

HPCS7005

Celtic Sanctity, Spirituality and Hagiography

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Assignment 1:

i) ‘... the groves devoted to Mona’s [i.e. Anglesey] barbarous superstitions be demolished. For it was their [the Druid’s] religions to drench their altars with 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: 2,640

Tacitus, a Roman writer and historian, records an event that took place on Mona (i.e. Anglesey) shortly after Gaius Suetonius Paulinus was appointed governor of Britain in 58 AD.¹ Tacitus, however, was not an eyewitness. Indeed, he was only born in c. 56 AD.² His description of the Druids, a group of religious individuals who killed prisoners barbarically, is one that is hard to dismiss. These mysterious individuals, important leaders in Celtic society, were described at length by Classical authors, both Roman and Greek, over the centuries. These accounts, though, must be viewed with caution: like Tacitus, it is unlikely the writers physically encountered Druids; some were writing many years after they existed. Even within the Classical tradition, Druids are not only described as blood-thirsty priests, but also as philosophers, scholars, astronomers and healers. Classical authors composed their texts with an agenda. Other sources available to ‘test’ the validity of these accounts include archaeological evidence, hagiographical and mythological texts, but each can be interpreted in a variety of ways and must be considered with caution. In short, it is incredibly difficult to understand the true nature of the Druids, given that they themselves did not leave their own written testimonies.

Druids are a staple of Classical works. Each portray Druids slightly differently, depending on the nature of the work and motivation of the author, though there are several shared themes. However, they do promote a particular view of Druids, some more blood-thirsty than others, which has stuck, and have also influenced later authors and interpreters of excavated material culture. When considering the light thrown on the Druids, one of the major contributors was Julius Caesar. His *Gallic War*, written c. 50 BC,³ following his campaigns in Gaul, was no doubt intended to show Romans that the Gauls were barbarians,

¹ John Roberts, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 733.

² Roberts, *Dictionary of the Classical World*, p. 739. See also, Nora K. Chadwick, *The Druids* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966), p. 38.

³ Carolyn Hammond, trans., *Julius Caesar: Seven Commentaries on The Gallic War, with an Eighth Commentary by Aulus Hirtius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. xviii.

thereby justifying his invasion; Caesar intended to show the saving and civilising power of Rome.⁴ In Book Six, Caesar notes the Druids a major participant in Gaulish (or ‘Celtic’) society, along with the knights. Caesar describes many facets to the Druids: as teachers, memorisers of poetry, and as arbitrators (including a yearly sitting of judgement in the land of the Carnutes).⁵ He also emphasises an aspect that is clearly repugnant to him, that being the sacrifice of criminals, or the innocent, frequently in flaming wicker effigies.⁶ Whereas Tacitus stresses the bloodthirsty nature of the Druids, Caesar does highlight other, more peaceful pursuits, together with their religious beliefs, such as the immortality of the soul.

Thus, Caesar gives a complex picture of the Druids, unlike Tacitus, the latter after all noting the Mona episode in a much larger historical work; nevertheless to Caesar the Druids are still an ethnological aside.⁷ The bloodthirsty image however is perpetuated in these Classical texts: the Druids as a barbarous people who need civilising. Although it is difficult to be certain whether Caesar actually encountered a Druid personally, it is thought he drew on the earliest available text on this subject, one by Posidonius, now lost.⁸ This Syriac-born Greek philosopher, who lived c. 135-50 BC,⁹ emphasised Druids as sophisticated thinkers, scientists and proponents of the immortal soul; this description was exaggerated and altered by later writers.¹⁰

Most of the Classical texts are remarkably similar in their descriptions of the Druids, though different authors emphasised particular aspects. Strabo, who lived in the first century BC and studied in Rome, writes about Druids and sacrifice.¹¹ Other Classical authors also

⁴ Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 3 and 5.

⁵ Hammond, *Julius Caesar*, pp. 126 – 128.

⁶ Hammond, *Julius Caesar*, pp. 126 and 128.

⁷ Miranda J. Green, *Exploring the World of the Druids* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), p. 42.

⁸ Chadwick, *Druids*, p. 40, and Hammond, *Julius Caesar*, p. xxvi,

⁹ Green, *Exploring the World of the Druids*, p. 40.

¹⁰ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 9.

¹¹ Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids: Story of an Ancient Priesthood* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 67.

introduced elements which are now part-and-parcel of our conception of Druids. Pliny the Elder, writing about natural history in the first century AD, had white-clothed Druids worshipping in sacred groves, cutting mistletoe with a golden sickle and sacrificing bulls.¹² He even suggests the word 'Druid' is itself derived from the Greek for 'oak tree.'¹³ There are of course references in other works, but together they give a picture of Druids as priests, teachers, judges, 'magicians', and philosophers, though their blood-thirsty nature was still stressed depending on the motivation of the writer.

One source, which should bring us closer in time to the Druids themselves, is the physical material left by them, discovered and interpreted by archaeologists. Indeed, Aldhouse-Green points out that if Strabo and Caesar's accounts of the Druids' sacrificial and priestly roles are accurate, one would expect to find it in the archaeological record.¹⁴ Caution, though, must be exercised when investigating artefacts dating from the Iron Age and/or from time of the Roman Empire. Although the chronology may fit with the existence of the Druids, it is incredibly problematic to connect a specific artefact with the Druids themselves, even though both were present at the same time.¹⁵

Given these caveats, what can be gleaned from the material evidence, and how does it contribute to our reading of the Classical accounts? As Tacitus focuses on the Druidic altars drenched in blood, does the material evidence prove such an accusation? Sadly, the evidence is ambiguous, and, once again, impossible to link directly, and incontrovertibly, with the Druids themselves. Among the archaeological record are bodies preserved miraculously because of environmental conditions, which show signs of ritualised killing; these are the so-called 'bog bodies.' The most famous is known as Lindow Man, who was discovered in

¹² Green, *Exploring the World of the Druids*, p. 18.

¹³ Chadwick, *Druids*, p. 12. See also T.G.E. Powell, *The Celts*, Ancient Peoples and Places 6 (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958), p. 156.

¹⁴ Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids*, p. 70.

¹⁵ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 23.

marshy conditions at Lindow Moss, Cheshire, in 1984.¹⁶ The general consensus is that the man was in his early twenties, and lived in the first century AD,¹⁷ though Hutton suggests a range of 5 to 3 BC, and Webster 2 BC to 119 AD.¹⁸ The body displays evidence suggestive of ritualised killing: he had received blows to the head, was garrotted and had his throat cut.¹⁹ Moreover, the body wore an armlet of fox fur, which may be symbolic; a few grains of mistletoe pollen, a plant Pliny the Elder said was sacred to the Druids, was in his stomach along with a final meal of grain and chaff.²⁰ From this description, it sounds like some sort of sacrifice. However, the garrote could in fact be a necklace, the gashes to the neck a post-mortem injury, and the grains of mistletoe the result of contamination, rather than some religious 'last supper.'²¹

As noted, the archaeological evidence for Druidic sacrifice is problematic, and fails to support the assertions in Classical texts to any degree. Other examples often cited about sacrificial pursuits, include Windeby Girl. This girl, who was between twelve and fourteen years old when she died, was found at Windeby, Schleswig-Holstein. One side of her head appears to have been shaved, she is naked apart from an ox-hide collar and seems to have been 'pinned down' by birch branches and a large stone.²² Once again, the unusual manner, or so it seems, of her death has been taken to indicate some sort of sacrifice. Once again, the evidence can be interpreted in different ways. Research suggests that the body is in fact that of a boy, who died of a long illness rather than trauma, whose 'blindfold' may in fact have

¹⁶ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 27.

¹⁷ Green, *Exploring the World of the Druids*, p. 81, and Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids*, p. 71.

¹⁸ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 27, and Webster, 'Dirty Window', p. 125.

¹⁹ Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids*, p. 71.

²⁰ Green, *Exploring the World of the Druids*, p. 81, and Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids*, p. 72.

²¹ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 28.

²² Green, *Exploring the World of the Druids*, p. 83.

been a band of cloth utilised to keep his hair in place and had slipped, and that the 'shaved head' could have been the result of post-mortem decay.²³

Numerous other examples have been utilised to support the Classical descriptions of sacrifice. These include the discovery of bones of young men at Ribemont-sur-Ancre in Northern France, which were broken, crushed and burned, with eighty headless bodies on an outer wall of a box-like construction.²⁴ This could be the result of war, rather than a ritual to honour Celtic gods. Thus, the case for Druidic sacrifice has not really been proved by the archaeological record. However, there is one artifact that may appear to give credence to the descriptions of Druids as men of science. In 1897, a fragmentary bronze sheet was unearthed north of Coligny (Aix), which has been dated to the first century BC, though Aldhouse-Green fixes it a couple of centuries later, and displays columns with part of a five-year lunar calendar.²⁵ This may have been used by people to fix auspicious dates, but who used it? For Powell it was the Druids,²⁶ though Hutton suggests it could have been them, or possibly other scholars.²⁷ Therefore, the archaeological record is far from proving the Classical descriptions of Druids.

Other sources available to the historian of Druids are later in date and have their own particular difficulties in terms of interpretation, partly because of the genre of those sources and manner of translations. One of those genres is hagiography, a genre that covers accounts of the lives, ministries and deaths of saints, both men and women, and sometimes incorporates records of post-mortem miracles, too. Druids appear in these texts, often as

²³ Jarrett A. Lobell and Semir S. Patel, 'Windeby Girl and Weerdinge Couple,' in *Archaeology: a Publication of the Archaeological Institute of America* 63, No. 3 (May/June 2010): <http://archive.archaeology.org/1005/bogbodies/windeby-weerdinge> <Accessed 31 March 2023>

²⁴ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, pp. 24 – 25, and Jane Webster 'A Dirty Window on the Iron Age? Recent Developments in the Archaeology of Pre-Roman Celtic Religion,' in *Understanding Celtic Religion: Revisiting the Pagan Past*, ed. K. Ritari and A. Bergholm, New Approaches to Celtic Religion and Mythology (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015) pp. 121 - 154 (pp. 129 – 130).

²⁵ Powell, *Celts*, p. 274, and Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids*, pp. 114 – 115.

²⁶ Powell, *Celts*, p. 274.

²⁷ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 28.

characters with whom the saint does spiritual battle, an activity showing ultimate superiority of the Christian faith over paganism.²⁸

One good example of the ‘battling’ saint can be found in the life of St Patrick by Muirchú, written in the seventh century and therefore one of the oldest examples of literature concerning Ireland,²⁹ though the saint himself was active in the fifth century. In this *vita* Patrick confronts High King Loegaire at Tara, who is surrounded by wise men, soothsayers, enchanters and others, who predict the coming of Patrick.³⁰ Eventually, Patrick lights an Easter fire, in direct opposition to a fire lit at Tara, leading to Loegaire’s wizards being raised in the air, an attempt to poison Patrick, and a contest involving the burning of a wooden house and the saving of boys’ lives.³¹

The chief problem with this as a source for studying Druids in Classical texts, is that it was written many years after Patrick had lived, years after Druidism had been eradicated elsewhere, and with a specific agenda in mind. As Hutton highlights, Muirchú casts Patrick in the mould of Old Testament heroes, like Moses and Aaron confronting the magicians of Pharaoh; there is also an echo of the prophet Elijah and his contest with the priests of Baal.³² This reduces these text’s usefulness as a source for this study. Moreover, there is also a question over translation. In the Latin, the magicians of Laoghaire are noted as *magi*, which began to be translated as *druidae* from the ninth century onwards,³³ and so the presence of Druids in this *vita*, as Classical writers understood them, is questionable. However, it does say something of an understanding of the unworldly, and magical nature, of those individuals. Similarly, a later Middle Irish homily, referring to pagan ‘priests’ on Iona prior to St

²⁸ Green, *Exploring the World of the Druids*, p. 136.

²⁹ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 35.

³⁰ A.B.E. Hood, ed. and trans., *St Patrick: His Writings and His Life*, Arthurian Period Sources 9 (Chichester: Phillimore, 1978), p. 86.

³¹ For what follows, see Muirchú in Hood, *St Patrick*, pp. 88 – 92.

³² Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 35.

³³ Chadwick, *Druids*, p. 14.

Columba's arrival, employs the Irish word *druíd* (singular *druí*); this has led to later misunderstandings of Druids present on the island.³⁴

It should be noted that Patrick, who wrote two letters, both of which survive, does not mention Druids, neither does he record a 'supernatural' encounter at Tara. Hagiographical works, therefore, have to be treated with caution. Similarly other texts, those written in the vernacular, which also reference Druids have to be read with care. The Ulster Cycle of stories, put together between the seventh and eighth centuries, are understood to have been derived from oral tradition.³⁵ The most famous of the tales is the *Táin Bo Cuailnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), which has the Druid Cathbadh at the court of Conchobar of Ulster, who is shown as a judge, arbitrator and a teacher of 'Druid Lore' to one hundred pupils.³⁶ These aspects of a Druid's role fits with the Classical description, though the Ulster Cycle, which survives in a twelfth-century manuscript, was compiled later; Jackson however argues it shows pre-Christian Ireland of around 400 AD.³⁷ Moving away from Irish to Welsh sources, the tenth-century poem *Armes Prydein*, notes that Druids foretold the future, though the word *derwydon* has been translated as both 'Druids' and 'wise men.'³⁸ Both types of source, then, the Latin and vernacular, the hagiographical and more 'mythological' texts, cannot safely be used to enhance our understanding of druids, or help us to interrogate the Classical accounts with any rigour.

The Druids did not leave written records about themselves, and so the earliest historical material we possess about them were authored by Greeks and Romans. They portray a body of men who were leaders in Celtic society, judges, scientists, philosophers, teachers, preservers of oral tradition, and priests who appeased the gods through human

³⁴ Richard Sharpe, trans., *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 20.

³⁵ Green, *Exploring the World of the Druids*, p. 8.

³⁶ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 32.

³⁷ Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 57.

³⁸ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 47.

sacrifice. These works were naturally biased. They were written, chiefly, by those who wished to emphasise the barbarity of these people, contrasted with the civilising influence of others. It is difficult to discover the truth amidst the writing. Other sources available to us, such as archaeological evidence, later vernacular and Latin texts, are interpreted in different ways, or indeed were also written with an agenda in mind. In some cases, the translations of words offer problems. In conclusion, very little of this material helps us to strip fiction from fact. The Druids, therefore, will inevitably remain mysterious, and Classical literature will continue to colour our readings of other texts and contemporary artefacts.

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