

# THE DRUIDS PATH

## DRUIDS ACROSS EUROPE, THE ISLES AND THE BEGINNING TIMES

By SEARLES O'DUBHAIN

### PART 1 OF 3 PARTS

The name for Druids or their cognates first appears in the classical histories of the Greeks and Romans dating back about 2400 years ago. The earliest possible written record of Druids among the Celts is found in the comments of the late fourth-century BCE Greek playwright Sopater who was said by Athenaeus to have made a punning reference to the Druids when he had one of his characters say:

"Among them is the custom, whenever they are victorious in battle, to sacrifice their prisoners to the gods. So I, like the Celts, have vowed to the divine powers to burn those three false dialecticians as an offering."

Certainly, if a Greek playwright can make an oblique reference to the Druids in a play to his audience, there must have been quite a familiarity with them by reputation and innuendo if nothing else.

The first contact of the Greeks with the Gauls is at Massalia (near modern day Marseille) in the sixth century BCE. The attacks of the Celts on Rome occurred in the fourth century BCE. The attack on Delphi occurred in around 279 BCE. These and other stories by the Greeks and Romans regarding those times seem to reference Druids for me. I especially like the story of the Celtic warriors who were on the Capitol Hill of Rome in the process of vanquishing the Romans who came upon some splendidly dressed older men who were sitting in council. The Celtic warriors stopped in their tracks, awed by the assembly and stayed their hands from slaying. When one of the men spoke to them in Latin and struck at them with a staff, the warriors responded by killing them all. To me this passage echoes the Celtic respect for the safety of a Druid's personage. They were safe from any battle and the warriors in this tale most probably thought they'd accidentally entered into an assembly of Druids. To harm any Druid would have been a violation of personal honor and a breaking of the strongest taboo for a Celtic warrior. When they discovered that these fellows were not Druids by their speech and actions, they happily dispatched them. This was reported by the Roman historian Livy in the late first century BCE but it was dated to 390 BCE in his history by drawing on earlier sources.

The first specific (by name) mention of Druids among the Celts by classical historians is contained in the work of Aristotle (circa 4th century BCE) and Sotion of Alexandria in the early 2nd century BCE as mentioned by Diogenes Laertius in a written work of the 3rd century CE. There are also mentions in the 1st century BCE writer Posidonius of first hand observations of Druids. I mention that these references as say that the Celts conducted no sacrifices without a Druid being present (see above mention of sacrifices by Sopater). This is confirmed in the writings of Herodotus, Dio-



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**THERE WERE  
DRUIDS  
AMONG THE  
FIRST PEOPLE  
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IRELAND**

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dorus, Posidonius, Caesar, and Strabo. The reference in Aristotle above may have been altered in the 2nd century BCE by a Greek scribe. A link between Pythagoras (very early 5th century BCE) and the Druids is sometimes said to exist through the connection (in a work by Strabo, 1st century BCE Greek historian and philosopher) of Abaris the Hyperborean's study with Pythagoras in Athens in the early 4th century BCE. Hecatus of Miletus (circa 500 BCE) is the source that supposedly connects the Hyperboreans with the British Isles and hence suggests that the plaid wearing (and magical acting) Abaris was a Druid.

I don't think that saying there were Druids among the Celts 2400 years ago is any great stretch as there were certainly reports of them being present 200 years ago and there are very strong suggestions that Druids existed among the Celts from their very earliest beginnings. That would push the presence of Druids among Celts back to about 3200 years ago or earlier. It's difficult to localize origins like this in an oral culture using only the rare references that were made in the literate cultures of the time. However, that's what the earliest recorded or attested classical histories have to say about the Druids. The insular traditions of course place the presence of Druids at a much earlier date in Ireland. That date is as early as 3800 years BP. This comes from an oral tradition and awaits archaeological findings to verify such an early date. All one can say is that Druids are reported throughout the insular literature and tales from the earliest of times.

In Irish traditions, Druids are said to have existed among their deities in the beginnings of the world. Some medieval Poets attempted to place this in the time period of about the early 2nd millennium BCE. That placement would be a mytho-traditional placement and have little in the archaeological record to certify it though (as can be seen) my discussion on Stonehenge and Newgrange ranges far beyond that point.

Jean Louis Bruneaux wrote a decent treatise on Druids and Druidism in his work, *The Celtic Gauls*. There is also a book by Francoise Le Roux and Christian-J, Guyonvarc'h, in French, entitled *Les Druides* that should answer many questions about Druids and Druidism on the continent.

As a case in point, the ritual center at Gournay certainly demonstrates that this was the case with nine votive pits. A trench or ditch around the ritual area also was filled with the bones and remains of the sacrifices. Sites in the British Isles have been excavated showing this practice of using pits and trenches was widespread for Druids in Celtic culture.

One such site is on Hayling Island in Hampshire. Its organization and components give us a pretty good idea of Celtic sanctuary and sacred space in Britain of the Iron Age:

(The site URL is: <http://www.barnarch.u-net.com/Hayling.htm>)

"The architecture of the temple is clearly designed to enhance the differentiation of the sacred site from the surrounding area (Webster 1995), and as such the outer enclosure formed the most significant element of the complex and may have formed the nemeton in Celtic parlance (Piggott 1978). The inner enclosure appears to have served primarily as an additional form of differentiation within the enclosure, cutting off what was probably the main ritual area from the rest of the temple. The pit seems to have been the focus. Deposition, on the other hand, was carried out in specific zones of the site, notably on the south side, i.e. the left-hand side for worshippers approaching the temple and its focus from the entrance on the east side. This zonation may perhaps be linked with allusions by Poseidonius (quoted in Athenaeus IV,152D) to Celts paying respect to the gods by turning to the right (Webster 1995:460), apparently indicating a spatially significant element to ritual practice, that perhaps also had its counterparts in everyday life (Fitzpatrick 1994). If Poseidonius is taken literally, it could be that sacrificial actions took place on the right-hand (northerly) side of the enclosure, whilst the deposition of the votive remains took place on the left-hand side. Clearly the act of deposition was important during the making of votive offerings, and for Hayling Island (but not all Iron Age temples, e.g. Gournay) the locus of these actions was mainly in a particular south-easterly zone within the enclosure."

The south-easterly zone is particularly significant as this is where the House of Donn is to be found in relation to the land of Ireland. Perhaps this is a case of a

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country, sanctuaries and homes all taking their structure from the sacred cosmology? If that's true for Iron Age Celts, it would place them squarely in agreement with temple and sacred space/sanctuary organization for other Indo-European people.

Regarding offerings and sacrifices made at these sacred sites and enclosures, it is said that pigs, cows, bulls, dogs, people and boars were offered as sacrifices in Druid ritual at sites on the Continent, in Britain and Ireland.

Some of these deities were chthonic. There is Donn, the Lord of the Dead in Irish traditions and his cognate Gwynn ap Nudd in Welsh mythology. Metrical Dindshenchas has a tale about Crom who was said to be a god that demanded human sacrifice and was symbolized in a stone circle which was decorated with gold and silver adornments for the stones. St. Patrick is said to have taken a sledgehammer to these stones in one of the legends associated with him.

The tales of Irish history, myth and traditions are filled with mention of Druids. This is true for the earliest of their histories as it is down to the time that Christianity became the established religion of the Irish. It is certainly true that much of the Irish oral history was synchronized by the scribes and monks to give them a connection to ancient Jewish history and hence a large role in the Judeo-Christian tradition into which they were injecting themselves. Part of this alteration of the histories attempted to show how Noah was related to some of the first people who were said to have come to Ireland. Another alteration of the traditions occurred to show how the Irish aided the Hebrews at the time of Moses. A story was told to show how an Irish linguist was present at the event on the Plain of Shinar of the Tower of Babel. The role of the pre-Christian Irish deities was reduced to being ancestors and heroes instead of gods. Some of these gods were reduced to the status of saints or angels, while a very few of them were characterized as being eternal-non-dying beings who were usually apart from normal reality. These factors are important to keep in mind when reading the written Irish histories. Another thing to understand is that the traditions and histories were not completely obliterated or lost. Much survived from the earliest of times. Part of that survival

was due to the role of the Filidh before during and after the time of the Christian synchronization of Irish history. The Filidh were an independent historical and educational system from that of the Church. They are recognized as being the inheritors in that role of the roles of the Druids for Irish Celtic culture. Much in the Irish Annals and surviving histories accurately reflects what happened in the eyes of the people who first recorded the events and as maintained, interpreted and altered by those who followed them. Much the same thing happened in the recording of Jewish history.

History is an important tool in archaeology. It helps one to understand the provenance and influences that appear to be recorded in the archaeological record. Even myths can lead one to important discoveries.

The Irish traditions, myths and histories tell us that there were Druids among the first people to appear in Ireland. They also tell us that even the deities of the ancient Irish had Druids. Beyond that, they also report that the latest wave of culture to sweep across Ireland before the coming of Christianity, the Milesians also had Druids among them. To me, this says explicitly that the Irish believed that Druids and their ways were a part of the history of their people from its beginnings. This idea was not altered or synchronized with Christianity when the great synchronism of Irish history occurred at the hands of the early church. If that was true of Irish culture before Celtic culture or Christian culture influenced it, then what of British or Gaulish cultures where Druids were reported to have originated and encountered by the Roman armies and their historians? I'd think that Druids would have been said to be a part of their culture/people from the beginnings of remembered history. We know that the classical historians mention Druids in the 2nd century BCE. we hear about magical and religious practices among the Celts as far back as 2400 years BP. The idea of a cohesive Celtic culture is advanced by some modern academics to have started some 3000+ years BP (if not 4000+BP). Were Druids present in these cultures from the earliest of times? It's certainly my position that Druids were there. I say this because Druids were the cohesive, educational, maintaining, socio-religious, legalistic, artistic and linguistic function of Celtic society. I didn't invent this idea. It's reported by Celtic historians and traditions from the earliest of times.

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In the case of Ireland, it's known as the Irish Celtic Druid Tradition and it spans a time from the present day back about 3800 years. For the first 2000 years, the traditions were maintained by the Druids using oral mnemonic techniques. After the development of Old Irish, this tradition was recorded by scribes in books, many of which survive today. That's what history and the tradition itself tells us about itself. Starting in the 5th century and continuing through the 14th century CE, Irish monks, Poets and scribes recorded the traditions in writing.

The relationship of one Celtic Druidic tradition to another is of course not exact. However, there are a considerable number of similarities between all of them based on what is known. The Irish and British traditions have more written histories and a better preservation of their traditions, especially the mythology and cultural practices. The practices of the Druids of Gaul that have survived were mainly preserved by the classical Greek and Roman historians. Some tales do survive and of course there are the written records, mainly invocations, curses and the odd manuscript, and additionally the Coligny Calendar. Here again, the Gaulish practices that we know from this sparse record for Druids is very similar to what we know about Irish and British Druids. Matches have also been accomplished for the major deity types in Gaul, Britain and Ireland.

When Christianity was introduced among the Irish Celts, many Druids and Filidh (Vision Poets) became monks and priests and many did not. The legal arm of the Druids (known as Brehons in Ireland) continued in practice for another 1200 years. The Poets or Filidh also continued as an independent power group among the Irish during that time. They are considered to have inherited and fulfilled many of the roles that the Druids held before Christianity. Even after Christianity, one of the most noted Irish saints (St. Columba, known in Irish as Columcille) said that Christ was his Druid.

On the continent of Europe, there are ritual enclosures, votive pits and road ways, as well as ceremonial weaponry and ritual tools. However, it is difficult to find items that correlate between the cultures. In fact, it is difficult just to find any items of themselves, let alone those that might be common between cultures. I think

that as more and more ritual centers are discovered and investigated, through archaeology, a better picture will emerge for all of the Druid traditions.

Druidism was a philosophy and a spirituality that addressed the Celtic concern with the imminence of the Otherworld and the effect of its denizens on worldly matters. The primary areas of concern were in terms of productivity and prosperity as well as success in battle and raiding. There were major festivals and feast throughout the Celtic world that the Druids were said to officiate. Some of the practices of the Druids, the vision poets and the seers included psycho-human conscious alteration in a manner similar to shamanism. The Druids themselves were scholar-philosopher-priests. They served their people and the kings as advisors, priests and magical workers, in addition to being the closest thing to scientists of the day.

The term Celtic, is referencing cultures that had a Celtic language, produced Celtic art and music and who were governed by Celtic law codes and a kind of traditional "common knowledge." This knowledge among the Irish was known as coimgne. I mainly study Irish Druidism (which is known as Draíocht), but I also attempt to keep up to date on Welsh materials and any discoveries about Druids or Celtic religious practices that are uncovered on the Continent.

Celtic religion changed after being influenced by Christianity in many of the same ways that Jewish religion changed after Christianity also influenced it. The new religions are not the same as the old religions. The customs are different. The priesthood is different. The languages are different. Even the art is different. When the Jewish religion had prophets it was different from a Jewish religion without prophets. When Celtic religion had Druids, it was different from when it didn't have Druids. We know about Jewish religions because the oral traditions were set down when writing was introduced and the prophets and patriarchs stories were recorded. We know about Celtic religions and Druids because their oral traditions were recorded and set down when writing was introduced to Celtic culture. In the writings that recorded Celtic culture we learn that Druids were a part of that culture for some 2000 years before the histories, laws, tales, myths and traditions were

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written by the scribes and monks. In Jewish culture we learn about the histories of the Jews, their laws, tales, myths and traditions by much the same methods of recoding an oral history in writing.

The recording of history has a lot of influences on it. That was true in the past as it is today. Religion, politics, personal and national bias, wars and natural disasters all serve to change the ways and accuracies of recorded histories. None the less, we do have them and they can be evaluated in spite of their being influenced, changed or colored. The same sorts of influences affect how archaeologists interpret the archaeological record in part but not as greatly because the artifacts often survive through many periods of interpretation. I'm hoping that as more artifacts from ancient Celtic religions survive, we'll have a better and less biased understanding of the Druids.

The tales of Irish history, myth and traditions are filled with mention of Druids. This is true for the earliest of their histories as it is down to the time that Christianity became the established religion of the Irish. It is certainly true that much of the Irish oral history was synchronized by the scribes and monks to give them a connection to ancient Jewish history and hence a large role in the Judeo-Christian tradition into which they were injecting themselves. Part of this alteration of the histories attempted to show how Noah was related to some of the first people who were said to have come to Ireland. Another alteration of the traditions occurred to show how the Irish aided the Hebrews at the time of Moses. A story was told to show how an Irish linguist was present at the event on the Plain of Shinar of the Tower of Babel.

The role of the pre-Christian Irish deities was reduced to being ancestors and heroes instead of gods. Some of these gods were reduced to the status of saints or angels, while a very few of them were characterized

as being eternal-non-dying beings who were usually apart from normal reality. These factors are important to keep in mind when reading the written Irish histories. Another thing to understand is that the traditions and histories were not completely obliterated or lost. Much survived from the earliest of times. Part of that survival was due to the role of the Filidh before during and after the time of the Christian synchronization of Irish history. The Filidh were an independent historical and educational system from that of the Church. They are recognized as being the inheritors in that role of the roles of the Druids for Irish Celtic culture. Much in the Irish Annals and surviving histories accurately reflects what happened in the eyes of the people who first recorded the events and as maintained, interpreted and altered by those who followed them. Much the same thing happened in the recording of Jewish history.

History is an important tool in archaeology. It helps one to understand the provenance and influences that appear to be recorded in the archaeological record. Even myths can lead one to important discoveries. The Irish traditions, myths and histories tell us that there were Druids among the first people to appear in Ireland. They also tell us that even the deities of the ancient Irish had Druids. Beyond that, they also report that the latest wave of culture to sweep across Ireland before the coming of Christianity, the Milesians also had Druids among them. To me, this says explicitly that the Irish believed that Druids and their ways were a part of the history of their people from its beginnings. This idea was not altered or synchronized with Christianity when the great synchronization of Irish history occurred at the hands of the Christians. If that was true of Irish culture before Celtic culture or Christian culture influenced it, then what of British or Gaulish cultures where Druids were reported to have originated and encountered by the Roman armies and their historians.

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## THE DRUIDS PATH

# DRUIDS ACROSS EUROPE, THE ISLES AND THE BEGINNING TIMES

## PART 2 OF 3

By SEARLES O'DUBHAIN



SEARLES O'DUBHAIN

Druids can be said to have been a part of their cultures/peoples from the beginnings of their remembered histories. We know that the classical historians mention Druids in the 2nd century BCE. We hear about magical and religious practices among the Celts as far back as 2400 years BP. The idea of a cohesive Celtic culture is advanced by some modern academics to have started some 3000+ years BP (if not 4000+BP). Were Druids present in these cultures from the earliest of times? It's certainly my position that Druids were there. I say this because Druids were the cohesive, educational, maintaining, socio-religious, legalistic, artistic and linguistic function of Celtic society. I didn't invent this idea. It's reported by Celtic historians and traditions from the earliest of times. In fact, these same people were Druids and were tasked to study and to remember the histories and traditions of their people. Long study and a perfected memory were two of the distinguishing marks of the Druids.

Another central issue that comes up from time to time is whether Druids existed within Celtic cultures at an early enough time to have used or to have been involved with Stonehenge. If Celtic culture existed in Britain as early as the mid second millennium BCE, then that says it is possible. If the Druids predated Celtic culture in the British Isles, then it is even more possible that they were involved with Stonehenge and other stone circle types of sacred sites. Traditions say that Druids were in Ireland at that time. I'm looking to the archaeological record to see if it confirms or denies this tradition.

What I've discovered seems to say that the Druids did not build Stonehenge but that the people of the land where Druidism flourished (Britain) most certainly did build it. The effects of the stones and the other structures from the Stone Ages of the past left their mark on the Druidic lore just as they left their marks on the Celtic cultures in which the Druids flourished. Celtic culture can be placed backward in time to when Stonehenge was still in use. Whether Celts and Druids used it is a hypothesis that has not been fully developed by research or in the academic literature. What can be said is that Stonehenge marked Celtic culture in much the same way that it affects modern culture. It is food for the psyche and the mysterious.

For what its worth, the time of the last use and alteration of Stonehenge was placed at 1240 BCE by Wainwright and Renfrew in *The Henge Monuments*. This dating leaves little gap between it and Celtic culture arriving in Britain. Of course, the Druids are sometimes considered to predate Celtic culture. One of the definitions of Druidism is the Way of the Men of the Oak. Worship and veneration of the

**A CULT OF THE  
OAK AND A CULT  
OF THE SUN  
EXISTED IN  
ANCIENT EUROPE**

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Oak as representative of deity goes back many thousands of years. In fact, it goes back over 20,000 years in Europe. According to Stuart Piggott as quoted originally by Anne Ross in her book, *Druids*:

“We are in fact ignorant of what may well have been many varieties of religious experience among the European and Neolithic communities from the sixth to the third millennium BC and their contribution to later Celtic religion is a wholly unknown factor....

“By the time of the historically documented Druids the background of possible religious tradition would then be roughly as follows. Taking as a starting point the forms of Celtic religion as inferred from archaeology, epigraphy and the classical and vernacular texts there are three main antecedent phases. The first would be the traditions, predominantly Indo-European, going back to the second millennium, and perhaps to its beginnings. Behind this again would be the wholly obscure religions of the Neolithic agriculturists with, in Gaul, and especially Britain, eastern and western components mixed from the end of the fourth millennium BC. and finally, underlying all, there would be the beliefs and rites of the hunting peoples of pre-agricultural Europe which might well have contained elements surviving in shamanism. It is a pedigree which could be a good twenty thousand years in length. Druidism, when we first encounter it, is an integral part of the social structure of Celtic Gaul; it is an Indo-European institution with, whatever criticisms may be leveled against the over-elaborate schemes of Dumézil and his school, analogues in the Brahmin class of Sanskrit India or archaic priesthoods of early Rome. But there are distinctive elements which may owe their existence to those earlier sources of European religious tradition we have just sketched out.”

Druidism has its roots twenty thousand years in the past of Britain and Europe and its more recent branches go back four to five thousand years ago in Europe and Britain. Druids existed among the Celts at the earliest recorded historical reports of them and they were an established priesthood at that time. The conservatism of Indo-European priesthoods is well

documented and an accepted \*given\* when considering their origins and long term effects on their cultures. By conservative I mean they preserved the lore and the traditions of their culture and they were slow to change its knowledge base for new ideas unless these ideas and concepts were clearly demonstrated to be true. "Slow to change" would be a good synonym for "conservative" in my above statements. Druids, Brahmins and other Indo-European priesthoods had a duty to conserve their cultural lore and practices. Druids and Druidism are not exceptions to this rule. Druids most probably were present and used Stonehenge in the late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. The only question is whether they were known by that name at that time. There was certainly a priesthood and there were most certainly oaks used in the henges and other sacred enclosures before during and after that time.

Of course, I'd also love to know more about Druidism as it existed in Gaul, Galatia, Iberia, the Danube Valley and the northern areas of Italy. In these areas (so far) the main source of information is in the archaeological record and the classical historical reports, followed by some meager strands of folklore and a few surviving written artifacts on lead or bronze. There's not enough information from Gaul to be conclusive about its beliefs but between the Irish and British traditions there are a lot of overlays and similarities. What is known about Gaulish Druidic teachings and practices does not contradict what is known about the Irish and British Druidism. The only problem is a lack of information from Continental sources. As archaeology finds more Gaulish curse tablets and written artifacts the information gap closes.

In any event, anyone studying the ways of Druidism should not be the least surprised to hear that they used any of the Neolithic or surviving Bronze Age monuments for rituals or as a religious or a magical-working site. There is evidence that Druids in Ireland used contemporary structures and sites of this type in their time. The new Druids of today certainly do much the same thing (and for many of the same reasons). Tara is one such ancient site that has had such a usage. Tlachtca and Uisneach are two other ancient and modern Irish Druidic ritual sites.

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A cult of the oak and a cult of the sun existed in ancient Europe long before recorded history and are supported by archaeological findings and anthropological interpretations of the data. The name Druid is thought to be composed of two Indo-European roots which mean "oak" and "knowledge." Priests of Oak Knowledge seem to have existed back to the times when oaks were used to structure sacred enclosures and ritual sites. There was little possibility of calling these priests Druids until Indo-European language and culture arrived on the scene. The earliest that could have occurred is concurrent with the building and rebuilding of the three major phases of Stonehenge, however.

Stonehenge is a physical representation of the center of the universe as a site for spiritually enacting rituals that tie the people to the place and the power within it. That characteristic of it has been acknowledged by many people and cultures that have come in contact with it over the years. In fact, such monumental structures, as Stonehenge certainly epitomizes, are built as symbols of power, are used as ritual centers and continue their existence across cultures due to their symbolic nature. New people borrow and adapt them to their own power structures and prestige as symbols and a center of their own power.

To a lesser extent, that is what is happening to and at Stonehenge even today.

As to a differentiation of sacred and secular in cultures, societies and among people in the near, old, ancient and prehistoric past, let me recommend that you read *Symbols of Power at the Time of Stonehenge* by D.V., Clarke, T.G. Gowie and A. Foxon. It contains pictures and detailed discussions of the possibilities regarding this issue:

"The dominant monuments in the British landscape at the beginning of this period were the large communal burying places -- conspicuous landmarks whose size and silting suggest that they played a major role in defining social groups and maintaining their cohesion. Gradually regional groupings began to acquire greater importance, exercising control over the design and construction of large monuments -- henges, stone circles -- which were created for use by

the living, involving considerable resources. Leaders of these groups acquired prestige good as symbols of their power."

This was only 5000 to 6000 years ago. Going further back into the past, one finds that social groups were more dispersed and that their ritual or social structures were less organized on a grand scale. However, this didn't prevent them from having sacred objects or locations. Many of these have survived from then to now and have been uncovered by archaeologists and explorers. Caves and cave paintings, streams, wells and springs, mountains and forests were the ritual centers in the past, formed as surely as the "things" in Norse tradition and discovered by the spiritual specialists of the people and their tribes.

One can look to the artifacts that have survived in Europe from the last Ice Age (going back 30,000 to 40,000 years) to see objects that can be considered to be ritual items, whether portable or fixed. Some of these artifacts might be a blending of science and ritual attitudes (such as the bone plaque from the Aurignacian levels at the Blanchard rock shelter of S.W. France - Cunliff, p. 71 of *Prehistoric Europe*, 1997). This place is a series of holes and patterns on bone that could be interpreted as indicating the phases of the Moon. In the Mesolithic, we find evidence of social change in burials, symbols and art that suggest shamanism was important to the tribal functions of the people. Into the Neolithic times, these social and religious functions became even more organized as the hunter gatherer societies yield to farming which led to settlements and a greater accumulation of wealth and power in those locations. This is when the great henge monuments, passage graves and other sacred centers begin to appear as a result of this human, social; organization and greater prosperity.

The archaeological record in Europe seems to show that humans have always seen the sacred as being a part of the everyday, but it also has been accompanied by an esoteric and magical outlook that points to the sacred and the spiritual as being beyond this interaction. As societies have developed, this attitude has caused many sacred areas, sites and monuments to be constructed as focal points for ritual practice and

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spiritual expression. In this desire to communicate beyond the ordinary, art has been a close associate of religion and the two are often found together. This

associated spans the entirety of human existence since at least the last Ice Age in the archaeological record and the human psyche.

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# THE DRUIDS PATH

## DRUIDS ACROSS EUROPE, THE ISLES and the Beginning Times

### PART 3 OF 3

By SEARLES O'DUBHAIN



SEARLES O'DUBHAIN

In any study of Druids, henges and the past of the British Isles one should reference the books and works of archaeologists, astronomers, mathematicians and mystics about Stonehenge, Newgrange and other Neolithic and Bronze Age structures. Here are two such works and some of the central points and issues they attempt to make:

John North, *Stonehenge: A New Interpretation of Prehistoric Man and the Cosmos*, The Free Press, 1996:

*"It will not of course be suggested that the monument on Salisbury Plain was an astronomical observatory, at least in the current meaning of that word. The stones were not erected as a means to investigating the heavens in a detached and abstract way. The aim was not to discover the patterns of behavior of the Sun, Moon or stars but to embody those patterns, already known in broad outline, in religious architecture. There are signs that such ritualized architecture had been practiced in the Wessex neighborhood and else where for over a thousand years before the first phases of the building of Stonehenge. While that monument in stone surpassed all before it, in architectural subtlety as well as in grandeur, to appreciate even this point one must know something of the earthen and timber structures that went before it and consequently about half of this book is concerned with that earlier material."*

North goes on to strongly suggest that the positioning of the timber posts in these structures offers a more reliable and precise testimony as to how the Sun, Moon and stars could have been observed in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. Additionally he shows how the landscape and the heavens were coupled to these structures through human activities, tools and constructions. He suggests that the most precise alignments were on stars and that these are the alignments most often found in almost all of these structures.

Geoffrey Wainwright and Colin Renfrew in *The Henge Monuments, Ceremony and Society in prehistoric Britain*, pp. 164-165, Thames and Hudson, 1990:

*"The building of communal monuments -- the great henges and timber buildings was a deliberate strategy by those holding power to maintain the social order and to increase their control over it, They were symbols of group identity which not only assisted in the cohesion of the group but would also have contributed to increased status and power for the individual who could manipulate the feelings of power and permanence which they*

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*must have inspired in the population. John Cherry has considered the role of such monuments in early societies and has pointed out that their construction consistently occurs at two points in the cyclical development of such groups. The first period of monument building takes place while societies are at a formative stage and assists in binding them into a coherent organization by providing a common focus for their activities and aspirations. There may then be a reduction in the intensity of public works until a second phase of monument building takes place as the fabric of that society decays. At this stage their construction can act as a way of focusing the communal will and efforts as an act of integration. Viewed in retrospect across 5,000 years of human settlement in these islands, public monuments coincide with periods of change. In Wessex, the henge monuments and timber buildings involved far greater investment of manpower than earlier monuments and they belong to a formative stage when a phase of economic expansion was taking place."*

Wainwright and Renfrew go on to say:

*"Questions about the use of the great enclosures has, up to now, polarized between views as to whether they were symbols of group identity manipulated by powerful individuals to enhance their own status, or whether they were the centres of learned orders, skilled in advanced astronomical and geometrical knowledge. The protagonist of the latter theory has been Evan MacKie who claimed the existence of a central authority with magical expertise and saw the timber buildings as the residences of this elite group. This theory was largely based on the work of Alexander Thom who espoused the view that some very advanced astronomical and geometrical knowledge had accumulated in Brittany and Britain well before 1800 BC. From this, McKie went on to postulate a learned and skilled professional order of wise men whose members were able to pursue their studies full-time while supported by the population, and could command the labour required to erect hundreds of henge monuments, stone circles and standing stones, some of which were their 'observatories'."*

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The two go on to suggest that recent work has cast doubt on some of Thom's theories and that the theory viewing these structures as centers of power and prestige for the ruling individuals is more in favor. Of course, the work of North above argues just the opposite viewpoint that these were ritual centers organized for use in spiritual matters as well as astronomical observation and acknowledgement. If one follows the lead of North and MacKie, then the profile of Druids as wise men, with knowledge of the stars and a high positioning within their society matches well with their theories and the factors that brought the henges into being in the first place. I wouldn't be surprised that Druids used such structures for star and ritual work. I'd be surprised if they didn't given what we know and what was reported about them in these two areas. The theory presented also would seem to strongly suggest that Druids (or priest-hoods like them) actually did construct Stonehenge, Woodhenge and a vast number of other Neolithic and Bronze Age sacred enclosures.

One should also look at the work of Alexander Thom and latter Clive Ruggles regarding Neolithic structures and astronomical uses:

Clive Ruggles, *Astronomy in Prehistoric Britain and Ireland*, p. 159, Yale University Press, 1999.

*"And there is certainly evidence (albeit almost entirely indirect) that the Druids, the principle mediators between the natural and the supernatural world of Celtic times, had considerable practical knowledge of astronomy and calendrics. Last of all, hitherto unsuspected patterns of continuity of material tradition from earlier times through to the Iron Age, as have been suggested recently in the case of timber circles, imply that one should not retain an entirely closed mind about the continuity from even older sacred or calendrical traditions."*

Ruggles offers up an example of astronomical alignments in Ireland which have also been tied to

Celtic sacred rituals and times through archaeological excavations. This connection takes that particular Celtic practice back to an earlier time of 2000 BC and continuing for 2000 years or more. His cites in support of the above quote and the point of my discussion are:

Cunliffe, Barry W. and Colin Renfrew, eds. (1997), *Science and Stonehenge* (Proceedings of the British Academy, 92). Oxford University Publishing.

Piggott, Stuart, (1968) *The Druids*, London, Thames and Hudson.

Gibson, Alex (1995), 'The dating of timber circles: new thoughts in the light of recent Irish and British discoveries,' In John Waddell and Elizabeth Shee Twohig (eds.), *Ireland in the Bronze Age*, Stationary Office, Dublin, 87-89.

Above Ruggles says something similar to what noted Celtic scholar John Carey has to say about continuity of traditions from the Neolithic through the Iron Age in Celtic and Druidic traditions, practices and ritual sites:

Carey, John, (Time, Memory, and the Boyne Necropolis, Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium, 10/11, 1990 and 1991, edited by Harvard Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures, William J. Mahon and Phillip Freeman.

In his article, Carey emphasizes the point that the Celtic people had a continuity of traditions from the Neolithic through the Iron age. He discusses an Early Modern Irish retelling of the story about how 'Angus Won the Brugh.' This is contained in the tale, "Altram Tighe Dá Mheadar" (The Fosterage of the House of the Two Vessels) to illustrate that the sacred nature of Newgrange was recognized by the people who encountered it, lived near it and were influenced by it. Other such locations of continuity of tradition are Stonehenge, Crough Patrick and countless sites in Ireland, Scotland, Britain and the Continent. In Britain, the tales of Arthur and Merlin seem to echo this kind of continuity.

As John Carey says in his article on Newgrange:

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*"In the case of Newgrange, we must therefore suppose not only that there was some cultural link between its builders and the first speakers of Goidelic in Ireland, but that this link exercised a formative influence on the belief system of the latter. Again, the survival of some version of these ancient doctrines in the medieval literature indicates that the world-view of the Irish remained, at least in certain respects, astonishingly stable throughout the intervening centuries: the Boyne legends were still relevant, and important, in the Christian period."*

In these statements and conclusions, Carey is referring to the use of Newgrange as a cosmological and astronomical timepiece and observatory, confirmed through archaeology and astronomy as well as preserved and conserved in the Irish legends associated with it. I believe that there probably is a similar situation occurring in the case of Stonehenge as its presence translates the original intention of its builders through layers of Celtic and Druidic traditions onward to the psyches and impressions of modern times.

This is not to say that the Oak veneration of 20,000 years ago is the same as 2000 years ago or even today. What I am saying is that Druids were a part of Celtic culture from the earliest of times and

that there are some suggestions and reports that they predated its introduction into the British Isles. More hard archaeological evidence is needed to make the determination of exactly when that was but there were certainly Druids there when Stonehenge was there (as there are still Druids there today). :-)

Regarding the Giants' Walk, there's even legends in Geoffrey of Monmouth that Merlin brought the stones of Stonehenge from Ireland through Druid magic. Of course, no one can prove that beyond the fact that Geoffrey wrote it down thousands of years after it was supposed to have happened and hundreds of years after he thought it had happened. Druids are the stuff of histories, legends, lore and speculation. They study the mysteries and walk the Druid way in search of truth. This journey begins among stones and journeys to the sky through the center of the depths and up the core of the Great Tree. It is signed with cryptic markings and it is illuminated with kennings and esoteric chants. What better symbol for Druids than Stonehenge or Newgrange or even Tara of the Kings?



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