

GESM 120, SEMINAR IN HUMANISTIC INQUIRY:

## *myths and legends of the celts*

Spring 2018 – Prof. Lisa Bitel (History & Religion)

SOS 265 – 213 821 2151 – bitel@usc.edu

Section: 35384R

### *Are you a Celt?*

 the celts are:

- ♣ **Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Cornish, Manx, Breton, and earliest British** peoples.
- ♣ A population groups that **speaks related languages**.
- ♣ An ethnic group that **shares DNA, a culture, and a literature**.
- ♣ More than 42 million Americans claim **Celtic ancestry**.
- ♣ **For a thousand years, Celtic peoples ruled Europe**.

### **why study celts?**

 Between about 1500 BCE and 100 C.E., Celtic warriors and their tribes spread throughout Europe from Bulgaria to Iberia to Ireland. They were warlike and mobile, creative and spiritual. They shared not only languages and bloodlines, but also religion, social structures, political ideologies, and arts. Their civilization helped create modern Europe.

 Although they no longer rule Europe, the Celts and their legends have survived—and occasionally flourished--until the present day as a source of ethnic and national identities.

 This course examines Celtic identity through medieval and modern Celts' stories of themselves--from their supposed origins in Noah's Flood, through prehistoric and medieval times, the invasion and conquest of Celtic kingdoms, and the rebirth of Celticity in modern times.

### **why read their myths & legends?**

☯ Myths and legends reveal the enduring passions and highest ideals of a culture—their concepts of truth, virtue, heroism, happiness, good and evil, and divinity. Legends also expose the assumptions of the cultural elite about the cosmological, political and social order, and how history sustains this order.

☯ Legends and myths of the Celts not only help us understand Celtic peoples of past and present, but also show us how population groups define and constantly redefine themselves in religious, political, cultural, historical, and artistic terms—and how their identity evolves over time in relation to their environments and to other groups, be those neighbors, strangers, or enemies.

☯ We will read myths, epics, romances, histories, and poetry written in medieval Ireland and Wales for clues about how the Celts lived, loved, fought, and thought. We'll also look at swords, maps, stone carvings, and bog bodies for material self-expressions.

☯ We will trace Celtic myths and legends through history to present day Celtic cultures and modern depictions of Celticity, in order to answer a fundamental humanistic question:

**How do groups create and represent their collective identity?  
How do such self-representations change over long periods of time?  
What particular role does collective memory play in the process?**



☯ **COURSE OBJECTIVES** (*n.b. GE-B objectives in italics below*)

**We aim to:**

- ♣ Discover the Celtic peoples and their neglected medieval literatures across time and global regions.
  - *Cultivate a critical appreciation for various forms of human expression, including literature, language, philosophy, and the arts, as well as develop an understanding of the contexts from which these forms emerge*
- ♣ Learn to read ancient myths and modern folklore for clues to religious values, ideologies, cultural values, and collective identities.

## N.B. DRAFT SYLLABUS! N.B. DRAFT SYLLABUS! N.B. DRAFT SYLLABUS!

- *Engage with lasting ideas and values that have animated humanity throughout the centuries for a more purposeful, more ethical, and intellectually richer life*
- ♣ Apply the methods of multiple scholarly disciplines to medieval primary sources in order to consider issues of authorship, transmission, and the revision of myths over time.
  - *Learn to evaluate ideas from multiple perspectives and to formulate informed opinions on complex issues of critical importance in today's global world*
- ♣ Learn how fundamental social and political concepts--such as ethnicity, identity, religious belief, and memory—change over time.
  - *Reflect on what it means to be human through close study of human experience throughout time and across diverse cultures*
- ♣ Learn to analyze exotic primary source material and make persuasive arguments about the many functions of myths and legends.
  - *Learn to read and interpret actively and analytically, to think critically and creatively, and to write and speak persuasively*
- ♣ Learn to work both individually and in groups to accomplish our other goals.
  - *Learn to collaborate effectively through traditional and new ways of disseminating knowledge*

### important policies and protocols:

- Class etiquette requires that we all respect—although not necessarily accept—the beliefs and opinions of every individual in class. Criticism of ideas and open exchange is fundamental to our scholarly project. Be sure to listen and express yourself thoughtfully.
  - It also requires that you silence cellphones and ignore any sorts of messaging during class time...
  - ...and that you do not disrupt class by arriving late or leaving early.
- **Plagiarism is unacceptable.** If you commit plagiarism, your class grade will be lowered and you may even fail the class. I will report instances of plagiarism to the department Chair and the Dean of Students. If you aren't sure what plagiarism is, ASK!

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- E-mail and blackboard are the official modes of classroom correspondence; you are responsible for checking the class website on blackboard and reading your e-mail for course-related information and announcements.

 **academic accommodations:** Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30am-5:00pm, Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

 **class requirements include:**

- **Consistent attendance and participation in class** (including in-class assignments.) This class meets weekly. If you miss a class or a significant part of it your grade will be lowered. If you have an urgent reason for missing the class—an unavoidable accident, a life-or-death situation, etc.—discuss with me as soon as you realize it and you may not be penalized. If you arrive more than 15 minutes late or leave more than 15 minutes early you will be counted absent (without previous approval of instructor.)
- **Completion of all of the assigned readings** by the first class of each week.
- **Bring all readings to class.** Questions to guide your reading will be offered each week.
- **Write weekly blog postings** of approx. 250 words commenting on assigned readings and post to the class blog by 5 pm on the day before class. More information about this requirement will be discussed in class. You will use this material as the basis for your papers and exams.
- **Lead one class discussion**, based on your reading of other students' blog postings for the week.
- **Two examinations**
- **Two research projects** (each resulting in a paper of approx. 8-10 written pages--or the equivalent in other media, see Assignments below).

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 **GRADE BREAKDOWN:**

- Class attendance and participation (including presentation): 15%
- All blog postings and one stint as discussion leader: 15%
- Two research projects (including proposal, draft, final version, presentation of 2<sup>nd</sup> project): 20% each.
- Two exams (short essays, identifications, maps): 15% each

**BITEL CONTACT INFO & OFFICE HOURS:**

[bitel@usc.edu](mailto:bitel@usc.edu)

**Office: ACB 126**

**Office hours: Tuesday 1-3 and by appointment.**



**BOOKS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE:**

Kinsella, *The Tain*

W. B. Yeats, *Celtic Twilight*

Philip Freeman, *Celtic Mythology*

Jones and Jones, *The Mabinogion*

Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray*

Sir Walter Scott, *Rob Roy*

Roddy Doyle, *The Commitments*

Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short History*

***N.B. Other readings will be available online***