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What Is A Druid, Anyway?

Author: Ellen Evert Hopman**Posted:** October 3rd, 2004**Times Viewed:** 10,349

There are many different Druid Orders and as is the case with most Pagan groupings, no two Druids will see things in exactly the same way.

To further confuse matters there is a different focus and feel to American Druid Orders and English ones. I can only speak for myself, as an American Druid of the **Order of the Whiteoak** (Ord Na Darach Gile).

History:

*"Gaine daughter of pure Gumor,
nurse of mead-loving Mide,
surpassed all women though she was silent
she was learned and a seer and a chief Druid."*

(From *The Metrical Dindsenchas*, Gwynn translation, 1903)

There is plenty of evidence that women as well as men were Druids in ancient times. Druids presided at divinations and sacrifices and praised the Gods, but the primary task of all grades of Druids was to follow an intellectual path.

The Druids were the learned class of the ancient Celts, analogous to the Brahmins of India.

Both Hindu and Celtic culture are derived from the same proto-Indo-European roots. The caste system of the Hindus and the caste system of the Celts were essentially the same; both were fluid, that is one could move up or down the social ladder depending on skill and learning (it was only in the 10th century that Hinduism "froze" its caste system - a reaction to invaders from outside).

The Druid was analogous to the Brahmin, the warrior to the Kshatria. There were the producer class of farmers and craftsmen and finally the slaves who were analogous to the Hindu untouchables. Among Druids there were specialists; it seems unlikely that every Druid was mistress of every Druidical function. Druids did not commit their knowledge to writing; important facts were memorized and passed down orally.

A Druid could be a Sencha, or historian for the tribe. They could be a Brehon, in which case they would have memorized volumes of Brehon Law making them eligible to be a lawyer, a judge, or an ambassador. A Druid could also be a Scelaige, or keeper of myths and epics. These myths were recited at important occasions like weddings and births, at the onset of a major journey or a battle.

The Cainte was a master of magical chants, invocations and curses. They could banish or bless with a song. The Cruitiire was a harpist who knew the magical uses of music; she was mistress of the "three kinds of music:" laughing music (the sound of young men at play), crying music (the sound of a woman in the travails of childbirth), and sleeping music (the sound of which would put a person to sleep).

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 Earthwise Wicca
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 Hellenism (Hellenic Ethnic Tradition)
 The Holy Order Of Triformis
 Keltrian Druidism
 Living Tapestry Tradition
 Mahlorian Green Craft
 Mikkyo - A Japanese Esoteric Tradition
 The Minoan Tradition

The Druid might be a Liaig, a doctor who used surgery, herbs and magic to heal, or a Deoghbaire, a cupbearer who knew the properties of intoxicating and hallucinogenic substances.

Further specialties included the Faith, or diviner, the Bard, who was a popular poet and singer, and the highest grade of Druid, the Fili, a sacred poet and diviner whose words were prophetic.

Like Sorcerers, Druids performed feats of magic in the service of the king or queen and in the service of the tribe.

"Then Mogh Roith said to Ceann Mor: 'Bring me my poison-stone, my hand-stone, my hundred-fighter, my destruction of my enemies.'

This was brought to him and he began to praise it, and he proceeded to put a venomous spell on it..."

(Forbhais Droma Damhghaire, Sean O'Duinn translation)

Druids were the teachers of the sons and daughters of the nobility. It was their task to hand down from generation to generation the knowledge of sacred animals, trees, plants, stones and all the details of the landscape, its history and how each feature got its name, as well as the tribal laws and precedents.

In contrast to village Cunningmen and Wisewomen (Witches), who were counselors, midwives, magicians, herbalists, and veterinarians for their community, the Druids advised and worked closely with the nobility. A king or queen was a person from the warrior class who had spent their entire life learning the arts of defense and war, who was then elevated to the "Nemed" or sacred class by means of an elaborate ritual.

Druids were hereditary members of the Nemed class who had spent their lives learning the laws. A king or queen had to have a Druid advisor by their side at all times so that they could rule according to precedent. The stories of Arthur and Merlin are a good illustration of this relationship.

The justice of the king was so important that it would determine whether strong and good-looking children would be born to the people and if the weather, crops and animals would prosper.

There is evidence that the Druids supervised at human sacrifices. However, there is no evidence of the type of wholesale immolation in wicker cages reported by Julius Caesar. It is well to remember that Caesar was attempting to paint the Druids in a lurid light in order to get funding from Rome to continue his military campaigns and further his personal political ambitions. It seems likely that prisoners of war and criminals were dispatched in much the same way as we do it today, after judgment and sentencing.

The Druids were persecuted by the Romans and killed off in many Celtic areas.

However, the Romans never got to the extreme north of Caledonia (Scotland) nor did they invade Ireland. As a result Druids and their teachings persisted for many centuries. The Bards were able to continue to disseminate Druid teachings via story and song.

Who the Druids Were Not:

The Druids were not priests and priestesses of Atlantis, nor were they a lost tribe of Israel. Early English historians could not imagine that groups such as the Irish (whom they considered to be backward and inferior) could possibly have produced such a class of noble intellectuals and clergy.

The Druids did not build Stonehenge or the magnificent cairns of the Boyne Valley; Knowth, Dowth and Newgrange, which were built by pre-Indo-European, Bronze Age peoples. However, it is quite likely that the Druids used those monuments. In the case of the Irish structures, there is plenty of mythological evidence that the Iron Age Celts and their Druids revered these sites as sacred.

The Druids were not proto-Christians. They had their own system of ethics and deities that pre-dated Christianity.

Core Beliefs:

All of which brings us to the difficult question of what it means to be a Druid in the new millennium.

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Muhysqa
Reconstructionism
(Indigenous American)

The New England
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The Thelema Tradition
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Tradição Ibérica

Traditional British
Druidry

Uniterran Paganism

All modern Druids attempt to honor Celtic tradition. They also understand that there is no fully intact tradition of Druidism that stretches back to ancient times and that of necessity every Druid Order must create its own ritual form.

Some are happy to include recent speculations, such as the poetry of Robert Graves (inventor of the Celtic Tree Calendar) and others try to stick to more rigorously researched, scholastically verifiable sources.

It is more common to find practicing Christians among the English Orders. American Druid Orders, such as Whiteoak, Keltria, and ADF, place a larger emphasis on Pagan Celtic scholarship, seeing themselves as lore keepers for Pagan Celtic cultural, religion and magical tradition.

Irish Druidism is often concerned with the Forest Druid tradition, seeking to keep alive the ancient woods lore of the forest dwellers of the Elizabethan era and earlier.

As in the past, modern Druids tend to be intellectually curious, reading voraciously on subjects such as Celtic tribal law, history, philosophy, poetry, magic, religion, mythology, spirituality, traditional healing methods, music, archaeology and astronomy. They use these studies to create ceremonies that honor the Earth and the Celtic pantheon of Gods.

The Druids are not a male priesthood. There are a few popular authors and at least one old English Order that try to perpetuate that idea, but they are in the minority and do not represent the majority of Druids today. Druids are not among those who seek to exploit or ignore the Earth in Her time of need. They recognize that nature hangs in a delicate balance and that all life must be tended with care.

Druids do not ignore the needs of the people. As in ancient times they care for the welfare of the people, giving comfort in times of sickness and death, rejoicing in each other's life passages and achievements, and seeking to advise, as best they can, the secular leaders of their towns, states and nations. They donate time and money to religious, cultural and humanitarian projects that capture their imaginations.

In short, Druidism is not a solitary path. The Druid is not isolated from her spiritual community, her town, her city, her nation or the world.

Ways of Worship:

Druids love nature and seek to know the land they live on intimately, observing seasonal and astronomical changes and animal behaviors as timing for festivals and as portents for the future.

Druids honor rivers, trees, mountains, green herbs, rocks, animals and every living thing. The Whiteoak Druids, for example, take an oath to protect "the Earth and Her creatures," making offerings to trees, stones, and to the local River Goddess of the Druid's bioregion. Druids place an emphasis on praising the Gods and less of an emphasis on magic, using song, poetry, and crafts to express their love and kinship with their chosen deities. Druids make offerings to fire and water as a regular part of their rituals, in keeping with ancient Indo-European tradition.

Celtic Reconstructionist Druids, in keeping with tradition, work with the Three Worlds (Land, Sea and Sky) more than the Four Directions. Druids invoke and thank the ancestors, the Nature Spirits and the Gods in their rites. Druids are true polytheists, understanding each deity as a distinct individual with His or Her unique likes, dislikes, and spheres of influence. Among Druids it is considered somewhat rude to bring deities from different religions and cultures together in the same circle and every effort is made to work within genuine Celtic pantheons.

A Witch's circle is a closed space, designed to hold and contain energy to build it into a "cone of power." A Druid circle is a permeable affair; persons may walk in and out at will. Since part of the energy raising involves inviting the Nature Spirits to participate, Druids feel that there is no point in walling off the circle. Druid ceremonies are most often performed out of doors, ideally in the presence of living water, a fire, and a tree (or a pole or staff substitute).

Modern Druids do not practice animal or human sacrifice, regarding hard work and artistic achievements as adequate offerings.

The major festivals of the Druids are: Samhain, the ritual end of the harvest season and great festival to honor the dead; Imbolc, a festival especially dedicated to the Goddess Brigid; Beltaine, the beginning of Summer and Lughnasad, the start of the harvest season and a festival dedicated to Lugh and His foster mother. These festivals are known as "Fire Festivals."

Many Druids also celebrate the Equinoxes and Solstices and some meet at the full or new moons.

Or Uniterranism

What Is A Druid,
Anyway?

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FOR this section.

Reading and Other References:

For a list of links to the major Druid Orders, book lists and service projects please see:

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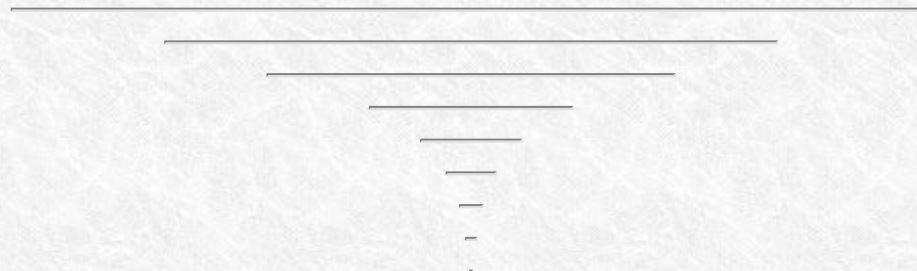
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