



Winter Deity
The Cailleach

In Celtic traditions, the Cailleach is the hag. She rules over Winter. She is the crone. The embodiment of the Dark Mother.

She is found in both Irish and Scottish lore with slightly differing names and many many stories.

She is considered to be a storm bearer, a destroyer goddess, yet she also has the power of creation in her ability to craft mountains and hills. Her hammer creates landscapes, while her staff freezes the ground.

She rules the dark part of the year and her counterpart Bride or Brigid rules the lighter part of the year. (This echoes the later neo pagan stories of the Oak King and Holly King and their battles that end in each of them holding court over one half of the year). Her reign is from Samhain to Beltane.

The Cailleach means "veiled one" and she often appeared to people as a veiled old woman. Sometimes she is depicted as having only one eye. Sometimes she is said to have red teeth and blue or deathly pale skin. In some traditions she is even seen as a shapeshifter who can transform into a bird.



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Yet this goddess also has different facets. In some traditions and stories she transforms from an old woman to a young one, and in this way rules both parts of the year. In others she moves through these life stages and then stays eternally the crone.

She holds many roles. In addition to her ruling over Winter and determining what intensity and duration this will hold, she is also linked to animals as a protector. Specifically she is connected to wolves and the herding of deer.

She is also tied to the harvest and the last harvested sheaf of grain was dedicated to her. This was also used to begin the next planting season.

At Imbolc the Cailleach determines the length of the remainder of winter weather as this is the day she gathers the remainder of her firewood for Winter. If she wants winter to last a little longer she makes this day sunny and bright to allow her to gather as much firewood as possible. If she has determined a shorter Winter will occur, she makes this day less hospitable as she needs to gather less wood.

(Sound familiar? Our friend the groundhog uses the weather in a similar way to predict the coming of Spring)



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The Cailleach also makes an appearance in the traditions of Yule, where her likeness was carved or drawn onto a log then the log was burned to burn away the hardships and strife from the past year and welcome in the new year. Often the ashes and remains of the log were used as divination tools. Or the remnants of the log were saved to start the next year's Yule fire.

Family-The Cailleach was said to have married many times. Her most fruitful marriage was to The Bodach and they had many children together. In some tales these children begin the lineage of the people in a certain region. In others this family was harbored by the people of a region and so the land there is blessed to be fruitful during the lighter months.

Although a storm bringer and dark goddess, the Cailleach is neither good nor bad, but holds both aspects within.



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Resources

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imbolc#:~:text=Imbolc%20was%20believed%20to%20be,can%20gather%20plenty%20of%20firewood.>

<https://www.learnreligions.com/cailleach-the-ruler-of-winter-2561705>

<https://mythopedia.com/topics/cailleach>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cailleach>

<https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/scottish-festive-tradition-burning-cailleach-1517365>

<https://folklorethursday.com/folklife/the-burning-heart-of-scotlands-yule-charring-the-old-wife/>