

Druidism

Druidism was the religion of the Celtic people that was administered by priests and priestesses called Druids. Remnants of Druidism still presently exist.

The Druids were a priestly caste existing among the Celtic people. The Celts, as they were called, were a tribal people who spread throughout Gaul, Britain, Ireland, and other parts of Europe, Asia Minor, and the Balkans. This migration had occurred by the 5th. century BC. By the first century AD the Roman had launched many attacks against the Celts that greatly dwindled their population. Christianity dealt them their final defeat.

There is little first hand knowledge or the Druids or of their religion. The chief reason for this is that they taught their acolytes secret Druidical knowledge by word of mouth. None of this trusted knowledge was committed to writing; it was all learned through mnemonics.

The most important knowledge that exists of the Druids comes from the writings of Julius Caesar. Caesar was not only a warrior and statesman but a priest as well; therefore he was keenly interested in the Druidism and the Celtic people. Moreover, he was friendly with a pro-Roman Druid, Diviciacus, who shared with him many Druid beliefs, especially about their gods and life after death.

Caesar mentions some of these beliefs and the behavior of the people in his "Gallic Wars." The Gauls, he observed, treated their ordinary people almost like slaves. There were two notable classes among them, the Druids and the knights.

The Druids were concerned with the divine worship; they officiated over both public and private sacrifices, interpreted ritual questions, settled disputes and issued punishments to those refusing to obey their rulings.

Caesar asserted several times "that Druid power originated in Britain and that Britain remained the center of Druidism." This judgment of the Druids was profound and also served to unite the Celtic people. Druidic decisions were critical and were to be completely adhered to. Caesar noted those not obeying the decisions were banished from the tribe and even a wider community. In Gaul there were always boundary disputes that required Druidic intervention. The suggestion that the Druids settled boundary disputes indicates the importance of Druidic rule among the Celtic tribes.

More evidence that the Druids and the religion of Druidism held the Celts together were the tribal assemblies which occurred on days that were vital in the agricultural year. The original Druidic festive days were 'Beltain,' May 1, the beginning of summer, or the light half of the year; and 'Samhain,' November 1, the beginning of winter, the dark half of the year (see [Sabbats](#)). The assemblies, especially large and important ones, took place in "sanctified" places. It was here that people from a large area or a whole island would

gather. For example, ancient Ireland was divided into five communities, each separate and independent of each other, but all unified on days of great feasts.

Both on the continent and in Ireland the Druids held themselves above the kings unless they held both offices. They held themselves in very high esteem, which was shared for them by the people. The Druids called themselves "creators of the universe." In Ireland kings went nowhere without Druids to advise them. Druids believed they were the incarnations of the gods.

What were these "sanctified" or sacred places in which the Druids assembled? First and most important they were sacred groves of trees, especially oak trees. The name Druid means, "knowing the oak tree" in Gaelic. It was within these groves that most assemblies and religious ceremonies occurred. The Druids also valued the trees for curative benefits. The mistletoe, which was seen as a sign from the Celtic Otherworld (their name of a place where after life was thought to exist) was used as a cure against poisons, infertility, and even used to cure animals. It can readily be seen that it was here in these sacred groves that the Druids dispensed their judgment and punishments. When the people were not nearby groves they assembled by rivers, streams, and lakes. The Celts worshipped water gods and believed water to be sacred.

Like trees and water the Druids held some islands to be sacred too. One is the island of Mona, (also called Mon or Anglesey); the Romans destroyed the sanctuary there in 60 AD. It is thought that both Irish and British Druids periodically assembled in sacred strongholds. The Isle of Man, sacred to the sea god, [Manannan](#), appears to have been viewed with similar solemnity. A stone discovered in the 19th century bore a Celtic inscription, written in Ogam (a cryptic writing used mainly for commemorative inscriptions on wood and stone), which translates: "The Stone of Dovadona, son of the Druid." This indicates Druids inhabited Man as late as the fifth and sixth century AD, and other discoveries and legends also indicate this. There is the discovery of the three sons of the fifth-century Irish King Erc buried on Iona. This preceded the coming of Saint Columba. It seems that one of Columba's brethren was sacrificed to build a monastery there. This indicates pagan beliefs and ceremonies still existed long after the coming of Christianity.

According to Welsh legend such human sacrifices were recommended and performed. During the building of Vortigen's castle the construction was delayed because as soon as a stone was laid it disappeared. The Druids ordered a child, born without a father, be sacrificed and its blood sprinkled on the site to cleanse it.

There are several descriptions of Druidic human sacrifices. They were performed within a religious and spiritual sense. Many were performed publicly among the Celtic people especially at the celebration of Beltain. There were also private human sacrifices. If a leader of warriors was defeated in battle, in disgrace, he would often turn his sword upon himself. The reverse was also true, a petition to the gods, was sometimes accompanied by self-sacrifice.

Behind Druidical performance of human sacrifice laid the Druidic belief in an after life. Again Caesar emphatically states it, "Doctrinally...the most important Druid belief was that after death the soul passes from one to another -- hence the Celts' bravery in battle." This belief in reincarnation was not just in the transmigration of the soul from one human form to another, but to other life forms as well. This is evident in the Irish epic 'Tain Bo Cuailnge,' "The Cattle Raid of Cooley." In it two magical bulls possessing human reasoning, initially originating as two swineherds of the Lord of the Otherworld, pass through a long series of [metamorphoses](#) -- they become ravens, stags, warriors, water monsters, demons and aquatic worms. The evidence from archaeology, the classic writings, and vernacular tradition to the present reinforces Caesar's assertion. In tombs have been found remains of lavish amounts of food, hearty mead, equipment that would seem to indicate the belief the soul would need these things in the Otherworld.

In the poet Lucan's "Pharsalia," a verse epic about the Roman civil war, he addresses the Druids with, "If we understand you right, death is only a pause in a long life." The writer Posidonius states that Celtic men were willing to have their throats cut so they could follow their prince into death, and then into a new life.

A similar interpretation might be drawn from the sacrifice scene on the Gundestrup Cauldron. One column of warriors are marching to the sacrifice while another, reborn, are marching away from it. An explanation for this might be the Celts compared men to sacrificial vassals in which human life was offered up in exchange for another existence.

It is known that the wheel was a Celtic symbol of rebirth. The wheel appears on sword-sheaths and other pieces of art.

That the Celts did not fear death was not because they had a low regard for life or a feeling of recklessness in battle, but it arose from generations of Druid teachings. Druids taught such teachings for countless generations, having been recited at gravesites. Many seasonal assemblies were held at burial sites, including the enigmatic passage graves (dolmens of the [megaliths](#)) that stud Ireland. From these beliefs came the interweaving of the spiritual and mundane worlds until the two could hardly be separated. Such an attitude or viewpoint is a blending of ancient Celtic and proto-Celtic ideals that formed the essential and archaic nature of Druidism.

The Druids were said to be the keepers of traditional wisdom that was concerned with moral philosophy, natural phenomena and theology. They were skilled in the reading of omens, the interpretation of dreams, the conducting of sacrifices, the construction of a calendar, herbal medicine, astronomy and the composition of poetry. Some say they also practiced sexual magic.

One way the Druids read omens was by killing a victim. "The inhabitants employ a very surprising and incredible custom when they want to know matters of great importance. They consecrate a human being to death, drive a dagger into his belly, above the abdomen, and draw conclusions about events to come from the squirming of the victim and the squirting of his blood. They have been practicing this since time immemorial."

The composing of poems was the chief duty of the bard, who was also considered a priest in Druidism. In most, if not all, battles bards went along, not to fight but to record the battle that they later composed into verse to be sung and read to the people of their tribe or clan. Bards were free to move about in battle without being in danger because it was a strict rule of Druidic law that no bard should be killed. Bards, like other priests and priestesses, were considered gifted for their offices. Some were also seers.

Ammianus, a Roman historian (c. 330-395 B.C), said Druids "are uplifted by searching into things most secret and sublime."

Much attention has been drawn to the Druid human sacrificial ceremonies that usually conducted on the festive days. "Pliny recorded that the slaying of a human being was considered a highly religious acts among the Britons, and the eating of the flesh regarded as a 'wholesome remedy.'" Also "the Roman historian Diodorus Siculus states the Irish ate their enemies, and the Greek historian and traveler Pausanias tells how the Gallatin Celts ate the flesh and drank the blood of children." The Irish Celts also are said to have washed their faces in the blood of the slain, and imbibed in it. They drank the blood of dead relatives, a custom that existed until the 16th century. In the Western Isles the blood brotherhood survived until recent times. All of these cultural traditions seem to indicate a Druidic influence.

Why was such influence so strong and prevalent, it might be asked? Caesar gave two reasons: Druids were omitted from military service and did not have to pay taxes. These appear to be mundane reasons when Caesar also noted some Druids studied as long as twenty years. The Druids, as it had been noted, seemed to possess gifts for learning and art. Their concern for moral philosophy made them skillful judges in rendering rewards and punishments. Their priestly duties also enhanced their judgments, as they knew how to conduct the proper ceremonies to the gods. There were also female Druids because women were important in the Celtic culture.

There were many gods and goddesses Celtic pantheon. The Celtic belief in the gods was known by their personal names that rendered three kinds of information about an individual. This information was the person's "own" name, his identity; his "collective" name (the classics stated that the Celts knew themselves by the name of Keltoi, or Celtae); and his "ancestral" name -- which would, in the early period of these people, indicate which pagan god from which he was descended.

Caesar said that the Gauls "all assert their descent from [Dis Pater](#) and that it is the Druidic belief."

Three other major gods were [Teutates](#), "god of the people," he possessed qualities of both the Roman gods [Mars](#) and [Mercury](#) in that he was not just a god of war, but of healing, fertility and protection, guarding the people against disease and hostility. Though he was guardian of the people he required his victims to be drown in sacred wells or pools,

which figured strongly among the Celts. In such receptacles were often offered expensive weapons and ornaments to the gods.

Esus was not a very popular god, and little wonder, since he required his victims to be hung or stabbed. There are few inscriptions to him; although, he was called lord and master.

[Taranis](#), known as "Thunder," is equal to [Jupiter](#). He was symbolized by the wheel which was either of lightning or a solar symbol, and, less frequently the spiral representing a lightning flash. He required prisoners of war to be burned in wicker cages.

These three gods lead the Celtic large and complex pantheon and played important roles in sacrificial worship ceremonies. Each, it was believed, had given explicit instructions, known to Druid priests, as to how their victims were to be sacrificed. The most notable were the sacrifices offered to Taranis which was the sacrificing of prisoners. Both the Greek biographer, Diodorus Sculus, and geographer, Strabo, described the sacrifice. "They set up a colossus of wood and straw' -- it must have been something like a gigantic basket-like plaited figure -- 'shut cattle, wild animals and human beings in it, and set light to the whole thing.'" This ceremony was usually held at the feast of Beltain and was referred to by Caesar. Fires played an important role at Beltain and Samhain, because of the threat of poor crops and a harsh winter. Diodorus thought the human beings were slain first by a blow to the head. But the writers agreed that the victims, however killed, were not sacrificed so much as a cruelty, but for the sake of religiosity. Others have written that before their deaths the victims were told what to ask the gods for when reaching the Otherworld. This, again, reinforces the Celtic belief in an after life. All agreed the Druids, or "wise men" officiated at these rituals. The Roman Senate by decree outlawed such human sacrifice in 97 BC. It was called a barbaric practice.

Celtic warriors were known to be fierce fighters. Caesar laid this to the fact of their Druidic belief in life after death. This not fearing death made them braver. They were well trained and skilled in warfare, and because of this they acquired the name of headhunters. It was described that Celtic warriors were seen "...with whole wreaths of victims' heads dangling from their bridles."

There is also literature hinting of homosexuality among the warriors. One writer, Diodorus, says Celtic women were not only as tall as the men, but as courageous as well. But despite of their charm the young men paid little attention to them. "They longed instead for the embrace of one of their own sex, lying on animal skins and tumbling around with a lover on either side. It is particularly surprising they attached no value to either dignity or decency, offering their bodies to each other without further ado. This was not regarded as at all harmful; on the contrary, if they were rejected in their approaches, they felt insulted."

Such behavior was regarded to be the result of their training. Celtic children were allowed to play what were called "sex games" so they would be familiar with each other bodies when mating. As soon as young men were old enough to bear arms they lived

solely among men. They trained exclusively with men; therefore, it was thought natural they should form a likeness for each other. It was not hard in such a situation to see how latent homo-eroticism could turn into true homosexuality. Constant companionships developed such bonds as a driver for his passenger, or a spear-carrier for the warrior. Examples of this were "[Achilles](#) loved Patroclus as did Alexander the Great Hephæstion. Wherever there was no taboo, such relationships understandably gave rise to a cult of the male body."

It is also stated that women that bore children were greatly respected and won a high social status. In time of war they were extremely courageous and fought beside of their men. By ancient Druidic law a man was permitted to have two wives.

When thinking of Celtic women the name of [Brighid](#) must be mentioned. There are many legends concerning her, so it is difficult to say whether there was a real woman by such a name owning up to all the things attributed to her, or she was just a Celtic goddess. According to Celtic mythology the Irish Brighid is the equivalent to the Gaulish goddess [Minerva](#). Caesar included Minerva among the major deities of Gaul. Both were patronesses of poetry, learning, healing, and art or craftsmanship.

Later the Christian church made her Saint Brighid, but her pagan past survived. Her feast day is February 1, which directly coincides to Imbolc, the pagan festival for the celebration of spring.

The two goddesses may be thought of as one only by different names according to other writings and legends. Brighid and nineteen nuns guarded a perpetually burning sacred fire surrounded by a hedge within which no male could enter. Minerva's sanctuary in Briton also was supposed to have contained a perpetual burning fire.

There is doubt whether the pagan Brighid and Saint Brighid, or Saint Brigit, were one and the same. Therefore, there is speculation that the Celtic, Irish Brighid was once abbess of a pagan sanctuary, which later became Brighid's monastery near Kildare. It was at such sanctuaries that men and women studied together. There were also sanctuaries or schools for women who became Druid priestesses. This has important historical significance because during the Dark Ages, when the Church was busy hunting heretics, Ireland, being isolated by itself, was left alone. During this time Ireland built great schools and libraries at which students could study. Many of Europe's nobility sent their sons and daughters to study in Ireland during this period. Such institutions date back to Druidic times. The schools for women eventually in Christian times became schools for the sisterhoods or nuns.

Historically the Romans wanted to demolish the military and political strength of the Druids and bring them under the control of the Empire. This was pretty well accomplished by the beginning of the second century AD. The Romans, though, were not too concerned about Druidism itself during their earlier conflicts with the Celts because Druidism and the Roman religion were both polytheistic therefore they coexisted

together. Even though the Druids lost much of their power Druidism still lingered on. The ancient and emotional beliefs of a culture were hard to destroy.

Such was seen when Christianity became the official religion of Rome. Christianity was monotheistic, and most of the Emperors soon saw themselves as godheads. There was to be no questioning of their rule or religion, if there was, it amounted to treason. Soon on the surface, especially in Briton and the Western Isles, the pagan religion seemed to die and enter the Roman temples or churches. But like other pagan religions Druidism did not completely die within its practitioners, they just observed and hid their old and sacred beliefs while observing Christianity as well.

It seems that the Celtic Druidism lingered on into the twentieth century although there was evidence of it in the centuries before. An informant of Dr. Anne Ross, a native of Perthshire, took her to the sacred square where the rites, described by Minister James Robertson of the same area, were performed. The informant remembered witnessing the rituals as a young girl before the First World War. In her description a bonfire was lit, the oatmeal pancake was made with much care. There was the darkened area "...resembling the mark of a huge thumb' appeared." The cake was then sliced into pieces and placed in a bag. Onlookers drew pieces out of the bag. The person drawing the charred slice had to jump through the fires, and was then driven from the area with shouts and jeers. "He was a kind of scapegoat,' the informant said, 'but in the old days, he or she would have been sacrificed.'"

Dr. Ross was told a similar story in Derbyshire in 1977, when she witnessed the lighting of the Beltain fires on May Eve under the pretext of burning rubbish.

Traces of Druidism have been discovered throughout the centuries. There has been much romanticizing about the Druids. In the 17th century John Aubrey alleged the Druids constructed [Stonehenge](#), a theory that is thought to be inaccurate. However in the 18th century William Stukeley endorsed Aubrey's views and became the first "Arch Druid" and the founder of modern Druidism. Since then there have been formations and splitting-ups of Druidic Orders.

The Druids may not have built Stonehenge but it has been significant in their history. There is speculation that the Druids met near Stonehenge. A half mile south of it is Normanton Down, Wiltshire, one of the finest barrow cemeteries in Britain. It will be remembered the Druids met at burial sites. Other aspects of Stonehenge suggest the Druids may have used it to construct their Coligny or Bush Barrow calendar; therefore, it is supposed they would not have used it as a burial ground or met there.

The Bush Barrow calendar ties in with the Bush Barrow excavation of 1808. A man of considerable height and social status was discovered under the mound eleven feet high. He was obviously a king or chieftain. Sewn on the breast of his garment was a lozenge-shaped breastplate, with an engraved surface. The inscriptions indicate his possible burial was 1900 BC.

Before 1915 Stonehenge was privately owned and modern Druids met there. With the over turning of a stone in 1900 fees began to be charged. In 1915 the owner Cecil Chubb turned it over to the government. For this the Druids ritually cursed him, but continued meeting there until 1988, when spectators that their meetings attracted stopped their meetings because of the vandalism.

The modern North American Druids have no connection with the ancient or modern British Druids. The first group or grove, the Reformed Druids of North America (RDNA), was formed in 1963, at Carleton College, in Northfield, Minnesota, to protest the school's mandatory student attendance of religious services. When the requirement was dropped the "grove" continued not so much as a religious group but a philosophical one. Rituals were based on discovered anthropological materials including a non-bloody sacrifice. This group is no longer an active organization but has independent groves scattered throughout the country.

Several groves split off to form a separate branch, this being called the New Reformed Druids of North America (NRDNA), which emphasized neo-Pagan religion. One such grove was in Berkeley, California, led by Archdruid [P. E. I\(ssac\) Bonewits](#) during the 1970s. In 1983 he formed his own organization, [AR NDRAfOCHT FEIN](#) (Irish Gaelic for "Our Own Druidism"), which had about 400 members in 1988.

Some have said the spirit of ancient Druidism is dead. Others call them headhunters in a derogatory sense. But, the importance of ancient Druidism seems to be that it was the one thing yhat held the Celtic people together, and these people and their ancestors eventually civilized a major part of Europe, Ireland, Briton, and the British Isles. For this they and their customs, though some were crude, deserve respect and understanding.

Several of the details within this article were attained from previously reading two novels by Morgan Llywelyn, "Bard," and "Druids." This writer is grateful and recommends these books and others by this author to those interested in reading about the lives of the Druids. *A.G.H.*