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Walter L. Brenneman Jr.

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WALTER L. BRENNEMAN, JR.\*

# The Circle and the Cross: Reflections on the Holy Wells of Ireland

## The Sacredness of Water and Its Symbolism

*Mary Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow? With  
cockle shells, and silver bells, and pretty maids in a row.*

If we take seriously the question asked in this familiar nursery rhyme, that is, how does Mary's garden grow, what makes it grow, through what means does it grow, it seems clear that Mary's garden is not enabled to grow by the presence or absence of cockle shells, silver bells, or pretty maids in a row. Rather, Mary's garden is able to grow because it has fertile earth in which it is planted, but also, and most importantly, because that earth is watered. If we were to plant seeds in the most fertile of soils, and if those seeds were not watered, they would fail to germinate, to emerge as living plants. Thus, it is this last element, water, that is crucial to the growth of Mary's or anyone else's garden.

But water is crucial to the life of not only Mary's garden, but of virtually all life in varying degrees. It is certainly central for human life, as well as the life of all mammals and reptiles. Because of this fact, which is true always and everywhere, water has come to symbolize, for all times and places, life itself, and complimenting water's symbolism of life is its importance in all fertility. Water is perceived cross culturally as the *fons et origo*, the source of all existence.<sup>1</sup> Life emerges from water. We, as humans, all emerged from the salt-sea within our mother's womb. In fact, the greatest percentage of our bodies as humans is composed of water, and so not only do we emerge from water, but we return to water after death. Water has the power not only of giving life, but also of drawing life back into itself, of dissolving life. Because of water's ability to dissolve things, water is seen as an agent and symbol of purity. We use water in a practical and ritual manner to absorb filth, impurities, and "sin."

Because of water's ability to both give birth to life and to dissolve it, water takes on a circular quality. We see this most clearly in the tidal nature of the sea. There the water of the sea rises and falls, comes and goes, and in a circular manner, endlessly repeating itself. This

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\* Prof. Emeritus of Religion, University of Vermont.

1. See MIRCEA ELIADE, PATTERNS IN COMPARATIVE RELIGION 188 (1996).

circularity of water takes on a symbolic power and extends itself to the moon, who is mistress of the tides and whose symbolism of rising and falling, coming and going, is related also to the symbolism of woman. So woman's menstrual cycle reduplicates the cycle of the moon with its regenerative power. There thus emerges the symbolic complex of water-tide-moon-fertility-woman.

But there is another symbol that arises from this complex and is connected to the circularity or cyclical nature of water. This is the symbol of time itself. Time emerges from the circular nature of water in a special configuration, a configuration that is cyclical and that repeats itself endlessly. This is a form of time in which time regenerates itself periodically on a yearly basis. With each cycle of time, the year comes to an end, dissolves back to its watery beginnings, then emerges again, purified, as did Atlantis from under the sea, to begin a new year without any memory of the past, indeed, without any past, without any history, in our sense of the word.

The dissolution and emergence of the world from within water brings to mind another important symbolic function in which water plays the leading role. This symbol is that of the immersion and emergence of the individual person, animal, or object. Ritually, immersion into water is the symbolic equivalent of death, as well as a return to primordial beginnings through dissolution. From these beginnings emerges a new world. There is a Celtic myth that describes a white mare, image of the earth as mother, galloping heedlessly into the sea, moving in deeper and deeper until she disappears. Of course, many are familiar with the Greek myth of the birth of Venus or Aphrodite who emerges from the brine of the salt-sea.

The ancient symbolism of immersion and emergence and its connection with death and rebirth is still very much with us today in the rite of baptism within the Christian tradition. Baptism is properly a rite of passage, a rite of initiation that moves the catechumen from one way of life, from one identity as a person, to another new and more vital identity. By becoming immersed in the waters of baptism, the initiate dies with Christ, and his or her past is erased, including both original sin, that is the sin inherited from the first man, Adam, and present at one's birth, as well as personal sin, or those sins committed willfully by the initiate prior to baptism and ritual death. When the initiate emerges from the waters of baptism, he or she is a wholly new person, with the purity of Christ Himself with whom the initiate is identified. In other words, the initiate has been given a new life, has begun again, has been reborn. Here in this ritual of baptism, with which many of us are familiar, we see clearly the circular as well as the death and life giving power that water possesses.

Another quality unique to water is its "shape." In essence, water has no shape of its own; it is shapeless and takes its form or shape from the shape of that in which it is contained. Water conforms to all things and in doing so it "flows." Water flows into all the nooks and crevices, all the gaping holes in which it is found, and by flowing, it shapes itself to fit the container into which it has flowed. Thus, water, except in its forms of ice or vapor, has a liquid form, a shifting shape, and one that is always found in some type of vessel, some form of container.

Because water is covered by the material nature of the vessel, whether it be a golden chalice or a pool within a cave, it takes on a hidden quality. The vessel naturally covers or hides the greater part of the "body" of water that it holds, even in the case of the vastness of the surface of the oceans, for most of the water lies hidden beneath the surface because of the depth of the container, ranging from the sea itself to a tiny silver shot glass. To be sure, there are translucent vessels such as those made of glass, but in essence it is the function of the vessel to hide what it contains, and what it contains for our interest in this essay is water.

### The Sacred Spring

Perhaps the most powerful, mysterious, and symbolic of water's many containers or vessels is the spring. Because of the mystery that emanates from a spring, a mystery that arises from hiddenness, springs the world over are often considered sacred, full of numinous power and otherness, whose referent is found in the sphere of the divine. Ann Ross, in her book *Pagan Celtic Britain*, gives extensive evidence for the archaic nature of the cult of sacred springs, or wells as they are called in the British Isles, and even states that the cult of the sacred well has greater historical continuity than any other phenomenon within the history of religions.<sup>2</sup>

The mystery that emanates from springs is due largely to the fact that the spring functions as mediator between the hidden and the revealed. That which is hidden is water, deep within the earth, and this water is life-giving and is revealed by the shaft of the spring, which extends from the earth's surface deep into the earth. It is the sacred spring that gives access into water's mystery and potential. Thus, the sacred spring becomes seen as the source of life, life that is given through the water that is borne to the earth's surface by the spring and made available to humankind. Amplifying the life giving power of water is its

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2. ANN ROSS, *PAGAN CELTIC BRITAIN* 46-59 (1996).

ability to heal. Much of this ability to heal is derived from water's capacity to dissolve things, including the agents of disease.

In our fieldwork in Ireland,<sup>3</sup> we discovered that the vast majority of healings that occurred at sacred springs were healings of the eyes. Some claimed that problems with the eyes were due to an injury to the eyes from the peat fires in cottages. There is, most probably, a deeper meaning to the healing of eyes. For example, Irish mythological tradition associates the eyes with wisdom, in the sense of "seeing" into the meaning of things. We speak of a "seer" as one who has prophetic wisdom. In a sense, wisdom as healing of the eyes occurs when those elements that are separated due to illness or injury are brought together again, that is, they are made whole, healed. When the eyes are made whole, they are able to see into the meaning of things again.

There is an Irish legend about St. Brigid that thematizes the symbolic relationship between water, the eyes, and wisdom. St. Brigid is the Christian redaction of the Celtic mother goddess Brigid, a goddess of the fertility of the earth and especially of water and intuitive wisdom. In the legend, St. Brigid is being pursued by an unwelcome suitor. In order to deflect his advances, she asks him which of her features he most admires. He replies that it is her eyes, for he longs for her wisdom, at which point she plucks out both eyes and drops them at his feet. St. Brigid then went to a holy well, bathed the empty sockets, and her sight/wisdom was restored by the water.

Water and its connection to wisdom is amplified by its relationship to prophesy. Recently, on a pilgrimage to Greece and Turkey, I visited the well known Oracle of Delphi, which is sacred to the god Apollo. There was a large temple constructed to Apollo in which a priest represented Apollo and gave forth oracular pronouncements upon request. The interesting aspect of this is that the oracular pronouncements originated not in the temple of Apollo, but from the nearby spring of Castalia at which sat the Pythia, the female seer who gained her oracular knowledge from drinking the waters of the well. These oracles were then taken to the temple of Apollo and given to the priest. Eliade supports the connection between water and prophesy. He writes, "Oracles were often situated near water....[T]he Pythia prepared by drinking water from the Kassotis fountain," and later, "That prophetic power emanates from water is a primitive intuition which we find in a great part of the world."<sup>4</sup>

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3. My wife, Mary, and I conducted field research on Holy Wells from 1978 to 1994 in preparation for the publication of WALTER L. BRENNEMAN, JR. & MARY G. BRENNEMAN, *CROSSING THE CIRCLE AT THE HOLY WELLS OF IRELAND* (1995).

4. ELIADE, *supra* note 1, at 202.

Why, then, are some springs considered sacred and others are not? There are several reasons for this. One is that some event occurred at the site of the spring external to the spring itself. For example, there are numerous sacred springs in Ireland dedicated to St. Patrick because of the fact that Patrick visited the site on his evangelizing journey through Ireland. Another, perhaps more interesting reason is because there is something intrinsically powerful in the site itself. Most often, this "something" has to do with the actual configuration of the earth at the site of the spring.<sup>5</sup> The spring may be situated beside a lone tree in the center of a meadow or in a small copse within a field. Both of these instances attract the eye and the heart because they are "breaks in space." It is such breaks in space that become sacralized as well as the springs located in them or near by. Or the spring may be located in low-lying meadow that reeks of fertility. Sometimes holy wells are located in very rocky areas in which the water literally emerges from the stone. Such a place is the limestone area of County Clare in Ireland known as the Burren. Still other wells may be located near the shore of the sea and reveal themselves only at low tide. These last three types of configuration might be classified as umbilicus wells, flint wells, and sea wells.

When holy wells are found situated squarely within one of these types of earth configuration, they take on the role of a center. That is, they become a source from which creation takes place and they radiate power to the surrounding area, which they form into a world. Thus, for example, there is often in modern times a holy well located within the grounds of a church, which itself is a center. All of the ancient provincial centers of Ireland, of which there were four, had a burial mound to mark the center. Completing the complex and located very near the mound was a sacred tree, a sacred stone, and a sacred spring. This complex of rock-tree-water forms a microcosm, a small world that mirrors the larger world of which it is the center. I shall go into greater detail on the Irish sacred spring, or holy well, shortly.

There is one more characteristic of the sacred spring that I want to touch upon. This characteristic is its feminine nature. The feminine quality of the sacred spring becomes clear when we contrast it with the water vessel we term a river. While the river is constantly moving in a linear direction, which heightens its masculine nature, the sacred spring remains still. Any movement it has is of a vertical type, whereby water flows upward from the depths of the earth to the surface. The fact that

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5. This type of power is termed by us Loric Power, or Loric Space, as contrasted with Sacred Space. See BRENNEMAN & BRENNEMAN, *supra* note 3, ch. 3.

the spring offers access into the body of "Mother Earth" lends an additional dimension to the spring's feminine nature.

### The Sacred Springs of Ireland

Springs have been considered sacred in Ireland for millennia. Artifacts retrieved from certain sacred springs in Ireland have demonstrated the archaic nature of the cult of the spring in Ireland. The earliest mythological data we have regarding sacred springs in Ireland concerns the cult of springs practiced by the Celts in Ireland. The Celts throughout Gaul and Spain, as well as those who migrated to the British Isles, all were centered religiously on the sacrality of the earth. In Ireland, the earth was understood as a great goddess and was identified often with Ireland herself. Various names were given to this mother goddess, differing by region and period. To some she was known as Macha, to others the Morrigan, and later, in Ulster, she became identified with the mythological queen Medb.

We have termed religions that center on the divinity of the earth cosmic religions.<sup>6</sup> They focus on the power of the feminine from which comes the fertility of the earth, as well as a particular form of wisdom that is intuitive in essence. Such religions center on the worship of a great goddess and often the human community is governed by women. The plant is revered and has greater religious significance than the animal. Water takes on an important symbolic power as the source of life as well as the source of the wisdom to which we have just referred.

In contrast to cosmic religions, whose religious center is the earth, are what I term, following Eliade, historical religions. The cosmology of historical religions is structurally the same as cosmic religious cosmology, and included the heavens or the sky, the earth, and the underworld; however, the center of value, the sphere that emanates the greatest sacred power, lies in the heavens. The heavens are the locus of light, and they have a more detailed structure than in cosmic religions where they are of secondary value. In historical religions, the heavens are divided into the atmosphere, which is just above the earth's surface, then the sky, and beyond the sky the highest heaven or the transcendental realm.

It is light rather than darkness, as in earth centered religions, that is the bringer of life within historical traditions. The source of this life-giving light is the sun, which is located at the boundary of the sky, at its very end. Beyond this boundary set by the sun lies the transcendental

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6. BRENNEMAN & BRENNEMAN, *supra* note 3, at 10-12.

realm, of which we have just spoken, and in which the supreme sky-god dwells. Creative activity within this worldview is not associated with watery darkness as in cosmic religions but with dry light or, more precisely, with enlightenment. The creative moment occurs when the elements are separated at the beginning of time and put into an orderly whole. Recall the first words of the first book of the Hebrew and Christian Bible, *Genesis*: "And God said,...'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; And God separated the light from the darkness."<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, for cosmic religions, creation arises, very often, from the watery dark abyss and reveals itself through the coming together of opposites in a kind of mystical union or divine marriage. The opposites are then separated and creation of the three-tiered cosmos takes place. For example, in ancient Akkad and in Sumer, as well as in some Babylonian cosmogonic myths, prior to the creation of the earth there existed only a primordial sea. In Akkad, this sea combined both fresh and salt water, Apsu and Tiamat. Then there emerged from the primordial sea a cosmic mountain in which masculine and feminine were combined, the male being the top part of the mountain and named An, and the female the bottom and named Ki. One of their children, Enlil the air god, separated his parents from their nuptial embrace, An ascending to become the sky and Ki remaining to become the earth.<sup>8</sup> There are several cosmogonic myths in which water plays the role of *prima materia*, holding all potential.

Sacred space in cosmic religions is found primarily within the natural world prior to its manipulation by human construction. It is distinguished by breaks in space as they appear on and within the configuration of the earth's surface: spaces such as a small grove of trees within a meadow, to which we earlier referred, or the confluence of two rivers, or an island at the center of a lake or pond, or a canyon, volcano, or cave. Mountaintops also are often appropriated as sacred, and the thoughtful ascent of a mountain plays an important ritual role in many cosmic cults. The yearly ascent of Crough Patrick in County Mayo, Ireland, comes to mind as an example of a mountaintop pilgrimage, while the rigorous three-day pilgrimage to Station Island in Lough Derg, County Donegal, presents us with the archetype of the island-in-lake symbol of the Other World.

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7. *Genesis* 1: 3-4 (Revised Standard Version).

8. SAMUEL NOAH KRAMER, *MYTHOLOGIES OF THE ANCIENT WORLD* 93 (1961) (discussing the mythology of Sumer and Akkad).



Celtic cosmology also reflects this focus on the sacrality of the earth. What is most interesting about this cosmology is that the most sacred space on the cosmological hierarchy occurs in the interior of the earth, rather than in conjunction with a break in space on the earth's surface. Thus, we see three levels or spheres in the Celtic cosmological hierarchy. The first and least important lies in the sky or heavens; beneath this sphere lies the surface of the earth including its breaks in space. Sacred space is indeed found here, for example, at the burial mounds where chieftains resided and were inaugurated, as well as sacred islands located in lakes such as Lough Derg, which is a pre-Christian site. Other sacred spaces were found in groves of trees in which Druidic priests conducted ritual sacrifices to various earth divinities as well as caves that were often thought to be the dwelling of the goddess of the place.

We must remember that these sacred spaces were not "standardized," except for the central feature, *i.e.*, the mountain, grove, or lake. Rather, they also distinguished themselves within cosmic religions because of their unique qualities, because of their differences. There was, and is, a form of power that emerges from uniqueness in various forms, not the least of which is the uniqueness of a place. This form of power draws us toward the place and causes us to desire to be within the precincts of that particular place, to be held or contained by the place, to be a part of it, to belong. When we are within that place we are protected by the spirit that radiates from its particular uniqueness. I term this power, as it relates to a place, "placehood." Generically, I have named this form of power loric power, about which I have spoken earlier in this article. We are embraced by the spirit of the loric, made welcome by a sensation of "coziness" that rests us within the arms of a Good Mother. And so, the spirits of these many and varied places are named, given a personhood, a divinity, as the goddess of the place. All across Ireland during the Celtic era there were found the preserves of many such goddesses of the place, who were responsible not only for the spirit of identity that emanated from the place, but also for the fertility of the place, a factor of no mean importance. This goddess of the place also played a major role as consort of the local chieftain, to which we shall turn shortly.

The most sacred of spheres within the Celtic cosmology lies beneath the surface of the earth, deep within the belly/womb of the Good Mother goddess. Because the earth carried and radiated the greatest sacrality in Celtic religion, its interior contained the essence of that sacrality. To be within the earth, buried beneath its surface, was to be held in the loving and life-giving embrace of the mother goddess who bestows upon us life itself, fertility, and intuitive wisdom. In this most

sacred of places, which was termed the Other World by the Celts, there continued perpetually a sacred banquet to which all the dead were invited, for the Other World was both the land of the dead and the land of eternal youth. And so the banquet bestowed upon its participants a constant renewal of youthful life.

The central fare at this banquet was a sow, or female pig. The pig, within the Celtic tradition as well as cross-culturally, is a symbol of the feminine and in particular the great mother. This is due to her prolific fertility resulting in many offspring or piglets, as well as her fondness for wallowing in the earth, especially in its form as mud. But, having been a keeper of pigs, I find it important to dispel the false story that pigs are "dirty" creatures. In fact they are most fastidious, always defecating in one and the same spot, far away from their favorite wallowing spots. Because the pig symbolizes the mother goddess, it was this very goddess that was consumed perpetually at the banquet in the Other World.<sup>9</sup>

It was the Other World, located beneath the earth, that was the domain of the most important divinity in the Celtic pantheon, the Great Mother Goddess. It was in the Other World that the greatest power of life and fertility lay. In order for humans on the surface world to participate in life in abundance, it was necessary, by some means, to come in contact with this plethora of life-giving power residing beneath the earth. There were several means whereby this could be accomplished. Perhaps the greatest access to the power from the Other World was offered by the yearly cycle itself. Each autumn, at years end with its increase in darkness, there came a day when the barrier between the Other World and the surface world was broken. This occurred on November first or second and was called the festival of Samain (pronounced Sowan). During this feast, the inhabitants of the Other World would emerge on the surface of the earth and make contact with the living, bestowing upon them various occult and not so occult powers as gifts. This was the turn of the year<sup>10</sup> and also the time of the inauguration of kings to which we shall refer in a moment.

Another way of contacting the power of the Other World was to place oneself within the precincts of a configuration on the surface of the

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9. It is for these same reasons that pork is not to be consumed by sky-centered religions such as Judaism and Islam.

10. This tradition is retained within the Christian liturgical year in which November first and second are All Saints and All Souls day respectively. There follows during the nadir of darkness in late November the feast of Christ the King, which marks the year's end as well as looks forward to the end of all time. The next Sunday celebrates the coming of the season of Advent, which begins the yearly liturgical cycle again.

earth that symbolically participates in the Other World. I have already mentioned the image of an island in a lake as symbol of the Other World. By going to such a place, for example Lough Derg in County Donegal, one could contact the power of the Other World. In fact, when the Celts occupied Lough Derg and used it as an image of the Other World, pilgrims would visit the island on which there was a cave that gave additional access to the Other World. There, pilgrims would enter the cave and remain locked within it for three days, undergoing a symbolic death and assimilating the life-restoring fertile power of the Goddess who dwelt beneath the surface of the earth in the Other World. Today there is a Christian pilgrimage to Lough Derg that continues to take place over a period of three days. The pilgrim must fast on one meal a day of tea and oat cakes, remain in bare feet, and keep vigil, that is stay awake, for one and a half days. Instead of being locked in a cave, the pilgrims are locked in the basilica built on the one-and-one-half-acre island during the period of their vigil.

For our purposes, the most interesting and important way of contacting the power of the Other World is by the cult of the sacred spring. The spring symbolized the vagina of the Mother Goddess who was located beneath the earth. From within her womb there issued through her vagina/spring the sacred life-giving water, which symbolized her menstrual blood and at the same time contained and transmitted wisdom. It was believed by the Celts that a magical fish, a salmon or trout, lived within the spring. This fish was the possessor of great wisdom due to its ability to cross boundaries, that is its instinctual habit of moving from salt to fresh water in the course of its laying, fertilizing, and caring for eggs. There is also a legend that the tree of wisdom, which is a hazel tree, stands by the sacred well. It drops its berries or nuts into the spring, which are eaten by the salmon. It is thus that the salmon gains wisdom, which is given evidence to by the spots on his side reflecting the berries of the tree of wisdom.<sup>11</sup> The well that is referred to in this legend is called the Well of Segais, and it is located beneath the earth at the center of the Other World. This is the model of all Celtic sacred springs and is the source of the two most sacred rivers in Ireland, the Boyne and the Shannon. Wells located on the surface of the earth provide an *axis mundi*, or world pole, in this case an inverted one, which functions to connect the surface world with the Other World and to allow movement back and forth between the two worlds.

Having now looked in detail at the Celtic cosmology and the role of the sacred spring within that cosmology, it is time to examine the

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11. See ALWYN & BRINLEY REES, *CELTIC HERITAGE* 161 (1961).

place played by the sacred spring in the inauguration of kings. It is at this inauguration rite that the new king benefits from the wisdom and life giving power of the well. To begin with, the inauguration always takes place at a sacred center, at the center of the world over which the king will preside. In a stricter sense, it is better to view the king's domain as a place rather than a world, although both place and world are total in the role they play for king or emperor. We must remember that the chieftains were just that, they were the heads of tribes or clans, and did not rule all of Ireland. They did, however, hold complete and total power over the place in which their clan lived. Thus, Ireland as a world was composed of many places, many small and unique loric spaces, which were inhabited by particular families and their patriarchal heads. In fact, there was no "high king," that is, no king that reigned over all of Ireland until the fourth or fifth centuries A.D.

We have no direct documentation of the actual inauguration rite of chieftains except for the brief account by Giraldus Cambrensis given in his *Topography of Ireland*. There we find the prospective king plunged into a huge vat in which was being boiled the remains of a white mare. The initiate was required to eat of the flesh of the mare whilst he was bathing in the broth. In this manner he was being united with the goddess of the place represented by the white mare.<sup>12</sup> It is this central theme of the mortal king uniting or mating with the goddess of the place that seems to run through all inauguration rites of kings in Ireland. Based on this theme as well as on the common structure of rock-tree-water found at all the major royal sites in Ireland, I have tried to conjecture what might have been involved in the province as well as in the *tuath*, or local place, during the inauguration of a king or chieftain.

We do know that the high king who later ruled over all of Ireland made a circuit of the entire island as part of his inauguration rite. If we reduce this circuit to a much smaller scale, for example the scale of a province or even smaller of a family domain or place, we could imagine the chieftain circumambulating the burial mound that played the role of sacred center. This was to symbolize his setting the boundary of his domain by walking about it. The place or domain over which he had jurisdiction was understood as the goddess of the place with whom the chieftain mated in the course of the inauguration. In fact, through the act of this mating with the goddess, the chieftain sacrificed his life to her. It is thought by some scholars that this often took the form of regicide.

Following the marking out of the boundary of the place with whom he was to mate, the initiate would draw a chalice of water from

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12. See GIRALDUS CAMBRENSIS, *THE TOPOGRAPHY OF IRELAND* 138 (1968).

the sacred spring. This drawing of water was the highlight of the act of mating and symbolized his entry into her vagina, represented by the well, which offered access into her womb. Simultaneous with the mating at the drinking of the water from the sacred spring was the conveying of wisdom by the water from the spring. Recall that the goddess of the place offers both fertility and wisdom, and she does this by means of water, water from her vagina, the sacred spring. In fact, there is a near identity between the water from the sacred spring and wisdom, for the quality of the wisdom, as I have mentioned earlier, was watery and intuitive rather than rigid and analytical. This wisdom given to the chieftain was what enabled him to rule effectively and to maintain fertility in the place by means of judicious decisions. Because of this, the wisdom of the water from the sacred spring was known as sovereignty. Thus, there was an identity between water wisdom and sovereignty, all of which the chieftain was given at the inauguration rite when he mated symbolically with the goddess of the place by drinking of the water of the sacred spring.

After this ritual drinking/mating, the chieftain had achieved the status of sovereign and was free to take up the seat of the kingship, symbolized by the sacred stone located by the spring. This stone often had an indentation on its surface that functioned as a seat, and into this the king would lower himself. The final act was to take into his hand the badge of sovereignty, the Celtic "mace," if you will, formed by a branch of hazel wood, which he took into his right hand. Recall that the hazel tree is the tree of knowledge that drops its "berries" or nuts into the spring where they are eaten by the sacred salmon who lives in the spring. Once he assumed the mace of kingship, seated on the sacred stone or throne, and imbibed of the intoxicating water of the sacred spring, he had completed the inauguration successfully and was duly received by his nobles and his people of the place as king.

It is clear, at least from this reconstructed sketch of the Celtic inauguration of kings, that the central role in the ritual is played by the water from the sacred spring/vagina of the goddess. It is this water that confers upon the king the ability to rule and to maintain the fertility of the place. For it is this water that gives him wisdom, and wisdom is sovereignty, the quality necessary for the assumption of any kingship. And finally, it is this water drawn from the spring and symbolizing the mating of the king with the goddess that insures the fertility of the goddess, who is identified symbolically with the place, the land on which the people dwell and which sustains their very lives.

Ireland was divided into five provinces during the Celtic era and remains so today in Irish tradition, even though the country officially is parceled into counties. In Celtic Ireland, the four provinces were located

in the four corners of Ireland. In the northeast was located Ulster, the northwest was the province of Connaught, the southwest was the land of Munster, and in the southeast Leinster. The fifth province played the role of center and was known as Meath, today the name of a county. At the center of the center was located the hill of Tara with its burial mound, sacred stone, sacred tree, and sacred spring. It was here that the high king, when there was one, dwelled and here that he was inaugurated. But each of the other provinces also had its center at which the chieftain was inaugurated and at which were located the same structural components of burial mound, stone, tree, and spring. Further, each local chieftain within the four provinces had his center at which he was inaugurated and which also contained the same components including the sacred spring. The point I want to emphasize here is that there were many sacred springs located throughout the entire island of Ireland. Each of these springs was presided over by the goddess of the place who dwelled there and who was often associated with a living woman, with whom the chieftain also ritually mated. The spring and the entire center took her name.

### **From Celtic Sacred Spring to Christian Holy Well**

With the coming of Patrick in 432 A.D. there was a substantial change in the meaning of these centers, though they did not disappear. Patrick imitated the high king and made a circuit around the entire island, expelling the "dark forces" of the Celtic magic and in the process sained or purified the sacred springs. The burial mounds were no longer used ritually in Patrick's Christianizing process, but the complex of rock-tree-water not only remained but was incorporated into the Christian rite of the mass. Thus, the priest would visit the complex and use the stone as an altar upon which the sacrifice of the mass took place. The sacred tree continued to be revered as well as the sacred spring. Patrick, however, converted the goddess of the place into its Christian counterpart, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the local chieftain into a Christian saint.

It must be remembered that the Virgin Mary is not a divine being as were the goddesses of the place. The Virgin also had a two-fold role as did the local goddess, but the roles were slightly different. Whereas the local goddess was Lady at the Well and presided over the local territory ruled by her consort, the local chieftain, the Blessed Virgin presided over the entire world through her title of Queen of Heaven and Earth, given to her by her son, Jesus, at the moment of her crowning in

heaven by Him.<sup>13</sup> The Blessed Virgin also assumed the role of Lady at the Well after the saining of the wells by Patrick. Functionally, the consort of Our Lady is Jesus, her son, since He is king and she is His queen. This mating of mother and son is also in consonance with the Celtic practice of the king mating with his mother at the Samain ritual of inauguration. The Celtic king mated with his mother as he mated with the goddess of the place, and it was the place, or the earth, that gave him life and was his mother.

Prior to the coming of Patrick and the Christianization of the springs, it was common ritual practice to make offerings to the local goddess through the sacred spring. Thus, gifts such as ritual vessels and weapons as well as skulls, since the head was considered to be the source of power, were dropped into the spring. These offerings could be considered as symbolic seeds that fertilized the goddess and insured her fertility in the coming or present growing season. After the coming of Patrick, the central place that fertility held in the use of the springs was consumed by the role of healing through the application of the sacred water to the area of sickness and the drinking of the water as a means for systemic healing. But despite this shift in function from fertility to healing, the practice of bringing ritual offerings to the spring continued. Now the function of the offering was no longer that of seed for fertility but rather the offering took on the disease, which was then offered to the spring by placing the offering beside the spring or on the canopy that covered or framed the spring. Thus, the illness contained in the offering was assumed by the spring in the place of the client who had borne it beforehand. The spring becomes, in characteristic Christian and Christ-like fashion, the redeemer of the suffering person.

Today these offerings of disease and of sin take many forms, most of which are more humble than those offered by the Celts to their local goddess. Perhaps the most predominant form of offering today is a strip of cloth, a handkerchief, or some other small piece of clothing. These characteristic offerings are called by the devotees of the spring clouties. They are most frequently tied to the sacred tree that stands by the spring, so that the tree takes on the pain of the disease or sin that is deposited there in the cloutie, just as the wood of the cross took on the sins of all humankind within the economy of salvation in the Christian tradition. Other offerings found at these sacred sites include pens, pins, coins, teeth, jewelry, or pictures of a sick or deceased person, along with handwritten notes of petition.

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13. For a description of this celestial and earthly queen, see *Revelations* 12.

All of what I have just mentioned brings to mind the important process of syncretism that took place at the Celtic sacred springs after the Christianization of Ireland. It was this process that resulted in the transformation of the Celtic sacred springs to Christian holy wells. In any process of syncretism, an older structure is retained as well as its central meaning, while a new meaning is grafted onto it. Both meanings co-exist together, providing a new and fresh breadth of symbolic meaning. This process is unlike synthesis, in which two different meanings or structures are joined to form a new meaning or structure. What occurred at the holy wells of Ireland through the Christianization of the Celtic sacred springs was a syncretism of Christian and Celtic symbolic objects. It was easy for the Celts to Christianize their springs into holy wells because they recognized in the Christian structures introduced to the spring their own essential meaning, only differently expressed, for each object in the structure.

Now let's review the structural components at the Celtic sacred spring and see how each individual component became a "bridge symbol" to move it toward its Christian identity as a holy well. The central symbol and structural component is the spring itself. Whereas the spring in the Celtic tradition offered access to the local goddess and to her fertility, the water in the Christian context gave healing from disease, especially the disease of sin. More precisely, the well became associated with the Christian baptismal font, the vessel from which emerged new life through immersion in the water or its application to the client. This merged with the Celtic understanding of fertility as new and abundant life. For the Christian, the waters of the holy well offered access not to the fertility goddess of the place but to Jesus Christ, the divine physician who Himself emerged from the waters of baptism renewed in spirit by John the Baptist.<sup>14</sup> Jesus also offered fertility in the form of life, eternal life, which was brought about through the process of death and rebirth, the same process offered by the goddess in the ritual sacrifice of the king at Samain in November, now recognized in Christ and His death on the cross/tree.

The next structural component of the sacred spring complex to be assimilated into the holy well was the sacred stone. For the Celts, this stone played the role of seat of the kingship. It functioned as a throne, as a mother that held her son, the king, and provided him with unwavering stability. The idea of a seat, and the rock as a seat, is more than merely functional, for a seat is the symbol of authority and headship. For example, Rome is known as the seat of Peter, the head of the Church,

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14. See *Matthew* 3: 13-17.



and where Peter "sits," there is the Church. Likewise, each bishop has a chair or seat in which he presides at all official functions. Further, a chairman of an academic department in a university holds or sits in the chair because he is the head of the department. The sacred stone at the spring offered a chair, or foundation, for the "house" of the king. In like manner, the Christian was able to see in the Celtic stone the foundation or seat of Christ, the king, who built His church on the rock of Peter. A fine example of the syncretism of Celtic and Christian rock symbolism can be seen in the Stone of Scone, an ancient rock associated with Celtic kingship, which now resides under the throne of Edward the Confessor in Westminster Cathedral.

Now let us move on to the final structural element at the spring/well complex, the sacred tree. For the Celt, the tree was the provider of wisdom, the wisdom of an intuitive type that I earlier identified with the sovereignty given the king by the goddess of the place. The tree that symbolized this wisdom most intensely was the hazel, which, you recall, dropped its nuts into the well of Segais in the Other World. They were the containers of wisdom and were eaten by the sacred salmon who in turn was eaten by Finn in the Irish myth, who was granted wisdom through the nuts from the hazel tree. Now since the tree offered wisdom, and wisdom was sovereignty, the tree was a symbol of authority, and so a hazel wand was always held by the Celtic king at the time of his inauguration. It was this wand that brought wisdom-fertility-wholeness-healing, the interrelated complex of symbols that are all associated with water and the sacred spring, now holy well, complex.

It is also the tree that heals within the Christian tradition, the tree of the cross. For it is this tree upon which is hung sin, crucified for the sake of the world, in the form of the death of the king, Jesus Christ. So it is the cross, the tree of death, that is also the tree of life as well as the symbol of authority and kingship. It is no wonder that the Celts had no trouble recognizing the meaning of the sacred tree within the Christian tradition as it was introduced to them. They simply assimilated it with the sacred tree at the spring and to it they offered their sin as well as their petitions for healing. And so at the holy well we see the clooties of sin nailed to the tree, to the healing cross, at the well. With this final component, the Christians have successfully transformed in a meaningful way the Celtic sacred spring into the Christian holy well.

### **Epilogue: Seeing Through Water**

This essay has taken a great deal of care and spent much time in an effort to convey to the reader a "new" way of seeing water. The work here has tried to avoid seeing "at" water in an effort to see "into" water.

To put it more simply, the method employed in this essay has tried to lead the reader away from a mindset that explains water and its uses as wells, etc., a mindset that attempts to remain within its already held viewpoints and presuppositions and to reduce what is engaged, in this case water, to those presuppositions that are largely technological. In place of this mindset, the research here has tried to demonstrate to the reader what results when the usually held scientific and utilitarian presuppositions are not used to examine water. When this is done, then water begins to speak to us, instead of us speaking to it. Water begins to tell us what it is in a most intimate manner. Perhaps water's disclosure to us is akin to the Celtic idea of wisdom of which I spoke earlier and which was bestowed by water, the water from a well. But in order to utilize this new hermeneutic, one must "see" water as more than an object of utility, as more than a mere "thing" to be manipulated by technology for the convenience of humankind. One must take seriously, take as real, the meaning of water, the symbolism of water. This, for most of us, is a risk. Will we disappear if we set aside temporarily our dearly beloved scientific view of reality, or will we expand our consciousness into new possibilities for meaning, for understanding, and for research without losing the scientific commitment to truth.

*Mary Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow? With  
cockle shells and silver bells, and pretty maids in a row.*