

# The Significance of Celtic Designs

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## **I. Celtic Knotwork**

The early Celts left behind an enduring legacy of almost hypnotic knots, fierce beasties, and spirals, some of them drawn so finely that people called them "the work of angels". What they did not leave behind was a Rosetta stone, if you will, saying that one particular knot stood for strength and another one meant love, etc.

We know that the Celts believed strongly in the interconnectedness of all life, and that their interlaced patterns reflected this belief. We can glean a bit more information about their symbols and beliefs from the old Celtic myths and legends. But without better evidence, we are not willing to ascribe certain meanings to the various knots we sell. We're willing to bet, though, that as you wear and enjoy our jewelry, it will take on its own special significance just for you.

## **II. Claddagh**



Traditionally, claddaghs are expressions of love and friendship. Like most traditional symbols, the origin of the claddagh has been obscured by the passage of time. It is almost certainly from the Irish fishing village of Claddagh, near Galway. Some stories say that "back in the 16th Century a young love torn jeweler from Galway in Ireland named Richard Joyce was kidnapped by pirates. Thinking of the girl he left behind, he designed a ring to express how he felt. It consisted of a heart to express his love, a crown for his loyalty and hands for their friendship. On returning after 5 years he was delighted to learn she had not married, he then presented the ring to her. The Claddagh has been worn as a wedding ring ever since." Others say the design was brought back from the Crusades by a young man captured by the Saracens. Whatever its history, the claddagh has become an enduring symbol of affection. The heart in the center of the design represents love, the hands that surround it represent friendship, and the crown at the top (if present) is symbolic of fidelity. Claddaghs are worn on the left hand, facing inward, if your heart is spoken for. If you are unattached, wear the ring on your right hand, facing outward.

## **III. Celtic Cross**



Strictly speaking, a "Celtic cross" is not just any cross that has Celtic knotwork on it. Celtic crosses are, in fact, much older than Christianity. They are equal-armed crosses, enclosed or backed by a circle. The cross can symbolize the four quarters of the earth, and/or the four elements (earth, air, fire, and water). The circle is a symbol of eternity and the path of the sun in the sky. After the introduction of Christianity, it became more common to see the equal-armed cross atop a matching pedestal, which gave it a more elongated form.

## **IV. Pentacle**



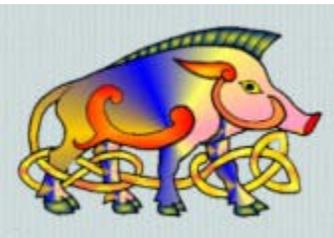
Pentacles are composed of a five-point star enclosed within a circle. Pentacles can be variously interpreted as representing the five elements (earth, air, fire, water, and spirit), or the five stages of Life (birth, youth, adulthood, old age, and death). In both cases, the path used to trace the star shape symbolizes the continuity and connection between the extremes. The pentacle is often used as a symbol of faith by Pagans, and particularly by Wiccans.

## V. Animals



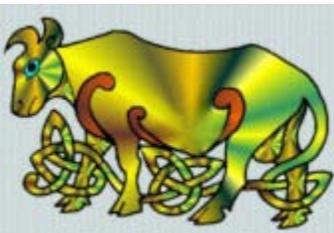
### **Birds:**

Associated with death transitions in Celtic mythology.



### **Boar/Sow:**

The boar is a symbol of masculine power. The meat of the boar was served at Otherworld feasts for the deities. The sow is associated with some Crone/Mother Goddesses, such as Cerridwen, and with Otherworldly feasts. The pig is the image/archetypal symbol of plenty, healing, and shape shifting.



### **Bull:**

Figures heavily in what little Celtic creation mythology surviving from Ireland, though this may not be Irish at all, but rather a myth derived from a Middle Eastern source. In the Celtic world, the bull was a symbol of virility, sovereignty, and wealth. The famous Irish legend, The Cattle Raid of Cooley, surrounds the taking of a famous bull. In Ancient Ireland, a tabhfheis, or a highly ritualized "feast of the bull", always preceded the crowning of a new High King.



### **Cat:**

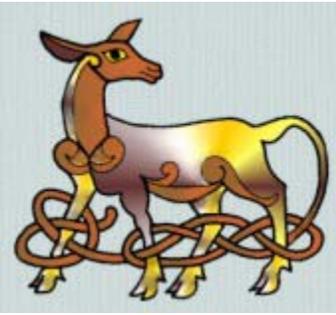
Unlike many other Indo-European cultures, the Celts did not revere cats, though there are many references to them in Celtic mythology. They serve the same archetypal guardian function as demons/angels in the Judeo-Christian myths. Three mythic references to cats which are prominent are; one, a cat which helps to guard the gates of the Otherworld; two, one who is able to shape shift into a ball of fire; and three, one called Irusan of Knowth who stole humans like the faery. Cat-like monsters were also believed to dwell in dark caves.



## Crane:

Numerous Celtic myths tell us of a heroic figure or deity who was changed into a crane such as Aife, the Lady of the Lake, or Munanna. Archetypally this bird means an apparent, rather than substantive, change. A sign of, or punishment for, deception.

## Deer / Stag:



The deer was the principal animal hunted by the Celts for food. The doe was associated with most woodland Goddesses, such as Saba and Flidais, and is their totem animal. The stag was often seen as the incarnate form of woodland Gods such as Cernunnos. White stags were considered to be from the Otherworld and, in myth, their appearance always heralded some profound change in the lives of those in the story. Considered in Celtic mythology to be among the oldest creatures in existence.

## Dog:



Sacred to the faeries of Ireland and Scotland probably because they were held in high regard by the Tuatha de Danann. Many Celtic myths involve dogs or dog familiars, who belonged to heroic figures or deities, and wars were often fought for and over them such as the one between Fionn MacCumhal and King Arthur. Examples of the importance of Celtic dogs are found in the myths of Gwyn Ap Nuad, Cuchulain, Amaethaon, and Taliesin. Dogs are also the archetypal symbols of shape shifters.



## Dragon:

The dragon is another mighty magical animal that appears in British and Welsh stories. It is, of course, a creature of fire but is also related to the Power of the Land. Another word for Ley Lines is Dragon Lines. Another name for raising power is to invoke the "Eye of the Dragon". The whole Earth was viewed by the Druids as the body of the Dragon. Menhirs and stone Circles were located at great Power nodes. The Celts also called Dragons 'Fire Drakes'.



## Eagle:

Eagles were the feared scavengers of Europe and were usually linked to death Gods, such as Beli, in the same way as the crow was linked to death Goddesses. In Welsh mythology, Llew was turned into an eagle at the moment of his murder.



## Horse:

Horses were sacred to many Indo-European Goddesses, and often filled the archetypal place given to cats in other cultures. They were linked to the night, the moon, mystery, and magic. Nightmares, a name which is derived from that of the female horse, were thought by the Celts to be brought by a visiting horse Goddess such as Epona or Mare. In most Celtic myths the horses are black or white.



## Ouzel:

Usually spelled Ouzel in the United States. This water bird is known for its tenacious and deceptive personality. While it looks harmless enough, it is revered for its ability to staunchly defend itself and its flock. In myth, the Ouzel of Cilgwri once picked a smith's hammer down to the size of a small nut.

## Raven/Crow:



The Crow is deeply linked to Crone Goddesses such as Badb, and to Goddess of war or death like the Morrigan. The Raven is similar to the crow in that it is deeply associated with death deities. But, while the crow is usually reserved as a spirit form for feminine deities, the raven has been the Otherworldly body for both Gods and Goddesses. Like the crow, it flew over Celtic battlefields as the deity incarnate. The raven is most closely associated with the Irish/Welsh God Bran.

## Salmon:



While the airborne creatures archetypally linked the Celts to the Underworld, sea creatures linked them to great knowledge, sacred mysteries, and deep emotion, (typically, only deities of great wisdom and temperament ruled the Celtic seas). Most prominent among these wise sea creatures was the Salmon of Knowledge. The myths of Nudons and Fionn are among the many dealing with this fish. It is said to have acquired its great knowledge from eating the Nine Hazels of Wisdom that fell from the Tree of Knowledge. This fish was said to be among the oldest of living creatures.

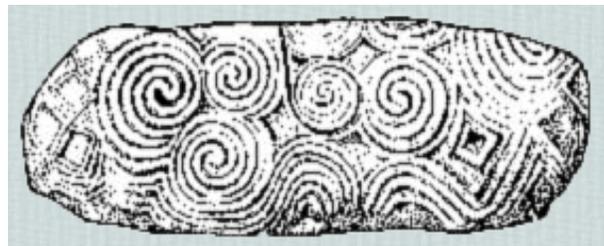


## Serpent:

Represents the cyclic nature of life due to the annual shedding of its skin. It is a phallic symbol, a symbol of the Triple Goddess, and of the earth mysteries. It is important to the Druids, and is found on much old Celtic jewelry. Contrary to popular myth, there are snakes in Ireland, though they are pretty much confined to the rugged western region of the Island.

## VI. Geometric Motifs

Geometric motifs have always been prominent in Celtic artwork. Some of the motifs or symbols date back to 3000 BC and can still be seen today on stone carvings. Newgrange in Ireland, is one of the oldest burial mounds in Europe and is highly decorated with stone (see picture on the right) carvings depicting spirals, lozenges, chevrons and key patterns.

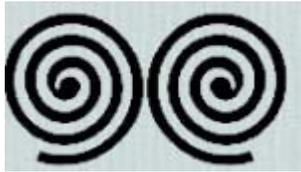




The single spiral is the oldest and most recorded of these motifs. It has symbolized the concept of growth, expansion, and cosmic energy, depending on the culture in which it is used. To the ancient inhabitants of Ireland, the spiral was used to represent their sun. A tightly wound, clockwise spiral represented their shrinking winter sun.



A loosely wound anti-clockwise spiral represented the large summer sun.



The dual centered spiral is also prolific in stone carvings. It has associations with motifs from other cultures such as the Yin Yang symbol. It signifies the duality of nature and balance.



A double spiral is used to represent the equinoxes, when day and night are of equal length.



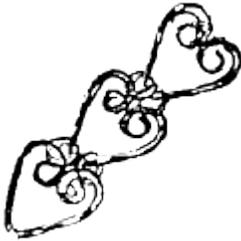
Triple centered spirals were used by the early Christian monks in their illuminated manuscripts. It originated as a symbol of the Triple Goddess (maiden, mother, crone, also represented by the waxing, full and waning moon), pre-dating Christianity. In fact, most of Christianity's holidays and symbols are taken from Pagan mythology.



These symbols are called *triskele* or *triskelion*. The Triskele is used to symbolize the cycles of life with in the three fold, or three spheres of influence in the material world. The three spheres (Land, Sea and Sky) represent the three aspects of the material world that are contained in every object. Each aspect ever flowing outward and always returning to the point from which it started.



The **triquetra** is a three part ancient symbol comprised of three interlocked vesica pices, often used to represent people or concepts in groups of three. Also known as the **trinity knot** and **Celtic triangle**, it has been found in Celtic art, paganism and also has been used in Christianity. It represents the threefold nature of the Goddess as virgin, mother and crone. It also symbolizes life, death, and rebirth and the three forces of nature: earth, air, and water. The inner three circles represent the female element and fertility.



Chevrons resemble arrowheads used by hunters and warriors alike and were a symbol of power among the Celts. The motif is nearly heart shaped and occurs as repeat band patterns in ornamentation.



Flowing scroll patterns were used for decoration rather than symbolic purposes. The Book of Durrow, an illuminated manuscript contains many fine examples of such patterns.



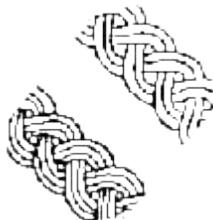
Celtic knotwork designs vary from the elegant single knot and double knot patterns to the very sophisticated interlaced patterns.



The Ulster Cross depicted here is a fine example of interlaced knotwork. A single thread is used, symbolizing eternity.



The key patterns of Celtic art are really spirals composed of straight lines. It is another universal pattern attributed largely to the Greeks, but in fact originated in the Ukraine some 15,000 years earlier.



The borders of the illuminated manuscripts, the Book of Kells, Book of Durrow, and the Book of Lindisfarne are adorned by various patterns - spiral patterns, key patterns, interlacing, plaiting and ropework.