

The One Who is Many, the Many Who Power and Potentiality in the Sacred Females

by Sherry Rowley

L'auteure examine les déesses de l'Irlande, ces Triades divines composées de trois personnages féminins, chacune avec sa multiplicité de dons, qui exercent en même temps un pouvoir unique et multiple.

The best known of the triadic forms of female divinity in Ireland is that in which the three sacred females have separate and distinct names and identities, but appear together as a single unit.

Because of the insular nature of Ireland, Celtic religion is believed by many scholars to have survived there for much longer than anywhere on the continent. Ireland had not been subject to Roman occupation and remained relatively untouched by outside forces until the coming of the Vikings in the ninth century. Christian missionary work did not begin in Ireland until the fourth or fifth century CE (Common Era, same as AD). We know that some of the Celtic Irish material is different from similar material of the continent, but whether that is a reflection of the purity of the insular material or whether the difference actually reveals a strong assimilation of native pre-Celtic with Celtic material remains open for discussion. What we do have is a tradition that had a longer and more peaceful period of growth than those of Continental Celtic cultures, and one that preserved pre-Christian myth and ritual until a relatively late period. This tradition is rich with tales about the ancient goddesses—the sacred females—of Ireland and may well reflect elements of pre-Celtic indigenous sacred belief.

One of the features common to the Irish, British, and continental Celtic religion is the predominance of divine triads. Sacred groups of three appear frequently in the pre-Christian and early Christian Irish materials, and the extensive appearance of triple forms, iconographically and in design elements, further reflects and reinforces the importance of these triads to the culture. An individual goddess of pre-Christian Irish religion possesses multiple, sometimes contrasting attributes, revealing her to be too complex to be narrowly defined by a single role such as that of sovereignty goddess, war goddess, fertility goddess, or goddess of love. She often embodies all of these aspects and is just as likely to take a lover into her arms as she is to take up arms against a lover. The triple goddess of pre-Christian Ireland is no less complicated than her singular sister.

Indeed, she comprises three separate sacred females, each with her own multiplicity of attributes. A brief examination of the triple goddesses of Ireland will demonstrate that divine triads, while manifestations of sacred females often uniting to perform a specific role, resist analyses that draw upon a maiden/mother/crone model and defy all attempts to define them strictly by function. The triad form exemplifies the manifold possibility and multiplicity within the sacredness of the female. Triple goddesses attest that pre-Christian and early Christian Irish religion has a complex perception of female deity which embodies all of the potentiality of divinity.

Triadic female forms in Ireland are comprised, not surprisingly, in at least three different ways. Perhaps the best known of these forms is that of the Badhb or the Morrígan, the triple form of the war goddess. This triad is composed of three females who each have separate and distinct names and traits. The combinations are generally: Nemain, Macha, and the Morrígan, together referred to as the Badhb; Anann, Badhb, and Macha, together called the Badhb; Nemain, Badhb, and Macha as the Morrígan; or Badhb, Macha, and the Morrígan, together called the Morrígan. The separate and fourth name identifies the three females when they have come together and taken on their war aspect. The women in this triad may manifest themselves as birds or other animals. They may also appear as an old crone or hag, and sometimes they have been called the Crones in place of their triadic title. The members of this triad often appear interchangeably in the literature, probably because they reflect different aspects or manifestations of the same (triple) goddess. This triple goddess will be discussed more completely in a later section of this paper.

Although the Badhb or the Morrígan is the best known of the triadic forms of female divinity in Ireland, perhaps the most common form is that in which the three sacred females have separate and distinct names and identities, but appear together as a single unit, for instance, Clindna, Aeife, and Edaein Fair-hair, who are the “three treasures of spinsterhood and chastity” of the Tuatha dé Danann (the deities of pre-Christian Ireland). Frequently the group are sisters, as is the case with Caechne, Dóe, and Fadat, who battle against a male enemy of their family; and triadic groups of wives are also to be found, such as the three wives of Celtchair mac Uithechar: Findabair, Daruamna, and Bribethach. The most well known manifestation of this triad is probably the group consisting of Banba, Eriu, and Fodla. These are three queens of the Tuatha dé Danann, and Ireland has, at one time or another, been called by each of their names. They merge their powers together in their triad form, and in one famous battle they create a magical

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army which appears as an illusion to the enemy sons of Míl and aids in the enemy's eventual defeat. These triads are known by what unites them: they are sisters, maidens, wives, mothers, warriors.

Sacred females also appear in groups wherein each has the same name, but they represent different identities. For instance, Brigit in her triple form is goddess of smithcraft, goddess of poetry, and goddess of healing. She also appears at times as the mother of the Dagda (a god in the Tuatha dé Danann), the mate of the Dagda, and the daughter of the Dagda. Another goddess who takes three forms is Macha: Macha, wife of Nemed; Macha, wife of Crund; and Macha, daughter of Aed the Red. She is the same Macha who figures as one of the triple forms of the war goddess Badhb; thus Macha has the position of being

twice a member of a triad. Findabair, introduced a moment ago as one of a triad of wives, also appears to be twice a member of a triad. She is Findabair, daughter of Medb and Ailill; Findabair, daughter of Conor mac Nessa; and Findabair, daughter of Lugaid Láigde.

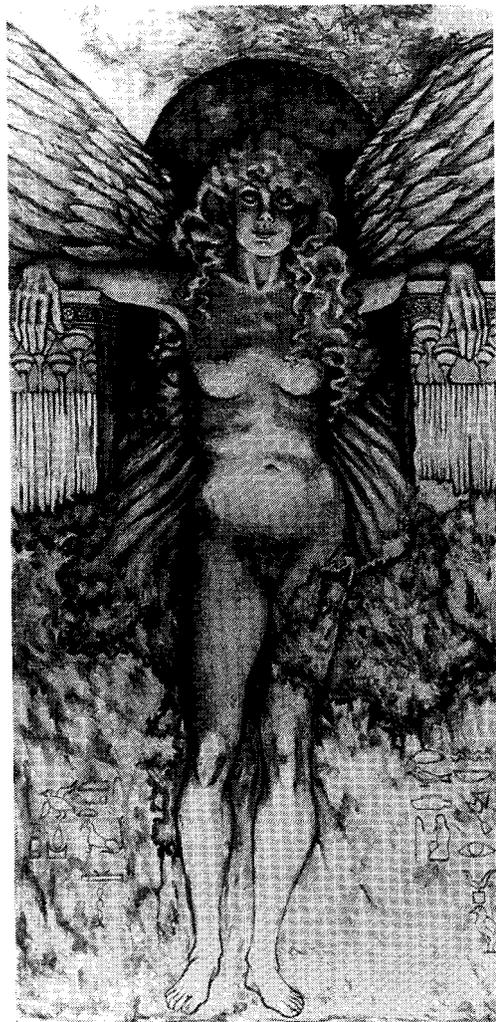
It is clear that some triads are more complex and powerful than others, and it may well be that triadic combinations are so common to the pre-Christian Irish tradition that some of them have no significance beyond the fact that there is a grouping of three. Among the most complex triads in pre-Christian Irish religion are those known predominantly as warrior goddesses. Careful study of these triads, however, reveals that each member manifests herself in a range of different

ways and that the triad itself takes on a multiplicity of manifestations.

Warrior triads often include sacred females who shape-shift. Shape-shifting is not uncommon in the sacred figures of pre-Christian Ireland and early Christian Ireland. Female deities often shape-shift into creatures that are directly linked with fertility and the earth. Such a creature may be either a direct manifestation or a shape-shifted manifestation of a deity. For example, the triple form of the Badhb often manifests herself as great black birds while on the battlefield. Individual members of warrior triads are also known for their own particular exploits on the field of battle. Nemain takes the form of a crow, and her primary function seems to be to confound armies with madness. Macha may be able to take on the form of a horse, as she is said to run faster than the swiftest of horses. The Morrígan herself appears in more forms than the bird shape associated with her in her triple form. She has, in various stories, taken the form of a white hornless red-eared heifer, a black eel, and a gray-red bitch-wolf. Thus, each triad is a dynamic interaction of multiple shape-shifting forms emanating from individual members as well as from the triad itself.

Aside from shape-shifting into a diversity of forms, the divine triads of Ireland also embody multiplicities of attributes. For instance, the function of the Morrígan in the form of the triple war goddess seems primarily to incite people to deeds of valour or to plan strife and chaos; she often appears over the battlefield in the form of a raven or crow. The Morrígan, however, is not exclusively related to war. Evidence suggests that she is also related to fertility and has the power to grant sovereignty. In one tale, the Morrígan meets with the Dagda a week before a great battle is to take place. When he comes upon her, she is straddling the river, holding the tresses of her hair loose in her hands. He joins her in this position, and they have sexual intercourse. She then prophesies how she will herself destroy the enemy and deprive the enemy of his blood. All that she foretells comes to pass, and she delivers two handfuls of blood to the hosts of the Tuatha dé Danann, proclaiming the great deeds of the battle with her poetry. The act of sexual intercourse reveals the Morrígan's connection to fertility and sovereignty. She awards victory to the Dagda in the same way that a sovereignty goddess awards victory and kingship to her mate, an arrangement sealed by an act of sex. Her role in this tale is not merely warrior; she is linked to the fertility of the earth and imparts victory to her mate.

The triad the Morrígan and the triad the Badhb are often interchanged in the texts. The Badhb, however, has her own individual characteristics and, accordingly, should



Lilian Broca, "Winged Goddess,"
stone lithography, 33.5" x 15.5", 1993.
Photo: Weekes Photo Graphics

be examined separately from the Morrígan. She seems to be the triad most closely connected with death. In her triple form as the war goddess, the Badhb is known as *Badb Catha*, "Battle Raven," and as a raven or scald-crow she hangs over and tears at corpses. The Badhb also takes the shape of a crone—and her appearance often presages someone's death. She is the one who appears as three crones/hags to Cúchulainn (an Ulster hero) as he is on his way to the battle in which he will die.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Badhb, and the one that sets her apart from the Morrígan, is her connection with the *bean sídhe*, "woman of the síd," (the place where the Tuatha dé Danann live), the woman who foretells death for certain people by her terrible howls and wails. Either Badhb or her daughter appear at most deaths of heroes, and her daughter appears as the beautiful banshee who is washing Cúchulainn's bloody clothing before his last battle. The fact that the women who are warriors and death-dealers are also those who wail and keen for the dead is not unusual. One's victory in battle is another's sorrow: those who bring death know for whom death will come. It is interesting to note that the first keening to take place in pre-Christian Ireland is documented in the *Dinshenchas*, a vast body of Irish traditional lore concerned with geographic configurations and place names. Here, we discover that it is Brigit (often another triad) who originates wailing and keening for the dead after the battle of Tara. Although not so described in this tale, it is also probable that Brigit took part in the battle, as befits her name "fiery arrow." In any event, the Badhb is inextricably connected with banshees. She is not merely a manifestation of the warrior goddess but is also a goddess of death.

One of the sacred females who is manifest in all combinations of the Badhb and the Morrígan and is herself a triad is Macha. In the context of the triple form of the warrior goddess, Macha revels amidst the bodies of the slain. "Macha's Fruit Crop" or the "Masts of Macha," the heads of slaughtered men, are probably so named after her manifestations in these triads. It is also possible that the heaps of human crania which have been discovered at various sites in Ireland were offerings to the goddess Macha.

But Macha is not solely connected with war. As daughter of Aed the Red, Macha is linked with sovereignty. She is seven years in kingship before taking one of six rivals as her husband and using shape-shifting to defeat and enslave the others. As the wife of Crund, in probably one of the most famous tales about Macha, she is clearly connected with childbirth and fertility. In this manifestation, Macha is forced to race against the king's horses while she is pregnant in order to save her husband's life. She wins the race and gives birth to twins at the finish line. Angry that the men of Ulster showed no regard for her condition, Macha pronounces a curse on them: for nine generations they will be overcome with the weakness of a woman in child-birth whenever they encounter battle. Stories of

Macha, therefore, reveal her as a triple war goddess and as a triple goddess connected with childbirth, fertility, and sovereignty.

To conclude, it is clear that a multiplicity of sacred aspects exists both among the members of the triple-forms of the goddess, and for the triad itself. This diversity of roles indicates that the divine triads of Ireland, like the individual sacred females of pre-Christian Irish religion, do not conform to narrowly defined roles such as that of war goddess, fertility goddess, or sovereignty goddess. Indeed, careful study shows that divine triads embody some or all of these important aspects. The connection of one member of the triple goddess to the land, to sovereignty, and to fertility does not preclude her connection to war and death. In fact, the inextricable link between the sacred female and the earth binds her to ensuring that the natural cycles of birth and death are perpetuated, while committing her, ultimately, to the protection of everything with which she is connected.

Moreover, although the triadic forms conform to one of three classifications, there are only two methods by which they function: three individuals work together as if they are a single unit or there is a common single unit, such as a name, which applies to three individuals. The triadic forms that appear throughout pre-Christian and early Christian Irish tradition, therefore, reflect an essential characteristic of female sacrality in pre-Christian Ireland: the one appears as the many, and the many compose the one. These triads represent a complex perception of the female deity which embodies all of the potentiality of divinity.

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MICHÈLE BUTOT

An Ode to Lilith

THEY like to tell a story of Adam
 and of Adam's wife
 and how the downfall of the Garden
 was Her Fault

Of how Eve was born from Adam's rib to be his
 housewife
 and it was ALL HER FAULT

Let me tell you the story they don't like to tell....

Male and female (S)he created them
 female and male at once

And her name was Lilith

They don't like to tell you Adam had a first wife,
 don't like to tell you she left him

And her name was Lilith

Adam propositioned her, and she taught him,
 and they were sacred together

But when he instructed her to lie down BENEATH
 him,
 when he tried to FORCE her,

Lilith said NO.

Lilith said NO, and she sprouted Wings
 and flew to the western deserts

Slave to no-one
 Lover of animals and elements
 Wolf woman, Owl woman, Jackal
 woman, Other woman, Witch.

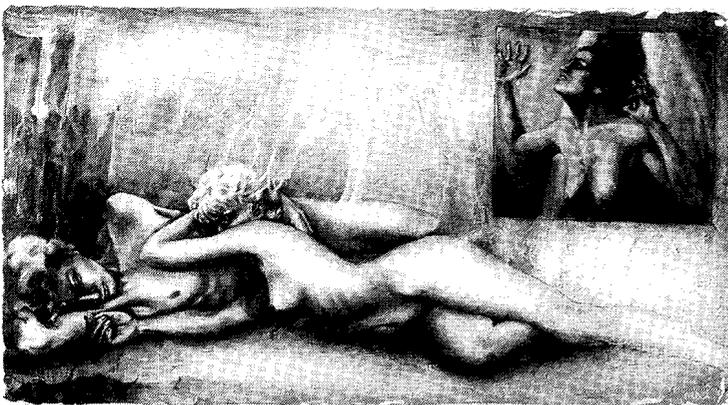
Lilith of luxurious hair and arching
 wings
 woman of taloned feet, Goddess
 of birth and death,

Lilith said NO.

They don't like to tell you Adam had a first wife

Male and female (S)he created them
 female and male

And her name was Lilith.



Lilian Broca, "Lilith with Eve and Adam," graphite, acrylic, spackle on rag paper, 24" x 43", 1995. Photo: Weekes Photo Graphics

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