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Celtic Sanctity, Spirituality, and Hagiography

'...the groves devoted to Mona's [i.e. Anglesey's] barbarous superstitions he demolished. For it was their [the Druids'] religions to drench their altars in the blood of prisoners.' (Tacitus, *Annals*, XIV, 30-31) Write a critical appreciation of the Classical references to the Druids in the light of what is known from other sources.

The Druids appear in the writings of a number ancient Greek and Roman authors. They are famously present in Julius Caesar's account of the conquest of Gaul, but they also appear in the writings of Cicero, Tacitus, Pliny, and Livy. In the works of these writers and others, they appear as a strange combination of comfortable and familiar philosophers and exotic and barbaric sacrificers of human beings. The Druids themselves left behind no writings of their own, but archeology and the writings of later Christian authors can be used to understand the accuracy of such depictions, but who the Druids really were remains a mystery.

Scholars have classified the classical authors who refer to the Druids into essentially three categories. The first are thought to derive their information from a no longer existent work by Posidonius and wrote during the first clashes between the Romans and the Gaulish and British civilisations of whom the Druids were a part. These authors were Julius Caesar, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and Pomponius Mela. They present the Druids as powerful leaders among the Gauls who were philosophers and practitioners of human sacrifice. The second group of authors are Pliny, Lucan, Tacitus, and Suetonius. These continued to reference the Druids' involvement in human sacrifice, but now in their works the Druids appear not as powerful leaders but as shadowy magicians and diviners. Finally, there are a number of Greek authors who wrote even later. They are Dio Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Diogenes Laertius, and Ammianus Marcellinus. These see the Druids as mostly philosophers and wisemen and appear to view them favorably in contrast to the other writers.¹

It is difficult to interpret the classical references to the Druids. Few of the classical authors ever met a Druid, and few are likely to have travelled through Gaul or Britain but must have received their information from another source. They wrote from a Greek or Roman perspective that, whether positive or critical, would not have understood the significance of what they wrote about. Some things they no doubt interpreted in terms that they and their readers

¹ Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 2-21.

would have understood as when Caesar says that the Gauls worshipped Mercury and claimed to be descended from Dis Pater.² How similar the actual Gaulish gods were to these classical deities cannot be known.³ At other times they record facts or events that seem too fantastical to be true, such as Strabo's account of the island community of Samnite women.⁴ All readers like a good story. And besides a lack of understanding of another culture, often individual writers had their own agendas. Scholars point out that Caesar's work was an attempt to justify his conquest of Gaul. If so, his depictions of the region for consumption back home are suspect. Rome needed to justify its conquests to itself, and thus authors could have exaggerated or even invented lurid stories of Druidic practices. Even the more positive Greek authors can be seen as viewing the Druids as a type of noble savage.⁵

According to the classical authors, the Druids were to be found only in Gaul and Britain, and Caesar and Pliny speculate that they originated in Britain (in the case of Caesar) or in Gaul (in the case of Pliny).⁶ T. D. Kendrick notes that there is no reference to the Druids in connexion with any of the other Celtic regions closer to Rome, which would hardly be the case had they existed there, and Caesar specifically states that they were not to be found in the Germanic regions.⁷ There is one other Celtic region for which there is evidence that they existed there but which does not appear in classical literature, and that is Ireland. That Ireland does not appear in the writings of classical authors is hardly surprising. The Druids in Britain are mentioned by only three authors (Caesar, Pliny, and Tacitus), and Ireland was never invaded or well-known by the Romans.⁸ That there were Druids in Ireland at some point is made clear by the numerous

² Julius Caesar, *The Works of Caesar* (Roslyn: Random House, Inc., 1957), p. 137.

³ Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids: Story of an Ancient Priesthood* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 33–35.

⁴ Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. by Horace Leonard Jones, 8 vols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), II, p. 247.

⁵ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, pp. 4, 12, 21.

⁶ Caesar, *The Works of Caesar*, p. 135 and Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. by W. H. S. Jones, 10 vols (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1963), VIII, p. 287.

⁷ T. D. Kendrick, *The Druids: A Study in Keltic Prehistory* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1966), p. 201 and Caesar, *The Works of Caesar*, p. 138.

⁸ Caesar, *The Works of Caesar*, p. 135; Pliny, *Natural History*, p. 287; and Tacitus, *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, trans. by Church, Alfred John and William Jackson Brodribb (New York: Random House, Inc., 1942), p. 337.

references to them in mythology and saints' *vitae* as well as references to them in law codes and penitentials.⁹

According to the classical writings, the Druids appear at one time to have been much more than merely the academic and religious figures of Gaulish society. They were secular leaders as well. According to both Caesar and Strabo, they were powerful judges, and Caesar even claims that they would excommunicate any who did not abide by their decision, effectively cutting off that individual from Gaulish society.¹⁰ Diodorus Siculus claims that their power was so great at one time that they had the ability to stop two armies about to engage in battle.¹¹ Perhaps these are exaggerations, but it seems unlikely that they would have been invented for a group without significant power. Further, the one man who is named as a Druid in the classical sources, Divitiacus, was a man of considerable power. While Caesar never calls him a Druid, Cicero in his work states that he met him and specifically gives him the title of Druid.¹² In contrast to Caesar's claim that Druids did not fight, Divitiacus was a leader of a tribe and headed a warband, but he was also a cultured and knowledgeable individual.¹³ He was much more than a philosopher or priest.

What the classical authors agree on concerning the Druids is that they were philosophers with nine writers describing them in these terms. Pomponius Mela calls them 'teachers of wisdom' while Strabo says that they study and teach natural and moral philosophy.¹⁴ Caesar, while he does not call them philosophers, discusses their ideas and describes how they ran schools.¹⁵ Consistently, the Druids are listed as the wisemen or philosophers of Gaul along with the Brahmins of India and the Magi of Iran.¹⁶

⁹ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 36.

¹⁰ Caesar, *The Works of Caesar*, p. 135 and Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, p. 245.

¹¹ Diodorus Siculus, *Diodorus of Sicily: With an English Translation*, trans. by C. H. Oldfather, 12 vols (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1939), III, p. 179–81.

¹² Cicero, *De Senectute, De Amicitia, De Divinatione*, trans. by William Armistead Falconer (London: William Heinemann, 1923), p. 321.

¹³ Caesar, *The Works of Caesar*, pp. 41, 45.

¹⁴ Pomponius Mela, *Pomponius Mela's Description of the World*, trans. by F. E. Romer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 107 and Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, p. 245.

¹⁵ Caesar, *The Works of Caesar*, pp. 135–36.

Caesar states that the Druids did not write down any of their doctrine and practices and theorises that one reason is that they wished to keep them secret.¹⁷ It is possible that that theory is correct since in general the classical writers do not discuss what the Druids believed as if they really did not know. The one thing that recurs in the classical literature is their idea of what happens to the human soul after death. It would seem that this doctrine was known, and it contrasted so strongly with classical thought that it drew repeated comment. However, there is no consensus on what the Druids actually taught concerning the state of the human soul. Ammianus Marcellinus and Hippolytus link their ideas to the teachings of Pythagoras while Caesar claims that they believed in a form of reincarnation.¹⁸ Others, however, describe it as a belief in an afterlife.¹⁹ It is doubtful that the teachings of Pythagoras would have reached Gaul and converted the Druids to it so thoroughly by the time the classical authors wrote, and it seems unlikely that they would have been so dependent on a foreign Greek source for so central a doctrine. Further, Ronald Hutton notes that archeology does not agree with the belief in reincarnation. Graves that have been excavated have been found to be full of goods that would assist the dead in the next life. If one's soul merely inhabited another body immediately, there would be no need for such preparation.²⁰ Further, Proinsias MacCana points out that Irish and Welsh mythology show no sign of a remnant of a belief in reincarnation such as one might expect if such ideas were dominant in Celtic society. Only a few unique figures like Taliesin take on multiple lives.²¹

While the position of philosopher appears to have been the Druids' most noted feature in classical literature, it was not their sole position. One other position was that of priest. Nora

¹⁶ Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses*, trans. by H. Lamar Crosby, 5 vols (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1946), IV, p. 301; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. by R. D. Hicks (London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1959), p. 3; Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, trans. by J. H. MacMahon (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark: 1870), p. 26; Clement of Alexandria in Kendrick, *The Druids*, p. 106.

¹⁷ Caesar, *The Works of Caesar*, p. 136.

¹⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Ammianus Marcellinus*, trans. by John C. Rolfe (William Heinemann Ltd., 1935), XV.9.8, pp. 179–81 and Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, p. 61.

¹⁹ Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, p. 245; Pomponius Mela, *Pomponius Mela's Description of the World*, p. 107; and Lucan, *Lucan: The Civil War (Pharsalia)*, trans. by J. D. Duff (London William Heinemann Ltd., 1962), p. 37.

²⁰ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 21.

²¹ Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, 1970), p. 123.

Chadwick disputes this, noting that the word *sacerdos* nowhere appears in conjunction with the Druids. They were only philosophers.²² However, according to Strabo, their presence was necessary at a sacrifice, and Diodorus Siculus concurs, saying that it was because they knew ‘the language of the gods’ and interceded with them for the people.²³ While Chadwick notes that Strabo and Diodorus Siculus do not state that the Druids were the ones to perform the sacrifice, Caesar specifically states that they were the ones to perform it, and it could be asked how those who knew the religious material of a culture would not have been the ones who also performed its religious rituals.²⁴

In discussing the sacrifices of the Gauls and Druids, the classical authors draw attention to the use of human sacrifice, writing with horror of the practice and claiming that the Romans were a civilising force by banning such practices. However, not all classical sources, such as the Greek writers, even state that Druids were involved in such practices. Many of these were Christian writers who should have been horrified by human sacrifice, and thus either they were ignorant of it or it was not all that the other authors, such as Strabo or Tacitus or Diodorus Siculus claimed. The accusation of human sacrifice was an easy way to demonise another and is one to which the Romans resorted in their accusations against the Christians.²⁵

About such claims archeology can say very little. If human sacrifice was practised, it is safe to assume that the religious leaders should have been responsible, but even possible examples in the archeological record such as mass graves or even the bodies found in bogs do not actually prove that it was practised because there are other possible explanations for them.²⁶ It is interesting that those who identify the dead found in bogs and other locations as the victims of the Druids do so based off the writings of the classical authors, yet the classical authors do not describe the victims of the sacrifices as dying the same deaths as that experienced by those that have been found.

²² Nora Chadwick, *The Druids* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966), p. 45.

²³ Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, I, p. 245 and Diodorus, *Diodorus of Sicily*, p. 179.

²⁴ Chadwick, *The Druids*, p. 28.

²⁵ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

In the pagan mythology of Ireland that was preserved by monks, there is hardly any reference to human sacrifice, and the one reference in the *Book of Leinster* does not date till the twelfth century and is not likely to preserve old customs. If human sacrifice was such an integral part of the identity of the Druid, it is not possible that it would not appear in the Christian memory of them.²⁷ Druids came to represent the pagan force that opposed the advance of Christianity, and such a barbaric custom would have fit perfectly, yet Peter Berrisford Ellis notes that the *vitae* of the Irish and British are devoid of such material.²⁸ Thus, there is little to corroborate the claims of classical writers but also little to contradict them.

There appears to have been one more aspect to the Druids' identity, and that was that they prophesied and practised magic. Cicero mentions that among the learning of Divitiacus was the knowledge of divination while Strabo and Lucan divide what Caesar classified as Druids into three divisions: the bards or poets, the *vates* or diviners, and the Druids proper who were the philosophers.²⁹ As seen by this division, magic and prophecy do not appear to have been among their most notable features at first, and it is only later after their power was broken, that they appear more in the classical literature. Pliny specifically calls them magicians and describes some rituals that they may have used while Hippolytus says that they 'resort to magical rites'.³⁰ Closely related to magic are the stories of prophecy. Tacitus claims that the Druids prophesied the fall of the Roman Empire, and there are stories of three women who are claimed to be Druidesses who prophesied concerning future emperors.³¹ Miranda Aldhouse-Green points out the late date for these stories and their unrealistic nature to argue that they refer to a memory of the Druids rather than to Druids themselves, but still these stories reveal how the Druids came to be viewed at this time.³² That prophecy and magic came to be their defining feature in the eyes of others can be seen in later material. Irish mythology is full of Druids such as Cathbad who

²⁷ Kendrick, *The Druids*, p. 122.

²⁸ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, pp. 34–35 and Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Druids* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), p. 149.

²⁹ Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, p. 245 and Lucan, *Lucan*, p. 37.

³⁰ Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. by H. Rackham, 10 vols (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1952), IV, p. 549 and Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, p. 61.

³¹ Tacitus, *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, p. 630 and Kendrick, *The Druids*, p. 95.

³² Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids*, p. 221.

make prophecies and use magic very much like Merlin in later medieval literature, and the *vitae* present them in the same way.³³ In Muirchú's *vita* of St Patrick, he describes an encounter between the saint and the king of Ireland's two Druids at Tara. The Druids first prophesy that Patrick will take over the island if the king does not stop him, and then they use their magic in a contest with the saint.³⁴ While Muirchú does not specifically call them Druids—instead they are *magi*—the *Tripartite Life of St Patrick* does give them that title.³⁵ In all these stories they are not leaders or philosophers.

Just as little is said about the beginning of the Druids in the classical literature, little is said about their end. Suetonius and Pliny claim that the Roman emperors suppressed the religion, and Tacitus describes the destruction of their sanctuary on Anglesey, but nothing further is said.³⁶ By the fourth century they appear to have been a thing of the past within the Roman Empire and no longer viewed as a threat because the Roman author Ausonius mentions individuals who were reported to have been descended from Druids and appears to view such lineage as something to be proud of.³⁷ It is possible that the Druids transitioned to a more acceptable form of worship and became priests.³⁸ With the rise of Christianity, Druidism would have found itself on the defensive in the same way as official paganism. However, MacCana notes that Christianity often retained elements from pagan tradition, so it is entirely possible that some Druidic material remained in Christian culture.³⁹ In Ireland, Hutton notes that there were no martyrs, and the Irish law codes even designate the position of Druids within Christian society. He discusses the Irish *vita*, *Betha Beraigh*, which contains the story of a contest between St Berach and a Druid named Diarmait 'in which a king decided to give land neither to his own chief Druid nor to St Berach, for fear that one would curse him if he gratified the

³³ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 39–40.

³⁴ Oliver Davies, trans., *Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 96–104.

³⁵ Chadwick, *The Druids*, p. 14.

³⁶ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. by Robert Graves (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 201; Pliny, *Natural History*, p. 287; and Tacitus, *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, pp. 336–37.

³⁷ Kendrick, *The Druids*, p. 97.

³⁸ Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), p. 227.

³⁹ MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, p. 131.

other'.⁴⁰ Here the Druid holds a position of equal respect in society as does the saint, and this can even be seen in the portrayal of St Brigid's owner. Although a Druid, he does not fulfil the typical role in saints' *vitae* as antagonists of the saints but is sympathetic and caring and in the end converts.⁴¹ Some scholars believe that the Druids became the bards of Ireland and Wales, and this appears to be possible.⁴² Strabo and Lucan describe the bards as a class within the Druids, and they appear in Lucan's description just as they would through the medieval period, singing the praises of their leaders.⁴³ The bards functioned in similar ways to the Druids with oral traditions and learning, and even, as is apparent in 'Preiddeu Annwfn', show some antagonism to monks and their form of learning.⁴⁴ It is possible that there are even references to the Druids in their poetry. The Welsh word for Druid, *Derwydd*, appears throughout the *Book of Taliesin* where it appears in the poem 'Armes Prydein Fawr' and is used in another poem to refer to the wise men who visited Christ.⁴⁵ While it means no more than prophet, it is possible that it once meant more than that and is reflecting a memory of the past.⁴⁶

Thus, essentially what can be said about the Druids is that they are a mystery. The classical authors who wrote about them saw them in a contradictory light as admirable philosophers and leaders and as quack magicians and horrible practitioners of human sacrifice. Because of the disconnect between cultures and the motivations for the various authors, it is difficult to understand what is true and what is not, but archeology and later Christian writings can help a little. What does seem to be common to all sources is that they were the religious and academic leaders in ancient Gaulish and British society and left an intriguing legacy for those that would follow.

⁴⁰ Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles*, p. 263 and Charles Plummer, trans., *Bethada Náem nÉirenn: Lives of Irish Saints*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), II, pp. 32–37.

⁴¹ Davies, *Celtic Spirituality*, p. 140–43.

⁴² Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, pp. 33–34.

⁴³ Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, p. 245; and Lucan, *Lucan*, p. 37.

⁴⁴ Gwyneth Lewis and Rowan Williams, trans., *The Book of Taliesin: Poems of Warfare and Praise in an Enchanted Britain* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2020), pp. 100–01.

⁴⁵ J. Gwynogvryn Evans, ed., *Facsimile and Text of the Book of Taliesin* (North Wales: Llanbedrog, 1910), pp. 18, 27, 32, 47, 64, 74, 76.

⁴⁶ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, pp. 46–47.

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