



## **ASH- TREE OF INITIATION**

The warrior is depicted as courageous, fearless and ready for all eventualities, prepared to put his duty first in order to protect the sovereignty above his own personal desires; to lay aside his own morals for a bigger cause than himself. Is this noble acquisition an excuse for the endless blood let of war in order to gain power? Is the age- old concept of a male warrior outdated and irrelevant in more educated times? Why are so many deep myths exploring this archetype that seems so prevalent and destructive in society?

Ash is the tree of warriors associated strongly with the Vikings, the Aescling (Men of the Ash) as well as the tree of Celtic warriors in the old Irish texts. As with all tree lore it is borne out first in its practical use as a weapon from the primitive spear and bow, through to the cavalry lance and even the mosquito aeroplane of world war one. Its wood is light and flexible yet inherently strong capable of bearing more weight than any other British timber.

The tree like the warrior lives a short time (compared to other forest trees of its stature) and its properties speak of progress and speed in the above uses named, as well as in the structure of the early car which most definitely has changed society drastically. Movement, progress, change, the constant human restlessness is captured in the spirit of this tree, but where does the power of the warrior, this outward pouring of constant progress originate?

*'How oft a summer shower have started me  
To seek for shelter in an old tree:  
Old huge ash- dotterel wasted to a shell,  
Whose vigorous heads still grew and flourished well,  
Where ten might sit upon the battered floor  
And still look round discovering room for more... '*

*John Clare*

In the depths of an aged hollow tree we find the source of our power, a strength flowing from feminine qualities of stillness, patience and perseverance. I sense in the centre of the Ash and in all of us is that still, creative force that flows from the ability to yield and to give unconditionally. As mentioned before using the terms male and female need not be gender related but qualities we all possess.

In Celtic lore as we look at the archetypes and the function of the warrior we are drawn first into the female power. The original hunters of indigenous tribes across the world served the women first by providing them with the best meat to nurture the new life born from their wombs. The earth is often depicted as a female spirit – the 'Juno' or in Greek lore 'Gaia'. The sovereignty of the land and whom the warrior first serves is therefore the female spirit from where all creation is born.

The maturity of the male spirit is therefore dependant on its acknowledgement of its female origins. In Celtic lore the training of both warrior and poet is often conducted by the mature women.

However, it is then essential the youth once mature finds his own way and severs the ties with the mature women in order to find her in himself. In Earth spirituality we first have to accept and work with our deep desires, our need for power and ambition in order to eventually transcend them.

The deliberate severance of our innate pull to the darker regions of our psyche to form a higher nobility before maturity; such as that which is encouraged in more modern religion leads to a repressed state that will eventually be acted out. However being shown a safe place to be held without judgement, a foundation that accepts us truly as we are enables true nobility to arise as naturally as a new spring. This foundation will remain with us throughout our lives, refreshing us in more harsh times. A judgmental foundation based on fear and sin will simply create a conflict in harsh times and make the suffering all the worse for it.

The harsh rights of passage in indigenous tribes are only possible therefore if the child has been held and loved by a nurturing mother. This pulling away from the nurturing mother is also essential so a foundation can be established in the individual.

However it is also true to state some individuals will not feel the need for such rights of passage and their challenges will be of a different nature, this is those born of the Poet's tree, the Willow and choose a life of solitude and deep listening expressing themselves through less physical means.

In a sensitive society therefore the female/male warrior and the male/female poet will be acknowledged and nurtured. I use the term 'poet' to capture the essence of those of a more reflective and creative nature.

The outward signs of Ash are overtly apparent in today's society and with the boon of social media the more male qualities of 'doing' and 'being seen' are dominating our society. However true reflection and nurture is in the aged- hollowed out tree unseen by the outside world.

The young warrior or poet therefore is trained by the mature female and inspired by the mature man. They painstakingly leave the nest, chose the right of passage suitable for them, be it in solitude or in achievement, and then finally mature themselves to continue the cycle.

If we live in a society that continually worships the stage of youth, the stage of initiation and the rights of passage through doing, we lose the mature stage and no longer have the role models to enable us to live in peace with a firm foundation.

Ash is the tree that checks peace, gives us the strength to move on and to work with change. However, if we deny its feminine strength in the depths of its being, do not drink from the sacred well and find the cave of solitude within we are constantly restless and without foundation losing that beauty that stays with us in harsher times.

### **The Tree of Life**

The most known association of Ash in European tree folklore is in its form as Askr Yggdrasil, the centre of the universe around which everything moves. Its roots represent the Underworld and are said to be guarded by a huge serpent, the trunk represents this world and its canopy the Upperworlds upon which sits an eagle and goats browse on its leaves. The spring, at its base, is where the Norns reside, who rule over the destiny of us all.

The World Tree or Tree of Life seems to reflect a universal concept replicated in traditions all across the world from the Cotton tree in Mayan Culture and the great centre pole of the tepee in Native North American culture made of the Cotton Wood tree. In Siberia the World Tree is the Birch. All of these forms seem to follow the pattern of a totem bird at its top and a well or pool at its base with some form of reptile as a guardian of the Underworld. This is further enhanced in Christian lore in the form of the apple tree and its serpent. The apples represent the receptacle of the hidden knowledge and the serpent its guardian. The reptiles take us back to the oldest life forms inhabiting the land connecting us to our primal earth-bound roots. The Underworld in Norse Mythology is called Hel, the origin of the word for Hell and is the place of the dead. The dark depths of life where serpents and insects dwell and our primordial instincts stem from need not be marked as evil.

Often the beings of this world are the recyclers, cleaners and messengers of the natural kingdom to which all so-called higher species depend on. In Earth spirituality this connection is encouraged and sought out as being rooted in the world enables us to then ground ourselves in reality and accept all aspects of ourselves as discussed earlier.

O thou, whose mighty palace roof doth hang  
*From jagged trunks, and overshadoweth*  
*Eternal whispers, glooms, the birth, life, death*  
*Of unseen flowers in heavy peacefulness;*  
*Who lov'st to see the hamadryads dress*  
*Their ruffled locks where meeting hazels darken;*  
*And through whole solemn hours dost sit, and hearken...*

### **John Keats**

The wells and springs (or indeed the apples), connect us to our depths of memory, fate and true knowledge which is well protected as only those who are ready and are of a pure heart can drink from them.

In Celtic Irish lore Ash is also known as the warrior's tree as an Ash spear is wielded by the solar hero Lugh Lamfada and the early race of men in Irish stories called the Fir bolgs (men of spears) were also said to wield superior ash spears. The spear and the sling were the only long range weapons used by the Irish Celts in the Bronze and Iron ages. There were said to be five sacred trees planted in Ireland and three of them were Ash for the warriors.

However, it is all too easy to expound on the qualities of the warrior in a patriarchal society where the stories of predominately male heroes and barbaric Vikings are so popular. The Kennings from ancient Celtic lore, which were first written down in 1391 in the Book of Ballymote on the Ash help one to look more deeply into the more subtle female aspects of the tree:

Ash, a check on peace is Ash for of it are made spear shafts by which the piece is broken.

Checking of peace.

Flight of beauty, a weaver's beam.

Flight of beauty.

Nion, the Ogham name for Ash means, 'a thing produced' possibly implying a more subtle use of Ash. The spear (especially when referred to as the weaver's beam) can also be a magical tool to help heal and move people on in their lives.

Sick children have been passed through split Ash for healing and it is said a shrew was buried in an ash tree to bring about healing e.g. Ash by the church in Selborne in Hampshire.

Ash wood juice has been used to protect infants from harm. Ash crosses are made for sea protection and the Vikings were thought to use Ash as a magical implement. In the past Ash roots were carved into magical images.

In Celtic lore the tree of life stands in the Otherworlds as a beacon of light with acorn, fruit and nut on its boughs. It is covered in beautiful song birds and often also has a spring at its base. The tradition continues where we acknowledge faerie trees by waterways and honour them by tying rags and wishes upon their boughs.

In Irish Celtic lore we have the nine hazel trees of Connla's well situated along the river Boyne and in the first tales of Merlin brought to us by Geoffrey of Monmouth we have Hazel shrubs surrounding a fountain. The Hazel tree (explored further in later booklets) therefore is a good candidate for the tree of life.

The five sacred trees of Ireland consisted of one Oak, two Ash and two Yew. They played a pivotal role in the structure and qualities of Ireland. Not only were they key assembly points for the Druids

and for Ireland's armies they marked the five provinces of Ireland representing the five key qualities ( knowledge, battle, prosperity, music and kingship) and ultimately the five key elements ( fire, earth, air, water and ether). This knowledge was passed down to Fionntan mac Bochna the oldest living poet in Ireland via a branch which bore the three fruits of nuts, apples and acorns.

Fionntan being the oldest person alive at this time had the role of remembering the stories and the wisdom of the land enlivening the oral tradition at a time when it may have been lost. The branch was given to him by Trefuilngid Tre-eochair a giant that claimed to control the rising and setting of the sun, bringing once again the knowledge of the land into the province of its guardians- the giants.

In the Prose Dindsenchas we find a description of the three key ash trees of Ireland mentioned above:

Eo Mugna, great was the fair tree,  
High its top above the rest,  
Thirty cubits it was no trifle,  
That was the measure of its girth.

Three hundred cubits was the height of the blameless tree.  
Its shadow sheltered a thousand.  
In secrecy it remained in the north and east  
Until the time of Conn Ceadchathach.

A hundred score of warriors, no empty tale,  
Along with ten hundred and forty  
Would that tree shelter, it was a fierce struggle,  
Until it was overthrown by the poets.

How fell the bough of Daithi?  
It spent the strength of many a gentle hireling,  
An Ash, the tree of nimble hosts,  
Its top bore no lasting yield.

The Ash of Tortiu, take count thereof,  
The Ash of populous Uisneach.  
Their boughs fell, it was not amiss,  
In the time of Ead slane.

In the Mabinogion ( a collection of ancient Welsh tales) there is the story of the Lady of the fountain where we have the atypical tree of life in the form of a Pine with a fountain at its base. Otherworldly beings bring a scion of the tree of life when travelling to the human world to create a portal to their realms. The mortal who receives it can travel to the Otherworld which is why the silver branch is a badge of office for the poet who frequents these different worlds as explored in the Willow booklet. The true function therefore of the Ash tree is as an initiator and the image of the warrior is simply a metaphor for the courage it takes to take up the mantle of your true purpose in life.

### **History of Woodmanship**

In the Willow profile we have already explored natural regeneration, what a native tree is, ancient woodlands and their inexorable destruction building up an in-depth picture of the history and ecology of our woodlands.

We will to explore the history of woodmanship through the Ash which has benefitted immensely from coppicing which is the main practice used in traditional woodmanship when the tree is cut down to ground level and allowed to regrow.

Lime, Ash and Hazel are all trees which live a relatively short- life, reaching an older age after a couple of hundred years. However, when they are coppiced we find the same rootstock lives for hundreds if not thousands of years! There are many examples of the above tree species with coppice stools of over a thousand years old, still healthy and productive.



## Neolithic Woodsmanship.

Forestry is only possible through the use of heavy machinery as it requires a tremendous amount of energy and strength to fell large trees, harvest and process them. Early people may have managed to clear woodlands in vast quantities but were also much more aware of the benefits of coppicing than we are today.

In modern times we may well have developed technology in ways we could never have imagined and the classification and science of woodlands is extremely sophisticated. However, our ancestors' skills of craftsmanship and their ability to live with and from woodlands has never been surpassed.

Woodsmanship and many of its crafts probably reached its zenith as early as the late Bronze age as early woodsmen not only managed woods but each individual stool. This micro-management meant they could fully utilize the natural growth of the tree. They may leave some supple branches growing on the stool for fodder (food for the livestock), a shoot that has grown in a rather crooked fashion may be ideal for a craft or a shoot may be trained to grow prongs for a pitch fork etc..

When building, the smallest wood possible would be used, whether it be wattling for housing or hurdles for livestock. This ensured that the manual labour, harvesting and growing of each product would be as efficient as possible.

We have evidence of this sophisticated management as early as Neolithic times with the building of the sweet track across the Somerset levels in 3900BC. This track way enabled people to traverse the wetlands of Somerset. It was built from different woods and yet all the dimensions were similar. This example indicates complex coppicing regimes were in place drawing rods here and there from stools and topping others for leaf fodder. This must have been the case as they would not have had any metal tools for splitting and cutting. In fact large trees felled in the wildwood were probably wasted due to being impracticable except for 'dug out' boats and wood henges!

Later in the Bronze age we have an example of the largest wooden structure ever created in Britain, a whole village being built on the water at the site known as Flag fen near Peterborough. It consisted of 4 million pieces of timber, the equivalent of five times the size of one of the huge warships created for the Napoleonic wars!

This village made up of round houses called 'Crannogs' would have been created by flint hand tools by highly skilled crafts people.

It is likely in early times through to the Middle ages the woods would have been managed by the whole community. The men felling the trees, the women gathering leaves and bark, the children collecting kindling and creating faggots etc.

All the modern research which tells us we need community, exercise, common goals, to be outdoors, mindful and forest bathe would have been simply a way of life for the early people. Of course hardship and disease may well have been apparent but as stated before what a world we could create combining new found knowledge and technology with our ancient relationship with nature and community still intact.

Let us hope the work towards Forest schools and sustainable living helps us to achieve that.

The Ash is the tree that disturbs the peace and enables us to work with change so that we may kindle the fire of change and breed hope for the new generation.

We all know the effort it takes to bring change into our own lives. To put a project in place, change home and circumstances takes great energy, perseverance and tenacity.

When you begin a new project visualise the spear of Ash moving forward fearlessly but not recklessly for progress for the sake of progress is what has changed the world when things were just perfect the way they were!

Many poems and songs have been written of Oak, Ash and Thorn giving these three trees a special place in our British traditions, and where the three grow together a magical place of wonderment.

## Uses of Ash

Fraxinus excelsior (Latin). Nion (Ogham) Aesc (Anglo Saxon)

'Dark is the colour of ash: timber that makes the wheels to go; rods he furnishes for the horseman's hands, and his form turns battle into flight'

Ancient Irish Tales (T.P.Cross and C.Slover 1936)

Ash established itself later than some tree species after the last ice age and especially increased when Elm declined in Neolithic times.

Ash timber as well as its wood has been sought after for centuries. It has been used to create early weapons such as bows and spears to the modern cavalry lance. Its other uses are diverse including tools, frames and shafts of vehicles both modern and ancient. It is the second most recorded timber tree in history and is the most commonly used plantation tree since the 17th Century.

Ash casts a light shade and is light-demanding, living no longer than 200 years in normal conditions. If it grows in infertile soils and is thus forced to grow slowly it will live longer and as a coppice stool indefinitely! The largest stool in Bradfield woods is 18.5 feet across and is at least 1000 years old and still has good vigour.

Ash wood is known as the perfect fuel for the fire and was traditionally used as the Yule log burnt at the Winter Solstice to celebrate this time of year, the birth of the Sun God.

## The future of Ash- Ash dieback

In 2012 we discovered the first signs of Ash dieback or Chalara in nursery grown Ash trees and by 2013 signs were seen in the wider environment. Unlike the Elm disease which infected our Elms in the 1970s it is likely that the Ash will evolve to cope with the disease although we hope the loss will not be too great whilst this process is occurring. The current policy is to exercise caution in removing especially older species where the disease has been confirmed. The older trees will resist the disease far more effectively than younger trees. Unfortunately spores from the fungus *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus* which causes the disease are carried on the wind.

As explored in the Rowan booklet the key to the species survival and indeed the survival of our native species is genetic variability for this creates the opportunity for the species to evolve to cope with the disease. This was not possible for our Elms as they were clones reproducing by suckers rather than seed.

## SUMMARIES AND RESOURCES FOR THE ASH TREE

The Ash tree is the tree of warriors as has already been discussed. However, the strength of the warrior in Celtic lore comes from acknowledging a power within and enabling a greater wisdom to determine our outcomes. Ash calls us to make changes in our lives that are known by going within and discovering what we truly want.

Here are a few questions to actively explore the themes related to the Ash tree:

What changes would you like to implement in your life?

How can you move forward with integrity whilst being true to yourself?

Do you have a fear of success?

Do you wish to hide and not draw attention to yourself?

Are you prepared to challenge the status quo?

## **Deepening your connection to Ash.**

Mature ash trees are an incredible sight. They are majestic and tall and well worth discovering especially at the moment when we are losing most of our Ash trees here in the UK. Sit with an ash tree if possible and listen to its message, it may well be a sad one as its plight is acknowledged. It is likely that a new generation of trees will survive for the future but we must mourn the loss of the current trees.