

Section 8 – The Proliferation of Deity

The Celts

Northern and western Europe were colonised by *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* and *H. heidelbergensis* before modern humans. The first *H. sapiens sapiens* arrived around 40,000 years ago. The new arrivals remained and their DNA can still be found, notably in populations like the Basques of southwest France and northern Spain. These people hung on to their hunter-gatherer lifestyle, and it now appears that agriculture was spread to Europe by people from Anatolia, who migrated into Europe and brought their technology and culture with them.¹

The early population of Europe left behind evidence that it was a Goddess culture. The Red Lady of Paviland, the discovery of the remains of women shamans and the wealth of archaeological finds make this clear. The arriving agriculturalists brought with them a different conception of the Goddess, who now existed within a broad pantheon. This probably explains the similarities between the later European pantheons of the Germanic, Norse and Celtic peoples and those of the Mesopotamians. The two populations co-existed for many years, but in the end, the early Europeans adopted the new lifestyle and culture.

By the first millennium BCE, the new, settled agrarian lifestyle was widespread and well-established, along with the religious beliefs that went with it. One of the most significant of the cultures in this milieu was that of the Celts.²

Celtic culture originated in Central Europe and spread across the continent. For many years, scholars believed that the Celts were a distinct ethnic group that physically migrated out of central Europe to dominate the west by force of arms. However, extensive DNA sampling shows that this did not happen. Celtic culture spread and was adopted by the indigenous people, voluntarily. Celtic culture was welcomed, not imposed. It was a migration of ideas and technology rather than of large numbers of people.

While the arriving agriculturalists had brought farming, the Celts had another, ground-breaking technological innovation: metallurgy. This advance spread like wildfire, replacing the old Neolithic stone technology. Celtic culture spread across Europe in two waves, the first at the end

¹ Pinhasi, Fort & Ammerman, *Tracing the Origin and Spread of Agriculture in Europe*, *Public Library of Science*, 2005 (<http://journals.plos.org/plosbiology/article?id=10.1371/journal.pbio.003041>)

² ‘Celt’ is pronounced with a hard ‘C’. This is because the name comes from the Greeks, who called them ‘Keltoi’.

of the second millennium BCE, with its distinctive metallurgy being bronze and the second, five hundred years later, with iron.³

The Celts are a mysterious people in many ways. Unfortunately, because they did not write down important knowledge, much of what we know about them comes either from contemporary Roman historians or later Christian ones, who were often unsympathetic. As a result, the Celts were, until recently, often overlooked by historians. In recent decades, Celtic culture has been much more thoroughly researched, using both traditional methods and new tools such as DNA analysis, which has helped fill in many gaps. As a result, our understanding of their lives has evolved greatly.

The Celts deliberately did not write down important information and instead it was learned by heart as a way of preserving and protecting it. Nevertheless, and while only Druids would have been educated to this level, the Celts did know how to read and write. The Druids were the intelligentsia of Celtic society, of whom Caesar wrote:

‘They are said there to learn by heart a great number of verses; accordingly some remain in the course of training twenty years. Nor do they regard it lawful to commit these to writing, though in almost all other matters, in their public and private transactions, they use Greek characters.’⁴

Druids are often represented as priests, but this is a caricature. In the first place, Druids were as likely to have been women as men.⁵ Secondly, while their role did have an important religious element, this was only part of it. They were the educated class of society. They were doctors, lawyers, oracles, historians, political advisors, musicians, singers, scientists and astronomers, poets and educators. They were also artists and technicians, smiths and jewellers, and they wove a distinctive chequered pattern of cloth, which is still known today in Scottish tartans and plaids.⁶

The druidic life began at around the age of five, when a child was selected, either because of her ability or because of her family, for special education. Training probably began in her home village at the hands of the local Druid, alongside the other children. The chosen ones would then go on to one of the druidic colleges for further training. There were hundreds of such colleges across the Celtic lands, which, by the time they were Christianised, extended from the Alps to the Atlantic, as far south as Spain and north as Scotland.

³ The Celts were not the first to adopt bronze metallurgy; it first appeared in Sumer around 2800 BCE. However they did spread it through central and west Europe, which at the time was completely Neolithic.

⁴ Caesar, Caius Julius. *Commentaries: The War in Gaul. Book VI*

⁵ Green, Miranda. *Exploring the World of the Druids*. Thames & Hudson. 1997.

⁶ 217 Strabo. *Geography*.

A Druid was fully trained after nineteen years of education. This is equivalent to the length of time required for a young person, beginning at primary school, to achieve a Master's Degree today. The level of sophistication of this class should not be underestimated.

Druidic learning, however, was secret. Druids were only permitted to pass a little of their knowledge on to non-druids. Knowledge made the Druids indispensable in a culture that did not write, and the Druids encouraged this, decrying written knowledge as corrupt and not truly learned. There is an analogy here with music, where a piece is not considered 'learned' until it can be played without reference to notation. It means that the piece and all its nuances have been fully internalised. This is how Druids saw learning and their nineteen years of study was devoted to learning by heart the ancient lore transmitted to them, in small groups or individually, by qualified druids. Almost certainly this knowledge was preserved in the form of songs and repetitive chants.

Druids were encouraged to travel after their formal education was over, a tradition that persists even now in the successor cultures. Today in Europe, a craftsperson completing her or his apprenticeship has to undertake a tour, where she or he can work on active projects. These are the most qualified and respected of European craftspeople and the tradition has been recorded since the time of the medieval Guilds, which themselves had their roots in druidic education.

It is probably as a result of this travelling that Celtic culture was so widely and so quickly spread. Druid teachers, doctors and craftspeople would have travelled out of the Celticised heartland, taking their culture and, most significantly, their knowledge and craft skills, with them. As educated people, they would soon have become very important to the communities they visited and even settled in, which in turn would have absorbed their learning and culture.

Even after the Romanisation of the Celtic lands of Gaul and southern Britain, it seems that the Druids did not disappear. The so-called 'Deal Warrior' was buried between 200-150 BCE.⁷ He has been described as 'slight' in build, and attention has been drawn to his unusual headdress, which is very light, made of bronze (though this is an Iron Age burial) and has no padding to protect the skull.⁸ Indeed, the British Museum website notes:

'The metal was worn directly on the head and not padded or strengthened with leather; when found impressions of human hair were left in the corrosion on the inner surface.'⁹

⁷ British Museum: http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/peprb/s/skullcrownofdealwarrior.aspx

⁸ Oliver, Neil. *A History of Celtic Britain, Part One: Age of Warriors*. BBC Broadcast. 2011

⁹ British Museum.

This suggests that the head-dress was not a war helmet but ceremonial or indicative of the wearer's status, and perhaps the Deal Warrior was a Druid.

Supporting this, Neil Oliver has shown that the headdress bears a striking similarity to items known to have been worn by priests hundreds of years later, in Roman Britain. This would suggest that the Druids were able to maintain their position in society despite the changes that must have taken place after the Roman conquest. It seems likely, then, that they would also have been able to do this in Gaul and other territories. In political terms, the Romans may have found it expedient not only to tolerate the Druids, but also to treat with them, since they held such an important role in Celtic society. Indeed Miranda Green has described them as being more important than the chiefs and monarchs.¹⁰

If the Druid culture could withstand the catharsis of imperial domination, it is certainly possible that it could have adapted to Christianisation, especially in the Roman form with the Mother Goddess, Mary, ensconced at the centre. Further evidence for this is that the Druids, of Ireland in particular, wore a tonsure, which is to say they shaved part of their heads.¹¹ This practice became common amongst Christian clergy. These parallels suggest that the badges of priestly office may have been carried forward to Christian times and that the first Christian priests in these lands were actually Druids.

The Celts were not city-dwellers; their huge, hill-top fortresses were refuges into which they retreated in times of warfare and the depths of winter. Paradoxically, the hilltops are the warmest places in winter, because the cold air falls to the valley floors, and the sun is not obstructed. In the other seasons, the Celts lived in simple wooden huts on the land they worked, tending their herds and crops. Therefore, they challenge the accepted definition of the term 'civilised', which means, to historians, 'living in cities'. Because of a relentless tendency for scholars to see history through the filter of classicism, the Celts were not considered civilised by many academics, at least until the last quarter century. Their art and the richness of their culture makes such an assessment untenable, except in the strictest technical definition of the word.

¹⁰ Green, Miranda, quoted in Oliver 2011.

¹¹ Von Pflugk-Harttung, Julius. *The Druids of Ireland. Transactions of the Royal Historical Society (New Series)*, 7, 1893, pp 55-75 (on-line resource: <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=3428760>)