

The Ancient Roots of Goddess Spirituality

Until very recently, I had always thought of the roots of Goddess spirituality as based solely in the ancient past. I believed it was the work of devotees of the Goddess (pagans, priestesses, Wiccans, etc.) to piece together the fragments of a noble, resplendent past in order to create a practicable tradition for modern times – and that even though we could never hope to recapture the Golden Age of the ancient Goddess cultures, we could stitch together a workable spiritual system, like a lovely patchwork quilt to keep us warm in the drafty modern world of rationalism and materialist thought.

I have since come to understand that the roots of modern Goddess spirituality do not go only as far as the ancient past, after all – their true source is the realm of Spirit, beyond time and place. The people of the ancient past drew their spiritual wisdom and sustenance from these roots, just as we do today.

To explore this idea, I offer my own spiritual journey with the Celtic Goddess known as The Mórríghan, spanning over two decades. My knowledge and understanding of this Goddess is based on: 1) Academic sources

2) Celtic Reconstructionist sources

3) Eclectic Wiccan/Goddess spirituality sources

4) Gnostic experience (through such methods as shamanic journeying, ritual invocation, etc.)

My journey with the Mórríghan began at the University of Toronto, 24 years ago. In my Women's

Studies classes, I learned about ancient religions and the Great Goddess - immediately I felt fired up with inspiration and a longing that I couldn't place. When I should have been focusing on course work, I was instead reading everything I could find about these ancient religions, and expanding my search by exploring modern systems of Goddess spirituality. Feeling drawn to the Celtic Goddesses, I enrolled in a course on Celtic Culture - this was a department far removed from my double major in Women's Studies and Psychoanalytic Thought. Twice a week I would cross the expanse of Queen's Park to reach Trinity

College. I had a mere fifteen minutes to make the trek from one side of campus to the other; as I hurried past scurrying squirrels in the chill of the winter air, I often wondered why I had voluntarily made this choice. But when I reached class, I would sit in reverie as our professor spoke of the Celts, and read their poetry and mythology. Lyrical names of places, heroes and deities would float in my daydreams, and the one name that stood out to me most was *The Mórríghan*. As I read *The Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the epic poem of the Irish Celts, I became fascinated by the antagonistic relationship between the mighty hero Cú Chulainn and the Mórríghan, a mysterious goddess associated with the battlefield and death. When the course was finished, I felt a profound sense of loss- there wasn't time in my schedule to take additional courses from the Celtic Studies department, and I thought that was an end to only 'authentic' knowledge I could truly learn.

As I studied paganism over the years, I often tried to find out more about this shadowy figure who haunted my imagination – in most sources I found (be they academic or pagan), the Mórríghan generally was given a short, crisp description which described Her invariably as a goddess of war, sorcery and death. In the pagan sources I perused, there may as well have been a red flag, or a skull and crossbones next to Her name– there seemed to be a collective unspoken warning to *steer clear* of this very dark Goddess. So I thought it wise to study other goddesses who did not carry the energy of smoking, blood-soaked battlefields and dark sorcery.

I began to undertake training programs in magick and Goddess Spirituality through books that were less about learning a specific tradition or system, and of a more experiential nature (namely *The Temple of Witchcraft Series* by Christopher Penczak, and *Goddess Initiation* by Francesca De Grandis). When I self-dedicated as a priestess after several years of study, there was a point in my dedication ceremony which involved opening to the form of the Goddess who was available to guide me. Much to my surprise it was the Mórríghan who appeared to me – and Her presence was more clear and powerful than I could have imagined. With jet black hair and violet robes, She was tall and mighty and Her presence seemed

to fill the sky. I felt so honoured that She had appeared to me, but I didn't know how to begin to have a relationship with Her. Tentatively I began to invoke Her at my altar, and powerful emotional experiences would follow. But I still thought of Her as a 'dark' goddess, and felt apprehensive to what a devotional path with Her might mean – because of this resistance, a personal relationship didn't flow easily. I continued to learn about different Goddesses, but didn't enter into a close relationship with any; and I began to despair that I would never have a devotional relationship with a Goddess as I had long desired. Eventually I chose a different approach and began to study shamanism with different teachers, in the hopes that it would help me to experience the Goddesses in a different way. It worked better than I could have dreamed.

Studying shamanism changed my spiritual journey profoundly. I no longer felt dependent on 'finding' resources (books, groups, teachers). I learned to journey into the spirit realm, and interpret my experiences and the information I received. My first teacher encouraged me to go to my spirit guides (in the form of power animals) for guidance and help, and I learned to rely on my own discernment and intuition for interpreting their messages and signs.

When I felt confident in my shamanic abilities, I decided to return to studying European Goddess traditions. Armed with my new tools, I could more easily communicate with Goddess. And if communication was unclear, I trusted that the answers would come – if not immediately, they could be found through signs, symbols, dreams, and in nature.

Around this time, the Mórríghan appeared in my life in a different way than before. A flurry of books appeared on the market with their focus entirely on Her – this was unprecedented in my experience, and I snapped up every one I found. The approaches tended to be either reconstructionist (firmly based in academic sources, and focused on recreating an 'authentic' Celtic system) or eclectic (with less rigorous academic research, and using a loosely Wiccan-based system).

I appreciated the different approaches for distinct reasons. The reconstructionist sources (such as The Book of the Great Queen by Morpheus Ravenna, as well as various online forums) compiled all literary references to the Mórríghan that could be found, and cited primary sources. The downside for me was that the works and accounts were presented in a dry, formal manner that did not captivate me. The online forums had an air of judgement and condescension for any opinion that could not be backed up by research, or experience that fell outside the prescribed roles of the Mórríghan, as outlined in the 'approved' sources. Whenever a new member innocently asked whether there was a connection between the Mórríghan and Morgan Le Fay (which occurred fairly consistently), any discussion was quickly shut down, and the querent was referred back to the texts that were in favour with the group.

The biggest issue I had with academic sources and reconstructionist approaches is that there appeared to be no appreciation for where the knowledge of ancient systems first originated. The primary forms of ancient religions were oral traditions stemming from tribal shamanic cultures- followers were not likely to be found in libraries cross-referencing texts, citing sources, and quoting 'experts'. Information and knowledge were received for the tribe/community from medicine men and women, shamans and shamankas, priestesses and priests, as well as by individuals of the tribe for their own personal journeys. Their 'primary source' was Source energy itself.

Academic/ reconstructionist approaches do not seem to value the gnostic knowledge that would have been the very basis for the ancient religions they study- such experiences in modern times are generally categorized by reconstructionists as 'UPG' (Unsubstantiated Personal Gnosis), which to me seemed patronizing, at best. Since my own experiences did not meet the approval of these authors and groups, I was relieved when I realized this was not the approach for me and took my leave of them.

I appreciated the approach of the other books I had discovered (Feast of The Mórríghan by Christopher Penczak, Celtic Lore and Spellcraft of the Dark Goddess by Stephanie Woodfield, The

Morrigan: Meeting the Great Queens by Morgan Daimler). These authors compiling all the qualities and aspects they had come to associate with Her - not just through research but through shamanic journey, ritual, and their own devotional paths. The downside for me was that doing the actual rituals and journeys found in the books felt superficial and insignificant (which is why I felt frustrated with Wicca in the first place, and had left this path years ago). But I drew inspiration from how the authors conceived of the Goddess based more from experience than academic sources, and kept this in mind as something to explore in the future.

Shortly after my self-dedication ceremony, I was surprised when I started feeling the presence of Morgan Le Fay very strongly in my life. I had a strong sense of being called to do the Avalon training I'd discovered through the Glastonbury Goddess Temple. Eventually this calling became so strong and insistent that I felt I had to follow through. At the time, I thought this meant that I'd be leaving The Mórríghan behind for awhile, which brought feelings of sadness- but I couldn't deny the pull I felt towards the Avalon tradition any longer.

In the First and Second Spiral of the Avalon training, I was pleased to discover that not only I still felt the presence of the Mórríghan with me, but that She would often appear as I was invoking the Wheel (with the Centre being Her favourite place, as well as Beltane and Samhain). I was aware that Danu was traditionally referred to as Her mother (or seen as another of Her forms), and that Banbha was thought to one of Her sisters (or another of Her forms) - so it didn't seem out of place for Her to make appearances in the Wheel invocation. I continued planning to further explore a relationship with Her after my training was done.

Before my First Spiral Dedication, I scheduled a soul reading with a practitioner I knew and trusted, to make sure that dedicating and continuing to the Second Spiral were the right steps for me to take. I felt the presence of Modron during the reading, and it was so powerful it was like the veils had parted in the

room and She was right there with me. She showed me that I had been a priestess in the past and would be again in the future, and it seemed clear beyond a doubt that this path was the right for me to follow. At the time, I didn't have a strong personal connection with Modron, and was surprised to have such an intense experience arise spontaneously. (The following year, I would learn through reading Welsh literature of parallels between the stories of Modron and Morgan Le Fay. They were both said to be married to Urien, a king from Welsh history and legend who was eventually incorporated into Arthurian tales. Modron had a son named Owain, and Morgan Le Fay had a son named Ywain. Modron was also referred to as the daughter of *Avallach*, which has a connotation of 'a place of apples', much like Morgan was associated with *Ynys Affallach*, "the Island of Apples".)

Two years into my Avalon training, I was fascinated by all the connections I was making between Morgan Le Fay, the Mórríghan and now Modron – but I was no closer to drawing any conclusions about how the Mórríghan factored into my spiritual life. Before returning to Glastonbury for the Second Spiral dedication, I did a labyrinth walk to again receive guidance for my spiritual path, and who should be waiting for me at the centre but the Mórríghan? Again, I was surprised at Her appearance, when I was expecting to receive some guidance or understanding about my Avalon training. She told me, 'The map is not the territory'. I understood this to mean that any spiritual tradition or system was a map drawn by an individual, group, or culture; and in a true spiritual journey, each individual needed to walk this territory for themselves. It felt like a challenge for what lay ahead- like I was being asked to explore, What is Avalon to *me*? Who is the Lady of Avalon to *me*? Indeed, as I proceeded to the Third Spiral, these are the questions that I have journeyed with daily. I wondered often what the significance of the Mórríghan was to me as I was studying the path centred on The Lady of Avalon and Morgan Le Fay.

I continued to research any connections I could find between Morgan Le Fay and the Mórríghan, and still found two diametrically opposed camps. The academic/reconstructionist approach would contrast these figures with such proofs as etymological roots of their names - they postulated that since the root

of Morgan's name was likely derived from the Welsh *Morgen* meaning "sea-born" and the Irish Morrigan likely meant "Great Queen" or "Phantom/Shadow Queen", the two could not be related. The eclectic approach chose to instead to explore their commonalities, such as parallels in their stories: Morgan Le Fay is depicted as a villainous sorceress in Arthurian stories, but this is not her original form. She was referred to as Morgan the Goddess in the Vulgate Cycle (a 12th & 13th century compilation of Arthurian stories) and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (14th century poem). She could be seen as having had an Initiatrix role for Arthur, similar to the Mórríghan and Cú Chulainn in *The Táin*. The Mórríghan was present at the end of Cú Chulainn's life, just as Morgan appeared for mortally wounded Arthur.

Over and over as I read these conflicting opinions, I would find myself asking the same question: how could two beings with similar names, from traditions in the British Isles, stemming from the same root culture, and sharing associations with ravens, magick, shapeshifting and the faerie realm, NOT be connected? Regardless of what answers I found in books, they felt profoundly connected to me.

When I began the 3rd Spiral, I studied the images of the Lady of Avalon included in *Priestess of Avalon*, *Priestess of the Goddess* by Kathy Jones. With shock, I realized the second image from the Practice is how I have always seen the Goddess who's been guiding me for years, who I've known as the Mórríghan. (Eventually I remembered that I had even drawn a similar picture 20 years earlier, although I had never seen any images of the Mórríghan or the Lady of Avalon at the time. I had thought of the image I had drawn only as 'The Sorceress' - but when the Mórríghan appeared to me at my first self-dedication, this is just how She appeared.)

After doing the Avalon Practice for three months, I felt my connection to the Otherworld open – before I knew it, I was communicating more clearly with the Mórríghan, Morgan La Fey, and The Lady of Avalon – they all appeared to me in Avalon journeys, and in life. Undertaking a shamanic journey every day was powerful work, and I found myself thinking back to my shamanic studies where I had learned

about the world tree. In the traditional shamanic view of the universe, the roots of the world tree connect us to the underworld, the ancestral realm, spirit guides and ultimately to our power. The branches connect us to the Upper World, or the celestial realm, and ultimately to Source energy.

When we connect to our roots which anchor us to the realm of Spirit and Goddess, we have access to the same energies that were there in the ancient past - that will continue to be there in the distant future. This realm is beyond time, and is accessible to people throughout time. So the issue is not that everything we seek resides in the ancient past, and that our task is to try to piece it together as best we can (inevitably not measuring up to our concept of a golden age) but instead to recognize that we are just as worthy today of connecting to the timeless realm as were the ancient priestesses of the past. These ancient priestesses were as human as we are now, with shadow sides (seen as 'flaws' and 'weaknesses') and their own struggles.

I've come to believe that seeing our traditions as substandard, or pale imitations of the 'real thing', do us a real disservice – it can make it seem as if we're merely dressing up in the robes of our ancestors, without ever being able to recapture what was lost. But as long as we stay anchored to the spirit realm above and below, we are receiving all the guidance and information we need - for our individual paths, and for our modern Goddess paths.

When I could not find a definitive answer in books about the connection between the Mórríghan and Morgan Le Fay, I finally realized I needed to surrender to my own experience, and go directly to the source to get to the bottom of my question. In a recent journey to Avalon, I invoked the presence of Mórríghan and Morgan Le Fay, and asked about their relationship- they looked at each other with sly amusement, and then the Lady of Avalon appeared behind them. There was a rush of intense violet light, and their forms faded as I communed with the energy of the Lady. I finally understood that the forms and traditions they stem from may be different, but ultimately they return to the Lady of Avalon

like rivers to the ocean- as I do, through them. If I were to have based my understanding of the Mórríghan and Morgan Le Fay entirely on literary sources (be they academic, reconstructionist or eclectic wiccan), I would still be feeling conflicted about if my experiences were valid. Back when I saw the roots of Goddess tradition being based in the ancient past, it felt like I could never hope to fully understand who She was. But when I finally started experiencing the roots of Goddess traditions as timeless and accessible to all, I was able to learn directly from Spirit, and from Her.

In *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, a powerful work all about reclaiming the sacred feminine nature, Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes:

She is the source of the feminine... We each receive from her a glowing cell which contains all the instincts and knowings needed for our lives... She has been lost and half forgotten for a long, long time. She is the voice that says, 'This way, this way.'... Where does she live? At the bottom of the well, in the headwaters, in the ethers before time... She is from the future and from the beginning of time. She lives in the past and is summoned by us. She is in the present and keeps a chair at our table, stays behind us in line, drives ahead of us on the road. She is in the future and walks backward in time to find us now... She lives in a faraway place that breaks through to our world.

People may ask for evidence, for proof of her existence. They are essentially asking for proof of the psyche. Since we are the psyche, we are also the evidence. We are the proof of this ineffable female numen. Our existence parallels hers."

The roots of Goddess spirituality go deep into the Realm of Spirit and the Sacred Feminine within- we could no more be separate from them than from ourselves. Had the roots of the Goddess traditions been purely about the ancient past, they likely would have been lost forever under the crush of thousands of years of patriarchy, and the monotheism and rationalism that followed. But the Goddess was never truly lost, and has always been present in one form or another – and over the last few decades She has been arising in feminine consciousness like a phoenix.

A Mexican phrase used by the Zapatista movement was based on a short poem from a Greek homoerotic poet in the 1970's and translates literally as, "They tried to bury us; they didn't know we were seeds." To me this sums up the spiritual history of women, and humanity in general. The

annihilation of ancient pagan religions and priestesses, and the oppression of women in the millennia that followed, did not succeed in destroying our sacred knowledge about the Goddess, because there is nothing about the sacred feminine that can be destroyed. Generations upon generations of women were born without ever consciously knowing about our spiritual history, or the sacred feminine that lay within - but the information was passed on, because it is based in the realm of Spirit. The ancient roots of modern Goddess spirituality are to be found where they've always been - in the earth, in nature, in every living thing; in our blood and bones and our very cells... the roots are Her, have always been Her, will always be Her. Ancient Goddess cultures knew this, and now we are again consciously drawing from Her as our source of sacred wisdom and power. Blessed Be.