

Celtic Druidism

History:

Modern Druidism is one of the Neopagan family of religions, which includes Wicca and recreations of Egyptian, Greek, Norse, Roman and other ancient Pagan religions. Druidism is a reconstruction of the beliefs and practices of the ancient Celtic priesthood-professional class. The ancient Druids performed the functions of modern day priests, teachers, ambassadors, astronomers, genealogists, musicians, theologians, poets and judges; they also were specialists in healing and divination. They underwent lengthy training: some sources say 20 years. Druids led all public rituals, which were normally held within fenced groves of sacred trees. Most leaders mentioned in the surviving records were male. It is not known whether female Druids were considered equal to their male counterparts, or whether they were restricted to special responsibilities. References to women exercising religious power might have been deleted from the record by Christian monks during the Celtic Christian era.

Druidism and other Neopagan religions are currently experiencing a rapid growth. Many people are attempting to rediscover their roots, their ancestral heritage. For many people in North America, their ancestors can be traced back to Celtic countries.

Many academics believe that the ancestors of the Celts were the Proto-Indo European culture who lived near the Black Sea circa 4000 BCE. Some migrated in a South-Westerly direction to create the cultures of Thrace and Greece; others moved North-West to form the Baltic, Celtic, Germanic and Slavic cultures. Evidence of a Proto-Celtic Unetice or Urnfield culture has been found in what is now Slovakia circa 1000 BCE. This evolved into a group of loosely linked tribes which formed the Celtic culture circa 800 BCE. By 450 BCE they had expanded into Spain; by 400 BCE they were in Northern Italy, and by 270 BCE, they had migrated into Galatia (central Turkey). By 200 BCE, they had occupied the British Isles, Brittany, much of modern France, Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland, North West Spain, and their isolated Galatia settlement in Turkey.

Although the Celts had a written language, it was rarely used. Their religious and philosophical beliefs were preserved in an oral tradition. Little of their early history remains. Most of our information comes from Greek and Roman writers, who may well have been heavily biased (the Celts invaded Rome in 390 BCE and Greece in 279 BCE). Other data comes from the codification (and modification) of Celtic myth cycles by Christian monks. The latter included the Ulster Cycle, the Fenian Cycle, the Cycle of Kings, the Invasion Races Cycle from Ireland, and The Mabinogion from Wales. Unfortunately, much Celtic history and religion has been lost or distorted by an overlay of Christianity.

After the invasions by Rome, the Druids were converted to Christianity, through persuasion or genocide. The descendants of the Druids maintained Christian and ancient Roman and Greek knowledge intact while the rest of Europe descended into the Dark Ages. The Christian Church adsorbed much of Celtic religion: Pagan Gods and Goddesses became Christian saints; sacred springs and wells were preserved and associated with saints; many temple sites became the location of cathedrals. By the 7th Century CE, Druidism itself was destroyed or continued deeply underground throughout most of the formerly Celtic lands. There is some evidence that Pagan religion did survive in isolated areas of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into the 20th Century.

Myths about Druids

Ritual Killing: Many historians believed that the ancient Druids performed human sacrifices. All of these references can be traced back to the writings of one individual, Julius Caesar. He may well have been prejudiced against the Celts because of their continual warfare with the Romans. In war, the enemy is routinely demonized. Some remains of executions have been found in the archeological record, but it is not obvious whether the victims were killed during religious rituals or to carry out the sentence of a court. There is one reference to human sacrifice in Celtic literature, but it appears to be a Christian forgery. The ancient Celts might have engaged in ritual killing; certainly other contemporary societies did. Modern Druids, of course, do not.

Stonehenge, etc.: Many people believe that the Druids constructed Stonehenge, the complex of standing stones in South Central England. Stonehenge I ("Old Stonehenge"), which was composed of the 56 "Aubrey" holes, was constructed circa 3500 BCE. The current formation was completed circa 1500 BCE. This was almost a millennium before the start of Celtic civilization. It can be safely concluded that the Druids did not construct Stonehenge. However, they may well have performed rituals there, and understood its astronomical meanings and uses. But Celtic sacred spaces were normally associated with groves and streams; Stonehenge is in the middle of a plain.

In Ireland and Great Britain, there are many ancient "Druid" altars, beds, rings, stones, stone circles and temples. However, radio-carbon analyses assign dates such as 1380 BCE (Wilsford Shaft) to 3330 BCE (Hembury). Again, ancient Druids may have used these megalithic monuments, but they did not build them. Ireland now has countless wells and springs dedicated to the Christian Saint Bridget. She was obviously descended from the Celtic Goddess Brigid/Brigit. "Finding the cult of Brigit impossible to eradicate, the Catholic church rather unwisely canonized her as a saint, calling her Bridget or Bride." 1 The sacred ownership of the various Pagan holy sites were simply translated from Goddess Brigid to St. Bridget after the area was Christianized.

Celtic God Samhain: This non-existent God is often mentioned at Halloween time. He is supposed to be the Celtic God of the Dead. No such God existed. Samhain is, in reality, the name of a Druidic fire festival. It can be loosely translated as "end of the warm season".

Monotheistic Druids: Some writers have promoted the concept that Druids were basically monotheistic, following a sort of pre-Christian belief system. There is essentially no evidence of this. Druids worshipped a pantheon of Gods and Goddesses.

Beliefs and Practices:

Beliefs and practices of the ancient Celts are being pieced together by modern Druids. Because so much information has been lost, this is not an easy task. Some findings are:

Goddesses and Gods: The Celts did not form a single religious or political unity. They were organized into tribes spread across what is now several countries. As a result, of the 374 Celtic deities which have been found, over 300 occur only once in the archeological record; they are believed to be local deities. There is some evidence that their main pantheon of Gods and Goddesses might have totaled about 3 dozen - perhaps precisely 33 (a frequently occurring magical number in Celtic literature). Some of the more famous are: Arawn, Brigid, Cernunnos, Cerridwen, Danu, Herne, Lugh, Rhiannon and Taranis. Many Celtic deities were worshipped in triune (triple aspect) form. Triple Goddesses were often sisters.

Afterlife: The dead were transported to the Otherworld by the God Bile (AKA Bel, Belenus). Life continued in this location much as it had before death. The Druids believed that the soul was immortal. After the person died in the Otherworld, their soul lives again in another human body. At every birth, the Celts mourned the death of a person in the Otherworld which made the new birth possible.

Creation Myth: No Druidic creation story appears to have survived, although there are numerous accounts of the supernatural creation of islands, mountains, etc.

Baptism: There is some evidence that the Celts had a baptism initiation ceremony similar to those found in Buddhist, Christian, Essene, Hindu, Islamic, and Jainist sacred texts. Other researchers dismiss baptism as a forgery by Christian scribes as they transferred Celtic material to written form.

Divination: Druids used many techniques to foretell the future: meditation, study of the flight of birds, interpreting dreams, and interpreting the pattern of sticks thrown to the ground.

Awen symbol: This is a symbol drawn in the form of three pillars, in which the outer two are sloped towards the center pillar, as in /|. The symbol has been in use since the 17th century; it recalls the Druidic

fascination with the number three.

Triskele symbol: This is an ancient Druidic symbol consisting of three curved branches, bent legs or arms radiating from the center of the symbol. The flag of the Isle of Man contains a triskele.

Seasonal Days of Celebration

Druids, past and present, celebrate a series of fire-festivals, on the first of each of four months. Each would start at sunset and last for three days. Great bonfires would be built on the hilltops. Cattle would be driven between two bonfires to assure their fertility; couples would jump over a bonfire or run between two bonfires as well. The festivals are:

Samhain (or Samhuinn) Literally the "end of warm season". November 1 marked the combined Feast of the Dead and New Year's Day for the Celtic calendar. It is a time when the veil between our reality and that of the Otherworld is most easily penetrated. This fire festival was later adopted by the Christians as All Soul's Eve, and later became the secular holiday Halloween.

Imbolc (or Brighid) Literally "in the belly". February 1 marked The Return of Light. This is the date when the first stirrings of life were noticeable and when the land might first be plowable. This has been secularized as Groundhog Day.

Beltaine (or Bealteinne). May 1 was the celebration of The Fires of Bel. This was the peak of blossom season, when domesticated animals bear their young. This is still celebrated today as May Day. Youths dance around the May pole in what is obviously a reconstruction of an earlier fertility ritual.

Lughnasad (or Lughnasadh, Lammas). August 1 was The Feast of Lugh, named after the God of Light. A time for celebration and the harvest.

There were occasional references in ancient literature to:

the winter solstice, typically December 21, when the night is longest
the spring equinox, typically March 21, when the day and night are equal
the summer solstice, typically June 21, when the night is shortest
the fall equinox, typically September 21, when the day and night are equal.
However, these do not appear to be major seasonal days of celebration for the ancient Druids.

Modern Druidic Movements

Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD): There are two beliefs concerning the development of this group. One traces their origin to the Ancient Order of Druids (AOD) by Henry Hurle in England in 1781. This group repeatedly split due to internal dissension into many separate organizations. By 1918, there were five groups attempting to perform solstice ceremonies at Stonehenge; all were breakaway groups from the original Ancient Order of Druids. By 1955, all had disappeared except for the British Circle of Universal Bond which subsequently split in 1963 to form the OBOD. The other lineage is claimed by the OBOD who trace their ancestry back through the AOD to a group founded in England in 1717 by John Toland. He is said to have combined local groups of Druids (called groves) from a 10 locations into the Mother Grove. The OBOD's current address is: PO Box 1333, Lewes, East Sussex, England, BN7 3ZG. Email address: office@obod.co.uk

The Reformed Druids of North America: This movement started as a type of undergraduate prank at a midwestern U.S. college (Carleton College at Northfield, MN) in 1963. (One source says 1957). The administration had required that all students to attend church. Some students invented the RDNA as a reaction to this rule. The leaders were amazed when many of the students wanted to continue the RDNA, even after the protest against the administration had been won. From this source, a number of Neopagan

Druidic movements have split off, including:

Ar nDraiocht Fein: (ADF) This can be loosely translated as "our own Druidism". Their name is pronounced "arn ree-ocht fane". It was founded by Isaac Bonewits who is currently the Archdruid Emeritus. The ADF emphasizes scholarly research, and " a blend of ancient practices and modern realities". His motto is "paganize mainstream religion by mainstreaming paganism". Their goal is to recreate a Pan-European Druidism, involving elements from Baltic, Celtic, Germanic Slavic and even pre-classical Greek and Roman beliefs. The ADF publishes a quarterly ADF journal, a bimonthly News from the Mother Grove, and a semi-yearly Druid's Progress. Their address is: PO Box 516, East Syracuse, NY 13057-0516. Email address: kithoward@delphi.com

The Henge of Keltria: Five ADF members compiled a list of 13 concerns about the ADF at the Pagan Spirit Gathering in 1986, Emulating the actions of Martin Luther, they attached the list to the door of Isaac Bonewits' van in 1986 . Fortunately for Isaac, they used tape in place of the nails that Martin Luther used. Keltria has focused on ancient Celtic religion and holds only non-public rituals. They published a journal: Keltria: A Journal of Druidism and Celtic Magick" from 1986 to 1998.

Book References:

1. Douglas Monroe, The 21 Lessons of Merlyn, Llewellyn Publications, (1992). You can read reviews and/or order this book from Amazon.com online bookstore
2. P.B. Ellis, The Druids, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI (1994) Review/order this book
3. E.E. Hopman, The Druid's Herbal For The Sacred Earth Year,É Destiny Books, Rochester, VT, (1995) Review/order this book
4. C. Chippindale, Stonehenge Complete, Thames & Hudson, New York (1994) Review/order this book
5. P. Carr-Gomm, The Druid Tradition, Element, Rockport MA (1991) Review/order this book
6. J. Bonwick, Irish Druids and Old Irish Religions, Dorsett Press (1986) Out of print, but may be obtainable
7. R. Nichols, The Book of Druidry, Aquarium, London (1975) Review/order this book
8. B. Raftery, Pagan Celtic Ireland: The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age, Thames & Hudson, New York (1994) Review/order this book
9. B.G. Walker, "The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets," Harper & Roe, (1983), P. 116 to 118.

Internet References

CATHBAD has prepared an information sheet: The Solitary Practitioner's Basic Druidism FAQ at: <http://www.uoguelph.ca/~bmyers/druid.html>
The Ar nDraiocht Fein has a lengthy home page at: <http://www.adf.org>
The IMBAS page is devoted to Celtic Reconstructionist Paganism . "IMBAS" (pronounced "imvuhss") is a Celtic word meaning "great wisdom" or "inspiration". See <http://morrigan.alabanza.com/imbas/>
The Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids is a well established Druidic group in the UK. See: <http://druidry.org>
The Blackthorn Grove has a web page devoted to Druidism and all other Pagan paths. See: <http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/1669>
Trefn Gwyddoniad is a Druidic group following a Welsh ritual structure who trace their presence in the US back to 1792. See: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/5724/contents.html>
Ellen Hopman, "The Origins of Keltria," at: <http://neopagan.net/OriginsKeltria.HTML>
The Henge of Keltria web site is at: <http://www.keltria.org/keltria/>