

Druid

A **druid** was a member of the high-ranking class in ancient Celtic cultures. Druids were religious leaders as well as legal authorities, adjudicators, lore keepers, medical professionals and political advisors. Druids left no written accounts. While they were reported to have been literate, they are believed to have been prevented by doctrine from recording their knowledge in written form. Their beliefs and practices are attested in some detail by their contemporaries from other cultures, such as the Romans and the Greeks.

The earliest known references to the druid's date to the 4th century BCE. The oldest detailed description comes from Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (50s BCE). They were described by other Roman writers such as Cicero, Tacitus, and Pliny the Elder. Following the Roman invasion of Gaul, the druid orders were suppressed by the Roman government under the 1st-century CE emperors Tiberius and Claudius, and had disappeared from the written record by the 2nd century. In about 750 CE, the word druid appears in a poem by Blathmac, who wrote about Jesus, saying that he was *"better than a prophet, more knowledgeable than every druid, a king who was a bishop and a complete sage."*

The origin of the word 'Druid' is unclear, but the most popular view is that it comes from 'doire', an Irish-Gaelic word for oak tree (often a symbol of knowledge), also meaning 'wisdom'. Druids were concerned with the natural world and its powers, and considered trees sacred, particularly the oak. There is a lot of mystery shrouding the actual history of the Druids, as our knowledge is based on limited records. Druidism is thought to have been a part of Celtic and Gaulish culture in Europe, with the first classical reference to them in the 2nd century BC.

Practices and doctrines

Societal role and training

The Greco-Roman and the vernacular Irish sources agree that the druids played an important part in pagan Celtic society. In his description, Julius Caesar wrote that they were one of the two most important social groups in the region (alongside the *equites*, or nobles) and were responsible for organizing worship and sacrifices, divination, and judicial procedure in Gallic, British, and Irish societies.

Two other classical writers, Diodorus Siculus and Strabo, wrote about the role of druids in Gallic society, stating that the druids were held in such respect that if they intervened between two armies, they could stop the battle. Their practices were similar to those of priests today, connecting the people with the gods, but their role was also varied and wide-ranging, acting as teachers, scientists, judges and philosophers. They were incredibly powerful and respected, able to banish people from society for breaking the sacred laws. Pomponius Mela was the first author to say that the druids' instruction was secret and took place in caves and forests. Druidic lore consisted of a large number of verses learned by heart, and Caesar remarked that it could take up to twenty years to complete the course of study. What was taught to druid novices anywhere is conjecture: of the druids' oral literature, not one certifiably ancient verse is known to have survived, even in translation. All instruction was communicated orally, but for ordinary purposes, Caesar reports, the Gauls had a written language in which they used Greek letters. In this he probably draws on earlier writers; by the time of Caesar, Gaulish inscriptions had moved from Greek script to Latin script. The Isle of Ynys Mon, Anglesey, and Wistman's Wood in Dartmoor are both believed to be Druidic sites. Indeed, Anglesey was supposedly a place where Druids were taught.

Druidism can be described as a shamanic religion, as it relied on a combination of contact with the spirit world and holistic medicines to treat (and sometimes cause) illnesses. They were said to have induced insanity in people and been accurate fortune tellers. Some of their knowledge of the earth and space may have come from megalithic times.

Within the Druid class, it is believed that there were subsections, all with color-coded robes. The eldest Druid, or one deemed to be the wisest, was the Arch-druid, and would wear gold robes. The ordinary Druids would wear white and act as priests. The Sacrificers would fight and wear red. The blue Bards were artistic, and the new recruits to Druidism completed lesser tasks and were held in lesser esteem, wearing brown or black.

All aspects of Druidism were well structured and ordered; from the hierarchy of the Druid class, to their pattern of life that followed nature's cycles. They observed lunar, solar and seasonal cycles and worshipped according to these on 8 main holy days:

- **Samhain**, the day that we refer to as Halloween (31st October). This was when the last harvest would take place and it was a day full of mysticism and spirituality because the living and the deceased were the closest to being revealed to each other than on any other day.
- **Yule** was the winter solstice, a time when Druids would sit on mounds of earth, for example at New Grange in Ireland, throughout the night, waiting for sunrise, when they would be reborn.
- **Imbolc** (2nd February) involved using sheep's milk by way of celebrating motherhood.
- **Ostara** was the spring equinox.
- **Beltane** took place on 30th April as a festival of fertility.
- **Litha** was the summer solstice, a time when they believed that the 'holly king' took over from the 'oak king' of Yule.
- **Lughnasa** was the first harvest on 2nd August.
- **Mabon** was the autumnal equinox.

Then the cycle of holy days would repeat itself again, reflecting the cycles of nature, planets and indeed life itself, as the Druids believed in reincarnation. They also believed that sins committed in a previous life could be made up for in the next.



Their places of worship ("Temples of the Druids") were quiet, secluded areas, like clearings in woods and forests, and stone circles. Probably the most famous stone circle in Britain is Stonehenge, an ancient megalithic monument dating back to about 2400 B.C. Most people's first thoughts about the Druids might be of them congregating around Stonehenge and casting magical incantations. There is indeed thought that this was a place of worship for them, as it still is today for pagans and other neo-druids. There is disagreement though, about whether the Druids built Stonehenge or not. It is not clear exactly when the Druids came to Britain, but it is likely that they actually arrived after Stonehenge was built.

Sacrifice

Greek and Roman writers frequently made reference to the druids as practitioners of human sacrifice. Caesar says those who had been found guilty of theft or other criminal offences were considered preferable for use as sacrificial victims, but when criminals were in short supply, innocents would be acceptable. Diodorus Siculus asserts that a sacrifice acceptable to the Celtic gods had to be attended by a druid, for they were the intermediaries between the people and the divinities. Some historians have questioned whether the Greco-Roman writers were accurate in their claims. J. Rives remarked that it was "ambiguous" whether druids ever performed such sacrifices, for the Romans and Greeks were known to project what they saw as barbarian traits onto foreign peoples including not only druids but Jews and Christians as well, thereby confirming their own "cultural superiority" in their own minds.

Philosophy

Alexander Cornelius Polyhistor referred to the druids as philosophers and called their doctrine of the immortality of the soul and reincarnation or metempsychosis, "Pythagorean":

The Pythagorean doctrine prevails among the Gauls' teaching that the souls of men are immortal, and that after a fixed number of years they will enter into another body.

Diodorus Siculus, writing in 36 BCE, described how the druids followed "the Pythagorean doctrine", that human souls "are immortal and after a prescribed number of years they commence a new life in a new body".

Druids in mythology

Druids play a prominent role in Irish folklore, generally serving lords and kings as high-ranking priest-counselors with the gift of prophecy and other assorted mystical abilities – the best example of these possibly being Cathbad. The chief druid in the court of King Conchobar mac Nessa of Ulster, Cathbad features in several tales, most of which detail his ability to foretell the future. In the tale of Deirdre of the Sorrows – the foremost tragic heroine of the Ulster Cycle – the druid prophesied before the court of Conchobar that Deirdre would grow up to be very beautiful, and that kings and lords would go to war over her, much blood would be shed because of her, and Ulster's three greatest warriors would be forced into exile for her sake. This prophecy, ignored by the king, came true.

Female druids

Irish mythology has a number of female druids, often sharing similar prominent cultural and religious roles with their male counterparts. The Irish have several words for female druids, such as *bandruí* ("woman-druid"). Druid women were also considered equal to men in many respects, unusual for an ancient community. They could take part in wars and even divorce their husbands.

According to classical authors, the Gallizenae (or Gallisenae) were virgin priestesses of the Île de Sein off Pointe du Raz, Finistère, western Brittany. Their existence was first mentioned by the Greek geographer Artemidorus Ephesius and later by the Greek historian Strabo, who wrote that their island was forbidden to men, but the women came to the mainland to meet their husbands.

According to Historia Augusta, Alexander Severus received a prophecy about his death by a Gaul druidess (druidessa). The work also has Aurelian questioning those druidesses about the fate of his descendants, to which they answered in favor of Claudius II. Flavius Vopiscus is also quoted as recalling a prophecy received by Diocletian from a Tungri druidess.

Sources on druid beliefs and practices

The earliest surviving literary evidence of druids emerges from the classical world of Greece and Rome. Historian Nora Chadwick, in a categorization subsequently adopted by Piggott, divided the Classical accounts of the druids into two groups, distinguished by their approach to the subject as well as their chronological contexts. She calls the first of these groups the "Posidonian" tradition after one of its primary exponents, Posidonius, and notes that it takes a largely critical attitude towards the Iron Age societies of Western Europe that emphasizes their "barbaric" qualities. The second of these two groups is termed the "Alexandrian" group, being centred on the scholastic traditions of Alexandria, Egypt; she notes that it took a more sympathetic and idealized attitude toward these foreign peoples.

One school of thought has suggested that all of these accounts are inherently unreliable, and might be entirely fictional. They have suggested that the idea of the druid might have been a fiction created by Classical writers to reinforce the idea of the barbaric "other" who existed beyond the civilized Greco-Roman world, thereby legitimizing the expansion of the Roman Empire into these areas.

The earliest record of the druids comes from two Greek texts of c. 300 BC:

Some say that the study of philosophy originated with the barbarians. In that among the Persians there existed the Magi, and among the Babylonians or Assyrians the Chaldaei, among the Indians the Gymnosophistae, and among the Celts and Gauls men who were called druids and semnothei.

Subsequent Greek and Roman texts from the 3rd century BCE refer to "barbarian philosophers", possibly in reference to the Gaulish druids.

The earliest extant text that describes druids in detail is Julius Caesar's Commentarii de Bello Gallico, book VI, written in the 50s or 40s BC. He said they played an important part in Gaulish society, being one of the two respected classes along with the equites (in Rome the name for members of a privileged class above the common people, but also "horsemen") and that they performed the function of judges. Caesar wrote that the druids recognized the authority of a single leader, who would rule until his death, when a successor would be chosen by vote or through conflict. He remarked that they met annually at a sacred place in the region occupied by the Carnute tribe in Gaul, while they viewed Britain as the centre of druidic study; and that they were not found among the German tribes to the east of the Rhine. According to Caesar, many young men were trained to be druids, during which time they had to learn all the associated lore by heart. He also said that their main teaching was "the souls do not perish, but after death pass from one to another". They were concerned with "the stars and their movements, the size of the cosmos and the earth, the world of nature, and the power and might of the immortal gods", indicating they were involved with not only such common aspects of religion as theology and cosmology, but also astronomy.

Though he had first-hand experience of Gaulish people, and therefore likely druids, Caesar's account has been widely criticized by modern historians as inaccurate. One issue raised by such historians as Fustel de Coulanges, was that while Caesar described the druids as a significant power within Gaulish society, he did not mention them even once in his accounts of his Gaulish conquests. ***Daphne Nash believed it "not unlikely" that he "greatly exaggerates" both the centralized system of druidic leadership and its connection to Britain.*** Archaeologist Miranda Aldhouse-Green (2010) asserted that Caesar offered both "our richest textual source" regarding the druids, and "one of the most reliable". She defended the accuracy of his accounts by highlighting that while he may have embellished some of his accounts to justify Roman imperial conquest, it was "inherently unlikely" that he constructed a fictional class system for Gaul and Britain, particularly considering that he was accompanied by a number of other Roman senators who would have also been sending reports on the conquest to Rome, and who would have challenged his inclusion of serious falsifications.

Other classical writers also commented on the druids and their practices. Caesar's contemporary, Cicero, noted that he had met a Gallic druid, Divitiacus, of the Aedui tribe. Divitiacus supposedly knew much about the natural world and performed divination through augury (*Augury is the practice from ancient Roman religion of interpreting omens from the observed behavior of birds.*)

Another classical writer to take up describing the druids not too long after was Diodorus Siculus. He remarked how there were poets and singers in Celtic society whom he called bardous, or bards. Such an idea was expanded on by Strabo, writing in the 20s CE, who declared that amongst the Gauls, there were three types of honored figures:

- The poets and singers known as bardoi,
- The diviners and specialists in the natural world known as o'vateis
- Those who studied "moral philosophy", the druidai

Roman writer Tacitus, himself a senator and historian, described how when the Roman army, led by Suetonius Paulinus, attacked the island of Mona, the legionaries were awestruck on landing, by the appearance of a band of druids, who, with hands uplifted to the sky,

poured forth terrible expletives on the heads of the invaders. *Tacitus is also the only primary source that gives accounts of druids in Britain, but maintains a hostile point of view, seeing them as ignorant savages.*

There is no specific dress code for ritual within the Druidic movement; some participants wear ordinary clothes, others wear robes. Some groups favor earth-colored robes, believing that this links them to the natural world and that it aids them in traveling unnoticed when going about at night.

The most common form of ritual used for seasonal celebrations is a solitary nature ramble to observe and connect with nature, combined with a personal meditation on the meaning of the season at hand. When larger, group rituals are organized among Druids, the rituals tend to be more elaborate and formally structured, with a fixed ceremonial framework unique to the Druid group, and a central ritual activity that varies with the season.

In the British Isles, Druid group rituals often involve the participants standing in a circle and begin with a "calling of the quarters", in which a participant draws a circle in the air in a deosil direction to hail the north, south, east, and west, marking out the space in which the ceremony will take place. *Libations may be poured onto the ground while a chalice of drink is passed around the assembled participants, again in a deosil direction. Food, often in the form of bread or cake, is also passed around the Druids and consumed. This may be followed by a period of meditation among those assembled. A form of earth energy is then visualized, with participants believing that it is sent for a designated healing purpose.* This may be designed to help the victims of a particular event, such as a war or an epidemic, or it might be directed to assist individuals known to the group who are ill or requiring emotional support. After the end of the ceremony, the Druids may remain together to take part in a meal, or visit a nearby pub.

Archaeology

As the historian Jane Webster stated, "individual druids ... are unlikely to be identified archaeologically". A. P. Fitzpatrick, in examining what he believed to be astral symbolism on Late Iron Age swords has expressed difficulties in relating any material culture, even the Coligny calendar, with druidic culture.



An excavated burial in Deal, Kent discovered the "Deal Warrior" – a man buried around 200–150 BCE with a sword and shield, and wearing an almost unique head-band, too thin to be part of a leather helmet. The crown is bronze with a broad band around the head and a thin strip crossing the top of the head. Since traces of hair were left on the metal it must have been worn without any padding beneath. The form of the headdress resembles depictions of Romano-British priests from several centuries later, leading to speculation among archaeologists that the man might have been a religious official – a druid.

Prohibition and decline under Roman rule

In the Gallic Wars of 58–51 BC, the Roman army, led by Julius Caesar, conquered the many tribal chiefdoms of Gaul, and annexed it as a part of the Roman Republic. According to accounts produced in the following centuries, the new rulers of Roman Gaul subsequently introduced measures to wipe out the druids from that country. *Rome's first emperor, Augustus, had decreed that no-one could be both a druid and a Roman citizen, and that this was followed by a law passed by the later Emperor Claudius which "thoroughly suppressed" the druids by banning their religious practices.*

Possible late survival of Insular druid orders

The best evidence of a druidic tradition in the British Isles is the independent cognate of the Celtic **druwid-* in Insular Celtic: The Old Irish *druídecht* survives in the meaning of 'magic', and the Welsh *dryw* in the meaning of 'seer'.

While the druids as a priestly caste were extinct with the Christianization of Wales, complete by the 7th century at the latest, the offices of bard and of "seer" (Welsh: *dryw*) persisted in medieval Wales into the 13th century.

Archaeologist Stuart Piggott, author of *The Druids* (1968), accepted the Greco-Roman accounts and considered the druids to be a barbaric and savage priesthood who performed human sacrifices. This view was largely supported by another archaeologist, Anne Ross, author of *Pagan Celtic Britain* (1967) and *The Life and Death of a Druid Prince* (1989), though she believed that they were essentially tribal priests, having more in common with the shamans of tribal societies than with the classical philosophers.

Modern Druids

Today, the practice of modern Druidism is alive and well in two different branches of neo-Druidism. The Druid Order was the most well-known contemporary society of modern Druids until the early '60s when a new order, known as the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD) was established. This division has since gained notoriety across the world, claiming a 20,000-person membership.

1. OBOD runs online mentorships, classes, and workshops to develop its three disciplines, described as a spiritual practice that speaks to creativity, nature and wisdom. The three categorizations of OBOD are alternatively described as the Singer, Shaman, and Sage.
2. The Druid Order is known for the ceremonies conducted at Stonehenge throughout the year during Solstices and Equinoxes. They have conducted these for over a century and look to the cycle of the seasons as a regulator and key to unlock inner harmony. They see modern Druidic beliefs not as a religion, but more as a fraternity or esoteric society that accepts all religions. They also pride themselves in observing and minding their own business. Only when asked for advice will a member of the Druid Order give his opinion.



One of the basics of the Druidic beliefs is the idea of Awen or the divine inspiration. It is otherwise described as gnosis, or the intuitive wisdom derived from the practice of Druidism. It is thought to be unique in every individual and is described as poetic inspiration. Awen is used to describe the poetry used by bards to pass down the story of the Druids, and modern usage describes poets and musicians in the same way. The symbol of Awen is depicted by three rays representing harmony and universal balance.

In Druidry, a specific ceremony takes place known as an Eisteddfod, which is dedicated to the recitation of poetry and musical performances. Within the Druidic community, practitioners who are particularly skilled in their recitation of poetry or their performance of music are referred to as Bards. Although bardism can also be found in other Pagan traditions such as Eco-Paganism, it is of particular importance within Druidry. Bards perform at Eisteddfod at various occasions, from formal rituals to pub get-togethers and summer camps and environmental protests. Among the Druidic community, it is often believed that bards should be divinely inspired in producing their work.

Storytelling is important within Druidry, with stories chosen often coming from the vernacular literature of linguistically Celtic countries or from Arthurian legend. Musical performances typically draw from the folk musical traditions of Ireland, Scotland, England, France, and Brittany. Instruments used commonly include lap harps, mandolins, whistles, bag pipes, and guitars. Bards utilize archaic words such as "t'was", "thence", and "deeds", while speaking in a grandiose manner of intonation. The general purpose of bardism, according to scholar of religion and bard Andy Letcher, is to create an "ambience" of "a catchall ahistorical past; a Celtic, medieval, Tolkienesque, once-upon-a-time enchanted world".

Among many Druids, there is a system of tree lore, through which different associations are attributed to different species of tree, including particular moods, actions, phases of life, deities and ancestors. Different species of trees are often linked to the ogham alphabet, which is employed in divination by Druids. Rather than ogham, some practitioners favor coelbren—an alphabet likely devised by Iolo Morganwg—for their divinatory practices.

Many Druids engage in a range of healing therapies, with both herbalism and homeopathy being popular within the Druidic community.

By 2020, modern Druidry had spread to 34 nations, across 6 continents, and had taken root in 17 diverse biomes. The importance that modern Druids attributed to Celtic language and culture, circa 2020, varied depending upon the physical and cultural environments in which the individual Druid lived.

By 2020, roughly 92% of world Druids were living outside the British Isles. Based on 2011-2013 census data from Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland, and 2008 ARIS Report data from the United States, the population of Druids residing in anglophone nations was estimated at 59,299. The current global population of Druids is likely to significantly exceed this number, as many countries with resident Druids do not allow for the existence of Druidry within their census instruments. Pagan faith surveys are also likely to undercount Druids, as only 63% of world Druids identify with either of the categories Pagan or Heathen. In addition, 74% of world Druids report having significant privacy and safety concerns, due to discrimination and persecution within their local communities, and so are likely to be underreported in the census data that does exist. While modern Druidry has spread rapidly across the globe, Druids do not proselytize, and 74% of world Druids actively work to keep their spiritual practices private.