

Cailleach Bheur: "The Great Hag"



The *Cailleach Bheur* is a hag goddess concerned with creation, harvest, the weather and sovereignty. In partnership with the goddess Bríd (Brighde), she is a seasonal goddess, seen as ruling the winter months while Bríd rules the summer. (Some folks believe that she and Bríd are actually two faces of the same deity.) The name—meaning old woman—comes from the Old Gaelic *Caillech* ("veiled one"), an adjectival form of *caille* ("veil"), believed to be an early loan word from Latin *pallium*, "woollen cloak."

In Scotland, a group of hags, known as *The Cailleachan* (The Storm Hags) are seen as personifications of the elemental powers of nature, especially in a destructive aspect. They are said to be particularly active in raising the windstorms of spring, during the period known as *A Chailleach*. They also in folklore introduce winter by washing their plaids in the maelstrom off the coast of Argyll known as the Corryvreckan whirlpool (below). Corryvreckan translates as "cauldron of the plaid."



As with many mythologies, in Irish and Scottish stories features of the landscape were often said to result from actions of the gods. In the case of Scotland, the land goddess Cailleach Bheur, who took the form of a giant hag, caused several notable features. She is credited with making numerous mountains and large hills, which are said to have been formed when she was striding across the land and accidentally dropped rocks from her creel or wicker basket. In other cases she is said to have built the mountains intentionally, to serve as her stepping stones. She carries a hammer for shaping the hills and valleys, and is said to be the mother of all the goddesses and gods.

The Cailleach displays several traits befitting the personification of winter: she herds deer, she fights spring, and her staff freezes the ground.

The Great Hag is prominent in the landscape of Argyll and Bute, Scotland. In later tales she is known as the *Cailleach nan Cruachan* ("the witch of Ben Cruachan"). Ben Cruachan is the tallest mountain in the region and its name features in the war cry of the Campbells (though the "Cruachan" actually refers to a rally point, a meadow on the shore of Loch Awe across from the chief's Innischnonnell Castle.) Tea-towels and postcards of The Witch are sold in the visitor shop for the Hollow Mountain, which also features a mural depicting her accidental creation of Loch Awe.

LOCH AWE

This is one of the famous tales of the goddess: Every night, after tending her cattle, the Great Hag went to the top of Ben Cruachan (below) to block the spring that arose there with a huge boulder, so that it would not flood the plain below overnight.



But, one evening she fell asleep on her way up the mountain and awoke to find the waters of spring gushing out in a great torrent and cascading down the mountainside. In vain the Great Hag struggled to block the spring with a rock, but the force of the flood was too great, even for her.



Above Cailleach by Sarah Bowie; below Loch Awe



Finally defeated, she looked down at the flooded valley and saw people and animals, dead and dying, in the floodwaters. She was so overcome with guilt that she turned to stone. The flooded plain below Ben Cruachan became Loch Awe (Loch Obha), the heart of what would become Campbell country. -Story adapted from Shahrukh Husain, "Gods, Goddesses and the Cosmos" in Barnes & Nobel MYTH AND MANKIND, HEROES OF THE DAWN: Celtic Myth (2003) p. 22

What did the Cailleach look like? Well, almost anything. Often depicted as a stereotypical old hag (think of our modern idea of witches), her skin was sometimes blue or black. She could have been veiled or the owner of three faces, or fangs. She was a one-eyed blue giantess or she had boar tusks.

The Cailleach was not a goddess of any one realm, nor was she one to be trifled with. Instead she could be fierce and kind, benevolent yet uncaring, a goddess of war and chaos as well as one of love and protection. She was a protector of the creatures of the forest, in particular, animals like deer, wolves and boar.

In Scotland, the Cailleach has been renamed Beira, a winter goddess, by the folklorist Donald Alexander Mackenzie. She's a personification of winter and the mother of all Scottish gods and goddesses. Her staff was said to freeze the ground and the longest night of the year was the highpoint of her witchiness. From then on she visited a Well of Youth, the water of which allowed her to grow steadily younger until spring.

The Scottish Cailleach was responsible for many features of the Scottish landscape, including Loch Ness, which was said to have been created when she transformed her disobedient maid Ness into a river. Likewise, the Cailleach was supposed wash her face in some river springs, replacing a capstone every night. One day though, she became careless and forgot to replace the cap. The springs flooded, creating Loch Awe.

While many of the beliefs about the Cailleach are attached to the sea and wild places, the Cailleach is also attached to farming. People were, naturally, a little bit afraid of her. In Scotland and Ireland, the first farmer to finish his grain harvest made a little corn dolly of the Cailleach (sometimes called a Carlin). This got passed to the next farmer who finished, until the last farmer in the district to finish his harvest had the unenviable task of sheltering the Cailleach in his house over winter.