

Celtic Skies

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The Heavens have always mystified man. Even today, we are still making unbelievable discoveries with state-of-the-art equipment. Just imagine what mysteries the heavens held in the time of the Celtic peoples when very little technology was available and what could be seen with the naked eye or enhanced with a weak telescope, was explained, not by science, but embellished with religious belief, mythology and superstition. This was ancient man's way of explaining the unexplainable.

THE SUN AND MOON

The Sun and Moon held particular significance to ancient man, as they were the two primary visible celestial bodies. Stone circles are believed to be the observatories of ancient man. Stonehenge, one of the most notable, is aligned with the midsummer sun's rays and is thought to have been used to predict the motions of the sun and moon, including eclipses. With this information, weather conditions and the best times for planting and harvesting could be predicted on a yearly basis. Many personality descriptions are attributed to the moon and its effect on a person's mentality. Words such as lunatic, moonstruck, moonmad and mooning were all attributed to the belief that the moon had an ability to addle wits and make people go crazy, especially in the full moon phase. A commonly believed superstition held that if you let the rays of the full moon shine upon your face while sleeping, you would go insane by morning.

The sun was duly worshipped, with blood sacrifices by many cultures, especially the Druids. These sacrifices were to appease the sun god and assure his return the next day. Along with the worship, came a healthy fear and respect for the sun.

"On the 8 daie of Aprill, in the parts about Hereford and
Worchester, there appeared foure sunnes in the element,
beside the naturall sunne, of red color... The Bishop of
Hereford and Sir John Monmouth, knight, and manie others
behold the same to be most true. And after this there followed
the same yeare in those parts cruell warre, slaughter, terrible
bloodshed and a generall trouble through England, Wales, and Ireland"

Monastic Annals, Holinshead, Topsell, Brand

Though we are not sure how the writer of that record saw a total of 5 suns, this phenomena could mean that he witnessed the phases of a solar eclipse, meteorites, or some other sort of disturbance in the atmosphere that led to the sighting, it could also be attributed to the hysterics of the time or possibly a little too much imbibing. A solar or lunar eclipse always meant that disaster would follow. Ancient rulers always consulted their astrologer before making important decisions and especially before going into battle.

ASTRONOMERS

During Medieval and Renaissance times, there was no clear distinction between Astronomy and Astrology, they went hand-in-hand. Scientific Priests were the sole custodians of Astronomical legend and their reluctance to explain events in anything other than a religious format, was understandable but devastating to science.

Religious belief held that the earth was flat, floated on water like a log, and was the center of the universe. All of the planets, the sun, moon and stars were contained in a sphere that rotated around the earth. Ptolemy (pronounced Tolemy) is credited for charting this system of the World, and the theory reigned supreme from AD 140 and continued as popular belief for at least another 1,500 years.

Nicholas Copernicus (1473 - 1543) was a Polish church man. He was the first religious man to go public with the theory that the sun lay at the center of the universe, creating the "Solar System". This theory was actually proposed as early as 200 BC but was promptly discredited as it created too many problems for the Church to handle. Although the theory could be mathematically proven, religious groups would not concede to the thought that their "Earth" was not the ruling celestial body or in more familiar phrasing, the World did not revolve around them. This was a terrifying thought. Copernicus was put in jail for his beliefs although he was a favorite and was allowed to continue his studies with little interruption, we can only wonder why. Before his death, he published a masterpiece containing his studies and theories. The book met with violent rejection, mainly from the Church, who promptly gathered as many copies as possible to use as fuel in a large bonfire. Even so, the seed was planted. From that time on, astronomers secretly placed the sun at the center of the universe and set out to prove it. It would not be for many years to come before the theory was too widely accepted for the Church to dispute it.

CONSTELLATIONS AND STARS

The stars were an important tool, many of the brightest stars could be seen with the naked eye and their movements could be measured, then used. The people of the Celtic coastlands depended on the heavens to point the way, and sailors often plotted their courses solely by using the stars. Most of the constellations bear Greek or Arabic names and mythology, however, all ancient civilizations made names and stories for the groups of stars that were visible. It is still somewhat of a mystery how and why different cultures on different continents saw the same shapes and gave similar stories to the constellations. No one knows for sure if the sea travel routes were so much in abundance that legends could be carried to other lands or if the patterns of the stars was so obvious that it created similarity. One example of this phenomena is the constellation Draco, or the dragon to the Greeks. This constellation is also seen as a crocodile in both ancient Indian and Egyptian legend.

A popular constellation for the Celtic people was Cassiopeia. Containing hundreds of stars, the Celts named it Llys Don or home of the fairies. Taurus, the bull, was worshipped by the Druids and Spring festivals were planned when the sun was in Taurus, or rather when Taurus rose in the east just before the sun. A popular event in Scotland today is when Taurus rises in the sky at twilight around New Year's Eve.

Stars within the constellations also had individual names. In the constellation Canis Major, or Great Dog, lies a star named Sirius, the dog star. The word Sirius derives from the Greek Seirios, meaning scorcher. During the summer months, this star rises with the sun and it was believed to have lent its scorching heat to that of the sun. This time of the year came to be known as "The Dog Days of Summer".

The general belief that the earth was flat was not as popular as the Church believed. The Celtic and other ancient peoples surely must have seen evidence to the contrary on a daily basis. The simple fact that both the sun and moon could be seen as round dimensional objects would have been their biggest hint that the earth might also be formed thus. Celtic seafaring people put two and two together while watching another ship approaching their own or when they were approaching land. Another ships mast or the topmost land feature was seen on the horizon before the bottom came into view. If the earth was flat, you would be able to see the closest object in its entirety, at very far distances. Ancient observatories like Stonehenge and Avebury in England, have been around since the earliest recorded histories, giving ancient man credit for understanding concepts of Astronomy that even modern man does not fully understand.