



Berba of the Three Sisters

Celtic Tradition - Ireland

Since the dawn of humanity, Berba has whispered to you, the people of her shores, carrying the stories of the land, the rivers, and the lives intertwined with their flow. For generations, her voice has been a constant presence, guiding, observing, and witnessing as time moves on.

In the days of our ancient ancestors, water was not merely an element but a sacred bridge to other realms, a portal to hidden knowledge and otherworldly power. The great rivers of Ireland, they believed, did not have their origins in the everyday, but in a single, enchanted source: Conla's well of knowledge. This hallowed spring was the cradle of wisdom, surrounded by nine sacred hazel trees. Their branches hung heavy with crimson nuts, each containing the entirety of human knowledge, wisdom beyond the mortal grasp.

When these nuts ripened and fell into the spring's cool waters, they were consumed by the salmon that swam there, becoming bearers of the world's wisdom. The knowledge carried within these salmon coursed through the arteries of Erin, giving life to its rivers, connecting the spiritual and physical worlds like veins in the body. It is said that whoever caught and tasted a salmon of knowledge would be granted insight beyond measure, understanding the truths of the universe.

From this well, seven sacred streams flowed, each carrying not just water, but stories, or *scéalta*, from the ancient spirits of the land. Among these tales is one of great significance: Dagda, the warrior god and son of Danu, embarked on a hunt across the rivers of the Otherworld. His prey? Three otters, elusive and quick, who slipped through the rivers as

shadows. The chase was relentless, leading Dagda to the very threshold of Tír na nÓg, the fabled land of eternal youth. As they emerged from the elf-mound, the otters transformed before his eyes, shedding their forms and becoming the very essence of the rivers Berba, Siur, and Eoir.

These three sisters, born of the Otherworld and blessed with the power of the waters, separated at Conla's well. From that point, they each journeyed through the heart of Ireland, their paths winding through ancient forests guarded by the great lungs of Rowan, Holly, Hawthorn, Hazel, and the Great Oak, who stood as sentinels over their courses, protecting the flow of life that the rivers carried. The sisters traversed valleys, hills, and plains, each following their destined route, their waters nurturing the land and the life that depended on them.

Berba, the eldest of the three, journeyed the farthest seeking her sisters. Her course took her across the vast expanse of Erin, and she became more than just a river—she became immersed in the memories of the land. Through her silent, steady flow, Berba saw the rise and fall of tribes, the triumphs of warriors, the creation of myths, and the devastation of wildlife. She bore witness to the deeds, good and ill, of all who live by her. Her waters absorbed the lore of the land, becoming a silent but ever-present witness.

The rivers of Ireland, like Berba, are more than just waterways — they are living connections between the past, present, and future. They remember what we have forgotten, hold the wisdom we seek, and carry the potential of what is to come. Berba's journey has taken her from Conla's well to the farthest reaches of Erin, but she always returns to the embrace of her sisters, joining them once more at a shared estuary, where the rivers run to the sea.

Now, Berba still whispers to those who will listen. She continues her eternal journey, watching, waiting, and carrying the knowledge of all who have lived by her side. But her story, and the story of all the rivers of Ireland, depends on us. If we listen to her wisdom and protect the land and waters that sustain us, Berba will continue to witness the future. If we forget, her voice may one day fall silent, and with her, the knowledge of ages will be lost.



It is up to us to protect Berba and her sisters, to safeguard the greater community of life they support, so that the wisdom of the rivers may flow on, for generations to come.

Berba's whisper still echoes. □

Adapted by Angelina Foster, Emily Rainsford and Ciara O'Keeffe (2024).

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Comments

This adaptation has been made by the people who are trying to mitigate the climate and extinction crisis from Blueway Art Studio.¹ This is a project based in Athy, Ireland, and led by Angelina Foster. It seeks to preserve Ireland's Celtic heritage through art, participation and social animation, creating networks and building links for the construction of a sustainable society.

As part of this work, they have launched an initiative called the Future Ancestor Project, which aims to transform the worldview and lifestyles of their community and reconnect them with their territory through the folklore of the Barrow River so that people take responsibility for the community of life around them.

For this work they rely, among other things, on stories, and specifically on the old Celtic myths of the area, where Berba, Goddess of the River Barrow, stands out. Regarding this river, Angelina Foster comments:

The River Barrow is designated in its entirety as a Special Conservation Area under the EC Habitats Directive. Such sites are collectively referred to as Natura 2000 sites. The Barrow is known as one of The Three Sisters; the other two being the River Suir and the River Nore. The Barrow is the longest of the three rivers and, at 192 km, the second-longest river in Ireland, behind the River Shannon. The ancient names for these rivers are Berba, Siur and Eoir. The

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Barrow in our native tongue is *An Bhearú*, meaning 'boiling,' derived from another folklore story. The Barrow is slow-flowing and is known as the silent waters and a good salmon river.

And as for the otters, the original form of the river goddesses, Foster explains:

The otter is a fitting spirit animal for the three sisters. Otters dwell in rivers and the sea which reflects the sisters' journey to the sea. Otter in the Irish language translates as *Madra Uisce* meaning 'water dog,' or *An Dobharchú* meaning 'water hound.' There are folklore stories of Dobharchú, King Otter, a mythical giant otter or lake monster dwelling in lakes throughout Ireland and Scotland.

Ireland has long been considered a stronghold for the otter. However, recent surveys now show that the otter is not as widespread as it once was. Dramatic declines occurred in many European otter populations during the latter half of the 20th century. As a result, otters became extinct in several countries. While conservation efforts have reversed the decline in some countries, the otter remains threatened or rare in many others.

Thanks to Angelina Foster, Emily Rainsford and Ciara O'Keeffe for lending us the adaptation of this Celtic myth, and also to Dr Cathy Fitzgerald of Haumea Ecovercity.com who shared the Earth Charter and The Earth Stories Collection as part of ecoliteracy training to creative practitioners, for the Irish Arts Council, 3-County Local Authority Carlow, Kildare and Meath creative engagement 'Gnáthóga Nádúrtha | Natural Habitats programme. Thanks for contacting us and finding ways to feed The Earth Stories Collection.

Sources

Foster, A; Rainsford, E. & O'Keeffe, C. (2024). Berba of the 3 Sisters. Personal communication, 25 October 2024.



Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 4a. Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Preamble – Earth Our Home: The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depends upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air.

Principle 2b: Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.

Principle 4b: Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities.

Principle 5e: Manage the use of renewable resources such as water, soil, forest products, and marine life in ways that do not exceed rates of regeneration and that protect the health of ecosystems.

Principle 8b: Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.

Principle 9a: Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.