

Macha

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Macha is a Goddess of many faces and aspects, but one that is not so commonly known in-depth. She is a Goddess of Ireland and though Her parts in the mythology are spread out, they provide us a rich view of Her many attributes. Perhaps the most well known of Macha's tales in Irish mythology is the race against the king of Ulster's horses.

The tale comes to us from the Irish epic, *Tain Bo Cuailnge*.¹ One day a beautiful woman came through the woods to the home of Cruinniuc mac Agnomain, who was a widower. The woman entered his home, put it to rights and that evening took Cruinniuc to bed. While she resided there the household knew no want. It came to pass that the woman grew great with child. During this time, Cruinniuc made ready to leave for the fair. Before he left, the woman reminded him that it would be best not to speak in boast or carelessness.¹

During the races at the fair it was all too soon that Cruinniuc forgot his wife's words and when the crowd exclaimed no one could beat the king's horses, he responded that his wife could. In disbelief the crowd demanded that Cruinniuc prove his claim and so a messenger was sent for his wife. Upon her arrival she pleaded with the crowd to wait until she had delivered. Incised as the crowd was, they would have none of it. They brought her before the king and he asked of her name.¹

The *Tain* records her response, "My name, and the name of my offspring will be given to this place. I am Macha, daughter of Sainrith mac Imbaith".¹

With this she lined up beside the King's chariot and horses and the race was begun. As the chariot reached the end of the field, Macha gave birth beside it. In the midst of the birthing Macha cursed all who could hear Her voice that they would suffer the pains of labor for five days and four nights during the time of their greatest need. Macha then delivered a girl and a boy. The name of this land became known as *Emain Macha* meaning the twins of Macha and the curse went for nine generations among the men of Ulster.¹

It is said that the boy ran to the sea. This is curious as Macha is also known as "The Daughter of the Sea".² It brings one to wonder if the sea is being spoken of metaphorically to indicate one of the Otherworlds. This terminology could be used to indicate that the son died



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immediately after birth. Some versions of the tale also indicate that Macha and Her twins died in birth which might metaphorically speak to Macha and Her children returning to the Otherworld.

This imagery and the tale also tie in to Macha's association as a Horse Goddess.³ Hence Her ability to overcome the king's horses, but less directly a possible tie in to Her watery nature. Imagery many times will show horses amongst the waves as they 'gallop' to shore.

The tale of Macha racing the horses and cursing the men of Ulster is not the only tie between Her and the Pagan capital of Ulster³, Emain Macha. There is also the tale of Macha the Red.⁴ In this tale, Macha was the daughter of Aed, one of three kings who took turns ruling. When Aed died Macha rose to take his place on the throne. Dithorba and Cimbeth objected to this so Macha challenged them to battle. Macha defeated the other two kings and thus came to rule by not only inheritance, but by conquest. It came that Dithorba died and his sons rose to challenge Macha. On the night of the tale the five sons of Dithorba were sitting around the fire.⁴

At this point the tale differs, which I believe is dependent on how the word 'cailleach' is defined. Gods & Heros of the Celts by Marie-Louise Sjoestedt tells us that Macha came upon the men as a beautiful woman, as cailleach is translated here as 'the local Goddess'.⁴ Other versions of the tale list that She came upon them as a hag or leper which could be resulting from a derogatory association of a crone, which cailleach is also translated as, perhaps a more modern definition to discredit the original.

The tale continues that in this guise She used Her sexual wiles to lure the men, in order from the youngest to oldest, away from the others and into the forest where She bound them by Her magick. It is thus said that She bound them by Her magick and then taught them by Her magick. Afterwards the sons of Dithorba built the fort temple at Emain Macha where they remained in the service of "the Mighty Goddess" for the rest of their lives.²

Emain Macha is not the only location in Ireland bearing the name and a tale of Macha. There is also the "Plain of Macha" and the "Hill of Macha".⁴ Perhaps it is from this that the idea of Macha as a group of Goddesses arises. In "Gods and Heros of the Celts", Marie-Louise Sjoestedt lists Macha as a group of seasonal Goddesses that were matrones of the great feasts and the sacred sites they were held upon.⁴

There is also a tale of Macha working with the land when the people first arrived to Ireland. It is said that the land was so densely forested that the people could not grow food and their animals could not graze. Macha came with Her Great Axe and cleared the land for the people.² This further ties Macha to the forests as it was also in the forests that She bound the sons of Dithorba.

This tale and all of these land areas bearing the name of Macha and the seasonal indications bring us to Macha as land Goddess and Goddess of Sovereignty. These aspects can also be seen in the outlay of Emain Macha being based upon Macha's cloak pin.⁵ Nicholas R. Mann furthers this association in Druid Magic where he describes a dream that leads him to the knowledge that if the sacred center of Pagan Ulster, Emain Macha, is based upon Macha's brooch pin then the trees and landscape of Ireland would serve as Her cloak.³ To me, this further reinforces Emain Macha as spiritual and political center of Pagan Ulster. The sacred land would be Her mantle of sovereignty from which the chosen ruler would lead the peoples. Being that leaders previously held their role in strong connection to the land and its sovereignty, this would seem to make Macha an integral part of the landscape, the rulers and the people as well as

making connections to the fertility of the land. These ideas also lead us back to her association as a Horse Goddess as the horse carries a strong tie to sovereignty for the Celtic peoples.⁶



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Perhaps the most well known attribute of Macha is as a part of the Morrighan. It is within this group that Macha is known as one of the Battle Goddesses of the Tuatha De Danann.³ It is interesting to note that in this group the magickal abilities of Macha come to the forefront again. It is said that as part of the Morrighan Macha used no weapon, only her magick.⁴ Many times Macha is seen as the Mother aspect of the Morrighan though She was also seen as a crone by Her actions. One such is guarding the *mesred machae*, which Celtic Women's Spirituality, Accessing the Cauldron of Life by Edain McCoy explains as the pillared gate upon "which the severed heads of conquered warriors were displayed" at the Ulster fortress of the Red Branch warriors, Emain Macha.⁶ This imagery is further carried on in the Masts of Macha, which is one of the terms used to refer to the heads upon the battlefield that belonged to Macha.⁷ This terminology also puts Her in the realm of the crone as one who guides the slain onto the Otherworld.

There is also speculation that like the Morrighan, Macha is a triplicate and is actually, the Macha.⁸ Perhaps as we saw the Mother and the Crone aspects of Macha, there is a maiden as well making Her a triple Goddess.

Looking at all these attributes and aspects, it is my opinion that Macha was quite an important Goddess to the ancient Irish people in Ulster. Perhaps the reason that She is not mentioned more in the texts is not because of obscurity, but because the tales were written during or after the change of attitudes of the people. New viewpoints which were taking them away from Macha, Goddess of the Land, Sovereignty, Fertility, Death and towards different Goddesses and Gods more matching the attitudes of the times. Perhaps then it could be said that Macha existed before the Celts; native to the land. The myths tell us of many different groups of peoples to inhabit the land of Ireland. The Tuatha De Danann were among the earliest and it is said they went underground, to the hills, and/or to the Otherworld as successive inhabitants arrived. Macha is known as a Goddess of the Tuatha De Danann³ so perhaps She too went to these more reclusive locations with Her people. In my personal work with Her, Macha seems to exhibit all of these broad attributes and more. I believe She is a Goddess who has many aspects that were forgotten in the passage of time; only a few of which were still remembered when Her history was actually written.



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Macha Blessing

May you be swift as Macha's horses.
May you be always welcome in Her hall.
May you learn the wisdom in Macha's tales
And ride into battle with Her by your side.

May your land bloom fruitfully.
And you find prosperity in all you do.
May you learn Macha's magick
And see with the light of Her knowledge.

The beauty of the maiden Macha be upon you.
The gentle embrace of mother Macha be with you.
And when death comes, may the swiftness of
crone Macha guide you surely.

May you dance with Her in plenty.
May you dance with Her in transformation.
May you dance with Her in beauty.
May you dance with Her in love.

Macha Prayer for the Seeker

Macha protect me though I may fear.
Help me as I battle through the death of parts of me
I must let go.
May You come swiftly with Your scythe and sword
to take away the old.
May Your axe clear the land to begin planting anew.
Help me to see that death is but a transformation
leading to rebirth and new life.

Macha help me to be sovereign of myself.
Help me to stand-up for what is right, while
maintaining compassion.
May I realize my self-empowerment without falling
into boastful traps.

Macha grant me vision to see what is within.
And Your wisdom be with me in all that I do.
Help me in my transformations to be more fully
myself

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And yet to be more like You.

Your praise is upon my lips.
Your beauty the sight before my eyes.
My gratitude to You swells my heart.
Wondrous Goddess, I love You.

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Macha Ritual

This is a quick and simple ritual to ask Macha for Her protection. This works especially well for protecting the home, but can also be used to protect the self. If the need is immediate, simply calling out to Macha and asking for Her help will protect you.

Items Needed:

Dried Irish Moss or Blessed salt water
Fire safe or water proof container
Charcoal & Matches if using the incense method
Black, Red or Cream colored candle to represent Macha's flame.
Fire safe candle holder or surface for the candle
Yourself :)

Light the candle to represent Macha. Call to Macha in your heart's words and ask for Her help in this working.

Place a charcoal tablet in a fire-safe container, light it and add the Irish Moss for incense. If using salt water, fill a bowl with water, add salt (preferably Sea Salt), then place your hands over the bowl and bless the water.

If doing a house protection, move throughout the home wafting the incense or sprinkling the salt water. Make sure to get the corners and any entry points (e.g., doors {include closet doors and the like}, mirrors, windows, faucets, drains and even the toilet). At each entry point stop and ward the entry. Hold the incense or water bowl before the entry and, if desired, in the air draw a symbol that represents protection to you. While doing this say the following:

This home is protected by Macha.
Blessing to all those who enter in welcome.
None that mean harm may enter.
So it is.

If performing the protection blessing for yourself, place your hands around the candle. Feel the warmth of Her flame. Feel Her energy surrounding you, protecting you.

When done thank Macha and if you feel called to do so, ask for Her continued blessings.

1. The Tain translated by Thomas Kinsella from the Irish Epic – Tain Bo Cuailnge
2. Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood by Merlin Stone
3. Druid Magic by Maya Magee Sutton, Ph.D. & Nicholas R. Mann
4. Gods & Heros of the Celts by Marie-Louise Sjoestedt
5. The Elements of The Celtic Tradition, by Caitlin Matthews
6. Celtic Women's Spirituality, Accessing the Cauldron of Life by Edain McCoy
7. The Religion of the Ancient Celts: by J. A. MacCulloch (accessed via www.sacred-texts.com)
8. A History of Pagan Europe, by Prudence Jones & Nigel Pennick