

# the modern celts of northern spain

STORY & ARTWORK  
BY BEEBE BAHRAMI

WHEN I BOARDED THE BUS IN FERROL, GALICIA, I ASKED THE driver in Spanish, "Is this the bus to Cedeira?" He never looked at me but responded to my question in Gallego, the language of this northwest region of Spain. Gallego is related to both Spanish and Portuguese, though it is much closer to Portuguese. When I asked for clarification in Spanish, he began a long diatribe in Gallego as people on the bus nodded their agreement. One woman finally smiled at me compassionately and grabbed my sleeve, inviting me to take a seat. All she said was, "Si, Cedeira."

It took me a few more days in Galicia to learn that I was experi-

encing not just a nationalist sentiment expressed through language, but a more ancestral feeling, one where Galicians speak a distinct language from the rest of Spain both to assert autonomy and to reconnect with their regional past, one many will tell you is more Celtic, matriarchal, and Atlantic than Castilian, patriarchal, and Mediterranean. This is a recent reconnection, permitted only with the death of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco in 1975. Franco's regime had prohibited many regional festivals, and it is only in the past two decades that Spanish regions, with great fanfare and enthusiasm, have been reintroducing old festivals and sometimes inventing new ones.

OPPOSITE PAGE, 1 and 2: An engraving of a *meiga*, a healing witch, protects the threshold to a gourmet food and wine shop in Santiago de Compostela; 3: "Bar Celta" in Santiago de Compostela, one of many northern bars, cafes, and taverns that have taken up the Celtic spirit; 4 and 5: Galician claims to matriarchy often point to the prominence of women in public. A case in point is this covered market in Santiago de Compostela where the majority of merchants are women; 6: The street and store front of Druida in Santiago de Compostela; 7 and 8: This Celtic female figure, a Galician Celtic-style of blue and white ceramic work, represents a common style of beer tap in bars and restaurants throughout Galicia.

## CELTIC SPAIN?

In Galicia, a regional movement has been afoot since about 1981. It fashions itself around an assortment of ancestral people believed to have once populated this northwestern region of Iberia: Celts, matriarchs, healer witches (*meigas*), naturalists, and pilgrims. Galicians place a lot of nationalistic emphasis on their traditional instrument, the *gaeta*, a form of bagpipe they popularly claim to be of Celtic origin. Galicians also highlight their focus on the natural world, both ecological and metaphysical. They stress the rain and green of their province — comparing it to Ireland, Scotland, and Wales — rather than the perpetual sun of the rest of Spain. They emphasize their Atlantic-based culture in contrast to the Mediterranean. All in all, many Galicians stress that which distinguishes their region from the rest of Spain.



In recent years, there has also been an exponential growth in Web sites on Celtic Galicia, with a few linking Galician nationalism to the Celtic past. One site, that of the leftist political party, Partido Galeguista (<http://www.png-pg.org/>), draws on Celtic themes in defining the party's platform and uses Celtic motifs in its Web design. The design group that developed Partido Galeguista's site maintains its own site dedicated to elaborating on Galicia's Celtic origins and traditions (<http://www.novafantasia.com/mamoa/english.html>, click on "Celtic Galicia").

An area of Spain defining itself as Celtic may be surprising, but in a time of globalization and rapid local changes worldwide, it is common to find people looking for something that distinguishes who they are and where they come from. The Celtic past is not as neat or as continuous as popular modern accounts would indicate. The ancient Celts never went by that name, one given to some of the related tribes



The Castro de Baroña, a *castro* settlement over 2,000 years old, on Galicia's western Atlantic coast. Many such *castro* remains are sprinkled across Galicia.

(*keltoi*) observed by Classical writers in the sixth century B.C. These tribes developed diverse cultures across Europe. While there are certain similarities in cosmology, artistic styles, and social organization, each tribal group developed very different social and cultural forms in the regions where they settled.

The effort of a Celtic revival — or any revival — is not directed toward understanding the past, however, but toward creating a people of the present and a place of belonging in a rapidly changing world. As Simon James concludes in *The Atlantic Celts — Ancient People or Modern Invention?* the idea of modern Celts is not artificial because “discrediting the insular Ancient Celts does not make the modern Celts fraudulent. For more sophisticated understandings of the nature of ethnic identities now available to us, which reveal the Ancient Celts to be a modern construct, equally suggest that the modern Celts constitute a perfectly real and legitimate ‘ethnic group.’ The resolution of this

paradox lies in chronology: the modern Celts are not the present representatives of a people who have existed continuously for millennia but constitute a true case of ‘ethnogenesis’ — the birth of an ethnic identity.”

Some Galicians — and some of their neighbors to the east, the Asturians and the Cantabrians — are creating histories and associated Celtic festivals that bring villagers and townspeople together toward creating coherent well-woven communities in the face of the fragmenting consequences of globalization. Globalization encourages this ethnogenesis.

#### THE ANCIENT CELTS OF SPAIN

During their expansion from somewhere in the east, a Celt-related people arrived in Spain some 2,500 years ago. How and why these people arrived in Spain is still open to debate. The most likely scenario is one of a mobile people crossing the Pyrenees and fanning out into the peninsula in several



The typical attire of a male festival participant that is seen at many of the festivals in Galicia, such as the Festa Castrexa and the Festa Celta do Lugnasad.

waves, not so much of invasion and conquest, but of culture contact and *tessorae*, hospitality agreements, which were often recorded on contracts carved in portable stone pieces. These Celtic-related people and the indigenous Iberians influenced each other's cultures, mixed, and created a unique Celtiberian culture. The Celtiberians were especially concentrated around the mountainous territories in the northeast, today's Navarre and Aragon. Celtic-influenced tribes also spread to Portugal and northward into today's Galicia, Asturias, and Cantabria. In such northern reaches, these people founded small settlements, called *castros*, in isolated mountain and coastal environments, often on high places for defense. *Castro* remains, numbering in the thousands and concentrated mostly in Galicia, fuel the modern

Galician image of the Celts as accessible ancestors whose influences continue into contemporary Galician culture.

The earliest known reference to the Celts in modern Galician history was in the mid-19th century by a group of Galician nationalists. Galicia has long been viewed as remote from the rest of Spain and overlooked by the country. It is the country's poorest province, even in Spain's current climate of economic development. (Most recently, it was the region hardest hit by the *Prestige* oil spill, a situation that is now severely challenging one of Galicia's main industries, fishing.) In elections shortly before Franco seized power in 1936, the majority of Galicians voted for regional autonomy. Franco's rise to power quickly ended nationalist movements in Galicia, but when public nationalist discussions surfaced again after his death, so did the Celts.

This reconnection with the Celts has especially been prominent since the early 1990s, coinciding with Galicia's desire to increase its profile in the rest of Spain and Europe. The most visible efforts were tourist campaigns to popularize the Christian pilgrimage (the *Camino*) to the Galician city of Santiago de Compostela. Certain Galicians, primarily from the middle class, wanted to connect Galicia's distant past with the international present, which was brought into bold focus with multiple events in 1992: the Olympics in Barcelona, the World's Fair in Seville, and Madrid's designation as Europe's cultural capital. In light of all these events, these Galicians expanded the focus of their cultural revival from pilgrims to another internationally recognized group that they felt added to Galicia's image as unique: the Celts.

#### A CELTIC DRUID IN GALICIA

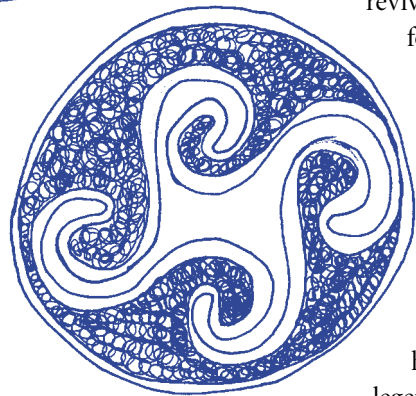
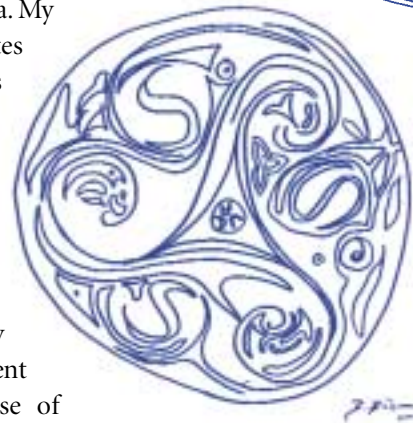
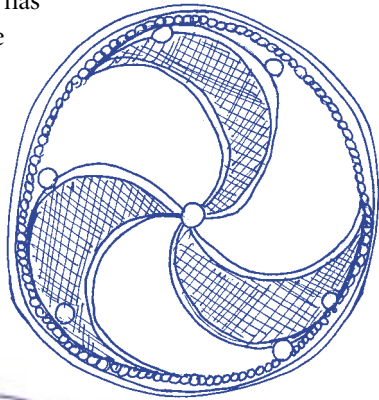
During a visit in 1997 to Santiago de Compostela, I discovered, on one of the many narrow medieval stone streets, a storefront sign that read *Druida*. A standard collection of New Age paraphernalia dressed the window: fragrant healing candles, oils, and incense; Galician sculptures of *meigas*; Celtic scroll designs on paper and carved in stone. Inside was a bulletin board with several announcements about esoteric classes in white magic, Galician traditional medicine and healing, Galician and Celtic legends, and ads for private tarot, runic, and psychic readings. I noticed one man's name was associated with all these advertisements. When I told the shop

manager I was interested in meeting him, she directed me to the office on the second floor. There I met a gregarious, energetic, and easy-going man in his mid-40s who called himself a druid. I have since learned that this man has inspired many of the Celtic festivals that are cropping up across Galicia. (Because he chooses not to use his name publicly, I am maintaining his anonymity here.)

He told me the story of his family's ancestry. "I come from a long and ancient line of seers and healers," he began. "As is the Celtic way, the way of my ancestors, psychic and healing powers are inherited. My lineage is one of the healer-seer lineages of Galicia. My family lineage dates back to 2,500 years ago. Our lineage and our customs have remained intact over all that time. Even in the 15th to 17th centuries, when my family's traditions went underground because of the Inquisition, we managed to continue our practices and our sacred lineage. Through my work, this inheritance will continue. You see, my family comes from a long line of both Celtic and Viking druids, both of whom settled in northwestern Spain and became a part of the people of this land. Today, I call myself a Celtic-Viking druid. I do a lot of research in the archives in Santiago, looking at medieval manuscripts, which contain a lot about Galician folk medicine and magical healing practices. As importantly, I visit the villages, where the old people still remember and use these very same practices."

He and I maintained contact and shortly after we met he wrote to follow up on our interview and to explain his interpretation of the origins of Samhain, a precursor to Halloween, and of Galicia's influence in ancient Ireland. Here I translate and paraphrase his words: "Celtic Galicia was founded by the 'Saefes' Celts in the sixth century B.C. They brought with them their magico-religious traditions, including the veneration of the Celtic God Dagda. Dagda could mend the dead and wounded from battle — as long as he had their head, the residence of the soul — and restore them to life and health with the exception of their voice. But if his head was missing, a soldier was doomed to wander eternally without his soul."

Popular "Celtic" motifs reproduced in tourist shops and revivals. Most are taken from archaeological artifacts and stone carvings found throughout Galicia, Asturias, and Cantabria.



He continued on a related theme: "Breogan's sons [Breogan is the mythic father of Galicians and is the central character in Galicia's modern national anthem] took the Samhain tradition to Ireland." How did Breogan's sons get to Ireland? Here is the druid's account of a mythic Spanish Celtic invasion of Ireland. Much of this is also a part of the wider oral mythic story cycle that people are creating through the recent Celtic

revivals in Galicia: "Breogan founded, according to legend, the city of Brigantium, which today is known as La Coruña, where he built a tall tower called the Tower of Hercules. [The tower was in fact built by invading Romans, but here we are in the realm of legend, not history.] From this

tower on a very clear day Breogan's son Ith saw a green land far, far away. He set sail for it and came upon a green land full of honey, fruit, wheat, and fish. He enjoyed a little of these pleasures but was killed by the people of this land, the Tuatha de Danann. Ith's sons returned to the green land and avenged their father's death by defeating the Tuatha de Danann. They founded a Galician royal dynasty in Erin. Because they brought their customs with them, this is how Samhain comes to be celebrated in Ireland."

This is the power of myth, and the pliability. This is the power of the Celts. They have an ambiguous enough origin mixed with enough lore and legend that those who want to find their ancestry in this past will. And as myth and legend speak a symbolic truth, offering a people an ancestral genesis and embodying the values they wish to put forth, the truth of this story cannot be refuted because it is about genesis and belonging, not historical fact. Many, I am sure, including the Irish, will not agree with this particular telling of a Celtic origin myth.

#### CELTIC-INSPIRED FESTIVALS

The people who plan and participate in Celtic revival festivals in Galicia explain that they are motivated by the desire to recover their village's or their region's roots before all is

lost through modernization and globalization. Many of these festival planners are the young people of a village or region who establish a cultural organization to coordinate the festival activities. These young people work in conjunction with self-appointed "experts" (often widely read and self-taught) on Celtic and Galician ethnography. These festival planners also arrange physical and budgetary details with the local government.

Nearly all modern Celtic revival festivals in Spain began in the early to mid-1990s, and they have gained momentum since then. This goes hand-in-hand with the increase in international influences and a more open attitude toward religion in Spain after decades, many say centuries, of religious oppression. Since the late 1980s, Spaniards, especially young Spaniards who did not grow up under Franco, have increasingly been exploring alternatives to Catholicism. The most popular religious explorations are Buddhism, paganism, Santeria, Hinduism, the Hare Krishna, and Islam. (A thriving Muslim convert community has grown to the thousands in southern Spain and, like the Celtic movement, claims an ancestral past and is "returning" to it, in this case, through conversion. See For Further Reading on page 38.)

Although the reason given for the Celtic festivals' genesis is serious — reconnecting with a collective past before it is lost — the actual experience of the festivals is lighthearted and jovial. These events are like many festivals in Spain, fun and spontaneous, while building greater community cohesion. There are several festivals throughout the year (especially in summer and autumn), but the one I highlight here, the Festa Castrexa, is emblematic of the revivals. It is also widely publicized, especially on the Web, which has led to its own interesting genesis.

The Festa Castrexa, or roughly, the Castro Festival, takes place annually in late July in the town of Xunqueira de Ambia, just southeast of Ourense. It began in 1994 when a group of young people were exploring Celtic themes. Their enthusiasm for their own town's "Celtic" past evolved into a festival that tapped into a pagan past when inhabitants of the region supposedly venerated a water nymph, called Tanitaco, associated with the nearby river Arnoya. Nature spirits, goddesses, and sacred water were all self-conscious allusions to the Celtic themes upon which they drew. This festival



Accompanied by a local dog, Beebe enjoys one of many mountain footpaths in northern Spain.

celebrating Tanitaco, the festival's creators claim, dates back some 2,000 years.

Townsppeople attended the first Festa Castrexa in 1995, and it was an immediate success. The Festa has continued, growing larger each year, and now the townspeople share the festival with others from the region, as well as with the group from Cartagena who call themselves the Celtic Mercenaries, who return every year since their first trip from Spain's southern region of Murcia in 1997. The Celtic Mercenaries learned about Xunqueira de Ambia's festival on the Internet (<http://galeon.hispavista.com/xunqueira/entrari.html>) and rallied their forces for the trek north to join in the fun. So popular is the Celtic Mercenaries' participation that they are now part of the official festival program.

By 1998, what had been a one-day festival in Xunqueira de Ambia had become two days. The festival program begins with a procession in the center of town with a carved image of the nymph Tanitaco, adorned in flowers and greens, upon a flatbed two-wheel cart. Here, the appointed druids make offerings to the nymph and then the cart, pulled by two handsome Celtic youths, is pulled in a procession through town and toward the banks of the Arnoya River. Festival participants dressed in all manner of "Celtic" garb follow the cart. Women wear long skirts and belted tunics. Men wear trousers and short tunics with leather belts and small shields painted with Celtic motifs common in Galicia. Druid priests and priestesses wear long white belted robes, some with draped hoods. Some men and women have capes, often of a plaid design, tied or held clasped with a fibula-like piece, draped across their back and shoulder.


Arriving at the river, the statue of Tanitaco is set down in a place of honor by the riverbank, ready to witness the start of the games: stone throws, spear throws, rope pulls, and the main attraction, the platform fight where two people stand on a floating platform on the river and maneuver strategically to push or topple the other into the river. All games have competitions for men, women, and children. Following the games, at nightfall, the festival participants stand along both sides of the riverbank with torches in another offering ceremony to Tanitaco and to the sacredness of the river. This is followed by a “castro style” dinner of Galician savory dishes and free-flowing beer. Bonfires are built and people dance around the fires into the night.

Other similar festivals are emerging across Galicia, such as a Samhain celebration in Cedeira (north of Ferrol), a festival focused on a tradition of illuminating castros by surrounding them with lit torches in Santa Maria de Castelo (north of Ourense); the festival in honor of the Mater Dolorosa in the town of Anceu along Galicia’s southwestern Atlantic coast; the Celtic festival in Naron; the celebration of the Celtic god Lugh’s day in Bretoña, a town north of Lugo (a major city possibly named for Lugh); and the Interceltic Festival in Aviles in neighboring Asturias.

#### THE APPEAL OF CELTIC CONNECTIONS

Belonging has always been important to people, no matter where they hail from. In a world where belonging is not as

clear, or perhaps not as tribal and community-driven as it once might have been, revival movements are emerging that reconnect people with values and traditions that appear to be more meaningful and coherent. The great appeal of Celtic revivals is that no other area of belonging need be given up. No conversion to another religion is required, for instance. The Celtic cosmology does not ask the revivalist to give up any previous religious background to participate, and it includes much of what today’s Spanish revivalists hunger after: a spiritual outlook that returns a balance to life without demanding one give up being a Christian; a gender balance that seeks to express Galicia as more matriarchal than the rest of Spain; an environmental balance that includes the veneration of natural forces, especially of water and of the mountains; a health-centered balance that emphasizes Galicia’s herbal healing traditions, as practiced by *meigas* and *curanderas* (healers); and a nationalist bent toward defining Galicia as different from the rest of Spain and similar to other “Celtic” regions, like the British Isles and Brittany.

Perhaps less apparent is that Galicia’s nationalist sentiment has in the recent past less to support it. The Catalans do not need to go back 2,500 years to claim a Catalan authenticity; they have a continuous past. Being Catalan has always been different from being Castilian. The same is true for the Basques. Galicia has for a long time been a region within Castilian Spain, a region with its own language, but without a past and culture as clearly delineated as those of the Basques and Catalans. Some Galicians build a case for their region’s distinction through the Celts: In the midst of dramatic cultural, economic, and political changes in Spain, these Galicians are striking their balance between the past and the present, and are trying to create an anchor for their future. 

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#### FOR FURTHER READING

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