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Oenach Aimsire na mBan: Early Irish Seasonal Celebrations, Gender Roles and Mythological Cycles

Sharon Paice MacLeod

A yearly cycle of work activities existed in early Ireland which had a strong seasonal basis and was originally based on the movement and herding of livestock.[1] From this cycle, certain cultural patterns emerged pertaining to a variety of social activities, including courtship, marriage, raiding, and the holding of seasonal assemblies.[2] Evidence pertaining to work and gender roles, and folk traditions associated with seasonal festivals, suggest that one half of the year may have been regarded as the 'male' half and the other as the 'female' half. These gender-specific patterns may have also manifested in the veneration of certain male or female deities, in accordance with the season or quarter of the year.

The yearly cycle seems to have been originally divided into two halves, a warm summer period (*sam*) and a cold winter period (*gam*). Summer began on May 1st when livestock were moved away from the settlement towards higher ground and summer pasture (and away from the growing crops). Winter began on November 1st when the herds had returned from summer grazing.[3] At some point the seasons were divided in two once again, resulting in a total of four seasonal holidays or festivals: *Beltaine* on May 1st, *Samain* on November 1st, *Imbolc* on February 1st, and *Lugnasad* on August 1st. While early information pertaining to the early spring festival is scarce, the feast of *Imbolc* appears to have been associated with the birth of animals and the return of a fresh supply of milk. *Lugnasad*, which marked the

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[1] Patterson, Nerys, *Cattle Lords and Clansmen: The Social Structure of Early Ireland* (1994, University of Notre Dame Press); p. 118.

[2] References from later accounts of Irish and Scottish Highland folk practices (which reflect, to some degree, the conservative and archaic nature of the traditional way of life), agricultural histories from other parts of the British Isles, and information contained in medieval Irish historical sources help round out our understanding of early Irish life.

[3] Patterson, p. 119.

beginning of autumn, seems to have been primarily a harvest festival.[4] We will examine each of these festivals in turn, exploring their connection with agricultural and pastoral cycles prior to investigating their connections with gender roles, folklore, and the related veneration of male and female deities.

The Work Cycles of the Year

a) *Beltaine or Beltene*, which marked the beginning of the summer half of the year, was also known as *Cétshamain* ('the first of summer'). On this day the herds were moved away from settlement areas to new grazing areas and summer pastures.[5] There were a number of advantages to this practice. By moving to the higher pastures around May first, fresh food could be obtained for the animals at a time when supplies of stored fodder would have reduced or exhausted. In addition, it was extremely important to move the animals away from the emerging crops and grain.[6] For these reasons, the community divided itself on *Beltaine*.

Women and children left with the flocks and herds, taking with them equipment for cooking, dairying and spinning. It was important that everyone left simultaneously so that no one's cattle remained near the crops and fields. Men stayed behind to weed the fields and protect the crops (and in some cases, to prepare for warfare or raiding). It is believed that a few women would have also remained to garden, cook, take care of the sick and elderly, and provide for the working men.[7] Because of the separation of men and women at this time, *Beltaine* was the end of the marriage season (and therefore, traditionally an unlucky time to wed).[8]

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[4] Ibid.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 135-6. This a very old European practice which may have originated in communities which emphasized the raising of sheep, as sheep naturally move uphill in early spring. In fact, they are so difficult to restrain that farmers who wanted their milk and wool had to follow them and remain with them in the higher elevations.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 136.

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 136-7.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 138. Temporary marriages could end on this date as well.

b) As the summer progressed, old stores of vegetables and grain would have run out. July was often regarded as a period of scarcity.[9] *Lugnasad*, which took place on August 1st, marked the beginning of the grain harvest (primarily wheat and barley).[10] While the reaping of grain seems to have primarily been considered men's work, some women likely came down from the hills to help with the harvest (as less milking and dairying were required during this part of the summer).[11]

The summer months (May through September) were considered the prime season for raiding (another area of male concern), but little warfare took place in August due to the workload of the harvest. Early accounts of the assemblies associated with *Lugnasad* cite the importance of maintaining peace at this time.[12] These written sources also mention that marriage contracts were formed during the *Lugnasad* assemblies.[13] Some women would therefore have been present at the great harvest assemblies, and it may be that marriageable women left the summer pastures to be present at this important social event.[14]

While the other three seasonal festivals were primarily associated with the herding and care of animals, *Lugnasad* seems to have been predominantly a harvest festival. During the month of August, however, lambs were weaned from their mothers, causing the ewes to ovulate. Breeding at this point of the year would result in the birth of lambs five months later around the time of *Imbolc*, when fresh milk was most needed.[15] Quite a number of human

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[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 141-2.

[10] Some sources refer to the festival as taking place on two weeks on either side of that date, or a week on either side of the date, with *Lugnasad* at the center.

[11] Patterson, pp. 136-145. Flax was a valuable crop and an object of women's work. It was reaped in mid-August at which time (due to the decline in sheep's and cow's milk) some women could return from the summer pastures to assist with harvesting flax as well as wheat.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 145-6.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 141-145.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. *145*. Temporary marriages were often entered into at this time. These could be dissolved at *Beltaine* by the payment of wages to the woman, without loss of honour-price or reason for the divorce.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 143.

babies may also have been born around *Imbolc*, the product of sexual unions which took place nine months earlier at *Beltaine* (prior to the departure of women to the summer pastures).[16] This may have resulted in *Beltaine* folk traditions associated with joyful fertility celebrations and sexual unions.[17]

c) *Samain* (which means 'summer's end') marked the start of the winter season. It was also the end of the old year and the beginning of the new. Just as the Celtic day was reckoned from dusk to dusk (thus originating in darkness), so too did the new year originate in a dark period.[18] By *Samain* all the animals and their caretakers had returned from the summer pasture. The harvest had to be in by this date, and stores of cultivated vegetables and wild fruit and nuts were gathered and stored.[19] Many sheep and cattle were expecting next spring's young, and with fresh milk no longer available, people turned to stores of cheese produced from the summer's abundant milking and churning.[20] Some older and surplus animals (the latter primarily young males) were culled, but most were grazed on crop stubble and stores of grains and grasses throughout the winter.[21]

Samain also marked the end of the season for hunting deer and wild boar.[22] It coincided with the beginning of the boar's breeding season, during which time the animals would be left alone to breed. Earthly (and legendary) boar hunts took place in preparation for this festival, and wild or domestic pigs (fattened on acorns and crop

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[16] The fresh supply of milk at this time of year would coincide well with the new human mother's need for nutrition for the nursing of her own young.

[17] There were also sex and fertility overtones at Lugnasad, due to the marriages and subsequent sexual unions between humans (as well as animals) at this time of year.

[18] Patterson, p. 119.

[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

[20] Only the occasional cow was allowed to stay in milk over with winter (with its winter calf), prolonging lactation beyond October.

[21] Patterson, pp. 122, 136.

[22] Deer were protected to some degree from hunting during snow falls when they came down from the mountains in search of food. This practice encouraged hunting during the summer when animals were in peak condition but left them alone to breed.

stubble during the autumn) seem to have been the symbolic 'sacrificial animal' of the season.[23] After *Samain*, some outdoor work was still required (feeding and tending animals, and various household and property needs), but the emphasis shifted towards indoor and domestic activities (such as preserving meat and food stores, spinning and weaving).[24]

The bounty of food after the harvest, and the shift in social emphasis (outdoor to indoor) resulted in the guesting and feasting season. Nobles and clients met each other at rounds of feasts where relationships might be fostered or tested, and marriages arranged.[25] Informal courtships which began during customary visits to the hills and mountains during the summer (or at the August gatherings) sometimes led to more formal marriage negotiations or alliances during the winter months when the entire community was back together.[26] *Samain* also marked the end of the official season of warfare.

Feasting, however, could lead to political tensions (as well as competitive and socially purposeful violence).[27] These events may have been expressed through tales of mythical hunts and adventures, feasts and arguments, and battles and contests.[28] Storytelling formed an important part of the social activities associated with the dark half of the year, and music, poetry and tales would have been recited during the feasting.[29]

A great deal of pressure must have been involved in the period leading up to *Samain*. Crops and wild foods had to be harvested and stored, and sufficient grain, root vegetables, cheese, honey and salted meat and fish preserved to last throughout the winter. The herds had returned, including pregnant animals which had to be maintained

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[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 124-5.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 122.
[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 123-5.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 128.
[27] Although Samain was the official end of the raiding and warring season and few large battles were recorded as having taken place during this time, some plotting and violence no doubt occurred.
[28] Patterson, pp. 123-5.
[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 120, 126-7.

throughout the cold months. Deer and boar hunting had taken place, as well as other general preparations for the winter season. Creditors and debtors often settled their accounts at this time, and many lords now expected their winter tribute (partially consuming it during the lavish feasting).[30] Although it was often a time of plenty and relative leisure, there were numerous tensions and anxieties associated with the season. These may have led to rituals of propitiation and protection (as at *Beltaine*, the other most important liminal point of the year) as well as rites and offerings of thanksgiving.

In addition to the tangible pressures of the season, the beginning of winter was also a time of impending darkness and difficulty, with overtones of possible misfortune, illness or death. *Samain* was a particularly liminal time, when many interactions between the seen and unseen worlds took place. It is easy to see how imagery associated with danger, death and the spirit world became associated with this time of year. Important rites of propitiation and divination, and rituals associated with purification and thanksgiving (all of which are common in New Year's celebrations around the world) probably also took place at *Samain*, as this was a time of endings, darkness and completion, as well as new beginnings, creation, and the unknown.

d) *Imbolc* took place on February 1st and was the symbolic beginning of spring. Animals which had been bred during the summer gave birth around this time, and the return of fresh milk, as noted above, would have been extremely important. Cow's milk had long since run out and stores of food largely consumed during the guesting and feasting season (as well as by the family itself during the winter months). Old food supplies were depleted and new supplies had not yet come.[31] Farmers were anxious to resume their dwindling store of milk and therefore worked to ensure that their sheep gave birth before their cows, as sheep are able to graze lower

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 123-6.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 131. Guesting and feasting was largely ended between Imbolc and Beltaine.

for grass and survive better on the meager vegetation of late winter.[32] In addition, ewe's milk is extremely delicious and nutritious and has a higher fat content than cow's milk, making it more valuable during the cold weather and the almost inevitable food shortages which took place at the end of winter.[33]

The festival of Imbolc had a predominantly female focus. In addition to assisting with or supervising the birth and care of animals, women were responsible for milking, churning and dairying.[34] During the winter months they were also in charge of providing hospitality to guests and supervising the use of food stores for domestic and social consumption. In Irish folk tradition, women likewise opened up their cupboards on Feb. 1st to take stock of food supplies. The birth of lambs at *Imbolc* was a time of great happiness,providing new food stores and a sense of plenty, and ensuring the continuation of life.

The name of the festival may be derived from its associations with ewe's milk (supporting, on various and often differing grounds, the false etymology in Cormac's Glossary). Some have suggested a connection with purification and lustration rituals; a derivation from words denoting 'belly or womb' (*imm* + *bolg*) is also possible. Whatever its origin, the emphasis of the feast day is on female interests and activities, birth, and the production of milk.[35] In Christian times the holiday was associated with Saint Bridget, a divine figure credited with the protection of women, infants and animals (and one who most agree was originally a pagan goddess). While the Christian feast of Candlemas (which takes place near *Imbolc*) was only instituted in the eleventh century, there are indications that, prior to the advent of Christianity,the ritual focus of the season was on motherhood, animal and human.[36]

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[32] *Ibid.*, p. 130. Early calving (before the first week in March) could be dangerous, as it may be 4-6 weeks before the cows have sufficient milk to feed their young (due to low vegetation levels).
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 131.
[34] Ibid., pp. 131-2.
[35] Ibid., p. 130; Hamp, Eric P., 'imbolc, óimelc' in *Studia Celtica, Vol. 14/15* (1979/1980), pp. 106-113.
[36] Patterson, pp. 129-30.

For men this was a season of relative inactivity. It was not yet time to plow or plant seeds, but the observation of weather omens in preparation for these activities took place at *Imbolc*. Men's work with the land and the animals would resume sometime after *Imbolc* (although sowing did not take place until March).[37] As the weather warmed and the days grew longer, in addition to agricultural concerns, spring was a time of resumed raiding. Spring warfare was less profitable than summer raiding due to the weakened condition of the cattle, so it was often a useful time to settle disputes and rivalry among allies and vassals eliminate rivals, and align forces prior to the larger outings of spring and fall. These were strategic activities associated with planning and waiting, rather than full fledged raids or warfare.[38] It is interesting to note that while clients were obliged to provide military service during the hostings of spring and autumn, in some cases they could only be raised in a tribal 'hosting' between mid-January and early March (the period of time surrounding *Imbolc*).[39] This tradition may be associated with a secondary manifestation of Saint Brigid: *Bríg ambue*, 'Bridget of the cowless warrior'.[40]

Summary

In viewing the seasonal activities associated with the yearly cycle, it seems reasonable to suggest that the bright half of the year (*Beltaine* to *Samain*) was associated with male energies or concerns, and the dark half of the year (*Samain* to *Beltaine*) with female concerns.[41] The male half began on May 1st when women left to tend the herds, while the men remained in the settlement to tend the crops. Due to the separation of the sexes, Beltaine was the end of the

[37] Ibid., p. 129

[38] It was best to settle disputes and rivalry before engaging in larger campaigns of summer and fall, when raiding of well-fed cattle was worth the effort of driving them away over great distances.

[39] Patterson, pp. 133-4.

[40] Ibid., pp. 132-3.

[41] I am deeply indebted to Nerys Patterson for her wonderful research on the seasonal cycles of work in *Cattle Lords and Clansmen.* It was here that I first encountered the suggestion that there may have been male and female halves or cycles in the yearly work pattern (p. 19).

marriage season as well as the beginning of the primary season for warfare and hunting (both of which are male concerns). At *Lugnasad*, male activities were still the main focus, as reaping and other harvest activities were primarily the work of men. However, there would have been some female presence to assist with the harvest, a presence supported by the prevalent marriage customs associated with *Lugnasad.*

The female half of the year began at *Samain*, the end of the old year and the beginning of the new cycle of life. Women and herds had returned from summer pasture, and many of the animals were pregnant from summer breeding. Samain was the end of the hunting and warfare season, and the work focus shifted from outdoor to indoor activities (many of which were presided over by women, including feasting and hospitality). This was the start of the dark half of the year, a liminal period associated with the unknown (the supernatural) and creation (often linked with female energies). *Imbolc*, the other festival which took place during this half of the year, was associated with birth, lactation, female concerns and the continuation of life. Men would have been relatively inactive during this season, waiting for the proper time to plough and sow, and planning raids and hunting in the warmer months to come.

Gender Roles and Folklore

Folk customs and beliefs associated with the Quarter Days formed a strong part of Irish culture well into the present era. A great deal of energy went into the observation of these holidays and the symbolism associated with them. Because of the connection with important agricultural practices the church could not efface these indigenous calendar customs, and, while some holidays received a measure of Christian overlay, many of the practices associated with them reflect age-old rhythms and beliefs. Folk traditions recorded as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (as well as the larger body of tradition documented in the last century in Ireland and Scotland) seem to reflect a pattern of male and female activities and symbolism which mirrors that of the yearly work cycle.

a) Prior to the seasonal movement of people and flocks on *Beltaine*, important assemblies and festivals would have taken place. In some cases, new chiefs or leaders were inaugurated and

installed.[42] The festivals may have involved large assemblies of people and the ritual use of bonfires (as well as offerings or sacrifices) to encourage abundance and fertility and ensure the protection of livestock and produce.[43] Early texts and folk traditions mention the running of cattle between two fires to protect them from disease. Although there was a joyous and life-affirming aspect to the *Beltaine* celebrations, it was also a time of potential danger. Therefore it was important to ritually ensure that the crops, the animals and the community survived and maintained health during this important growing season (notably, a time when the community was divided).[44] Irish, Scottish and Welsh folk records from a variety of eras indicate that the *Beltaine* fires were created by men (who also presided over the attendant rituals of propitiation and protection).[45] A number of rituals associated with protection and propitiation were recorded in eighteenth century Scotland, which feature men in the central role. At *Beltaine*, groups of men gathered to create a caudle of eggs, butter, oatmeal and milk, which was then poured onto the ground as an offering. Special cakes were also created by the men which were offered to various animals as an entreaty against harm to the flocks.[46] In Ireland, the male head of the household sometimes walked around the boundaries of the farm in a protective rite. He was often accompanied by others who carried implements and tools associated with animal husbandry, as well as seed grain, well water and the herb vervain (*verbina officinalis*). The procession started in the east and stopped at each of the four cardinal directions to enact a

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[42] Patterson, p. 135.

[43] Ibid., p. 139.

[44] Danaher, Kevin, *The Year in Ireland* (1972, Mercier Press, Cork / Dublin), pp. 88-9. Certain Beltaine customs were observed in which the whole community could participate, such as the gathering of May flowers or boughs, or the setting up of a May bush to ensure an abundance of milk throughout the summer.

[45] Patterson, pp. 139-140; Danaher, pp. 95-6; Carmichael, Alexander, ed., *Carmina Gadelica* (1992, Lindisfarne Press, Edinburgh), pp. 586-7; McNeill, F. Marian, *The Silver Bough - Volume Two* (1959, William MacLellan, Glasgow), pp. 55-58, 61; Owen, Trefor M., *Welsh Folk Customs* (1987, Gomer Press, Llandysul, Dyfed), p. 97.

[46] Patterson, p. 139; Pennant as quoted in McNeill, pp. 58-9.

small ceremony (which was performed by the father).[47] In both Scotland and Ireland the father of the house often recited a blessing and performed certain rites to protect the family, the house and the farmstead, as well as the herds and crops.[48]

Another folk rite from Scotland involved the baking of a *Beltaine* cake by groups of men or boys who had gathered for that purpose. The cake was broken into pieces and distributed to the group. One of the pieces was blackened with ash, and whoever received that piece was known as the Hag (*Cailleach*) of *Beltaine*. This person was treated as a symbolic victim of sorts, and was sometimes picked up and tossed 'into' (i.e. over) the fire.[49] It has been suggested that these 'victims' represented male heads of households who had failed to pay their debts or obligations, and were thus excluded from rituals. Martin Martin records that in 17th c. Scotland all fires in the community were extinguished on the Eve of *Beltaine*, and brands from a fire ritually kindled by nine groups of nine men were then distributed to each household (except those households which were socially and thus ritually penalized or sanctioned).[50] This may have led to folk beliefs in which fire or coals were not given out of the house at *Beltaine*, for fear of the household's 'luck' leaving with the fire. This custom may originate in earlier times when only those who were castigated or deviant in some way would need to ask for fire on *Beltaine* (all others having duly received the new fire).[51]

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[47] Danaher pp. 116-117.

[48] Ibid.; Carmichael, pp. 83-4.

[49] McNeill, p. 60.

[50] Monro, Donald, ed., Martin Martin – A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland circa 1695 (1999, Birlinn, Edinburgh), p. 73.

[51] Patterson, pp. 137-40. Beltaine traditions often involved a fear of the theft of milk by witches or fairies and therefore included propitiatory rites and the recitation of prayers to protect milk products. Various agreements were re-negotiated on May first, such as those between tenants and lords. Indeed, many lords received part of their tribute at this time in the form of milk, butter, curds and cheese. A number of *Beltaine* traditions mention the offering of 'first fruits' to the head of the household to ensure luck and abundance in the coming year (first water from the well, first milk from the dairy, etc.). This was considered highly preferable to having these items go 'out of the house' or farmstead (or to

There may have been a predilection for male symbolism and activities at *Beltaine*, with an attendant fear or superstition of female energies. Natives in the Scottish village of Barvas maintained an ancient custom of sending a man across a salmon stream early on May morning, and preventing any female from doing so in the belief that they would hinder the salmon coming into the river.[52] The mock 'sacrificial' victim previously noted was called the Hag of *Beltaine*, a name with potential derogatory connotations. In many folklore contexts, witches or witch-like figures are referred to as *caillacha*. Indeed, in some areas of Scotland cattle were driven around the fire to protect them from witches, and piles of straw, furze or broom thrown into the fire by the cowherds who cried out 'Fire, Fire – Burn the Witches.'[53] The separation of the sexes may have also manifested in May Day festivities in which men dressed as women or played female roles (including the May Queen).[54] This may have been a symbolic way of emphasizing male energies, as women do not seem to have played a large part in these rituals.[55] Guising (also a part of Samain festivities at *Samain*) may indicate the liminal nature of the holiday and symbolize the upcoming crossover of gender roles or associations.[56]

b) Lugnasad was a favourite time for the holding of fairs and assemblies, and early sources record the details of the Lugnasad gatherings or *oenaighi* of Carmun and Tailtiu. The Annals of the Four Masters state that the line of horses, carts and people thronging to the Lugnasad fair at Tailtiu in 1168 was six miles long. While the

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'others'), and may reflect anxieties associated with the payment of tributes at this time.

[52] Martin, p. 16.

[53] McNeill, p. 61.

[54] Patterson, pp. 139-40; Danaher pp. 99-103.

[55] Ibid.

[56] There are a number of traditions which take place at Samain pertaining to horses or mares (one of the symbols of the Goddess of Sovereignty). There are also some Beltaine folk rites associated with horses, such as the Hobby 'oss of Cornwall (and others). These are often associated with fertility, perhaps symbolizing the union or linking of the energies of the sexes, before the women leave the community (and before the yearly cycle moves fully into the male half of the year).

Festival of Carmun waned during the Middle Ages, the Fair of Tailtiu continued into the 1700's. Numerous other harvest festivals are still held, including the numerous Lammas Fairs and the Gooseberry or Bilberry Fairs.[57] On the Eve of Lugnasad, great bonfires were lit in Scotland, and '*saining*' rites or charms were performed to ensure that the milk of the cattle retained its virtue and substance.[58] A special cake was made of sun-dried grain (usually barley) which was toasted on a fire of rowan or other sacred wood. Pieces of this cake were distributed by the male head of household to the members of the family who then walked around the hearth fire in a sunwise direction.[59]

On *Lugnasad*, it was hoped that the first crops were ready for harvesting, and considered improper to cut any grain before this time. If the crops were not yet completely ripe, a symbolic portion was cut by the male head of the household on this day (and the remainder when it was fully ready). The newly gathered crop was then used to prepare a festive meal.[60] While many women were still away tending the herds, some women would have returned to assist with the flax harvest (which was often considered women's work) as well as the harvesting of grain.[61] Their presence at the *Lugnasad* assemblies led to the arrangement of both temporary and permanent marriages (August being a good time for such alliances prior to the heavy work-load of the harvest and the pre-winter season).[62]

In Scotland, an important folk custom associated with the harvest was the cutting of the last sheaf. This was sometimes referred to as the Hag or *Cailleach*, and the privilege of cutting it was often given to a young woman. However, a male reaper held the sheaf while the woman cut it with a scythe. In many cases, the sheaf was considered to be an undesirable object which was passed onto other

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[57] Danaher, pp. 175-6.
[58] McNeill, pp. 97-8.
[59] Ibid., pp. 98-9. The embers of this fire were put into an old pot along with bits of old iron and carried sunwise by the man of the house around the fields and flocks
[60] Danaher, p. 167; Patterson, p. 142.
[61] Patterson, p. 136.
[62] Patterson, p. 138; Danaher p. 169.

farmers who had not yet completed their reaping. The last person to receive the *Cailleach* considered this a potential symbol of upcoming need or want. In other cases, though, the sheaf was dressed and decorated, and hung up at the harvest supper (and variously referred to either as the Harvest Maiden or *Cailleach*). She was often toasted at the supper: 'Here's to the one who helped us with the harvest.'[63] We can perceive a parallel pattern of symbolism associated with the mixing of the sexes (due to the return of some women at harvest time) and the beginning of the marriage season, with folk traditions in which the male reaper holds the stalk while the female cuts it (she helps with the harvest, but is not in charge of it) and the mixed imagery pertaining to the last sheaf of the grain harvest (undesirable hag imagery, versus the desirable maiden who assists with the harvest and is the recipient of honour and gratitude.).

c) November Day and Eve were regarded by the old people as one of the leading festivals of the year in modern Irish folk tradition. It was believed that all crops and livestock had to be in by *Samain*, and that spirits and fairies were abroad on this night. Offerings of food were left near the doors of houses for the fairies in order to ensure their favour in the coming year. [64] The folk belief that the fairies 'flitted' or changed residence at *Samain* and *Beltaine* may reflect the seasonal movement of parts of the community. Divination was common at *Samain* (and usually associated with love, fertility and marriage), and these rites were often performed using apples and hazelnuts, the produce of trees associated with the Otherworld.[65] Guising, processions and pranks also took place, and many activities which were not normally acceptable were overlooked or tolerated.[66]

At dusk on *Samain* great bonfires were lit. It is interesting to note that in many cases *Beltaine* fires were lit at dawn, while *Samain* bonfires were often made at dusk.[67] Torches were lit from these fires and used by the men to circle the farms and fields in a sunwise

[63] McNeill, pp. 120-128.
[64] Danaher, 200, 205.
[65] Ibid., pp. 202, 218-227; McNeill (Vol. Three), pp. 31-39.
[66] Danaher pp. 210-212; McNeill (Vol. Three), p. 24-5.
[67] McNeill, pp. 56-62.

direction for protection.[68] Rites of propitiation took place in many areas, such as the traditional offerings of ale made to a sea-deity in the Isle of Lewis.[69] Feasting also took place (even in the poorest of households) and apples and hazelnuts were often included in this ritual meal.[70] In certain Scottish communities, a *Samain* cake was traditionally made by groups of women who gathered specially for this purpose. They began their work after sundown, marking out a large space in the house by a circular line (inside of which was considered to be consecrated ground). The women sat on the ground in a circle and took turns preparing and toasting the sacred cake, working in a sunwise direction.[71] It should be noted that while women often prepared food (including special oatcakes or bannocks for the holidays), the creation of the *Samain* cake involved a ritualized ceremony held only by women (and contrasts with the ritual creation of *Beltaine* foods by groups of men).

Another interesting Samain custom from Irish tradition was the procession associated with the *Láir Bhán* ('White Mare'). A group of youths, blowing on cow horns, were led by a person dressed in a white robe or sheet holding a decorated horse skull. They processed from house to house, and at the doorway a long string of verses was recited.[72] The white mare was sometimes a symbol of the Goddess of Sovereignty (a figure who, as we shall see, was associated with *Samain*). Similar imagery may also underlie the *Mari Lwyd* tradition of Wales. This likewise involved a procession with a decorated horse skull which went from house to house to engage in poetic contests. The *Mari* customs also took place during the dark half of the year, between Christmas and New Year. [73] The nature of certain Yuletide

[68] Ibid., pp. 17-20; Danaher p. 206.
[69] McNeill, p. 20.
[70] Danaher pp. 204-6.
[71] McNeill pp. 21-2.
[72] Danaher p. 213; Owen, pp. 49-56. The procession associated with the *Láir Bhán* has s number of similarities with the Welsh procession of the *Mair Lwyd* (perhaps 'Grey Mare'). In early Irish legends, light colours such as white or grey often denoted the sacredness or significance of an animal or thing. In addition, many Christmas / Yuletide or Gregorian New Year's customs were in all likelihood originally associated with Samain (the old Celtic New Year).
[73] Owen, pp 49-56.

customs suggests that some *Samain* customs (previously connected with the liminal period associated with the old New Year's rites) were transferred to the Gregorian New Year (or the period between Christmas and New Year).

Samain has a pronounced association with spirits, gods / fairies and the forces of the unseen world. Numerous legends and folktales describe interactions between the inhabitants of this world and the Otherworld, in many cases referring to the appearance of ominous or mysterious men and women in the form of deities, spirits, fairies or witches (who re-appear in modern Halloween customs and imagery). Guising, pranks and divination attest to the extreme liminal nature of the holiday, a time 'outside of time' when interactions between the worlds could take place. It was a time of darkness, mystery and the unknown, but also a time of creation. The New Year was born out of darkness, just as the Celtic day started at dusk. The shift from male to female energies was symbolized by the creation of *Samain* cakes by groups of women working after sundown, the processions associated with the white or grey mare, and imagery associated with witches, hags and other supernatural spirits whose powers were honoured but also feared.

d) *Imbolc* has a pronounced female energy, with its focus on birth and lactation. In later times, the holiday was associated with Saint Bridget, and numerous rites took place which honoured this female figure. In Ireland it was believed that Bridget travelled around the countryside on this night, blessing people and livestock. Cakes or butter were put outside on the windowsill as an offering, to see if she had come. Sometimes a sheaf of corn was placed beside the cake for the saint's beloved white cow.[74] A ribbon or piece of cloth known as *brat Bríde* ('Bridget's Mantle') could also be left outside to be touched by the saint. Her blessing imbued the object with healing and protective properties, including assistance in childbirth.[75] Bridget's crosses were made of straw or rushes (three- or four-armed crosses, diamonds or lozenge shapes) and hung in the home and barn. The ceremonial decoration of the crosses often involved the impersonation of Bridget by a member of the family (in many cases

[74] Danaher, p. 15.
[75] Ibid., pp. 31-3.

the eldest daughter).[76] A sheaf of straw was sometimes made into the shape of a human figure (representing Bridget) and then dressed and decorated. In some areas unmarried girls carried the figure around to each house, bringing the blessing of Bridget to the household.[77]

In eighteenth century Scotland, a sheaf of oats was similarly dressed in women's apparel and placed in a large basket called 'Bridget's Bed.' A wooden stick or club was then placed next to the figure. A woman who was in charge of the ritual and her assistants cried out three times: 'Bridget is come, Bridget is welcome.' This was done just prior to going to bed. Upon arising in the morning the women looked among the ashes of the fire to see if the impression of Bridget's club was there (an omen of good crops and a prosperous year to come).[78] Later folk accounts from nineteenth century Scotland describe the Bridget figure as having been decorated with shells, crystals, flowers and greenery. A wand of sacred wood (such as birch, broom, bramble or willow) was placed by the figure, and the track of this object was sought in the morning in the ashes.[79] Groups of girls carried the figure in a solemn procession. They visited every home, and everyone was expected to give a gift and honour Bridget. Afterward the girls retired to a particular house and feasted on the food given out during the procession. Although the door was barred and the windows secured, the figure of Bridget was placed where she could be seen by all. Later in the evening groups of young men arrived and humbly asked permission to honour Bridget. After some parleying they were admitted, and dancing and singing took place throughout the night.[80]

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[76] Ibid., pp. 15-23.

[77] Ibid., pp. 24-31. In parts of southern and western Ireland, young men went about in procession, and in earlier times they dressed in women's clothing. Some carried the Bridget figure with them, but their procession involved music and laughter, and was quite different from the solemn women's ceremony.

[78] Monro, p. 81.

[79] McNeill, pp. 130-131: In some cases the last sheaf of harvest is the one used to create the Bridget doll. In other cases, the last sheaf is finally disposed of at Imbolc.

[80] Carmichael pp. 580-583. At dawn a hymn is sung and the feast's remnants distributed to poor women.

At this time of year, men waited for the appropriate time for spring ploughing. They sometimes turned a sod or two symbolically at *Imbolc* and engaged in various forms of weather divination. To see a hedgehog come out of its hole was a good sign. If the animal stayed out, this indicated the return of good weather. However, if it returned to its hole, more bad weather was to come. [81] In Scotland the revelatory animal was a serpent (the hibernating adder). On *Imbolc* it was supposed to emerge from its hollow and a hymn was sung to it:

> Today is the day of Bridget, the serpent shall come
> from the hole
> I will not molest the serpent, nor will the serpent
> molest me.[82]

The serpent was sometimes referred to as 'The Daughter of Ivor' or 'The Queen' (indicating its female identity) and its hole was often referred to as its 'knoll or mound' (reminiscent of the significance attached to fairy mounds or hills in Celtic tradition). In this survey of folk traditions we can see that the folk beliefs and ritual traditions connected with the four Quarter Days reflects the alternation of gender roles seen in the annual work cycle previously described.

Seasonal Patterns and Divine Figures

In addition to gender-related patterns associated with the yearly work cycle and traditional folk customs, it may be possible to demonstrate that a seasonal cycle of male and female deities was also associated with the yearly alternation of gender roles. Not surprisingly, these deities are some of the most prominent and well-documented divine or supernatural figures in early Irish sources: The Dagda, Lug, The Mórrigan and Bríg (Bridget).

a) Keating associated the *Beltaine* ceremonies with the hill of Uisnech, a site in the east central lowlands which was traditionally regarded as the sacred center of Ireland. He describes how a bonfire was lit there in the midst of a large assembly on whose behalf

[81] Danaher pp. 13-14. This custom was transformed into Groundhog Day in the United States.
[82] Carmichael pp. 583-5.

sacrifices were made. While no other extant literary evidence corroborates his report, archaeological excavation on the summit of Uisnech revealed a large area of scorched earth containing the charred bones of many animals.[83] That fires were associated with the holiday in fairly early times is evident from the reference to *Beltaine* in Cormac's Glossary. He states that a 'lucky' fire (comprised of two fires made by Druids 'with great incantations') was created at *Beltaine*, through which cattle were driven to safeguard them from disease.[84]

There is also a reference to Uisnech in the "Wooing of Étain." The tale mentions a famous king of the Tuatha Dé Danann called Echu Ollathir, a figure who was also known as the Dagdae (the Good God): 'for it was he who performed miracles and saw to the weather and the harvest, and that is why he was called the Good God.'[85] Later in the tale, the god's dwelling is said to have been at Uisnech, the center of Ireland.[86] In various sources the Dagda appears as a warrior and protector. He was said to have expertise in druidic magic and to own a magical club with which he could wield power over life and death. He possessed many fertility attributes and owned a cauldron of inexhaustible abundance.[87] In the figure of the Dagda we see a beneficent and powerful deity associated with abundance and fertility, magic and protection, weather and the harvest, and the powers of life and death (all concepts associated with *Beltaine*) who was said to live at the very site where *Beltaine* rituals were recorded as having taken place.[88]

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[83] Patterson, pp. 139-40.

[84] Stokes, Whitley, ed., *Sanas Chormaic* (1868, Calcutta, Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society), p. 29.

[85] Gantz, Jeffrey, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (1981, Penguin, London), p. 39; Gray, Elizabeth, *Cath Maige Tuired* (1982, Irish Texts Society, Naas), pp. 44-45. In the Battle of Moytura, the Dagda's epithet is explained as referring to his many powers and abilities ('good' meaning 'good at many things.')

[86] Gantz, p. 40: Uisnech Mide 'with Ériu extending equally far in every direction, north and south, east and west.'

[87] Gray (1982), pp. 24-5, 47.

[88] Ross, Anne, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (1996, Academy, Chicago), pp. 78, 83, 203, 213, 224, 235-6, 257-8, 463, 466-7, 470-2; Watkins, Calvert, *Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (2000, Houghton Mifflin, Boston / New York), p. 9. I

b) The origin of the Festival of *Lugnasad* was attributed to the god Lug, the Irish representative of a widespread, multi-skilled Celtic deity (variously appearing as Lug / Lleu / Lugos). One of the most important tales associated with Lug states that he instituted the festival to honour his foster-mother Tailtiu who had died from the exertions of clearing many plains (presumably in preparation for agriculture). Other versions of the origin myth state that Lug set up the assembly to honour two of his wives (who had also 'died').[89] These stories are interesting in light of the social arrangement at this time of year, when women return to help with the harvest, and also when men's wives had been absent from them for quite some time. The legends appear to reflect the male focus of the holiday, while honouring the secondary (but very important) female contribution.

Lug's association with agriculture is explained in the tale "*Cath Maige Tuired.*" Here he is represented as a multi-talented and powerful deity who assists the Tuatha Dé Danann to free itself from the oppression of the Fomoire (to whom it must pay an exorbitant tribute). The Tuatha Dé Dannan king, at the time, was Bres, an

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would here mention the figure of 'Bel' who seems to have possibly been connected with the Beltaine rituals. A number of scholars have postulated that he may be connected (in name, at least) with Belenus, a widely-worshipped Celtic deity who was venerated in Gaul, Italy and the British Isles. There are 31 dedications to him throughout Europe (an unusually high number in terms of survivals). The root of his name (and presumably also of the word *Beltaine*) means 'to shine or burn; shining white.' It is possible that the word (as utilized in the name of the holiday) was simply a descriptive term which in later times suggested the existence of a certain figure associated with these qualities. For example, in the tale known as the 'Wooing of Étain' the young of every kind of livestock were said to have been 'assigned' to the possession of 'Bel,' a mythical figure supposedly associated with the name of the holiday (which was explained as meaning the 'fires of Bel'). The root also occurred in the name of another divine figure, *Belatucadros* (perhaps 'Bright Beautiful One'), a deity associated with war and protection. Dedications to this god are found in many areas where many images of the horned god (in his warrior aspect) also occur. These divine images also suggest an association with protection and fertility.

[89] Gwynn, Edward, ed., *The Metrical Dindsenchas,*Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1924, reprinted 1991: pt. 4, pp. 146-163 (Tailtiu); pt. 3, pp. 40-54 (Bua/Nas).

ungenerous and unfit ruler.[90] Later in the proceedings, Bres is imprisoned by the Tuatha Dé. However, Lug spares his life in return for agricultural information (specifically, when to plow, sow and reap).[91]

Just as women begin to 'infringe' upon the male half of the year in a beneficial and helpful capacity at this time, so do various divine women manifest to enact a helpful and symbolic role in the myths and legends associated with *Lugnasad.* Most of these divine women are said to have 'died' and been buried in certain hills (much as mortal women are remembered, but not physically present, while they physically reside in the hills or mountains at this time of year).[92] For example, Tailtiu is recorded as having reclaimed meadowland from woodland with an axe (after which it became a blossoming plain known as Bregmag). She then perished on the new moon nearest the Feast of Lug, and from that time on the 'chief Fair of Erin' was held around her grave.[93] The site of the *Oenach* of 'Teltown' (an Anglicization of Tailtiu) was marked by a mound, and the site may still be visited today. Similarly, after the death of Lug's wives, they were buried at sacred hills (Nas at the site named for her, and her sister Bui at Cnogba (the Hill of Knowth).[94] After their

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[90] Gray, Elizabeth, 'Cath Maige Tuired: Myth and Structure (1-24) in *Eigse 18-19* (Vol. XVIII, Pt 1, 1980), pp 201-208. Bres is the son of the Fomorian king Elatha ('art, science, acquired craft or skill') and a Tuatha Dé Danann woman (Ériu). Bres is unfit ruler (presumably due to his father's ancestry). Lug is also of mixed ancestry, but his father is Tuatha Dé Danann, which is what appears to matter most. Bres is also the offspring of a union which took place without the consent of either divine family. For both divine and mortal marriage arrangements, a couple's union had consequences for both of their people.

[91] Gray (1982), pp. 66-69.

[92] Danaher, pp. 169-171. Many of the *Lugnasad* assemblies were held on hills, heights or mountains.

[93] Gwynn (Vol IV), pp. 147-163, 415.

[94] The mixed imagery of the harvest sheaf (maiden / cailleach) may symbolize an ambivalent attitude towards the presence of women during the male season (or perhaps the impending arrival / encroachment of the female half of the year). Likewise, the Goddess of Sovereignty has a dual aspect (life / death, beneficence / fierceness, etc.) See O'Cathasaigh, Tomás, 'The Eponym of

death, the Gaels came 'with Lug' from the site of Tailtiu 'where he raised a fire' to mourn his wives, an event which then grew into the assembly of Taltiu.[95]

Another divine woman associated with *Lugnasad* was Carmun. The *Dindshenchas* account associated with the Feast of Carmun mentions the assembly mounds at the site named for her, as well as the great gathering which took place there at harvest time. Carmun is described as an experienced battle leader who (out of distress or want) ventured westward into Ireland using magic to attempt to destroy the sap of 'all swelling fruit.' A female member of the Tuatha Dé Danann (Bé Chuille, 'Woman of Hazel') and three male deities go out to meet Carmun and her three sons, who are subsequently defeated. Carmun is captured and later dies 'among the oaks of the strong graves.' The host of the Tuatha Dé comes to mourn her ('for the delight of her beauty') and to raise the first wailing over her. This was the 'first true fair of Carmun.' It is interesting to note that Carmun's grave was dug by Bres (according to the judgement of the elders).[96] The festivities associated with the assembly evidently continued for seven days. The first day of the assembly was the fair of the saints, the second for high kings, and the third day for the women of Leinster: 'womenkind not small in esteem abroad; this is their gathering, the third day.'[97]

Although to my knowledge a direct connection has not yet been established, it is likely that a *Lugnasad* assembly was also held at Emain Macha or Ard Macha (and associated with the goddess Macha). In the *Dindshenchas* of Ard Macha, the goddess appears as the wife of Nemed, a figure credited with the clearing of twelve plains (including one which bore her name). She was buried on the

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Cnogba' (*Éigse* Vol. 23, 1989) for the association of Lug's wife Bui with the Cailleach and / or the Goddess of Sovereignty.

[95] Gwynn (Vol III), pp. 48-53. Bui's name is spelled '*bua*' and '*búa*' in the Dindsenchas of *Cnogba* (Gwynn, Vol III), pp. 40-47. *Nas* is a poetical term for death. *Bu* may also signify 'death (or be related to *bó* 'cow'). See O'Cathasaigh's article in the above footnote for a discussion of this term.

[96] Gwynn, Vol III, pp. 2-9.

[97] Ibid., pp. 11-17. The women's fair was followed by that of the Leinstermen, various princes, the companies of Ireland, and Clann Condla.

plain, and to mourn her men of Ulster held the Assembly of Macha at the site. The account goes on to tell the story of her subsequent pairing with Cruinn mac Agnoman, a man 'rich in herds.' He goes to an assembly and boasts that his wife, although pregnant, can run faster than two horses belonging to King Conchobar. She wins the race, but dies from the effort (after having given birth to twins). While the date of the festival is not mentioned, it should be noted that horse races are a prominent feature of many *Lugnasad* assemblies.[98]

While a male figure (Lug) arranged and instituted the harvest festival, a variety of female divine figures associated with agriculture or fertility are connected with the mythology of *Lugnasad.* After their primary contribution, however, their physical presence is no longer a necessary factor (although respect and veneration for their contribution is still present). This appears to reflect men's roles as caretakers of the crops and the harvest, and women's roles in assisting with the harvest (returning from the hills to perform this act). Tailtiu, Carmun and Macha were associated with sacred hills or mounds, and all were honoured at a *Lugnasad* assembly. All three demonstrate some connection with agriculture or abundance (Tailtiu cleared the land; Carmun used magic to try and destroy the 'sap of fruit,' Macha brought abundance to her husband). After bestowing their blessing or contribution, the women 'die' or 'disappear' into various hills or mounds, where they are honoured (but, for the most part, are no longer present).

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[98] Gwynn, Vol. IV, pp. 3-7 and pp. 125-131. Macha's father's name, in various accounts, is given as Midir or Aed Ruad. In a pre-tale to the *Táin* (Kinsella, Thomas, *The Tain,* 1977, Oxford University Press, p. 7) Macha describes herself as the daughter of *Sainrith mac Imbaith.* The word *imbaith* may signify 'ocean' (relating to *imbádud* 'wallowing, drowning' or *bádud* 'act of submerging, drowning'; definitions taken from the DIL). The swimming of horses also took place at many Lugnasad gatherings. In the Dindsenchas of Ard Macha (Gwynn, Vol. IV, pp. 124-131), Macha is said to come from 'the waters' or 'the ocean waves.' The sale of foals took place at numerous fairs, and the racing or swimming of mares or stallions may have occurred to help establish the value of their offspring (Patterson, p. 144). The clearing of plains is mentioned in the tale of Macha (wife of Nemed) as it is in the accounts pertaining to Tailtiu.

c) One of the most interesting mythological episodes associated with *Samain* is found in "Cath Maige Tuired."[99] Here it states that the Dagda had arranged to meet a woman about a week before *Samain*. He encounters her at the Unshin River in Connacht, and finds her with nine loosened tresses on her head, with one foot to the north of the river and one foot to the south. After their union, she provides assistance to the Dagda (and the Tuatha Dé Danann) in the form of strategic planning, magic, physical support and prophetic information. She tells the Dagda to summon the *aés dána* to her (for council and magical intervention) and together they chant spells against the enemy. She herself goes to destroy the Fomorian king. Magical weapons made by the 'three gods of Danu' (a figure who is equated with the Mórrigan in one passage) provide an especially powerful boon. These events take place the week before *Samain*, after which the Tuatha Dé disperses, arranging to reconvene on *Samain* Eve for the battle itself.[100]

There are a number of remarkable details pertaining to the Mórrigan's involvement in this significant event. She stands astride a river whose name (*uinnius*) signifies an ash-tree (or a spear-shaft of ash). The ash was a sacred tree in early Irish tradition, and in Norse mythology it was the representative of the world tree. The union of the Dagda and the Mórrigan at this site around the time of *Samain* is clearly of great significance. Once she has united with the Dagda, she bestows her blessing and assistance upon the gods, and they begin to gain strength and power in their struggle.

While a number of deities assist with the battle (especially Lug, Ogma, Goibniu and Dian Cecht), after the strengthening of the host by the Mórrigan and her poetic chanting, the battle turns in favour of the Tuatha Dé. The text states that after her powerful magical incantation, the battle broke 'immediately afterwards' and the Fomoire were routed. The Mórrigan then announces the victory to

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[99] Rees, Alwyn and Brinley, *Celtic Heritage* (1989, Thames and Hudson, New York), p. 32; Gray (1982), pp. 44-47.

[100] Gray (1982), pp. 44-47. While the timing of certain of these events is hazy, the union of the Dagda and the Mórrigan is clearly stated to have taken place just before Samain Eve. The summoning of the gods of power by the Mórrigan is also said to have taken place a week before Samain.

various heights and *síd* mounds, rivers and waters.'[101] The union of the divine couple results in the acquisition of the goddess' blessing and assistance which eventually guarantees the success of the venture (and the prosperity of the tribe). The Mórrigan's actions are reminiscent of (and likely symbolize) her role as Goddess of Sovereignty. Here we might recall the various folklore traditions associated with *Samain* noted above which included the symbolism of the white or grey mare (symbol of the Sovereignty Goddess) as well as the power and skill associated with poetic crafting.

The magical skill attributed to the Mórrigan also connects her with *Samain*. In *Lebor Gabála* the Mórrígan's mother Ernmas was said to be a witch, and both her daughters Macha and Mórrigan also display skill in magic, shapeshifting and prophecy. Witches or hags (caillecha) were associated with *Samain* in numerous sources. In *Táin Bó Cuailgne* the Mórrigan appears to Cú Chulainn as a beautiful young woman and an old hag, a feat which various goddesses or divine women associated with Sovereignty also perform.[102] The concept of a trio of witches or warrior-goddesses (much like the Mórrigan and her sisters Macha and Nemain, all three of whom are referred to as *Badb*, 'scald-crow') may have been known throughout the Celtic world. This is suggested by a Gallo-Roman inscription to the *Cathobodua* ('Battle-Raven') as well as a British inscription to the 'three *lamia* or witches.' The imagery associated with these figures is still manifest in the connection between Hallowe'en or *Samain* and the power (and fear of) hags and witches.

Two other divine women associated with magic and witchcraft were also connected with *Samain* in early Irish tradition. Tlachtga, daughter of the arch-druid Mug Roith (from whom she was said to have learned 'the world's magic') was well-versed in magic and a powerful and independent female figure. At the Feast of Samhain she was said to have directed the druids to gather and create fires at a site named for her (Tulach Tlachtga, now the Hill of Ward in County

[101] Ibid., pp. 65-71.

[102] O'Rahilly, Cecile, *Táin Bó Cúailgne* (1976, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies), pp. 62, 181.

Meath).[103] Additionally, the supernatural figure known as *Mongfind* ('Bright Mane') was also associated with *Samain.* She was the wife of Eochu Muigmédon and stepmother of Niall of the Nine Hostages. She was well known as a sorceress, and died on the eve of *Samain* by taking poison which she had prepared for her royal brother. After her death, the common people are said to have referred to *Samain* as 'The Festival of Mongfind':

> . . . 'so long as she was in the flesh, had powers and was a witch: wherefore it is that on Samain Eve women and the rabble address their petitions to her.'[104]

The symbolism of Mongfind's name ('Bright / White Mane') brings to mind the light coloured horses associated with the Goddess of Sovereignty (and *Samain* folk processions). She is both the wife of a king and mother of a king. One tale associated with Mongfind describes how she tested Niall and his four stepbrothers to see which one would be king. The young men have an encounter with a woman who is clearly the Goddess of Sovereignty, a poly-formed and powerful figure associated with the land, fertility, and the powers of life and death.[105] Indeed, the imagery connected with these female figures (and the festival itself) demonstrate a pronounced association with darkness and creation, life and death, magic and transformation, and female power.

d) The association of *Imbolc* with the early figure of Bríg (triple goddess of poetry, smithcraft and healing) and her later incarnation as Saint Bridget (associated with fertility, lustration and the protection of women in childbirth) are well-documented and have already been described in some detail. It is interesting to note that Bríg's husband was Bres, a figure associated with the festival

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[103] Gwynn (part 4) pp. 187-191; Chadbourne, Kathryn, 'Giant Women and Flying Machines' in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, Volume XIV (1994), pp.106-114.

[104] Silva Gadelica, quoted in Rees, p. 165.

[105] Herbert, Maire, 'Transmutations of an Irish Goddess' in Billington, Sandra and Green, Miranda, ed., *The Concept of the Goddess* (1996, Routledge, London), pp. 141-151.

directly opposite *Imbolc* in the seasonal calendar. Perhaps an early myth placed the couple on opposing points of the year wheel and elaborated in more detail the conflict between Bres and Lug, the eventual victor and patron of the harvest.

Summary:

We can see that the annual cycle of work activities, folk traditions and legends point to the distinct possibility that the summer half of the year (*Beltaine* to *Samain*) was associated with male concerns and the winter half (*Samain* to *Beltaine*) with female concerns. The original two-fold division of the year was marked by great festivals with a pronounced liminal character, overseen by (and perhaps dedicated to) the great father and tribal-god of the Tuatha Dé Danann (The Dagda) and the Sovereignty Goddess and female namesake of the gods (The Mórrigan, epithet of the great Irish goddess also known as Danu or Anu).[106] The further division of the yearly cycle resulted in the great celebrations of the harvest (instituted by Lug, a newcomer to the Tuatha Dé) and the late winter / early spring traditions (probably enacted locally or in the home) associated with Bridget and *Imbolc*. [107] It is hoped that this exploration will pave the way for additional inquiries into the symbolism of the yearly cycle, its traditions and its divine figures.

[106] Paice MacLeod, Sharon, 'Mater Deorum Hibernensium: Identity and Cross-Correlation in Early Irish Myths' in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, Volume 19 (1999).

[107] Early references to Imbolc are scarce and do not seem to suggest large tribal assemblies. It is interesting to note that as the seasons progress, Bridget's quarter of the year gives way to that of her father The Dagda.