

Crane Women in Celtic Myth

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Cranes and herons fly, fish, fight, and dance their way through myths and legends in every land. They guard underworld castles, bring murderers to justice, save infant heroes who fall from cliffs, invent languages, marry poor men, and conceal magic treasures in bags made from their skin. Cranes are found from China to North America, Siberia, Africa and Australia. The British Isles have no native cranes; instead, the gray heron (close cousin to North America's great blue heron) takes her place. Large herons look very much like cranes, filling the same ecological—and mythological—niche.

The heron/crane is a magical bird with mastery over the three worlds of air, land and water. Excellent fliers, they nest and forage on land, and fish for their suppers in coastal waters, rivers or lakes; some even swim. Cranes wear the magical colors of red, black and white. Even the gray heron shows red during the mating season, when its bill takes on a reddish hue. Cranes and herons were hunted for food, domesticated in ancient Egypt, and kept as pets in Pakistan and Ireland.

Cranes and herons are familiar in the everyday, homely sense of the word. In England, gray herons are Skip Hegrie, Jack Hern, Jenny Crow, Tammie Herl and Frank Hanser. In Ireland, they are called Long Mary, Long Katey, Bog Nora, Rough Sheila and Throat Juny.

With few exceptions, mythic cranes are associated with women and goddesses. Most often, the power of the crane is the power of the crone.

Like crones, cranes are often seen as ugly and difficult. Celtic scholar Miranda Green dismisses cranes as “associated with unpleasant females.” At the same time, cranes are associated with longevity. One of the ancient wonders of Ireland was a solitary crane who lived on Inis Kea since the beginning of time.

Longevity brings wisdom and esoteric knowledge. Cranes inspired alphabets, those magic letters that allowed knowledge to be encoded in ways that few could decipher. Mercury created the Roman alphabet by watching flights of cranes. It is said that Ogham created ogham from watching how crane's legs bent and crossed to form patterns. It is also said that *corr* (heron or crane) was omitted from the bird ogham to honor the secrets of cranes. Druid lore is sometimes called crane knowledge, and monks like St. Columba, who combined skill in the old ways with the new path, were called crane clerics.

Crane dances, which mimic their elaborate mating rituals, may also contain secrets. The crane dance Ariadne taught to Theseus mapped the path through the Cretan labyrinth, allowing him to escape. Some believe Theseus was a historical figure, a petty king who captured Ariadne, queen and last living representative of the Mother Goddess. Knowing her world was ending, Ariadne encoded a message from the Goddess into her dance; if this is so, we have yet to find the key.

Sacred to Artemis and to Kali, cranes are fierce defenders and skillful predators. Patient in stalking, they are deadly when they strike. Cranes appear on the crests of battle helmets, on shields, and in Roman and Celtic military images. At the Second Battle of Moytura, Lugh used a *corrghuineacht*, a crane-prayer, to curse his enemies, strengthen his troops and call for victory. He performed the crane-prayer on one leg, with one eye closed and one hand behind his back, in imitation of the crane's stance.

Cranes are the messengers of the gods and often viewed as psychopomps; not, as crows and ravens, after sudden or violent death, but for transitions to the Otherworld, secret initiations, and (sometimes) the journey back. The crane-like stork delivers babies even in modern cartoons.

Ariadne, creatrix of spiral dances, is linked to the constellation Corona Borealis. Arianrhod, Queen of the revolving castle Caer Sidi, whose name resembles Ariadne's, shares with her that same constellation. In Ariadne's story, the stars represent the crown she gave Theseus to light his way through the labyrinth. In Arianrhod's, the stars represent Caer Arianrhod, which some say is the same as Caer Sidi, the castle where souls rests between incarnations. If cranes are not sacred to Arianrhod, they should be.

The Irish warrior woman and goddess most closely linked with cranes is Aoife, whose skin became the crane bag. And what is the crane bag if not a container of hidden knowledge? This bag, held by men, is made from woman. Evidence in northern European ballads suggests that in ancient times, men could not engage in any magical activities without the teaching and support of women. Irish myths record that the best warriors were trained by women with strong Otherworldly connections, even as Aoife trained Cuchulain.

Some tales suggest that the warrior Aoife who trained Cuchulain and bore his son was not the same Aoife whose skin holds the magical tools of Manannan mac Lir. These tales say the crane bag came from a different woman, cursed by a jealous rival into taking the shape of a crane, or turned into a crane by mac Lir for her jealous behavior toward his son. The third Aoife, wife of Lir, must be one of the most hated women in all of Irish mythology for turning her stepchildren into swans.

All three women named Aoife surely fit Miranda Green's profile of "unpleasant" women. All were marred, some would say ruled, by jealousy. Aoife the warrior may have sent her son deliberately to his death to pay back CuChulain for leaving her. Only one woman is said to be the source of the powerful crane bag, but I find this hard to credit. Personal jealousy could not form the basis of serious magic, whatever the tales say. The crane bag must have come from a woman of deep and powerful magic, who knew much more than she told, more than the tales tell us.

Perhaps one Aoife, like many Irish gods and heroes, lived many lifetimes. Consider Aoife, third wife of Lir. Of her early life, we know only that she had two sisters. After the death of Lir's first beloved wife, Aoife and her sister were offered to him in a political marriage. Lir, still grieving, said he didn't care who he took and so chose the elder. She bore him two sets of twins, three sons and a daughter, and also died.

So Lir comes back for Aoife, a consolation prize taken to warm the king's bed and care for his and her sister's children. Things went well at first, but when the children grew in grace and beauty, jealousy filled Aoife's heart. Perhaps Lir lavished love on his children that he denied to her. There must have been signs all was not well, for Lir's daughter Fionnuala suspected her stepmother of treachery, and neither Lir nor Aoife's foster father Bodb Dearg were surprised at her betrayal.

So Aoife cast the spell that changed her niece and nephews into swans. Immediately, she regretted her action, but it could not be undone. Aoife appeared before Bodb Dearg, who struck her with a Druid wand and changed her into the worst thing she could name: a witch of the air. Consider what a 'witch of the air' might be: Perhaps she took the form of that unpleasant, crone-like bird, the crane.

Imagine a version of the story in which this is what happens. Aoife lives in crane form for hundreds of years, many crane lifetimes, and becomes very wise. In this story, Aoife the warrior is one incarnation of Aoife the stepmother. In that life, she is doomed to fall in love with a man who leaves her, bear him a son, and know her son has been killed by his own father. This becomes part of her working out of the consequences of her earlier actions. Eventually, she retires to the castle under the sea with Manannan, the son of another husband who is now a god.

In each incarnation, Aoife had a warrior's heart. The women who trained the great fighters of Irish myth were hard, unrelenting and difficult. What better form than a crane could Aoife take, when she left this world for the land under the waves? During the hundreds of years she lived there, what marvelous things must have been accomplished, what journeys taken, and what knowledge gained for Manannan to choose her crane skin to contain his own magic.

Many of the magic things hidden in the crane bag are tools of transformation. Shape-shifting is often accomplished by putting on the skin, or a portion of the skin, of whatever one seeks to become. There is the belt or girdle of the de Dannan smith Gobhniu, along with his smith-hook. Another item is described as “a strip from a whale’s back” or a “belt of fish skin.” Then there is Manannan’s own shirt, and the King of Lochlan’s helmet. What is the holder to do with such items if not put them on? And what is likely to be the result, if not to transform the wearer into the whale, the magic smith, the god of the sea, or the Otherworldly king?

Aoife is not a mortal woman, but a goddess. No mortal woman could live for so long and experience so much. So it seems likely that the crane skin became the crane bag not on Aoife’s death, but when she no longer needed that particular form. Perhaps she gave Manannan mac Lir her crane skin as a parting gift. Even now she may rest on the Isle of Apples—or perhaps not resting, but training new warriors for another day of battle.

Thus say the crane women: We live with arcane lore, secret knowledge, and contra-diction, the speaking of opposites. We love the edges, the fringes, the places where things grow and die, ravel and unravel, where ideas from different places mix and merge. If you seek crane knowledge, learn patience. We are secretive and do not volunteer what we know. The deepest answers come only to the skillful questioner.