venerated dead commingled in a great bowl at the center of the chamber. Obviously, these were people with a highly developed concept of ancestry, of death and life, of passage to a world beyond this world, a passage that opened somewhere in the depths of the earth.

The passage graves are astronomical marvels as well. The lintel above the doorway to Newgrange on the Boyne is perfectly aligned with the sun at winter solstice. For fifteen minutes on that day, golden light inches—then streams—down the long hallway, eventually illuminating the central chamber in its brief, lambent glow. So transcendent is this experience that people from all over the world



The passage grave at Newgrange in the Boyne River Valley. Note the spiraling knotwork on the entrance stone. Similar patterns line the walls inside the passage grave. Most scholars believe the carvings to be deeply religious, the never-ending braids perhaps symbolic of a belief in life after death or in reincarnation. The entire mound uses more than four thousand tons of stone.

The Poul nabrone Dolmen (*Poll na mBron* or “hole of the sorrows”) on the Burren in County Clare. Originally these doorways were used as burial chambers, backfilled with dirt and gravel and sometimes covered with grass, but centuries of wind and rain wore them open. When this dolmen was excavated, it contained the remains of twenty-two people, six of them children, none over forty years old, and many with arthritis—evidence that our ancient ancestors must have lived short, hard lives in this windswept stony country.



Dolmens exist everywhere in Ireland: in the midst of the cattle in farmers' fields, on hillsides, and in hollows. Clearly these ancestral people populated the entire island and believed in death as a passageway.

Of course, many legends have arisen surrounding these doorways, including that to pass through them is to pass into the country of the Little People, the “Other” of Irish myth, but much more on those little folk later.

book tickets years in advance, hoping for a cloudless, sunny day in Ireland (that last alone a giant leap of faith). But winter solstice is not required for the full impact of the experience. Deep in the heart of the earth, in absolute silence and palpable darkness, it is possible to intuit the ancient heart of history.

Who Came Before? The Mythology of Prehistory

In the absence of anthropological data about the ancient people of Ireland, myth rushes in to fill the gap. According to the *Leabhar Gabhala*—the Book of Invasions, pronounced *Lauer Gavahla*—which was written down in the eighth century A.D., there were six invasions of ancient Ireland.

- The people of Cesair. According to the myth, Cesair was a female leader whose entire race of people drowned with the exception

of Fintan, her consort, who survived as a falcon, eagle, hawk, or salmon, i.e., a shapeshifter. This shapeshifting motif runs through all of the mythological cycle of Irish stories. Disney's *The Sword in the Stone*, in which Merlin changes Arthur into a squirrel and a fish, is a perfect example of this ancient Celtic concept—become another and you will understand how another thinks.

- The Fomorians. Combine *Pirates of the Caribbean* with the Cyclops of Greek myth and you have a relative idea of the Fomorians. They were raiders who lived on Tory Island (Túr Rí, Tower of the King) off the coast of Ireland, having survived, according to legend, the Great Flood. The Fomorians are hideous monsters; their “secret weapon” Balor of the One Eye, a hairy giant with an eye in the middle of his forehead, wields a vicious and deadly club. They were fond of raiding and kidnapping and are the stuff of mythological nightmares.
- The Partholon. According to the myth, they were a race of makers who created ten lakes, nine rivers, and four plains. They built the first guesthouse and dwelling, brewed beer, brought gold and cattle, and created a legal system. They were also the first to fight the aforementioned Fomorians. Unfortunately, the entire race of the Partholon were destroyed by a plague on the first of May, the date that would become the sacred Celtic feast of Beltaine.
- The Nemedians. The awful fate of this supposedly gentle race was that they became tribute slaves of the Fomorians. Each November first—the sacred Celtic feast day of Samhain, or Celtic New Year—the Fomorians demanded two-thirds of all Nemedian produce, as well as two-thirds of their children as slaves. Eventually, the Nemedians revolted; many were killed and survivors fled for the Continent.
- The Firbolg. Some versions of the myth have them arriving on August 1 (Lughnasa) in the captured ships of their Greek slavemasters, accompanied by Gauls and Dumnonii, Celtic tribesmen of France and Britain. The Firbolg settled in the west country of Connacht.
- The Tuatha de Danaan (the tribe of the goddess Danu). These folk become the fabled Little People of Ireland and their gods become the gods of the early Celtic inhabitants of the island; much more on them later.

Eventually, around the year 500 B.C., all of these “races” were

The far south of Ireland at the Ring of Kerry. The Milesians supposedly landed at the Bay of Kenmare. Note the ancient ring fort at the center of the photo.



supposedly supplanted by the Milesians, an actual historical tribe of Iberian Celts from the northwest coast of Spain, at which point “verifiable” Irish history begins. The archeological truth of that arrival, however, is much more complicated, as we will see.

Power Over Time: The Little People of Ireland

Fado, fado: long long ago, there lived in Ireland an ancient race of people who never grew sick, never grew old, and never died, for they held power over time. . . . So begins the ancient myth of the Tuatha de Danaan, the tribe of the goddess Danu. Small and exquisitely beautiful—both the men and women—the de Danaan were nonetheless fully formed humanoid beings, whose diminutive bodies gave off an unearthly glow, a radiant aura variously depicted as blue, gold, or iridescent.

Three legends explain the presence of these Little People in Ireland. All say that they arrived on the first of May (Beltaine, one of the ancient sacred holidays). The first has them arriving from Greece, the second from a wondrous city that disappeared beneath the sea in a great earthquake (evidently the legendary Atlantis), and the third from cloud ships that hovered above the island. Whatever the place of origin or mode of delivery, the Little People never left. In time, they came to be known by a variety of names by the human inhabitants of the island: *An Sidhe* (the Others, pronounced *An Shee*), the Little People, the Shining Folk, the Fair Folk, and the fairies. So they remain, even to this day, but do not think of them as leprechauns, for the Little People of Ireland are much older, much wiser, and much more dangerous than that.

According to the myth, there were people already on the island when the Tuatha de Danaan arrived—the Firbolg, who lived in the west country of Connacht—but the Tuatha de Danaan possessed *draoidheacht*, or magic. They defeated the Firbolg in the First Battle of Mag Tuiread (pronounced *Moy Tirra*) for control of the island,

but their battle had a terrible price. Nuada, the chief of the Tuatha de Danaan, lost his arm in the fight. By the laws of the de Danaan, physical imperfection disqualified him from kingship. The tribe selected Bres the Handsome, whose mother was a Danaan but whose father was a Fomorian. Bres turned out to be a disaster. First he lacked generosity, a cardinal sin among the Tuatha de Danaan, and later among the Irish. He did not provide for poets, musicians, and jesters, stinting them on beer and biscuits, which caused the poets to write the first satire against him. (Satire by a poet in ancient Ireland was so dangerous that it could kill its victim or cause him to break out in boils.) Worse, however, Bres turned traitor and brought the one-eyed Balor and his piratical Fomorians down upon the Tuatha de Danaan.



The de Danaan would have been defeated, but they were assisted by Lugh, the Son of the Light. Young, handsome, and pure of heart, Lugh was at once a carpenter, blacksmith, poet, harper, genealogist, hero, healer, and sorcerer. While he battled the Fomorians with his magical spear, the physicians of the Tuatha de Danaan built for Nuada a magical silver arm, and he rejoined the fight. Together, Lugh and Nuada defeated the Fomorians. Nuada was renamed king, known from that time forward as Nuada Argetlamh (Silver Arm), and the mythical de Danaan became, according to the ancient tales, the dominant race on the island until 500 B.C.



Triumvirates and Trinities

Three was the sacred number in ancient Celtic Ireland. Many gods and rulers were tripartite, one reason why Ireland eventually Christianized so easily (more on that in part 2). Many artifacts display three-headed gods. We do not know the origin of this preoccupation with threes, but among our mythological Little People,

two early sets of rulers and the two most powerful god figures are, respectively, triumvirates and trinities.

The myths tell us that the Tuatha de Danaan were ruled for a time by a trilogy of brothers—MacCuill, MacCecht, and MacGreinne. Though we know nothing of them as rulers, the next threesome of rulers were women—Banba, Fodla, and Eriu (Ireland was equal opportunity for both gods and rulers). Eriu gave her name to the island: Eire, Erin, Ireland.

The goddesses of the Tuatha de Danaan were particularly powerful in trinities. The Light Trinity of the Danaan were the three goddesses Brigid, Anu, and Dana. While Anu and Dana are referred to in the myths as the mothers of gods, Brigid is the goddess of all the creative forces—childbirth, mothers, ewes, fire, poetry, blacksmithing. Her feast day was Imbolc, February first. In the most fortunate of households, she left her footprints in the home from the hearth ashes. So powerful was the Brigid archetype that she permuted into Christianity's St. Brigid, and actual early Christian saints such as St. Brigid of Kildare are her namesakes. Irish legends say that she served as a midwife at the birth of Christ.

Equally powerful, however, was the dark trinity of the Morrighu. Composed of three fearsome parts, the Morrighu's "personalities" are Macha, goddess of war; Banbh, goddess of carrion; and Nemhain, goddess of panic and chaos. These three live to cause trouble. When the Celts eventually arrive in Ireland, this trilogy troubles every human hero for hundreds of years. So powerful is this dark trinity that they show up as the Weird Sisters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and later, conflated into one woman, they vie for power as Morgan le Fay in the Arthurian myths.

"Banbh, Nemhain, Macha." Eriu addressed them separately with a formal nod. "We of the Triad Council are willing to listen to your wisdom."

"Wisdom is it?" said Macha. She smiled, her lips folding up into a rictus that looked almost painful. "When have any of the Danu considered us wise?"

Eriu resisted swallowing. She looked at them each in turn. Panic rose in her throat when she met the eyes of Nemhain, but she fought it back. Panic is what Nemhain engendered. Everywhere she went, she seemed to be able to draw upon any creature's worst fear, bring it to the surface, strengthen it until the poor victim gibbered in terror, made terrible decisions based upon that panic.

Panic was not what she felt when she regarded Banbh; rather she felt revulsion. It was rumored among her people that Banbh's favorite use

of metaphor were as those of carrion feeders, ravens and vultures, birds of darkness who fed on the blood of the fallen.

And then there was Macha, their Primary Sister. She was beautiful, although she in no way resembled the People of the Danu, no nor the Penitents. She was taller, even than her sisters. Her long, black hair floated and shifted in the breeze and her dark almond-shaped eyes gave away nothing, reflected everything. Eriu could see herself in them now, small and pale, her cap of cloudy curls ruffling in the wind, her eyes wide and startled.

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However, these trilogies were not the only gods of the de Danaan; others included:

- Dagda—The “good” god, good meaning provider; Dagda is the possessor of a bottomless cauldron filled with porridge
- Boann—Wife of the Dagda and goddess of the Boyne River
- Dian Cecht—God of physicians
- Gobniu—God of blacksmiths
- Aengus Og—God of birds, butterflies, and love
- Ogma—Honey-mouthed god of oratory and sweet speech
- Manannan Mac Lir—God of the sea
- Mongan—Son of Manannan, shapeshifter and god of the beasts

The leprechaun is an Americanized version of the Little People of Ireland, trotted out for St. Patrick’s Day and several silly or scary movies. Leprechauns in Irish folklore come much later than the de Danaan and are shoemakers, all male, tricksters, and somewhat irritable. The name may derive from the Irish *leith brogan* (shoemaker) or *lugh chromain* (small or hunchbacked Lugh, a diminution of Lugh Lamfhada, the god of the long spear arm). Rainbows, pots of gold, and lucky shamrocks all come much later and are much less powerful than the magic of the ancient Tuatha de Danaan. Closely related to the leprechauns are cluricaunes, who are little thieves, particularly of the wine and whiskey in family cellars.



The Legend of the Bain Sidhe

“Someone in the family will die soon,” your Irish grandmother might have said, shaking her head sadly. “Last night I heard the banshee crying at the window.”

You don’t have to be Irish to have heard of the banshee. Phrases such as “screaming like a banshee” or “wailing like a banshee” have passed into common American usage. The word *banshee* derives from two Irish Gaelic words, *bean* or *bain* (woman) and *sidhe*, which simply means “of the other.” In Celtic mythology, she was a woman of the Little People—the Tuatha de Danaan—who attached herself to one of the major Irish clans. Blessed or cursed with the “Sight,” the banshee knew when someone in the clan was about to die and so performs the *caoineadh* (keening) that mourns the death in advance. Many legends agree that she sees this as her honorable duty to the ancient Irish clans. Some versions of the legend have her dressed all in white or silver with long white hair. She can appear as a beautiful young woman or a terrifying hag, but all agree that her mournful lament chills the bones and brings sorrow to the heart.

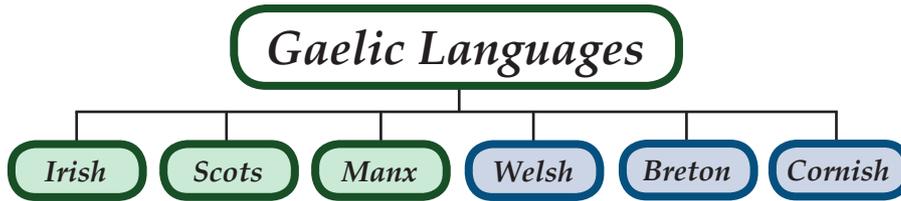


Gaelic Languages

“Banshee” is not the only Irish-origin word to have traveled to America. We also brought along the words “galore,” from the Irish *maith go leor* or good enough, “brogues” for shoes, “colleen” from the Irish *cailin* or girl, “hooligan” from the Irish name O’Houlihan, and the aforementioned “keening” from the Irish *caoineadh*.

There is no single language known as “Gaelic,” although most Americans think Gaelic is what we mean by Irish. Instead, there are six distinctive forms of Gaelic languages, some in regular use, others vanishing or vanished from the earth.

Note that the languages are related to each other by color. This is because speakers of each set of three could understand each other,



though there would be variations, but a speaker of Irish would not understand a speaker of Welsh or Cornish or vice versa. Why is this? It is believed that the protolanguage of the Gaelic languages arose from the Indo-European language base, but because it moved in waves, two types of Gaelic eventually differentiated themselves. Q-Gaelic or Goidelic was the first wave—those wanderers who arrived on the islands now known as Ireland, England, Scotland, and Wales somewhere between 2000 and 1200 B.C. This form of Gaelic eventually permuted into Irish, Scots, and Manx. The second wave of immigrants spoke P-Gaelic, also called Brythonic, and that language eventually formed as Welsh, Breton, and Cornish.

Currently, Cornish has vanished as a language. Manx all but vanished but has been heroically revived on the Isle of Man. Irish has long been considered a dying language, but there is now a huge effort to revive it.

Irish is the official language of the Republic of Ireland and has been named one of the official languages of the European Union. It is mandatory in all schools, used in various publications and on some radio (Raidio na Gaeltachta) and television programs (Telefis na Gaeltachta, now T4), and used in a ceremonial way in the business of the Dail, or Irish Parliament. The 2011 Irish census found more than 40 percent of the Irish people claiming knowledge of Irish, but estimates are that, in truth, only 3-5 percent of the Irish population speak it as their primary (birth) language and as the language of everyday life.

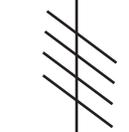
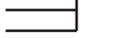
Many of these people (about 90,000) are located in the Gaeltachta, the Irish-speaking regions of Ireland: Galway, Connemara, Mayo, West Donegal, the Dingle Peninsula, Kerry, and the Aran Islands. An interesting new program called the Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge pays grants to families with native Irish competency. The Irish government also removed English road and directional signs in the Gaeltachta in an effort to keep those areas purely Irish. This effort has had mixed reactions, as tourists find the Irish-language road signs impenetrable.

Interestingly, however, there is a huge push among Irish Americans to learn the Irish language. Irish-studies programs such as those at Harvard and Notre Dame have extensive Irish-language courses and degrees. Private-sector foundations, such as Glucksman Ireland House in affiliation with New York University, offer extensive language and culture courses. Online Irish communities and grassroots organizations such as Daltai na gaeilge (www.daltai.org) have also been instrumental in starting a mini diaspora of Irish-language learners all throughout the United States and Canada. Because a language houses not only the stories, songs, and history of a culture but also its quirks—its ways of seeing the world—these efforts seem particularly worthy and vital.

It is also important to understand the essential role that language plays in the story of how the inhabitants of Ireland became the “Celts.”

A Little Irish Primer

Hello	<i>Dhia duit</i>	(<i>Jeea dootch or gwitch</i>)
Goodbye	<i>Slán</i>	(<i>Slawn</i>)
What is your name?	<i>Cad is ainm duit?</i>	(<i>Cod iss anem dootch?</i>)
How are you?	<i>Conas tá tú?</i>	(<i>Cawnas taw too?</i>)
Good enough	<i>Maith go leor</i>	(<i>Maw guh lor</i>)
To your health	<i>Sláinte</i>	(<i>Slawncha</i>)
Thank you	<i>Go raibh maith agat</i>	(<i>Gra ma hawgat</i>)

	<i>Iodhadh</i> (<i>i or yew</i>)
	<i>Straif</i> (<i>z or blackthorn</i>)
	<i>Muin</i> (<i>m or vine</i>)
	<i>Dair</i> (<i>d or oak</i>)

Oh My Ogham

Ogham (pronounced *ahum* or *ohm*) is another delightful language conundrum from our ancestral past. One group of scholars holds that it is an ancient druidic hand-signal language, another that it is an ancient Christian language originating around the fourth century and designed to confound Romans, and a third that it is itself a Latinized hieroglyphic. Of a certainty, it is found carved on the edges of standing stones all over Ireland.

Ogham is a series of lines running across and to either side of a central bar. Vertically it is read from bottom to top and horizontally from left to right, with each stick group standing for both a letter and a tree or bush (perhaps a later addition to the letter language). It seems to have been used to name people or places or to count. Originally, it would probably have also been carved onto wooden sticks, none of which still exist.



An ogham stone in a forest in Ireland. Note the incised white sticks along its bottom right side. The sticks may commemorate a person or a date or indicate a direction. Scholars are still not clear on the “Rosetta stone” for ogham.

Language and the Wandering Irish: Did Our Ancient Ancestors Visit Us Before We Were the U.S.?

Picture languages such as ogham and words of Irish origin cropped up in America long before Christopher Columbus made his voyage. In fact, many travelers arrived on these shores well before the great migrations of European invaders.

We know that the Norse came for a visit in the eleventh century A.D., traveling from Greenland and Iceland to the tip of Newfoundland, where they founded an encampment called Vinland at present-day L’Anse aux Meadows, now a Canadian national park. We also



Columcille, a modern megalith park in Bangor, Pennsylvania.

believe that Brendan the Navigator, a sixth-century Irish monk, made a seven-year voyage to the New World in an Irish hide boat called a currach, a voyage that was later duplicated by adventurer Tim Severin (more about that in part 2). These two voyages would be, respectively, 500 and 900 years before the voyage of Christopher Columbus.

But what of our Bronze Age ancestors, the elders from 3000 to 1200 B.C., let's say? For the past twenty years or so, an academic argument has been raging over the speculation that incised stones throughout the Americas could indicate long-ago visitors as diverse as the Chinese, the Phoenicians, the early Norse, and the Iberian Celts (these would be the ancestors of our Milesian Celtic immigrants to Ireland). Stone circles and dolmens from a wide variety of historical periods have been found scattered throughout East Coast locations. Rocks bearing inscriptions that sometimes look like Norse or Phoenician runes and

sometimes like the ancient Celtic language of ogham have been discovered in such diverse areas as Massachusetts, Connecticut, and possibly even West Virginia. While most serious scholars debunk these “visitor” stones, a few scholars (backed up by the late Yankton [Sioux] writer and historian Vine Deloria, Jr.) think that the evidence might be worthy of study and that the earlier theory of a single Amerindian migration across the Bering Strait Land Bridge is too narrow for a big world of seafarers and wanderers. Whatever the eventual archeological and anthropological truth of the matter, it is great fun to speculate that great-granddad times hundreds might have been wandering the neighborhood before we lived here.

The Milesians Arrive in Ireland, or, When Did the Irish Become the Celts?

Deep in the green forests of Galicia on the west coast of Spain, a huge and solitary oak tree stands ringed by a thick hedge of prickly blackthorn. A full moon has risen over the sea and it casts its white light across the water in an undulating wedge. Torches glimmer through the forest and reflect on the water below. The men and women who carry them are dressed in long white gowns bordered with knotwork of gold. Around their necks they wear gold lunula, or hammered crescents. They are druids. Tonight, they are approaching the sacred oak grove for the most important night of prayer in the long history of their tribe. On the morrow, their chief and his family will depart for Inisfail, a small green island far to the north. If it proves hospitable, if they can farm and raise cattle on its emerald hills, their tribe will migrate there. They are the Celts of Galicia in Spain. The year is 500 B.C.



Is this a true story of the departure of the Spanish Celts for Ireland? If so, is this the first arrival in Ireland of people who self-identify as “Celts”? As with all things anthropological (or Irish), this myth is the source of tremendous controversy. As legends go, it is a huge story—the Milesians arriving in seventy-five great ships, nine of them commanded by the sons of Mil or Milesios, captain of an army that had served the Persian pharaoh of Egypt. The myth would have the entire clan following the path outlined in the map below.

However, archeologists and anthropologists now consider the legend to be variously:

- A huge exaggeration of a small arrival
- A conflation of a number of smaller and more ethnically varied arrivals taking place over hundreds of years, so that Ireland accumulated its Celtic identity over time
- A complete fabrication



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Let's begin by examining the myth, as all myths are like popcorn—containing, somewhere, a hard kernel of historical truth. Then we can look at the current archeological and anthropological thinking.

The Arrival of the Milesians

Retold and adapted by Juilene Osborne-McKnight

Fado, fado: long long ago, there lived in Ireland an ancient race of people who never grew sick, never grew old, and never died, for they held power over time. They were known as the Tuatha de Danaan and they had lived on the land for time out of mind.

But from the sea in their great ships came the nine sons of Mil, bearing with them their women and their cattle, their gold and their wine. They landed at the bay on the south tip of the green island and proposed to make war against the Tuatha de Danaan for the rights to the land of Eire.

The Tuatha de Danaan pleaded with the invaders. "Allow us time to prepare, for we do not remember how to make war."

And the Milesians granted their request and retreated to the ninth wave of the sea.

But when they were far out on the water, the Tuatha de Danaan raised a great fog that spread down the hills of Ireland and over the water. The ships were obscured from each other, trapped in a raging wind.

When the wind lifted, five of the nine sons of Mil had been drowned in the sea. The four remaining sons were angry! They chased the Little People of the Tuatha de Danaan all the way to the Plains of Mag Tuiread, where, in a great battle, they defeated the Little People.

Three of the sons of Mil called for the exile of the Tuatha de Danaan. "Banish them from these green hills. For they have cost us our brothers!" they cried.

But the poet Amergin had looked into the eyes of the Little People and he saw that they possessed draoidheacht—the magic. And he was wise enough to know that if he banished the Little People the magic would go with them.

So he gave them instead the cities beneath the hollow hills, the rooms beneath the rivers of Eire.

And because they were allowed to remain, the magic remained in Ireland.

Is firinne sin. This is as it is.

So is it indeed? It is useful to unpack current scholarly thinking about just how Ireland came to be known as a "Celtic" country, and to do that we need to look at the wide world of the people known as Celts.