

SYNOPSIS

The Navel of Ireland A Sacred Geography

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When we think about Ireland, we generally imagine the ancient land of the Celts. Ireland, however, goes back much further in history, and it is also somewhat problematic to make a division in time between the Irish of the great stone monuments and the people of the Heroic Age of Cúchulainn. By-and-large, the people were the same, and those we think of as Celts simply adopted and adapted the beliefs brought in by the Gaels, grafting them onto the religious traditions that had developed in the Ages of Stone.

Indeed, everything comes from the stone — in particular, the Stone of Uisneach, believed to be at the very center of Ireland. At least, this was the ritual center of Ireland, the center of the sacred geography. In the comparative, anthropological approach to religion, we call such a center the *omphalos* ‘the navel’, for it is here that the sacred land of Ireland was born.

Of course, the Irish can do nothing in a simple, one-dimensional way. When we take in the panorama of the sacred geography of Ireland from the navel stone of Uisneach — the Stone of Divisions — we see it all in three dimensions: the vertical divisions, the circular divisions, and divisions of the four cardinal points.

The Vertical Divisions

Like all such navels in the world’s religions, Uisneach represents the point at which heaven, earth, and the underworld meet. This is the Irish equivalent to the rocks of Bethel, where Jacob saw in a dream the angels ascending and descending the ladder to heaven; and it corresponds as well to the holy stone of Ka’aba in Mecca, which fell from heaven, opening up a line of communication.

In traditional European thought, the Stone of Uisneach corresponds to the World Tree, the *axis mundi*. Among the Germanic peoples, this is the great tree Yggdrasil, connecting the Valhalla of the gods above, with the “Middle Earth” of humans, and on down to the realm of the goddess Hel (from whom we derive the

name of the place). It was on this tree that the chief god Odin (the Wodan of Wednesday), sacrificed himself to himself, hanging for nine days and obtaining the sacred knowledge of the runes.

When they converted to Christianity, many Europeans indeed interpreted the crucifixion as the same sort of sacrifice — the God sacrificed to the God. Thus, the crucifix is sometimes referred to as the Holy Tree, and it is represented as such in Christian artwork.

Returning to Ireland, we find the same sacrifice, but this time on a stone. The great hero Cúchulainn, son of the god Lugh, must also undergo death and resurrection for the salvation of his people. As a product of the Heroic Age, he is doomed to fall in battle. When he recognizes that he is wounded to death, he straps himself to a stone pillar. Thus, he honors the historical connection between the Gaelic Irish Celts and their Megalithic ancestors. When the Badb, the great raven goddess, descends onto his shoulder, his soul ascends into heaven, where his people behold him in his chariot.

The death of Cúchulainn is packed with religious symbolism regarding the vertical division of Ireland. He straps himself to the stone in order to die standing up — aligned, as it were, with the Navel of Ireland. That he was not physically at the Stone of Uisneach actually does not matter, for the center is wherever the sacred resides, wherever the god, or in this case the demigod, may be. The descent of the Badb from the sky and the ascent of Cúchulainn's soul to the sky affirm the connection between earth and the heaven of his father, the great sky god Lugh. The flow of his sacred blood into the ground at the base of the sacred stone marks the connection with the earth and the underworld. Both the stone and his blood render the earth fertile.

This is not the only vertical division of Ireland, though. Before the Gaels took over the land, Ireland was ruled by the Tuatha Dé Danann, the people of the Goddess Danu. These were a magical, holy people who had come on ships that floated through the air. The next invasion was by the Gaels, the Sons of Mil, who landed in far more conventional craft. After a great struggle, the Gaels and the Tuatha Dé Danann divided Ireland between them, the Gaels taking the realm above ground, and the Tuatha Dé Danann taking the realm below ground.

The Tuatha Dé Danann thus inhabit the *sidhe*, the Neolithic burial mounds found throughout the British Isles and Brittany. Here, they hold court and govern from the Brugh na Boinne, the great mound at Newgrange. From time to time, and chiefly at the Celtic New Year's Eve (which corresponds to our Hallowe'en), they interact with the Gaels for good — or for ill.

The Circular Divisions

For the circular divisions of Ireland's sacred geography, let us return to the Navel of Uisneach. The topography of Ireland is like a great inverted saucer. The center of the island is low, and there are ridges of mountains ringing the island close to the coasts. If we light a fire on the hill of Uisneach, the flame will be visible from all around the highlands — in every direction.

From time immemorial, a bonfire was lit at Uisneach and observed from the surrounding highlands. Not only was it observed, but it was passed on to the coasts by secondary bonfires lit at strategic locations. Thus, we have two concentric rings of fire surrounding the sacred center of Ireland.

The placement of the surrounding flames was also significant. Being at the center of the world, the Navel of Ireland was the logical place from which to observe the movements of heavenly bodies, particularly of the sun. If we examine the sacred geography of the circles, we note that significant positions of the sun correspond to significant geographical places — places from which the holy bonfire would be answered and from which the fire would be passed on to the ends of the island.

As always, this Neolithic practice was adopted and adapted by the Gaelic Celts. As we shall see shortly, the center of Ireland was moved to the area known as Meath (or Mide) 'the Middle', where the royal court of Tara was located. On Mayday Eve, the bonfire was lit at Tara, and this was to be the only bonfire allowed on this holy day of Beltaine. This lonely bonfire was probably a symbol of the new Irish order under the exclusive sovereignty of the high king.

This was not the last change made in the bonfire tradition. According to legend, when St Patrick came to Ireland, he lit a competing fire on the hill of Slane. Seeing this fire, the Druids warned the high king that unless this new flame be extinguished that very night, it would never be put out but would replace the old. In the spirit of a new religious story replacing an old one, when the king sent his soldiers to seize Patrick and his followers, they were transformed into deer and escaped in exactly the same way that the harpers escape the invading Connachtmen in the Cattle Raid of Cuailnge.

Nor was the old circuit of the sun forgotten by the Gaels. In the Irish tales, this circuit is traveled by one hero or heroine after another. Indeed, in the tale of Étaíne, the heroine passes from one major point to another, just as though she were some Neolithic earth goddess following her solar consort. Of course, she follows him sunwise (that is, clockwise) in keeping with ancient Pagan — and now Christian — processions.

The Four Cardinal Points

Whatever religious tradition we follow, we cannot even consider the passage of the sun without taking into consideration the four cardinal points — east, south, west, and north. Once again, this division of Ireland appears to date from the very earliest of times, and the crux of this division is Uisneach, the Navel of Ireland.

From time beyond memory, the east, south, west, and north of Ireland have been staked out as the political divisions. Since there was no dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, these served to provide holy divisions of Ireland as well. In a belief system so common in Europe that we cannot tell in what particular religious tradition it was introduced, the east was yellow, in keeping with the rising sun, and this direction and this province was marked by prosperity. The vernal south was green and represented peace and vegetal abundance. The west was blue and corresponded to the ocean across which the souls of the dead traveled. The north was red and stood for war, death, and all things dreadful. And at the very center of all was the Navel of Ireland, connecting the three levels and the four directions of the world.

When we combine this division of Ireland by the four cardinal points with the circular division of the island following the passage of the sun, we have a calendar. This calendar reflects not simply the passage of time, but it also provides the geographical colors and attributes to the seasons of the year, as it marks out the traditional holy days — days that had been holy since the times of the megaliths.

This division by the four cardinal points can also be seen as a representation of the sun symbol. The vertical and horizontal lines crossing within the circle form a symbol known all over the world from the Steppes of Central Asia to the State of New Mexico. In the British Isles, it was later transferred from the orb of the sun god to the symbol of the Celtic cross.

Of course, when the Gaelic Celts came to dominate Ireland, they adapted the traditional division by the four cardinal points to the four provinces of Ireland — Leinster, Munster, Connacht, and Ulster. Needless to say, the center could not continue at the old Neolithic monument of Uisneach; so it was moved to Tara by the new regime. Here it formed the fifth, middle province of Meath (once again, the ‘middle’). And if we travel through Ireland today, we will pass from county to county among these very same provinces.