

Title: Conversations

Subtitle: Druidism

Second Subtitle: Druidism

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Quote:

"Druidry is not a religion. It's a philosophy and you can worship a God or not. You can be a Christian or a Moslem or anything else and still be a Druid. I say God made that tree, a Druid will say the energy of a creative force is in the tree." North-East UK Druid.

History:

Modern Druidism is one of the Neopagan family of religions, which includes Egyptian, Greek, Norse, Roman and other ancient Pagan religions. Some attempt to reconstruct of the beliefs and practices of ancient Druidism. Others of Druidism work directly with the spirits of place, of the gods and of the elements of Druidism.

Within ancient Druidism, there were three specialties. "A general category of grades accords the arts to the bards, the skills of prophecy and divination to the Ovates, philosophical, teaching, counselling and judicial tasks to the Druid." 1

The Bards were "the keepers of tradition, of the memory of the tribe - the sacredness of the Word." In Ireland, they trained for 12 years learning stories, poems, philosophy, the Ogham tree-alphabet.

The Ovates worked with the processes of death and regeneration. They were the Celts. They specialized in divination, conversing with the ancestors, the dead.

The Druids and Druidesses formed the professional class in Celtic societies. They performed functions of modern day priests, teachers, ambassadors, astronomers, geomancers, musicians, theologians, scientists, poets and judges. They underwent lengthy training, say 20 years. Druids led all public rituals, which were normally held with the Druids in trees. In their role as priests, "they acted not as mediators between God and man, but as ritual, as shamans guiding and containing the rites." Most leaders mentioned were male. It is not known whether female Druids were considered equal to men or whether they were restricted to special responsibilities. References to Druidic power might have been deleted from the record by Christian monks during the Middle Ages.

Since ancient Druidism was an oral tradition, they did not have a set of scriptures and other "religions of the book." 2 "Some Druidic "teachings survived in Ireland and Scotland which remained active until the 17th century, in medieval oral tradition, folk lore and ritual." 3

Druidism and other Neopagan religions are currently experiencing a rapid resurgence. Many, attempting to rediscover their roots, their ancestral heritage. For many practitioners, their ancestors can be traced back to Celtic/Druidic countries.

Most modern Druids connect the origin of their religion to the ancient Celts. However, historical data is scarce. The Druids may well have been active in Britain and Western Europe before the advent of the Celts.

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

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

The Christian Church absorbed much of Celtic religion: many Pagan Gods became Christian saints; sacred springs and wells were preserved and associated with saints; temple sites became the location of cathedrals. By the 7th Century CE, Druidism was or continued deeply underground throughout most of the formerly Celtic lands. There is evidence that Pagan religions did survive in isolated areas of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania until the 20th Century.

Myths about Druids

Ritual Killing: Many historians believed that the ancient Druids performed ritual killings. These references can be traced back to the writings of one individual, Julius Caesar. He has been prejudiced against the Celts because of their continual warfare. The enemy is routinely demonized. Some remains of executions have been found in the record, but it is not obvious whether the victims were killed during religious rituals or the sentence of a court. There is one reference to human sacrifice in Celtic mythology, which is a Christian forgery. The ancient Celts might have engaged in ritual killing, but it is not clear if contemporary societies did. Modern Druids, of course, do not.

Stonehenge, Avebury, etc.: Many people believe that the Druids constructed Stonehenge, a complex of standing stones in South Central England. Stonehenge I ("Old Stonehenge") composed of the 56 "Aubrey" holes, was constructed circa 3500 BCE. The current Stonehenge was completed circa 1500 BCE. This was almost a millennium before the start of the Iron Age.

Druids may have preceded the Celts in England. Thus, either the Druids have been responsible for the finishing of Stonehenge and other monuments, or proof that they were or were not involved. Even if they did not actually construct them, they may well have performed rituals there, and understood its astronomical alignments. In Ireland and Great Britain, there are many ancient "Druid" altars, beds, and temples. However, radio-carbon analyses assign dates such as 1380-1330 BCE (Hembury). Again, ancient Druids may have used these megaliths, but not necessarily build them.

Ireland now has countless wells and springs dedicated to the Christian Saint Brigid, obviously descended from the Celtic Goddess Brigid/Brigit. "Finding the Celtic roots of the Catholic church rather unwisely canonized her as a saint, the sacred ownership of the various Pagan holy sites were simply transferred to St. Bridget after the area was Christianized.

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

Monotheistic Druids: Some writers have promoted the concept that Druids were monotheistic, following a sort of pre-Christian belief system. There is evidence that Druids worshipped a pantheon of Gods and Goddesses.

Beliefs and Practices:

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

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

Afterlife: The dead were transported to the Otherworld by the God Bile. The dead continued in this location much as it had before death. The Druids believed in reincarnation. After the person died in the Otherworld, their soul lives again in a new body at every birth, the Celts mourned the death of a person in the Otherworld was possible.

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

Baptism: There is some evidence that the Celts had a baptism initiation ceremony. However, found in Buddhist, Christian, Essene, Hindu, Islamic, and Jainist sacred texts, dismiss baptism as a forgery by Christian scribes as they transferred Celtic beliefs to Christianity.

Moral code: Druids do not follow the Wiccan Rede which states (in modern terms) "do what thou wilt, as long as it harms nobody". The closest analogy are the Celtic virtues of hospitality, honesty, justice and courage. "Daven" briefly describes the Veneration of the Earth.

"Briefly stated the virtue of Honor requires one to adhere to their oaths; it will ultimately hurt others or oneself in the process. A Druid is obligated to family and leaders thus exhibiting the virtue of Loyalty. Hospitality demands a host when guests are under one's roof. Honesty insists that one tell the truth, nothing but the truth to yourself, your gods and your people. Justice demands that everyone has an inherent worth and that an assault to that worth demands reparation or another. Courage for the Druid does not always wear a public face; it is the standing-strong-in-the-face-of-adversity, alone or with companions. Some Druids have a daily routine when pain has worn one down without complaint.

Divination: Druids used many techniques to foretell the future: meditation, 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 one stands facing towards the center pillar, as in /|. Sometimes, one or three dots are added to the top of the pillars. This symbol has been in use since the 17th century; it recalls the Druidic fast of three days. "Awen" means inspiration in Middle Welsh.

Triskele symbol: This is an ancient Druidic symbol consisting of three curved arms radiating from the center of the symbol. The flag of the Isle of Man is based on this symbol.

Seasonal Days of Celebration:

Druids, past and present, celebrate a series of fire-festivals, on the first of which would start at sunset and last for three days. Great bonfires would be built, and people would be driven between two bonfires to assure their fertility; couples would run between two bonfires as well. The festivals are:

Samhain (or Samhuinn) Literally the "end of warm season". November 1 is the Feast of the Dead and New Year's Day for the Celtic calendar. It is a time when the veil between this reality and that of the Otherworld is most easily penetrated. This fire festival was adopted by 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 the Sun, when the first stirrings of life were noticeable and when the land might be expected to begin to grow. It has been secularized as Groundhog Day.

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

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