



MA in Irish Mythology and Folklore

2025-26

Department of Early and Medieval Irish
Department of Folklore and Ethnology

Course co-ordinator: Dr Fionnán Mac Gabhann

MA in Irish Mythology and Folklore

This course explores Irish tradition, focussing both on the earliest and on the most recent sources: medieval tales evoking the pre-Christian past; and the folklore and vernacular culture of recent times. Apart from Latin, Irish is the oldest literary language in western Europe, reflecting the vigorous cultural self-confidence of the early Irish themselves; and a wealth of Old Irish and Middle Irish tales, poems and other texts speak of the culture and beliefs of the pagan period, evidently drawing on the materials of ancient myth. Ireland is also unusual in the systematic and thorough way in which its folklore has been collected, especially in the early part of the twentieth century: an ambitious state ethnographic project which has resulted in an archive famous among folklorists everywhere for its abundance of evidence including stories, charms and customs. Despite the many changes brought by its eventful history, Ireland's traditions have been remarkably durable, and continuities can be identified linking the popular culture of modern times with the world of primeval myth. Various of the course's modules trace these continuities, examining such enduring themes as gender, kingship and the supernatural. All sources are read in translation.

Instruction and learning take place across a range of methods and media. Recorded lectures present and interpret the subject matter, guiding students to further reading in primary and secondary sources. Discussion boards provide ongoing opportunities to engage directly with topics as they arise, and can also serve as a starting point for student interaction. For each module, the student will produce an essay in which they will be able to explore some aspect of the subject in depth, further developing their research skills and their familiarity with the material. This development continues, on a more extended scale and at a higher level, in the dissertation that a student will write as the final component of the course. This dissertation, written under the supervision of one of the instructors in the programme, will focus either on its Mythology or its Folklore aspect.

Programme Outline

Course Practicalities

This is an online programme running for 12 months (full-time), or 24 months (part-time), from the date of first registration.

- In Part I students take 60 credits consisting of six core modules
- In Part II students complete a research dissertation worth 30 credits

Lectures are pre-recorded, and both they and ancillary lecture material (notes, slides, bibliographies, etc.) are made available via [Canvas](#), the online teaching platform used by University College Cork.

Part-time option: Part-time students will complete a minimum of 40 credits and a maximum of 60 credits in Year 1. In Year 2, they will complete their taught modules as well as submit the 30-credit dissertation by the end of the second academic year.

Part-time students must choose **CC6025** and **FL6011** in year 1, as both are introductory; moreover, if they are only doing 40 credits in year 1 then the remaining modules should be one each from CC and FL, unless special circumstances render this unfeasible.

Part-time students should consult the programme co-ordinator in advance of selecting their module options.

Part I: Core Modules (60 credits)

- **CC6024:** Tales of Kings & Heroes in Medieval Ireland (10 credits)
- **CC6025:** Celtic Paganism & its Irish Legacy: The Medieval Evidence (10 credits)
- **CC6027:** Gender Perceptions in Medieval Ireland (10 credits)
- **FL6011:** Doing Irish Folklore: Archival Collection & Dissemination, Past & Present (10 credits)
- **FL6012:** The Gaelic Otherworld: Stories and Theories (10 credits)
- **FL6014:** Festival, Carnival & Celebratory Traditions (10 credits)

Part II: Dissertation in Mythology or Folklore (12,000–15,000 words) (30 credits)

- **CC6026:** Dissertation in Irish Mythology (30 credits)
- *or*
- **FL6010:** Dissertation in Irish Folklore (30 credits)

Part I: Core Modules (60 credits)

SEMESTER 1

CC6025 Celtic Paganism and its Irish Legacy: The Medieval Evidence

(10 credits, Autumn Semester)

[Module duration: 08 September - 17 October]

CC6025: Celtic Paganism and its Irish Legacy explores the evidence for the myths and religious beliefs of the prehistoric Celts, especially as reflected in medieval Irish literature.

The pre-Christian Celts did not leave a literature; but there are some indications of their religion in the writings of Greek and Roman authors, and in archaeological remains. Also, one of the distinctive traits of medieval Irish culture was a keen interest in, and the preservation of traditions derived from, the pagan past. This module will explore the evidence for the myths and beliefs of the ancient Irish, using the full range of sources available but with a focus on the medieval literature. All texts will be read in translation. We will look at the aspects of Irish society that favoured the transmission of early tradition, but also at the ways in which this tradition was inevitably transformed in a Christian context. This approach, with its emphasis on methodology and the evaluation of evidence, will enable us to investigate the preliterate past while at the same time gaining a fresh perspective on the mentalities of the medieval Irish.

Assessment: 3,000-4,000 word essay (75%), Submission Date is **Friday 14 November**
Online moderated activities (25%)

FL6012 The Gaelic Otherworld: Stories and Theories

(10 credits, Autumn Semester)

[Module duration: 29 September – 07 November]

FL6012: The Gaelic Otherworld: Stories and Theories explores, through the study of folklore, various vernacular conceptualisations of the Gaelic Otherworld, at once (and at times ambiguously) native, ancestral and Christian in nature. Key aspects of popular religion and belief, from the early modern period down to the present, are examined, as well as vernacular concepts of curing and healing.

Drawing examples from key aspects of both the life cycle (e.g., birth, death) and the annual cycle (e.g., festivals, patterns) in Irish and wider Gaelic traditional culture, principal topics will include such areas as the holy well tradition – patterns and pilgrimage; fairy belief; wise-men and wise-women; charms, charmers and charming; the bean sí – the Gaelic supernatural death messenger; keening and wailing. Using various available folklore sources, both published and archival, students will also be introduced to the collection and study of various genres of oral narrative, with particular focus on legends and 'mythical history' in Irish and wider Gaelic folklore, and will gain familiarity with various scholarship methods and tools used in narrative research.

Assessment: 3,000-4,000 word essay (75%), Submission deadline is **Friday 5 December**
Online moderated activities (25%)

CC6027 Gender Perceptions in Medieval Ireland

(10 credits, Autumn Semester)

[Module duration: 20 October – 28 November]

CC6027: Gender Perceptions in Medieval Ireland explores culturally assigned gender characteristics in Early Irish society as reflected in surviving texts such as legal treatises, heroic literature, poetry and saints' Lives.

Medieval Irish culture appears to have idealised certain gender characteristics as reflected in a variety of textual sources; not only in the strong and memorable female and male characters of saga literature but also in the references to gender roles in Early Irish legal treatises. This module encourages students to explore Early Irish conceptualisation of gender norms and also of transgression of the expected roles of genders within that society. The module content concentrates on female models of idealised behaviour before turning to the ultimate model of masculinity, the male hero; the myth of heroic prowess coupled with the underlying threat of unpredictability and violence will also be examined. In addition, the malleability of gender identity in poetry and saga will be a particular focus. Saints' Lives of the Middle Ages, often an expected source of gender role reversal and fluidity, will also be covered. A range of representative texts will be read in translation as preparation for the independent research projects undertaken by students. Students will also be expected to contribute regularly to online moderated activities.

Assessment: 3,000-4,000 word essay (75%), Submission Date is **Tuesday 23 December**
Online moderated activities (25%)

SEMESTER 2

FL6011 Doing Irish Folklore: Archival Collection and Dissemination, Past and Present

(10 credits, Spring Semester)

[Module duration: 12 January – 20 February]

FL6011: Doing Irish Folklore: Archival Collection and Dissemination, Past and Present explores processes of folklore collection and resource creation in the Irish and international contexts. This module examines the relationship between collection and archiving on the one hand, and the shape and nature of resources generated on the other, in order to achieve an understanding of how to approach, use and assess primary folklore sources.

Irish folklore archives, such as the National Folklore Collection, will be examined in terms of their generation, significance and use. The context of early-twentieth-century folklore collection in Ireland will be considered in the context of previous collection in Ireland and contemporary collection internationally. The National Folklore Collection will be explored, with attention paid to the Main Collection, the Schools' Collection, the use of questionnaires and field diaries, the role of women in resource generation, and the character of the content. The organisation of the resource and its finding aids, both analogue and digital, will be considered, and the rich content will be sampled and discussed. The practice of other folklore archives will be explored and assessed.

Assessment: 3,000-4,000 word essay (75%), Submission Deadline is **Friday 20 March**

Online moderated activities (25%)

FL6014 Festival, Carnival & Celebratory Traditions

(10 credits, Spring Semester)

[Module duration: 02 February – 13 March]

FL6014: Festival, Carnival & Celebratory Traditions explore scholarly and popular perspectives pertaining to rite and ritual, festival and carnival, the life-cycle and the annual cycle, including funerals, wakes, weddings. This module aims to advance and deepen students' understanding of time, temporality and periodicity in vernacular culture and everyday life in general.

This module will explore the concept of time in vernacular, popular and everyday life. Topics covered will include celebration and festival, rites and rituals as well as traditions around wakes and weddings. The contexts of these traditions in contemporary society will be examined throughout the module.

Assessment: 3,000-4,000 word essay (75%), Submission Deadline is **Monday 13 April**

Online moderated activities (25%)

CC6024 Tales of Kings and Heroes in Medieval Ireland

(10 credits, Spring Semester)

[*Module duration: 23 February – 3 April*]

CC6024: Tales of Kings and Heroes in Medieval Ireland introduces students to the early prose literature of the Celtic countries, and examines medieval Irish literary compositions about characters and events of the early historical era. This introduction has a focus on the central role of historical and mythological kings, heroes and events in this corpus of literature.

This module begins with the early heroic literature of the Celtic countries, with a focus on the mythological aspects of medieval Irish texts from the Ulster and Fenian Cycles. It continues with a detailed study and analysis of selected narrative texts, in translation, introducing students to medieval Irish literary compositions about characters and events, particularly kings, of the early historical era. Attitudes to kingship and views of history in these tales are explored. All texts are read in translation.

Assessment: 3,000-4,000 word essay (75%), Submission Date is **Friday 5 May**
Online moderated activities (25%)

Indicative Timetable* (Taught Modules) *Subject to change*

Please note that each module is six weeks in duration. Course-work involves weekly readings, discussion-group participation, and essays.

(Those pursuing the **part-time** MA in Irish Mythology and Folklore must complete all taught modules, totalling **60 credits**, over the course of the two years. Part-time students will complete a minimum of 40 credits and a maximum of 60 credits in Year 1. In Year 2, they will complete their taught modules as well as submit the 30-credit dissertation by the end of the second academic year.)

Start date: 08/09/2025

MA in Irish Mythology and Folklore							
September 2025	08	Module 1					
	15	CC6025					
	22	Starts w/c					
	29	08 Sept	Module 2				
October	06	Essay	FL6012				
	13	Deadline					
	20	14/11					
	27			Module 3			
November	03		Starts w/c	CC6027			
	10		29 Sept				
	17		Essay				
	24		Deadline				
December	01						
	08						
	15						
	22						
	29						
January 2026	05						
	12			Module 4			
	19			FL6011			
	26			Starts w/c			
February	02			12 Jan			
	09			Essay	Module 5		
	16			Deadline	FL6014		
	23			20/03	Starts w/c		
March	02				02 Feb		
	09				Essay	CC6024	
	16				Deadline		
	23				13/04		
	30						Starts w/c
April	06						23 Feb
	13						Essay
	20						Deadline
	27						05/05

Part II: Dissertation in Irish Mythology or Irish Folklore

(30 credits)

Students choose CC6026 or FL6010

Students will be supported in dissertation research in their chosen area through regular interaction with a supervisor.

Preparation for the research part of the programme happens throughout the year (identifying a suitable research topic, liaising with an appropriate supervisor etc.) and the dissertation completion phase occurs between April and August approximately.

The Dissertation should be submitted to the relevant Department by a date in August/September specified by the Department.

CC6026 Dissertation in Irish Mythology

(30 credits)

Module Objective: To develop research skills in the field of Irish mythology.

Research on a subject selected by the student in consultation with the Department.

Assessment: A dissertation of between 12,000 and 15,000 words.

FL6010 Dissertation in Irish Folklore

(30 credits)

Module Goal: To develop research skills in Folklore and Ethnology.

Research on a subject selected by the student in consultation with the Department.

Assessment: A dissertation of between 12,000 and 15,000 words.