

# Ancient Ireland

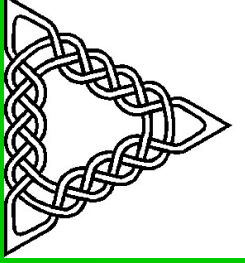
- The pre-history of Ireland is shrouded in the distant past.
- Neolithic people of Ireland built megaliths, standing stones, and burial chambers that historians and archeologists think had religious significance.
- By the Iron Age Ireland was peopled by numerous Celtic speaking tribes.



**Long Cairn of Creevykeel**

Photo From Irish Tourism Board

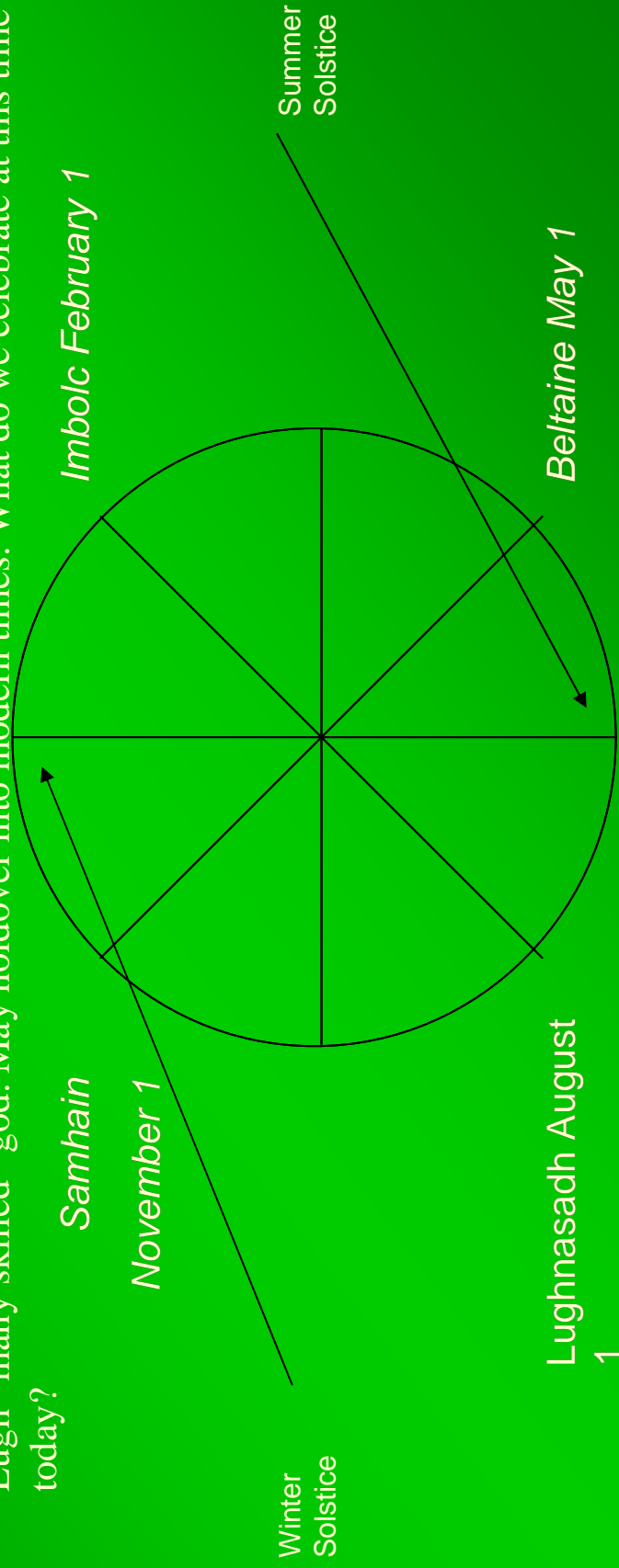
# Pre-Christian Ireland

- The religious ethos of Iron & Bronze Age Ireland can be discerned in archeology, landscape & art.
  - The religious structure of pre-Christian (Pagan) Ireland was centered upon animism & sacred sites & nature.
  - Triads & trinity were revered: Earth-Sea-Air, Underworld-Man's Realm-Otherworld, Maiden-Mother-Crone, etc
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- The ancient Irish & Gaels manifested their gods in sacred places & were represented by standing stones and art.
  - Sites such as Tara Hill became centers of both worship and kingship, which to the ancient Celts were intertwined.

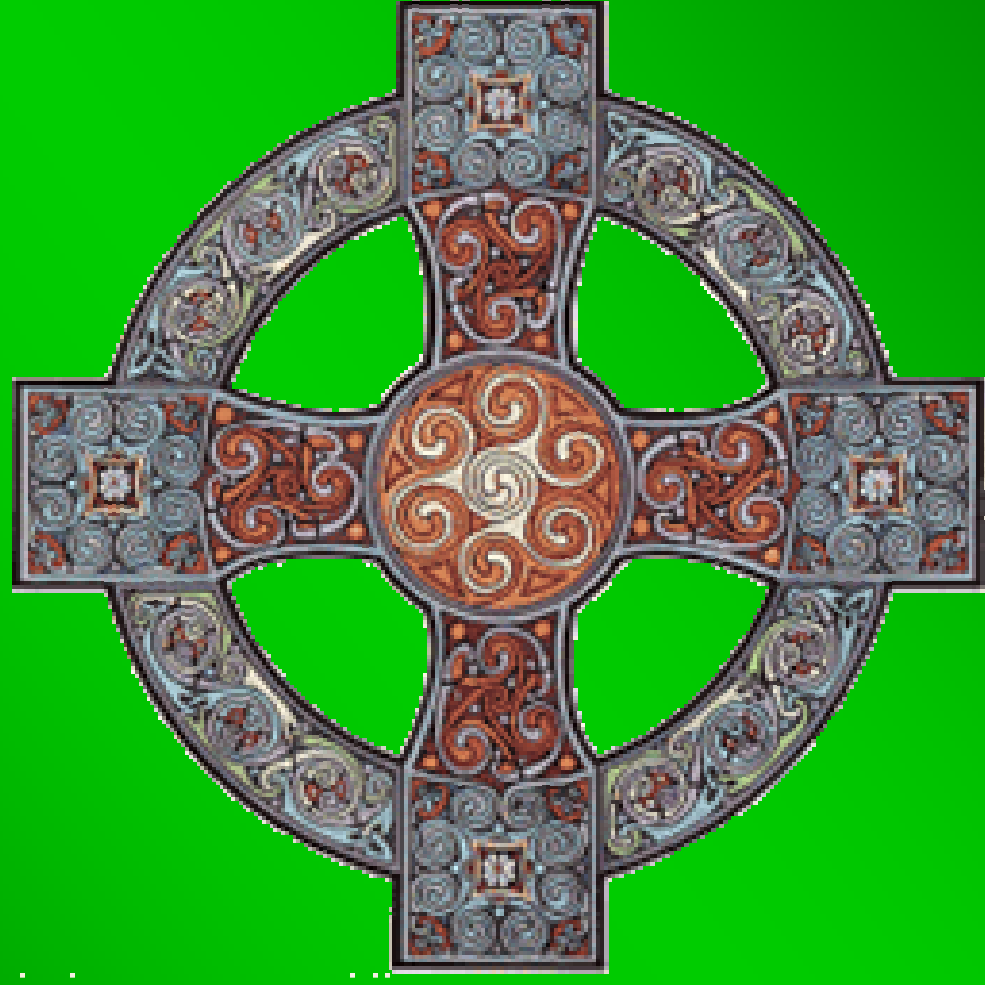
- There were many ancient Celtic deities, (polytheism) each tribe having their own, but most derived from a basic theology.
- Brigid, Lugh, Cernunnous
- The *Lebor Gabalá Erenn* or “Book of Invasions” states that ancient Ireland underwent 5 invasions of mythical or semi-mythical beings and people.
- The last of these two divine races fought an epic battle: the eldest race, *Fir-bolg* or little ones, represented wild nature, chaos, and magic, and battled the *Tuatha Dé Danann* the forefathers of ‘humans’ that represented order, kingship, and technology, and war.
- The *Tuatha Dé Danann* defeated the *Fir-bolg* and drove underground to live in caves and dark forests and bogs. It was a costly battle as the *Tuatha Dé Danann* lost their divinity and became mortal. Pre-Christian Irish felt they were the descendents of the *Tuatha*. The *Fir-bolg* lived on as fairies, the ‘Fay-folk,’ ‘sidhe’ and other mythical incarnations that haunted humanity.



- The pagan Irish observed a fourfold year, with sacred days at each of the ‘points of the compass.’
- **Samhain (sow-ihn)** Fall harvest, transition, and “night of fires.” A time where the veil between the realm of the living and the dead blurred. The ‘fairy-folk’ or *fir-bolg* & *sidge* (shee) roamed the Earth. Celtic New Year
- **Imbolc (im-bolc)** In the old Celtic calendar what we call February was the 1<sup>st</sup> month of Spring. Days grow longer. In our new calendar this is the Spring Equinox.
- **Beltaine (byel-tin-yuh)** “Fire Day” Summer celebration some scholars think venerated a fire or sun deity.
- **Lughnasadh (loo-nuh-suh)** Celebration of the bounty of summer, transition to early fall. Lugh “many skilled” god. May holdover into modern times. What do we celebrate at this time today?



- As can be seen in Celtic knot work, the circle or spiral held great reverence amongst the ancient pre-Christian Gaelic speaking Irish and Scots.





# Standing Stones at Clannish



Photo from: Gaeltacht & Highland Isles Tourism Board

# Tara Hill



# Tara Hill

- **Tara Hill** in County Meath has been a revered site for millennia. It was a burial site for centuries, was the center of pre-Christian Irish worship, and was the seat of Irish ‘High Kings’ or *Ardh Ri*
- To be *Ardh Ri* of the five Irish kingdoms a chief needed the blessing of the Earth, manifested at Tara. This again demonstrates the trinity aspects of pre-Christian Ireland: Chief (male)-Earth/fertility (female)-Threshold (between the real and the divine).
- Many religious and secular scholars believe this is why after St. Patrick, and St. Columba began their missions to the Gaelic kingdoms of Ireland and western Scotland conversion was achieved more easily than in other pagan areas: The belief systems were similar enough for transculturation to occur.

**Chief**

**Father**

**Earth/Fertility**

**Son (Christ & Mary)**

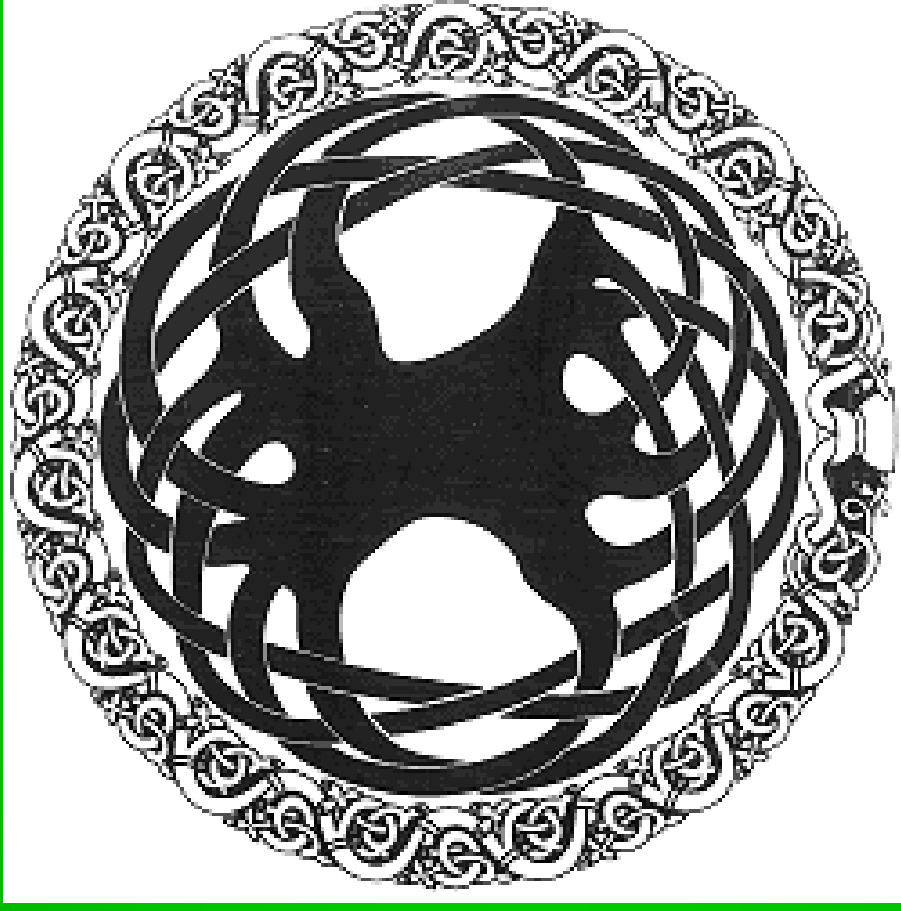
**Threshold: real & divine**

**Holy Ghost**



# St. Patrick

- Christianity came to Ireland in the 5th century A.D.
- Religion in Ireland was still concerned with the forces of nature
- Druids were the priests or soothsayers of this Celtic world
- What we know about Druids is limited-mainly Roman then Christian sources.



# St. Patrick

- Patrick was a Romano-Britain, son of a Roman civil servant.
- Abducted by Irish pirates and enslaved.
- Returned to Ireland in the 5<sup>th</sup> century to convert the island to Christianity.
- He and St. Columba are the patron saints of Ireland.

