

## Beira, Mari, and Indo-Europeanization of non-Indo-European Divinities

Ian Ryan

California State University, USA, Fullerton; e-mail: [ianryan96@yahoo.com](mailto:ianryan96@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

It has often been thought that the Basques, in language and religion, are completely free of Indo-European influence. And, as this paper shows, this is certainly not the case. The chief of the Basque pantheon, Mari, is shown to have extreme influence from the Celtic peoples that surrounded the ancestors of the Basques on all sides. This paper will focus on the comparison between Mari and the Irish Cailleach Bheara. I propose regular sound correspondences between the names of Mari and Bheara. Also, I will show sound correspondences between the words for colors turning up in Celtic and Basque religion proposed by Zelikov. These points show that the Celts had a great amount of influence on Basque religion.

**Keywords:** Basque Studies, Basque Religion, Cailleach, Celtic Studies, Celtic Religion

We tend to think of male divinities when we think of Indo-European gods. However, there are some Indo-European cultures that place high importance on goddesses. One of these cultures were the Scots of Pre-Christian times and was worshipped a goddess of winter known as Beira. She rules over winter, while her other side, the youthful Bride, rules over summer and spring (Ó Cruaíoch 2006). Both of these goddesses have Indo-European names. Bride comes from Proto-Celtic *Brigandi* “The High One”, in turn derived from Proto-Indo-European feminine *b<sup>h</sup>rg<sup>h</sup>éntih* “to rise” (Matasović 2009). Beira, the term used in Scotland, Cailleach Bheara in Ireland, or simply the Cailleach in both Scotland and Ireland is derived from the Gaelic word *bior(ach)* or *beur(ach)*, meaning “sharp, shrill, inimical” due to her association with cattle and the sharp winds of winter (Ó Cruaíoch 2006). The Cailleach part of her name is derived from Old Irish *caille*, or “veil”, apparently a loan from the Latin word *pallium*, or “woolen cloak” (Macbain 1998).

The Cailleach is common to all areas of Western Europe touched by the ancient Celts. In Portugal, there’s the Moura, and we all know the Cailleach is present in Scotland and Ireland. However, there’s something unusual about this, in that the Basques have an etymologically similar goddess called Mari. To understand this, we have to go over the diachronic changes that Q-Celtic languages (the languages that have the Cailleach as a deity) gone under. The [m] sound in Mari opposed to the [bh], or [w] sound in Gaelic actually corresponds to the lenition sound change of the [m] sound the [bh] sound. In addition to this phonological correlation, the [a] sound in Mari corresponds to the reduction of the diphthong to the [ea] sound in Bheara (Prósper 2002, 2005).

My explanation for this a few months ago was that Beira, Cailleach Bheara, and the Mouras all had a non-Indo-European origin. However, when considering these sound laws common to all Celtic, specifically Q-Celtic languages, I have come to the conclusion that it was not the Celts that were influenced, but the Basques that were influenced by Indo-Europeans. This isn't the only Indo-European influence on Basque language or even mythology for that matter. The Basque *Lamia*, is found in the Baltic as the *Lauma*, and in Greece under the same name, *Lamia*. Matasović has also found that there were Proto-Celtic loans into early Basque, and vice versa (Matasović 2009). Thus, while Mari clearly shows mostly non-Indo-European traits, Indo-Europeans seem to have left their mark.

This is certainly the case when we consider what Mikhail Zelikov has found out about the etymology of some folklorically important lexemes in Basque, and interestingly Irish, speech. This is the etyma of "red", "black," and "white". Colors have long been important in the study of mythology and especially folklore, upon which mythology of heavily Christianized peoples can be reconstructed from. In Basque folklore, Mari wears a red skirt. This is actually one of her epithets in Basque belief, being *Ionagorri*, or "red skirt". Here's the kicker, Mari can also take the form of a carrion-eating bird, such as a raven or sometimes an owl in her guise as a bringer of death. The raven is actually one of the animals that the Irish death goddess Morrigan is associated with. Mari, on the other hand, is associated with megalithic tombs, monuments, and petroglyphs engraved on them as the bringer of death according to the Basques. Interestingly, petroglyphs found in the context of these tombs and other monuments in Iberia have great similarity to ones found in Ireland. One type of these carvings is of an owl (Zelikov 2020).

In a particular Basque legend, Mari is tied horse in a red robe by two brothers and is sent through a forest. This scares a shepherd into thinking he's seen the Devil, who is, in Basque as well as numerous, especially Breton culture, is often associated with the color red. He goes to a priest, whom he asks for a blessing. In the Irish "The destruction of Da Derga's hostel the three heroes go dressed in red riding on red horses. One must think of the Indo-European sacred twins, or the Trimurti, respectively. Red is also the color of Cuchulainn's battle-fury and the color of many, specifically Celtic, gods (Zelikov 2020). Also apparent is the sound law change that is shared between Basque and Celtic I didn't previously touch upon: *gwh-* > *b-* (Corominas 1976: 155). This was under influence from Celtic (Gorrochategui 1987: 957).

Now, on to our final color: black. As stated in previously in this paper, the etyma *gorri* in Basque means "red". However, due to the previously mentioned sound law change, we now move on to the word *bero* meaning "hot; heat", and we'll come back to this etymon soon. Let's look at the word for devil *tusuri* meaning "bad; malicious/noble". It's often associated with the etymon for Basque pagan, or *gentiliak*, which often carried the notation of wizardry and great strength. Back to *bero*: in a Basque folktale written in 1917, it is said that around the time or Christ a bright star was seen in the sky. They got a blind man from the Cave of Leizai and forced pulled his eyes open with a poker. The blind man exclaimed "Oh my children! Jesus Christ is born!" thinking they will die because of this, the blind man asks to be thrown down a cliff. The term *bero* is cognate with the Irish monster Balor, in turn cognate with Belenus, identified with Apollo, in keeping with the root of the former two mythological figures' root *bhelH-* "shining",

“white”. This isn’t actually due to the shining divinity of these gods, but actually their association with *erabelhar* or black henbane. Which is in Basque paganism used by the servants of Mari, the *belhagile*, better known to Christians of the time as witches, in religious ceremonies (Zelikov 2020).

The Basques have long been thought of as completely separate from the surrounding Indo-European peoples. However, I hope this paper has shown that the reality was exactly the opposite. It appears that the chief goddess of the Basque pantheon was heavily Indo-Europeanized, or better, Celticized. Time will tell if other aspects of Basque religion are found to be heavily influenced by the Indo-Europeans, like is also shown for the *Lamia*. It seems that everywhere the Indo-Europeans went in Europe, they made a massive mark. Whether the people in question are Indo-European or not can be a matter of future researches.

## References

Corrominas J. 1976. Elementos prelatinos en las romanes hispanas. *Actas del I Coloquio sobre lenguas y culturas prerromanas de la Península Ibérica (Salamanca, 27 – 31 de mayo de 1974)*; pp.: 87 – 164

Gorrochategui J. 1987. Vasco-Celtica. *Anuario del Seminario de la Filología Vasca “Julio de Urquijo”*; pp.: 951 – 959

Macbain A. 1998. *Etymological Dictionary of Scottish-Gaelic*. Hippocrene Books, New York

Matasović R. 2009. *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic*. Brill, Leiden and Boston

Ó Cruailaoich G. 2006. *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise-Woman Healer*. Cork University Press, Cork

Prósper, Blanca María 2002. Lenguas y religiones prerromanas del occidente de la península ibérica. *Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca*; pp.: 422 – 427

Prósper B.M. 2005. Estudios sobre la fonética y la morfología de la lengua celtibérica in Vascos, celtas e indoeuropeos. Genes y lenguas (coauthored with Villar, Francisco). *Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca*; pp.: 333 – 350

Zelikov M. V. 2020. Reflections on Some Ethno-linguistic Parallels between Celts and Basques (The Atlantic substratum of the “red devil” & “black wizard”). *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, Vol. 48, № 1 & 2; pp.: 23 – 40