

<b>Syllabus Objectives</b>	<p>Knowledge</p> <p>§ be familiar with local or national evidence for the ancient origins of religions in Ireland</p> <p>§ be aware of the particular characteristics of religion in Ireland before and after Patrick</p> <p>§ trace the development of religion in Ireland through the study of one or two key moments in that development</p> <p>Understanding</p> <p>§ understand that religion in Ireland is of ancient origin, has developed over thousands of years and is still developing</p> <p>§ understand the meaning of inculturation and its relevance for the Irish experience of religion</p> <p>Skills</p> <p>§ identify evidence of religious belief in ancient and contemporary Ireland</p> <p>§ show how the Christian message was inculturated in the Irish context</p> <p>Attitudes</p> <p>§ appreciation of and respect for the variety of religious traditions and secular movements which exist in Ireland today</p>
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## **Topic 2.1 Local evidence**

### Procedure

*Introduction - local archaeological evidence of religious belief & devotional practice before Patrick*

### Research Assignments:

- Research a stone circle, a dolmen, a standing stone, or a holy well in the locality.
- Visit to a site associated with pre-Christian religious practices or beliefs.
- Research which Irish rivers are named after goddesses

### Process:

1. Consult general surveys e.g. Shell Guide and the AA Illustrated Road Book
2. Consult local guidebooks or area surveys etc. to pinpoint places of earlier devotion
3. Consult the files of local newspapers and search out souvenir monographs that were published to mark jubilees and centenaries of local churches, parochial halls and schools.
4. Interview senior citizens, whose memories of their own grandparents' lore can stretch back for a hundred years.
5. Write up the findings of the research.

### Sources of information e.g. sacred sites, passage graves, holy wells, pattern days etc:

- The Folklore Department of UCD
  - The Ulster Folk Museum
  - The Public Records Offices
  - The education departments of city and county libraries and museums
  - Heritage centres that have local information based upon the most recent research
  - Local guide books
  - Journals of local history societies
  - Parish histories and county surveys
- e.g. 1. The Archaeological Survey of County Donegal - Brian Lacy indicates the sites and categories of all field antiquities from the Mesolithic period to the seventeenth century AD in

Ireland's most northerly county. It lists as well non-religious antiquities, burial places, tomb-slabs, holy wells and ecclesiastical sites.

e.g. 2. Pre-Christian Ireland from the First Settlers to the Early Celts - Peter Harbinson's has a full-scale survey of prehistoric remains throughout the island.

- The Ordnance Survey Memoirs edited by Angelique Day
- The Irish County History and Society Series - William Nolan (general editor) Geography Publications 1985 - 2000.
- Nósanna agus Piseoga na nGael - Irish Folk Custom and Belief - Sean Ó Súilleabháin
- The Holy Wells of Ireland - Patrick Logan
- Books on Irish folkways - Kevin Danaher
- Book of Irish place-names. Oifig an tSolathair have commissioned a county by county survey Ainmneacha Gadlge na mBaile Poist (Irish Names of Postal Towns) lists sixteen beginning with the word tobar (well), seventeen with teampall (church), four with tearmann (sanctuary land), five with discart (hermitage), twenty-two with doire (oak grove), fifteen with teach (house, church), more than fifty each with lios (ring-fort) and rath (ring-fort), and nearly 200 with cill (church, cell). Most of these are overtly Christian as are the ones with clochar (stone building, convent), mainistir (monastery), eaglais (church), domhnach (Patrician church), manach (monk) and sagart (priest).

e.g. Pre-Christian religious belief and devotion

The Celts of fifth century Ireland had holy places associated with springs, wells and rivers. Water everywhere is viewed as life-giving; rivers and wells have always been associated with fertility and motherhood, and also with strength, destruction and purification. The place-names that give the clearest indication of pre-Christian worship are doire (oak-grove) and tobar (well). They are likely places of worship of local deities. There are reckoned to be about 3,000 holy wells in the country. Their healing powers were age-old: Dian Cécht, the Gaelic god of healing, used water from a sacred well to treat the wounded after the two great battles of Magh Tuireadh when the Dé Danann defeated the Firbolgs and the Fomorii.

Like the continental Celts, the pagan Irish venerated individual trees and sacred groves, to which they commonly applied the term nemeton, a word related to the Latin nemus (grove) and the root of the Irish word neimheadh (sanctuary). The oak was particularly sacred with the hazel, the rowan and the yew also revered. It is easy to see why trees should have been considered sacred - by their nature they unite the heavens, the earth and the underworld; they are not inanimate but living and so could be seen as being possessed by a god or a spirit; leafless at certain times but covered in buds or foliage at others, they represent fertility and rebirth. The sacred groves did not outlast the deforestation of Ireland that took place in the sixteenth century to provide ships for the Tudor navies, but the persistence of fairy thorns and the like is proof of the reverence in which particular trees were held.

Burial and sacrifice with their obvious associations with death and the afterlife had religious implications even for pagans. Burial mounds were regarded by the Celts as holy places. They seem to have regarded these, too, as entrances to the other world and also as the dwellings of their divine ancestors, and the Boyne Valley necropolis was the Irish centre par excellence for sun worship.

The priests who officiated at these shrines were the druids, recruits from the warrior aristocracy; who taught the continuity of life beyond the grave. They were engaged in the practice of magic, divination and ritual and in the offering of sacrifice, sometimes human sacrifice, to the gods.

### *Outcomes*

§ name local evidence of pre-Christian religion in Ireland

§ describe the religious beliefs and/or practices associated with this archaeological evidence

§ describe any local devotional practices that may have their origin in pre-Christian times. Outline the original form of these practices and describe their current form if they still survive.

*Resources which teachers have suggested include:*

County Libraries, local Historical Societies and Tourist Information offices supply information about pre-Christian sites in a given locality.

Ó Ríordáin, S. P. (1979 Fifth edition) *Antiquities of the Irish Countryside* See especially pp. 56-94 and check the 'Index of Places.'

Another excellent resource book is Harbison, P. (1988) *Pre-Christian Ireland. From the First Settlers to the Early Celts* London: Thames & Hudson

Religion: The Irish Experience – J.R. Walsh Veritas

## **or Topic 2.2 National evidence**

### *Archaeological evidence of national significance*

Research Assignment: *Evidence of religious belief & devotional practice before Patrick*

Sources: The Irish Experience – J.R. Walsh Veritas pages 31-33; etc.

View video: *In Search of Ancient Ireland* – Documentary Series; A Little Bird/Café Production

Discuss: What evidence is there of religious belief and devotional practice before Patrick?

Take feedback and conclude with reference to belief in life after death etc.

Or

Research Assignment: Boyne Valley sites

Sources: The Irish Experience – J.R. Walsh Veritas pages 31-33; etc.

Discuss: What archaeological evidence is there of religious belief and devotional practice in this site?

Take feedback and conclude with reference to design, decoration etc.

Assignment: *Research on the internet some ancient sites:*

e.g.

- Lough Gur, Co. Limerick
- Knockainey (Cnoc Áine), Co Limerick (associated with the goddess Áine)
- Drombeg, Co. Cork

### *Literary evidence from myths and sagas*

The beliefs and devotional practices of the Gaels are evident in their earliest surviving writings:

- Book of the Dun Cow (an eleventh-century manuscript)
- Book of Leinster (Rawlinson manuscript)
- Yellow Book of Lecan (The Táin Bó Cuailgne - Cattle Raid of Cooley)

Modern Celtic scholars have categorised the literary evidence into four cycles: Mythological, Ulster, Kings and Fenian that tell stories of gods and heroes, and of kings and warriors who straddle fancy and real history. The stories of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the gods who lived in Ireland before the coming of the Celts, are full of magic, fighting, feasting, and lovemaking; and there seems to be no fear of the deities or death. They were the people of the goddess Dana, the mother of An Dagda. One of the goddesses was Boann, the personification of the river Boyne, and it seemed that the burial site in the bend of the river was the dwelling place of their wilful if largely benevolent deities.

The religious beliefs of the Gaels are gaugeable from their sagas. They held in their imaginations a heroic age with epic warriors and conflicts, and queens as powerful and independent as any king. In these other worlds they lived idyllic lives where all appetites were satisfied.

The account of the Battle of Moytirra tells of several deities of the Tuatha Dé Danann (the Daghdha, Nuadhu, Breas, Lugh), Mór-Ríoghan (Morrigan) who was goddess of war, the mythical physician Dian Céacht, and Balar of the evil Eye.

In the mythological tale 'Altrom Tige Dá Medar', 'The Nurture of the Houses of the Two Milk-Vessels,' we read of Manannán, king over all the kings of the Tuatha Dé Danann who lived in fairy



Discuss: Does the celebration of this festival today have anything in common with how it was celebrated in pre-Christian times?

### Assessment Questions

- 1.a. i. Name one place in your locality that shows evidence of religious belief in Ireland before Patrick.  
ii. Briefly describe the religious belief and/or practices that are believed to have taken place in this place.  
iii. Describe one devotional practice today that has its origin in pre-Christian times.
- or*
- 1.b. i. Name one pre-Christian place of national importance.  
ii. Briefly describe the religious belief and/or practices that are believed to have taken place in this place.  
iii. Give one example from an Irish myth or saga that gives an insight into pre-Christian religious belief and/or practices.

### Outcomes

- Name a pre-Christian site of national significance
- Briefly describe the religious beliefs and/or practices believed to be associated with this site
- Give two examples of Irish myths and sagas that give insight into pre-Christian religious beliefs and/or practices. Briefly describe these insights.

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### Resources which teachers have suggested include:

Newgrange see, for example, the entry 'Aonghus' in Ó hÓgáin, D. (1991) *Myth, Legend and Romance* Prentice Hall Press: New York/London pp. 38-40.

See also the Junior Certificate History textbooks, e.g. Healy, G. (1998) *Travelling Through Time* Dublin: Folens, 1998 pp. 16-17; Quinn R. & O'Leary, D. (2002) *Door to the Past* Dublin: Folens pp. 17-19; [www.knowth.com](http://www.knowth.com).

<http://witcombe.sbc.edu/sacredplaces/newgrange.html>

[www.heritageireland.ie](http://www.heritageireland.ie)

[www.mythicalireland.com](http://www.mythicalireland.com)

'Mythological Cycle' in D. Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend and Romance*, 312-315. Abbreviated English version of the 'The Battle of Moytura (Moytirra)' in Dillon, Myles (1994, paperback 1997) *Early Irish Literature* Dublin: Four Courts Press pp. 58-60.

'Eithne' in Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend and Romance*, 175. Abbreviated English version of 'Altrom Tige Dá Medar' in Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature*, pp. 68-72.

[www.pantheon.org/mythica.html](http://www.pantheon.org/mythica.html)

*Student Work: THE MYSTERY OF NEWGRANGE*

In the 1960's archaeologists examined the passage tomb at Newgrange and found a square opening at the entrance, which they called the roof-box. They were puzzled by this and wondered what it was for. The local people knew of a local legend, which said that, on certain days, the sun shone on the decorated stone at the entrance. Because the entrance faced southeast one archaeologist decided to go into the tomb on December 21<sup>st</sup>, the shortest day of the year. He waited for the sun to rise. Gradually, the sun's rays came through the opening in the roof-box. The light crept along the passage until it reached the chamber where the archaeologist stood. This experience lasted about 17 minutes until the light moved away and left the chamber in darkness. It appeared that the roof-box had been perfectly placed so that the sun could enter the chamber only on a few days around December 21<sup>st</sup> each year.

However, one question still remained unanswered:

Why did the people of the New Stone Age build the passage tomb at Newgrange?

Some possible reasons for this might be:

- Newgrange is a sort of calendar to tell the people when the sun is at its lowest point in the sky.
- Newgrange is a temple or church where the people worshipped the sun.
- Newgrange is a tomb where the people of the New Stone Age buried their dead. These people believed in an after-life.
- Because of the amount of bones and cremated remains that have been found in such places as Newgrange, it is believed that these places were communal burial places.

What is certain about Newgrange is that it is older than the pyramids of Egypt. Tradition has it that the Celts, who arrived on the scene three thousand years after Newgrange was built, used it to worship their sun-god Aengus Og by carrying out rituals or ceremonies at the site. One aspect of these ceremonies was the sun entering the chamber, which some people now believe is related to significant times in the farming calendar. One source of evidence to support this point of view is that excavations have shown that cereal crops were grown in the Boyne Valley where it is situated and that the forests had been cleared.

The earth, the sun, the harvest, a farming calendar, a place of worship, a tomb and belief in the afterlife: whatever its purpose, it is beyond doubt that Newgrange was and will continue to be a place of considerable significance.

(Adapted from *People of the Past 1*, *New History in Context 1*, Collins, Gallagher, Byrne and Keogh; *Discovering Times Past*, Edmund O' Donovan, Folens; *Evidence of the Past*, Foley and Enright, School and College Publishing)

*Questions:*

1. What is there about Newgrange that would indicate it was a place of importance for the people of the New Stone Age?
2. What significance might Newgrange have had for the people of the New Stone Age?
3. Why does Newgrange have special significance for people in Ireland and elsewhere today?

### *Student Work: The Dream of Oenghus*

Oenghus was asleep one night, when he saw a girl coming towards him as he lay on his bed. She was the loveliest that had ever been in Ireland. Oenghus went to take her hand, to bring her to him in his bed. As he looked, she sprang suddenly away from him; he could not tell where she had gone. He stayed there till morning and he was sick at heart. The apparition which he had seen, and had not talked with, made him fall ill. No food passed his lips. She was there again the next night. He saw a lute in her hand, the sweetest that ever was; she played a tune to him, and he fell asleep at it. He remained there till morning, and that day he was unable to eat.

He passed a whole year while she visited him in this way, so that he fell into a wasting sickness. He spoke of it to no one. So he fell into wasting sickness, and no one knew what was wrong with him. The physicians of Ireland were brought together; they did not know what was wrong with him in the end. They went to Fínghen, Conchobhar's physician, and he came to him. He would tell from a man's face what his illness was, and would tell from the smoke which came from the house how many people were ill in it.

He spoke to him aside. 'Ah, unhappy plight!' said Fínghen, 'you have fallen in love in absence.' 'You have diagnosed my illness,' said Oenghus. 'You have fallen into a wretched state, and have not dared to tell it to anyone,' said Fínghen. 'You are right,' said Oenghus; 'A beautiful girl came to me, of the loveliest figure in Ireland, and of surpassing form. She had a lute in her hand, and played it to me every night.' 'No matter,' said Fínghen, 'It is fated for you to make a match with her. Send someone to Boann (Goddess of the river Boyne) your mother, that she should come to speak with you.'

They went to her, and Boann came then. 'I am attending this man,' said Fínghen, 'a serious illness has fallen upon him.' They told his story to Boann. 'Let his mother take care of him,' said Fínghen; 'a serious illness has fallen on him. Have the whole of Ireland scoured to see if you find a girl of this figure which your son has seen.'

They spent a year at this. Nothing like her was found. Then Fínghen was called to them again. 'No help has been found in this matter,' said Boann. Said Fínghen, 'Send to the Daghdhae, that he should come to speak with his son.' They went to the Daghdhae, and he came back with them. 'Why have I been summoned?' 'To advise your son,' said Boann; 'it is as well for you to help him, for it is sad that he is perishing. He is wasting away. He has fallen in love in absence, and no help is to be found for him.' 'What is the use of talking to me?' said the Daghdhae, 'I know no more than you do.' 'More indeed,' said Fínghen, 'you are the king of the fairy folk of Ireland. Send someone to Bodhbh, king of the fairies of Munster; his knowledge is noised throughout Ireland.'

They went to him. He welcomed them. 'Welcome to you, men of the Daghdhae,' said Bodhbh. 'That is what we have come for,' 'Have you news?' said Bodhbh. We have; Oenghus the son of the Daghdhae has been wasting away for two years.' 'What is the matter with him?' said Bodhbh. 'He has seen a girl in his sleep. We do not know where in Ireland is the girl whom he has seen and loved. The Daghdhae bids you seek throughout Ireland for a girl of that figure and form.' 'She shall be sought' said Bodhbh, 'and let me have a year's delay to find out the facts of the case.'

They came back at the end of the year to Bodhbh's house at the Fairy Hill beyond Feimhen. 'I went round the whole of Ireland until I found the girl at Loch Béal Dragon, at Crotta Cliach, (The Galtee mountains) said Bodhbh. They went to the Daghdhae, and they were made welcome. 'Have you news?' said the Daghdhae. 'Good news; the girl of that figure which you described has been found. Bodhbh bids you let Oenghus come away with us to him, to know whether he recognises the girl when he sees her.'

Oenghus was taken in a chariot to the Fairy Hill beyond Feimhen. The king had a great feast ready for them, and he was made welcome. They were three days and three nights at the feast. 'Come away now,' said Bodhbh, 'to know whether you recognise the girl when you see her. Even if you do recognise her, I have no power to give her to you, and you may only see her.'

They came then to the lake. They saw three times fifty grown girls, and the girl herself among them. The girls did not reach above her shoulder. There was a chain of silver between each couple; and a neck let of silver round her own throat, and a chain of refined gold. Then Bodhbh said, 'Do you recognise that girl?' 'I do indeed,' said Oenghus. 'I can do no more for you,' said Bodhbh. 'That is no matter, then,' said Oenghus, 'since it is she that I saw. I cannot take her this time. Who is this girl, Bodhbh?' said Oenghus, 'I know, truly,' said Bodhbh, 'she is Caer Ibhornheith, daughter of Ethal Anbhuail from the fairy hill of Uamhan in the land of Connaught.'

Then Oenghus and his people set off for their own country. Bodhbh went with him, and talked with the Daghdhae and Boann at Bruigh Maic ind Óaig. They told them their news, and told how she seemed, in figure and form, just as they had seen; and they told her name and the name of her father and grandfather. 'We feel it to be discourteous that we cannot content you,' said the Daghdhae. 'What you should do, Daghdhae,' said Bodhbh, 'is to go to Ailill and Medhbh, for they have the girl in their province.'

The Daghdhae went till he reached the lands of Connaught, with three score chariots in his company. The king and queen made them welcome. They spent a full week banqueting round the ale after that. 'What has brought you?' said the king 'You have a girl in your country,' said the Daghdhae, 'and my son has fallen in love with her, and has become sick. I have come to you to find out whether you would give her to the lad.'

'Who?' said Ailill. 'The daughter of Ethal Anbhuail.' 'We have no power over her,' said Ailill and Medhbh, 'if we had she should be given him.' 'This would be good-let the king of the fairy hill be summoned to you,' said the Daghdhae.

Ailill's steward went to him. 'You have been ordered by Ailill and Medhbh to go to speak with them.' 'I will not go,' said he, 'I will not give my daughter to the son of the Daghdhae.' That is told to Ailill; 'He cannot be made to come, but he knows why he is summoned.' 'No matter,' said Ailill, 'he shall Come, and the heads of his warriors shall be brought with him.' At that, Ailill's household troops and the men of the Daghdhae rose up against the fairy hill, and overran the whole hill. They brought out three score heads, and the king, so that he was in captivity at Cruachu.

Then Ailill said to Ethal Anbhual, 'Give your daughter to the son of the Daghdhae.' 'I cannot,' said he, 'her magic power is greater than mine.' 'What is this great magic power she has?' said Ailill. 'Easily told; she is in the shape of a bird every other year, and in human shape the other years.' 'What year is she in the shape of a bird?' said Ailill. 'It is not for me to betray her,' said her father. 'Off with your head, unless you tell us!' said Ailill. 'I will not hold out any longer,' said he. 'I will tell you,' said he, 'since you are so persistent about her. Next All Hallows she will be at Loch Béal Dragon in the shape of a bird, and wonderful birds will be seen with her there, there will be three times fifty swans around her; and I have made preparations for them.' 'I do not care, then,' said the Daghdhae; 'since you know her nature, do you bring her.'

Then a treaty was made between them, between Ailill and Ethal and the Daghdhae, and Ethal was let go. The Daghdhae bade them farewell and came to his house and told his news to his son. 'Go next All Hallows to Loch Béal Dragon, and call her to you from the lake.' Oenghus went to Loch Béal

Dragon. He saw three times fifty white birds with their silver chains, and curls of gold about their heads. Oenghus was in human shape on the brink of the lake. He called the girl to him. 'Come to speak to me, Caer!' 'Who calls me?' said Caer. 'Oenghus calls you.' 'I will go, if you will undertake on your honour that I may come back to the lake again.' 'I pledge your protection,' said he.

She went to him. He cast his arms about her. They fell asleep in the form of two swans, and went round the lake three times, so that his promise might not be broken. They went away in the form of two white birds till they came to Bruigh Maic innd Óaig, and sang a choral song so that they put the people to sleep for three days and three nights. The girl stayed with him after that.

*(Translated by Kenneth Jackson)*

### *Student Work: The story of "Children of Lir"*

Once upon a time there lived a king called Lir who had four children; a daughter named Fionnuala and three sons called Aodh, Fiacra and Conn. Their mother the queen was dead, and the children were sad because they missed her terribly. They missed the stories she used to tell them, the games she used to play, and the songs she sang at bedtime as she hugged them to sleep. The king saw that his children were sad and needed a mother, so he decided to marry again. His new bride was called Aoife. She was beautiful, but she was not the kind-hearted person the king thought she was. Aoife grew jealous of the four children because their father loved them so much. She wanted the king all to herself, so she planned to get rid of the children. She asked a druid to help her, and together they thought up a terrible spell. In the castle grounds there was a lovely lake which the children spent most of their time playing beside. One day Aoife went with the children to the lakeside. As they played in the water, she suddenly pulled out a magic wand and waved it over them. There was a flash of light and the children vanished. In their place were four beautiful white swans. One of the swans opened its beak and spoke with Fionnuala's voice: "Oh, what have you done to us? She asked, in a frightened voice." "I have put a spell on you." Replied Aoife. "Now everything you have will be mine. You will be swans for nine hundred years. You will spend three hundred years on this lake, three hundred years on the Sea of Moyle and three hundred years on the Isle of Glora. Only the sound of a church bell can break the spell."

When the children did not come home that evening, the king went to look for them by the lake. As he came near, four swans swam up to him. He was amazed when they began to call out. "Father, father" they cried, "we are your children. Aoifa has placed a terrible magic spell on us." The king ran back to the castle and pleaded with Aoife to change the swans back into children, but she refused. Now he saw how selfish she was and banished her from the kingdom. Lir promised a reward to anyone who could break the spell, but nobody knew how. Lir spent the rest of his life beside the lake, talking to his children, until he grew old and died. The swans were heartbroken. They no longer talked or sang, and nobody came to see them. Three hundred years passed and it was time for the swans to move to the cold and stormy Sea of Moyle between Ireland and Scotland. The poor swans were tossed about by the wild waves and dashed against sharp rocks. It was a harsh life with little food and the years passed slowly. When the time came for them to fly to the Isle of Glora, the swans were old and tired. Although it was warmer on the island and there was lots of food, they were still very lonely. Then one day they heard the sound they had waited nine hundred years for. It was the sound of a church bell. The bell was ringing in the tower of a little church. An old man, called Caomhóg, stood outside. He was amazed to hear swans talking and listened to their sad story in astonishment. Then he went inside his church and brought out some holy water, which he sprinkled on the swans while he prayed. As soon as the water touched them, the swans miraculously began to change into an old, old woman and three old, old men. Lir's children were frightened. Caomhóg told them about God and his love for all people. They no longer felt scared. Fionnuala put her arms around her brothers and all four old people fell to the ground, dead. Caomhóg buried them in one grave. That night he dreamed he saw four swans flying up through the clouds and he knew that the children of Lir were at last on their way to Heaven to be with their mother and father again.

### *Questions:*

In what sense can the story of the "Children of Lir" be described as a myth?

If someone asked you is the "Children of Lir" totally false / untrue, what would you say?

Besides the framework is there a meaning or message to the story of the "Children of Lir"?

Explain your answer.