

## ANCIENT CELTIC SYMBOLS IN MODERN TATTOOS

Плеве А.С., Морозкин Р.Е.

г. Саратов, МОУ «Гимназия № 5», 6 класс

Руководитель: Зорина С.М., учитель английского языка, МОУ «Гимназия № 5», г. Саратов;  
Фучеджи О.А., учитель химии и биологии, МОУ «Гимназия № 5», г. Саратов

Nowadays there are many possibilities to stand out from the crowd. One of them is a bright and unusual tattoo. We noticed that some strange beautiful symbols are very popular. We found out that those were ancient Celtic symbols each with its own meaning and value. This way we set the aim of our project to figure out the reasons for the popularity of those Celtic symbols with the present day society.

To find it out we intended to solve the following problems:

- to learn most important historical facts about the Celts;
- to analyze basic Celtic symbols;

In the practical part of our research, we are going to track down the place of the Celtic symbols in the modern culture.

### Some Historical Facts about the Ancient Celts

Ruling over a big part of Europe during the Iron Age and the Medieval Period, the Celtic people surely played a big role in shaping the structure of the continent. From their ethical codes, artworks, jewelry, building techniques, blacksmithing, farming and diplomacy skills to their folklore and beliefs, the ancient Celts had a unique way of life in every meaning. But how much do we know about them? In fact not so much information has been saved by this time.

The «Celts» refer to a people that existed in both ancient and modern times. Today, the term often refers to the cultures, languages and people that located in Scotland, Ireland, other parts of the British Isles and Brittany in France.

The first written mention of The Celts is about 2,500 years old. This way it is obvious it is a rather ancient culture.

Some evidences indicate that the Celts spread out across a vast area of continental

Europe. They lived as far east as modern-day Turkey and even served as mercenaries for the Egyptian queen Cleopatra.

With the spread of the Roman Empire most of the Celts were Christianized but still numerous sources provide hints of the religious beliefs of the Celts. First of all the Celts were interested in Druidism. The Druids were considered as their own teachers of wisdom strongly connected with the powers of nature, trees in particular. These men claimed to know the size and shape of the earth and of the universe, the movements of the sky and the stars, and what the gods intended. They taught that people's souls were eternal and there was a second life for the dead.

The Celts believed in many gods such as **Alator**, the one who nourishes the people, **Elen of the Ways**, the wise protector of travelers, **Brigid**, the goddess of fire and poetry, **Cernunnos**, the god of life, animals and underworld and hundreds of others, both male and female.

As a result, this mixture of Christianity and pagan beliefs gave birth to a unique culture with its marvelous art, literature and music. Artistic craft became the most important branch of the Celtic art. It happened due to its deep symbolism and meaning on the one hand and great skill of the Celtic craftsmen on the other.

In this part of the work we are going to look at the basic elements of Celtic symbols in some particular tattoo examples and trace down the possible meaning involved.

### The Basic Celtic Symbols

Celtic symbolism played an important part in their belief system. At this point, it is essential to have some knowledge about the principal signs.



Pic. 1. Triskelion, triquetra, the Tree of Life

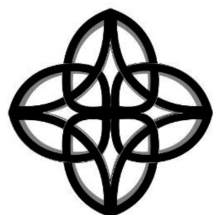
Triskelion, Triquetra, the Celtic Tree of Life (pic. 1) are the most common and are met almost in any pattern. Others are Carolingian Cross, Claddagh Ring and Celtic Cross. The number of other symbols is enormous but these are of the greatest importance.

Beside separate symbols there are so-called knots. These knots are complete loops that have no start or finish and represent eternity together with faith, friendship or love. Only one thread is used in each design, which symbolizes how life and eternity are interconnected. For example there is a very important Love Knot (pic. 2). This design features interlaced knots and represents the love between two people.



Pic. 2. Love Knot

Dara knot (pic. 3) is also frequently met. It demonstrates oak roots and symbolizes connection, power and love.



Pic. 3. Dara Knot

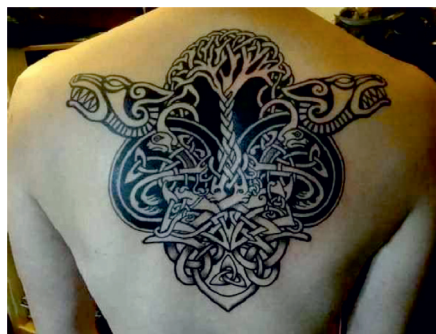
It is essential to say, that there is a great number of other knots. They can be very complicated and consist of many symbols interlaced. It all depends on the person's intentions and wishes. They say that creating a pattern of knots by himself a person creates his own life.

Choosing or creating a pattern for a tattoo, for example, a person can use these symbols separately or, what is more widely spread, combine them and turn into something fantastic and very profound.

### The Usage of the Celtic Symbols today

#### *Interpretation of the Celtic symbols and knots and their possible meaning in some particular examples*

Let us introduce some tattoos and try to explain the meanings of the basic knots and symbols and understand the message of the whole picture.



Pic. 4. Pattern 1

This is a very speaking tattoo! It has one of the most important symbols – the Celtic Tree of Life. With numerous roots below and stretching branches above, it is the symbol of all life on the planet, everything born on the earth and sustained by the power of the Universe.

There is also a number of so-called triquetras. Triquetra is another commonly used Celtic symbol. Derived from the Latin language, the term *triquetra* simply means «three-cornered». As for its meanings, it is the representation of the triple deities. As far as symbolizing a trinity goes, it was used to represent mind, body and soul; past, present and future; life, death and rebirth; creation, preservation and destruction; Father, Son and Holy Ghost; thought, feeling and emotion; earth, air and water.

These triquetras are situated within a shape of heart, composing a heart-shape knot, which we have already mentioned. In the upper part of the pattern there are two Celtic-style wolves, the animals, associated with loyalty and strength.

Having analyzed the whole picture we can suggest that the owner of the tattoo is open to the nature with his mind and soul. He/she appreciates fidelity and honesty, cherishes family bonds and love, and is ready to protect his beloved ones at any cost.



Pic. 5. Pattern 2

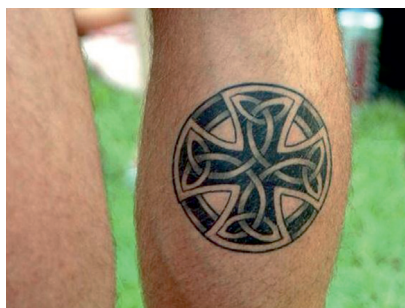
The basic part of this tattoo is represented by the Celtic cross. As one of the most common Celtic symbols, the Celtic cross is of significant cultural and religious importance. One of the theories suggests that Saint Patrick (or Saint Declan) created the symbol to convert the Druids. Realizing the importance of the sun and its life-giving power to pagans, Saint Patrick decided to combine the Christian cross with the Celtic circle representing eternity or, as another theory suggests, the Sun.

Some experts claimed that the Celtic cross represented the four stages of the day: morning, noon, evening and midnight while some considered it as a representation of earth, air, water and fire.

In this tattoo, the sun circle is at the same so-called **Claddagh Ring**. The heart on the ring is a symbol of love while the clasping hands demonstrate unity and promises, the crown represents loyalty, meaning to say, «I come to you with my whole heart».

In the center of the cross, there is a shamrock – a well-known symbol of luck. On the other hand, it means the love and loyalty of the Irish people to their motherhood.

This way it is possible to conclude that its owner is an Irish, who believes in God but respects his ancient beliefs. Moreover, he/she is a noble person with strong moral principles.



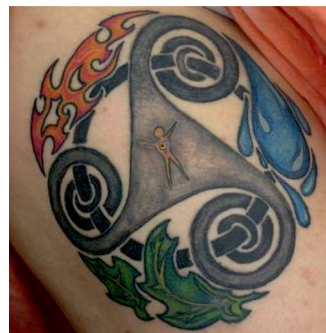
Pic. 6. Pattern 3

This tattoo represents a combination of the Celtic Sun Circle and one more important symbol – Carolingian Cross. Made of four triquetras, Carolingian cross is a symbol most commonly used by the Carolingian Dynasty of France which appeared in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. It represents unity, balance and the eternity of God.

This symbol is preferred to be used separately, though it is very popular. Its name is triskelion. The terms *triskelion* and *triskele* are Greek words with the same meaning «three-legged», it is also called «the triple spiral».

There are a lot of interpretations most of which are related to trinities and triple nature of things. Firstly it was used to represent triple deities, in other words, three deities worshipped as one. On the other hand, it also shows triple

nature and the movement of life formed of past, present, and future. From this point of view, it is similar to triquetras. Triskelion was also a symbol of strength in Celtic culture since it represents the will to move forward overcoming difficulties.

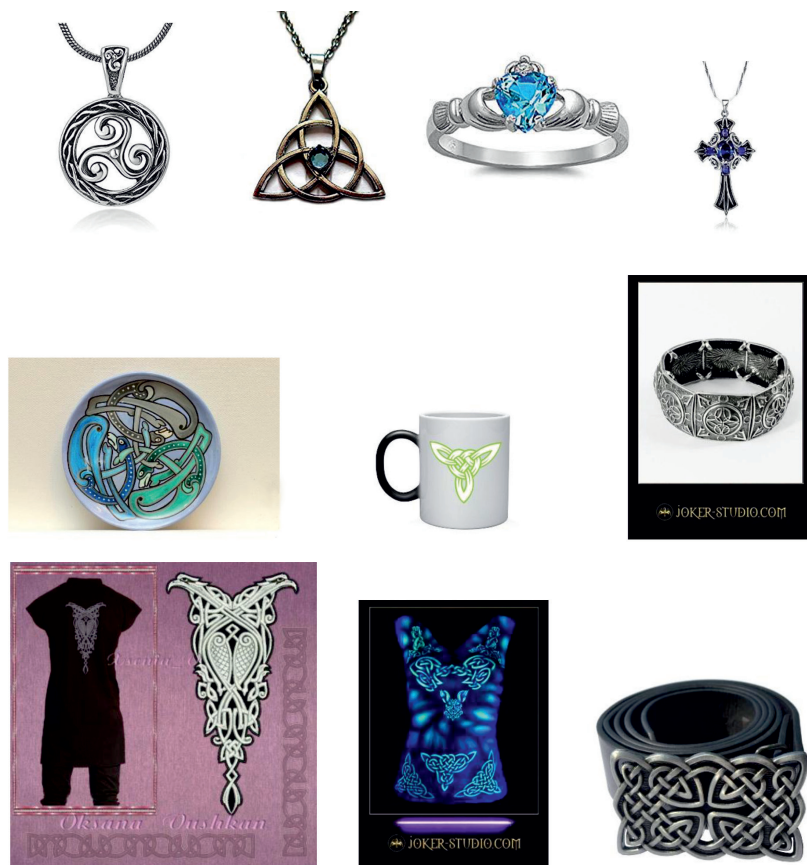


Pic. 7. Pattern 4

This particular tattoo shows triskele as a symbol of balance of basic natural elements (water, fire and earth) and a human as a centre of this circle of life.

Here are the most popular symbols, but the variations of their usage are endless. As one could see, there may be separate signs or knots. But the Celts took shapes of animals, birds or insects, each of which had a specific meaning, and filled them with numerous symbols, creating their own «tattoo story». This practice is still very common.





*Pic. 7. The Celtic symbols in present day items*

#### *The Celtic symbols in some other spheres*

Certainly, tattoos are not the only way to use these marvelous symbols. Today you can find them in jewelry (pic. 7), accessories, dishes and clothes (pic. 7).

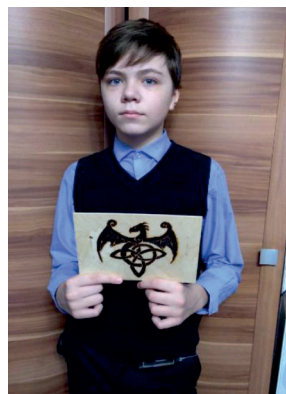
#### **Conclusion**

One of our friends is fond of cross-stitching. Once she made a simple symbolic picture. It turned out to be an Irish symbol of luck in love. It was stunning to come across a Celtic symbol in everyday life (pic. 8).



*Pic. 8. A Celtic symbol in cross-stitching*

Here are some more things we have made ourselves (pic. 9, 10).



*Pic. 9. Our pieces of art in the Celtic style*



*Pic. 10. Our pieces of art in the Celtic style*

This Celtic-style dragon is a charm, which gives strength and wisdom. And these bracelets and a pendant have got variations of love-knots as charms to give their owners some luck in love.

To sum it up it is important to say that the ancient Celts were at some point the dominant culture in Europe and established their culture and traditions in a great part of that continent. Their worship of the natural aspects around, was reflected by their artists, blacksmiths and craftsmen. The meaning of their artwork was so deep and up-to-date at the same time that they could survive through the hundreds of years and keep their identity. This is the most important

reason of the point that despite the fact that the Celtic civilization does not exist any longer, its remnants can be seen everywhere.

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