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Druids: A Very Short Introduction

DRUIDS

A Very Short Introduction

Barry Cunliffe

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Preface

The Druids have been a subject of fascination since first they were encountered by Classical writers perhaps as early as the 4th century BC. The Renaissance brought those Classical descriptions to the attention of scholars, and in doing so unleashed a flood of books devoted to druidism – a flood that shows no sign of abating and to which this present essay is a small contribution.

Each generation interprets the Druids according to their own perspectives and prejudices, and therein lies one of the fascinations of the subject. What I have attempted to do here is quite simple. First, I distinguish the literary evidence from the detail of archaeology and present them separately to prevent the comfortable circularity of argument that has sometimes intruded upon the discussion, and secondly I have tried to deconstruct the narratives so that each set of sources can be seen in the contexts in which they were written. In this way, I hope, it will be possible to understand the dynamics of the subject. Over the 800 years or so from c. 400 BC to AD 400, the Druid caste changed dramatically, as did the society of which they were a part. The last 500 years has seen our vision of them change equally as rapidly. The fascination of the subject lies in teasing out these threads in an attempt to understand the transforming power of time.

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Chapter 1

The Druids in time and space

Every midsummer solstice hundreds of ‘Druids’ flock to Stonehenge in the middle of Salisbury Plain to celebrate the midsummer sunrise. For them, and indeed for the many others who visit just to enjoy the occasion, it is a moment to feel the timelessness of being – it gives the reassurance of stability in a frightening, ever-changing world and the sense of being part of a community whose roots go deep into prehistory. It is a place to contemplate the profound rhythms of time. Perhaps it has always been thus.

More recently, those who regard themselves to be Druids have extended their claim to the past. One group has stated its belief that the bones of a young woman, buried near Avebury some 4,000 years ago, are those of a tribal ancestor and has demanded that they should be returned to them for burial. Even the more moderate Council of British Druid Orders (COBDO) states that: ‘It is the policy of the Council of British Druid Orders that the sacred remains of our brothers and sisters should be returned to the living landscape from which they were taken.’

To most archaeologists and scientists this is a nonsense. The debris of the past, be it flint tools, potsherds, or human skeletons, is valuable, indeed unique, evidence that can be made to tell a story of our prehistory and should be curated for future generations to continue to study using new techniques as they become available. Many would argue that the modern Druids are a complete reinvention with no legitimacy – a confection dreamed up by fertile imaginations to gratify personal needs. At best, they are an eccentricity to be tolerated; at worst, a threat to rationality to be challenged.

The Druids have been written and talked about probably since well before 300 BC. Each generation has taken a view and through the vagaries of time scraps of these opinions have come down to us, allowing the fascination of picking through the morass of observations, polemics, distortions, and wishful thinkings, in the hope of arriving at a narrative of druidism as objective as the data will allow. The texts mentioning Druids are drawn from wide tracts

of territory over long spans of time. To stitch together a mention in a Classical Greek source with a Welsh Tudor document in order to create a vision of ‘the Druid’ is an obvious nonsense – discontinuity and change caused by time and space must be taken into account.

Standing back from the detail – with which we will engage later – the documentary evidence available to us can be divided into three broad clusters. First, there are the observations made by Greeks and Romans, and selectively repeated in later texts. The earliest of these may date to the 4th century BC, the latest to the 7th century AD. What survives is only a tiny fragment of what must originally have been written. Then we have the vivid tales and myths of the Irish and Welsh vernacular literature – essentially a deeply rooted oral tradition that was eventually committed to written text between the 8th and 11th centuries AD by Christian clerics. Oral traditions change over time with the telling, and Christian scribes were not averse to editing and interpolation. Finally, after a period of silence, comes the rediscovery of the past as Classical texts are identified in monastic libraries and published, and the search begins for national origins. By the 17th century, Druids are frequently mentioned, and in the 18th century the notion of the ancient priesthood, intermixed with myths about the Celts, is avidly romanticized as the process of reinvention gets under way. Since our concern in this book is with the real Druids, we will necessarily concentrate on the Classical and vernacular sources. The reinvented Druids, created Frankenstein-like from a few scraps of real data and a great deal of imagination, fascinating though they are as a phenomenon reflecting human needs and susceptibilities, will be touched on rather more briefly in the concluding chapters.

So who were the Druids? The Classical texts ascribe to them a formidable variety of functions: they were philosophers, teachers, judges, the repository of communal wisdoms about the natural world and the traditions of the people, and the mediators between humans and the gods. According to Julius Caesar, ‘The Druids are in charge of religion. They have control over public and private sacrifices and give rulings on all religious questions’ (*BG* VI.13). Yet, curiously, they are never referred to directly as priests (*sacerdos*). In later texts and the vernacular literature, they appear more as mystics and magicians. Given the range of attributes, it is probably best to regard them as a caste of intellectuals. Caesar’s famous generalization, that in Gaul there are only two classes of men who are of any account or importance – the Druids and the Knights – puts them on a par with the tribal elite.

The territorial extent of druidism is not easy to define. The Classical texts tell of Druids only

in Gaul (France) and in Britain, while the vernacular sources make it clear that Druids were also to be found in Ireland. Strictly, then, druidism is to be seen as a phenomenon restricted to the northern part of Atlantic Europe. However, the absence of reference to Druids in other parts of Europe does not necessarily imply that they were not more widespread. Indeed, some writers have assumed that Druids were coterminous with the Celts of the La Tène period (after c. 450 BC) and that the caste spread with the migration of Celtic communities into the Po valley, the Carpathian Basin, Transylvania, and along the Danube into the Balkans, and eventually, in the 3rd century, into Anatolia. In support of this is often quoted the place-name *Drunemeton* where the Council of the Galatians met in central Anatolia. The name may roughly be translated as the 'sanctuary in the oak grove' and belongs to the group of '*nemeton*' place-names found across the Celtic world signifying a sacred place. While this *could* allow that Druids served the Celtic immigrants in Anatolia, it does not imply that they did. There is no need to suppose that this highly specialist caste of wise men (assuming they were in existence at this time) chose to migrate with the mobile factions of the community who moved out of their western European homeland in the 5th century. A sacred place suggests the presence of priests but not necessarily Druids.

If, then, we take the cautious view in locating the Druids in Gaul, Britain, and Ireland, the question arises where and when did druidism arise? Julius Caesar is quite explicit:

It is thought that the doctrine of the Druids was invented in Britain and was brought from there to Gaul; even today those who want to study the doctrine in greater detail usually go to Britain to learn there.

(BG VI.13)

Since there was no particular propaganda value in this statement, we may accept that Caesar was directly quoting either what he had been told by Gaulish informants or had read in a source no longer extant. How valid this belief was it is impossible to say but there is no reason why it should not have been true. We will return to this matter again below, in [Chapter 2](#). On the question of when druidism emerged, there is little that can safely be said. There are reasons to suggest that Druids existed in the 4th century BC (see [Chapter 4](#)) and it could be argued, as we shall endeavour to do later, that the caste has its roots deep in prehistory, possibly as far back as the 2nd millennium. There is no reason at all to assume

that druidism was solely a feature of the La Tène Iron Age.

How, then, do we know about the Druids? The earliest sources are Classical writers living in the Mediterranean region who chose to write about the barbarian peoples of western Europe. Principal among them are Julius Caesar (100–44 BC), Diodorus Siculus (late 1st century BC to early 1st century AD), Strabo (c. 63 BC to AD 21 +), Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79), Tacitus (AD 55–120), Athenaeus (fl. c. AD 200), and a number of Greeks who, in the first few centuries AD, were compiling encyclopaedic works using an array of texts available to them in the libraries of Alexandria. The intriguing problem is that, with the partial exception of Julius Caesar, all were using second-hand sources whose authors had probably never encountered the Druids for themselves. Their quotations are partial, selected, and are coloured to suit the viewpoint of the author and the prejudices of the time. Thus they need careful handling. It is necessary to identify the original sources and to assess the processes of transmission. We must also try to understand how druidism changed over time and how the Classical perception of the Druids changed. We are dealing with highly dynamic processes of change, the only clues to which are the surviving words of a few Greek and Roman writers.

It is quite conceivable that the number of original sources – that is, people who actually observed Druids – was very small. Julius Caesar is certainly one. He was present in Gaul subduing its inhabitants from 58 to 51 BC and made two brief expeditions to Britain in 55 and 54 BC. During this time, he had ample opportunity to observe the Gauls and Britons and, while he may have had access to earlier accounts, it is likely that his famous account of the Druids in his war commentaries, *De Bello Gallico* VI.13, was based, in some part at least, on his actual first-hand experiences. One of the Gauls he befriended, Divitiacus, was himself a Druid.

Two broadly contemporary writers, Strabo and Diodorus, together with the 2nd-century AD writer Athenaeus, used an earlier text that is generally agreed to be the lost works of Posidonius (c. 135–c. 50 BC), a Stoic philosopher born in Apamea in Syria. Posidonius travelled widely in the western Mediterranean including coastal Gaul to collect information first hand for his great work *Histories*, published in the early 1st century BC. *Histories* no longer survives in its original form but was widely quoted and seems to have been the major source from which Diodorus Siculus and Strabo obtained their information on the Celts and the Druids. Athenaeus also used the work, and some have argued that Caesar may have

augmented his first-hand knowledge with details derived from Posidonius.

The communities with whom Posidonius would have come into contact in his travels in southern Gaul in the early decades of the 1st century BC had been exposed to the influence of the many Greek cities which developed around the shores of the Golfe du Lion following the foundation of the first colony of Massalia (Marseilles) around 600 BC. They had also experienced the movement of the Roman armies, marching to and fro across their territory through the wars in Iberia throughout much of the 2nd century BC. Finally, in 123 BC, the Roman armies moved in to take possession of the whole coastal region and the lower valley of the Rhône, creating what was to become the Roman province of Gallia Transalpina. Unless Posidonius had managed to penetrate far inland, the Gauls he encountered are those most likely to have been influenced by their long exposure to Mediterranean culture. Posidonius, clearly an acute observer, was well aware that he was seeing a people in a state of transformation. This sense of change is made explicit when in one description of Celtic behaviour (quoted by Strabo) he uses the phrase 'and in former times' to preface his account.

The Posidonian tradition was clearly influential in late 1st-century BC accounts of Celts and Druids, but once the Roman armies had taken control of Gaul during Caesar's campaigns in the 50s, and 90 years later had spread through much of Britain following the Claudian invasion of AD 43, many Romans – soldiers, administrators, and traders – would have had the opportunity to have come face to face with Druids, should they have so chosen. We have already suggested that Caesar's account of Druids is likely to have been largely based on his first-hand experiences, and we know that one Gaulish Druid, Divitiacus, visited Rome and had conversations with Cicero. A century later, the Roman armies fighting their way across Britain faced resistance led by Druids. These encounters fed in new knowledge which may have informed the descriptions of 1st- and 2nd-century AD writers like Lucan (AD 39–65), Pomponius Mela (fl. c. AD 43), Tacitus (AD 55–120), and Suetonius (early 2nd century AD). But in the new Imperial age, there was a new imperative – to depict the Druids as the leaders of a vicious sect that revelled in human sacrifice – thus providing a moral justification for conquest. While, in the Posidonian tradition, the Celts and Druids were presented in the comforting, if patronizing, guise of 'the noble savage', under the Imperial tradition they had become the enemy who must be destroyed in the name of humanity. The demonization of others to justify aggression is a familiar political ploy.

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