

Celts and Germans

Stephen McNallen

The chieftain towered over his seated warriors in the smokey hall. Clatter and chatter faded and all eyes turned to this mustachioed, muscular figure who was their leader.

Raising the mead-filled horn high over the throng, he toasted the High God, the one who carries the spear and has ravens hovering about his shoulders. All shouted their approval, and another warrior rose to his feet, lofted his horn, and praised the name of the Thunderer. The others echoed him, and in the warmth of their camaraderie, they might have well been in the great hall where warriors go when they die, served by the maidens of battle from the meat of the ever-reborn swine.

A scene from viking history? An evening in a typical Germanic mead hall? No - the word picture painted here is of a feast among their cousins, the Celts.

Like most of us, it wasn't news to me that the two main tribal groupings of ancient Europe had a lot in common. Both are part of the greater Indo-European family. Their mythology shares a common structure, the material aspects of their culture are much alike, and the general heroic worldview unites both Celt and German. But this, as it turns out, is only the beginning!

The distinction we make today between these two branches of our kin arise, in no small measure, from the observations of Julius Caesar. Essentially, he declared the tribes on one side of the Rhine to be Germans, and those on the other to be Celts. In actuality, it was not that simple. Scholars now think that some groups we once labeled German, were really Celtic. Other tribes might have belonged to either classification, because we don't know what language they spoke! The clear implication is that the physical artifacts they left behind were indistinguishable, and that language is the only definite marker between the two.

Physical appearance is no clue, because the Roman commentators describe the Germanic peoples and the Celts in exactly the same terms. Both were tall, tending toward the blond, and light skinned. The word "Teuton", by the way, is cognate with the Gaelic "tuath", meaning people or tribe, which certainly points to a fundamental kinship!

For me, the clincher came when I read Hilda Davidson's *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (Syracuse University Press, 1988). Significantly, it's subtitled "Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions". Page after page and chapter after chapter, she documents the similarities between the mythology, folklore, and ritual of the Germanic and Celtic peoples. I began making a list as I read, and it wasn't long before I had a couple of sheets covered with scribbled notes. I won't get bogged down in the minutia of these, but some comparisons beg to be made. To make the bulk of this material more easily accessible, I've lumped my comments into some broad categories:

GODS and GODDESSES...

The Celtic Lugh and our own Odin are much the same. Odin is father of the Gods, keeps two ravens, carries a magic spear, and has one eye. Lugh is first in the Celtic family of Gods, is linked with ravens, carries the Spear of Victory, and closes one eye when he performs fantastic deeds on the battlefield.

The Nordic Thor, whose name means "Thunderer", prizes his mighty hammer. He rides about the heavens, laughing in his red beard, in a wagon pulled by supernatural goats. Taranis of the Celts, whose name also means "Thunderer", drives a chariot behind sacred bulls. He wields the thunderbolt, whose

name in the old Gaelic tongue derives from the same Indo-European root as the name of Thor's hammer, Mjolnir. Taranis, too, is pictured as having a flowing red mane.

Tyr, as our tales tell, lost his hand binding Fenris the wolf. He used to be the Sky God, scholars say, until Odin took his place. The Celtic Nuada lost his arm in battle against the Fomorians, and so Lugh - the Celtic equivalent of Odin - became leader of the Gods.

In the domain of fertility and plenty, our own Frey rules supreme among Asafolk. One of his favorite beasts is the horse, which just happens to also be sacred to Dagda, "the good God", who is Frey's Celtic equivalent.

OTHER DIVINE BEINGS...

Giants? The Celts have them just as Asafolk do; they're called the Fomorians, and the Celtic Gods battle mightily against them. Moreover, the role they play is pretty much the same - representing the forces of inertia and entropy in the cosmos.

Valkyries find their reflection in the Morrigan, fierce Goddesses of the battlefield who grant victory, spin the fates of war, and serve the heroes in the afterlife. This twin aspect - fiends of blood and death on the one hand, enticing lovers on the other - is found in both cultures. Similarly, both Celtic and Germanic sagas tell of supernatural women warriors who instruct and initiate the chosen heroes. Brynhild teaches Sigurd hidden magical lore, and the female chieftain Scathach ("Shadow") takes the Irish Cu Chulain under her care and makes him the warrior he is destined to become. It is probably no accident that Sigurd and Cu Chulain are descended from Odin and Lugh, respectively.

Consider the "lesser" beings, the ones that seldom figure in myth and poetry, but who make the life of the common man and woman more bearable. The land spirits, for example, are alike in both cultures. Elf lore, and the connections of these wights to the ancestors, was recognizably the same to the ancient Teuton and his or her Celtic contemporaries

RELIGIOUS LORE and PRACTICES...

I referred to virtually identical warrior paradises in the scene which opened this article, but the overlap between Celtic and Germanic lore goes far beyond this.

Bogs throughout Northern Europe received sacrifices from Celt and German alike. Weapons and armor captured in battle, food and beakers, miscellaneous items - all were deposited in lakes and marshes in the same way, to the point that we can't even tell which finds are German and which are Celtic.

When the Druids sacrificed to the Gods, the blood from an animal was sprinkled with a sprig of greenery on the assembled people, so the divine energy inherent in blood could be directly transferred to them. In historical Odinism, our forebears did exactly the same thing in the course of a sacrifice or blot.. (Today, modern practitioners of both religions use mead or other fermented fluid in this role.)

Across the length and breadth of our European homeland, our ancestors honored the Gods in the open air, because we thought it inappropriate to shut them up into limiting, lessening structures like the Christian churches. Similarly, in the earliest days, our representations of the Gods and Goddesses were simple indeed - often carved from pieces of wood to which Nature had already given the basic shape, awaiting only a few refinements from human hands.

These customs accurately describe Celts as well as Germans.

Tribesmen of both groups used intoxicating drink in religious ritual. Often this was mead, but it could be ale as well. And, while we're considering altered states of consciousness, let's remember the fit or frenzy of the Odin-gripped warriors, the berserkers. In old Ireland, essentially the same warrior's madness bore the name of "*i ferg*".

Readers of the Norse stories will remember how Sigurd the Volsung killed the dragon Fafnir and roasted its heart. When he burned his finger, he stuck it in his mouth and found that he could understand the speech of birds. The Irish hero Fergus gained the same gift when he singed his finger while cooking a salmon over a fire.

MAP of the UNIVERSE...

When we look at the cosmology of the Teutons and that of the Celts, we can't help but see the likeness. Both have the giant tree, the center of the cosmos and indeed the framework in which all the worlds are found: to Asafolk, it's Yggdrasil; the Celts call it Bile .

The other key component of the universe in ancient Germania was the Well of Wyrd, containing the deeds that make up the past. Drinking from its waters gives wisdom, and Odin gave up one of his eyes for the privilege. As it turns out, the Celts have an almost identical well; hazel nuts fall into it where they are eaten by the Salmon of Wisdom.

IN CONCLUSION...

The only real differences between Germanic and Celtic religion seem to be the names by which the Gods are called. A viking of the tenth century would likely have felt quite comfortable in a Celtic ritual among the Gauls a thousand years earlier. Celtic religion deviates from the "Odinist norm" no more than do, for example, a priestess of Freya in Iceland and a warrior pledged to Wotan in Germany in Herman's time. Indeed, one is inclined to say that there is only "European religion" - and that the Germanic and Celtic beliefs are two expressions of it.

So what are the implications of all this? Well, it means that the Irishman need not feel out-of-place calling on Gods more often associated with Norway's fjords than the Emerald Isles hills and valleys. Ultimately all us Northfolk are spiritual as well as genetic kin.

Also Celtic-Germanic unity flies in the face of the sometimes-heard assertions that since Europeans often boast roots in different countries we're somehow mixed ancestry. How often have you heard someone say "I'm a Heinz 57 blend...part Irish, part Swedish, with some English and German thrown in?" Clearly that's not mixed at all, because the Northern peoples are essentially one, in both their physical aspects and in their ancient religions. We mustn't let people divided us on the basis of superficialities!

Thirdly, the catalog of our similarities means we can use the one to fill gaps in our knowledge of the other. As we reconstitute the tapestry of our ancient Odinic beliefs, there will be holes where the moths of time and persecution have done their work. But if we know the common pattern and how it's woven in the Celtic material, we can patch the holes with greater confidence.

Enough! All this scholarship makes thirsty work! I'm going to pour a fine bottle of Guinness into my mead horn, and toast all things Celtic/Nordic...Skoal, and Slainte, to you!