Essay 1

Druids were the central skilled learned class in various culturally Celtic inclined societies. The name druid may have meant *'knowing the oak'* and *'philosopher'* or *'seer'* depending on the language dialect. Naturally, there is much cross cultural relevance where the druids are concerned considering that their tradition once spanned the isles as well as western Europe. Despite occupying a massive place in folk history, their identity is murky because we rarely, if ever hear them speak from their own perspective. The absence of native literature from this time period means that our understanding of the druids rests almost entirely upon Greek and Roman authors whose purposes were rarely neutral. Instead, their accounts were shaped by their own exploits and moral philosophy as well as run of the mill stereotyping.

The main writers on the druids specifically and not just the Celts in general were Roman writers Julius Caesar and Publius Cornelius Tacitus as well as Greek writers Strabo and Diodorus Siculus. What we *can* do to remedy our understanding of these quotes is compare them to the mention of druids in medieval literature and in mythical texts throughout the isles. We can then piece together a more accurate picture and see how the classical tellings continue to hold their weight. As an example, the role of chief Ollamh in Ireland survived the arrival of Christianity which was likely the cultural equivalent of the position of chief druid to the Gauls mentioned by Caesar. While a particular nation's chieftain or king were considered their official leader, druid opinion was of high value and foundational to society.

The druid role would likely have been a lifetime role, and was mentioned as such by Caesar.[1], which was true for the Irish Ollamh as well, whereas kings and warriors would have come and gone more readily. Greek historian Diodorus Siculus went as far to say, *"...they have all the multitude subservient to them."*[2] In Ireland, similarly, the chief Ollamh was allowed to wear six colors while chieftains were only allowed to wear five. The Ollamh was also allowed to speak at an assembly before the High King.[3] It's worth noting that St. Patrick himself was said

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[1] Gaius Julius Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, trans. W. A. Macdevitt (London: Macmillan, 1917), Book 6, ch. 13.
[2] Diodorus Siculus. *Library of History (Books III – VIII)*, trans. C. H. Oldfather. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935.
[3] Berresford Ellis, Peter. *A Brief History of the Celts.* Constable & Robinson Ltd, 1998. Pg. 39.

to be the slave of a druid.[4] They were the learned members of society holding valuable cultural and tribal knowledge and history. This was mentioned by Caesar in the way he phrased that the druid education took upwards of 20 years. They did not regard it lawful to commit these to writing, though in all other matters, they used Greek characters. He alluded to the fact that they believed writing too much down could negatively impact their ability to retain knowledge through memory.[5] This was true among the druids in the isles who placed a large emphasis on education and memorization.

In Ireland, the *Filí* or *Filid* are according to Celticist John Koch, the cultural descendants of the druids of old, who had to memorize over 250 major tales and 350 minor ones, aptly thought of as cultural repositories. There were 7 orders of learned poets in Ireland with the highest education and role taking at least over 12 years to acquire. There were also panegyrics of chieftains being read as late as the 1800's in Scotland described by folklorist Alexander Carmichael when he said, "Immediately after the proclamation the chief druid or bard performed a rhetorical panegyric setting forth the ancient pedigree… of the family."[6] There are various texts proving the value of the collecting of herbal knowledge such as *The Physicians of Myddvai* which is a Welsh herbal volume of herbal material attributed to physicians active as early as the 13th century.[7] The importance placed on druidic learning, memorization of history and stories as well as acquiring knowledge in general for the betterment of their people is not generally doubted and this cultural pattern continued through various roles on the isles.

Caesar stated that the Druids believed strongly in reincarnation and alluded that this practice created a general fearlessness of death.[8] Enough stock was placed in reincarnation at minimum that suicide was common when given a good enough reason for it such as defeat in battle. This was speculatively perceived as the better outcome than slavery or torture. Gaulish leader Brennus after the defeat in Delphi and Briton Boudicca after her defeat at the Battle of Watling Street famously

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[4] Patrick, Confessio, in The Confession of St Patrick, ed. by Ludwig Bieler (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), §§14–16.

[5] Gaius Julius Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, trans. W. A. Macdevitt (London: Macmillan, 1917), Book 6, ch. 13.

[6] Alexander Carmichael, "The Bards and Bardism of the Highlands", 16 October 1865, Carmichael-Watson Collection, Coll-97/CW107/1, University of Edinburgh Library Heritage Collections, cited in "The formalities observed… Immediately after the Chief druid (or orator) … setting forth the ancient pedigree, valour, and liberality of the family", p. 162 (unpublished manuscript).

[7] The Physicians of Myddvai; Meddygon Myddfai, or The medical practice of the celebrated Rhiwallon and his sons, of Myddvai, in Caermarthenshire, physicians to Rhys Gryg, ed. by John Williams ab Ithel and trans. by John Pughe (Llandovery: Welsh MSS Society, 1861)

[8] Julius Caesar, Commentarii de Bello Gallico, trans. W. A. McDevitte and W. S. Bohn, 1st edn (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1869), VI.13, p. 203.

committed suicide. One of the most visceral quotes concerning the belief in suicide as well as Roman cruelty comes from Pausanius when he said, "Every woman who chanced to find a Gallic sword committed suicide. The others were soon to die of hunger… the barbarians sating their lust even on the dying and the dead."[9] This belief continued throughout the isles and became very part and parcel of mythical tales where characters were commonly reincarnated into another form or person. For example, in some versions of the Irish tale the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* Cú Chulainn was said to be a reincarnation of Lugh. In the *Wooing of Étaín*, Étaín was transformed and reincarnated into many variations over the span of hundreds of years. In Welsh mythology, magical resurrection via cauldrons, spells, and shapeshifting at minimum serve as mythical symbols for rebirth similarly as in Irish folklore.

The druids were also said to have been seers and commonly perform divinations for their patrons. They were consulted for their ability to predict outcomes and offer counsel on matters of destiny. They were said to have practiced augury, which was to prophesies events based on the movement or song of birds.[10,11] There are a few later quotes related to female druidesses performing divinations for Roman leaders as well.[12,13] This role continued across the isles in varied form and was an incredibly common motif in both Irish and Welsh mythical text as well as embedded within the cultural fabric of the isles themselves. A few Irish examples include, "...he, the chief seer and chief poet. Gaine, nurse of mead-loving Mide, surpassed all woment; she was learned and a seer and a chief druid."[14] Even with the arrival of Christianity, the reverence of seers continued. As an example, before St. Ciarán was conceived, Ciarán's mother had a dream that a star fell in her mouth. She related this to the 'magicians' who were '...the knowledgeable ones.' They

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[9] Pausanias, Description of Greece, trans. by W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Ormerod, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1918), II, p. 527 (X.22.4).
[10]Cicero, De Senectute; De Amicitia; De Divinatione, trans. by William Armistead Falconer (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1923), p. 323.
[11] Plutarch, Plutarch's Morals, trans. from the Greek by several hands, corrected and revised by William W. Goodwin (Boston; Cambridge: Little, Brown, and Company; Press of John Wilson and Son, 1874), vol. 5
[12] Flavius Vopiscus, "The Lives of Carus, Carinus and Numerian," in The Scriptores Historiae Augustae (Historia Augusta), Volume III, ed. and trans. by David Magie, Loeb Classical Library 263 (London; New York: W. Heinemann; G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1932), p. 417.
[13] Aelius Lampridius, The Life of Severus Alexander, in The Scriptores Historiae Augustae (Historia Augusta), ed. and trans. by David Magie, Loeb Classical Library 263 (London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1932), p. 300.
[14] The Metrical Dindshenchas, ed. and trans. by Edward Gwynn (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1903), pp. 44-45.

prophesied that she would birth a son whose virtues would be praised across the world.[15]

The druids were also well understood as bards and musicians. Sicilus said, "They have lyric poets called bards, who, accompanied by instruments resembling lyres, sing both praise and satire…"[16] This tradition is probably one of the most widespread and one that arguably, still continues well into the present. The bards of Ireland had a well known convention from 1616-1619 called *Iomarbhágh na bhFileadh* or *Contention of the Bards* where the principal bardic poets wrote poems against each other and in support of their patrons. The role of praise or satire amongst Irish druids was well known and recorded, even after the *Flight of the Earls.* The Irish also had famed harpers such as Turlough O'Carolan and Pádraig Dall Ó Catháin who were active as late as the 1700's. The Welsh had famous and wonderful well known bards such as Taliesin, Aneirin and Dafydd ap Gwilym.

The druids were also judges according to Caesar, "...for they determine almost all controversies, public and private."[17] This also falls in line with the role of the Irish judges or Brehons. "Brehon" comes from the Irish *brithem*, meaning judge. The *Senchas Már* and other early Irish law codes were mostly pre-Christian and this was written in the prologue of the *Senchas Már* where it is described how the laws of ancient Ireland would remain the same except that the druids lost their status. Dubthach maccu Lugair was a named druid and judge who was named as one of the main contributors. The sense from the text that a true judgement was important and expected of the druids cannot be overstated. It was said that when Brehons deviated from the truth and made a false judgement, red blotches appeared on their cheeks, all the fruit in the territory fell off under ripe or cows refused milk to their calves.[18] For the worst of all offences, a Brehon may be deprived of his profession entirely. If the king committed unlawful or untruthful acts, the king lost half of his dire-fine while the lesser chieftains, priests or poets lost all of it. Many scholars believe that bog bodies may have been ritually dispatched chieftains or kings.

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[15] Standish Hayes O'Grady, Silva Gadelica (I–XXXI): A Collection of Tales in Irish with Extracts Illustrating Persons and Places, ed. and trans. by Standish Hayes O'Grady (New York: Lemma Publishing Corporation, 1970), vol. 2. P 36.

[16] Diodorus Siculus, Bibliotheca Historica, Book V, ch. 31, in The Library of History, trans. C. H. Oldfather, 12 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1933–67), V, pp. 93–95.

[17] Gaius Julius Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, trans. W. A. Macdevitt (London: Macmillan, 1917), Book 6, ch. 13.

[18] Ancient Laws and Institutes of Ireland, trans. by John O'Donovan and Eugene O'Curry, ed. by W. Neilson Hancock, 6 vols (Dublin: Commissioners for Publishing the Ancient Laws and Institutes of Ireland, 1865–1901), I, p.43..

That brings us to the next contested idealism of the druids which was that they performed sacrifice. According to Caesar, the druids oversaw the sacrifices and the entirety of Gaul was "...devoted to superstitious rites… and they who are engaged in battles… sacrifice men as victims."[19] He also went on to say that the Gauls sacrificed the innocent if there was want of the criminal and they believed that life needed to be traded for life. He continued that they went as far to burn great figures of large size filled with living men. Maurus Honoratus described a Gaulish ritual where a member of the peasantry willingly offered himself as sacrifice believing that his offering would end a plague. He was fed well for a year and then paraded around town and adorned in wreaths and vervain before being put to death.[20]

When Caesar mentions the 'innocent,' his clever omission may be that these were willing participants although of course, this fact will remain unknown. As mentioned, scholars believe that Irish bog bodies judging by their appearance and other peculiarities like non-calloused hands and nipples that were removed, may have been failed kings. From this lens, they must have known going into kingship the risk they were taking and although sacrificed, they went into it willingly. There naturally seems to be a pattern of ritual tradition surrounding the process of sacrifice. For example, the Irish bog bodies were seemingly killed in a 'three fold' pattern where their throat was cut, they were strangled and then drowned or placed in the water. Another classical example is that the Gaulish Kimbri were said by Siculus to "...keep prisoners captive for five years until they were impaled in honor of the Gods."[21]

Strabo described a sacrificial ritual also by the Kimbri where "...the senior priestess used to climb and then leaning over the cauldron she cut the throat of each one as he was raised up. On the basis of the blood pouring forth into the bowl they performed a prophecy." There is also an inscription from Gaul that reads "Arete the Druidess, high priestess, guided by her dreams, offered a sacrifice to Silvanus and the local nymphs." One of the most viscerally charged and rather tragic quotes on sacrifice comes to us from Tacitus where he described the Roman assault on Anglesey as "…the groves devoted to Mona's barbarous superstitions he

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[19] Gaius Julius Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, trans. W. A. Macdevitt (London: Macmillan, 1917), Book 6, ch. 13.
[20] Maurus Servius Honoratus. In Vergilii carmina comentarii. Servii Grammatici qui feruntur in Vergilii carmina commentarii; recensuerunt Georgius Thilo et Hermannus Hagen. Georgius Thilo. Leipzig. B. G. Teubner. 1881.
[21] Diodorus Siculus. Library of History (Books III – VIII), trans. C. H. Oldfather. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935.

demolished. For it was their religions to drench their altars in the blood of prisoners."[22] Pliny also described a quite famous druid ritual where they cut mistletoe and 'sacrificed' two white bulls. He also mentions that sacrifices of bread and wine were made before taking harvests of sacred plants.[23] As far as the idea of sacrifice of inanimate objects or animals, this was incredibly common and without as much contestation as human sacrifice. The most common offerings were indeed, inanimate objects such as food, jewelry, coins, weapons, pots, wooden carvings, household goods or bog butter and this continued for a very long time on the isles. Thousands of Gaulish wine amphoras have been found with the tops cut off while they did not have to be cut to pour the wine alluding to a ritual offering and it is still tradition in Ireland for fisherman to offer alcohol into the sea in exchange for a good fishing trip.

There were curious folktales passed down through the generations that had to do with someone or an animal being 'sacrificed' for magical purposes and in Ireland someone murdered may have been given the task to guard a treasure[24] or you had to kill an animal for the treasure to be revealed.[25] Saint Odhran, a monk at Iona Abbey, was purportedly offered as a sacrifice during the construction of the abbey. The main cemetery on Iona is still called *Reilig Odhráin*, meaning "Odhran's burial ground." Some stories suggest that Odhran may have offered to be buried alive, possibly influenced by lingering tradition. When his grave was opened a few days later, he spoke disturbing words and the grave was sealed again. In the same passage it is mentioned that there was an 'ancient' tradition that a building could be made secure by walling up a human being or animal alive. Although, this may be more fanciful than fact. [26]

Looking at the available sources, it becomes clear that it is entirely possible the druids performed sacrifices based both on classical sources as well as later folklore but to what extent the sacrifice of innocents was practiced, will remain largely

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[22] Cornelius Tacitus, The Annals, Book XIV, ch. 30, in Tacitus: The Annals, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (London: Macmillan, 1876), pp. 156–57.
[23] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, XVI.95, in *Natural History*, trans. by H. Rackham, 10 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1938–63), V, pp. 90–93.
[24] Irish Folk Duchas, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0834, Page 104. "Before the treasure is got one of the men is supposed to be killed that is digging for the treasure otherwise the treasure will not be got."
[25] Irish Folk Duchas, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0230, Page 005. "There is a bull watching the treasure. The treasure is in an "alth". There is a knif to kill the bull. The person who seeks the treasure has to kill the bull with the knife before he gets the treasure."
[26] Adamnan, William Reeves. Adamnani Vita S. Columbae. 1892. Pg. 242.

unknown. There were undoubtedly unique and nuanced beliefs and practices between nations. There is always the issue of bias and missing cultural context to consider. This idea of putting someone to death as a sacrifice was, most importantly, not unique to Celtic culture. It was so prevalent at that time in our history, it may have been an inspiration for the story of Christ's own sacrifice himself. Most cultures of the world practiced sacrifice of their criminals and war prisoners as well as suicide so this is not surprising but it has for some reason permeated the Druid legacy.

It is still highly possible that classical authors may have likely sensationalised sacrificial rites to emphasise the otherness of Celtic peoples. The motif of 'bloodthirsty' priests reinforced Roman claims to moral superiority and provided ideological support for conquest. Beyond ritual, classical texts attributed significant political influence to the Druids. The Roman suppression of the Druids on Anglesey further cements their perceived threat. A class of religious leaders capable of uniting divided and argumentative tribes and legitimising rebellion posed a challenge to imperial stability. By dismantling druidic institutions, Rome was underhandedly working at consolidating power and bringing elite rulers in Gaul and Britain under and into their empire. Most of what classical authors said may have been true but even a small amount of exaggeration could go a long way when Romans at home may have not had much first hand experience with native Gaulish, British, Welsh, Scottish or Irish nations.

In conclusion, classical texts present a complex and often contradictory picture of the Druids. They depict a powerful priestly class central to religious, legal, and intellectual life. These sources emphasise doctrines of immortality, long training, and social privilege. At the same time, they highlight human sacrifice and barbaric rites, most famously in Tacitus' account of Mona's sacred groves. Such depictions reflect both possible ritual realities however, most certainly, they depict Roman ideological bias, including hypocrisy and false moral superiority. The Druids, as seen through classical eyes, are simultaneously historical figures and literary constructs. The classical tellings do not provide unmediated access to the Druids, but they remain indispensable sources. A critical approach must neither accept these accounts at face value nor dismiss them. Instead, we should recognise the layered nature of the sources as products of conquest, literary art, and partial truth.

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