

Name: Katharine Morgan

Student Number: 2106544

Module Title: Celtic Sanctity, Spirituality and Hagiography

Module Code: HPCS7005

Assignment Number: 1

Title: ‘...the groves devoted to Mona’s [i.e. Anglesey’s] barbarous superstitions he demolished. For it was in their [the Druids’] religion 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.

Word Count: 2,723

The ancient Druids' role in human sacrifice is referenced in many classical testimonies.¹ However just as many classical authors portray the Druids as a deeply respected class of intellectuals who functioned as judges, governors, theologians, philosophers, astronomers, and Mages, and some do not reference sacrifice at all—a dichotomy encapsulated in the title of Ronald Hutton's 2009 book: *Blood and Mistletoe*.² In this paper I will write a critical appreciation of the classical references to the Druids, in the light of what is known from other (primarily archaeological) sources, and will argue that rather than giving us one definitive truth about the Druids, what the sources give us is, as Hutton has suggested, the ability for a pluralistic approach to the subject.³

There are no extant writings from the Druids themselves on their own teachings or experiences, so the classical references to them come down from Graeco-Roman authors who existed outside of the Druids' own culture. In his *De Bello Gallico* Julius Caesar reports how it was rare for the Druids to commit things to writing, preferring to memorise “a great number of verses” through oral tradition, giving their teachings an ephemeral quality which contributes to their overall fascination.⁴ Any examination of the classical references to the Druids then, must come with the caveat that whilst such references may be based on entirely reliable, empirical observations, they may also be based on cultural misunderstandings, or misrepresentations—intentional or otherwise—which reflect the personal and political biases of their authors. In the

¹The classical authors I will be referencing in relation to human sacrifice include Diodorus Siculus (writing c. 60–c. 30 BCE), Julius Caesar (writing c. 50–15 March 44 BCE), Strabo (c. 63 BCE–c. 21 CE), Pomponius Mela (writing c. 37–c. 50 CE), Lucan (39–65 CE), Pliny (23/4–79 CE), and Tacitus (c. 55–c. 120 CE). These authors have been referred to by scholars as having been influenced both by each other, and by the Greek historian Posidonius (c. 135–c. 51 BCE).

² When considering classical authors who have referred to these aspects of the Druids (along with those in the ‘Posidonian Tradition’), I shall refer to Cicero (106–43 BCE), and those authors considered to be in the later ‘Alexandrian Tradition’ including Dion Chrysostom (c. 40–c. 115 CE), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 210 CE) Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170–c. 235 CE), Diogenes Laertius (fl. 3rd century CE), and Ammianus Marcellinus (c. 330–c. 395 CE).

³ Given the scope of the paper, I have chosen to leave aside the consideration of the Irish medieval literary sources in relation to this subject, given that they are further removed in time from the Druids than the classical references, and they apply exclusively to Ireland, rather than to the rest of Britain and to Gaul. A longer study could include these, along with later sources from the seventeenth century revivals onwards; Hutton, *Gods of Prehistoric Britain*, <<https://youtu.be/QjC0lGr4h04>>[accessed 24 March 2023].

⁴ Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 14, trans. by Anne Lea, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 21.

case of the Druids, it is worth remembering as Anne Ross has noted, that “history tends to be written by the victors.”⁵

The extant classical literary references to the Druids have historically been divided into two traditions, some of which are believed to draw influence from the lost works of Posidonius, and some of which are likely to have been influenced by the Greek scholar Alexander Polyhistor and to older sources such as Sotion and Aristotle.⁶ The Posidonian tradition encompasses the writings of Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and Julius Caesar in the first instance—all of whom were contemporary with the Druids.⁷ These testimonies have some overlapping themes, the most conspicuous of which is the Druids’ predilection for human sacrifice, which Miranda Aldhouse-Green has argued was the Graeco-Roman historians’ “main fascination” concerning them.⁸ Diodorus and Strabo both highlight the use of sacrifice during the practice of “divination.”⁹ All three authors reference the sacrifice of criminals and “war prisoners” in particular, by various different means (commonly impaling, shooting or burning), and all three note the use of “enormous pyres” in the burning of “living people which are set on fire from below” as offerings to “honour their gods.”¹⁰ Such sacrifices, whilst not perhaps performed directly by the Druids, needed their attendance as “administrators” as they were the ones proficient in communicating with their deities.¹¹ It could be argued that the similarities described in these testimonies support the case for the Druids’ involvement in sacrifice. However such similarities may also be explained by the fact that these authors may have influenced each other, or used a common source (Posidonius, or an intermediary such as Timagenes).¹² If that is the case (a point which

⁵ Anne Ross, *Druids* (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 1999), p. 21.

⁶ Posidonius was a Greek polymath who lived c. 135–c. 51 BCE, and Alexander Polyhistor a Greek scholar and philosopher who lived c. 105–c. 35 BCE; Nora Chadwick, *The Druids* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966), p. 92

⁷ The Posidonian tradition also includes a fourth author—Athenæus [fl. c. 200 CE]—but as he does not discuss the Druids directly his testimony falls outside of the scope of this paper.

⁸ Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *The Gods of the Celts* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1986/2004), (p.28).

⁹ Strabo, *Geography*, 4.4.5., trans. by Benjamin Fortson, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 18.

¹⁰ Diodorus Siculus, 5.32., trans. by Philip Freeman, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 14; Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 16., in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 22; Diodorus Siculus, 5.32., in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 14.

¹¹ Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 16, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 22.

¹² Hutton notes how “some scholars have thought that Caesar inspired [Diodorus] to write his book.” Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 6.

itself remains unproven), then, as Hutton notes, “pretty well all that is recorded of Druids before [the] Roman conquest [...] rests on the indirect testimony of one traveller”, whose work could have been flawed.¹³

Despite the Druids’ role in human sacrifice being a key focus for the writers of the Posidonian tradition, Diodorus, Caesar and Strabo each emphasised a number of other aspects concerning the Druids, which highlight the position of deep respect and seniority that they held within their culture. Diodorus refers to them as “highly-honoured philosophers and theologians.”¹⁴ Strabo comments that “among the Gallic peoples three sets of men are honoured above all others: the Bards, the *Vātes*, and the Druids.”¹⁵ Caesar notes that “[i]n all of Gaul there are two classes of men who are of some rank and honour [...] first the Druids and, second, the warriors with horses.” These accounts, whilst different in the societal structure they present, nevertheless all agree in the Druids’ high status, a point further emphasised by descriptions of the Druids as judges, and as military arbitrators with almost mesmeric abilities who “stepped between the battle-lines and stopped the conflict, as if they held wild animals spell-bound.”¹⁶ These authors also reference the Druids’ teachings concerning natural philosophy, astronomy, and the immortality of the soul, which for them “does not die but crosses over after death from one place to another”.¹⁷ Piggott comments that through these references, Posidonius and those potentially conveying his ideas come across as “hard primitivist[s] with a rather soft centre”—they construct an image of the Druids as noble savages; as worthy, high status opponents, whose barbarous practices needed to be overcome with “civilised” Roman ones.¹⁸ The possibility of bias must be considered here—Caesar in particular is writing about the Druids from the perspective of a conqueror, as Hutton notes his depiction of the Druids made his own “incursions [...] seem more significant and glorious.”¹⁹ Caesar’s erudite style is much remarked upon and he is acknowledged as an astute tactician and a master of his own propaganda when it comes to Rome’s exploits in the Gallic wars,

¹³ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 9.

¹⁴ Diodorus, 5.31., in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p.13.

¹⁵ Strabo, *Geography*, 4.4.4., in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 17.

¹⁶ Diodorus, 5.31., in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p.13.

¹⁷ Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 14, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 21.

¹⁸ Stuart Piggott, *The Druids* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 92.

¹⁹ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 5.

Chadwick argues that the later accounts of Pomponius Mela, Lucan and Tacitus also fall “in direct line of descent from the work of Posidonius”.²⁰ However the accounts of these authors, written after the time of the Druids, generally assume a more sensationalist, less respectful view of them, emphasising, as Chadwick puts it, their “‘darker’ side”.²¹ Mela comments on the “savage customs” of the Druids which “remain in the drawing of a victim’s blood whilst he is being led to the altar.”²² The Roman poet Lucan emphasises the “barbarous rites and sinister ceremonies” which took place in the Druids’ “dark, and hidden groves.”²³ The politician Tacitus’ depicts the “frightening” Druids with their “savage superstitions”, who are dramatically defeated on Anglesey by the Roman soldiers with their own fire, in an attempt to stand against Rome which ultimately backfires.²⁴ The evidence given by these accounts has its limitations. They are secondary in nature and their further removal in time from the Druids themselves (by approximately fifty years), represents a period long enough to have given their subject matter time for embellishment or distortion in popular Roman consciousness. Chadwick postulates that the more extreme framing of these accounts may be down to the loss of status and prestige associated with the Druids over time, and the growth of Rome’s dominating influence over legislation and education as Gaul became increasingly integrated into the Roman Empire.²⁵ It is likely then, that these references are an even more extreme expression of Roman bias than those of Diodorus, Caesar and Strabo.

In contrast to the previous sources discussed, some of the classical references to the Druids do not mention sacrifice at all. The Roman orator Cicero was writing at roughly the same time as the early Posidonians, and (like Caesar), knew the Druid Divitiacus personally. His evidence emphasises the Druids’ “knowledge of the natural world” including their divinatory practices—but emphasises the use of “augury” as opposed to sacrifice.²⁶ In addition to this, the later ‘Alexandrian Tradition’ offers a more favourable view of the Druids and emphasises their role as philosophers, whose “lofty ideals and investigations” the ‘Alexandrians’ “connect[ed]

²⁰ Chadwick, p.30.

²¹ Chadwick, p. 84.

²² Pomponius Mela, *De Situ Orbis*, 3.2.18-19, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 25.

²³ Lucan, *Pharsalia*, 1.450-58, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 25.

²⁴ Tacitus, *Annals*, 14:30, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 28.

²⁵ Chadwick, pp. 70-71.

²⁶ The term “augury” denotes the practice of divination through the observation of birds. Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 1.41.90., trans. by Philip Freeman and J.T. Koch, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 24.

with the Pythagoreans.”²⁷ Diogenes Laertius links the Druids to Sotion and Aristotle, and tells of how “the study of philosophy first developed among the barbarians”, a heading under which he groups the Druids of the *Keltoi* amongst philosopher classes from other cultures, as does Dion Chrysostom.²⁸ Both Hippolytus and Ammianus tell of the Druids’ connection to Pythagorean philosophy, and Clement of Alexandria describes how “philosophy flourished in the past among the barbarians, enlightening the world and only later coming to Greece”, giving the impression that the Druids were amongst the original philosophers.²⁹ The Druids’ use of magic was referenced by Hippolytus and Pliny, who focuses on their use of “oak” and “mistletoe” which was harvested for healing purposes “on the sixth day of the moon” with a golden (likely copper) sickle.³⁰ These details are unique to Pliny however, and Chadwick has argued that they are probably a reflection of his own interests in medicine and magic, and are therefore more likely fantasy than fact.³¹

Piggott has criticised the Alexandrian tradition, arguing that it is an example of soft primitivism where “distance in time or space lends enchantment to the view [of a past culture], and desirable qualities are not only sought for, but discovered and idealised.”³² However this viewpoint fails to acknowledge the potential bias of the Posidonian authors, whose hard primitivism, Piggott argues, is more realistic due to their first-hand contact with their subjects (which remains unproven).³³ The accounts of Mela, Lucan and Tacitus also show the opposite of the tendency Piggott describes, having become harder in their primitivism over time. Piggott’s further criticism—that the Alexandrian tradition is “all second-hand library work, with no new empirical observations from first-hand informants or from field-work among the Celtic peoples”—can also be levied equally at those who are likely to have based their accounts on the work of Posidonius rather than direct, first-hand experience of the Druids.³⁴ As Chadwick notes

²⁷ Chadwick, p. 59.

²⁸ Including the Persian Magi, the Babylonian or Assyrians Chaldeans, the Indian Gymnosophists, and the Gallatian Semnotheoi. Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae*, 1, trans. by Philip Freeman and J.T. Koch, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 24.

²⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Stomata*, 1.15.70.1, trans. by Philip Freeman and J.T. Koch, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 29.

³⁰ Pliny, *Natural History*, 16.24, trans. by Philip Freeman and J.T. Koch, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. by Koch and Carey, p. 26.

³¹ Chadwick, p. 32.

³² Piggott, p. 92.

³³ Piggott, p. 92.

³⁴ Piggott, p. 98.

we simply have “no evidence from any of our informants” that they “were direct witnesses of [the Druids’] official practices or their private life.”³⁵ If classical references to the Druids are dismissed on this basis then all except Cicero’s and Caesar’s would remain as they are the only authors whom we know both met a Druid (Divitiacus), and even then, Caesar does not refer to him as such, and neither author details their interactions with him.

It remains highly questionable then, as to whether any of the multiple strands of information provided by the classical references to the Druids can be verified. Scholars (such as Ross, Piggott and Aldhouse-Green) have therefore turned to archaeological sources in an attempt to crystallise matters. However, as Piggott points out, there are no definitive inscriptions linking the Druids to any particular site or remains, and so it must be borne in mind that “any correlations at all between Druids and the archaeological material that might be attributed to them, involves assumptions and not inferences.”³⁶

Those searching for evidence to verify the Druids as natural philosophers, scientists and astronomers have historically attempted to locate them at megalithic sites such as Avebury and Stonehenge, and in artefacts such as the Coligny calendar. The purposes of Avebury and Stonehenge remain unconfirmed, but they appear to be positioned to correspond with celestial events and times of year such as the summer and winter solstices. This has given rise over the centuries to a plethora of explanations linking them to native pagan religious practices. In his twelfth century *Historia Regum Britanniae* Geoffrey of Monmouth told how the Druidic figure Merlin commissioned Stonehenge. Geoffrey’s *Historia* however, was written several centuries after the Druids were active and is regarded as pseudo-historical, with his stories of Merlin likely to be of a legendary, or fantastical nature. Nevertheless, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries antiquarians such as Aubrey and Stukeley picked up the idea that Avebury and Stonehenge were linked to the Druids, and modern Druids continue to claim them as part of their religious heritage. However, more recent archaeologists have pointed out that “there is no archaeological evidence for associating Early Iron Age, let alone Druid, ritual performances with Stonehenge or any other circle of earlier date.”³⁷ Furthermore, in the twentieth century Stonehenge was dated back to approximately two and a half thousand years before classical

³⁵ Chadwick, p. 48.

³⁶ Piggott, p. 13.

³⁷ Piggott, p. 89.

authors such as Caesar were writing about the druids, meaning, as Hutton has pointed out, that it is highly unlikely (albeit not impossible) that the Druids were part of its origin story.³⁸

When searching for an artefact to confirm the classical account of the Druids as natural scientists, scholars such as Aldhouse-Green have cited the Coligny Calendar—an artefact found in 1897 in a Gallo-Roman temple in France. Although this artefact contains Roman characters and is dated to the latter part of the Roman empire (second century CE), it also contains a sophisticated system of marking time written in the Gallic language, leading Aldhouse-Green to argue that it is an expression of pre-Roman Celtic ideas which most likely rested “in the hands of the Druids.”³⁹ However as Hutton notes, the calendar itself has been subject to significant differences in interpretation, seeing different scholars viewing its creators as both visionary scientists, and “backwoodsmen struggling to run a system of time-keeping that needed annual adjustment.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, there is no inscription linking the Druids to the calendar, and Hutton suggests, rather than it being an example of a way of working unique to a pre-Roman, Celtic system of thought, it may simply be a “local version” of similar calendars used by the ancient Greeks which came to the area via the Greek colony in Marseilles.⁴¹

There is archaeological evidence for the most controversial aspect of the Druids reported by classical sources—that of human sacrifice. Shrines indicating the practice of headhunting, and ritual shafts at places such as at Holzhausen and Swanwick where it has been inferred “that a human sacrifice may have been tied to the stake and offered to a deity, perhaps of the underworld” all chime with the early Posidonian references regarding the Celts.⁴² There are also water based deposit sites from the period (e.g. Lake Neuchatel, Llyn Careg Bach, and Gundestrup) which all appear to be “stubbornly votive in character.”⁴³ Aldhouse-Green argues that this is where evidence from the classical sources “marries with archaeological data” with “both demonstrat[ing] the existence of human sacrifice and of head collection.”⁴⁴ However it remains unclear whether the Druids themselves were responsible for such practices. In 1984 a further significant piece of archaeological evidence was found in the form of the bog body

³⁸ Hutton, *Gods of Prehistoric Britain*, <<https://youtu.be/QjC0lGr4h04>>[accessed 24 March 2023].

³⁹ Aldhouse-Green, Miranda, *Caesar's Druids: Story of an Ancient Priesthood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 115

⁴⁰ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 30.

⁴¹ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 30.

⁴² Aldhouse-Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 21-22.

⁴³ Piggott, pp. 76-77.

⁴⁴ Aldhouse-Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 15.

Lindow man, a perfectly preserved figure who appeared to have died by ritual killing, and whose stomach contained mistletoe pollen, which, given Pliny's reference to the Druids' use of mistletoe, lead Aldhouse-Green to conclude that "it is not impossible that he was a druidic sacrifice".⁴⁵ However, Hutton points out that the evidence around Lindow man is still "thoroughly insecure" and has been legitimately interpreted differently by different experts.⁴⁶ The manner of Lindow man's death may be answered by a number of possibilities of which Druidic sacrifice is only one, and, Hutton argues, Druidic involvement looks unlikely given that the body is dated to the later Roman period, at which point the Druids had already been suppressed.⁴⁷ Therefore Lindow man does not prove the classical authors' accusations of Druidic human sacrifice beyond reasonable doubt, and the problem remains that "to date not one single artefact or image has been unearthed that can undoubtedly be connected with the ancient Druids."⁴⁸ Archaeology then, like the classical literary references, does not give us any definitive answers in relation to the Druids, but instead offers "an increasing range of possible alternatives."⁴⁹

To conclude, the classical references—which seem to differ in content as much as they agree—represent how their authors (in all cases, people who lived outside of the culture they are describing), wished to portray the Druids to their audience, which is in turn a reflection of their own contexts and worldviews. When turning to other sources such as archaeology for clarification, we are presented with a body of evidence suggestive of multiple possibilities, all of which are open to different, and equally valid, interpretations. As Piggott notes,

[W]e have the Druids-in-themselves, whom we can never reach, but for whom we have literary and archaeological evidence from which we infer our Druids-as-known. There has also been a process of manufacturing Druids-as-wished-for going on since classical times.⁵⁰

The crucial piece of evidence that remains undiscovered is what the Druids meant to themselves, or to anyone from their own culture. We are missing their perspective, and, if they truly relied on oral tradition and memory to impart their teachings, their voices are likely to remain hidden—

⁴⁵ Aldhouse-Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 29.

⁴⁶ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 27.

⁴⁷ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, pp. 27-28.

⁴⁸ Hutton, p. 23.

⁴⁹ Hutton, *Gods of Prehistoric Britain*, <<https://youtu.be/QjC0lGr4h04>>[accessed 24 March 2023].

⁵⁰ Piggott, p. 11.

locked away in the veiled groves of history—ephemeral teachings stored in unreadable human memories. What the evidence concerning the Druids does give us is, as Hutton suggests, is the possibility of a plurality of interpretations.⁵¹

⁵¹ Hutton, *Gods of Prehistoric Britain*, <<https://youtu.be/QjC0lGr4h04>>[accessed 24 March 2023].

Bibliography

- Aldhouse-Green, Miranda, *Caesar's Druids: Story of an Ancient Priesthood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010)
- , *Exploring the World of The Druids* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997)
- , *The Gods of the Celts* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1986)
- Berresford Ellis, Peter, *A Brief History of the Druids* (London: Robinson, 2002)
- Caesar, Julius *The Gallic War* trans. by Carolyn Hammond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)
- Chadwick, Nora K., *The Druids* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966)
- Cunliffe, Barry, *Druids: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)
- Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1966)
- Haesussler, Ralph and King, Antony, eds., *Celtic Religions in the Roman Period* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2017)
- Hutton, Ronald, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009)
- , *Gods of Prehistoric Britain*, Gresham College, <<https://youtu.be/QjC0lGr4h04>>[accessed 24 March 2023]
- , *The Druids* (New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2007)
- , *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2006)
- Kendrick, T.D., *The Druids: A Study in Keltic Prehistory*, 2nd edition. (London: Methuen and Co., 1928)
- Koch, John T., and Carey, John, eds. *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales* (Massachusetts: Celtic Studies Publications, 1995)
- Maier, Bernhard, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture* trans. by Cyril Edwards (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1997)
- Piggott, Stuart, *The Druids* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999)
- Ross, Anne, *Druids* (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 1999)