

BRIGID OR BRIGANTIA: A 'PAN-CELTIC' GODDESS IN PROFILE

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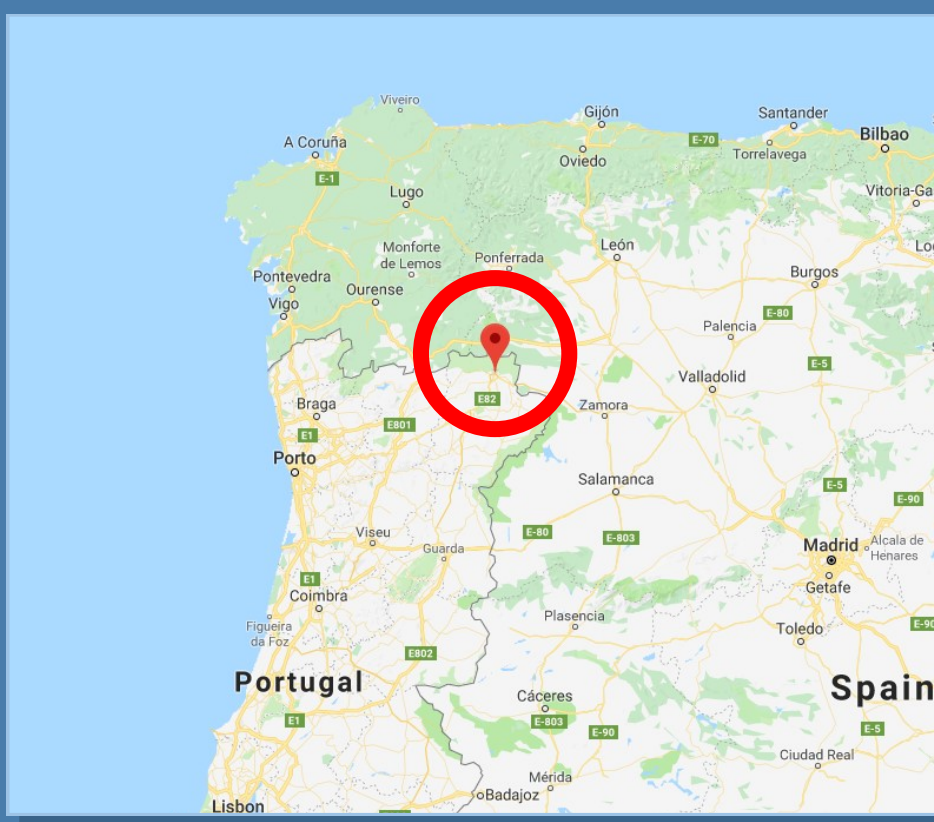


RIB 628
2nd century AD
Deae Victoriae
Brigantiae aram
dedicavit Aurelius
Senopianus

"To the goddess Victoria
Brigantia, Aurelius
Senopianus dedicated
(this altar)."



Brigantia dedications in the territory of the Brigantes



RESEARCHING CELTIC DEITIES

Celtic deities are still poorly understood. For generations, scholars have made simplistic assumptions, often based on the idea that 'Celtic' religion never evolved between the Iron Age and the Middle Ages. Brigantia is an obvious case of misunderstanding: a Celtic goddess par excellence considered endemic to the British Isles, and virtually identical to the Irish Brigid. This multi-disciplinary study, making use of epigraphic, literary, toponymic, etymological and iconographic evidence, provides new insights in the changing nature of Brigantia.

BRIGANTIA, VICTORIA & MINERVA

The inscription above makes a connection between Brigantia and the Roman goddess Victoria, the personification of victory, who was central to Roman ideology as patroness of war. Does this point towards Brigantia as a war goddess? The opposite might be more plausible: Victoria also brings peace and prosperity, hence we might need to insert Brigantia into this context. The bronze statue (right) is a representation of Brigantia, hybridizing features from the Roman Minerva and the indigenous goddess. Minerva often takes on the role of Celtic mother goddesses since she has similar functions to those ascribed to Brigantia and Brigid, notably as bringer of prosperity and fertility.



2nd-century bronze statue from Brittany, presumed to be Brigantia (Musée de Rennes)

BRIGID

Research Findings on Brigantia

- ⇒ A pan-Celtic deity attested across Europe.
- ⇒ Her name most probably means 'The Exalted One'.
- ⇒ Hence, a powerful goddess, bringer of fertility, prosperity and peace.
- ⇒ The Irish Brigid was also goddess of poetry and prophesy, but not necessarily Brigantia.
- ⇒ Brigid is still important today as a Catholic saint, but she evolved beyond her 'Pan-Celtic' and Romano-Celtic roots.

BRIGANTIA: BRITISH OR EUROPEAN ?

Traditionally, the goddess Brigantia has been considered to be unique to Britain as the goddess of the Brigantes. Since both theonym and ethnikon derive from the same root, scholars presume that Brigantia is merely named after the Brigantes. All known epigraphic attestations were found in their territory which covers several modern British counties, including Yorkshire, Durham, Cumbria and parts of Northumberland (Phillips, 1976). Beck (2013) has shown that Brigantia can hardly be a 'personified' version of the Brigantes, but is a goddess in her own right. We are probably dealing with a process of ethnogenesis in response to Roman imperialism, in which Brigantia was adopted as patron goddess to express people's identity.

Brigantia is also attested in many other places across Iron Age and Roman Europe: her name survives in place names, like Bragança (Bragança, Portugal), Brigantion (Bregenz, Austria), Brigetio (Szóny, Hungary) and many more (see Phillips, 1976; Beck, 2013). The theonym's wide dispersion suggests that these places were named after the goddess, similar to Athens being named after the goddess Athena who also was Athens' patron deity.

Interestingly the place-after-name, name-after-place debate is non-conclusive as the etymology of Brigantia could refer to a place being 'high' - figuratively as close to the gods or literally as the geography of the location.

TUATHA DÉ DANANN

In Irish mythology, the Tuatha dé Danann is a group of deities that represent the central figures of 'Celtic' Ireland. Among them Brigid as the goddess of prophesy, poetry and fertility. It also includes Dagda, 'the good god', Brigid's father and god of druid lore and magic, as well as Lugh, the god of warriors and light (cognate with ancient Celtic Lugus after whom many cities were named, like Lugdunum, Lyon).

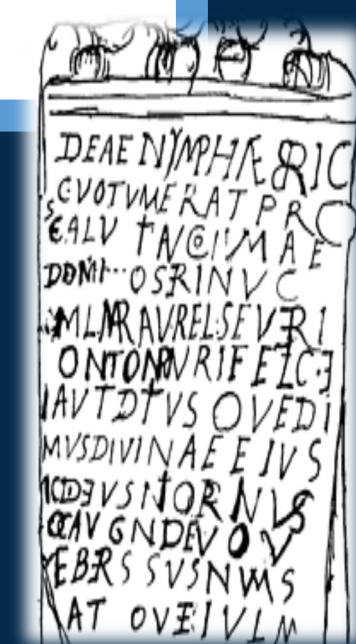
Brigid's myth is rich with imagery of fertility, similar to ancient Celtic Brigantia and other mother goddesses. It was said that her cows could fill a lake with their milk three times a day. Her larder would never empty no matter how much was taken from it. This myth is the likely reason why she became the patron saint of beer and cows in the Roman Catholic church and was worshipped at the feast of Imbolc (Ó'Cathain 1995).



Well of Brigid, County Kildare, Ireland. The waters are suspected to have healing properties, having been blessed by St Brigid.

A WATER NYMPH?

In this votive inscription from Brampton (RIB 2066), Brigantia is described as a water nymph. Does this hint at her identity and function? The connection of water and healing is strong and the Irish goddess Brigid also has an association with water which we see throughout Ireland with a multitude of wells in her name. But the dedicant was the Roman procurator: was he trying to understand Brigantia from his own cultural background?



Dedication Deae Nymphae Brig(antiae) from AD 112-7

This offering to the Goddess Nymph Brigantia, which he had vowed for the welfare and safety of our Lord, the invincible emperor Marcus Aurelius Severus Antoninus Pius Felix Augustus and of the whole Divine House, Marcus Cocceius Nigrinus, procurator of our Emperor and most devoted to his divinity and majesty, gladly, willingly, and deservedly fulfilled his vow. (RIB 2066)

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ETYMOLOGY OF BRIGANTIA

Brigantia has a deep-rooted etymology going back to Proto-Indo-European. The most common recurring meaning is 'high' both in a literal and figurative sense, the 'Exalted One':

