The Solitary Practitioner's Basic DRUIDISM FAQ

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compiled by CATHBAD

Thanks be to Raven, Jaguar, JJ Kane, Kami Landy, Iarwain, Branwen Heartfire, Erynn, and everyone at Nemeton-L. Special thanks to The Gods!

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I. INTRODUCTION

I am a solitary practicing Druid, or Celtic Pagan, or what-have-you; labelling myself I thought to be unnecessary. I don't belong to an order or coven, not because I feel these groups do not have merit, but because they do not always agree, and because at the moment I prefer solitary practice. I have Celtic ancestors. I like learning about the ancient Celts, specifically their beliefs and practices, and I have a desire to emulate them in a manner valid for myself and for this century. If you agree with one or more of these statements, you are probably drawn to Druidism, and this FAQ is for you. This third edition includes a few new questions, and attempts to remove some value-judgements that crept into its predecessor.

2. WHY DRUIDISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY?

Why not?:) Actually, there are a number of good reasons for modern people to consider Druidism. Some see it as a way to reconnect, or "ground" themselves in history, or to improve their relationship with their ancestors (if they are of Celtic descent). Some are attracted by the relationship with the natural world that a Druid cultivates, or by the artistic, creative methods used to build that relationship. There are those who choose Druidism over other forms of neopaganism. Perhaps a reason for that is because Druidism is not only a branch of neopaganism, but also the subject of academic study. Druidism is often of interest to archaeologists, historians, and mythographers who don't necissarily consider themselves Druids, or even remotely pagan. Thus, there is a wealth of serious academic material available concerning the Druids, and many discover Druidism through it. Finally, there are those who choose Druidism over more conventional religions that are more accepted and widespread, such as Christianity. Christianity belongs to a middle-eastern language, culture, and mythology-set; Druidism belongs to the Indo-European set from which we in the West inherit virtually all our other cultural practices, including our languages. An exploration of Druidism is for many people a resurgence in Western Europe's indigenous spirituality. Many seek Asatru to revive Northern Europe's spirituality for much of the same reason. If mainstream religions cannot provide answers to those "deep", spiritual, and philosophical questions, Druidism or another form of neopaganism often provides them.

3. WHO WERE THE DRUIDS?

I suppose the main thing that can be said about the Druids is that they were members of a professional class in their culture, the Celtic Nations of Western Europe and the British Isles. (The Druids were not an ethnic group; their culture, the Celtic culture, was.) They filled the roles of judge, doctor, diviner, mage, mystic, and clerical scholar. Many Druids were women; the Celtic woman enjoyed more freedom and rights than women in any other contemporary culture, including the rights to enter battle, and divorce her husband. Though through history we have lost much information about them, though this will be discussed later.

4. WHAT ARE THE CELTIC NATIONS?

Alba (Scotland), Breizh (Brittany), Cymru (Wales), Eire (Ireland), Kernow (Cornwall), and Mannin (Man).

5. WHAT ARE THE SOURCES BY WHICH WE CAN KNOW THE DRUIDS?

The main sources we have on what they did are Roman historians, who wrote on them as they were in the process of conquering Gaul (what is now France; a variant of gaelic is still spoken in Brittany) so there is that political problem, and they equated Celtic deities with Roman ones as well. The main authors are Julius Caesar, Pliny, Tacitus, Strabo, and Diodorus Siculus. One Roman author, Diogenes, placed the Druids on a list of the ancient world's wisest philosophers; a list which included the Magi of Persia and the Brahmin of India. But in my point of view, the best sources are the mythologies. There we can read of what the Druids did, how they behaved, what some of them said, and though the medieval manuscripts that preserved them were written by Christian monks, much wisdom yet remains there. In Ireland the chief myth cycles are the Ulster Cycle, the Fionn Cycle, and the Invasion Races. In Wales, the major myths are contained in a book called The Mabinogion. In this century, a number of folklore collections were made of remaining oral-tradition stories.

If you were to expand your search to include historical and archeological records, you might have more luck, and may arouse less suspicion if your area is not very pagan friendly. In fact what you will be doing is precisely what the Druids did, for they had to study so many academic, legal, and spiritual subjects they became walking encyclopaedias. The problem is that the Druids were the subject of a number of persecutions and conquests, not only by the Romans, but also by later Christians. Some Druidic wisdom was censored, evolved into something unrecognisable, or just plain lost. A modern person seeking the Druid's path must attempt to reconstruct the wisdom based on the sources discussed above. The Romans never invaded Ireland, so that country became a haven for Druidic learning for a while. After St. Patrick and St. Columcille, Ireland evolved an unique and beautiful blend of Christianity and Druidism, called Culdee Christianity, headquartered on the Isle of Iona, which was later to be eradicated by the invading English. Catholicism eventually became a point of national identity in Ireland (and without it they may never have become independant).

6. DID THE DRUIDS PRACTICE HUMAN SACRIFICE?

The Romans recorded that they sacrificed humans, specifically condemned criminals. Judicial executions were no different elsewhere in Europe, including Saxony. The Romans wrote that such victims were tied into huge wicker man-shaped effigies and burned alive. The archeological record does reveal a number of sacrificial deaths, such as "triple-deaths" where the victim was drowned, stoned, and impaled on a spear simultaneously. Some mythologies describe one person's life being sacrificed so that a terminally ill VIP would survive, thus indicating a belief in a cosmic balance of forces.

However, there is some debate over this; it may have been anti-Druid propaganda. Julius Caesar had good reason to make the Druids look bad, because, after all, he was trying to conquer them. It would fuel interest in his campaign back home if he could prove that the Celts engaged in such barbaric practices. Yet the Romans would kill people in gladitorial games, for the entertainment of the people. The Druids, if they did sacrifice people, could claim religious sanction. The archeological record is ambiguous if such sacrifice was judicial or ceremonial, or even if it ocurred at all.

Rest assured that modern Druids do not sacrifice anything at all.

7. WHY HAVEN'T YOU CALLED THEM "PRIESTS" YET?

The best word for them would seem to be "priests", yet I am reluctant to use it for two reasons: The Romans never used it, and because Druids didn't preach to congregations as priests do. Rather, they had a clientele, like a mystic or a shaman would have. Caesar and his historians never referred to them as priests, but perhaps they could not recognise them as such; the Roman priesthood, officiating over an essentially political religion, were primarily teachers and judges, with less emphasis on being seers or diviners.

8. WHAT ARE THE DRUIDIC HOLY DAYS?

There was a series of fire-festivals, occurring at 12-week intervals, and spaced between the seasonal festivals of solstices and equinoxi (thus, a festival every six weeks.) These fire-festivals would last three days, beginning at sunset on the first day, and would be the best time for sacrifices and divinations. They are:

Samhain (Nov. 1) Feast of the Dead, and beginning of the new year. Death came before Life in the Druidic cycle, because before new growth can occur, there must be room for it. On this day the boundry between this world and the Otherworld is thinnest, and so it is a time to remember all those who died during the year.

Imbolc (Feb 1) The Return of Light. The ewes begin lactating around this time of year, and it is a sign that winter is coming to an end. Perhaps divinations were cast to determine when spring would come (from this practice we might have got Groundhog Day.)

Beltaine (May 1) The Fires of Bel. Spring has arrived, and the people give thanks. This was a day of fertility and life, often the choice day for marriages.

Lughnasad (Aug 1) The Feast of Lugh. The essential harvest festival, to give thanks to the Earth for Her bounty. The name is a reference to the Irish god Lugh of the Long Hand, son of the Sun.

I have heard that Australians who practice these festivals do it in reverse order, because these dates are for northern-hemisphere seasons. It would make sense for them to celebrate Beltaine on Nov.1, for example.

In Wales, there was an annual festival called the Eisteddfod, which was a bardic musical and poetry competition. It still exists, alternating between North and South Wales.

Great bonfires were built on hilltops and kept burning throughout the whole of the fire festivals. By day, there would be carnival-like celebrations, and by night, serious rituals. Cattle were driven between bonfires to purify them, and couples would run and leap over the flames, often completely naked, also for purification (and it was fun!) Some sites were centers for the "perpetual chant", where Druids in rotation would chant incantations without stop; during festivals the entire community would join the chant.

Astronomical celebrations (the solstices and equinoxi) have only passing reference in the source literature (i.e. the myths, Caesar, etc.), but astronomical lines are found everywhere in the archaeology. There are hundreds of stone circles, round barrows, menhirs, etc. with solar, lunar, and/or stellar alignments. Perhaps the most impressive is New Grange, Ireland, where direct sunlight penetrates the inner chamber only on Midsummer morning.

9. WHAT DID THE ANCIENT DRUIDS BELIEVE?

The poetic tradition in Druidism comes from the method the Celts used to trace their lineage and history. Written records were distrusted for the most part, and though a runic writing system called Ogham did exist, it wasn't used for much beyond burial markers and landmarks. To write things down is to weaken the power of edidic memory, whic the Druids cultivated carefully, and to dishonour the thing written down. Druids in training had to learn all the Bardic poetry, in a manner we would call sensory deprivation. Poetic inspiration was an important spiritual practice, which the Welsh have focused on in their eisteddfod. In Irish myth there was a deity of poetry (Brigid).

The Druids taught reincarnation, and the omnipresence of a spiritual Otherworld, that is sometimes accessible to us, and particularly close at certain times of the year, like at Samhain. Oak was the most important symbol in druidic lore, as it is strong, tall, and very long-lived. Mistletoe was said to have healing qualities. Other important trees were the Yew, for its offspring grew from the dead stump of its parent, representing perpetually-regenerating life. The Ogham alphabet was a list of tree-names. Trees are important because they are bridges between the realms of Land and Sky, they communicate Water between these realms. When the Realms of Land, Sea and Sky meet, as within a tree or at a seashore for example, great power could manifest, and such places were best for poetic composition or spellcasting. Stones could channel, store, and direct earth-energy, and thus were used for markers, set in circles, and libations were poured over them in sacrifice.

Fire-worship is strong as well, but doesn't fit the Greek four-element picture. Fire is a thing unto itself, with the dual qualties of destructiveness and cleansing power. It is a spiritual principle, because it is always reaching up to the sky. This may be why they built those hilltop fires. Poetic inspiration is said to be a fire in the head, so Brigid is a fire-deity as well.

Druidic philosophy points to knowledge as the key to self awareness, else certain mythological holy-places of greatest import would not be associated with wisdom, ex. the Well of Wisdom (auspiciously located at the center of the world), the Spiral of Annwyn, the Cauldron of Cerridwen, and the 4 Wise Men of the 4 Cities in the North. Mythic places are inaccessible but also not inaccessible, for it requires a leap of faith to find them; the Well of Wisdom is at the bottom of the ocean, but to Sea Gods like Manannan, the ocean is as the sky.

The Druidic pursuit of knowledge would seem to suggest that ethical action is action that brings you closer to Wisdom. I would not seek to define wisdom at this point in the manner that the Celts may have known it, yet here the correlation between druidic wisdom and Eastern mysticism is striking; one considers the bhuddist Eightfold Path as a perscription of right actions designed to bring one closer to Nirvana. Wisdom becomes a kind of knowledge above ordinary knowledge (like facts), a form of total-awareness, or even a state of mind. Archeological evidence of "beehive" huts, secluded mountian shelters, etc. suggest the Druids used them to achieve higher states of consiousness in pursuit of this mythic wisdom. It is said that the pillars of the awen, / | \ stand for truth, knowledge, and justice; the triskele (which looks something like a spiral with three arms) also demonstrates the number three as spiritually signifigant, and may stand for any triad though usually understood to stand for the realms of Earth, Sea, and Sky.

The warrior-hero Oisin gives us this in a mythic way, a statement I shall arbitrarily name Oisin's Answer because it is how he answered St. Patrick's question of what kept the Fianna (a band of outlaw-warriors) together:

"It is what sustained us though our days, the truth that was in our hearts, and strength in our arms, and fulfillment in our tounges."

10. EARTH, AIR, FIRE, WATER; ISN'T THAT CELTIC?

Yes and no. The Druidic elemental cosmology may have had eight or nine individual elements, of environmental rather than physical nature (such as clouds, stars, oceans, etc.) The Four Elements is the invention of Pythagoras, (father of western occult numerology, among other things) and exploring Greeks and Romans may have identified his thought with the Celtic metaphysics they encountered. It is known, however, that Pythagoras was aware of Druidic thought, and may have travelled to the Celtic nations. The number Three was usually more signifigant than others.

11. WHAT GODS DID THE DRUIDS WORSHIP?

This depends on the nation you look at. Ireland had different gods than Wales, who had further different gods than Gaul. Another point to consider is not only were gods known by different names, but many of the names were deemed too holy to pronounce aloud. (thus the common oath: "I swear by the god my tribe swears by".) Here is a brief, by no means authoritative, list of deities.

The Tuatha de Danann (Tribe of the Goddess Danu) was the name of the Irish pantheon, for the Sidhe (faeries) were descended from Her. Ironicly, Danu herself never makes a personal appearance in the myths, but perhaps she is already everywhere, like the land. Certainly, some European rivers are named after her like the Danube and Dneiper. Some names you may recognise:

- Lugh Lamh-fada (Long Handed), Son of the Sun.
- Dagda the Good (good not by his moral disposition but by the
- diversity of his skills)
- Nuada Argat-lamh (Silver Hand) a two-time king of the Dannans.
- Morrigu, Babd, and Macha (a triple goddess of War.)
- Brigid (a triple goddess of Fire, Poetry, and the Forge)
- Diancecht, god of healing
- Manannan mac Lir, god of the sea and master of magic

Welsh mythology tends to focus on the actions of heroes, and their interaction with gods. The primary source is the Mabinogion, a compendium of legends from Wales' mythic time.

- Arawn, lord of the Annwyn (the underworld)
- Math ap Mathonwy, the quintessential wizard
- Pwyll, lord of Davyd
- Rhiannon, (wife of Pwyll) Goddess associated with horses and the Underworld.
- Cerridwen, (the hag) mother of the poet Taliesson
- Lyr, god of the sea

Manawyddan

Gaulish deities are the focus of Caesar's records. He drew analogies between his own Roman gods and those he discovered in Gaul.

- Herne the Hunter
- Taranus, Teutates
- Esus, Hu'Hesu, the Dying God
- Cernunnos, Master of the Wild Hunt, or the Animal Lord/Green Man
- Epona, The Horse Goddess

Not all modern Druids worship the gods by name. There is some evidence that the Druids of old believed in a kind of universal Life Force, flowing from a central place (such as the Irish Well of Wisdom or the Welsh Spiral of Annwyn), to and from all living things. Perhaps the best modern description is Obi-Wan's description of the "Force", from the famous Star Wars films. :)

12. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WICCA AND DRUIDISM?

The present form of wicca is less than a century old, though it follows a tradition of wisdom that is as old as Druidism, if not more. Wicca emphasizes the Earth, and the Earth-Mother, Druidism has equal emphasis on the Earth, Sea, and Sky. (otherwise known as the Three Realms.) Wicca has two deities, The Goddess (in her triple maiden-mother-crone aspects) and The Horned God. Druidism has many gods, who are not aligned in polarity but exist independantly. Druidic triple godesses are not linked by matrilineal line (like maiden-mother-crones) but by generation, as sisters: Morrigu/Macha/Babd (war & battle goddesses), Banba/Fodla/Erin (land & earth godesses) for example. Druids are not bound by the Wiccan Rede; perhaps the closes thing to an ethical statement is Ossian's Answer (see

This is not to say that versions of Celtic Wicca are inherently nonvalid. Wicca occasionally borrows Celtic deities and themes for its work, and no Celt I know has any problem with that. It is to say, however, that historicly and academicly, Celtic Wicca did not exist.

13. WERE THE DRUIDS SHAMEN?

This is an extremely hot topic of debate, mostly because Celtic matters and Shamanistic matters are very popular right now, and a synthesis of the two has been sought by many new-age authors and practitioners. It is this author's opinion that a more meaningful question is whether or not Druids were *similar* to shamen (and the answer to that is probably yes) because the Druids did evolve from an Indo-European culture that had shamanism. But to answer the original question, I here defer to someone who knows more about it than I do. From: inisglas [inisglas@inisglas.seanet.com] [quoted with permission]

The Celts had some very specific words for their religious functionaries and their visionaries. "Shaman" was not one of those words. Is there something wrong with the terms that our ancestors used, so that we must go off and find new words with which to label our seers and priests and poets?

Druids are firmly a part of the noble social order and ruling class, rather than being at the fringes of society. Poets more often lived at the fringes, as shamans do. Druids could and did bar people from participation in community sacrifices and rites. I don't believe that this was a part of shamanic practice.

Formal training for many years in schools of druids or poets does not seem to be a part of the shamanic framework, although I could be wrong about this. Shamanism usually is taught either under a single master with one or a very few students, or by the spirits themselves. Druids and poets are described as gathering in considerable numbers in "colleges" for the purpose of instruction in many subjects, particularly in the cities of Gaul. Druids and fili were considered very well-trained formal speakers by the Romans, who sometimes sent their young sons to be trained in oratory by Gaulish druids.

The Greeks and Romans thought of the druids as being Pythagorean natural philosophers, with a firm and delicate grasp of mathematics. I do not believe that the Altaic shamans are known for their command of mathematics, nor do I believe that they have an understanding of the metonic cycle of the sun and moon. The Gaulish druids had a very complex calendar which is preserved in the Coligny fragments. I have never seen any reference to shamans having calendars of this complexity. I could simply be missing something here.

Many Celtic "otherworld journey" tales are about people who have gone there unwillingly and without any control over the experience. The shaman is a master of control, and always decides when and where sh/e will or will not go into the otherworlds. Shamans can't be stolen away against their own will.

Shamanism as generally understood does not include possession by spirits. The description of the Welsh awenyddon by Geraldus Cambriensis says that these people acted "as if possessed," and had to be beaten or slapped severely to get them to come back to themselves after giving oracles. Once again, the shaman has complete control even in the deepest of trance states.

Celtic societies were literate societies. Although the druids were said not to write down important things, they were able and willing to keep other records in writing, using Greek for many purposes. Patrick was said to have burned "hundreds of druidic books" during his conversion of Ireland. Druids and poets are described as writing down tales and poems on staves. None of the shamanic societies that I know of were literate. Many still do not have written languages. This is not to say that all pre-literate societies are therefore shamanic societies.

In shamanism, there is a common theme of ascending to the upper worlds or sky realms, while I know of no extant Celtic tales about anyone ascending into the upper worlds to confront Gods or spirits. Yes, Gods arrive from there, but what humans go there? "Spirit flight" through the middle realms to spy on one's enemies or flit through the tops of trees in the forest isn't quite the same thing.

I know of only one tale that could be taken as a tale of a shamanic crisis and illness (the Sickbed of Cu/ Chulainn), but Cu/ sends his charioteer into the Si/dhe realm to check it out for him before he goes there himself. The shaman in crisis cures himself. Cu/ was cured by the same fairy women who beat him in the first place.

While we have a number of shamanic elements appearing in Celtic mythology, we don't usually have more than two or three themes appearing in the same tale. It's my understanding that a majority of the themes need to appear in the same person for them to be seen as a shaman. This may be my own prejudice in the matter. And again, it is entirely possible to have a spirit animal guardian, to have visions, and to make voyages into otherworlds without being a shaman. It happens in many tribal societies all the time. Sleeping in a cave, eating berries and salmon and wearing fur doesn't make a person a bear either.

Erynn

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14. WAS STONEHENGE A DRUIDIC TEMPLE?

Perhaps. The question of who build Stonehenge is one of academic debate. The theory that most people find acceptable is that since carbon-14 dating places the construction of Stonehenge before the rise of Druidism, they did not build it, however that does not rule out the probability that they knew how to use it. The solar and stellar alignments Stonehenge embodies would not have been lost on an intelligensia so well versed in astronomy.

15. WHAT ABOUT GLASTONBURY?

Some folkloric traditions and mythographic examinations suggest that Glastonbury Tor is the mythic Isle of Avalon. If, for example, the nearby river were to flood, the Tor would be an island. A certain thorn tree is said to be the descendant of the staff of Joseph of Arimathea, which was changed into a thorn tree when he set it there (the Thorn is sacred to faeries!), when he brough the Grail to Britain. Avalon means "Isle of Apples", and apple orchards do grow there. Some archaeologists believe that, if one accounts for centuries of erosion, the sides of the Tor are terraced into the shape of a Cretan Maze pattern. Whether or not the region is Druidic, anyone who has meditated by the nearby Chalice Well knows it is a holy place.

16. ARE THERE ANY OTHER DRUIDIC SITES?

There are hundreds of stone circles dotting Britain and Ireland. The Hebrides of Scotland are famous for them. In Ireland, there are many sacred wells dedicated to St. Bridget, am obvious borrowing from the earlier goddess Brigid. There is Newgrange, a temple/tomb/center for initiation rites in Ireland, thousands of years older than the Pyramids, which is constructed to allow sunlight into the inner chamber on Midsummer sunrise only. There is the Hill of Temhair (Tara) which was the high seat of Irish kings, and the stone that stands on it is thought to be the same one called Lia Fail, Stone of Destiny, upon which the Ard Ri was inagurated, and if worthy the stone would cry out.

17. WHAT IS ARTHURIAN DRUIDISM?

The Arthurian legends are unique because they embody the delicate transition period between Druidism and Christianity. Christianity was well entrenched as the religion of the nobility, yet Druidism remained in the form of folk-practices. Misty islands and otherworldly hunting expeditions, which comprise much of Arthurian legend, clearly originate from the older Celtic

mythologies where such encounters are signs of the presence of the Otherworld. The Irish Druid Uath Mac Immoman challenged a warrior to a mutual beheading in much the same way The Green Knight (who can be seen as Cernunnos The Green Man) challenged Sir Gawain. The Perilous Bridge that Lancelot has to cross is similar to the bridge at Scatha's School for Heroes that Cu/ Chullain must cross. And perhaps all those "wise hermits", that the Knights are always running into, are Druids in hiding. Merlin himself is now thought to have been a Druid, by some modern historical fiction authors and other academic speculation, since he too was an advisor to a king, a prophet, and a wilderness recluse. To stretch it a bit, perhaps the Grail follows those magical cauldrons like those posessed by Dagda, which could feed armies and raise the dead, and by Cerridwen, which was a font of wisdom.

It is worth noting that the sword called Excaliber may have come from legends surrounding a real sword. The Celts were Iron-workers, ahead of most other contemporary cultures. Iron-age technology helped the Celts defeat the Dannans (who were bronze-workers). Around Arthurian times, it was discovered that nickel-iron from meteorites could be used to create stainless steel, and swords layered with this metal would never bend, scratch, break, nor rust. Weapons like that would have been seen as magical, and develop names and reputations independant of their owners.

18. WHAT MODERN DRUIDIC ORGANISATIONS EXIST?

In the U.K., there is the Order of Bards, Oviates, and Druids. OBOD was founded in 1717, and has a correspondance course available worldwide. The OBOD encourages a spiritual understanding rooted in nature and the land, and protection of the Earth. Write to:

The Secretary, OBOD PO box 1333 Lewes, E. Sussex, England BN₇ 3ZG

In the U.S.A., there is Ar nDraiocht Fein, meaning roughly "Our Own Druidism". ADF is the fastest growing Druid organisation in the world. Its founder, Isaac Bonewitz, emphasizes accountable and highly qualified clergy, with a whole Indo-European focus. Write to:

ADF PO box 516 E. Syracuse, NY 13057-0516

Keltria is a positive neo-pagan Druidic path focusing on the Celtic pantheons and the triads of Ancestors, Nature Spirits, and Gods. They offer several resources including a book of ritual, a quarterly journal and a correspondance course for members. Write to:

Keltria P.O. Box 33284 Minneapolis, MN 55243

19. INTERNET CONTACTS:

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