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Dissertation Title: *The Druids Of The Past And Of The Present*

This work will discuss a subject that in the past century seemed to have gained momentum whilst in the past has lost and gained it over the course of the years, from the times of the old Celts and Romans to the anthropological research at the beginning of the 18th and 20th centuries and the mass revival of old spiritual traditions happening at the end of the 20th century. It will describe the Druids as such, the Classical sources and the knowledge they impart about the Druids as well as the validity of said sources. The subject is one that is extremely close to the author of this work, as it speaks of beliefs and knowledge that this author was brought up with being taught from an early age. Therefore it serves as not only a culmination of 4 years of study, summarised in appropriate form, but also as an expression of identity, carried from the early age into adulthood. This work is a mixture of academically backed statements, as well as personal opinions and experiences, that this author believes are equally as valid. Those statements, appearing periodically throughout this work, are not for the sake of pride, or self-esteem, but rather are true expressions of thoughts and experiences of the author and included with the intention of enriching the reading experience and limited knowledge provided by the predominantly primary sources. Even though the supervisor of this work was Professor Jane Cartwright, any mistakes and content is the sole responsibility of the writer of this work who takes deep pleasure in being able to write on a subject that there's limited information about, one that is so close to heart and cherished from a young age.

The Druids, often romanticised as all-powerful, all-knowing individuals of the myths, wearing white and passing through the plains with their staves, are a subject of much discussion, yet when it comes to the classical approach to Druids, to the very core of the idea, there is very little that can be found, that would directly tell us exactly what Druids represented. Much can be assumed, but when it comes to Academia, whether this is anthropology, archaeology or linguistic studies, any assumption without valid evidence remains just that - an unsupported statement open to interpretation and colliding hypotheses. To ensure that the due process is adhered to, this work will be divided into various parts, each consisting of various subparts.

The first part of this dissertation will discuss the so-called classical druids, the term used here on purpose and elaborated upon in the second part of this work.

The second part, on the other hand, will focus on what Druidry is as a concept, idea and groups that originate with the idea of classical druids but evolved into their own organisations today, what they represent and whether there is any connection to Druids as we understand them through their representation in classical sources such as Caesar, Strabo or Tacitus.

## **Druids**

*But of these two orders, one is that of the Druids, the other that of the knights. The former are engaged in things sacred, conduct the public and the private sacrifices, and interpret all matters of religion. To these a large number of the young men resort for the purpose of instruction, and they [the Druids] are in great honor among them.*<sup>1</sup>

Druids were a group, described to stand on the top of the hierarchy of their respective tribes, using their Wisdom and Knowledge for the use of their people.<sup>2</sup> Naturally associated with Magic and the Spiritual World, Druids often fulfil the archetype of a mage and for the majority of people, that is how they were. It is very easy to associate the concepts from the past, especially any form of a religious figure, with the supernatural phenomena. Whilst the classical sources draw connections between the Druids and the Magical Craft, they do not focus entirely on it. They portray Druids as Wisemen, akin to Elders,<sup>3</sup> who lead their people, provide soothing words and judge those that do not adhere to the Rules and Laws, often natural and moral ones. As it often was the case in the time before the history of Europe was clearly recorded on a wider scale than just Romans and Greeks, the Philosophers and Elders often fulfilled religious duties also. They would be responsible for keeping track of time, marking certain periods with appropriate holidays and holding celebrations appropriate for them. Possibly it was that very connection, the guidance and their leadership that made it so easy for people to connect them to Magic. Or more precisely, it was that much easier for them to practice Magic, due to their knowledge, wisdom and Spiritual roles. Aside from their ritualistic,<sup>4</sup> religious means of performing magic, there's very little other mention of how Druids perceived or even used this power. Even secondary sources, such as Professor Aldhouse-Green, refers to a ritualistic room and items, drawing connections between them and the Druids. Whether this was the case, or simply the only tangible reference to their practices, cannot be verified at this point, but given the association with planetary movements, the celebrations associated with them and the items that were found to be in connection with Druids, it is safe to say that Druids were ritualistic in nature. Another aspect when discussing druids is the very name itself. This creates a further discussion branch. When discussing the name, from the perspective of time, we are left without any evidence of Druids' own attitude to it. There is no record whether the name was a name of a specific group of beliefs, or rather a term associated with a function, in a way that mage, elder or even Head of, are. Depending on which definition we take, the name druid takes on an entirely new meaning. Druids, as much as their

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<sup>1</sup> Julius Caesar, De Bello Gallico, 6.13

<<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0001%3Abook%3D6%3Achapter%3D13>> [Accessed 01/08/2025].

<sup>2</sup> Julius Caesar, De Bello Gallico, 6.14

<<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0001%3Abook%3D6%3Achapter%3D14>> [Accessed 01/08/2025]/

<sup>3</sup> Julius Caesar, De Bello Gallico, 6.13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

association lies entirely with the Celtic Tribes, were not exclusively 'celtic' if treated as a role, rather than a group.

It is extremely important to note that Druids, according to the primary source,<sup>5</sup> were predominantly advisors skilled in oral lore which they used to pass down knowledge and make learned decisions. Rather than later descriptions of personas such as Merlin (both secondary sources and fantastical descriptions), Druids initially were treated as philosophers, the Magical association of druids arrived later on.<sup>6</sup>

They, as discussed later on in this work, were considered philosophers and possessors of knowledge that led their tribe and were responsible for solving any disputes that may arise in their tribes. As much as people tend to idolise Druids, partially due to the pop culture, those were wise men, focused on oral tradition and wisdom that comes from it, who only partially and due to their wisdom, were associated with and responsible for religious worship and, in turn, with Magic as such. And this is what the Classical approach to Druids shows. On the other hand, there is the neopagan approach to Druidry, which combines in itself the study of lore, culture, primary source, spirituality and often, but not always, the magical craft, based around the 8 Sacred Days, the Nature and sometimes the three aspects of Druidry

### **Classical Approach to Druids**

*Here are some conclusions from the classical commentators: Druids were cultured; they were barbarians. They were aristocrats; they were degraded butchers. They moved in society; they practised far from men. They influenced the greatest classical thinkers; they were the glue of the guerrilla movement against the Romans. All of these opinions come from ancient sources.<sup>7</sup>*

Druids in Classical Sources, such as Caesar,<sup>8</sup> Tacitus,<sup>9</sup> Diodorus,<sup>10</sup> are often presented as a group of wise barbarians, with the classical sources oscillating between making them out to be bloodthirsty heathens,<sup>11</sup> and wise man.<sup>12</sup> There is little written about druidic magic. We have mentions of their religious functions,<sup>13</sup> and their judicial role,<sup>14</sup> but we do not know much about them as magicians. We do have secondary sources that draw connections based on the archeological sources, like Miranda Aldhouse-Green in the Magician's House, but

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<sup>5</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 4. IV, <[https://penelope.uchicago.edu/thayer/e/roman/texts/strabo/4d\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/thayer/e/roman/texts/strabo/4d*.html)> [Accessed 01/08/2025].

<sup>6</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 4. IV.

<sup>7</sup> Penny Billington, *The Path Of Druidry*, (Woodbury, Minnesota: Llywellyn Publications, 2011), p. 15

<sup>8</sup> Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*.

<sup>9</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, Book XIV, <[https://penelope.uchicago.edu/thayer/e/roman/texts/tacitus/annals/14b\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/thayer/e/roman/texts/tacitus/annals/14b*.html)> [Accessed 01/08/2025].

<sup>10</sup> Strabo, *Geography*.

<sup>11</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*.

<sup>12</sup> Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*; Strabo, *Geography*.

<sup>13</sup> Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

other than that, we have very little to base our opinions on. There is one mention in the classical sources that points to the Druidic Magic, written down by [AUTHOR] who mentions a group of men and women, standing on the shore, with their arms raised up, causing the invading soldiers to experience the feelings of fear.<sup>15</sup> This recollection is problematic for multiple reasons and can be easily interpreted however the reader wishes. If the reader was to follow the author's reasoning, the fear felt by the soldiers, was strictly due to a 'barbaric' behaviour that they were unused to,<sup>16</sup> but if we were to follow a system of beliefs that would accept supernatural phenomena as normal and part of life, just as Roman, Greek and Celtic societies did back then, then we would arrive at a completely different understanding of this situation - the druids working their magic which, even if temporarily, took an effect and slow down an invasion. What can be observed based on this recollection by [AUTHOR] is that Druids worked in groups, at least during extreme times, such as war, this paints a picture of a collective, a group, rather than a singular individual. This aspect of gathering, contrary to solitude, will be brought up in later chapters, regarding druids these days and their practices, but what the classical sources say is that Druids gathered together, rather than work alone. Which is further supported by what Caesar had to say about them, as he outright stated that Druids as such, attended an 'Academy', going as far as to state how long their training lasted.<sup>17</sup> The validity of this statement will be looked into in the next chapter as well. Moving away from the aspect of Magic as such, let us focus on Druids as described by each of the major classical sources:

Julius Caesar (1st century BCE) - In his *De Bello Gallico*, he portrays Druids as the caste of priest-judges, who conduct sacrifices,<sup>18</sup> teach the youth,<sup>19</sup> and impose their judgement for any misconduct.<sup>20</sup> He also goes on to describe what these privileges are, giving quite well-formed information about the Druidic order in general.

Druids, according to Caesar, were of the highest rank within the society due to their knowledge and wisdom, they were responsible for religious events, education of youngsters and leading the tribe. Further to this, they were also exempt from participating in the wars, which is of no surprise, as they were of much more help sharing their wisdom and upholding the tradition than holding swords and fighting on the front lines. They also served as judges and held the ultimate authority in judicial matters, whether private or public.<sup>21</sup>

Other than their privileges, Caesar also briefly mentions their belief system, referring to the reincarnation.<sup>22</sup> Caesar's recollection is important, when discussing the primary sources, as it is most extensive and verifiable, valid. Caesar led the country

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<sup>15</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6.14.

and answered before the Senate. He was in an unique position that other writers, predominantly Strabo and Tacitus did not share.

Strabo, born 64 BCE, was a Greek geographer, anthropologist of his time and general academic writer, a Stoic among many things. He is the second source that's often referred to when discussing *classical Druids*. Strabo's recollection of Druids very much overlaps with Caesar's, but also adds his own. Strabo divides the priestly class of Celtic tribes into three categories - the Bards, the [O]vates and the Druids, a system that's used these days, by for example, the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids.<sup>23</sup> It is important to note, that these could be equally considered hierarchical positions as well as different roles that Druids specialised in. Due to the lack of explicit sources that would state otherwise, we are only left with what organisations like OBOD say about them. This limits our perception and scope of knowledge, as then the assessment of primary sources becomes coloured by the present interpretation. But it is that interpretation that provides us with perspective. We can, of course, gather the information from the words themselves. Bards are associated with poetry, the Ovates with Telling, while Druids with completion, nature and DOING. Therefore we can arrive at two conclusions, either those were three different steps necessary to achieve Druidhood, or those were different categories within the Druidic order. Furthermore, this, surprisingly, is reflected in the Slavic tradition which this author originates from. Following Gieysztor and his *Mitologia Słowian*, on page 212,<sup>24</sup> We see mentions of different ranks. Gieysztor in his works designates 3 castes - Ofiarnicy, Wróżbici and Wolchowie, meaning Those that make sacrifices, those that tell fortune and those that cast spells, directly reflecting all the functions associated with these three castes and druids in general. He describes them as mixing philosophy with tradition. Strabo further refers to the Druidic belief of the soul, something he extrapolates as a knowledge not restricted to just Druids, but other tribe members as well. Where he diverts from Caesar's writings and knowledge is at the sacrifice. Strabo points out that Druids were crucial for the Sacrificial ceremonies. According to Strabo, Druids had such an influence that not only were they responsible for judging matters, such as crimes against the moral code, but also capable of preventing meaningless bloodshed.<sup>25</sup> One of the most notable information Strabo included was the fact that Druids believe the world to be made a new through a cycle of fire and water, a theme that occurs in multiple different cultures and could, potentially highlight cultural exchange between the Druids Strabo discussed and other cultures, such as Judaism or Aztec. There is no proof that such a cultural exchange took place.

Strabo's attitude towards Druids was akin to that towards civic officers with religious, political and musical functions. He portrays them as philosophers who use their wisdom and knowledge to impose their judgements on others.

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<sup>23</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, IV.4.4.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian*, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2006) p.212.

<sup>25</sup> Strabo, *Geography*.

In comparison to Julius Caesar or Tacitus, Strabo places himself in quite the neutral position, not as emotional as Caesar's, whilst also not explaining Druidic rituality to the point that Tacitus does.

Tacitus, or Gaius Cornelius Tacitus, was a Roman historian, considered one of the greatest. He lived in the 1st century CE and became famous for his *Annals*. Tacitus, in his *Annals*, 14.30 provides the most startling description of these three sources. As mentioned before Tacitus described the most in detail Druidic magic and rituals. In 14.30,<sup>26</sup> Tacitus described the army invading Druidic shores and the subsequent response from the Druids. He goes on to say exactly how they cast their spell and the effect it had on the soldiers, that being having them completely paralysed to the point of standing motionless.. Although, in his description Tacitus blames the reaction on the unfamiliar sight.<sup>27</sup> The next chapter will discuss the validity of the classical sources and this very claim as well, taking into account the time period it happened in as well as the culture and tradition said soldiers came from and whether it truly was such an unfamiliar sight.

As mentioned before, although Julius Caesar and Strabo refer to magical ways of the Druids, it is Tacitus that describes them in depth. His very definition in *Annals*, 14.30 showcases that Druids participated in ritual, congregated magic, performing it with the use of their body, and to be precise their arms. Even if disregarded as magical act, and treated the way that Tacitus explained it, the act that the Druids performed could be treated as a strategic use of psychology, a category of study that was not well known back then, especially in the 'barbaric tribes', showcasing not only their deep understanding of human psyche but also a mind capable of creating useful strategy. It comes at no surprise then, that Druids, as mentioned before, had the final say about the war effort, if it was them that created such out-of-the-box strategies.

Interestingly enough, the mention of Druids raising their arms to the heavens is also used in the *Mists Of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer-Bradley,<sup>28</sup> a fantasy book of edited, novelized Arthurian Legends, potentially highlighting an inspiration or a direct belief that there is a connection between Druids and the Heavens or the sky. This may seem as loose connection, but given the time Zimmer-Bradley worked on her book, as well as the specific mention of it, it does not seem as such a far fetched conclusion.

Whilst Caesar's report on Druid has the element of first-hand outsider account, Strabo's the anthropological perspective, Tacitus writes a negatively impacted report of 'barbaric' practices, choosing to focus on emotion-inducing narration rather than retelling of facts or results of research, Strabo's work, on the other hand, is more anthropological, or what we would expect from an anthropological work these days. All three of those primary sources showcase different attitudes, yet the same, or very similar conclusion - Druids were heathens,

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<sup>26</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, XIV.30.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Marion Zimmer-Bradley, *Mists Of Avalon*, (Warszawa: Atlantis, 1994).

barbarians. Wise ones, but still participating in acts that are unbefitting of Ancient Greeks or Romans.

### Validity of Classical Sources:

The classical sources are notorious for being the outsider perspective. Not only this, but they were not exactly kindly inclined towards the Celtic Tribes, especially Gaul. Whilst the majority of the classical authors, which will be discussed more in depth in the later parts of this chapter, could be disregarded for this very fact, there is one source that cannot be easily dismissed, and this is Caesar.

Caesar described Druids, as described in the previous chapter, in his *De Bello Gallico*,<sup>29</sup> portraying them as wisemen and judges.<sup>30</sup> The difference between Caesar and other 'primary' sources lies with the fact that Caesar spent over 10 years in Celtic territories, studying the culture.<sup>31</sup> His writings were further scrutinised by the Senate. It could be argued that the Senate itself had preconceived notions and would be unlikely to accept anything that would contradict their worldview, but nevertheless, they serve as a way of providing even a tiny bit of validation for Julius Caesar's description of the Druids.

Other than Caesar we have the outsider's perspective, which cannot be taken at a face value. These are not the kind of primary sources that are available about Ancient Egypt or Greece or Rome, instead these are descriptions that are full of personal narration and observations, without the understanding of inner workings of the idea they describe. Taking into account the language barrier and lack of awareness of symbolism, those men who took it upon themselves to describe the Druids had limited knowledge to base their work on, leading to inevitable misunderstandings and misinterpretations of events and behaviours that may have meant something else than what they thought. The perfect example would be Tacitus' description of Druids. His focus lies entirely on describing them as heathens that participate in barbaric practices. Even his recollection of the Roman invasion,<sup>32</sup> referred to suppression of Druidic beliefs and destruction of their 'superstition', among other, more derogatory terms. It is vital, for any chronicle, recollection or report to contain as little emotion as possible, that is the simple way of Academia - not to judge as such but to discover and report. Tacitus did his best to include as many of his perceptions, attitudes and nationalism as possible, colouring his work with unnecessary emotion that puts his very effort into question nearly 2 millennia later. It would not be a problem, if not for the limited amount of sources the Academia can use these days. Tacitus' portrayal of Druids is important, but it is not infallible. It adds and builds upon what previous Chronicle writers said, gives as a direct mention

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<sup>29</sup> Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Roger B. McShane, Thomas H. Watkins, *Caesar Conquers Gaul*, 2022

<[<sup>32</sup> Tacitus, \*Annals\*.](https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/military-history-and-science/caesar-conquers-gaul#:~:text=Julius%20Caesar's%20conquest%20of%20Gaul,broader%20region%20of%20northwest%20Europe.> [Accessed 07/08/2025].</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

of women in association with Druids, which is crucial, even if it stays from the typical perception of a druid as dressed in white clothes (he mentions the women wearing black) , which brings up more questions than it answers. Does this mean that women were treated as being lower or higher in hierarchy? Did gender have any impact on the Druidic structure of hierarchy? Was the colour black a battle robe? A ceremonial robe, symbolising two opposing elements together with the male druids? Black and white? Were the male druids dressed in white at all, or were the women such a fearsome 'sight' or easy way to embellish for Tacitus that he simply omitted the description of men's clothing? This, of course, could be treated as an unnecessary focus on attire, yet, as clearly evidenced by nearly every religion and faction that implements uniforms, the clothing, colour, cut, are directly tied to the position and role fulfilled by the person. A person does not have to look further than the 21st century Catholic Church and its various styles of clothing for different ranks of priests to understand that a colour, cut and style play a vital role in any ceremonial organisation or undertaking. Of course, the validity of the primary sources only comes into play when discussing either only the ancient druids or the continuity of the Druidic tradition that we see today. Considering the claims of people like Iolo Morganwg, the aspect of Primary Sources is necessary, vital even, when discussing the past and possible connections to the present, but when treating the modern Druidry as inspired by the past, rather than continuation of it, the primary sources like Caesar, Strabo or Tacitus have little impact on the subject, as inspiration is open to interpretation and unrestricted by the reality or the fact, turning the past into a form of poetry that every person can understand however they wish and find something that would resonate with them, after all, even if desired, Druids these days would have a hard time performing Human sacrifices and the possible benefits gained by such practices, if any, would be heavily outweighed by the consequences, not to mention the necessary preparations before such a sacrifice could take place. Therefore, why, when attempting to revive or recover Ancient Druidic practices, are we so focused on the sources and what Druids back then did, when the majority of those actions are considered morally wrong, unlawful or simply impractical in today's society? Is it simply so the people who participate in such activities could say 'I practice what Druids of the past practiced?' or that 'I'm as much of a druid as those that lived in the 1st century BCE?' It is impractical, nonsensical and has little effect on what people do now. The only appropriate use of the historical, primary source, when discussing druidry is to analyse HOW druids were perceived back then and that such a thing as a Druid even existed. Considering the fact that aside from Julius Caesar, the other two mentioned before had little or no first-hand experience with Druidry, it is quite clear that the primary sources are as useful as Marion Zimmer-Bradley's book. Even less so, as *Mists Of Avalon* are considered useful and educational by Wise women and *Mages* these days, and the primary sources are looked at with a disdain that they very much deserve for twisting the history to achieve the goal set by the author of each recollection.

It may sound not academic and be frowned upon, but reading about Druids from Tacitus or Strabo's perspectives is akin to reading about the History of Poland

from an American or Japanese perspective. More so, as Polish history serves as the perfect example of how a chronicle can be written to fit a certain perspective, not needing to look further than Gallus Anonymous, who was neither of Gallic descent, nor wrote true history of Poland, but rather his own imagination, but nevertheless is used as primary source in many Academia works, regardless of how inappropriate that is.

Possibly, the more important question, if the title of this dissertation was different, would be 'what do the classical sources tell us about the Roman bias', which would open an entirely different discussion, as that is the truth. The classical sources hold little validity when it comes to the Druidic reality of their time, but they hold exceptional validity to the perceptions and attitudes held by the classical authors and the Roman society as such at the time. They tend to mix together parts of the truth, just enough to paint a general picture, before diving into the subject from a completely oppositionist perspective

The classical sources have one thing in common. They are all written from the perspective of the invaders, outsiders and generally people that had little insider knowledge about Druidry as such. This point is extremely important, as when looking at history and the timeframe, we clearly see that those were times of Roman conquest. Every military action, especially in Rome, required more than just the will of the Emperor. It required the support of the Senate. It may seem superficial or light-hearted, but writing for the sake of 'governmental approval' has always been crucial. Even today we see reports written by various individuals, claiming to be knowledgeable in their area of expertise, influencing those in power with their writings. This has always been the case, including in the Ancient Roman times. By writing about the heathenish foreigners who threaten the peace and order of Rome, the writers were able to influence the governmental bodies and sway them to their perception, ultimately succeeding in submission and supposed extermination of Druidic practices.

## **Druidic Revival**

The period of Druidic revival is set between the 18th and 20th century. It began with the Enlightenment influenced scholars and their work. The wish to oppose the Church and its dogmas also played a crucial role in this period.<sup>33</sup> The Druids were easily presented by those writers as 'noble savages',<sup>34</sup> whose religion predated Christianity. Back then, and even today, the aspect of Christians conquering and forcefully turning 'Pagans' towards their beliefs is part of a wide, live discussion, moreso back then. The appearance of Druidry, a 'fresh' religion, clearly cemented in the past, was a 'way out' for some people wishing for escape from the oppressive force of the Church and its dogma. The 20th century was a peculiar and particular period in history. People were afraid of the new millennium, awaited the second

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<sup>33</sup> OBOD, History Of Modern Druidry, <<https://druidry.org/druid-way/what-druidry/recent-history#:~:text=The%20Druid%20Revival%20began%20as,Christian%20ancestors>> [Accessed 07/08/2025].

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

coming of Christ, expected the world to end and were terrified by the 00 year, which they were not sure if the computer systems at the time would be able to process. The fear and expectations ranged from purely religious, metaphysical to down-to-earth logical. Of course, none of these happened, as far as we know (quantum physics and its explanation can be excluded in this paper), but it caused a religious phenomena where previously non-religious individuals were looking for a belief system, sometimes ANY belief system, that would give them any semblance of peace and safety. It caused religions to bloom and new systems to be created. The easiest way to achieve that was through anchoring those beliefs in history and traditions that were lost in time. Anthropological research, claims of long lines of succession and 'automatic writing' were all methods of providing validity to small organisations that aimed to gain momentum and give people what they desired - a feeling of belonging and safety through it. Not to mention Iolo Morganwg, who, whilst widely known and respected for giving strength to revival and nationalist movements, also managed to fabricate old poems, using them as basis for his goals.<sup>35</sup> It was, in the simplest terms, a myth-making in process, as well as an attempt at enriching the national culture through mystic connections to Ancient Druidry. Iolo Morganwg 1747–1826, or more correctly Edward Williams, was a 'prime force',<sup>36</sup> Behind the Druidic Revival. His work remains quoted until today and had a vast impact on how we perceive Druidry today. As mentioned in the source quoted, The University of Wales, the members of the Academia still struggle to untangle all the webs left by him today.<sup>37</sup>

Later on, as mentioned before after a century post Iolo Morganwg and all of his revival efforts arrived the period of heavy pressured spiritual revival. That period was also the time of Satanic Temples being created, Christian Sects growing in power, Buddhism being spread in the West and, of course, Druidry being revived. A perfect example of this would be the Stone Circle in Aberystwyth. People who visit the place automatically assume, or may assume, that the Circle comes from ancient times, where Druids were alive and well. Alas, that is not the case. The circle itself dates back to the 20th century,<sup>38</sup> and was created as part of the revival efforts. What's even more interesting and also an explicit example of how traditions evolve and mix over time. The stones themselves have Nordic runes engraved on them for further appeal of the masses (Old Futharak especially is quite popular in people seeking spiritual meaning), while serving as a perfect example of how something seemingly old and presented as having roots in old tradition, can be nothing more than a new age creation.

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<sup>35</sup>People's Collections Wales, Iolo Morganwg,  
<[https://www.peoplescollection.wales/collections/377706#:~:text=Edward%20Williams%2C%20or%20Iolo%20Morganwg%20\(1747%2D1826\)%20was,was%20not%20discovered%20until%20after%20his%20death](https://www.peoplescollection.wales/collections/377706#:~:text=Edward%20Williams%2C%20or%20Iolo%20Morganwg%20(1747%2D1826)%20was,was%20not%20discovered%20until%20after%20his%20death)> [Accessed 07/08/2025].

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.wales.ac.uk/cawcs/research/iolo-morganwg>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Coflein, *Gorsedd Circle Aberystwyth*,  
<<https://coflein.gov.uk/en/site/800608/#:~:text=The%20Gorsedd%20circle%20was%20erected%20at%20the,circle%20of%2012%20stones%20with%203%20outliers.>>

But nevertheless, it brings up a question whether new representations or movements rooted in perceptions of the past, can be completely excluded as irrelevant to certain historical identity. One could argue, that even if not serving much other purpose, from the Academia's point of view, the revival efforts and movements bring attention to the subject, create interest and start a conversation. All of these methods are useful when conducting research and analysis of primary and secondary sources as the more people become interested in a certain subject, the more new ideas appear and the more minds work together on solving the mystery of Ancient Druids, which, even if often misleading and full of contemporary mysticism, is very useful. But this also ties in to what was mentioned previously. The revival efforts focused on making the primary sources work in the favour by creating a heritage link that would resonate with people, something that was very much needed from the Academic and anthropological perspective, but very much not needed. All that was needed for the revival to take place was information that Druids existed, were Celtic in nature, were associated with nature and used divinatory and magical methods to achieve their goals. Of course, by painting the revival efforts as rooted in tradition and history a human mind immediately associated the beliefs described as 'true', 'historical' and 'suppressed' which in turn created a need to 'rescue' those beliefs in some people. Whilst this work will not focus on the appropriateness of the human perception of the 18th or 20th century, it will focus on the correlation between the revival efforts and their focus on available, main, primary source, and the resulting creation of Druidic orders throughout the world. Does the need or an idea to recreate (a purposefully chosen word) a certain spiritual movement justify a misuse of primary sources, which, as mentioned in the previous chapter, said very little about the reality of being a Druid or how exactly Druids functioned? Whilst it gave the structure and the root, it gave little less, requiring the people that took it upon themselves to recreate the movements, a lot of freedom of interpretation. Therefore, if the idea of Druidry was essentially a blank page with a few lines scribbled in-between, are the revival efforts 'authentic' from the historical point of view or are they simply a romanticised attempts by those that felt lost in the period they lived in and therefore reached into a past for something that would enrich their reality by fanciful imaginations?

An interesting attempt at connecting the Druidic tradition with the present is the *Eisteddfod*, which, deeply rooted in the Celtic tradition, serves as one of the most important Welsh events. Rather than focusing on spirituality as such, like the other revival attempts tend to do, the *Eisteddfod* focuses more on the poetic aspect of the craft, choosing to celebrate participants for their knowledge of the linguistics rather than magic or spirituality. The event itself is advertised as a 'celebration of Welsh culture and the Welsh language',<sup>39</sup> showcasing not only the target audience, but also the means of reviving the past, as well as the influences they gather from.

The *Eisteddfod*<sup>40</sup> serves as the most prominent revival attempt, rooted in intellect, rather than belief. Happening over the period of a few days, it not only allows people

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<sup>39</sup> Eisteddfod, *Governance And Policies*, <<https://eisteddfod.wales/about/governance-and-policies>> [Accessed 07/08/2025].

<sup>40</sup> Eisteddfod, *Governance And Policies*.

to learn more of the Celtic Culture - in this case Welsh, but also provides a stage for the nowadays Bards to present their work, gather support and become acclaimed for their accomplishments. It is crucial not only for the sake of the Welsh language, the Celtic Culture, the Druidic or Bardic craft, but also for the local economy. The Eisteddfod happens each year in a different part of Wales, allowing the region to enrich itself through the visitors that will inevitably arrive. Furthermore, what connects this event on an even deeper level to this work is the fact that the Eisteddfod chooses the Head Druid each year - The Archdruid of the Gorsedd of Bards.<sup>41</sup> It is even more interesting, as rather than presenting itself as following the Druidic footsteps or claiming to be of Druidic descent, the Eisteddfod carries a specific note of Druidry - the love for oral lore and the safekeeping of tradition and language and creates its own, unique experience, not seen elsewhere.

### **Druids Nowadays**

Druids these days, contrary to those defined and described in the previous chapters, do not fulfil such an official role within the society. Majority of the druids follow a solitary path, or alternatively gather in Groves or Covens, as the nowadays magical traditions dictate. Contrary to the past, druids are neither obliged or asked to share their knowledge, rather than the focus being inside out, it is completely focused on inside-out, where the change, caused by the druid or their beliefs, starts from within. At this point a question should be asked, whether the Druids we see these days, are an imitation of the past, an attempt at revival, a new path of spirituality influenced by the past, or rather a continuation of the past, influenced by the changes imposed by the world and the ever changing belief systems, society, laws and traditions.

A Druid is often described as going with the times and accepting of the change, which follows the dogma of Order of Ovates, Bards and Druids in the UK,<sup>42</sup> the organisation itself is accepting of Druids of any beliefs system and as the main collective in the UK, therefore in the countries of Celtic descent, it somewhat speaks for the tradition itself. This belief would of course be in line with what Druids of the past were associated with - Nature. Nature grows, changes, old things that serve little active purpose are used as fuel to provide nourishment for the new generations. Considering the close association between Druids and nature, it would be quite hard to believe that Druids, as such, would grow and change, just as Nature, or a tree does.

Druids these days, depending on their location, vary between working as part of the collective or sole practitioners. The Druidry as such is very much focused on self-development, learning and upholding traditions, by adjusting them to the norms required by the times. There is no central Druidic academy, as Caesar would like there to be, but instead there are guidebooks, often based on the self-developed

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<sup>41</sup> Ben Johnson, *The National Eisteddfod Of Wales*, <<https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofWales/The-National-Eisteddfod-of-Wales/>> [Accessed 07/08/2025].

<sup>42</sup> OBOD, *Join The Order & Train In Druidry*, <<https://druidry.org/our-courses/train-in-druidry>> [Accessed 07/08/2025].

interpretations of the historical facts, or sometimes, on rare occasion, on knowledge and beliefs passed down from a master to an apprentice.

The Druidic practice today is a mixture of new traditions that originate in old times and idealisation of what people imagine a Druid would do.

Druids these days are far spread and many. There is a popular saying 'Ask three Pagans what Magic is and you will get five answers', and this saying very much applies to Druids these days. Some of them are people who focus on the wisdom passed down through the Mabinogi, some of them decide to step on the Path for ecological reasons, as they feel close association with nature and feel this to be the right choice for them, whilst others treat the name Druid as a term that can be easily understood as a Mage or Wizard and connect the Druidic tradition, the Wheel of Pagan holidays and occult craft into one, choosing to follow an archetype of a Druid that gains their power from the nature but also affects the world around through his or her actions. There is a chapter in *The Path Of Druidry* by Penny Billington, who gives a simple exercise, to sit down and imagine, what a Druid IS to the person undergoing the task, it requires an open and accepting mind,<sup>43</sup> but it also shows exactly the attitude Druids these days hold, to accept the shapeshifting archetype and focus on the truth that comes within. Of course this approach can be easily challenged by the people that claim to follow 'The Old Tradition', this author being one of them. For people that learned their craft from a Master, who also in their time was apprenticed to another Master and so on, so forth, such an attitude is somewhat misleading. Of course, even for this author, this statement is not entirely wrong, as everyone is different and even if they follow a certain path, none of them will follow it in the same way. The approach stated by Penny Bullington certainly has its benefits, as it requires the person to look within, on top of being addressed to people lacking any sort of formal guidance. But when discussing a spiritual tradition, certain norms have to be retained. Caesar stated that Druids trained in a singular place, and as much as it moves away from a typical for those times system of the craft being learned from a Master to an apprentice, it does raise a point of central belief system. When this aspect of a core is brought up, it reshapes how we perceive Druids these days. They, contrary to what we experience now, were not just a group of people who decided to take up a name for themselves and follow certain guidelines that they assumed were connected to the idea. They were breathing holders of ancient oral tradition, taught to those that attended the academy. Given how all Druids learned orally, it is impossible to say what they were really taught. But it is also impossible, at this point, to say that they were NOT taught exactly what the Druids nowadays believe. This point is crucial for the understanding of Druidry today. It is very much a Schrödinger's cat in this regard. At the same time it may be a continuation of a Spiritual tradition, with much needed changes, whilst also being a creation of the 20th and 21st century, without any way to verify this. People tend to be divided into those that easily dismiss the practice of Druidry in the 21st century as imagination and make-believe of those that wish to follow the footsteps of their ancestors, and those that are staunch supporters of the dogma. Given the minimal

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<sup>43</sup> Penny Billington, *The Path Of Druidry*, (Woodbury, Minnesota: Llywellyn Publications, 2011) p.28.

amount of sources both of those groups or neither can be right. And for this specific reason, there is very little point in judging the validity of the revival efforts or Druids nowadays as either faithful to the old way or not. They should be taken at a face value, the way they are, with a judgement reserved for the future IF any new primary sources would be discovered (however unlikely that may be). Instead, they should be appreciated for keeping the spirit of the tradition alive in the 21st century.

Aside from the name and the association with nature, there is another aspect that is similar to the Druids of the past and that is the hierarchy with the Head Druid at the top. Druids these days tend to be part of different organisations throughout the world, something that due to lack of evidence to the contrary, cannot be easily dismissed.

All of those organisations, seeing as that is the nature of the world we live in, have the head figure, one that is in charge of the organisation and/or spiritual aspects of it. The main UK organisation designated the Head Druid,<sup>44</sup> but in addition to this, some minor orders also designate what other traditions, including this writer's, would describe as the Keepers of Elements - 4 Druids that are Heads of one of basic elements - Earth, Water, Fire and Wind, outside of this hierarchical, very hermetic approach, the Druidry traditionally invokes these 4 elements in their rituals (unfortunately, Wind is predominantly named Air, which is not only inappropriate but also overly simplistic, yet this is the attitude the public organisations have and the name they use). This, albeit different to what the primary sources say, is very much in line with the esoteric tradition, including one of this writer.

Why does the Modern Druidry appeal to people? It triggers specific aspects of human nature - desire for closeness with nature, feeling of being something greater than oneself and individual connection with the divinity that is personal and unique. In addition to this, as mentioned before, Druidry as both practice and group of organisations accepts other beliefs like Christianity. Contrary to the latter, Druidry does not limit what its practitioner believes or the God they follow, but rather leaves itself open to interpretation. This openness allows for freedom that other religions would describe as heresy and prevents any inner conflict that otherwise may occur. It is extremely important as it allows the practitioner to focus on developing themselves and their beliefs, without the stigma of straying too far or being excluded, at least by the official organisations, which, as of right now, are restricted by the Laws of the countries they are registered in. This brings yet another question. A lot of Druidic order include primary sources on their websites (OBOD as an example) to create a psychological connection between their work and the past, but is it truly needed? If we were to follow primary sources, Druids held particular beliefs that were suppressed by others. This in turn creates at least two possible responses in the current society - use this to show acceptance by going against this, or stick to a dogma and do not accept anyone who does not follow it. The Druidic orders chose the first option, but is it truly in line with Druidic beliefs of the past? Does accepting catholic priests or any other clergy as Druids in line with what Druids believed? Is

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<sup>44</sup> OBOD, *How Is It Structured*, <<https://druidry.org/about-us/who-runs-order-how-it-structured>> [Accessed 07/08/2025].

providing information, booklets and guidebooks in line with Druidic teachings or completely against it? One could argue that the world has changed and so have the rules, but that would be exactly the argument mentioned before - if the world and the culture have changed so much, why focus on written chronicles from centuries ago, if they have little impact on reality? If, on the other hand, the primary sources are so important for the Druids, why not change the attitude and follow the Tradition - teaching orally and preventing any secrets from being written down? Of course, the aspect of ability to write and the necessary materials could be brought up, but according to the revival efforts the Ogham was the written language used by the Druids. Yet, even if we have conserved examples of Ogham, we do not have Druidic secrets written down and passed to the next generations in Ogham itself. This point brings up the aspect of neopaganism that this author feels obliged to mention for the consistency and appropriateness of this work. Druids, Mages, Wisewomen or any other *magically* inclined individuals that were trained or brought up in the *Old Tradition*, like this author was, know that a Secret has to remain as such and the *Knowledge* is a *Secret* as not everyone should be aware of the *Truth*. This attitude is prevalent throughout esoteric traditions - *Do not write down what should only be passed between those within the Secret*. Such an important rule, even if not based in reality or history, should be adhered to by the Druids these days. If it is not, it then creates a possibility of two-levelled Druidry - the populist one, that chases the primary sources and tries to gather as much knowledge from them and Iolo Morganwg, amongst others, and the secret one that does not concern itself with the primary sources as they knowledge their gain from the training, just like the Druids of the past, IS the primary source they can rely on.

#### Druidic beliefs in practice today

When discussing Druidry today, relying on the primary sources turns the current movements into a self-aware parody of the once-powerful caste of citizens. Although the Druidic orders currently serve their purpose of gathering people interested in the past and those that seek connection in nature, the true Druidry lies in private practice. Even if not academically proven, that is the truth of life. The Druids of the past moved into the shadows to prevent their own extinction and continued their practice in private, away from the scrutiny or duties associated with their rank. Druids were predominantly the keeper of the knowledge, therefore it is not a far-fetched assumption that to protect that knowledge they decided to solely pass it orally to their own apprentices. The truth of nature always has and always will lie with Nature itself, the ever changing cycle of death and rebirth that Druids were so closely aligned with according to the primary source.<sup>45</sup> Druids of the past required no permission and no legislation to exist, they just were and for their knowledge they were accepted by their tribes.

Even looking at the official organisations, all of them share core beliefs:

Protection of nature - whether this is considered a pro-green, ecologist movement or simply a belief that one is part of the nature and therefore should take care of it, the

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<sup>45</sup> Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6.14.

present Druidic orders strongly associated themselves with the protection of Mother Earth. Whether this is Mother Nature, treated with a respect reserved for a deity, or simply the Earth that allows us to live, Druids, universally, treat Nature with respect. Adherence to the changing seasons, the wheel of the year - Druids and especially Druidic organisations, follow the Pagan wheel of the year, which designated 8 sacred days,<sup>46</sup> each referring to either a lunar or solar cycles - Samhain, Yule (Alban Arthan), Imbolc, Spring Equinox/Easter/Alban Eilir, Beltane, Summer Solstice/Alban Hefin, Lughnasadh/Lammas and Autumn Equinox/Alban Elfed.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, the majority of Druidic orders, most likely in reference and part of their belief in Mother Nature, invoke the four basic elements in their rituals - air, fire, water and earth, each one representing the cardinal direction, a ritual object and reference to human substance.

## Druids and Pop culture

In our collective  
imaginations, we conjure up noble, white-robed figures, wise in the ways of  
natural lore and magic. And, beneath all, connected to the natural world, to  
a universal energy and an unseen pattern that keeps them in harmony with  
their surroundings.<sup>48</sup>

The 20th century and the invention of televisions and subsequent interest in Pop culture and various stories from near and far led to increased interest in foreign cultures. These included France and Brittany and in turn Druids and their position. The *Asterix and Obelix*<sup>49</sup> and just one example of Druidic portrayal in the media, another one being *Merlin*.<sup>50</sup> Marion Zimmer-Bradley of course, as mentioned before, wrote her famous and extensive *Mists Or Avalon*.<sup>51</sup> All of these products refer either directly, or through side stories, to Druids and Druidic beliefs, either portraying them as evil, good or neutral, very much reflecting human nature. As the primary source did not provide any verifiable and independent assessment of Druidic moral nature, instead of romanticising Druids as just, wise and good, considered as such mostly due to their connection to the nature and the colour white, people should accept the fact that Druids, just like any other *function*, were people, who despite their knowledge and wisdom were not infallible and were prone to their own motivation - for a Roman a Druid was evil, simply because they stood on the other side of the 'fence', whilst for the Gaulish or Celtic tribes, the Druids were the epitome of justice

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<sup>46</sup> OBOD, *The Eightfold Wheel Of The Year*,  
<<https://druidry.org/druid-way/teaching-and-practice/druid-festivals/the-eightfold-wheel-of-the-year>>  
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<sup>47</sup> OBOD, *The Eightfold Wheel Of The Year*.

<sup>48</sup> Penny Billington, *The Path Of Druidry*, p. 15

<sup>49</sup> Alan Chabat, *Asterix And Obelix: Mission Cleopatra*, TF1, 2002.

<sup>50</sup> Julian Jones, *Merlin*, BBC, 2008-2012, 5 seasons.

<sup>51</sup> Marion Zimmer-Bradley, *Mgŷl Avalonu*.

and tightness. This is also the portrayal carried by the pop cultural publications. *Asterix and Obelix* is very much told from the Gaulish point of view, Merlin, from the point of view of Merlin himself, supporting Arthur on his journey and quest, standing in opposition to Uther, something that is reflected by Marion Zimmer-Bradley in her *Mists* (both referring to fog and myths), which, in turn, was told from the perspective of Morgain or Morigain, Morgan or, as the author herself states, any other names she was called 'through the years'. All of these works build upon the mythos created by the revival efforts and the interest this built. All of them tell a story from their unique perspective and the very fact of how popular they are, shows how interesting the subject is to the public. Furthermore, the publications themselves paint a certain imagination of a Druids - wearing white (*Asterix and Obelix*), using magic (*Merlin*) and wise, but not infallible (*Mists of Avalon*). What's particularly interesting is the contrast between BBC's *Merlin* and Zimmer-Bradley's *Mists*, that is the telling of the story from opposite perspectives. Male and female, right and wrong. In the BBC's description, Merlin acts as the protagonist, the hero of good standing. Whilst in Bradley's description Merlin ultimately ends up turned into a tree for treason and Morigain is painted as the hero of the story, one that had to make hard decisions for the sake of Magic or the balance. This perfectly reflects the primary sources and their one-sided description of events and Druidic order, if it could be called as such. This only further serves as proof that one-sided perception does not help the discussion and any potential developments on the subject. Whilst interesting, the pop cultural references and representations carry little weight (with possible exception of *Mists Of Avalon*, simply for how it is treated) and introduce close to no new leads in the Academic discussion about druids. If anything, these lead to various misconceptions and later on an existence of preconceived notions that people carry.

## Summary

When discussing Druidry, whether of the present or of the past, we inevitably face the problem of limited, valid sources to base the ideas on. But only when discussing them as one subject and the first being an extension of the second. When Modern Druidry and Ancient Druidry are divided into two, separate subjects, suddenly we are faced with an interesting aspect of the past and even more interesting modern practice that does not need to be judged for its fundamental historical truths. Therefore, it is this author's belief that these two should get kept separate, aside for the thin line of inspiration that connects them, as ultimately, the past only has as much impact on the present as people allow it to have, and no amount of effort will make the Druids of the present exempt from the war effort or make them universally accepted as judges of the Law. The world has changed and with it the culture, tradition and the norms, therefore the Druids of the past should not be judged by the standards of the present and the Druids of the present should not be judged by the descriptions and recollections of the past as well. This work has described both, the Druidry of the Past and the Druidry of the present, assessing each and providing the sources, as well as non-binding opinions. The subject of Druidry, whether the

present or of the past remains active and not exhausted, as ultimately, every person has the right to judge it for themselves, but nevertheless, what remains interesting is the widespread practice of magically associated wise men of the tribes, whether they be called Druids of Wołchw (Wołochs), Bards or Wróżbici or Ovates and Ofiarnicy. Possibly, what could be crucial in the study of druidry is the cross-cultural cross-examination of beliefs, terms and norms as well as in-depth discussions with those that claim to come from long-lived lines of Druidic or Wołochs practitioners. If the primary sources are used as the basis for what we know now and believed for what they say, the primary source of now, in shape of those practitioners are equally as valid and important and possibly, instead of disregarding them as 'of now' and 'influenced' we should treat them at a face value, just as much as people do with Caesar's or Strabo's or even Tacitus' recollections, completely disregarding their origin, their political influence or their own goals.

It is this author's belief, as mentioned before, that the Druidry of the past and the present should be divided into two, unrelated subjects, not because there is no connection, but because the connection carries no meaning as such in the practices of today. It may be cherished as the relict of the past, but it still remains as something left by those that stood in opposition to the druids. Whether it is appropriate to believe such sources and furthermore use them as basis for an entire new system of beliefs, remains to be said and judged by each individual. This author, on the other hand, as mentioned before, was brought up in a Wołchw tradition from an early age, taught that the knowledge should be passed orally, that oaks are sacred and nature should be protected. That Wołchws learned from Druids, and are separated into three categories, just as they are and always have been and that what is said about the Druids is nothing more than political speech. Having studied the Celtic Studies at University level, however limited the amount of knowledge about Druids was, this author can not, in good conscience, disagree with what he was taught, as everything so far, has proved it nothing, but the truth.

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