

Ancient Wisdom Now

By Linda Costello

The first historical records of the Druids were in Julius Caesar's memoirs of the Gallic Wars in 52 B.C. and most of his information was gathered from the writings of Posidonius, a Stoic who loved Rome and who had witnessed the Druids in Gaul.

Sometime around 23 – 79 AD, Caius Plinius Secundus, more commonly known as Pliny the Elder, wrote about Druids in white robes harvesting mistletoe with a golden sickle.

Aside from that, information has been gleaned from myths and archeology, bits and pieces that are scarcely enough to create a complete picture, and more is being discovered all of the time.

Given all that, there are some elements of which we are fairly certain. For example, we know that the Druids were not just religious heads, but they also held the legal and historical lore-bearing functions of their times. The Druids presided at any public rituals, and there is quite a bit of evidence of regular ceremonies – both community centered, and hearth and family centered.

As keepers of legal precedent, the Druids memories the laws and carried the information as reference to settle disputes. They were known to be very just.

The Druids held the function of being the repositories of the customs of the culture. It is said that their training was anywhere from twelve to twenty years in length, and in the process, they assimilated thousands of verses of eulogy, genealogy, legal precedence, hymns, chants, and offertory prayers, and passed them on orally.

In Irish Mythology, we find that the Druids were advisors to the chieftains and kings. There is a tale that St Patrick attempted to usurp some of the Druids' power by lighting a fire on a hill within sight of the Hill of Tara, before the Druids lit the custom Beltane fire. This resulted in a great confrontation between the Druids and St. Patrick, which had to be brought to the ruler for resolution.

In both Irish and Welsh traditions, there is evidence of a relationship between poetry and religious practices. Bardic training continued well into the 17th century, based upon an elaborate oral system. Incubatory practices were common, where the poets would go abroad during the light times of the year and then write inspired poetry about those experiences during the dark times.

Visionary bards were known as file, or sacred poets, and much of their poetry came from ecstatic trance induction. A popular method of inducing ecstatic trance was known as the Tarbh Fheis or the Bull Feast. In this ceremony, a druid would be wrapped in the hide of a slaughtered bull while others chanted rhythmically around him. This was done primarily for divinatory dreams of who would be the new king.

The religious practices included veneration of the ancestors. There was a strong belief in life in the otherworld after death, as evidenced by the practice of burying goods with the dead for use in the afterlife.

As did all Indo-European people of the time, they made sacrifices. Some of the offerings included submersion in water, burying, cremation (burning), and hanging in trees.

The Druids were polytheistic, and believed to be somewhat animistic. Each tribe had its own favorite deities who were honored, and there were specific gods and goddesses of place to guard what was thought of as sacred, such as wells and springs.

The people of the time crafted objects to be given to their gods and goddesses.

Fire was considered sacred and was used both as purification and as a marker of boundaries.

There were strong values of hospitality and reciprocity. Open, generous hospitality was a core value.

In the 15th – 19th century, there was a rediscovery of the word, Druid, and since the information from the past was so sketchy, much of it was recreated to fit the common philosophies of the day. This is one reason why there are many, sometimes disparate beliefs of who and what the Druids were.

What does all of this have to do with us, now, in the 21st century?

In the 1970's and 1980's, a group of people, known as Reconstructionists began work to build a functional religious practice, informed by the ancient druids. This work continues to evolve with new awarenesses and discoveries.

Although we can never really reconstruct the culture of the ancients, we CAN take key concepts and incorporate them into our practices and our daily lives.

We can develop practices where a trained "Druid" facilitates and presides over public rituals, where the primary feature is an offertory rite, sharing hearth with the powers, inviting them to partake and to give first fruits to them. This simultaneously connects us with the past and helps us to build a modern neopagan community.

In the same way that the ancients were aware of the power of the word, we can honor that power by treating the word as sacred. We can do so by practicing inspired word-smithing, brought about by trance journeys and meditations. We can compose in such a way to hold and pass on our culture to the generations to follow.

We understand polytheism as a way of recognizing the many forces around us and honoring them all by building relationships with them.

We can work to increase community-building, cultivating a tolerance and respect for others, and recognizing our seen and unseen allies.

And finally we can work to rebuild our relationship with the land. We can perform rituals which create a strong bond between the people and the land. We can be more aware of our impact to the land, increasing our environmental awareness. We can hold a healthy respect for the powers of the land, and honor them as they deserve.

At this time of ecological crisis, economic upheaval, and impoverished spirits, the practices and ideals that we saw in the ancient culture are just what are needed in our lives and in this world.

Reference: Much of the information presented here was taken from notes of a lecture given by Todd Covert at Pantheacon in 2006 called *Druids Then and Now*