

The Story of Airmid and the Healing Herbs

You might remember, if you cast your mind back to our very first Anam Cara workshop, when we told you about the Battle of Moytura, the battle between the Tuatha de Danann and the Fir Bolg (For those who missed it, the video is in the first folder on the website). Well, this story directly relates to that one. It is a short but important tale as it brings a very significant female deity to the forefront, someone who probably was seen as having a minor role in our Celtic folklore but whose story explains how healing and medicine came into the world.

Airmid was a Goddess, one of the Tuatha De Danann. With her father Dian Cecht, the God of Healing and her brother Miach, an alchemist and healer himself, she healed those injured in the Second Battle of Moytura. Now you may remember that in this battle, the king of the Tuatha De Danann, Nuada, lost his arm and because a High King had to be perfect in body and mind, he ran the risk of losing his royal title. So Dian Cecht, the healer, fashioned an arm out of pure silver and as this made him whole again, Nuada could continue as the High King and rule his people once again. After this, he became known as Nuada Lámhairgid, or Nuada of the Silver Hand.

However, Airmid's brother Miach believed that with his and his sister's healing expertise, they could come up with a better solution. Combining their skills, they built Nuada an arm of flesh. But when their father Dian Cecht found out, he was furious. How dare Miach shame him in front of the High King and the other members of the Tuatha De Danann. He attacked his son in a jealous rage, and though Miach was a skilled healer who could keep up with his wounds in battle, eventually he dealt him a savage blow to the head that ended his life.

After Miach's death, Airmid was devastated. She went to his grave to grieve every day for a year, and as she wept her tears of grief, they watered the earth. From the earth and Miach's body, all the healing herbs of the world sprang – 365 in all according to the number of sinews and joints in Miach's body – one for each day of the year.

Realising the importance of this gift, Airmid gathered all the herbs in her cloak, collecting and organizing them according to their properties for healing. They spoke to her and told her all of their healing powers. As she laid them out on her cloak as she was taught, she organized them into combinations that could cure every ailment on earth.

However, as jealousy ate into his soul, Dian Cecht found out about this and still angry with his son Miach, in his rage, he lashed out at Airmid. Her cloak and the herbs were scattered to the four winds. For this reason, no living human knows all the secrets of the herbs - not where to find them, nor how to use them. They are all there somewhere in the world, but only Airmid remembers how to use them to heal.

There is a postscript to this story.

One of the other stories associated with Airmid is the Well of Slàine in Co. Meath. The myth tells us that she built this well with her Father and with other healers and using a few herbs that she had managed to save from Dian Cecht's fury, they were able to sing incantations and with the herbs bring warriors slain in battle back to life. However, as the Tuatha De Danann began to move away from the world into the land beyond beyond, Tír na nÓg, their enemies piled stones into the well so it could no longer be a place of healing. Eventually the well was Christianized to Our Lady's Well and it stands today in Slane, Co.Meath as a symbol of healing and ancient heritage.