

*'The Spirit of Albion':*

*An Anthropological Study of the Order of Bards, Ovates & Druids*

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*Submitted for the degree of DPhil in Social and Cultural Anthropology*

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Title of thesis: 'The Spirit of Albion': An Anthropological Study of the Order of Bards, Ovates & Druids

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since the 1990s, a new form of spirituality has been spreading throughout the western world. Called 'Druidry', this spirituality is based on what is known of ancient Celtic beliefs and practices. This spirituality is not merely archaising; rather, it seeks to incorporate the *Zeitgeist* of the ancient Celts into a new (and admittedly modern) practice that holds meaning for its adherents.

Ethnographic research for this work was conducted with one of the most prominent modern Druid organizations, the Order of Bards, Ovates & Druids. This organization was chosen as it was founded by modern Druidry's progenitor, Ross Nichols. While many other Druid groups exist, this group is arguably the largest worldwide. Although modern Druidry is practiced in such geographically disparate regions as New Zealand, Australia, the United States and Europe, I focus on the movement in Britain, as it is the home of OBOD's international organization and it is arguably the country with the greatest number of Druid gatherings and the largest community of currently practicing members. Research was conducted with many different members of the organization, but concentrated on one of OBOD's 'groves', the Anderida Grove of the Seven Hills.

This thesis was conceived primarily as an ethnographic study of an emergent spirituality, with a particular emphasis on the continual confrontation within modern Druidry between the ancient and the modern. As such, the work focuses on describing and analysing modern Druid belief and practice, including discussions regarding such areas as ritual and myth. However, the modern Druid evidence can also lead anthropologists to a deeper understanding of certain key debates current within the discipline of anthropology. I have chosen to focus primarily on how nationalism and ethnicity are synthesised through the mechanism of the 'invention of tradition' to create what modern Druids refer to as 'the tribe'.

*Dedicated to*  
*Sonny and Myrna*

## Acknowledgements

Many individuals have, over the years, assisted me in the completion of this work. I would like to acknowledge all of those who have made this work possible.

The bulk of any ethnography is a reflection of the research gathered through the fieldworker's relationship with his or her informants. Therefore, I would like to thank all of the members of the Anderida Grove of the Seven Hills, past and present, for their patience with my many enquiries, for trusting me and for truly making me a member of their tribe. I would especially like to acknowledge the kind help and suggestions given to me by David Smith and Cerri Lee. I thank you all heartily and wish that the spirit of the Hengwha is always with you.

While my informants mainly came from this group, many others within the modern Druid community helped immensely. These individuals aided my understanding of the relationship between Anderida and other groups within the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, as well as the relationship between this organization and others within the modern Druid spirituality. Thus, I would like to acknowledge the help and guidance I received from all of those I met and spoke with at OBOD's camps and bi-annual assemblies. I hope that our paths shall cross again.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

*"The Spirit of Albion is calling you home..."* (D. Smith 2006)<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Druid movement*

Since the early 1990s, a form of spirituality based on the romantic past of the ancient Druids of Great Britain (anciently referred to as 'Albion'<sup>2</sup>) has spread throughout the Western world. Wary of defining itself as a religion, modern Druidry is often referred to by its adherents simply as a 'path' or a 'spirituality'. Along with the more publicized modern Wicca movement,<sup>3</sup> it forms one branch of modern paganism. This thesis, while focusing mainly on providing an ethnography of this movement, is also concerned with the ways in which modern Druidry can expand upon and clarify current debates within anthropology, specifically the relationship between ethnicity, nationalism, and the 'invention of tradition' discourses.

Although apparently a twentieth-century invention, modern Druidry lays claim to an older past. The often contested history of this phenomenon allegedly began with the priestly caste of the ancient Celts (the Druids) in Europe and the British Isles. In fact, the historical foundations claimed for this movement are at least partially ideological constructions. Although modern Druids claim that the ancient Druids were forced to 'go

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Dave Smith for his kind permission for the use of the name of his album, *'The Spirit of Albion'* (Caer Bryn Studios, 2006) as part of the title for this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'Albion' first appeared in the sixth-century BC work, *Massaliote Periplus*, which was a handbook for sailors containing geographical information. Although now lost, this work supposedly survives in the fourth-century AD *Ora Maritima* by the Roman poet Avienus. Additionally, the name is attested to by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* (Book IV).

<sup>3</sup> Wicca holds much in common with modern Druidry including a common heritage. This heritage will be discussed in chapter two. However, as this work focuses on Druidry I will leave the comparison of the two movements for a later work.

underground' after the Roman conquest of Gaul and Britain, they believe that the pagan religion of the inhabitants of these areas survived through hereditary knowledge that re-emerged in the eighteenth century through the establishment of fraternal organizations (and Masonic ones) concerned with reclaiming the supposedly lost philosophical and scientific knowledge of the ancient Druids. Not until the 1950s did the ancient Druids provide a template for the spiritual path which was to emerge, first through the Ancient Order of Druids (otherwise known as the Circle of the Universal Bond) and subsequently through an off-shoot led by Ross Nichols in 1964.

From 1964 until 1990, modern Druidry was not well-known to the general public, with the exception of some public ceremonies held by the Ancient Druid Order at Stonehenge and Tower Hill in London. However, in 1990 Philip Carr-Gomm (the current Chosen Chief of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids) published a collected and edited manuscript written by Ross Nichols entitled *The Book of Druidry*. The publication of this work sparked intense interest in the modern Druid path. Since that time, Druid groups have sprung up in large numbers across the Western world. At the time of writing, groups exist in Great Britain, Ireland, France, Holland, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and America.

The main focus of this spirituality is its reverence for nature. Although pantheistic or polytheistic<sup>4</sup> it prescribes no particular pantheon but focuses on the spirits or energies inherent in the landscape and the natural world in general. Whichever deities (or spirits or energies) the individual or group chooses to 'work with', they are not worshipped or propitiated, but invoked and appealed to for help. Due to the fact that the

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<sup>4</sup> Considerable debate exists within the community as to which term more accurately defines this spirituality.

ideological structure is based on a reverence for nature, ceremonies are conducted in the open air whenever possible.

Druidry sees itself as being free of dogma, and it has been continually emphasized that gurus or clergy do not and should not exist within the movement. Rather, this path encourages individual self-development (itself a modern Western idea). Adherents are encouraged to find their own path with help from other adherents, from their own research, and from the materials provided by and through the organizations. While the foundation of modern Druid practice is individual and is geared towards individual spiritual development, these individuals often (though not always) come together for group practice. Far from being purely an individual path, however, it is a collective movement which reifies the individual. I have therefore focused on the communal aspects of this path.

Like many societies, membership is not based on a single event or action. Rather, through the process of inculturation, an individual gradually *becomes* a Druid. Through study and meditation an individual's Druidry is developed and the individual is transformed. However, this is not a one-way process. As the individual is transformed, so is Druidry. The individual, through his or her links with the wider community, is continually enmeshed in a dialectical process that transforms Druidry as well. Hence, the absence of dogma and lack of figureheads are encouraged through the continual process of renegotiation of belief.

There is no such thing as a 'typical' modern Druid. Adherents range in age from late teens to mid-fifties, with no specific age being usual. The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids discourages individuals from joining before about sixteen years of age as it is

felt that a certain degree of mental and spiritual maturity is essential, although this is decided on a case-by-case basis. Furthermore, Druids come from all manner of professions ranging from blue collar to white collar. All social and economic classes are equally represented, and educational levels are diverse. As modern Druidry is a spirituality based on a connection with the ancient Celts, most that come to this path tend to be white; however racial background is not determinative and all races are actively welcomed. Most modern Druids come from predominantly Christian backgrounds, as might be expected, given the prevailing Judeo-Christian framework of British society.<sup>5</sup> While some of my informants cite an excessively Christian up-bringing as the reason they came to Druidry, others were raised in non-religious or non-spiritual households. Some bring their children to Druidry but all of the parents in my fieldwork stated that they were consciously raising their children to see spirituality as an individual choice, not an inherited obligation. Because it is an individual choice, members are not actively recruited, and they rarely have pre-existing familial or social connections that lead them to become modern Druids. The only connections one can plausibly posit are those of common temperaments or attitudes, which drive these individuals to seek out this path in the first place.

Individual adherents engage with the modern Druid community through one or more types of groups. While it would be impossible to provide an exhaustive list of these groupings, they can be classified into roughly four categories: those of the order, the Gorsedd (a group that celebrates the seasonal festivals to which any member of the public may attend), the grove (a group closed to non-members who celebrate monthly) and the

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<sup>5</sup> However, it can equally be argued that British society is secular and therefore most of these individuals were not raised within a religious framework.

seed group (who come together informally for study). However, membership often cross-cuts these groupings, as will be made apparent.

While many modern Druid orders exist throughout the Western world, this thesis focuses on one such order, the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (also known as ‘OBOD’). Arguably the largest international order of Druids, it claims to trace its history from the early eighteenth century, and thus could be said to have one of the longest histories of a modern Druid spiritual organization. The choice of OBOD for this study rested on the fact that it is perhaps the most recognized of the Druid orders and that this is the order formed by the founder of modern Druidry, Ross Nichols. As we shall see, this is a contentious claim. ‘Modern Druidry’ can trace its roots at least to the beginning of the twentieth century, or potentially to the eighteenth century masonic groups. Nichols’ stance as the ‘founder’ of modern Druidry is a claim made by OBOD and its adherents and is spurious at best. However, his manuscripts were some of the first widely published works on modern Druidry and therefore he is accorded this role as the founder of the modern movement.

While much of my fieldwork was undertaken within OBOD itself, the majority of the fieldwork was accomplished through one of OBOD’s constituent groves, the Anderida Grove of the Seven Hills, located in Sussex. This group currently has about seventeen members although at the start of my fieldwork that number was significantly lower since the group had just undergone a schism and was in the process of rebuilding and reorienting its goals. This process was unexpected but yielded a wealth of information regarding group dynamics and membership. Often a hotly contested matter, this grove (like others) continues to struggle with its own self-definition.

The Anderida Grove was chosen as it is one of the most high profile groups within OBOD. The group's two facilitators have both worked for the international organization. In fact, my first contact with OBOD occurred in a telephone call to the East Sussex-based international office that was received by one of these facilitators. OBOD has a very small staff and this individual is often the first person many people speak to in OBOD as one of his responsibilities is arranging for the distribution of the correspondence courses. He continues to be heavily involved in OBOD, regularly helping to organize the bi-annual international meetings and thus being in a unique position to provide me with data relevant to the smaller local groups and the larger national and international concerns. Additionally, comparatively speaking the Anderida Grove has quite a long history having been in continual existence since 1998 (although the original members had long been involved in the modern Druid community).

#### *Goals and theoretical perspectives*

Anthropologists often choose to focus their studies on the 'exotic'. This has historically involved travelling to another country to study a culture different from the researcher's own. By contrast, this work focuses on one of the 'internal others' in British society. Often, this internal other is unvoiced and underrepresented. However, it is often just as exotic, potentially more so, as the homogeneity of Western cultures is often accepted *a priori*. It is therefore often with shock that we encounter radical difference within our own communities.

Since this group is subsumed within the prevailing majority culture of modern Britain, its members share much with the dominant culture. Therefore, many of the

ethnographic data that are often collected by anthropologists in the field are immaterial here. Notions of exchange and the treatment of women, for example, do not differ markedly from the parent culture. While an analysis of these topics can yield rich data, these data are simply reflections of the parent culture. Therefore, these areas are outside the scope of this thesis and treating with them would result in an unnecessarily bulky exposition. Additionally, in some 'traditional' areas of anthropological research (for example, kinship) the nascent status of this group has meant that little or no data are currently available. Additionally, although nuclear families attend events, kinship ties often are conceived of as inconsequential to the constitution of the group. Furthermore, often my informants were either confused by or had no responses to my questions regarding these topics; they simply weren't relevant to the actors themselves. I have therefore chosen to focus on the areas that display the most marked difference and on the significance of the fact that, while it sometimes takes a Herculean attempt to resolve clashes between their culture and that of the majority, they often do so in a unique and vibrant way.

This thesis will therefore examine the ways in which communal identity is negotiated by this group within British society. By deconstructing the image of this group as a wacky, odd, slightly subversive sect, I will demonstrate that their focus on individual choice, personal spiritual development, and modern psychological ideas creates a truly modern community. While harking back to the image of the ancient Druids, the modern movement does not attempt to be 'traditionalizing', but rather to provide modes and models for modern situations based on the *Zeitgeist* of Britain's ancient Celtic past.

However, while it may at times seem that I have depicted the beliefs and practices of modern Druids as a coherent whole, modern Druid belief and practices vary quite widely between groups and individuals. Each system (whether group or individual), as we shall see, does present a coherent whole even though it may conflict with the coherent systems of other individuals or groups. I have therefore attempted to depict the range and variety of beliefs and practices, but caution the reader that not all beliefs and practices exist in each modern Druid group.

The main goal of this thesis is to provide an ethnography of the evolving spirituality of modern Druidry. Hence, much of the work is descriptive in nature. I have also attempted throughout the thesis to discuss the ways in which the modern Druid evidence can expand upon several key debates current within anthropology. The main areas I discuss throughout the ethnography are ritual and myth, as these are two of the most important contexts for the negotiation and construction of meaning and belief in modern Druidry. However, the main engagement with anthropological debate occurs in chapter nine of this thesis, in which I discuss how the modern Druid evidence can further anthropological enquiries into the nature of nationalism, ethnicity and the ‘invention of tradition’ debates.

One of the primary issues that presented itself during fieldwork was the question of whether or not modern Druidry can be said to be a ‘religion’. However, in order to answer this question, we are faced with the issue of defining the term itself. The term ‘religion’ has been hotly debated within anthropology from the inception of this discipline. Each ‘school’ of anthropological thought has posited its own theories and these theories have been widely criticised by other schools and/or authors.

Of the early theorists, Tylor's definition seems closest to 'common sense'; he argues that religion is merely a "belief in spiritual beings" (1958: 424). However, even during this early stage of anthropological enquiry, this definition appeared too reductive for researchers, as can be seen in Robertson-Smith's attempts to correlate religion with communal, cultural systems of significance. Furthermore, authors such as Durkheim sought to advance the position that 'belief' should be removed from the equation and instead replaced with a critical examination of the relationship between the sacred and the profane (cf. 1995). Durkheim crucially also attested to the significance of religious or ceremonial activity for the creation and sustenance of the social world and the relationship of the individual to the group.

Instead of claiming a supernatural root for religion, many anthropologists view religion as a particular type of social and cultural activity based on a unified set of meanings or 'world-view'. For example, Eliade sought symbolic meaning which was universal (cf. Eliade 1969). Geertz's four-fold definition is particularly attractive in this sense as it is based on a sense of culturally shared meanings (cf. 1978.) Likewise, Talal Asad's work focuses not on the definition of religion itself but on how meaning is produced within a system (cf. 1993.) Furthermore, Turner's and van Gennep's works seek to illuminate symbolic systems and explore the importance of religious rites for the construction of meaning within a social group (cf. Turner 1967, 1995; van Gennep 1960).

Although these theorists have expanded our understanding of religious phenomenon, anthropology has yet to offer a cohesive definition of the term 'religion'.

The crux of the dilemma is perhaps most clearly voiced by Whitehouse, who states:

Whatever-it-is should ideally be widespread, not only in the contemporary world, but also throughout most of what we know about the human past; the properties of whatever-it-is should be clearly distinguishable from properties of whatever-it-is-not;

and its existence should be explainable with reference to general capacities of our species, activated under generally specifiable conditions. (2004: 2)

Thus, the issue for anthropologists is how to make the distinction between religious and non-religious activities. With respect to modern Druidry, one could make either argument: that it is a religion and that it is not a religion. Certainly, some of the features of what we would call religious or ceremonial activity are present. Additionally, as we shall see in chapter two, the group on which I focused (the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids) states that one of the reasons for the schism from their parent organization was the founder's desire to start a religion based on the ancient Druids.

In many ways defining modern Druidry as a religion is problematic – not least of which is the fact that modern Druids do not have (and actively discourage) a unified set of beliefs. However, a unified system of meaning is present, even if individual beliefs may differ. Likewise, ceremonial or ritual practices vary quite widely and there is no 'dogma', or authoritative set of beliefs from which individuals must not diverge, and therefore one can question the application of the term 'religion' to this movement. This dilemma was solved quite easily during my fieldwork. All of my informants referred to modern Druidry as a 'spirituality' or a 'path'. Perhaps the most illuminating definition of modern Druidry came from one informant's statement that Druidry is "a way of being in the world – at once part of and also apart from it". During my research I found few who would call their beliefs and practices a 'religion'; this may be due to the fact that most modern Druids view religion to be a constraining set of principles that hinders the discovery of meaning in an individual's life and impedes the individual's ability to connect to other individuals and the forces of the universe. I found that by focusing on the emic instead of the etic, it was unnecessary to define modern Druidry as a religion.

Rather than focusing on etic debates of the definition of religion, I therefore focused on my informants' categorization, as it is the most relevant definition for the social actors themselves.

As noted above, one of the primary goals of this thesis is to explore the ways in which the modern Druid evidence can further our understanding of current debates regarding nationalism, ethnicity and the 'invention of tradition'. In chapter nine I will discuss the current state of debate within anthropology regarding these themes, and therefore I leave the full exegesis until that point. However, in reference to nationalism, I have chosen to focus on the work of Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, while also discussing the works of such scholars as Roger Just, Partha Chatterjee and Eric Hobsbawm. Specifically, I delve into the debates over how the term 'nation' is defined and how 'nationalism' has developed, as well as how history has been used as justification for the foundation of modern nation-states.

Equally important to this thesis are current debates regarding ethnicity. While I discuss many theories regarding ethnicity in chapter nine, I predominantly rely on the theories of Fredrick Barth, espoused in his ground-breaking work from 1969, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. In particular, Barth is referred to for his work regarding boundaries and their maintenance. Ethnicity can also be regarded as a cognitive pattern or way of classifying others, as in Clyde Mitchell's *The Kalela Dance* (1956). Moerman's theory that ethnicity provides a "blueprint" for social interaction (cf. 1965) is also relevant to this discussion, as are the theories of researchers such as Anthony Cohen, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Elizabeth Tonkin, and Abner Cohen.

The fusion of nationalism and ethnicity, I will argue, occurs through the ‘invention of tradition’. This mechanism is taken from the volume of the same name edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (cf. 1992). This work provides the basis for the understanding of how traditions are ‘invented’ and how their antiquity is often asserted as justification for current practices. In respect to the modern Druid case, this is clearly important as this spirituality can only trace its roots definitively to the latter half of the twentieth century. By discussing the interaction between these three levels, we will see that modern Druidry is based in a confrontation of the modern and the ancient, and resolves the two into a unique whole that is meaningful for the participants.

### *Ethical concerns*

Throughout the course of any research anthropologists are often faced with ethical dilemmas. The fieldwork undertaken for this thesis was no different. Chiefly, three ethical concerns appeared: apprehension regarding how the work would be received by the modern Druids themselves, the inclusion of potentially sensitive material, and my own position as an adherent of modern Druidry. First, certain of the individuals who informed this work were cautious about speaking with me ‘on the record’. They cited many reasons for this including a fear of being misunderstood. It was not so long ago, one of them pointed out, that witchcraft<sup>6</sup> was illegal in the United Kingdom. Despite the current popular craze for sanitized paganism reflected in the modern media through programs such as *Charmed* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, the risk of prejudice is quite real. In fact, many Druids have related that, when they tell a non-pagan that they are

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<sup>6</sup> Although Wicca (the modern British and American form of witchcraft) and Druidry are separate paths they are two of the main branches of the modern Pagan movement. As such, many of the criticisms of Wicca by non-pagans are also levelled at modern Druids.

Druids, they are often asked if they worship Satan (an impossibility, as Druids do not believe Satan exists).

The caution which I encountered did, however, abate as I gained my informants' trust and particularly as I have regularly allowed my informants to read drafts of this work. The disadvantage of this method is that I could be accused of tailoring my analysis to make my informants happy. However, this process actually led me to balance my evaluations more carefully, as I knew inaccuracies or my own bias would be highlighted for me by my informants. Also, in places where I have disagreed with my informants' interpretations, it allowed a dialogue to occur that often illuminated more issues for study. The process of this fieldwork was thus a joint conversation which hopefully makes the evaluation more relevant for both anthropology and modern Druidry.

Additionally, some of my informants were uneasy regarding the expression of certain revealed truths. Primarily this feeling was directed at the disclosure of the initiation procedure. The publication of particulars regarding initiation would, it was felt, ruin the experience of the initiate if he or she had the chance to read about it beforehand. Like other anthropologists studying sensitive topics, I have had to weigh the importance of the material for analysis with the ethical need to abide by the wishes of my informants. I have therefore refrained from discussing this procedure in detail. My informants were content, however, for me to discuss the broad themes involved in the rite. While the ethnography is undoubtedly the poorer for the exclusion of this material, it has been rendered necessary in order to maintain the trust this group has had in my discretion.

My position as a 'native ethnographer' was perhaps the most problematic issue in carrying out this research. However, this position itself is not all it seems as I was an

American studying *British* Druidry. Whatever the differences between these two cultures, they have much in common. Furthermore, my position as ‘native ethnographer’ is one of an adherent of modern Druid spirituality studying the phenomenon of modern Druidry. As a result, many of the problems that are typically said to face native ethnographers (cf. Jackson 1986; Kuper 1994; Messerschmidt 1981) arose in my fieldwork. While many anthropologists who engage in their fieldwork from the ‘outside’ may feel that they are more observer than participant, my status as an insider meant the reverse. Being a participant was second nature to me, but distancing myself far enough to be an observer produced a challenge. The problem has not been accessing what it feels like to be a Druid – it has been accessing what it feels like not to be a Druid. However, unlike many native ethnographers I was not born into this culture (in fact few are) and therefore I can refer back to a point at which I was not a Druid. Additionally, I spent time during research discussing with my informants how they became Druids and what that journey has meant for them. Hopefully, the inclusion of these data will help make this thesis as objective as possible.

### *Methodology*

Ethnography is necessarily a snapshot of a particular time and a particular place, a singular conjunction informed by the experience of both researcher and researched. As no culture is ever completely static, the experiences of the anthropologist in the field can never be replicated, even by the same anthropologist in the same community at a later date. This is particularly the case in this instance. Modern Druidry is an emergent spirituality; therefore dogma, structure, and community values are in a high state of flux

and are constantly being renegotiated. As many of its adherents have only been members for a matter of a few years, they are still going through the slow but vital process of inculturation. This process is complicated by the extreme avoidance of dogma or a clergy.

Additionally, there is no real consensus about what the practice of Druidry entails. Individual freedom to choose what beliefs and traditions to follow is perhaps the most consistent idea within this path. A sense of community does exist, but owing to the small numbers and international nature of the membership many Druids must practice alone. While many prefer to do this, those that do not have few opportunities to come together as a community. In this context, the ‘imagined community’ (cf. Anderson 2006) of OBOD’s correspondence courses and the many chat-rooms available on the internet become crucial in linking modern Druids to their community, a theme I shall explore in chapter seven.

Methodologically, this obviously posed a problem, but this was overcome by developing a multi-sited fieldwork paradigm. Thus I attended grove meetings, assemblies and camps in areas of Britain such as Sussex, Somerset, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Hampshire. Additionally, I conducted research through various internet sites, as these are some of the prime venues for collective representation. I was also exceedingly fortunate to have written sources from some of my own informants: the ‘Wealden Letters’ attached as Appendix One are one such source. Furthermore, Philip Carr-Gomm, the Chosen Chief of OBOD (himself a prolific author), also took time to speak with me; his responses were invaluable to this work.

Like many anthropologists, I began my fieldwork with an extremely long list of questions I wished to answer, dilemmas which I sought to resolve. Again, like most researchers, I was apprehensive about the best way to approach these subjects, mindful that the way I phrased a question could well bias the answer. Additionally, anthropologists can never be certain if they are asking the right questions or are posing them to those individuals who are likely to have the information being sought. Being researchers, we are often also outsiders and, therefore, must consider whether any information is being hidden from us. We must even be concerned with the form our inquiries take; the very act of an informant sitting down to fill in a questionnaire creates a social situation that is often singular and outside of their everyday experience, thus potentially biasing the answers. Furthermore, the answers must be questioned as informants will sometimes give responses they believe are pleasing to the researcher or may give stereotypical answers reflective of received wisdom, not the informant's own perspective.

My methodology was determined by the requirements involved in studying a contemporary group enmeshed within a larger Western society. The classic vision of the anthropologist in the field evokes a romantic image of the researcher alone in the bush or perhaps a tropical island living for an extended period of time with his informants. Sharing day-to-day life and activities allows the anthropologist to pierce the veil of the subject culture and discover the often hidden structures and unvoiced beliefs of a people. In the past, the diligent anthropologist studied the native language (often different from his own) and began gathering data on a vast array of subjects including such areas as kinship and exchange, although the fieldworker had usually encountered these issues in

his preparation for research.<sup>7</sup> This was the prevailing methodology in anthropology because much anthropological fieldwork focused on closed societies (though one can argue that most of the societies studied by early anthropologists were not exactly ‘closed’). The group I study is enmeshed within British society, therefore I have had to revise the ‘traditional’ models of research in order to fully engage with my subject. I have attempted to allow my data to dictate my methods rather than vice versa. Modern Druids (for the most part) do not live in Druid communities and as Westerners do not differ markedly from the Western norm regarding some of the classic areas of enquiry. Though the study of Western society is important it is not the focus of my work here.

However, while my methods may have differed markedly from those of the traditional anthropological model, the goal is the same. Fieldwork is meant to immerse the researcher in the day-to-day activities of the group so that he or she may move away from their position outside the group and become (as much as possible) an ‘insider’. For most fieldworkers this endeavour takes place in the geographically bounded space in which his or her informants reside. Since modern Druids do not generally live in communities but are scattered throughout the countries in which they reside, they must travel often long distances to meet with other Druids. My fieldwork reflected this and was, therefore, multi-sited. Additionally, many modern Druids learn about their spirituality through the internet and the correspondence courses offered by groups such as OBOD. Therefore, I sought to learn in the same way by researching through these means. Instead of hampering my ability to accurately study modern Druids, I realized that the problems inherent in doing so shed light on what it actually is like to be a Druid. After all, many Druids first become Druids through the research they have done on the

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<sup>7</sup> It must be noted, however, that even as regards ‘classical’ anthropology, this was merely a model.

internet and through participation in online rituals. While my position as an insider may have helped in certain ways, it is important to note that it also complicated this research as it resulted in an increased danger of taking things for granted. For example, on one occasion I recall being shocked to be squarely in the middle of a discussion in which an informant stated he was an atheist. I had assumed that, like myself, modern Druids believed in a supra-human entity, even though our definitions of that entity (or in fact entities) might vary. This highlighted for me the importance of not making assumptions based on my own engagement with modern Druidry, but rather allowing my informants to enlighten me as to their world-views.

The primary focus of study for this thesis occurred mainly on three planes: my investigation of OBOD-sponsored events, my regular attendance of gatherings of the Anderida Grove of the Seven Hills, and my completion of the OBOD Bardic correspondence course. OBOD events I attended included the bi-annual international gatherings held in Glastonbury and several of the quarterly week-long camps held in a variety of locations in England. These events provided a chance to see how a range of individual Druids and groves interact with one another. Study of the Anderida Grove was more regular and included monthly meetings, the eight yearly Gorsedd (or seasonal) celebrations, bi-annual camps, and monthly pub moots. Additionally, interviews were undertaken with the approximately seventeen members of the Anderida Grove and individuals that attended Gorseddau, pub moots, and OBOD gatherings.

Throughout the text of this thesis I rely heavily on quotations from Ross Nichols, the founder of OBOD, and Philip Carr-Gomm, the current Chosen Chief and re-founder of this Order. As such I am using their works as informants, as their work often forms

the basis of belief. It is through their works that many people first learn the tenets of Druidry, and these are often the first exposure people have to this spirituality. However, as this work is limited in scope, I will only discuss the first correspondence course in detail. As it takes roughly a year to complete the Bardic grade, this thesis focuses primarily on the correspondence course related to this grade. At the time of writing I have recently been initiated into the second grade of Ovate but have not included this information, as I am still in the initial stages of accumulating this knowledge.

This research included individual interviews but it is primarily the result of group interviews and participant observation. With one exception, interviews were conducted orally without the aid of a recording device as most informants expressed apprehension about being recorded. Additionally, many situations did not allow the use of recording media and in any event it was usually discouraged. While questionnaires were considered the idea was ultimately discarded as they often encourage stereotypical answers to fixed (and often biased) questions. Some direct questioning occurred, though much of the data came from unprompted statements. In fact, due to the constant renegotiation of belief, virtually all of the Druids interviewed were quite animated when a topic was broached and needed little prompting to discuss an idea at length. As participant-observation was the goal, notes were taken only after the event in question, as I deemed it would disrupt the flow of the proceedings too much to take notes during them. All of the data collected were analyzed on an on-going basis.

Particularly useful for this work were the moots and internet message boards frequented by modern Druids. The moot/message board format is a vital part of modern Druidry, a venue for the exchange of ideas both ideological and practical. Instead of

having to create an alien social situation in order to query my informants, I was met with a 'native' format which was already part of the process of the definition of Modern Druid ideology and identity. This format allowed me to gather data without having to ask the questions first – they both asked and answered them. All that remained for me was to prompt elaborations or to ask related questions. In many instances this format was quite illuminating, as many of the issues raised for discussion were not questions I would have thought to ask. Therefore, the data I gathered were undoubtedly deeper, richer and, most importantly, produced data that were more relevant to my informants. Unlike some groups, where the mechanisms of change are shrouded and the contest of belief negated, in Druidry the conflicts that occur over belief and practice are primary and therefore take center stage. Hence, my methodology was not as hampered as some cases by the bias inherent in the ethnographic method.

Fieldwork 'proper' began in August of 2004 and has continued up to the present date. Unlike many cases, my fieldwork was conducted 'at home' with a group of which I am a member. This has been both a blessing and a hindrance. While I have been compiling these data I have had the opportunity to ask my informants to clarify questions that have arisen during writing. However, the continual influx of data has required extreme selectivity such as the aforementioned choice to use only material contained within the first correspondence course. Discussion of this material will be held for a later work (as I expect to be continuing my research past this thesis, I have chosen to remain to some extent 'in the field' to allow me to maintain my contacts).

## *Chapters*

This ethnography begins in chapter two with what I have termed the ‘Creation Myth’ of modern Druidry. An attempt to provide a firm historical basis for the reader, this section begins with a discussion of the problems encountered in the historical sources before moving on to a discussion of the etymology of the term ‘Celt’. Following this is a look at Druidry through the ages, commencing with the archaeological sources for the ancient Celtic culture and continuing through chronological time to the Victorian era and the genesis of OBOD.

The structure of Druid organizations is described in chapter three, entitled ‘Structure and Knowledge’. The examination starts with the relationship of the various orders and continues on to a discussion of the administrative structure of OBOD itself. As the name of the organization suggests, the Order is made up of three structural (but not hierarchical) grades referred to as *Bard*, *Ovate*, and *Druid*. After an explanation of these grades we turn to look at the various ways in which knowledge is disseminated by OBOD. Finally, this chapter concludes with a consideration of the organization of the groves and seed groups within OBOD, with special attention being paid to the Anderida Grove of the Seven Hills.

Changing focus, chapters four and five (‘Cosmology’ and ‘Myth’) address the ideological basis of modern Druidry. Although wide variation does exist within and between groups (and individuals) cohesion exists in the system of each group (or individual), and these two sections investigate the most prevalent beliefs of modern Druids. Chapter four describes the cosmology of modern Druidry. It discusses basic themes such as nature and reincarnation as well as providing a discussion of the most

commonly invoked deities. Complementing this is chapter five, which focuses on the use of myth within this community. Much of the chapter is taken up with a telling of the myth of Taliesin, concluding with a structural analysis of the myth.

A great deal of time is spent in this work discussing ritual, as chapters six and seven focus on this theme. Chapter six ('Druidry in Action I: Seasonal Rituals') explores the eight seasonal festivals that make up the 'mandala' of the Druid year through an exegesis of their history and their associations. Likewise, chapter seven ('Druidry in Action II: Life-Crisis Rites and Modes of Practice') describes the life-crisis rites of this group as well as providing an examination of the several ways in which Druidry is practiced. This chapter also includes an exegesis of the basic structure of Druid rituals. Once again, I must note that while the material in this chapter presents the most common types of practice, individuals or groups will often only practice one or two types of activities. While this chapter provides an overview of the ways in which modern Druids practice, they are by no means the only ways in which they celebrate their spirituality; rather, individuals and groups chose which types of gathering make sense as part of the coherent system of their spirituality. The emphasis in this thesis on ritual has been dictated by the ethnographic data. As this is the predominant milieu for the expression of communal identity and forms the basis for communal activity, a careful assessment of ritual was inevitable.

'Ritual Structure' is the province of chapter eight. In this section the focus is therefore on the way a typical modern Druid ritual is structured. This includes a discussion of the preparations for rituals and the numerous venues for the acquisition of ritual tools and props, a distinction elaborated in the chapter. Furthermore, we will see

how ritual roles are apportioned and how locations for practice are chosen. Finally, this segment concludes with an exegesis of the structure of rituals themselves, covering such themes as the opening and closing of the ritual and the chronological progression of liturgical elements.

Chapter nine is entitled 'Thesis/antithesis/synthesis'. In this section I argue that the study of modern Druidry can advance key understandings within anthropology. First, this section examines nationalism and its role (in this case) as 'thesis'. This antithesis to this thesis, I argue, is the idea of ethnicity. Finally, through the mechanism of the 'invention of tradition', ethnicity and nationalism are fused in the notion of the 'tribe', which reflects the adoption of the concept of 'neo-tribalism' by modern Druidry. This section thus discusses the ways in which Druidry can be said to be an 'invented tradition' and, in fact, whether this term is useful analytically in anthropology as a discipline. Modern Druids, I argue, have ethnicity while not actually being an ethnic group. Their ethnicity is set in opposition to the prevailing national identity of Great Britain. In an attempt to 'opt out' of contemporary British culture (which they believe to be lacking in many regards) they have created an alternative culture resting on what they argue is the 'true' spirit of the land and people of Great Britain. This culture, while not advocating a strict adherence to fact, is based on the historical and archaeological knowledge of one of the earliest named cultures within the British Isles, the Celts.<sup>8</sup> Key to this alternate identity is the establishment of a community which they refer to as 'the tribe'. The synthesis of nationalism and ethnicity occurs through the invention of this tribe. It is through reference to tribalism in this context (which is admittedly very different from the

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<sup>8</sup> The Celts were certainly not the first group to live in the British Isles. However, they are credited by modern Druids as being the 'true' Britons; that is the people who defended the land of Britain from successive waves of invaders such as the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings.

way the term is used analytically) that we can see how this invented tradition is diametrically opposed to the usual national and ethnic markers of identity. This process can further shed light on how the ancient and the modern confront each other in the spirituality known as modern Druidry.

## Chapter Two

### **The History of Modern Druidry: A Contested Trajectory**

The term ‘Druid’ originates with the ancient Celts. Therefore, any exegesis of modern Druidry must start with an explanation and historical contextualization of the use of this term. It begins, therefore, by discussing the evidence for the ancient Celts and the problems with the sources for this evidence. Following this exploration will be a critical examination of the work of Renaissance linguists and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century antiquarians, which aids in understanding how the Celts were re-awoken in response to Europe’s need to justify its programs of nation-state building. We will scrutinize the Romantic Movement’s use of the image of the ancient Celt as a foil for modernity, which has had great impact on the romantic image of the Celt. This romantic image continued through the nineteenth- and twentieth centuries through the orientaling freemason societies that abounded in Britain at that time. In addition, we will discuss Iolo Morganwg’s late eighteenth-century attempt to muster the image of the ancient Celts to assert a Welsh identity as distinct from the English. Finally, I will discuss what happened to the Celts in Britain during the period of Romanization through the Middle Ages.

All of these sources have all been used by modern Druids to generate a myth of historical continuity with the ancient Celts, a continuity which is at best difficult to assert and at worst positively spurious. The modern Druid movement is a modern movement which was consciously created roughly fifty years ago, a fact that few modern Druids deny. However, the community claims a link to the ancient Celtic past, albeit a

recognizably problematic one. The term 'Druid' often evokes romantic images of a mythic past. However, as we will come to see, the history of this movement is long and complicated. Fact, fiction and the symbolic blend together in this tradition to form the rich and complex creation myth<sup>9</sup> of modern Druidry. The history of the modern Druid movement begins with the ancient Druids of the Celtic age and stretches right through to the twenty-first century.

### *Problems with the sources*

As the modern Druid creation myth begins with ancient Celtic society it is appropriate to begin with this material. The sources used by both scholars and modern Druids to reconstruct these societies are predominantly archaeological and literary. However, as we shall see, these sources contain many contradictions and biases. The consequence of these contradictions and biases (as well as the sheer historical distance between our era and theirs) is that the Celts as we know them are largely a construct, which only really elucidates the biases and world-view of modern western culture and not that of the ancient Celts.

The archaeological evidence for the ancient Celts presents the researcher with many difficulties. While archaeology can tell the researcher what kinds of animals were being raised or what type of house form a group preferred, it cannot definitively tell us about their beliefs. Moreover, due to the climate in most of Europe, certain types of archaeological remains (such as wood and cloth) degrade very quickly while others (such as metal) remain in the archaeological record much longer. This raises the possibility

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<sup>9</sup> It must be noted that here I am using the term not as a reference to the creation of the universe (as it is usually used) but to describe the creation of the group itself.

that the significance placed on finds by archaeologists may not correspond with their significance for their original manufacturers and consumers. Also, many practices do not leave any archaeological remains. Moreover, new remains are found every year necessitating revisions to current knowledge of the Celts.<sup>10</sup> However, the archaeological evidence is extremely important to our understanding of the ancient Celts because as a whole the Celts were almost completely illiterate and therefore did not leave a corpus of recorded literature.

Moreover, writing was confined to a very small number of functions such as the recording of important ritual dates. History and literature were passed down through the centuries instead in oral form (although it is easy to overestimate the longevity of such things). The literature that has survived is mainly the Irish and Welsh mythological cycles, which present the researcher with difficulties similar to those encountered in the archaeological sources. Primarily, these problems stem from the fact that the texts were not codified until after the beginning of the Christian era, a period of the attempted eradication of non-Christian Celtic beliefs. In the Irish case, for example, it was until recently believed that the Christian monks codified the texts in the fifth and sixth centuries AD.<sup>11</sup> Supposedly, the Church charged the codifiers (the monks) with civilizing and converting the Irish ‘pagans’, therefore their accounts are certainly not unimpeachable. Unfortunately, we simply do not know if the monks simply committed traditional beliefs and practices to the page or whether they may have exaggerated (or even lied about) certain practices in order to discredit the pagan beliefs and practices of

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<sup>10</sup> These revisions are often hotly debated amongst modern Druids.

<sup>11</sup> Recently the dating of this material has been called into question. This material is now thought to have been written in the eighth century, with most extant copies being produced at the earliest in the eleventh century. This further highlights the problematic nature of these texts as source materials for the ancient Celts and their beliefs.

the Celts. At the least they may have edited or censored the material, leaving out images or themes that seemed too strange or horrific to them. Alternatively, though, these horrific themes may have provided the Christian church with evidence to support the discrediting of Celtic beliefs and practices. Moreover, the codifiers may have (consciously or subconsciously) added Christian themes to these tales. Furthermore, we have no way of knowing how much the tales might have changed over time from their first telling until they were codified or even if variation was accepted in traditional Celtic lore. Certainly, the Irish monks and scholars for centuries afterwards took these tales as static representations of a homogenous and unchanging culture.

The pre-Christian works of classical authors are the main literary source for the ancient Celts. Although many authors mentioned the Celts the most useful writers for the present purpose are Julius Caesar, Strabo, Tacitus, Diodorus Siculus and Posidoneus. Just as the mythologies are riddled with difficulties, so too are these works. First, many of the works of the classical authors do not survive or exist only in fragments. Other classical writers often quote them but because we do not have the original texts, it is impossible to verify a subsequent author's quotation. Secondly, many of the classical authors had no first-hand knowledge of the Celts. Instead, they used word of mouth and second- or third-hand observations without enlightening the reader of the source of their information. The reader may therefore accept the writer's conclusions as statements of fact, often without question. Additionally, the classical authors ranged in time from the fifth century BC to the beginning of the Christian era, therefore observations made in the fifth century may not have been true by the second century. However, the classical authors would often quote earlier writers' observations as if Celtic culture had remained

static throughout five centuries. Even more questionable is the fact that these authors often had agendas that were not made overtly clear. In Caesar's case, these ranged from his need to gain political support in the Senate to justifying to the Senate his use of funds and manpower in attempting to conquer the Celts. This is supported by Cunliffe's point: "the prime motivation [for the Gallic War] was Caesar's need to establish military prestige and thus to build a power base, while at the same time amassing booty in order to pay his debts" (1997: 239).

Conversely, one could postulate that the pre-Christian work of Greek and Roman authors is void of the bias inherent in the Christian sources. After all, the classical world was 'pagan' and, therefore, it could be argued that these writers shared similar religious beliefs and values. However, in this context pagan is merely the converse of Christian. In other words, this extremely broad category groups together societies which in actuality had very different religious structures and beliefs. To assume that all pre-Christians held the same beliefs and practiced in the same manner would be wildly diverging from all evidence. In fact, the differences between the two types of 'pagan' structures would become a locus of controversy during the period of Roman occupation of Britain. In that period we can see the Roman Empire seeking to syncretize the two belief structures in an effort to subjugate the native pagan beliefs and practices with a goal towards assimilating the British Celtic population into the Roman Empire as a whole. Therefore, it becomes clear that one of the main differences between the Christian sources and the pre-Christian ones is that while the Irish monks and scholars were bent on converting the heathen British Celts, Romans were unconcerned with the religious status of the British pagans. Instead, the Roman Empire was concerned with how to assimilate a foreign people and

administer the territory within the overall structure of the Roman Empire. The Greek authors are less problematic in this regard. Their interest in the Celts was merely as creatures to be observed and directly contrasted with the Greeks' vision of their own society.

Ethnocentrism within these classical sources is perhaps the most crippling problem with the works. Their observations of Celtic practices must be questioned as they did not have an insider's knowledge of Celtic culture. They were not ethnographers and often did not recognize their biased view of alien cultural concepts. One must even question how well the classical authors understood the language of the Celts. Furthermore, classical authors wrote for a classical audience and would have conformed their observations to the comprehension of their readership. As Piggott points out, "In considering our documents we must first look for the context and culture of the writers and of their audience, and the ideological and social framework within which they fitted: then we may turn to the actual words" (1985: 18). Since the classical authors did not understand (and in fact were not interested in) native categories, they ignored them and attempted to fit ethnographic data into their own classical categories. Furthermore, the Gauls sacked Rome in the fourth-century BC and, therefore classical authors would have understandably felt threatened by them. After all, the Gauls weren't that far away – many had been settled for some time in the Po valley. This threat (perceived and actual) certainly could have resulted in inaccurate accounts.

Classical authors tended to assume that all of continental Europe and the British Isles were one homogenous cultural area, though some authors (such as Caesar) would have been aware of differences between the groups. As will be discussed below, this is

problematic as the classical authors note at least two names for this group of people. The groups that the classical world would have had most contact with would have been those living close to the Mediterranean in the area referred to as Gaul, which covered much of western Europe (France, Germany, Belgium, etc.), but excluded the British Isles. It is difficult to extrapolate from observations of southern Gaul what the rest of the Celtic world would have been like. Additionally, the groups living in these areas were not large, politically stable entities but were rather unaffiliated (or loosely affiliated) tribal groups. They might come together in times of mutual need but each had their own territory and political organization, independent of any pan-tribal polity. This independence would have led to a lack of cultural homogeneity across such a large territory.

With all of these difficulties it would seem obvious to ask the question of how much can be definitively known about pre-conquest Celtic Britain. The answer is that we cannot know much for certain. We do not need to disregard the archaeological or literary evidence, but it should be stressed that the evidence we do have is fraught with perils for the uncritical researcher. Although the modern Druid community as a whole recognizes many of these issues, many individuals within the community often do not. When the information is justificatory, it is often accepted wholesale in spite of the threat of inaccuracy.

### *Etymologies*

Even the terms used to describe these ancient peoples present a quandary. Greek and Roman authors used two basic terms to describe their contemporaries living in central

Europe and the British Isles: 'Celt' and 'Gaul.' 'Celt' appears to have come from the Greek word *keltoi*, but it is not known whether this was a Greek term applied to these peoples or the local term co-opted by the Greeks. Powell notes, "the Greeks wrote it down as *Keltoi*, having received it orally from the native pronunciation" (1958: 15). He states that 'Celt' did not apply to those living in the British Isles or, at the very least there is no evidence that it did so. However, the Greeks were not ignorant of the British Isles. According to Collis (2003: 16, 66), in the fourth century BC Avienus wrote *Ora Maritima*, in which he made use of the Massaliote Periplous, supposedly a pre-600 BC navigational source of the British Isles by an individual he calls "Scylax".

Geography could have been the deciding factor in terminology. According to Hutton, Julius Caesar distinguished between Celts, Gauls and Germans on the basis of their geographical location. Those tribes that lived west of the Rhine were Celtic and those who lived east were German (Hutton 1991: 142). Although Hutton argues that this is probably a dubious distinction, it does point to the assumption that even a contemporaneous author such as Caesar was unsure about who these tribes were, what to call them, what they called themselves and whether or not they could be grouped under one ethnic label. As Caesar was more concerned in his *De Bello Gallico* with justifying his conquest of these peoples the question also arises as to whether this confusion was general or a reflection of Caesar's particular emphasis.

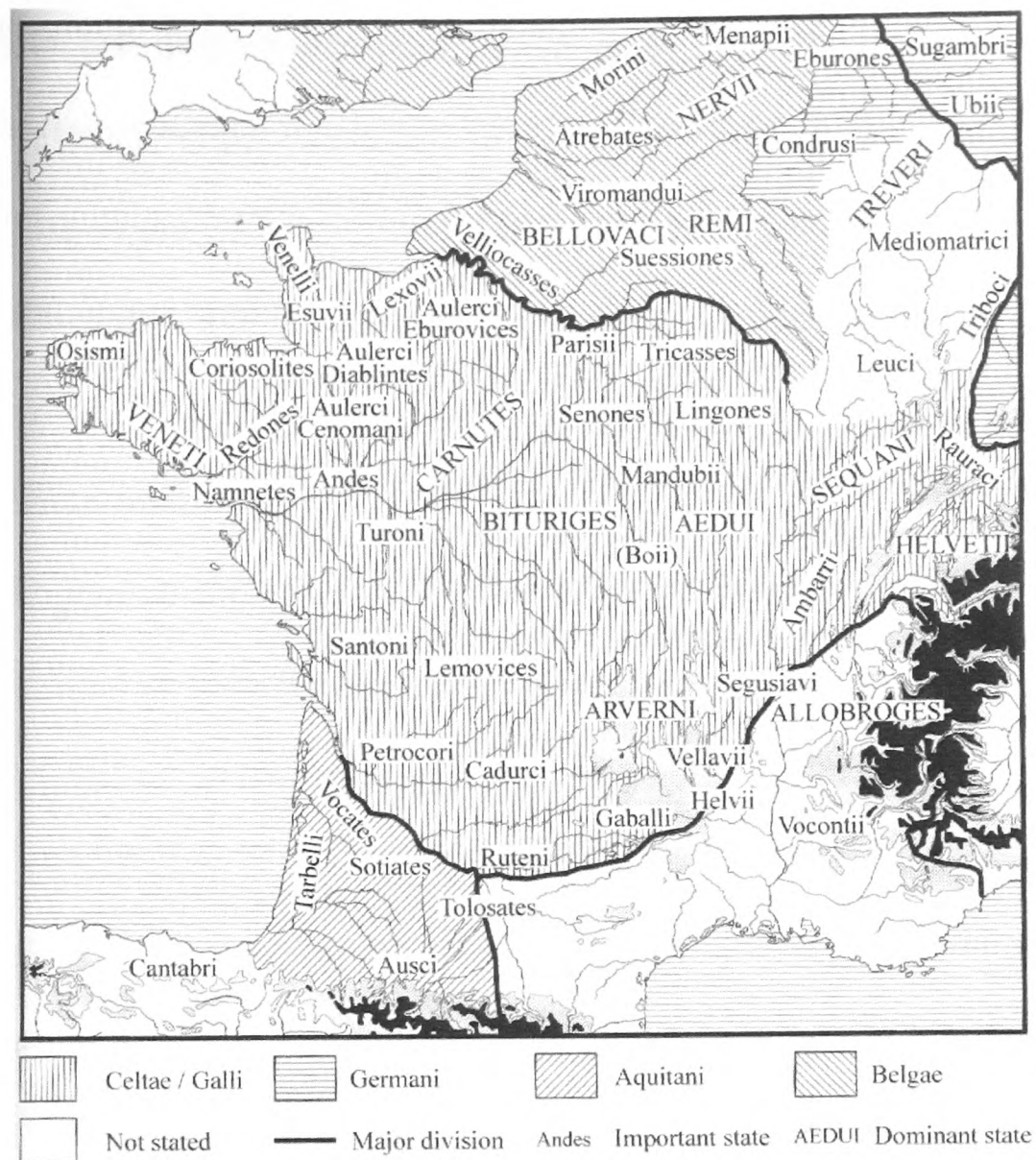


Figure 2-1. Map based on Caesar's description of tribal divisions (Collis 1984: 119).

Confusion over these terms is not confined to classical writers. Cunliffe attempts to resolve the uncertainty by claiming the Gauls were a sub-set of the Celts. He argues that:

The simplest way to explain this apparent confusion would be to accept that *Celtae/Keltoi* was the general name by which the broad sweep of peoples stretching from north of the Alps to Iberia were known to the classical world, and knew themselves, and that *Galli/Galatae* was a specific term applied to those tribes who chose to migrate to the south and south-east. (1997: 2)

While this may in fact be the case, the converse may also hold. This may explain the modern distinction between Celts and Gauls, according to which it is popularly assumed that the Gauls lived in continental Europe while the Celts lived in the British Isles.

However, Powell argues: “the name *Keltoi*, known earliest in this Greek form, had become generally adopted by the people of the North Alpine cultural and linguistic province and its extensions, on the ascendancy of the Hallstatt, wagon-grave, ‘royal tribe’ whose tribal or family name it had originally been” (1958: 49). While this may certainly be true, Powell unfortunately gives no evidence for his conclusion that *Keltoi* was originally a family name, nor does he explain the use of the alternative term ‘Gaul’.

The one thing that seems clear is that there was confusion in the classical world over terminology and this confusion has not been resolved, but merely exacerbated over time. In fact, the term ‘Celt’ can be said to be more related to the late Victorian period, when the image of the Iron Age inhabitants of Britain was heavily romanticized. However problematic the term ‘Celt’ may be, it is the term most commonly used by modern Druids, and therefore it is the term I will use with reference to any one of the peoples who lived in continental Europe and the British Isles from the end of the Bronze Age until their conquest and absorption by the Roman Empire up to the first century AD.

### *Excavation of the Past*

As previously stated, the image we have of the ancient Celts is primarily a construct based of what little evidence we have for Celtic beliefs and practices that is the product of archaeological excavations and analysis.<sup>12</sup> Much of this archaeological work and analysis has been revised over time and some of the older theories have been discarded.

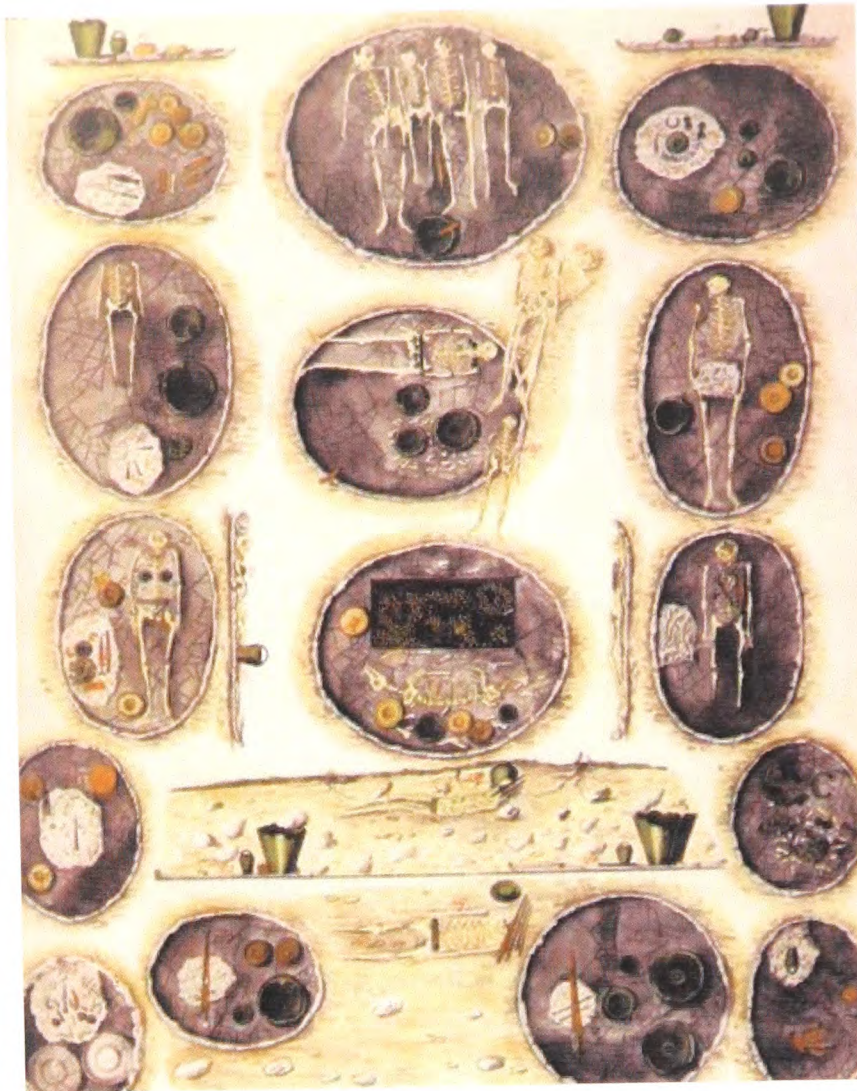
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<sup>12</sup> Although many anthropologists use this type of data in drawing conclusions about ancient social structure it must be noted that the terms used differ markedly between the two disciplines. Most notably for the present inquiry, archaeologists use the term ‘culture’ very differently than anthropologists. Essentially, when archaeologists speak of a ‘culture’ they are speaking of the material remains of a society while anthropologists are referring to a whole corpus of ideas and practices. As these issues are not the focus of the present discussion, I merely wish to alert the reader to the methodological and taxonomical differences between the fields.

However, the older theories are the ones that have been taken in by modern Druids. Primarily, the works of such scholars as Powell and Collis have provided a foundation for modern belief within OBOD. While many of these theories have been abandoned by academia, they have remained current within OBOD, even when the scholars have revised their own assumptions about the Celtic era. This occurred primarily in the 1970s but has continued to this date. This is perhaps a reflection of the fact that these works and their theories were current at the time of OBOD's foundation by Ross Nichols, and are therefore OBOD's institutionalized construction of ancient Celtic culture.

These early archaeologists suggested that Celtic culture developed at different rates throughout Europe and the British Isles. The culture began in the northern Alpine region and, over the course of several centuries, spread to modern Germany, France, Spain, Britain and Ireland, as well as areas of eastern Europe such as the former Yugoslavia, as evidenced by material remains. It therefore seems necessary to trace the development of these areas separately.

The beginning of the Celtic phase in Central Europe is referred to by archaeologists as the 'Hallstatt culture', after the town of the same name in the modern Austrian Alps. It was at Hallstatt that researchers in the seventeenth century discovered an immense late Bronze Age site which was extensively excavated between 1830 and 1863 (Collis 1984: 75). The significance of the site is due primarily to its size, which denotes the importance of the area at the time concurrent with the burials. A large salt mine nearby that was used up until about 400 BC supports the conclusion that Hallstatt was a major site in the Celtic Era.



*Figure 2-2. Depiction of some of the graves at Hallstatt done by Johann George Ramsauer, who discovered the cemetery in 1846. (Image from [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)).*

The Hallstatt period in Central Europe is further subdivided into Hallstatt A, B, C and D. The first of these two periods is more commonly referred to as the Urnfield Culture (Collis 1984: 24) and roughly covers the period between 1200 BC and 700 BC (ibid). This material culture was geographically situated along the Rhine and the Danube. It is marked by a change in burial habits from inhumation to so-called ‘cremation burials’. Specifically, “The dead were generally cremated, and the broken bones placed in an urn for burial in a flat cemetery. Many of these cemeteries assumed large proportions and have been called urnfields” (Powell 1958: 34). This period also saw the introduction of bronze for tool manufacture and many bronze implements are associated with the burials. The innovation of bronze for agricultural use made farming

easier and more profitable, which in turn led to an increase in output and the settling of communities of farmers. This in turn led to an accumulation of wealth and the beginnings of a hierarchically stratified society. These settled communities were periodically infused with groups descending from the pastoralist warriors who had previously invaded central Europe from Caucasia and the Pontic steppes.

During Hallstatt C and D (700 BC – 500 BC [Collis 1984: 24]) the influence of the descendants of these warriors appears in the burial record as a change from cremation burials to inhumation, often with a dismantled funerary wagon. As horses had been so important to the warriors from the steppes, it is easy to see how inhumations with wheeled carts would reflect an increase in the influence and wealth of the old warrior classes. As with the Urnfield culture, these burials are associated with a new innovation: iron tools. This new technology increased production and accumulation of wealth as bronze had done earlier thus leading to an even more highly stratified society. We can now talk of a Celtic chieftaincy, which was beginning to consolidate power and influence.

By 500 BC continental Europe was entering the La Tène period. As with Hallstatt, this era was named after the discovery of a cemetery, this time at La Tène in Münsingen, Switzerland. This phase did not see a marked change in burial practices but did coincide with an increase in the wealth associated with most graves. Additionally, the finds associated with these graves were decorated in a new style that archaeologists routinely call “orientalizing” (cf. Collis 1984). The La Tène period has thus become associated with a distinctive and complex form of art mainly used in metal work.



*Figure 2-3. First century BC Romano-Celtic mirror found at Desborough, Northants. This image is regularly used as an example of the 'orientalizing' La Tene art style. (Image from [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)).*

According to Collis (1984: 113), this change was due to an unspecified internal collapse and the destruction of an important trade route from Marseilles into central Europe. This collapse resulted in migration from the old centers of Hallstatt culture in the North Alpine region into Germany and France. As previously noted migrations from the Urnfield culture area to Germany and France had occurred previously. However, the second wave of migration is not well understood. According to Powell, "it looks very much as if a dominant warrior society had moved, for reasons not altogether understood, across the North Alpine province in the course of some two centuries. The old areas were not completely deserted by these people, but the centre of power and wealth certainly drew westwards" (1958: 45). By the third century BC, then, central Europe had

been overrun by an Alpine culture notable for its powerful chieftains and orientaling art forms.

The effects of the movement of people and ideas had an impact on Britain and Ireland as well. As previously noted, after Hallstatt A and B, groups migrated from the North Alpine zone up and along the Rhine and pushed westwards into modern-day Germany and France. Over time, these groups migrated from northern France into Britain, taking their Urnfield culture with them. This material culture began to appear in Britain by about the tenth century BC, as indicated by the discovery of bronze swords of a type with antecedents in the area of the middle Rhine.

The first migrations from France into Britain were probably refugees.<sup>13</sup> They are identified as having come from France by a type of pottery found in their burials, which comes from the middle of the Bronze Age. However, Powell suggests this was merely the beginning of the migration to Britain and probably only involved small groups. As he notes, the mass migration really began in about the eighth century BC (1958: 47). These initial migrations were most likely small bands of warriors, Powell tells us, due to the military nature of most finds and the lack of associated domestic wares. Without the presence of domestic items, he argues that it is unlikely that women and children would have accompanied these first immigrants. While this seems plausible, even Powell himself points out that we simply do not know whether these forays were initially militaristic or colonizing in nature.

These new groups, however small, affected the culture of those peoples who were already resident in Britain, predominantly through the introduction of innovative ideas

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<sup>13</sup> It must be noted that this 'invasion theory' is one of the theories that has latterly been discarded by academics, but is an example of the type of scholarship being read and absorbed by members of OBOD.

and objects in agricultural techniques and pottery types, though not burial practices: “to the older inhabitants of the island, this was no new thing because cremation had long been practiced here, stemming from the Late Neolithic ritual known widely in Britain and Ireland” (Powell 1958: 51).

The next wave of immigration to the British Isles involved a much larger group of people. Archaeologists have coined the term ‘Iron Age A’ for this period in order to distinguish the British sequence from the continental one. This was necessary as the British Isles had a different trajectory from the cultures of central Europe. The migration during this period is aptly described by Powell: “from the early part of the fifth century BC, Southern and Eastern Britain received colonists from the Low Countries and Northern France before whom, numerically and economically, earlier invaders pale to insignificance” (ibid: 52). These new immigrants, it seems, arrived somewhere along the southeast coast of Britain and over the next two centuries spread into Wales and the Midlands. Additional immigrants migrated to Britain during this time but their numbers were far fewer than those of the first waves.

The Iron Age A migrants had originally come from the North Alpine region, bringing their Hallstatt material culture with them. By contrast, the migrations to the British Isles that occurred in the third century BC brought the La Tène culture from the area surrounding the river Marne. As previously noted, the migration of Hallstatt culture bearers during Iron Age A had begun with small bands of explorers. The Marnian migration, however, saw entire domestic units from the middle Rhine region transplanted into Britain, as is shown by the large amount of domestic finds.

In Ireland the first invasions, according to Powell, may have started as early as the sixth century BC. Like those who entered Britain, these migrants were mainly associated with the Hallstatt culture. However, they were largely domestic groups and not adventurous warriors like their British counterparts. Once again, the presence of domestic paraphernalia is used as justification for this assumption. Powell notes that these groups may have initially migrated to Britain, but he considers it more likely that they either emigrated directly from the North Alpine zone or came through Scotland. The first century BC, however, did see an influx of migrants from Britain to Ireland. Unlike the earlier migrations which were composed mainly of small bands of warriors or domestic groups, migrants during this period appear to have been mainly from the aristocratic class of their society. This is evidenced by the fact that the metalworking styles they brought with them were of the La Tène type, which had gone out of fashion in continental Europe by that time. These migrations of La Tène culture-bearers to both Britain and Ireland were slow and steady, occurring from approximately the third century BC until Julius Caesar's invasion in the middle of the first century BC. As the Romans began to press through continental Europe, the numbers of migrants drastically increased as more and more refugees arrived on the shores of the British Isles.

This expansion of the Roman Empire into central Europe and the British Isles effectively brought an end to the Celtic Age. During the Gallic Wars, Julius Caesar endeavored to bring the Celts under the subjugation of Rome. Once achieved, Caesar knew that the region's vast resources would be his to appropriate. He began his conquest in the Alps around 58 BC, marched to the north into modern day France and the Low Countries in 57 BC, and by 56 BC was zigzagging across the northern region of

continental Europe between northwestern France and the Low Countries attempting to quell various uprisings. This achieved, Caesar turned his attention to the British Isles in 55 BC. Although he did manage to send some troops across the English Channel into Britain, they were swiftly recalled to deal with rebellions in previously subdued areas of Gaul. In 54 BC, Caesar once again attempted the invasion of Britain but, according to Cunliffe, “the planned invasion of Britain in 54 BC was again deflected by trouble close to the German frontier” (1997: 242). Fighting in Gaul continued until 51 BC when Caesar returned to Rome, leaving the area nominally a Roman territory but with very little direct Roman control.

Until AD 42 the Celts in the British Isles were mostly ignored by the Roman Empire. However, in that year, Emperor Claudius received a refugee from internal fighting in the British Isles, King Verica of the Atrebates, thus providing Claudius with an excuse to invade the British Isles. Cunliffe describes this as “a flamboyant gesture which had been in the minds of the emperors since Caesar’s time” (ibid: 254). Claudius invaded in AD 43 and was successful. By AD 55, one hundred years after the initial Roman excursion to the British Isles, the Romans had set up a zone of military control that stretched roughly from present day Exeter in the southwest of England north through Gloucester and then to Wroxeter in the northwest and Lincoln in the northeast.

Once the Roman Empire had established military control, Celtic religious traditions began to fuse with those of the conquerors. Shrines were set up to Celtic gods, for example, which paired the traditional Celtic name with a counterpart from the Roman pantheon. Increasingly, the Celts became Romanized. Although Celtic rebellions were launched to expel the Romans from the British Isles (most famously the rebellion of the

Iceni under Boudica in AD 60-61), syncretization of beliefs and assimilation into the dominant Roman culture became the norm. From this cursory examination of the historical evidence of the ancient Celts we now turn to an exploration of the ways in which this Celtic past has been sculpted for particular purposes through various periods of reconstruction and revival.

*Language and Antiquities: historical constructions of Celts*

The images and visions we have of the Celts today are partially conditioned by historical developments that took place after the Roman conquest. The Norman Conquest and the period of Anglo-Saxon rule in Britain have influenced the ways in which we see the Celts. Druids, however, disappeared from the historical radar. It may be that Druidry survived underground as modern Druids claim, or it may simply have died out to be reestablished at a later point. Although the intervening era between the Roman conquest and the Renaissance may have played some small role in our conception of the Celts, its impact was minimal. Therefore, it is unnecessary for the current discussion. We rejoin the story when the Celts were rediscovered in the Renaissance, predominantly through the study of Celtic languages and antiquities.

The Renaissance of the fifteenth century brought with it a rediscovery of classical texts and, therefore, a rediscovery of the material written contemporaneously about the ancient Celts. For these scholars the term ‘Celt’ “became part of a fanciful ethnological syncretism, bringing together the Old Testament and the classics, in an attempt to forge an ancient lineage for the modern nations of Europe” (Chapman 1992: 201). This had previously been attempted in the first century AD, when Josephus (AD 37-101)

attempted to “correlate biblical and classical sources, and to suggest that the Gauls were descended from Gomer, son of Japhet” (Collis 2003: 23). Annius of Viterbo once again explored the subject in 1497. He created a genealogy of the world’s nations from his supposed translation of a third-century BC text by Berosus that he had received from two Armenian monks (ibid: 34), a text which has been revealed to be a forgery possibly written by Annius himself (Hutton 2005: 7). Annius’ goal was to give justification for the idea that the Celtic people were directly descended from the peoples that survived the Old Testament flood. He achieves this in his text by stating that, “the first king of the Celts and Britons was Samothēs (d. 2014 BC), son of Japhet” (Collis 2003: 34).

Political jockeying for supremacy in Europe spawned an interest in the Celtic languages. Chapman notes that, “The ‘nations’ of Europe, and their intellectuals, had been preoccupied with establishing their own order and centrality” (1992: 124). Since the thirteenth century a heated debate had raged in Europe as to which language was oldest and which nation could claim, through its language, to be the original European nation. Some nations attempted to establish a link between the vernacular language they spoke and Hebrew, while others looked to the Celts for such a link.

Perhaps the best place to start is with Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), who, in his *De vulgari eloquentia*, argued that Adam spoke Hebrew and that all other languages were descendants of the languages spoken in the Tower of Babel (Collis 2003: 46). The crucial argument in Dante’s work is the concept that languages evolve. Once sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scholars accepted this theory, the race began to discover the root language from which all others descended. By succeeding in this task scholars believed they could discover which nation was the oldest, as they assumed language and

nationality were equated. In his Mount Haemus Lecture, Hutton supports this view by stating, “part of that phenomenon was a new sense of national identity, held together by a new interest in national pasts, defined by common languages and cultures” (2005: 6). The main proponent of this idea was the Breton monk Paul-Yves Pezron (1639-1706). Collis relates that, “according to Pezron, nations were defined by their languages” (Collis 2003: 48). Other scholars agreed, differing only in the number of hypothesized language groups and the age of each group.

Linguistic studies led Renaissance scholars to question the terminological divide between ‘Celt’ and ‘Gaul’ discussed earlier in this chapter. Pezron argued from linguistic evidence that the Celts and the Gauls were synonymous, while Edward Lhuyd (1660-1709) argued that there was a linguistic distinction. Therefore, they comprised two distinct groups. Collis states Lhuyd’s distinction clearly:

The ‘C’ Celts he labeled ‘Goidels’, and, like Buchanan, assumed an Iberian origin, while the ‘P’ Celts or ‘Brythons’ came from Gaul. This division between P and Q Celtic, and his nomenclature was picked up again in the nineteenth century when the full importance of his pioneering work was finally recognized. (2003: 50)<sup>14</sup>

In fact, philologists into the nineteenth century accepted Lhuyd’s argument that the Celtic language group contained the languages of Welsh, Breton, Irish and Scottish. As the linguistic development of Celtic languages is not the main concern here, it suffices to note that the work of these two scholars later played a pivotal role in the development of the Romantic Movement. Collis supports this view in his statement that “the views of Pezron and Lhuyd form the essential backdrop to the Druidomania and Celtomania which swept Britain and France in the eighteenth century” (ibid: 53).

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<sup>14</sup> In this statement Collis discusses the division of Celtic languages is into two branches: ‘P’ Celtic and ‘Q’ Celtic. The ‘C’ Celtic he refers to may be another term for ‘Q’ Celtic, though I suspect it is a typographical mistake as I have not been able to find any literature on ‘C’ Celtic.

While linguistics certainly helped raise awareness of the existence of the Celts it was the development of the study of antiquities that helped to create our romantic image of them. Beginning in earnest in the sixteenth century, early manuscripts, inscriptions, records, drawings, and plans of ancient buildings and monuments were collected and analyzed. Although Hector Boece had written a treatise on British stone circles in 1526, the first major antiquarian project did not begin until 1533, when King Henry VIII appointed John Leland as King's Antiquary and entrusted him with the task of scouring Britain for antiquities. As a "Britannic Druidophile" (Fowler 1987: 235) this brief suited him well and he undertook to make detailed drawings and plans of the many monuments, ruins and important buildings in Britain. As Fowler points out, this pattern was to be the dominant methodological approach used by antiquarians for two hundred years after Leland (*ibid*). However, Leland's importance comes not just from his recording of these monuments but his interpretation of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites. It was in Leland's study, Fowler argues, that the myth of the Druid was invented (*ibid*).

The fervor for antiquities continued into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under the guidance of individuals such as John Aubrey and William Stukeley. Although the extensive analysis and research seen in their works leads many to refer to them as the fathers of modern archaeology, they are useful for the present inquiry because of the romantic vision of the Celts they have helped produce.

Approximately one hundred years after Leland's travels, Aubrey began his study of megalithic stone circles throughout Britain, specifically those of Avebury and Stonehenge. In 1648 he began his research with the circle at Avebury (sometimes called 'Abury'), continued his measurements through 1649 and finally completed his sketch of

the monument in 1663. At this point, the circle was mostly *in situ*, but unfortunately Aubrey did not accurately record the positions of the stones, causing great problems for future antiquarians and scholars (cf. Lewis 1891).

In 1693 Aubrey completed his *Monumenta Britannica*, in which he recorded a plethora of data about Stonehenge including the number and position of the stones. According to Fowler, Aubrey's work fixed the correlation between Druids and stone circles in the minds of the public. This was due to Aubrey's assertion that Stonehenge was actually built by the Druids. Thus, he refers to it as "Templa Druidium" (Fowler 1987: 235). This was not merely romanticizing; rather it points to the nascent status of seventeenth century scholarship. Green supports this in her statement that, "in the absence of a long prehistoric perspective, he argued that since Stonehenge and Avebury were not Roman, they must be pre-Roman, and because they were clearly temples, they must therefore be Druidic" (1997: 141). Even though unpublished until 1980, it has been argued that British antiquarians contemporary to Aubrey knew of the contents of *Monumenta Britannica*. Therefore, according to Fowler, it was Aubrey's work that established the link between Druids and stone circles that has been so often copied. Although Fowler gives no indication of how other antiquarians could have known the contents of the unpublished work, other evidence supports his assumption. In 1692 Aubrey became an advisor (along with the first Chosen Chief of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, John Toland) on Edmund Gibson's Oxford University-based team, which was set up to revise the standard historical reference book of the day, William Camden's *Britannia* (Hutton 2005: 13). Therefore, his ideas, if not his treatise itself, may well have been in circulation due to the influence he held within academic circles.

Aubrey's work was to form the cornerstone of the work of the eighteenth century's most famous British antiquarian, William Stukeley. Stukeley, a student of law, medicine, and religion, studied Avebury and Stonehenge. In about 1722, Stukeley completed a sketch of Avebury. Although the circle and its stones had been almost completely destroyed (Lewis 1891: 277), Stukeley's sketch appears to be more accurate than the sketch done by Aubrey when the circle was still virtually intact. By comparing the two sketches, it becomes clear that Aubrey only sketched those stones that were still upright, completely omitting or erroneously locating broken or damaged stones.

Like Aubrey, however, Stukeley is best known for his work at Stonehenge. In 1740 he recorded his research in a work entitled *Stonehenge, a Temple Restored to the Druids*. Fowler argued that in England, Aubrey created the connection between Druids and stone circles. Hutton clarifies that the first person in the British Isles to make this assertion was actually Hector Boece (2005: 8). However, as Chapman points out, it was Stukeley who firmly cemented this contention in the public consciousness. Chapman states that Stukeley "made the first steps in the creation of modern druid (and entirely bogus) druidism, and provided the intellectual foundation for the baseless association of Celts and Druids with stone-circles" (1992: 208). It was Stukeley's influence, Chapman argues, that accounts for the continued use of stone circles for Druid rituals today.<sup>15</sup> Stukeley's influence may stem not from his treatises but from his drawings and paintings of Druids themselves (see Figure 2-4, below), in which they were fancifully depicted wearing regalia for which there is little evidence.

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<sup>15</sup> However, modern Druids only occasionally use stone circles.



*Figure 2-4. Stukeley's depiction of an ancient Druid (James 1993: 91).*

Stukeley's portrayals of wise, bearded old men in hooded cloaks carrying sickles or staffs captured (in true romantic style) the popular imagination. These 'noble savages' are depicted as part of the natural landscape (often with Stonehenge in the background) and thus as part of Britain itself. Stukeley was so taken by the romantic image of the Druid that he even began referring to himself as the Archdruid Chyndonax (Chippendale, Devereux, Fowler, Jones and Sebastian 1990: 98).

Both Aubrey and Stukeley cemented in the public consciousness the connection between stone circles and Druids and as such both had a massive impact upon the development of the myth of the Celtic past. Their studies of megalithic stone circles led

“to a new awareness of Paganism among the learned” (Jones and Pennick 1995: 209). In Britain, this new awareness was based on an attempt to understand “Britain’s ancestral heritage, which was seen as Druidic” (ibid: 210). However central the figure of the Druid was, though, one should probably say rather that Britain’s heritage was seen as *Celtic*. The Druids were part of that culture but not imagined as its genitors. Regardless, the works of these antiquarians still represent an attempt to emphasize in a very public way their sense of pride as the descendants of such a wise and noble heritage.

Once created, the figure of the mythical Druid was then used to advance the proposition that Britain’s heritage was superior to those of other European nations. Druids were proclaimed as sophisticated scientists, as illustrated by their erection of the stone circles that many have argued are actually sophisticated astrological clocks. Furthermore, they were touted as proto-Christians, “priests of a true and wholesome religion, unlike the Greek and Roman pagans, and that they had prepared the British to accept the still better religion of Christ” (Hutton 2005: 10). Fowler concurs with this view: “the Druids were transformed from Caesar’s Gaulish diviners and judges to Stukeley’s British scholars, teachers, priests, and anticipators of *true* (i.e., *Anglican*) Christianity” (1987: 235, original emphasis). Fowler even argues that the Druids were held up as role models for the British people when he states that, “in the hands of later eighteenth-century Romantic antiquarians, writers, and poets, ‘our holy Druids’ became British patriots and the fonts of philosophical and scientific knowledge” (ibid.). It can therefore be seen that the early British antiquarians helped to create and shape the myth of the Celtic past, a pattern that would be repeated by the Romantic literary movement.

### *Romantically immortalized*

The romanticism of the early antiquarians was mirrored in the British Romantic movement of the early eighteenth century. Collis argues that romanticism was formative to the enthusiasm for all things Celtic when he notes, “I personally see the popularity of the concept of the Celts in the eighteenth century as being rooted in the Romantic movement” (2003: 197). Although this was primarily a literary movement, enthusiasm is believed to have been generated by the collections of modern Scottish songs compiled by Allan Ramsay between 1724 and 1730. This interest in Celtic folk customs was considered unusual before the British Romantic movement as British intellectuals and the British elite had previously been uninterested in those who lived ‘on the fringe’. As Malcolm Chapman has argued, once political security has been achieved, glamorization of the ‘other’ can safely occur (1992: 125). Further, he argues that before the Romantic Movement nature was conceived of as wild and culture was the civilized or tame. Romanticism inverted these concepts by its emphasis on the idea that nature is beautiful and the imposition of human ‘civilizing’ forces only corrupts that inherent beauty. As Chapman states, “indeed, romanticism, in the British context, is the spiritual and intellectual *alter ego* of urban industrialism” (ibid: 129) As the Celts were equated with the wild and the natural, they were increasingly seen as immune from the negative influences of modern, industrialized life. Therefore, after the Romantic Movement those living on the fringe were depicted as heroic and closer to nature.

Although the works of authors like Charlotte Brooke, Sir Walter Scott, J.F. Campbell, and Alexander Carmichael were considered important, perhaps the most influential works of this period were James Macpherson’s (1736-1796). Macpherson was

a “minor Scottish man of letters...born in a Gaelic-speaking parish near Inverness, and educated at the Universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh” (Breeze 1993: 669). Between 1760 and 1765 he published several works which were supposedly translations of the poems of an Irish bard named Ossian; these included *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language, Fingal, Temora, and The Works of Ossian*. Taken together, these works launched “the Ossianic Controversy.”

According to Macpherson, Ossian was a third-century AD Gaelic bard whose life and work were contained in several texts written in the sixth or seventh century. Macpherson claimed to have translated these texts but general academic opinion is that although he did know some Gaelic, he was not well enough versed in the language to have accomplished this task. Therefore, his translation of authentic texts (if we assume his unnamed sources actually existed) would have been difficult at best, impossible at worst. Although he shrouded his discoveries in the mantle of general “Gaelic oral tradition” (Chapman 1992: 121) it is commonly accepted that his work was a forgery. Thus, Chapman states, “When interest in the Celts *was* provoked, it was centred less upon scholarship, than upon forgery, fantasy and wish-fulfillment” (ibid: 208). However, Macpherson’s work was pivotal as his writing style broke many of the conventions of the day and helped to stimulate interest in the study of Celtic languages. Additionally, his choice of subject had previously been considered by the British elite to be unworthy of study. In fact, *Ossian* defined the “‘minority’ literature” (ibid: 123).

These works continued to be widely read over the next century, so it comes as no surprise that literary interest returned to the Celts again at the end of the nineteenth

century, albeit as allegories. Between roughly 1890 and 1914 several writers used the romantic notion of the Celt as a literary device to criticize what they saw as the sad state of modern, urbanized society. These authors included W. B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, Nora Hopper, William Sharp (alias Fiona Macleod) and George Russell. They “found the present sadly wanting; all beauty, mirth, truth, valour and poetry had left the world, their absence to be lamented in tender grief” (Chapman 1992: 218). The term ‘Celtic Twilight’ was coined by the most important of these writers, Yeats. He stated that Celtic literature contained “mournful, languishing, mysterious melancholy, of the dim ‘Celtic Twilight’” (Breeze 1993: 670). The ‘Celtic Twilight’, however, most likely referred to the dawn of a new era which would be based on an Irish literary revival. Although this movement was interested in the fantasies of the Celtic myth, some have argued that it was more influenced by the pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic movements (ibid). Whichever is the case, they brought Celtic themes once more to public attention.

### *Rosicrucians, Spiritualism and witches*

Yeats was not only involved in the literary revolution of the ‘Celtic Twilight’, but also in a movement that would lend structure to the modern Druid movement of the twentieth century. In 1890, he was initiated into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, supposedly the first Rosicrucian organization in Britain.<sup>16</sup> Rosicrucianism is a German form of masonry whose tenets were espoused in four pamphlets published between 1614 and 1616 by the Rosicrucian Fraternity. This organization was based on the myth of the Rosie Cross, according to which a German nobleman with a monastic education traveled

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<sup>16</sup> However, in reality the first Rosicrucian group in Britain was the Societas Rosicruciana, which was founded in Anglia about two decades earlier.

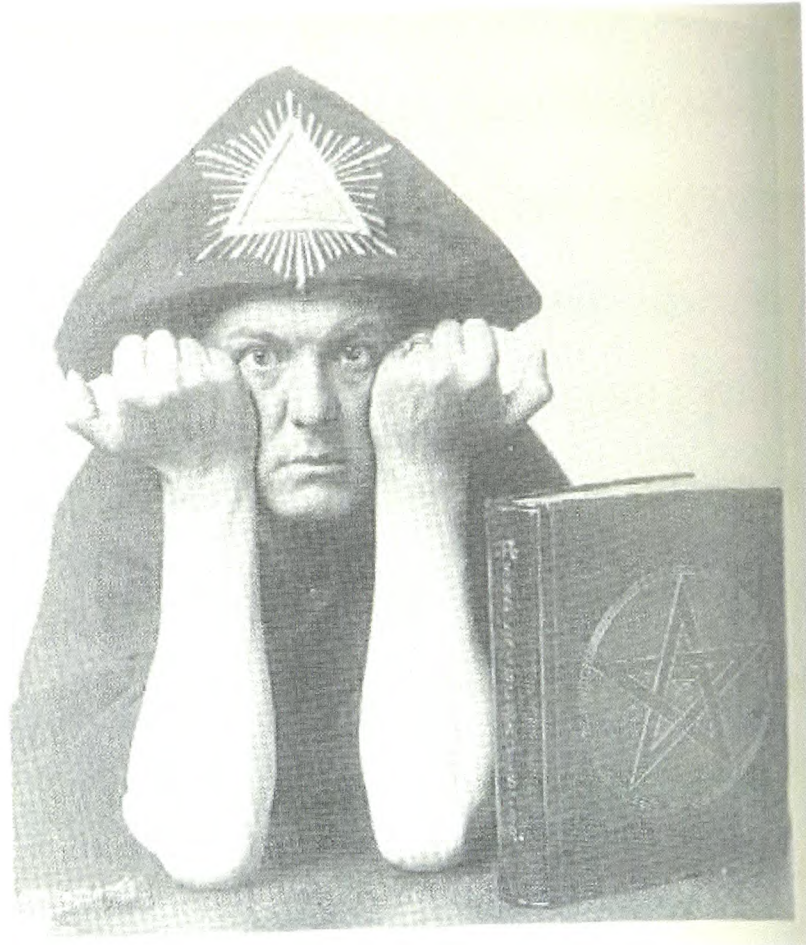
to Damascus seeking “occult knowledge” (King 1989: 13-14). From there, he traveled to Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, and Spain before returning to Germany. During these travels he was rumored to have gathered hidden knowledge of magic. Many years after his death his followers entered his tomb and beheld an eerie light filling the windowless chamber. The light struck a crucifix hanging on the wall that began to glow red. Hence, his disciples took on the name of the Fraternity of the Rosie Cross whence we derive the term ‘Rosicrucian’.

Rosicrucianism developed in Britain as a result of interest in ceremonial magic. Chapman has noted, “as religion declined in importance among intellectuals ...so their tolerance of apparently alternative religious practices increased until with romanticism magic and superstition begin to re-enter popular intellectual discourse as charming features of primitive life” (1992: 213). It was not just the decline of religion, however, but the spawning forty years previously of the Spiritual movement which created this interest in the occult. The movement began in 1848 in America when two mediums named Margaretta and Kate Fox began to be ‘visited’ by spirits who communicated with them by knocking and tapping on the table at which they were seated. Although this was later proved to be a hoax (the sisters created the noises by cracking their toes) it started a vogue for attempts to contact the spirit world. Interest in levitation, materializations and Ouija boards became increasingly common. As a result of widespread interest the sisters traveled to Britain in 1852.

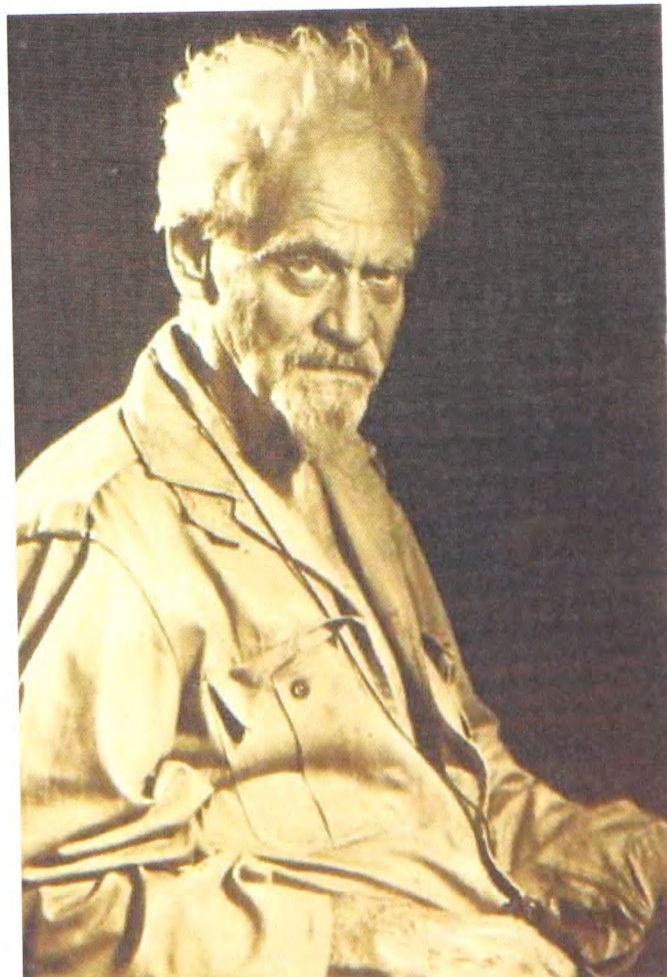
In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the result of the desire for hidden knowledge of the spirit world led to the emergence of many groups who claimed to own manuscripts of secret lore and practices. One such group, The Golden Dawn’s

Temple of Isis-Urania, was founded in this atmosphere, “at a time when many people were beginning to be dissatisfied with the pathetically over-confident materialism of the nineteenth-century on one hand, and the fatuous pietism of fundamentalist religion on the other” (King 1989: 43). These groups often intertwined Celticism with their beliefs, as is evidenced by the imagery woven into the Temple’s rituals by its leader, G.S.L. Mathers. This is unsurprising as, “the Ossianic romanticism of the Celtic revival of the nineties had always possessed a certain charm for Mathers” (King 1989: 49). Although the Golden Dawn was a short-lived phenomenon, it spawned many other such groups.

One of the Golden Dawn’s best known members was the infamous ceremonial magician, Aleister Crowley. After a schism occurred within the order, Crowley became a member of the half that was reformed by Mathers as the Amoun Temple. Subsequently, in response to a clash with Mathers, Crowley founded a magical society named the Astrum Argentinum. As if this was not enough, he also took control of the German Masonic group, the Ordo Templi Orientis, whose most famous member was the progenitor of the modern Wicca movement, Gerald Gardner. These teachings have profoundly influenced the modern Druid movement, as will be examined below. The Golden Dawn, therefore, forms another link in the chain of modern Druid history, as it was, “an organization whose activities and teachings were largely responsible for the survival of ritual magic in both Great Britain and the U.S.A” (King 1989: 41-42).



*Figure 2-5. Aleister Crowley (Luhmann 1991: Plate 8).*



*Figure 2-6. Gerald Gardner (taken from [www.flamelcollege.org/magical\\_arts.htm](http://www.flamelcollege.org/magical_arts.htm))*

### *Iolo Morganwg*

Perhaps the most important historical strand in the creation of modern Druidry was the desire of many to re-create the ancient religion of the Druids. In Wales, the main practitioner of so-called ancient Druid rites was Edward Williams (1747-1826), also known as Iolo Morganwg, who undertook to recreate ancient Druid rites in his treatise *Barddas*. This obsession of Williams' would follow him through his life, leading him constantly to rewrite his version of a "Druidic' philosophy" (Hutton 1991: 140). Williams claimed to have based his literary work on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts but scholars agree that his work was nothing more than an imaginative forgery. Chapman relates, "There *are* cases of unambiguous forgery (or, at least, imaginative creation – the druidical rites of the Welsh Eisteddfod, and the druidism attached to Stonehenge, for example – these have, of course, since established themselves as traditions over a century old)" (1992: 139). The Welsh Eisteddfod, a cultural festival focusing on the Welsh language, poetry, and song owes much to the legacy of Williams. In 1792, Williams and a group of his followers held a ritual of his own design at Primrose Hill in London, attired in costumes he also designed (Hutton 1991: 140). This was the first 'revival' of the Welsh Eisteddfod, or national competition of the arts, which continues to this day.

The tradition created by Williams won many supporters. In large part, this success was due to the increasing sense that Celtic countries (Wales, Ireland and Scotland) were nations in their own right, with ancient traditions that needed to be revived lest they be lost. Hutton argues that, "this is a result of the belief in the importance of national characters, racial identity and folk-memories which was one

product of the Romantic Movement” (ibid: 142). This is illustrated by the fact that it was at a ritual like the one at Primrose Hill that the Welsh national anthem was first sung. The ritual took place, Lewis informs us, in the Welsh village of Pontypridd where one of Williams’ followers, Evan Jones (also known as Myfyr Morganwg), had constructed a serpent out of stones (1907: 70). According to Lewis’ unnamed informant, Myfyr

was the recipient of much antiquarian lore from ‘Iolo Morganwg,’ the copyist of so many Bardic and other manuscripts, the originals mostly being of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though some were of earlier date. Myfyr added to Iolo’s store many ideas of his own, or borrowed from Stukeley... he gathered about him a few disciples of his Neo-Druidic cult, and at last designed and erected, with their help, a double circle. (ibid)

At this circle they held “many Gorseddau<sup>17</sup> ... and at one of these, about 1860, the air and verses now received as the Welsh national anthem were first performed” (ibid: 71). Many of Williams’ inventions have made their way into modern Druid practice, as will be seen throughout this work.

### *The modern Druid pedigree*

During the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Druid groups sprang up in considerable numbers in Great Britain and France. The focus of this thesis, the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (henceforth referred to as ‘OBOD’) claims to trace its lineage through one such group founded on September 22, 1717 by the noted British antiquarian John Toland. Modern Druids claim that at the Apple Tree Tavern<sup>18</sup> in London, Toland

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<sup>17</sup> The term commonly used among the modern Druid community is ‘Gorsedd’ (plural - Gorseddau). Whether Gorseddau is an antiquated term or this reference merely contains a typographical error is unknown.

<sup>18</sup> I have been unsuccessful in tracing any record of this tavern. However, I would argue that it is a metaphor for Druid organizations. Trees are at the very heart of the Druid tradition and collections of individuals within Druidry are referred to as ‘groves’. Additionally, apples are sacred to the Druids. Some argue that this is due to the fact that when an apple is halved width-wise the seed casings form a pentagram, sacred to many pagan traditions.

met with like-minded individuals who sought to form a union of ten Druid groves active in Great Britain and France (Nichols 1990: 97). The representatives of these groups came from London, York, Oxford, Wales, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, Anglesey, Scotland, Ireland and Brittany (J. Matthews 1996: 263). They called their union 'An Druidh Uileach Braithreachas' or 'The Druid Circle of the Universal Bond' but later began referring to it as the Ancient Druid Order (ADO), and often simply the Druid Order. While this is the common view espoused by modern Druids in conversation and in their written works, it was actually a freemason group that was formed in 1717 at the Apple Tree Tavern. Actually, one of the leaders of the ADO, Robert MacGregor-Reid, falsely claimed this as the origin of the ADO in an attempt to provide historical legitimacy for his group.

Members of the order were generally upper-class Christians from aristocratic families with a taste for philosophy and a desire to discover secret occult knowledge. The elitist nature of these groups is exemplified by the fact that in 1753 the second Chief of the ADO, William Stukeley, traveled to Kew Palace to obtain the patronage of the Dowager Princess Augusta, Princess of Wales and mother of the future George III. After this meeting she supposedly began styling herself 'Veleda', a name Stukeley told her came from the ancient Druids. This tradition has continued to the present, with Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip both holding the title of Ovate within the Welsh Gorsedd. They are in good company as the current Archbishop of Canterbury has also been initiated into the Welsh Gorsedd, though as a Druid (due to his position as a Christian minister), not as an Ovate.<sup>19</sup> Most Druids at the time did not see any conflict between

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<sup>19</sup> It must be noted, however, that these designations apply not in the religious sense, but in the honorary sense. They are members of the community involved with the Welsh Gorsedd. Therefore, they are

their Christian (usually Anglican) faith and their desire to understand the philosophy of the ancient Druids, specifically as it related to the natural world. The ADO must therefore be seen not as a religious movement but as a philosophical one quite in keeping with the Christian ethic of British elite culture.

In the two hundred years following its inception the ADO faced continual schisms as the goals of the organization changed. According to literature written by one of OBOD's 'Past Presiders', John Matthews, one such schism created an organization with very different goals, which led to the creation of one of the three types of Druidry.<sup>20</sup> In 1781, a member of the Ancient Druid Order, Henry Hurle, split from that group and founded the Ancient Order of Druids, a Judeo-Christian society aimed at the "social improvement" (Nichols 1990: 103) of the working class. However, according to Hutton, this is a fabrication of George Watson-Reid's which occurred due to a conflict with his organization (the ADO) and the AOD, which claimed it was rightfully the first Druid organization, having been founded a decade or so earlier (personal communication with Ronald Hutton, March 2009). The AOD denounced the ADO as an 'upstart' organization, which led Watson-Reid to make his questionable claim to primogeniture.

In 1833, the AOD itself became the victim of schism when some of its members broke off and formed the United Ancient Order of Druids. This organization continued to work for the improvement of the lower classes, but focused on the provision of different types of insurance, most notably unemployment insurance. Nichols states that,

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proclaimed as members of the cultural strain of Druidry, not the religious strain on which I am focus. For further information about the Archbishop of Canterbury's Druid links see "Anglican Archbishop Becomes Druid" by Al Webb, United Press International on the following website:  
[http://www.beliefnet.com/story/110/story\\_11065\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/110/story_11065_1.html).

<sup>20</sup> The three types of Druidry are the previously mentioned Welsh cultural Druidry, the social welfare societies (which are Druid really in name only), and the religious Druidry of organizations such as OBOD. For more on the different strains of Druidry, see *The Druid Source Book* edited by John Matthews.

“while using some ceremonial in its meetings [it]...mainly acts as an insurance concern with an unusual history” (ibid). Other groups that split from the AOD include the Sheffield Equalized Order and the Manchester Order of Druids. In opposition to the ADO, these groups were not concerned with the philosophical quest for hidden knowledge and certainly had little or no interest in reviving the ancient religion of the Druids. They were instead essentially Masonic groups whose ritualized meetings were significant for their members less through the application, exploration, and understanding of the symbolism and meaning of the rituals than through the routine repetition of tradition.

Although there were many offshoots of the ADO, it continued to be the main Druid association in Britain up to and throughout the twentieth century. As previously noted, the leadership of the order had never held pretensions about fashioning a religion based on the ancient Druids. Rather, their interest lay with the philosophies of that group. However, as the twentieth century dawned, the new Chosen Chief, George MacGregor-Reid, endeavored to change the role of modern Druidry. MacGregor-Reid (a.k.a. Ayu Subhadra Savvanus<sup>21</sup>) became the head of the ADO in 1909 and continued in this role until his death in 1946, whereupon his son, Robert A. F. MacGregor-Reid (a.k.a. Ariovistus), became Chosen Chief. George MacGregor-Reid “tried to make Druidry into a religion, which in modern times it has never been” (Nichols 1990: 109). This was a contentious move. As acknowledged earlier most members of the ADO saw Druidry as a philosophy and so it did not conflict with their Christian beliefs. Therefore, MacGregor-Reid “must have lost some support over this amongst normally religious people who took their Druidry as a quite innocuous philosophic addition to it” (ibid).

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<sup>21</sup> Druids often (though not always) assume new names once they join Druid organizations.

Robert MacGregor-Reid succeeded his father and continued to head the organization until his death in 1964. Although he attempted to continue his father's quest to make modern Druidry into a religion, this idea caused tensions, which the younger MacGregor-Reid attempted to ease. By all accounts he managed this feat, but upon his death the situation no longer had a mediator, therefore the conflicts came to the fore. After Robert MacGregor-Reid's death, Ross Nichols (a.k.a. Nuinn), the father of modern Druidry, apparently felt slighted that he was passed over for the role of Chosen Chief. This was coupled with his desire to fully realize the religious potential offered by the philosophy of the ancient Druids. The result was that he and several members of the ADO split off to form a new group. He was elected Chosen Chief of the newly founded group, which was dubbed 'The Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids'. The ADO continued as an organization interested in the philosophical aspects of Druidry and is still in existence to this day.

The form of Druidry practiced by OBOD was essentially the creation of Ross Nichols.<sup>22</sup> The Order was only founded officially in 1964, but it can be seen as an offshoot of the ADO, as it was within this organization that the idea of Druidry as a religion began. Ross Nichols became a member of the ADO in 1954 and it appears that his background made him a stereotypical member. He was quite well educated, having supposedly received an M.A. in History from Oxford<sup>23</sup> in the 1920s, which he then parlayed into a career as a teacher and principal of a college. He was a Christian when he

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<sup>22</sup> Curiously, though, at the same time a group of students at Carlton College in the United States formed an organization they dubbed the 'Reformed Druids of North America' (RDNA). This was initially a response to the college's requirement that all students attend chapel services and they desired to be exempted from the early Sunday morning meetings. Ironically, they gradually became more interested in the Druids and the organization is still in existence.

<sup>23</sup> This M.A. was not, in fact, a Master's degree. At the time, Oxford had a policy that allowed a standard Bachelor's degree to be converted to a M.A. through participating in a ceremony and paying a fee. It did not require any study or examination in addition to that already completed for the B. A.

joined the ADO and was even said to have been ordained as a minister. He held strong ideas about the nature of religion and the forces of nature and it is reasonable to assume that upon joining the ADO he discovered an outlet for his voracious interest in these matters. It is, therefore, natural to propose OBOD is descendant from the ADO.

Nichols' attempts to construct a religion based on ancient Druid philosophy were aided by his membership in the ADO. However, his friendship with Gerald Gardner was equally foundational. Sometime during World War II the pair met at the naturist resort of Spielplatz in St. Alban's, England. This resort was the concrete reflection of the naturism movement, which "evolved in the 1920s as part of the process of the freeing of individuals from outmoded social restrictions that had started to occur following the First World War" (Carr-Gomm 2002b: 61). While at Spielplatz, Nichols and Gardner discussed Celtic mythology, the occult, and their mutual desire to craft a new religion. Philip Carr-Gomm comments, "Although nearly 20 years separated them, they shared a fascination with mythology, folklore, religion and the occult" (ibid). Gardner, himself an ordained minister<sup>24</sup>, had become interested in ceremonial magic through his involvement with the Ordo Templi Orientis and other Rosicrucian and Masonic groups. In addition, he was a member of the ADO. With the help of Nichols, he managed to create the modern Wicca movement in the 1950s. Gardner's new religion was based heavily on magic, while Nichols preferred to focus more heavily on mythology and the arts (an emphasis which is still obvious in modern Druidry). Gardner in turn influenced Nichols'

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<sup>24</sup> This designation is misleading. While Gardner was ordained in an esoteric Christian sect, the ordinations of this group have never been recognized by the Christian church. Furthermore, even within this sect he did not actively undertake to function as a minister.



*Figure 2-7. Three generations of Chosen Chiefs (clockwise from top) – Robert MacGregor-Reid (pictured on the right), Philip Carr-Gomm, and Ross Nichols at his retreat at Spielplatz (Carr-Gomm 2002c: Plates 2, 5; Carr-Gomm's photograph can be found at: <http://www.philipcarrgomm.druidry.org/about.htm>).*

fashioning of modern Druidry. Both men borrowed extensively from each other and therefore the two movements have much in common.<sup>25</sup>

One of the features of modern Druidry that will appear evident throughout this exegesis is the startling similarity between Druidry and Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. This emphasis was the result of Ross Nichols' fascination with Eastern philosophy, which resulted from his postulate that the Druids were originally a Dravidian group (a spurious claim which can be traced to the late Victorian period and which has latterly been disproven.) Jainism traces its origin from Dravidians and, therefore, Nichols argued that, "of all the known cultural communities it is the Jains who seem most like a society from which Druidry could have originated. It bears the signs of being long pre-Aryan, although one of its main later teachers was contemporary with the Buddha" (Carr-Gomm 2002c: 71). Carr-Gomm notes that, "Ross's enthusiasm for pacifism, vegetarianism and naturism clearly made Jainism attractive to him" (ibid). Along with these concepts, modern Druidry has borrowed the ideas of karma, the significance of the wheel (or *mandala*), and the concept of reincarnation, all of which will be discussed at length later in this thesis.

After Nichols' death in 1975, his successor took over the administration of OBOD but merely in a custodial capacity. He sought to preserve and organize the archives of the organization, but the organization itself was shut down. On February 14, 1988, it was re-founded by several of its previous members, who elected Philip Carr-Gomm as Chosen Chief.

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<sup>25</sup> The most notable similarity is the celebration of the four astronomical and four seasonal ceremonies that will be discussed in chapter six of this work.

Carr-Gomm was initiated into OBOD in May of 1969 by his teacher – none other than Ross Nichols. At that point in time the order did not have a uniform teaching course so every new member was personally instructed in a tutorial fashion. Perhaps the most considerable innovation of Carr-Gomm’s career as Chosen Chief has been the reorganization of these teaching techniques. Whereas “up until this time, Druidry had been a path which could only be followed by those who could physically visit a teacher” (Carr-Gomm 1990: 12), Carr-Gomm and his colleagues have brought Druidry to the wider public. They have accomplished this by setting up a website which not only describes Druidry, but also offers a distance-learning course in tandem with a tutorial scheme. Furthermore, Carr-Gomm edited the manuscript of *The Book of Druidry*, completed by Ross Nichols shortly before his death in 1975 but left unpublished in his lifetime. Carr-Gomm’s own works and those of the ‘Presiders’ of OBOD have further widened the store of modern Druid knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Between the website and the writings of Nichols and Carr-Gomm, interest in Druidry as an alternative philosophical and religious tradition began to grow exponentially after about 1990, the year Nichols’ book was first published.

### *Genesis*

The contested history of Druidry, when taken in light of the preceding arguments, can be seen as an intertwined mesh of fact and fiction, research and invention. Chapman puts this magnificently when he states, “the ‘Celts’, as we know them today, are a romantic and post-romantic creation, whose ancient genealogy is modern” (1992: 208). Having

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<sup>26</sup> These individuals are involved with research into all things Druidic and Celtic and are generally prolific authors. John and Caitlin Matthews, whom I rely upon in this thesis, are two of the past ‘Presiders’ of the order.

grounded the discussion in the academic and historical analysis of modern Druidry, we can now move on to the often unheard or under-represented parts of the myth.<sup>27</sup>

Historical research has suggested that after an initial period of conflict most Druids became romanized, blending their traditions with those of their conquerors. As for the cultural elite, they were supposedly absorbed into the Romanized ruling class. At this point, Carr-Gomm argues, they “mostly converted to Christianity”.<sup>28</sup> However, it is unclear to which time frame Carr-Gomm is referring, as Christianity did not become the official religion of the Roman Empire until the fourth century AD. At any rate, there is disagreement over this as OBOD’s website states, “with the coming of Christianity...the Ovates<sup>29</sup> became the village healers and midwives”.<sup>30</sup> Alternatively, some modern Druids have argued that the Ovates went underground, becoming witches or the ‘Cunning Folk’ attested to in English folk history. Furthermore, Michel Raoult has argued that clan tradition can cause information to be passed through descent or to specific people. He states that, “some of these lineages are also the source of the traditions of Witches, wizards, healers, midwives and village bonesetters who often uphold fragments of the Druidic tradition” (1996: 115). This fragmented body of knowledge, modern Druids argue, has been handed down through the transmission of myths and folk tales. When I queried my informants about the mechanism for this transmission and how the information is encoded, they universally failed to grasp the relevance of the question. For the modern Druids, the importance rests in the concept that these beliefs and practices are

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<sup>27</sup> Much of this discussion stems from Ronald Hutton's 2000 Mount Haemus Lecture entitled "The Origins of Modern Druidry" and represents the first glance we have at Hutton's yet unpublished manuscript, *The Druids in Britain*.

<sup>28</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/druid-path/druidhistory.html>.

<sup>29</sup> The role of Ovates will be discussed in chapter three.

<sup>30</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/druid-path/druidhistory.html>.

survivals, not merely inventions. By framing the endeavor in this manner they can communally justify the antiquity of their traditions. For its part, the Bardic tradition fared better, as it was continued in the Bardic schools of Ireland until about the eighteenth century.

Ross Nichols, it seems, was deeply conscious of the question of what happened to the Druids after the Roman conquest and was eager to find an answer. Between that time and the present no historical evidence supports the continued existence of groups of Druids or, in fact, Druidic knowledge. However, Nichols' account "provided an account of a survival of actual Druids, however intermittent, in organised bodies" (Hutton 2005: 3). Nichols believed that Druid knowledge essentially went 'underground' and first reappeared in Wales in AD 800 with the Cor Emrys, a group of alchemists. Hutton argues that this is actually wrapped up in the history and myth surrounding Alfred the Great and, in fact, has links to the foundation of the University of Oxford. However, as Hutton correctly surmises, the modern university was actually founded centuries later (in the thirteenth century). According to Nichols' myth the Cor Emrys' teachings were then, "suppressed in the eleventh century, but its teachings were revived by cells centred on individual Welsh alchemists or poets, until several of these bodies combined to form the Mount Haemus Grove in 1245" (Hutton 2005: 4). This grove was supposedly centered at Oxford, lending support to Hutton's theory that the myth of Cor Emrys actually centered there instead of in Wales as Nichols alleged.

We shall return to Mount Haemus shortly but for now we turn our attention to the Middle Ages. The Druids do not appear in literature of the time and there is certainly no acknowledged reference to them as contemporary practitioners. It may be, as modern

Druid myth would have it, that these groups had gone underground, but Hutton once again provides an attractive explanation for their absence. He states,

In general, however, the Middle Ages just didn't have a use for them. They did not promote the glory of Christendom, nor the claims of royal or noble families, or of towns or monasteries. They didn't even function particularly well as hate-figures, having nothing particularly exotic or demonic about them. There was simply no point writing about them. (Hutton 2005: 5)

During the Renaissance, Druids returned to the cultural radar partly through “a new sense of national identity, held together by a new interest in national pasts, defined by common languages and cultures” (Hutton 2005: 6). This began in Germany, which Hutton considers ironic, as “the one thing which the ancient writers had agreed about Druids, it was that Germans didn't have them” (ibid). The French caught on to the German appropriation of what they felt was their own national identity and promptly began to re-appropriate it. The British national identity at this time was coping with constant conflicts of identity between Scottish, Irish, Welsh, Manx, and Cornish so it is understandable that it took some time before the English waded into this debate, and claimed the Druids for the new *British* identity. Hutton states that, “this idea could not have come at a better political moment, because it was when the British Isles were being drawn together into a superstate dominated by England” (ibid: 13).

By the late seventeenth century these struggles over national identity had created an atmosphere in which everyone from the elite to the lay public hungered after history. It was in this climate that Gibson's revision of Camden's *Britannia*, discussed earlier in this chapter, was taking place. At this point in the tale we return to the Mount Haemus Grove at Oxford. The grove was supposedly *re*-formed by the antiquarian John Aubrey in 1694. To date, neither Hutton nor any other scholar I am aware of has found any proof of a Mount Haemus Grove other than in certain pieces of Stukeley's correspondence in

which he is “describing himself as ‘a Druid of the Grove of Mount Haemus’”<sup>31</sup> (ibid: 4). According to Hutton, this is a reference to a “mountain in Greek mythology which was the home of the winds” (ibid: 4-5). Although Stukeley does not appear to have practiced Druid ceremonies within a group, Ross Nichols seems to have included the Mount Haemus grove into myth he was creating to fill the silences in the historical record. His belief in this likely myth was so strong, in fact, that he not only gave no evidence to support his claims but apparently did not even feel it necessary. Hutton aptly points this out in his statement that Nichols,

Added that the existence of the order had been a secret in itself until the twentieth century, and accordingly he did not feel obliged to provide any source references or historical evidence for his claims. It seems fairly certain that he did not develop the latter himself, for the legendary history he recounts is still asserted by the Druid Order from which OBOD seceded. *It is an institutional view of the Druid past.* (Hutton 2005: 4, emphasis mine)

This ‘institutional view’ (which is another term for the ‘creation myth’ I am proposing) also suggests to Hutton that the myth of the foundation of the ADO is flawed. He correctly points out that as Toland, Aubrey and Stukeley were prolific writers (including treatises, correspondence and volumes of notes), it seems very odd that there is absolutely no evidence for the foundation of the group. Additionally, he surmises that none of the three were likely to begin such a group. He argues that Aubrey cared about antiquities and was not very interested in the Druids themselves, Toland may have been fascinated with the Druids but as a strange and alien group, and although Stukeley was “besotted with them and very much wanted to be one...he was completely alone in that wish” (Hutton 2005: 5). Alternatively, (as noted earlier) Hutton cites the foundation of

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<sup>31</sup> As Stukeley had been a student at Oxford University it seems reasonable to assume that this grove is connected with Oxford, even if it was first created there in the late seventeenth century.

Hurle's AOD in 1781 as the "true history" (ibid) of modern Druidry. However, the AOD was itself a splinter of the ADO so it is based on the same historical progression as Nichols' group.

### *Conclusion*

Though modern Druidry claims a long link with the past and, in fact, bases many of its precepts on literary, historical and archaeological evidence, it is a consciously modern construction whose tenets were first espoused about fifty years ago. However, it did not become popularized until the mid to late 1980s. From this point on, modern Druidry has attempted to create a new path of spirituality. As Hutton has noted, "since the mid-1980s a set of new Druid groups have appeared, which are devoted to the work of developing a new spirituality based upon the traditions, monuments and landscapes of the British Isles" (2003: 236). This lends credence to Hutton's assertion in his 2005 Mount Haemus Lecture that while Nichols' account of the history of Druidry may be factually inaccurate it may be symbolically accurate. By basing much of its creation myth on historical and archaeological research and the pseudo-histories of Ross Nichols (who was repeating the fabrications of the Reids) modern Druidry counters the frequent accusation of spuriousness. It is through this myth of the history of modern Druidry that modern Druids subconsciously and often consciously justify and validate their beliefs and practices. Furthermore, it helps create a sense of stability for modern Druids that allows them to defend their beliefs when new developments arise in our understanding of the past. Thus, we can see that modern Druidry is engaged in a confrontation between the past and the present, the traditional and the modern.

## Chapter Three

### **Structure and Knowledge**

In the last chapter we explored the ways the myth of the ancient Celtic past has influenced the creation of the modern Druid movement. In this chapter we focus on the organizational structures of modern Druidry. While this group often claims it is fluid and non-structured, it does, in fact, have structural elements. However, these elements are often under-communicated in an attempt to negate hierarchy and encourage egalitarianism. Modern Druidry is organized into orders, arguably the largest of which (the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, or 'OBOD') is the focus of the present enquiry. As we shall see, no overriding authority exists within modern Druidry and therefore no umbrella structure exists to which the orders are beholden. Each order has its own particular administrative structure. In the case of OBOD, this structure is fluid, which allows for the continual flow of personnel in and out of the group.

OBOD is divided into several structural 'grades', supposedly attested to by evidence from historical sources for the ancient Celts. In each of these grades individuals encounter distinct sets of knowledge which helps them to develop particular skills. This in turn, aids them in deepening their spiritual awareness. Each of the grades is experienced through study of the three correspondence courses developed by OBOD. The courses are comprised of knowledge that is constantly evolving in response to the evolution of modern Druid spirituality. Furthermore, students are encouraged to participate in seed groups and groves to further their own spiritual path but, more

importantly, to connect with other members of the community so they experience modern Druidry not just as a personal path, but as a communal one as well.

### *Druid orders*

Structurally, the modern Druid movement is divided into orders. While some orders are the result of parthenogenesis, others form from the schism and fragmentation of extant orders, as discussed in the historical overview in the last chapter. Each order operates as a strain of Druidry, in a manner similar to the way in which Christianity (especially Protestantism) is separated into different denominations. As Susan Reed states, “Each group, in its own way looks to what is or was known about how Druids functioned in Celtic societies and have tried to incorporate that into its philosophies and practices.”<sup>32</sup> Currently, some of the main Druid organizations are the Druid Network (which replaced the British Druid Order in 2003), An Draocht Fein, the Reformed Druids of North America and the subject of this thesis: the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids.

Susan Reed, in her article “An Introduction to Modern Druid Groups”<sup>33</sup>, has argued that individual Druids may be members of more than one order. However, this argument is misleading. As stated above, each order has a slightly different take on Druidry and therefore individual Druids choose to join the order that most appeals to them. The confusion stems from the fact that often Druids will attend events organized by other orders while not ascribing to that order’s particular view of Druidry. On the other hand, this misunderstanding could stem from a misreading of membership in trans-order organizations whose goals are squarely rooted in advancing the general Druid

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<sup>32</sup> See [http://www.nachtanz.org/SReed/mod\\_druids1.html](http://www.nachtanz.org/SReed/mod_druids1.html).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

cause. These organizations fall into two types: organizations involving individual membership and organizations whose individual members are Druid organizations. The only organization I am aware of in the first category is the Loyal Arthurian Warband. While this is an order in its own right, many individuals join this group because it is the protest arm of Druidry. LAW and their leader, King Arthur Pendragon, have campaigned for issues that affect all Druids including protesting against environmental destruction and demonstrating for open access to sacred sites such as Stonehenge. Of the second type of organization the two main bodies are the Pagan Federation<sup>34</sup> and the Council of British Druid Orders.

While there is no consistent confederation of Druidic orders, from time to time alliances such as the Council of British Druid Orders have been forged between orders to meet specific goals. In the late 1980s the Council of British Druid Orders was formed, and OBOD quickly became a member, alongside sixteen other British Druid groups. King Arthur Pendragon has stated that, “this august body was set up in the late 80s with the specific aim of freeing Stonehenge for public ritual on the quarterly dates which, as a monument, it was built to commemorate” (Pendragon and Stone 2003: 96). Once these types of goals are successfully attained, however, these federations tend to disperse until the next threat to the group arises. This is precisely what happened to CoBDO in 1996, before they were able to achieve the goal of gaining access to Stonehenge. It appears that the split occurred because the various member organizations simply could not agree amongst themselves what Druidry is and what goals it should seek to achieve. Druids mistrust centralized federations because (in their view) federations tend to want to define

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<sup>34</sup> The Pagan Federation is an organization designed to support all pagan faiths, including but not exclusive to Druidry, Wicca, and Odinism.

orthodox views, which promotes rigidified belief and structure. The inflexibility created by this process is exactly what modern Druids dislike about most world religions, which they feel do not allow for the creativity and eclecticism necessary to a truly relevant spirituality. Michel Raoult, Chosen Chief of a Breton Druid order sums this up nicely in his statement that, “the truth is there is no umbrella structure to control all the different groups, no body to certify and guarantee the authenticity of the Druids and groups of Druids expressing themselves publicly. But in any event, would this really be desirable or necessary?” (Raoult 1996: 120). Because of these deeply held feelings Druid federations, as structures, are usually no more than momentary alliances. In this atmosphere each order thus paves a distinct path uniting typically only in the face of a mutual external threat. Conflicts between groups are not adjudicated by any organization – they must be dealt with by the interest parties themselves, as it is felt that each order is and should be independent.

#### *Administrative structure*

The organizational structure of the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids is described by Chosen Chief Philip Carr-Gomm as chaotic and organic. The goal of the organization is to generate an atmosphere in which the Order can continue to evolve in ways that fulfill the needs of the membership. As such, there is no set organizational structure. In the 1970s, under the leadership of Chosen Chief Ross Nichols, the order did have a constitution, but what it contained and its efficacy I have not been able to verify. When the order was re-founded under Philip Carr-Gomm an attempt was made (between roughly 1990 and 1995) to run OBOD as a ‘proper’ society. Therefore, it had a kind of

Board of Directors referred to as ‘The College of Caer Lud’. By 1997 it became apparent that this structural organization was not working, so it was discarded. Philip Carr-Gomm states the reason for the abandoning of the structure in the following manner: “I believe...we are participating in a growing, creative, living, dynamic structure...precisely because all its processes can’t be quantified and analysed.”<sup>35</sup> OBOD has thus focused on creating fluid administrative positions. It succeeds in this endeavor precisely because it allows its constituent groves and seed groups to exist in a relatively autonomous state.

Hierarchy, modern Druids argue, is anathema to the egalitarian organization they are seeking to achieve. Here there are ostensibly no masters or gurus but merely guides and companions. The order’s website confirms this by stating, “the Chief is not a guru, the Order does not ‘follow’ a leader: instead it helps to empower each of us to fulfill our lives in the best possible way for us as individuals.”<sup>36</sup> The role of the Chosen Chief, therefore, is supposedly that of an elected representative.<sup>37</sup> Carr-Gomm sees the organization as a network of nodes supported and facilitated by individuals whose positions exist only to provide the support that the membership requires. In fact, Carr-Gomm seems to encourage organizational anarchy through attitudes such as that expressed in the opening to this chapter. As many modern Druids choose this spirituality due to their feeling that mainstream religion is too structured, it is understandable that Carr-Gomm would portray the organization in this manner. Additionally, he is wary of accusations that he is casting himself as a spiritual guru and therefore, I would argue, under-communicates the structural role he and other facilitators play. The reality is that

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<sup>35</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/intro/faq.html>.

<sup>36</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/touchstone/2003annrev.html>.

<sup>37</sup> However, no election was ever held to confer leadership upon Mr. Carr-Gomm. While OBOD members claim (through conversation and through their written works) that the Chosen Chief is elected, in reality Carr-Gomm apparently intends to name his successor.

the organization must have a structure in place to deal with concerns ranging from the types of knowledge gathered and disseminated through official OBOD channels, liaising with other pagan organizations, and overseeing any potential legal claims against the Order. Although OBOD dislikes the authoritarian nature of a centralized, structured administration it does in fact rely upon a well-defined administration. The positions included in this administration, their areas of responsibility, and their duties are depicted in Figure 3-1:

Position:	Area of Responsibility:	Duties:
Chosen Chief	Spiritual	Lead OBOD
Pendragon	Spiritual	Maintain and channel energy
Scribe	Spiritual	Documentation
Modron	Spiritual	Unknown
Honorary Bard (formerly known as the 'Presider')	Literary	Maintains links with literary and scholarly world
Tutor Coordinator	Education	Coordinate tutors/mentors; aid in development and maintenance of distance learning program
Tutors/Mentors	Education	Assist in individuals' study
Editor	Education	Put together and edit the organization's journals: Touchstone (main journal – UK); Serpentstar (Australasian); and Dryade (Dutch & Belgian)
Workshop/Retreat Coordinators	Education	Develop programs and arrange for Pan-OBOD workshops and retreats
Archivist	Administrative	Maintain the Order's archives in St. Alban's and Lewes
Office Staff	Administrative	Various duties including dealing with email and postal requests for information
Liaisons	Public Relations	Liaise with organizations such as English Heritage
Patron (ess)	Public Relations/Fundraising	Provide funding for the organization
Mount Haemus Award Recipient	Scholarship	Receives funding from OBOD to undertake specific research

Figure 3-1. Administrative roles within OBOD.

Additionally, several of these positions exist within the grove structure, which will be elaborated below. The positions that tend to exist in groves are that of Pendragon, Scribe and occasionally Modron.

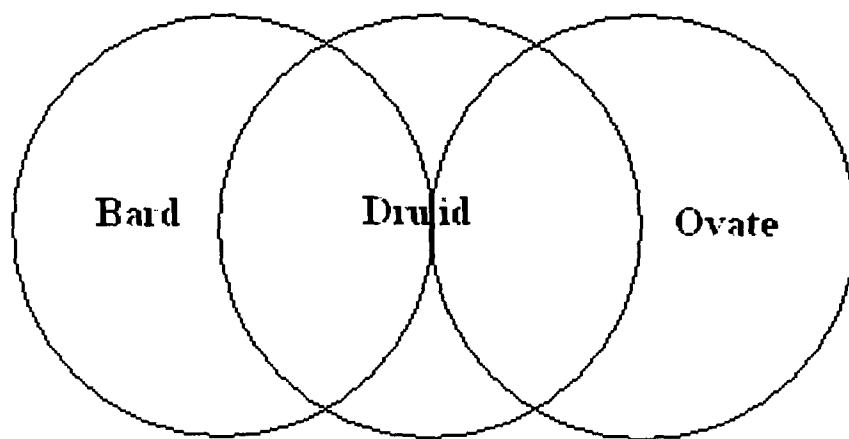
Most of these positions are fairly straightforward but four deserve further elaboration: the Chosen Chief, the Pendragon, the Scribe and the Modron. Of all positions within OBOD, the Chosen Chief is supposedly an elected position. However, this is not a general election. Under Ross Nichols, the Chosen Chief was elected by the “senior grade of the order” (Nichols 1990: 98) to serve a life term. At this point he was referred to as the Chief Elect. Nichols states that, “within 21 days he must name his Pendragon and usually also his Scribe; and only upon the appearance of this Triad does he become Chosen Chief” (ibid.). He makes no mention of the Modron, which I conclude is a recent addition. If the Pendragon or the Scribe voiced opposition to the arrangement a new election would occur. Although this is the pattern laid out by Nichols, it does not appear to be relevant in the current Order. Positions tend to be filled as necessary and are often assumed on a voluntary basis by OBOD members with the relevant skills and affirmed desire. Thus the organizational structure is continually evolving with a consistent flow of personnel in and out of administrative positions.

### *Druid grades*

The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids is so named as it is composed of three streams of knowledge or ‘grades’. These are the Bardic grade, the Ovate grade and the Druid grade.

The term ‘Druid’ is a general term that has “come to denote, for many, the type of

spirituality they follow”<sup>38</sup> but it also denotes the third grade of knowledge. As members of OBOD progress through the three grades they gain more specialized knowledge, moving from the Bard to Ovate and thence to Druid Grade. Although the teaching program for all three grades includes information about subjects such as myths, symbols, and rituals, each grade deals with this information in different ways. Briefly, the Bardic grade concerns itself with the individual’s relationship with the physical world, the Ovate grade focuses on the intangible or unseen world, and the Druid grade combines aspects of the two. The relationship of the material can be seen in Figure 3-2:



*Figure 3-2. Relationship of Grades.*

Through each of these grades skills and knowledge are expanded and deepened. David Smith has pointed this out by saying that each grade gathers “a range of skills usable in different situations” (1997: 5). The following three sections will elaborate on the specific types of knowledge and skills acquired during each grade.

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<sup>38</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/intro/faq.html>.

## *Bards*

“Hear the voice of the Bard!  
Who present, past, and future, sees;  
Whose ears have heard  
The Holy Word  
That walk’d among the ancient trees.”  
- Songs of Experience by William Blake (quoted in D. Smith 1997: 3)

The Bardic grade of OBOD was modeled on what is known of the ancient Celtic Bards. According to classical writers these individuals were gifted musicians, poets and storytellers, an image that is cultivated by modern Druids. Diodorus Siculus states that in antiquity there were “among them composers of verses whom they call Bards; these singing to instruments similar to a lyre, applaud some, while they vituperate others.”<sup>39</sup> Likewise, Strabo refers to them as “panegyric poets” (quoted in C. Matthews 1996: 230). While the importance of storytelling in pre-literate societies cannot be underestimated, these individuals were not merely entertainers in the modern sense. Their training required the memorization of traditional lore and often spanned many years. Modern Druids believe that the bards were therefore storehouses of knowledge ranging from history to myth to genealogy.<sup>40</sup> By combining this traditional knowledge with contemporary events, the Bard did not provide submissive recitations of knowledge but helped to expand upon that knowledge by creating new stories and poems, often with blatantly political and satirical themes.

This tradition supposedly continued in the Bardic schools of Ireland until about the eighteenth century. At this point individuals who desired to become Bards studied a broad range of subjects for up to twelve years (see Figure 3-3). However, the modern

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<sup>39</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/druid-path/bards.html>.

<sup>40</sup> The distinctions between these types of knowledge are the result of historicism and, therefore, it can be argued that these divisions would not have been relevant to the ancient Celts. They would more properly have conceived of these types of knowledge as intertwined.

Druid use of the Irish teaching program does pose problems. First, we do not have any evidence that these schools continued to teach the same curriculum over the centuries – it seems likely that they did not. Second, we must question whether the Irish tradition was the mainstream tradition for educating Bards in the British Isles or whether it is over-articulated due to the fact that they were the only Bardic schools to survive. Modern Druids resolve these apparent questions of authenticity by arguing that they are not concerned with authentically reproducing traditional curricula but with maintaining the spirit of the teachings instead. As the OBOD website states, “the Bardic stream is not simply a body of knowledge we once possessed and which we attempt to regain – it is a spiritualised mode of artistic creative consciousness which is dynamic and living – the future holds as much, if not greater promise than the past.”<sup>41</sup>

Modern Druids believe that ancient Celtic society was not merely academic but magical. According to Philip Carr-Gomm, as musicians and storytellers Bards, “used their knowledge of the power of the word and of sound to inspire and enthrall, to entertain and to charm – and even to bewitch” (Carr-Gomm 2002b: 10). The modern Druid depiction of Bards carrying harps and golden staffs covered with bells (which is highlighted in the Bardic correspondence course) underscores this impression as both items are considered to be magical aids to the healing process. Modern Druids thus perceive the power of inspiration not only as art for art’s sake, but also as a way to commune with the world around them.

The Bardic grade of OBOD is thus concerned with the arts as they relate to the physical world. Poetry, music and storytelling are central to the work of this grade and therefore inspiration and creativity are cultivated. As modern Druids believe this

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<sup>41</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/druid-path/bards.html>.

Year	Title	Curriculum	Adornment
0-1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ollaire (Beginner)</li> <li>• Tamhan (Poet's Attendant)</li> <li>• Drisac (Apprentice Satirist)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grammar</li> <li>• 20 Stories</li> <li>• Ogham alphabet</li> </ul>	Bronze Branch and bells
1-5	Drisac (Apprentice Satirist)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 40 Stories</li> <li>• 100 Ogham combinations</li> <li>• 12 Philosophy lessons</li> <li>• Poems</li> <li>• Diphthongal combinations</li> <li>• Law of Privileges</li> <li>• Grammar</li> </ul>	Bronze Branch and bells
6	Cli (Pillar)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 48 Poems</li> <li>• 20 Stories</li> </ul>	Bronze Branch and bells
7-10	Anruth (Noble Stream)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 95 Stories</li> <li>• Prosody</li> <li>• Glosses</li> <li>• Invocation</li> <li>• Poetic Composition</li> <li>• Poetic Form</li> <li>• Place-name stories</li> </ul>	Silver Branch and bells (on attaining Anruth status)
10-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eces (Man of Learning)</li> <li>• Fili (Poet)</li> <li>• Ollamh (Doctor of Poetry)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poetic Composition</li> <li>• Poetic Form</li> <li>• 100 Poems</li> <li>• 120 Orations</li> </ul>	Gold branch and bells (on attaining Ollamh status)

Figure3- 3. Eighteenth- Century Irish Bardic Training Schedule.<sup>42</sup>

inspiration is inherent in the natural world, Bards are urged to develop a sense of connection with the world through studying the four elements that constitute the physical world: earth, air, fire and water. As the teaching program of this grade will be discussed later in this chapter, I will merely note here that by developing a connection to the

<sup>42</sup> From <http://druidry.org/obod/druid-path/bards.html>

physical world modern Druids believe that they can develop knowledge and skills which can be used for the benefit of themselves, their community, and the world in general.

### *Ovates*

As with the Bardic grade, the Ovate grade of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids was developed from historical sources. While the term 'Ovate' does not appear in classical texts several terms, *vates*, *uatis* and *euhages*, are believed by modern Druids to be cognates. Philip Carr-Gomm maintains that these terms "may derive from the Indo-European root *uat*, 'to be inspired or possessed'" (Carr-Gomm 2002a: 66) and therefore the work of the ancient 'vates' was essentially shamanic. As very little has been written about *vates* it is impossible to know what their actual duties entailed. However, references in classical sources (specifically Julius Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*) state that these individuals were responsible for overseeing sacrifices. Once again, these types of statements must be approached cautiously, as classical sources are fraught with difficulties. David Smith puts this succinctly when he argues that, "if the ancient Druids performed sacrifice (there is no hard evidence of this other than Caesar's account, which could well have been propaganda), then the Ovates would have been the people who oversaw such events" (1997: 3). Whatever their role, it is logical to conclude that these individuals formed a segment of the Celtic priesthood.

While the Bardic tradition supposedly survived the Roman Conquest and flourished until the eighteenth century, the Ovates did not fare as well. According to OBOD's website, "with the coming of Christianity...the Ovates became the village

healers and midwives”.<sup>43</sup> As noted earlier, some modern Druids have argued that the Ovates went underground. Michel Raoult gives a tantalizing theory on this survival in his argument that clan tradition can cause information to be passed in hereditary lines or to specific people. He states that, “some of these lineages are also the source of the traditions of Witches, wizards, healers, midwives and village bonesetters who often uphold fragments of the Druidic tradition” (Raoult 1996: 115). In fact the types of skills associated with these trades are precisely those that modern Druids claim Ovates performed during the medieval period: healing, midwifery and divination. It is not my concern here to prove or disprove that these individuals were underground Ovates but merely to indicate that it is part of the modern Druid justification for their unbroken link with the past.

The Ovate Grade focuses on the domain of the intangible and unseen, specifically that of the underworld. Like the Bardic grade there is an emphasis on studying the natural world of plants and animals, but here the study is not related to their outer form but to their inner properties and qualities. To quote Strabo, the Ovate is “an interpreter of nature” (quoted in Carr-Gomm 2002b: 10). Through exploring the Ogham tree alphabet and the healing power of medicinal herbs, the Ovate begins to comprehend and work with the unseen qualities of the natural world. These explorations extend to the study of the sanctity of the manufactured landscape as depicted in stone circles and stone long barrows. This highlights the Ovate’s focus on the underworld as the ancestors are studied, honored and revered through the impact they have on the natural world.

Finally, the Ovate grade continues the exploration of myths and stories begun in the Bardic grade but with an emphasis on the enigmas of the realm of time. The goal of

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<sup>43</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/druid-path/druidhistory.html>.

this exploration is to gain the knowledge to transcend the boundaries of time. When this is taken in conjunction with the emphasis on the ancestors and the sacred landscape it is easy to see that Ovates are heavily involved with the theme of death. Modern Druids believe that the Ovate grade teaches its students to accept death as a natural part of life; it is not to be feared or reviled. This belief has led the Chosen Chief of OBOD to state, “knowing that it is only through death to one state that we achieve a wider life, the Ovate is in this sense also a psychotherapist”.<sup>44</sup> Carr-Gomm states that the Ovates’ role as psychotherapist stems directly from their ability to help people let go of their fears of death and ultimately of time. According to Philip Carr-Gomm, the darkness of these journeys and the more structured and demanding nature of the Ovate course leads to a more intense but often more unbalanced experience than that of the Bardic grade.

An argument could be made that Carr-Gomm’s statements reflect a rationalization of belief using scientific theories as seen through Carr-Gomm’s evocation of the modern process of psychoanalysis. However, this assumption is misleading. By equating the Ovate’s role with that of a psychotherapist, Carr-Gomm is not arguing that a modern Druid’s faith is rooted in scientific observations. As Anthony Smith has noted,

“It was not simply that science was a mode of cognition open to inspection and verification of results and capable of rational exposition and training; its wide range of practical applications in all kinds of circumstances, and the innovative spirit which its successes encouraged, nurtured a self-confidence in purely human faculties that most religious thought and traditional wisdom had denigrated. Faith in human powers of observation and reasoning demanded, moreover, complete freedom from any artificial constraints – social, religious or political – as well as from any intellectual dogma which might deflect or impede rational argument and rigorous experiment.” (1981:93)

Instead Carr-Gomm is arguing that the roles are analogous in that both help others make sense out of their position in the world, the Ovate from the standpoint of faith and the

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<sup>44</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/druid-path/ovates.html>.

psychotherapist from the vantage of science. As Durkheim argues, “science is a discipline that, however conceived, always applies to a reality that is given...there is a psychological science because there really are consciousnesses, which do not acquire from the psychologist their right to exist” (1995: 66-7). The role of the Ovate as ‘psychiatrist’ is therefore not literal but does emphasize the Ovate’s engagement with the inner processes of the individual. It is only after the individual understands him- or herself, modern Druids believe, that they can truly engage with the community through the next stage of their journey, the Druid path, to which we now turn.

### *Druids*

The most specialized grade within OBOD is the Druid grade. Once again, history has informed the creation of this grade. From classical sources OBOD has discovered that the ancient Druids were advisors, judges, statesmen, teachers of elite children, philosophers, mathematicians, astronomers and religious leaders. The portrait painted by these writers is one of well-respected, high status, learned individuals who used their accumulated knowledge to grapple with the most important social, economic, political and religious problems of the day. Although “the one Druid we know by name, the Aeduan Diviciacus, was also a major political figure” (Collis 2003: 215), on the whole these individuals seem not to have been regarded *a priori* as political figures. Instead they appear to have functioned as councilors to the chieftains of ancient Celtic societies.

The length of training for a Druid in antiquity is unknown and currently much debated. According to the OBOD website, “Caesar mentions that it took twenty years to train as a Druid, although Stuart Piggott rightly points out that this could have been a

figure of speech to denote a long duration of time, or that it might have actually been nineteen years, since the Druids almost certainly used the Meton Cycle, a method of reckoning based on the nineteen-year lunar cycle.”<sup>45</sup> However, this equation of the Meton Cycle with the Druids is due to John Toland’s limited readings regarding one specific stone circle located in Scotland; it therefore can be seen as another example of the romanticism of the eighteenth century movement.

Although the period of training is unknown, it is relatively clear that during their training Druids studied many subjects including divination, philosophy and mathematics. Carr-Gomm states that the Druids also “were certainly involved in spellcraft” (Carr-Gomm 2002b: 146). He argues that this is evidenced by finds from water hoards and from “references to Druids’ spells in the old texts” (Carr-Gomm 2002b: 146). Unfortunately, he makes no mention of which “old texts” he is referring to so the evidence for this assumption cannot be scrutinized.

As Druids were the cultural elite of ancient Celtic society it has been argued that after the conquest they were absorbed into the Romanized ruling class. At this point, Carr-Gomm argues, they “mostly converted to Christianity”.<sup>46</sup> Whether they continued to practice the old religion in secret is unknown but over the generations knowledge of the indigenous religions faded away. This knowledge, modern Druids argue, was handed down to future generations through the transmission of myths and folk tales.

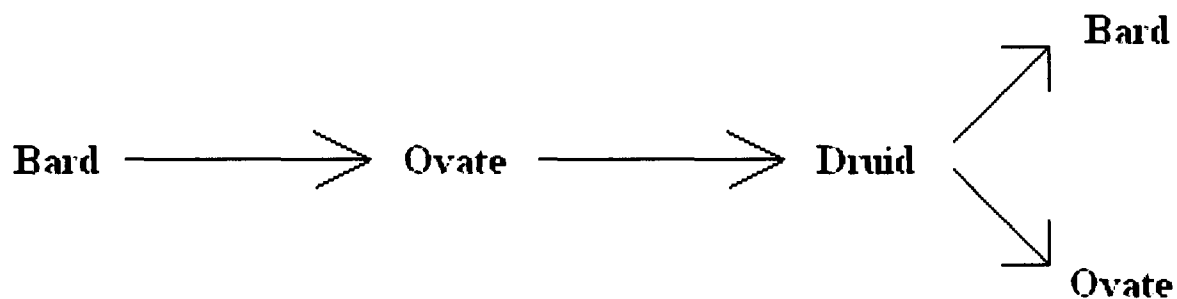
The Druid grade of OBOD focuses on honing the individual’s shamanic abilities. This occurs “as the Druid begins to understand the relationship between human and Otherworldly beings” (D. Smith 1997: 6). It would appear that upon completion of this

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<sup>45</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/druid-path/druids.html>.

<sup>46</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/druid-path/druidhistory.html>.

grade, a Druid ends his study and can then choose to pass on his accumulated knowledge to others within OBOD through facilitating a grove or becoming a tutor. However, members of this grade often choose to return to the Bardic grade or the Ovate grade to discover knowledge that they did not grasp during their first experience of the course. It is important to note here the importance of the term ‘discover’, as knowledge is not believed to be merely acquired, as one would acquire an object. Instead, the individual is thought to be uncovering fundamental truths through their experience of and meditation on the themes of the correspondence courses. Each time the individual returns to the same course he discovers new knowledge or new ways of thinking about knowledge to which he may previously been exposed. The relationship between the correspondence courses is depicted below, in Figure 3-4.



*Figure3- 4. Flow of OBOD grades.*

This diagram illustrates David Smith’s comment that “the Ovate (or Druid) is still a Bard and always will be” (1997: 5). Even though the training is divided into grades, modern Druids see interplay between the three different sets of skills that can be continually explored throughout the individual’s personal journey.

### *Bardic Course*<sup>47</sup>

For each of the aforementioned grades OBOD has developed a correspondence course. The Bardic course is designed to inculcate new members into the tenets of modern Druidry. It comprises a series of forty-eight lessons referred to as *gwersu* (singular *gwers*) and supplementary material. The forty-eight week structure implies that the course can be completed within a year, but it is exceedingly rare for any member to complete it within this time frame. In fact, some of my informants took up to ten years to complete the course. The term *gwers*, according to Philip Carr-Gomm, is the Welsh term for lesson and is related to the term *gweres*, meaning a beam of light.

Structurally, these lessons begin with the explication of a theme or general idea that the student is meant to study. By meditating on this theme the student's subconscious is allowed to grapple with the relevant issues. Following this comes a triad or "wisdom saying" that, through meditation, will further enlighten the student. Next is the practicum, a practical exercise intended to aid the individual in applying the insight gained from reflection on the lesson. The lesson ends with an *eisteddfod* containing a poem or piece of prose whose intent is to bring inspiration to the student.

The material contained in the *gwersu* comes from many sources. Although the *gwersu* are depicted as teachings developed over the centuries and passed down from the ancient Druids, this claim cannot be substantiated and is most likely meant purely to legitimize current practice. Philip Carr-Gomm wrote the current form of the course with the help of John and Caitlin Matthews. As previously noted, the reorganization of teaching techniques has been Carr-Gomm's most important role as Chosen Chief of the

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<sup>47</sup> No direct quotes from the Bardic course material will appear in this section, as all teachings materials are restricted to members of the Order. Therefore, I will merely summarize the broad themes contained within the course and their implications.

re-formed Order. However, most of the material contained in the course can be traced back to Ross Nichols. In fact, some of Nichols' work is directly excerpted in the teaching course. Most likely Carr-Gomm has merely codified Nichols' material while adding his own information and potentially his own gloss. This information lies alongside the scholarship of historians, archaeologists and authors.<sup>48</sup>

The approach to Druid spirituality taken in the Bardic course is additionally informed by Jungian and Freudian psychiatry. The course attempts to nurture individual self-development through meditation and visualization. Throughout the course Carr-Gomm emphasizes the personal nature of this journey, while stressing that it is only in connecting the inner world to the outer that harmony and balance are achieved.

The psychoanalytical process is recognized by Carr-Gomm (himself a psychiatrist) as potentially emotionally disturbing. This is due to the fact that the student is often asked to grapple with problems they have had in their past and to grow out of this encounter with their own psyche. In order to prevent the potentially harmful effects of this enterprise the course stresses that it is a personal path that should be undertaken at the individual's own pace. The student is very firmly advised to pause or in fact discontinue the work of the course, if at any point they feel disoriented or emotionally unstable. Particularly poignant is the emphasis on creating the 'Inner Sacred Grove', a mental space where meditation can be undertaken with the confidence of its safety. Additionally, students are reminded that any messages they feel they have received during visualization or meditation should not be taken literally, as they are only partial truths and often obscured by subconscious symbolism. This cautious approach to

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<sup>48</sup> This statement is only the case in reference to the new version of the Bardic course. The old version apparently contained information only from mythology, literature and mysticism. While the new course contains some history and archaeology, it is still primarily based on the above-mentioned sources.

revelation is borne out of modern Druidry's alignment with modern psychoanalysis, which posits that while some revelations are exactly as they seem (e.g. Freud's alleged statement that "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar") others may be shrouded in symbolism and therefore should not be taken literally.

The Bardic course contains many types of information to teach new members about Druidry and to provide them with particular skills. It functions to acculturate new members through the imposition of external cultural symbols whose meaning is not initially understood by the participants. Therefore, individuals must first be taught the symbolic importance of the beliefs before they can adopt those beliefs. This importance is then reified by the inculcated members.

Broadly speaking the course discusses myth, history, symbolism and belief. The course begins with an exploration of the historical basis for modern Druidry. It then continues on to discuss the four elements (fire, water, air and earth) and the relationship of masculine and feminine energies through the exploration of the myth of Cerridwen and Taliesin, which will be elaborated at length at a later stage of this thesis. Alongside these ideological standpoints are templates for practice, including a self-initiation procedure, home blessing rite and a format for seasonal rituals.

This course is not intended as an academic journey, but rather a voyage of personal discovery encompassing meditation and reflection. The intent of these lessons is to transform the neophyte's life through the establishment (or re-establishment) of a deep connection to the natural world, as well as to the inhabitants of that world. This connection is felt by many Druids to be lacking in the modern world, as is evidenced by

articles published in the Order's journal, *Touchstone*.<sup>49</sup> The *gwesu* have been devised, therefore, to combat this problem by assisting individuals to re-establish a connection with nature and other human beings. This occurs by establishing communication between the inner world of the self and the outer world of which we are all members. Modern Druids believe that when the work of the course is deeply meditated on, the individual will effect a positive change within their own lives. This change will, in turn, positively affect all people that they come in contact with and eventually bring harmony to all of humanity. This harmony will then necessarily affect the natural world in a positive way.

It is important to note, however, that OBOD does not require fanatical orthodoxy from its members. The teaching program was devised, Carr-Gomm argues, in order to give the student a starting point. As such, individuals are encouraged to accept the ideas from the course that they feel significant and meaningful to them and to leave the rest to one side. In this way the *gwesu* act as guides to the discovery of knowledge: they are not the ultimate source of knowledge. Their purpose is not to reveal a set of static beliefs but to aid the student in finding his or her own path. The course actively promotes the engagement with knowledge from outside sources and in many places gives references to books, websites, and organizations that can assist the student in this spiritual exploration.

Once members have completed the Bardic grade they can apply for admission to the Ovate grade. Any refusal would be based, according to Carr-Gomm, on the perceived lack of readiness of the candidate to proceed. While many believe that this is a formality, it is actually quite a serious process. For example, one of my informants stated that he thought all he would have to do was to write in and say he wanted to be an ovate. He was

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<sup>49</sup> Abunow, Yvonne, "I'm the Urban Pagan, Baby" in *Touchstone*, Issue 104 November 2004, pp. 10-11.

rejected on this first attempt and he duly recorded his response in his satirical “Homework Song” in which he states his tutor told him, “politely, patiently, and rather poetically, my homework was shit.” In the liner notes to his CD containing this song, he states, “I had started that whole OBOD mail order course thing. At the end of the first section [the Bardic Course] you have to write in and describe how you have learnt stuff and applied it to your life. Well, I was a bit harassed and really didn’t have the time so I sent off a letter basically saying “I’ve known this stuff for years, it was a lovely course, can I move onto the next grade please?” I got a really lovely letter back, para-phrased in the song...Not a course you can just breeze through.”<sup>50</sup> This procedure, however, allows OBOD to ensure that the material in the course is actually pondered by the student and that they are ready to tackle the next stage of their spiritual development through the Ovate course. Upon completion of the Ovate course the individual once again applies through their tutor and may (or may not) then proceed to the Druid course.<sup>51</sup>

### *Tutoring*

The tutoring program is one of the most fundamental teaching methods of the OBOD correspondence courses. Tutors are members of OBOD who have completed the Druid course and who have been recommended by their own tutor for this role. Once they have accepted the invitation to become a tutor the organization gives them a set of guidelines set out in the Tutor Training Manual. Additionally, they are given sample letters to enhance their ability to guide their supervisees.

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<sup>50</sup> Paul Mitchell, *The Drinking Times*, 2005, privately produced.

<sup>51</sup> I have not studied these courses as eligibility for the Ovate course requires at least one year of training in the Bardic course and my fieldwork was limited to one year. This must then remain an area for future research.

Upon enrolling in the Bardic course each member has the opportunity to obtain an individual tutor by requesting that the Tutor Coordinator assign one. The choice of tutor is based solely on geographical proximity; most members are assigned a tutor who lives at some distance from the supervisee. According to Philip Carr-Gomm this approach has been taken because it is felt that distance allows detachment. By corresponding at a certain physical distance, the roles of tutor/tutee are not blurred and can remain distinctly non-social and therefore objective.

The role of the tutor is mainly to provide a sounding board for the student. Tutors act as companions through the material so that a student can be guided without being unduly influenced. By placing the onus of development squarely on the student, OBOD encourages students to be responsible for their own spiritual development through engagement with the material provided in the correspondence course. The role of the tutor, therefore, is to encourage communication, which allows members to create harmony through the relation of their inner processes of self-reflection and the outer world.

Additionally, tutors provide OBOD with a way of gauging the development of the student. During the Bardic course members are not required to communicate with a tutor. They have the option but during my fieldwork I discovered that most members do not contact their tutors until the end of their Bardic training. At the end of the Bardic course the individual must contact their tutor, as it is a prerequisite for entry into the next grade. This is because OBOD wants to ensure that the individual has actively engaged with the material in the course. There are no formal requirements for entry into the next grade and no exam is given. The student merely writes to his or her tutor and discusses the

experience they had of the course. Students are asked to discuss their interests, their lives, and how they came to Druidry. This review process allows OBOD to ensure that individuals are not merely memorizing material, but actually absorbing the material and engaging with it in a way that is meaningful for their own individual lives. Additionally, it allows OBOD to revise material so that it is relevant for its members.

### *Seed groups and groves*

In addition to the knowledge and support members receive through the correspondence courses and their tutors, individuals may become members of a seed group or grove. Seed groups and groves are small groups whose goal is the exploration of the Druid spiritual path. Operating ostensibly independently of OBOD, these groups are voluntary and membership of OBOD is not predicated on joining one of these groups. In fact, many individuals choose to practice as solitary Druids. Although this is often a specific choice, it is also often the result of geographical constraints, which may not allow individuals to attend group meetings.

‘Seed groups’ are groups of individuals who come together to explore themes within Druidry. According to Philip Carr-Gomm, anyone can initiate a seed group and no rules attach to their formation. Members meet on a regular basis (generally six to twelve times a year). Some seed groups choose to celebrate the eight seasonal festivals together in an informal manner, but this is not a requirement. Individual members of a seed group may, in fact, choose to attend one of the larger public ceremonies held on these occasions by groves. Seed group status can be transitional as members often come and go in response to their own needs. Additionally, the status of the group as a whole

can be transitional as seed groups can elect to form groves, if two or more of their members attain the Druid grade and then announce to OBOD their intention to form a new grove.

Similarly, 'groves' are groups of individual members who meet regularly to discuss and explore Druid themes. Unlike seed groups though, OBOD does have requirements for groves. Firstly, groves must be facilitated by two members who have attained the Druid grade in order to be recognized by OBOD. Additionally, each grove must celebrate all eight of the seasonal rituals and hold 'groves' (more properly referred to as a *gorsedd*) for each grade.<sup>52</sup> As of January 2005 fifteen of these groups were in existence throughout the world. This official recognition, however, is merely a formality as these groups are mostly autonomous. Neither the choice of material nor the functioning of the group is in anyway regulated by OBOD.

The importance of these groups lies in the intimacy that they create. As OBOD's teaching program is undertaken individually, the organization feels it is important for its members to come together to connect with each other. The intimacy created by these groups is important not only to the individual's self-development, but also in creating an atmosphere where individuals help each other develop and grow. By building positive connections between individuals, mutual growth not only significantly affects the inner state of the individuals concerned, but also positively influences the development of humankind. As humans begin to care for one another and help each other grow, positive attitudes are fostered. These positive feelings are then spread through the world and thus enhance the "planetary aura" (Carr-Gomm 2001: Gwers 4, 66). The health and well-

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<sup>52</sup> This terminology is a bit confusing. While the group itself is called a grove, it is also required to hold 'groves' (or *gorseddau*) for each grade. By this is meant that each grove is required to have meetings (also called 'groves' or alternatively *gorseddau*) for each of the constituent grades of Bard, Ovate and Druid.

being of individuals is thus intimately tied to the health and well-being of the planet, a belief which may have been influenced by James Lovelock's "Gaia Hypothesis" (cf. *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* 1979). Certainly, many modern Druids are proponents of Lovelock's beliefs. Wherever the idea that positive feelings can benefit the planet originated, it remains one of the central facets of modern Druid belief.

### *Anderida Grove of the Seven Hills*

Of the fifteen recognized OBOD groves, I chose to focus my research around one group, Anderida Grove of the Seven Hills. Based on the south coast of England, Anderida "began as a simple meeting of 7 friends to celebrate the turning wheel of the seasons" (cf. 'Wealden Letters', Appendix One).<sup>53</sup> The grove was named after the ancient forest of Anderida that stretched from Portsmouth to Dover and the seven hills associated with Iron Age hill-forts that lie in the same area. Anderida is one of the better-known groves, partially because they hold their own retreats, but also because one of the facilitators of the grove works for OBOD. In fact, as already noted in chapter one, for many people who want to learn more about OBOD or join the organization their first contact is with this individual. This is so because he deals with membership inquiries and is a highly visible member of the team that organizes OBOD events. Within OBOD Anderida is referred to as a 'rebel' grove with a spirit of freedom and anarchy. As groves are all autonomous, however, the term 'rebel' seems inappropriate. More likely, this is an image cultivated by members of the grove themselves, as it is a position they aspire to achieve.

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<sup>53</sup> The 'Wealden Letters' (as I have termed them) are letters written between the Anderida Grove of the Seven Hills and the Wealden District Council in regards to a dispute over use of a public space in the District for rituals. This issue will be taken up at length in chapter nine.

Since March 2000, the grove has been organizing public ceremonies to celebrate the eight seasonal festivals of Druidry at the Long Man of Wilmington, a chalk figure in East Sussex. These gatherings are referred to as ‘opens’ as non-members are allowed to attend.<sup>54</sup> The grove also holds ‘closed’ meetings once a month near Brighton at the home of the facilitators. These meetings, referred to as ‘magical working groups’ are small, intimate affairs, which emphasize deep explorations of Druid material through discussion, visualization and meditation. They are open only to individuals who have been accepted as members of the grove.

Typically, groves contain members with particular roles. These roles are not usually elected positions but are taken up informally, when necessary, by any individuals who feel they would like to help fulfill a particular role. If the individual feels they no longer wish to fulfill the role or they want a break, another member will step into the position. It is unusual for this to cause any friction as, in my experience, members usually do not want to be burdened with the responsibility implied by a particular position. However, conflicts do occur, as will be elaborated later in this chapter.

Several of these positions deserve further note. Within a grove there are often one or more members referred to as ‘grove fathers’ and ‘grove mothers’. These individuals have usually reached the Druid grade and act as leaders within the grove. They often have important roles during ceremonies, including writing the substantive sections of the ceremonies and/or organizing and leading the proceedings. Within Anderida, however, this pattern does not occur. While two members of the group perform these functions, they prefer to be referred to merely as ‘facilitators’. This is due to their feeling that the

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<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, more non-members than members often attend these public rituals, a fact which will be discussed in later chapters.

status of 'grove mother' and 'grove father' privileges individuals within the grove, creating a hierarchy, which is anathema to Druid philosophy. As David Smith has stated, "this is an organic celebration, with no central organisation, or organiser, and no money ever is charged. All [we] do is write the ceremony for the day... [and] control the ceremony" (see Appendix One, the Wealden Letters). For practical reasons it is often necessary for one or more individuals to be responsible for the details of running such an event and as such, they prefer to be seen as facilitating events instead of leading them.

Groves such as Anderida often have individuals in the position of Pendragon as well. The Pendragon of the grove is responsible for 'maintaining the energy' of the grove. None of my informants within Anderida could give me an actual definition of this process, except to say that it involves channeling energy from the participants and from the universe during ritual and meditation, which helps to effect positive changes in participants and the world as a whole. His or her role is constant but is particularly important during life-crisis rituals such as initiations. During these events specific, highly significant goals must be achieved and, therefore, the channeling of energy is seen as paramount in these situations.

The rest of the grove contains the regular membership. Obtaining membership in Anderida is very similar to the path taken to obtain membership in other groves. Prospective members approach members of the grove at moots<sup>55</sup> or open public rituals and request that they be accepted as members. The first approach tends to be through the facilitators, as they are visibly involved in the organization of these events and have taken a prominent role in their performance. This can, however, be misleading to new members as it can create the impression in newcomers that the facilitators are

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<sup>55</sup> These social gatherings will be discussed in chapter seven.

hierarchically superior and determine acceptance into the grove. On the contrary, once the intention to join has been voiced, Anderida's facilitators raise the issue of new membership at a grove meeting (which is closed to non-members). For the new member to be accepted they must be a member of OBOD, and they must be accepted by all members of the grove. As there is no initiation procedure, upon acceptance new members enter by beginning to attending the closed monthly meetings.

As previously noted, during my research a drastic change in membership occurred. I became a member shortly after a schism within the grove. According to current members this schism occurred as a response to friction between several members and the feeling by some members that Anderida was primarily a social group. This has led Anderida over the last year to redefine its purpose and tailor its new membership accordingly. Currently, Anderida is experiencing a rapid expansion as ten individuals have put themselves forward as candidates for membership. This is a novel situation and has created much debate over the logistics of such growth. While Anderida prides itself on being non-elitist and open to all serious students of Druidry, it has had to face the question of whether it should limit membership. To this effect issues as simple as the constraints of physical space and as complex as the suitability of candidates have been raised.

The final structural component of any grove is perhaps its most important. Just as each individual Druid has personal ancestors and guides, so does the grove. These are spirits who help to guide and protect the grove as a group and cultivate positive energy for the group. They are not invoked as particular entities but are referred to in the

collective sense. Thus the membership of the grove is not conceived of as only existing in the physical world but in the intangible world as well.

### *Schism*

In this chapter I have attempted to depict the ways in which modern Druidry is structured. These discussions have been necessarily an examination of the general forms modern Druidry takes and, more importantly for our present enquiry, the ideals of this spirituality. Like all social groups, however, the ideal is rarely what confronts the researcher. Conflict (whether voiced or not) often erupts as a result of tensions inherent in the system. The ways in which these tensions are eased, how the conflicts they engender are neutralized, and how the group internalizes the resolution are vital and can tell us much about the group itself.

Modern Druidry is no exception to this premise. The consequences of the conflicts in this system often are minimal, merely ending in a difference of opinion between two individuals or groups. However, sometimes the conflicts are more heated and can result in the breakdown of the group. Fragmentation and realignment while not an everyday affair occur with enough regularity to assume they are a part of the system<sup>56</sup>. As alluded to in the last section of this work, during my research with the Anderida Grove of the Seven Hills (and later with the Morganswood Grove) there were several occasions of this type of conflict. In order to explore the mechanisms of conflict, negotiation, and realignment, the present section provides an in-depth look at the particular history of Anderida and how schisms have occurred and been resolved within

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<sup>56</sup> One of my informants early on in research indicated that groups split about every three to four years. This she related to the 'natural progression' of the group. While I cannot completely validate this premise, the pattern does appear to be borne out by my research.

that group. While obviously this material mainly regards Anderida, it can be said to be typical of the ways schisms occur within the wider modern Druid community within Britain.

The Anderida Grove of the Seven Hills, like all Druid groups, has its own singular historical trajectory. Although it has gone through several ‘incarnations’, Anderida was originally formed by seven Druids in August of 1998. The original members had previously been members of a grove based in Lewes at the home of OBOD’s re-founder, the ‘Chosen Chief’, Philip Carr-Gomm. During their period in the Lewes grove these individuals had ‘formed strong bonds’ with one another, as one of my informants related.

While the reason for the separation from the Lewes grove is not entirely apparent, it was suggested to me that the Lewes grove was temporarily shut down. This closure was due to the increase of commitments of the founders of the grove, Carr-Gomm and his wife Stephanie. Chief amongst these commitments was an extended trip to Australasia, where in the 1990s modern Druidry in general and OBOD in particular were gaining recognition and popularity. It is clear, therefore, that the separation of these members and their subsequent foundation of Anderida was not the result of enmity or ideological differences. In fact, both my informants and Carr-Gomm himself have noted that he gave his blessing for the new grove to be formed<sup>57</sup>. The Anderida Grove and its members have had a firm relationship (which they continue to possess) both with Carr-Gomm and with OBOD from the grove’s inception. On several instances the members of the Anderida Grove also practiced together with the Lewes grove, often at the invitation of the Lewes grove and the Carr-Gomms.

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<sup>57</sup> While not technically a necessity, this ‘blessing’ helps to ease the tension a potential split could create and helps to ensure the continued amity between groups.

Upon the first meeting of the new grove, as one of my informants stated, “everyone felt like they had been on a long journey in the world and had finely arrived home to the arms of a waiting family”. During the meeting the name ‘Anderida Grove of the Seven Hills’ was chosen first to recognize the forest of Anderida, which covered much of ancient Sussex. Secondly, this name commemorates the seven Iron Age hill-forts that ring Sussex: Wolstonbury, Chanctonbury, Hollingbury, Cissbury, Caburn, Whitehawk and Thundersbarrow. The same informant stated that this name was chosen to connect “the forest and the ancient peoples of the land” and that the grove would “work in honour of the ancient forest and the ancestors of Anderida”.

From the beginning the grove appears not to have been conceived of as a static entity. Growth and change were welcomed as necessary and vital to its health, which in turn would impart strength to the group and its individual members. Perhaps the first major change was the decision (sometime around November of 1998) of two of the original seven to leave the grove. Apparently these individuals felt they needed to take a break from Druidry and therefore left the grove. As these individuals left the grove a full five years before my fieldwork began, their reasons cannot be verified. However, it does appear from many conversations with my informants that this type of reason is commonly given when an individual wants to leave a group. It is often phrased as “my guides and guardians think my path lies elsewhere” or words to similar effect. In some instances this is clearly the case, but in many cases it may be that this is a non-confrontational way of leaving a group without the individual having to explain their reasons to the group who, it must be remembered, are often extremely close friends as well. Whatever their reasons, one of my informants stated that the departure of these two

early members resulted in a readjustment of the group due to “a change of energy within the grove”.

Anderida continued to change over the years. New members entered and old members left. In fact, during fieldwork only two of the original seven members remained as active members of Anderida<sup>58</sup>. Additionally, the location of grove meetings eventually was changed to the house of the two surviving members. Alongside these changes the grove took on more activities, such as the institution of the open rituals at Wilmington and the establishment of Anderida camps (organized originally for all pagans in the Sussex area, but now drawing individuals from all over the British Isles). Throughout all of these changes Anderida survived, in large part due to the will and leadership of the two survivors of the original grove. Indeed, the grove learned to change with changing circumstances and to view these changes as natural and healthy for the grove and its members.

This flexibility and in fact the very survival of Anderida was, however, severely tested in late 2002 and early 2003. By strange coincidence this was exactly the time I first had contact with Anderida. During the course of some basic fieldwork for my master's thesis I travelled to Wilmington in December of 2002 to participate in the Winter Solstice ritual, at which time I met and spoke with several of the members of Anderida. Two of these members were the aforementioned surviving original members and two were members who would shortly leave to create a new grove. At this time I was merely a participant in the open ritual and had no knowledge of or experience with the closed grove meetings.

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<sup>58</sup> However, at the time of writing one of the original members has recently been in contact with these two surviving members. Whether her path will lead her back to Anderida is, at time of writing, uncertain.

When I started my doctoral research in the fall of 2004 the closed grove meetings were very small, with only the two original members and two other members present. I noted at the time that most of the individuals that I had met in 2002 were not present. What had happened in the interval was not made clear to me until much later. However, at the time I was informed that there had recently been some sort of split. From the allusions made to me at the time I surmised (as it happens quite correctly) that the split was anything but amicable. Although the individuals in the grove were obviously thrown off-kilter by recent events, the early grove meetings of my fieldwork were not by any means sombre. They were, however, much more subdued than the meetings I was to encounter later in fieldwork.

It was obvious to me at the time that none of my informants was willing to discuss this sensitive issue, especially as it was so fresh. Additionally, my entry into the closed grove meetings was somewhat contentious. My motives as a researcher were questioned and, therefore, I felt it unwise at the time to alienate my informants by pushing them into discussing this obviously painful event. However, as time passed and my informants began to take me into their confidence I began to get a clearer picture of how this event unfolded. The remaining pieces of this story did not come together until my fieldwork proper was already completed, but I recite them here in order to give an account of this pivotal occurrence<sup>59</sup>.

The grove as I encountered it in late 2002 had, like most social groups, inner tensions. Some of these conflicts were ideological, others structural, and some interpersonal. Modern Druids accept, and as we have seen, actively encourage

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<sup>59</sup> This is understandably a delicate subject for all involved and in the interests of the continued good-will of my informants the following discussion will omit many precise details. In any event, the nature of the actual interpersonal conflicts is unimportant to the discussion at hand.

ideological differences. The structural and interpersonal conflicts are, however, much more difficult to resolve. From what I have been able to glean, within Anderida conflicts regarding structural and organizational matters at the time of the 2002 split had become more pronounced. At the zenith of these debates the natural group tensions were exacerbated by the temporary breakdown of the long-term romantic relationship between the two surviving original members of Anderida, which I suspect was to some extent either caused by or exacerbated by the tension in the grove. The two original members had “held the grove energy” for so long and had by all accounts put so much of their personal energy into the grove that their private relationship had suffered.

In many groups the problems within a relationship such as this would be left to the individuals to resolve. However, the very structure of modern Druid groups can make this at best a difficult and at worst an impossible task. On the purely practical level, meetings were held at the house of these two individuals and no other suitable location immediately presented itself. Additionally, (as I was later to find out) none of the members of the grove wanted these two individuals to assume that a change of venue for closed grove meetings meant that the rest of the grove believed these two did not belong in the grove. Furthermore, as the grove at this time was filled with a matrix of very strong, criss-crossing friendships, no one wanted to be seen as taking sides, eschewing the friendship of one partner for that of the other.

The result of this inner turmoil was, understandably, a feeling of “bad energy”, as one of my informants related. Because the energy within a group is felt to affect each individual, the spiritual growth of the individual is seen as tied to the atmosphere of the group. In this case that atmosphere was tense and therefore some of the members began

to feel their individual growth was being hampered. Although individuals within the grove sympathized with the facilitators and attempted to help them through this difficult period, many felt that their own spiritual path was being negatively affected by the situation.

In this we can see the tension within modern Druidry between the competing notions of the importance of “the tribe” (their term for their community) and the need to nurture individual spiritual growth. This group had been together for some time and in the process had formed very real and very strong attachments. These attachments rested not only on a shared spiritual path but also on a growing sense of community. Therefore, when structural and organizational differences presented themselves to the individuals involved, the tendency was not to voice these conflicts, instead favouring upholding the status quo. When two critical members had interpersonal difficulties the tension between the competing trends of group and individual became too much and the grove as a group began to break down. During this process fundamental ideological differences which had heretofore been un- or under-voiced came to the surface. The tendency was also to place the blame for these conflicts with the breakdown of the romantic relationship of the two facilitators. Although this may have been a catalyst for the resulting split, it appears that the problems within Anderida actually went much deeper.

From the often veiled and incomplete statements of my informants it became clear that while the relationship of the facilitators to one another was the spark that lit the proverbial tinder, the primary issue within the grove was the way in which the grove was organized and administered. The two critical members alluded to above were the facilitators of the grove and therefore were its *de facto* leaders. They acquired this status

in large part due to the twin facts that they were the only surviving members of the original grove and they had a longer individual engagement with Druidry and OBOD than many of the members of the group. It is important to note, however, that this was not a status that they chose or actively cultivated but one accorded to them by others. As a result, the facilitators were viewed as the solid nexus at the center of an often fluctuating community, thus providing a sense of continuity. In these two individuals was vested the administration of the grove. Additionally, as I have mentioned, grove meetings were held at their home. However, this central status, as several of my informants related, made them feel as if Anderida had become hierarchical, which as we have seen is anathema to modern Druid belief.

Therefore, when the solidity of this core was challenged, the practical dictates of grove administration (which were already in question) were contested. Seemingly simple questions such as “who will hold the energy of the grove” and “who will be the temporary facilitators” were virtually impossible for the grove to answer. The group was therefore faced with the decision between two equally unacceptable positions. On one hand, there was a real fear that if individuals stepped in to fill the vacuum at the center they would appear to be undertaking a coup and would in the process both hurt and anger the facilitators. On the other hand, many individuals in the group felt that continuing to practice their spirituality within the negative atmosphere of the grove was detrimental to their own spirituality. For some time the group tried to steer the middle course in the hopes that the situation would resolve itself without recourse to drastic action.

Not only were there conflicting views over the structure and administration of the grove, but there were some ideological differences as well. Some of the individuals I

spoke with stated that these differences could possibly have been resolved had the atmosphere within the grove not been strained, although this is doubtful. Most likely, the differences would have been un-voiced and, therefore, would have created an undercurrent of tension. Primarily, these differences appeared to revolve around the question of whether or not the grove should be completely autonomous, not tied to but merely associated with a broader modern Druid organization such as OBOD. Secondly, there were fundamental ideological differences which continue to be relevant today, especially within the group created after the split with Anderida.

Over the course of several months the ‘wait and see’ position taken by many members of Anderida collapsed. Not much headway had been made towards either reconciling the two facilitators or creating a comfortable spiritual working situation within the grove. As a result, several of Anderida’s members decided to leave, stating that their spiritual paths were leading them in a different direction than that of Anderida. These individuals subsequently formed a new group in the fall of 2004. Interestingly, this group, which I shall refer to as the Morganswood Grove<sup>60</sup>, decided to loosen its ties not only with Anderida but with OBOD as well. They are currently associated with several organizations but importantly have a strongly autonomous status.

The Morganswood Grove began by drawing up what they refer to as a ‘constitution’. This constitution reflects in many ways the lessons that this group felt they had gleaned during their time as members of Anderida. For instance, the constitution makes a point of stating that the group is run with an inner circle which is “in order to ensure that no one personality is dominant in the grove”. In other places they refer to the inner circle as an alternative to having “a fixed leader”. The professed desire

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<sup>60</sup> The group formed after schism with Anderida has asked not to be named so I have used a pseudonym.

of these individuals was that the construction of formal rules would allow each member to be fulfilled spiritually without the grove being threatened by interpersonal conflicts or hierarchical distinctions, as they felt Anderida had been.

This constitution has not insulated the Morganswood Grove from inner tensions, which continue to exist to this day. Structurally and organizationally the problems appear to be minor and the constitution has in many ways provided this group a stable basis, crucially also endowing them with a blueprint for the resolution of structural and organizational conflicts. However, contrary to its stated intentions the constitution has paved the way for a hierarchy, veiled and under-communicated as it may be. Clearly, the distinction of two levels of membership (that of the circle and that of all other members) is a hierarchy of sorts. Members of the Morganswood Grove recognize this imperfect state, but see this hierarchy as a necessary evil. Created to provide a core of stability, this hierarchy was established to ensure that the breakdown of interpersonal relationships would not result in the concomitant breakdown of the grove. Thus, this grove has attempted to ease tensions and resolve conflicts through the constitution, which can be seen as creating structural and organizational rigidity.

Within the Morganswood Grove there have latterly appeared vehement conflicts of ideology. One member, for example, considers himself an agnostic if not actually an atheist. Another member stringently believes that Brythonic Druidry is the correct path. It can be argued that having mostly resolved the structural and organizational dilemmas that spurred their rift with Anderida, other tensions which may have previously been below the surface have come to the fore. Similarly to Anderida's situation these conflicts (while always present in some fashion) did not escalate until an interpersonal crisis

occurred within the grove, thus igniting these debates as had previously happened when they were members of Anderida.

At the same time the Morganswood Grove was being established Anderida was tenaciously holding on. The original facilitators were happily reunited and began to work through the problems that were facing the grove. As one of these two said at one of the earliest grove meetings I attended, “now it’s time for healing” and in fact this was the predominant focus of many of the early grove meetings I attended. Anderida, for its part, had also learned many lessons from the split. These lessons, my informants in Anderida stated, were hard but have ultimately led the group “to a place of strength”. In opposition to the formal structure that was created by Morganswood, Anderida initially made an attempt to separate friendships from grove spiritual work. This attempt ultimately failed but has helped to develop an ability of Anderida members to grasp the fundamental difference in these two relationships. By recognizing this difference and the tensions it can create and embracing those tensions, Anderida has continued to avoid rigidity (with much less hierarchy than before the rift) while at the same time preserving the community aspect of the grove.

For three years these two groups continued to follow their own trajectories. Both groups grew: Anderida has grown to roughly 10-15 members since 2004 and Morganswood (who prize the intimacy of their grove) has 7-9 members. Both groves were healthy and seen to fulfil the needs of their respective members. However, a certain amount of enmity continued to exist between the groups. New members, of which I am a good example, did not have the full situation explained to them but rather often learned pieces of the conflict over time. The feeling on both sides seemed to have been that it

was not right to involve new members in old conflicts. Over the years attempts had been made at reconciliation, but as there were many parties involved a complete reconciliation was difficult to achieve.

During the end of my fieldwork two of the original members of the conflict (one from Anderida and one from the Morganswood Grove) began to converse again. Most of the other members were at varying stages of reconciliation at this point. When these two last individuals began to communicate the mood amongst both groups was practically jubilant. Friendships were reaffirmed and plans made to meet as a group again socially, although there has never been any desire voiced to me that the groups reunite. Both groups seemed happy with their group's resolution of the individuals' spiritual dilemmas.

One of the major features of the ensuing reconciliation was that the role of one particular individual in the conflict was finally discovered by both parties. This individual will hereafter be referred to as "Jane". She had been one of the four members of Anderida when I began my fieldwork and had been a member of Anderida during the rift. She maintained close ties with the members who formed the Morganswood Grove. In fact, Jane was also a member of that group. The members of Anderida were aware that she was still in contact with the members of Morganswood, but it appears that her membership of that group did not become not open knowledge until much later. For at least two years this individual was the only real link between these two groups and, therefore, what each group knew of the other group was invariably relayed by Jane. The veracity of her statements was accepted at the time. However, three years later when the reconciliation between these individuals was effected they began to compare the information that each side had been made privy to by Jane. From this comparison of

notes it became clear that a central feature of the continuing animosity between the groups was the perceived blatant misstatement and manipulation of information by Jane to fulfil her own personal goals. This of course engendered intense feelings towards Jane who was thus forced by the resulting conflict to leave both groups. The intense feelings that both groups have regarding this individual have dissipated slightly; however both groups believe that much of the rift was directly the result of Jane's machinations. Whether or not this is true cannot be determined. What is clear, however, is that this provided an extra strain at a very difficult time for both groups.

The two groves have continued separately, largely due to ideological and structural differences. The changes that occurred in both groups as a result of this turbulent period are felt to have benefited each group. Both have stated to me that ultimately, this schism and re-acquaintance allowed them to grow as a group and personally and to understand what it is that they expect from their grove. Additionally, for both groups the importance of open and honest communication between all members has become paramount. As one of my informants in Anderida has stated, this situation has taught him to "speak his truth". For Morganswood Grove the schism illustrated their group belief that equality within the grove must be vigilantly protected. This illustrates the idea that all groves are highly specialized, and perhaps this is the reason modern Druids often jokingly say that for a grove to be healthy it must split every three or four years, due to the continual realignment of individual and group needs. Such schisms should be viewed, my informants related, as an organic process of growth and decay, which in turn creates rich material for new growth.

Because of the intimate working nature of these groups, any interpersonal issues can rapidly highlight ideological differences. However, all Druids have divergent ideologies so these schisms are built into the theology. Without a hierarchy to fall back upon and without dogma, these issues must be dealt with on a personal level. Perhaps this is the most important reason for the adoption of the Druid identity. For the Druids of the ancient Celtic past are considered by modern Druids to have been peacemakers, individuals who had the ability to overcome conflict in a society that was in constant conflict with dramatically different cultures whose goal was to subjugate them. Likewise, it can be argued that the modern Druid in a world hostile to pagan religions must create an atmosphere in which peacemaking is his or her most vital skill.

### *Conclusion*

The structure of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids has been consciously created using historical sources. As such, OBOD's teachings have co-opted the past in support of a modern creation. The sources that have been used to create the correspondence courses range from classical texts to archaeological research to law codes and mythology. As stated earlier, these sources are not free from bias and often contain ambiguities or contradictions. These issues aside, however, it is important to understand that these sources inspired the creation of OBOD's structure, specifically the division of modern Druidry into the 'grades' of Bards, Ovates and Druids. Furthermore, the development of modern Druidry owes much to the development of freemasonry, theosophy, and the high magic societies led by the likes of Aleister Crowley. These organizations were divided into degrees and grades through which the adept must pass.

However, modern Druidry is not merely an attempt to impose archaic structural forms. Instead, it reflects the quest for new models and modes of coping with the ever-changing social world and the individual's place within the cosmic order. Druids believe that modernity has challenged individuals within society not to passively accept the structures that govern their belief but to actively participate in their construction. By not succumbing to a hierarchical structure Druids believe that they can redress the imbalance of power residing in Western society and reclaim their right to create relevant structures of meaning for themselves. They readily admit the constructed nature of their structures, but challenge all non-believers to question what their own adherence to "traditional" structures has brought in terms of their own self-development and the development of humanity. As such it is more concerned with the individual needs of its members than organizational homogeneity. It is this drive to distinguish one's own beliefs from those of other individuals that is one of the hallmarks of modern Druid identity.

Druidry must be understood as a product of the Western society from which it springs. Although they strive for the utopian goal of egalitarianism, stability cannot be created without a well-articulated hierarchy. In hierarchies, power is created by the capacity to determine orthodoxy and the concomitant right to decide when its breach constitutes heresy. This ideological stance then reifies the hierarchy itself. As modern Druidry strives for egalitarianism, it must deny the power of any individual to define doctrinal truth. This distrust of the structures of power creates tension as it resists the rigidity of the codification of doctrine while at the same time having a tendency to hierarchize nonetheless. This tension results in the need to under-communicate the

relevance and, in fact, the existence of organizational structure, thereby reifying the construction of modern Druidry around individual choice.

Druidry contains a fundamental contradiction. While using historical and literary sources to legitimize its stance it firmly denies the need for such legitimization. This contradiction can be resolved by the understanding that in modern Druidry, power must be defined as residing outside the organizational structure. It is placed instead in the knowledge supposedly transmitted from ancient Druids through the centuries in the form of myth. While the importance of myth to modern Druidry will be discussed at length in chapter five, here it is important to note that the possession and application of myth then legitimizes the structure of Druidry itself. By studying myth and history the modern Druid is supporting this power structure. However, structurally this force is not strong enough to withstand the need for organizational structure for long. This is mainly due to the fact that the only force holding these individuals together are the beliefs they share. There are usually no geographical, occupational or social commonalities amongst these individuals. Lack of commonality paired with an under-communicated organizational structure creates tension. This then results in the fragmentation of seed groups and groves (sometimes but not always antagonistically) followed by periods of accretion during which individual and group goals are reordered. It is this continual fragmentation and accretion that allows modern Druidry to be an organic and amorphous spirituality.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Cosmology**

Modern Druidry, like all religions, is based on a set of concepts that, taken together, can be referred to as the cosmology of Druidry. Obviously this thesis cannot hope to cover all such beliefs, by necessity it must be selective. For the researcher Druidry is problematic as it is a diverse religion without written doctrines, leading to difficulties in the comprehension of what mainstream Druidry actually espouses. Furthermore, as discussed in the introduction to this work, each group or individual chooses which beliefs fit into their system cohesively. However, some concepts exist which are common to most Druids. First, Druidry is rooted in a reverence for the natural world and all within it. Secondly, there is the belief<sup>61</sup> in a Great Spirit or a set of gods. Additionally it contains a set of beliefs regarding reincarnation and the Law of the Returning Tide (a notion similar to karma), the elements, and the circles of existence. After exploring these beliefs I will briefly discuss two important symbols within modern Druidry. The discussions that follow will provide a foundation for understanding the myths discussed in chapter five.

#### *Cosmology*

Modern Druid cosmology can be understood as a way of approaching and comprehending the universe. Its philosophy is portrayed as external to time because its ideas transcend time itself. The purpose of this path is seen as defending universal truth

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<sup>61</sup> As noted in the introduction to this thesis, the term 'belief' is problematic. Here it is used in the most conventional sense, denoting a conception of or faith in a group of non-human entities.

and returning a level of spirituality to the world that it sees as lacking in modern religious practice. The cosmology sees the world as an interconnected web of which human beings are merely a part, neither separable from nor the center of that network. The lives of individuals are seen as paths; they are journeys through a set of experiences that can, if fully explored, lead the individual to enlightenment. By providing a set of beliefs and rites of passage, the sacred is channeled through the individual, which opens the individual to other realities. Druidry is a magical system in which divinity is not commanded but petitioned, as deities themselves are seen as part of the web, not external to it. The illumination of the individual is not merely beneficial to that individual but as each is a node in the network of the universe personal growth brings enlightenment to the whole web.

### *Nature*

The theme that runs through every aspect of modern Druidry is that of reverence for nature. Orr states this aptly when she says, “the philosophy of Druidry is built on reverence for the Earth, the ancestors and the gods” (Orr 1999: 101). The natural world is seen as imbued with spirits. The spirits that are most frequently honored in Druidry are those associated with local environments. Druids attempt to gain knowledge of the world through a relationship with these spirits and by petitioning them for assistance and blessings.

Druids regard human beings as inextricably linked to the life of the planet. They believe that the universe is a web which contains all manner of life from humans to animals, plants to minerals. Because of this dependence on the earth, Druids endeavor

not only to create relationships with the spirits of nature but also to protect and preserve nature. This is displayed in their beliefs, but also in their actions. Modern Druids are extremely active in all manner of environmentalist campaigns from recycling to tree planting. The emphasis on environmental concerns is not surprising as, since the 1970s, Western society has seen a proliferation of literature regarding the interdependence of parts of the eco-system, a notion made famous by James Lovelock in his “Gaia Hypothesis” (which is widely read in the modern Druid community). In addition, their reverence for nature can be seen in the use of natural plants for healing. In this movement they are not alone as many individuals since the 1990s have increasingly believed that returning to herbal, folk remedies may give human beings a better quality of life.

The emphasis on nature has been present in Druidry since its inception but the environmentalist concerns that began to be popularized in the 1960s made this an ideal path for many individuals. Additionally, nature religions such as Druidry advocate the position that spirituality does not have to be based in the rigidly dogmatic approaches provided by other religions.

Modern Druidry espouses the view that as humans are born from the womb of mother earth they are not outside nature but part of it. Therefore, spiritual and physical dangers occur when humans alienate themselves from the forces of nature. Druidry seeks to combat this in several ways. First, by observing the natural world humans can become more aware of the ways in which their actions affect the entire web. Second, connecting with nature brings health and inspiration. A deeper sense of spirituality ensues through a connection with the land and all the creatures and plants it contains. Strengthening the

link with nature allows individuals to connect to their inner selves and then to each other. This will then, Druids argue, allow the human race to redress some of the harm it has done to the earth.

### *Animals*

Being a nature-based religion Druidry has reverence for the whole of nature. However, animals are particularly important to the practice of Druidry. Druids believe that the individual, while on the path to enlightenment, may be aided by spirit guides in the form of animals. These guides are variously understood as the spirits of particular animals, the spirits of an archetypal animal, a symbolic reflection of an inner psychological need, or as shamans and ancestors in animal guise. Whichever the individual chooses to believe the importance of these guides lies in the fact that they give individuals particular gifts. Each 'power animal' or 'totem animal' as they are often called has a specific power that the animal travels to the individual to give them. Additionally, animals play a role in 'shape-shifting' or 'skin-turning', a theme common to folklore and mythology.

All animals are sacred to Druids, but several deserve particular note. First, birds of all kinds are revered. The hawk brings the gift of wide perspectives while the raven signifies initiation and often death. The most revered bird, however, is the wren. In fact, its name in Irish is 'drui-en' or 'Druid bird'. This appears to be related to the alleged ability of the wren to travel almost invisibly and with little effort, which was likened to the ability of Druid shamans to journey in the Other World. Also considered highly sacred are the hare, as it represents the goddess Cerridwen and is said to bring

immortality and plenty, and the stag, which is related to Cernunnos and Herne the Hunter.

### *Sacrifice*

Much of the archaeological literature and many classical accounts of the ancient Celts point to the practice of human and animal sacrifice. Depictions of modern Druidry often grasp this macabre ancient practice as a way of dismissing Druidic belief as ‘inhuman’. For example, the 1973 film, *The Wicker Man*<sup>62</sup>, depicts individuals in 1970s Scotland burning a huge wicker figure of a man. Inside are all manner of animals and one human being. In the film, we are told this is done to appease the gods of the earth and sun who have, in their anger, caused the crops to fail. In order to counteract these types of depiction, Druids such as Cairistiona Worthington make statements such as, “sacrifice means to ‘make sacred’. This form of magic is thankfully no longer practised” (Worthington 1999: 53). This view of sacrifice as ‘making sacred’ is certainly not uncommon, though the colloquial usage of the term generally equates it with the notion of giving something up. Furthermore, Worthington’s statement is misleading. Human and animal sacrifices are no longer performed but other types of sacrifice are incredibly widespread. In May of 2005 I attended a Druid camp, the culmination of which was the burning of a 10 – 12 foot wicker man. There were no animals or humans trapped inside but, curiously, the photograph used to advertise the camp was one of the wicker man from the film. The theme of sacrifice has shifted to the purely symbolic field, as western notions about the sanctity and inviolability of all life have influenced Druidry.

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<sup>62</sup> Although modern Druids scoff at the vision of paganism depicted in this film I have found it is considered one of the ‘classics’ to almost every one of my Druid informants.

Practically and ideologically, however, it makes complete sense that human and animal sacrifices no longer occur in mainstream Druidry. In practice, human sacrifice would be considered murder by the authorities and animal sacrifice would at least have animal rights groups up in arms or potentially be a violation of the law. Additionally, many Druids are themselves members of activist groups. Of course these kinds of sacrifice would also cause a public relations nightmare for a group that is already often depicted as unbalanced. More importantly, however, it would create an ideological conflict that would be too hard for Druidry to overcome. According to the Law of the Returning Tide, all actions return to those who commit them and often to a much more serious degree. As one of my informants related, if a Druid were to sacrifice an animal, he would expect that negative energy to return to make him ill or possibly even cause his own death. Sacrifice remains important, therefore, only as a symbolic act within modern Druidry. This is the case as the sacrifice of an object is not believed in itself to effect the desired change; rather, it is the actor's intent in sacrificing that effects the change. The sacrifice acts symbolically because it is a tangible way that the individual or group can make their intentions manifest and, therefore, effect the desired result.

### *The gods*

The cosmology of Druidry includes the veneration of gods and/or goddesses. As with so much in modern Druidry, the choice of which of these figures to revere is left up to the individual. As Nichols states, "it is less a definite and more shape-shifting pantheon than the classical and there are literally hundreds of lesser names, mostly synonymous with one another, or shapes of local river-spirits and mountain-godlings" (Nichols 1990: 95).

Every individual chooses the gods and goddesses they wish to honor and, in fact, some choose not to venerate particular deities but ‘Spirit’ or ‘Great Spirit’ instead. The Druidic pantheon is thus not pre-determined but encompasses many different gods from diverse traditions and is constantly growing. Additionally, the pantheon is not static – the deities that are revered by individuals and groups have changed over time and will presumably continue to do so. Often deities from different traditions overlap, however, and one can find a god in the British tradition, for example, that roughly corresponds to one in the Irish tradition.

The gods and the goddesses in modern Druidry are not seen merely as facets of one ‘true’ god but, rather, as distinct figures. Each is responsible for a particular area (i.e. health, beer-brewing, animals) and each is considered to have their own identity and emotions. The website for a modern Druidic group called *Ár nDraíocht Féin*, for example, states that, “shoving all the Gods together in one divine lump would be analogous to saying that I am the same as you, after all, we are both human”.<sup>63</sup> The relationship between these individual gods and goddesses and human beings must, therefore, take these different aspects of each god or goddess into consideration. Each god or goddess is petitioned (not commanded) according to these individual traits when help or a blessing is desired and is thanked (not propitiated) for the results.

However, archetypes<sup>64</sup> of gods and goddesses are more relevant for most Druids than specific ones. This is because nature contains these archetypes just as we contain them within ourselves. The transcendent gods and goddesses are depicted as being in a

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<sup>63</sup> See <http://www.adf.org/about/druidism-wicca.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Curiously, this is the native term. As noted previously, modern Druidry has been influenced by Jungian psychology, predominantly through the works of the current Chosen Chief, Philip Carr-Gomm. While this



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may be the original source of the term within modern Druidry, the concept is understood within British society and this has undoubtedly also contributed to the use of the term by this group.

*Figure 4-1. The erection and subsequent burning of the wicker man (photographs by author)*

relationship with human beings that changes both sides through an exchange of energy. Through exploring these archetypes human beings can further their personal spiritual development and come closer to enlightenment. Of these archetypes, it is the god or spirit of place that is most relevant. Modern Druids believe that all Celtic tribes held the spirit of place to be the most revered deity, as this deity was resident in the land on which the tribe settled. Many of the gods and goddesses of Celtic times were actually of this type and so the plethora of Celtic deities is easily understood. It is argued that the more popular and widespread of these deities became adopted on a larger scale, which is why their names have survived to present times. The following discussion will seek to delineate some of the most important archetypes and figures within modern Druidry.

#### *The British gods*

The British pantheon is made up of gods and goddesses who were supposedly worshipped in England and in Wales during the Celtic era. According to my informants within OBOD, modern Druids use many sources to create this pantheon, such as the set of Welsh myths depicted in *The Mabinogion* (Orr 1999: 126). This pantheon contains two categories of gods and goddesses: the Children of Don and the Children of Lyr. The two divisions are conceived of as two different ‘lineages’ of gods with the goddess Don perceived as the matriarch of one clan and Lyr the father of the other. The Children of Don are believed to be the gods of the skies while those of Lyr are the gods of the underworld. It is important to note that these two divisions may have been mutually exclusive or may have overlapped in the Celtic period but are now treated as two separate

categories, though neither is more predominant in modern Druidry than the other. In actuality, many Druids revere figures from both lineages equally. Additionally, there may have been other gods and goddesses or other lineages in the Celtic era. This partial knowledge is further problematized by the fact many versions of the myths exist. While this leads to lack of agreement within the modern Druid community in reality it poses no problem for this spirituality, based as it is on the individual's right (and even, I would argue duty) to find his or her own path. That caveat aside, the following discussion treats the British pantheon as modern Druids envisage it.

The goddess Don and her consort Beli Mawr had several children, the most important being the goddess Arianrhod, referred to as the goddess of the stars and, more specifically, of the constellation of Corona Borealis (Orr 1999: 126). Often referred to as the 'Lady of the Silver Wheel', she presides over births and initiations. As the pagan musician Damh the Bard states in the lyrics to his song *Lady of the Silver Wheel*, "she spins the web of life". In a clear case of primordial incest, her lover, Gwyddion, was also her brother. He is notable for being concerned with the arts, specifically his role as a bard. Arianrhod's and Gwyddion's eldest son, Lleu Llaw Gyffes, is also distinguished as a catchall god, often referred to as the 'God of many skills'. The smith god Govannon and the god of agriculture Amaethon are also brothers of Arianrhod, though they seem to play a minor role within modern Druid cosmology.

The Children of Lyr are the gods of the underworld. Amongst others, these gods include Rhiannon, Arawn, and Bran. Rhiannon is a horse goddess and goddess of the land, Arawn is the god of the underworld and Bran is the god of war and a guardian of

the land. Minor gods in this group include Manawyddan (the god of the sea), Pwyll (a lord of the underworld), and Branwen (goddess of love and death).

Of all of the British gods and goddesses by far the most revered is the goddess Cerridwen (Orr 1999: 127). She is referred to as a dark mother goddess and is closely associated with her cauldron. As such she brings to mind Shakespeare's witches and is just the sort of figure one can imagine to be dismissed as a witch by Christianity. It is in her cauldron that the sacred inspirational brew of *awen* is concocted, the significance of which will be discussed later in this chapter. Additionally, Cerridwen's cauldron is seen as the site of rebirth and thus can be seen as symbolically equivalent to a womb. Orr finds the key reason why Cerridwen is so important to modern Druidry when she states that, "the journey that is Druidry is the search for this sacred vessel, the motivation to continue is the thirst to drink from it, to receive the *awen*" (Orr 1999: 104). King Arthur, modern Druids believe, continued this quest for the sacred cauldron of inspiration and rebirth in his quest for the Holy Grail. Cerridwen is thus the archetypal earth goddess. She is productive and creative but yet she is also destructive, as rebirth requires the individual to die (i.e. to be destroyed) before he can be reincarnated. At death she swallows our bodies and they help quite literally to feed the new life she produces.

### *The Irish gods*

The other main source for the modern Druid pantheon comes from Ireland. This pantheon was adapted mainly from the *Táin Bó Cúalnge* ('The Cattle Raid of Cualgne') and *Lebor Gabala Erinn* ('The Book of Invasions') (Orr 1999: 126). In this tradition, the gods are referred to as the 'Tuatha de Danaan' ('The Children of Danu'). Danu

(sometimes referred to as Dana) is a mother goddess who is also responsible for the land and rivers. Her name means “sacred gift” (Orr 1999: 128) and she is often equated with the goddess Brigit, discussed below. Danu’s consort is Dagda. He is the father god and is often equated with wisdom and benevolence. The children of Danu and Dagda include Bile (the god of death), Mannanan Mac Lir (the sea god), Goibhnui (the god of the smith and of beer-making) and Macha (a fertility goddess resident in Ulster). These figures are often seen as gods but are also referred to as a ‘superhuman race’, thus lending some to believe they were mythic heroes. They supposedly conquered the island in Fir Bolg and lived there until they themselves were conquered. At that point they became the Sidhe, or the Faeryfolk (Orr 1999: 128). If the Tuatha de Danaan are actually mythic heroes, it would explain the fact that modern Druids are often fascinated with faeries but do not actually worship them.

Perhaps the most important of the Irish figures for modern Druids is the goddess Brigit. She is also known as Brigid or Bride and is believed to be the precursor of the Christian St. Brigit, supposedly foster mother to Christ. This syncretism of pagan goddess with saint is not uncommon in Christianity. Brigit is revered by modern Druids as the goddess of the smith, of childbirth and of healing. Often referred to as the Lady of Waters and the Lady of the Perpetual Flame, she is associated with the elements of fire and water and their offspring, steam. For this reason she is often invoked through the use of steam lodges or sweat lodges, which will be discussed in a chapter seven. However, her crucial importance to modern Druids lies in the fact that she was known as the goddess of poetry. As such, when bards gather to recite their poems it is often to Brigit that they are dedicated. She is such a central figure in the Bardic tradition that one of the

eight festivals of the year, the festival of Imbolc (to be discussed in the next chapter), is dedicated to her.

Similarly, the Irish god Lugh is a central figure in modern Druidry. Lugh is known as the ‘spear thrower’ or ‘long arm’ and as the shining or bright god. Graphically, he is usually depicted as a youthful warrior. He is a member of possibly the most distinguished lineage of Irish gods; his father was the father of the gods and his son was Cu Chulainn. Cu Chulainn was “one of the great mythical heroes of the Irish texts and a guardian of the land” (Orr 1999: 128). He and his father both appear in the text of the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*. Additionally, there are many Celtic-era inscriptions naming Lugh, and it appears that he was widely revered throughout the British Isles. Like Brigit, Lugh is also a central figure of modern Druidry, with the festival of Lughnasadh bearing his name.

#### *The Gallic and non-Celtic gods*

Ancient Gallic gods play a role in the modern Druid cosmology, albeit a small one. Informants that I queried at OBOD camps and bi-annual meetings discussed figures such as Teutates and Belenus. Belenus is a notable figure in this pantheon as he is equated with the god of fire and light, Balor (in the Irish tradition) and Beli Mawr (in the Welsh). However, the most central of the Gallic gods is, perhaps, Cernunnos. Primarily known as the Lord of the Hunt, Cernunnos is often aligned with the native British figure of Herne the Hunter. Conversely, he is also represented as the wild lord, full of the energy of the forest. Often, he is depicted with the horns of a stag and is considered to be the protector of the forest and its animals. Cernunnos is thus very similar to the British folk figure of



Figure 4-2. Cernunnos, the 'wild lord' is depicted with the horns of a stag on a panel from the Gundestrup Cauldron(2<sup>nd</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> Century BC, Denmark). Image taken from Greenwood's *The Encyclopedia of Magic and Witchcraft* (2004: 194).



Figure 4-3. Three figures at a pagan gathering dressed as the 'Green Man'. Photo courtesy Preest.

the Green Man (sometimes called the Wild Man) that protects all vegetation and is actually made of vegetation himself. Both figures show, “the precious power of the masculine completely at one with the feminine...he illustrates the love that exists in the natural world” (Worthington 1999: 75). Since modern Druidry is a religion based on the love of and reverence for nature, it is understandable that figures such as Cernunnos and the Green Man should hold such a central position in modern Druid belief.

Finally, there are other categories of deities which have small but devout followings. Some modern Druids follow the Saxon or Norse tradition, which emphasizes figures such as Woden and Freya. Native American Indian and Australian Aboriginal influences are also beginning to penetrate the cosmology of the modern Druids. Still others (but by far the minority) worship the gods of the classical world, with an emphasis on deities such as Pan, Mercury and Minerva. This seems odd in that the Celtic region was conquered by the Roman Empire<sup>65</sup> and many attempts were made to suppress the religion of the area. However, these modern Druids rightly point out that there was a period of syncretism in which Celtic gods and goddesses were given an additional name, that of their counterpart in classical religion. Furthermore, some of the native deities may well have been cognates of the Roman deities, although my informants seemed unaware of this.

Use of inscriptional evidence and myths in the formation of modern Druidry shows once again how the past is being co-opted for present use. However, it is a particular view of the past, as archaeologists are still unsure who made the inscriptions

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<sup>65</sup> It can be argued that there were in effect two conquests – that of Rome and that of Christianity. The two met, however, in the reign of Emperor Constantine.

and for what purpose. The myths used are also problematic in that many of them were only codified much later than the Celtic era. Additionally, many of them were codified by individuals who may have had their own agendas in their depictions of the past. Admittedly, modern Druids do recognize that they create their pantheons from problematic sources, but this does not diminish their significance. Instead, they see their gods as archetypes whose complex associations can be beneficially used in modern spiritual practice.

### Awen

One of the most crucial concepts to understand when studying modern Druidry is the concept of *awen* and its Irish equivalent *imbas*. *Awen* (or *imbas*) is variously described as shining knowledge, “divine inspiration” (Orr 1999: 61), and “flowing spirit” (D. Smith 1997: 4). However, *awen* is actually a bundle of concepts. For example, it is also “the name by which the universe calls God inwardly”.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps the best place to start in order to understand these diverse concepts is to briefly describe the myth that explains the origin of *awen*.

The first literary reference to the concept of *awen* is in Nennius’ *Historia Brittonum* of 796 AD, but it is perhaps best known through the mythical tales involving the goddess Cerridwen. This myth will be discussed at length in the next chapter, so I will only give the briefest sketch here. Simply, the story says that the goddess Cerridwen once gave birth to an extremely ugly son. She knew that he would always be unfairly judged for his lack of beauty so she decided to neutralize this flaw by imbuing him with superior intelligence. Cerridwen made a brew to provide him with a great store of

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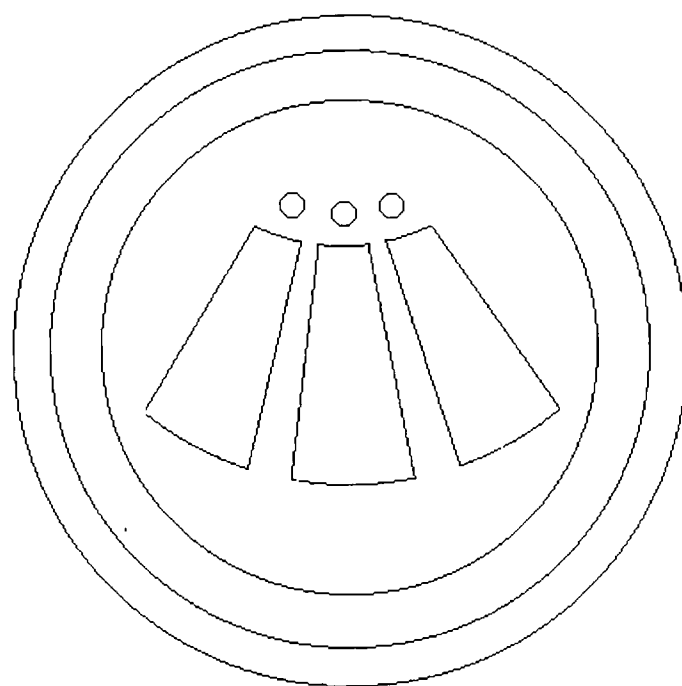
<sup>66</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/druid-path/awen.html>.

knowledge. As events transpired it was her servant, Gwion Bach, who received the wisdom and prophetic powers contained with the brew in the form of three scalding drops of liquid. Orr states that, “in those three drops are held the entire worth of the brew and Gwion is transformed with all that was meant for the goddess’ son. After the inevitable tussle with the furious goddess he emerges as the legendary Bard Taliesin” (Orr 1999: 104). Thus we see that *awen* is considered to be inspiration from Cerridwen’s cauldron. More importantly, however, this myth tells us that the reception of *awen* is what transforms the boy into a bard. As stated earlier, the Bardic Grade is the first of the three grades of Druidry so it can be understood that, without *awen* from Cerridwen’s cauldron, Druids could not gain insight into the world.

The *awen* is symbolized by three sets of three: three dots, three bars, and three circles. The number three is sacred to the modern Druids, and as the *awen* contains three sets of three, it can be seen as one of the most important symbols within Druidry. The sanctity of the number three is by no means confined to modern Druidry, however. Christianity has its own set of three in the concept of the Holy Trinity, a concept which has influenced many of the world’s greatest literary works, such as Dante’s *La Divina Commedia*, which is separated into three cantos and is written in *terza rima* (a three part rhyme scheme). Furthermore, works such as *La Divina Commedia* note the importance of three sets of three. Modern Druids are extremely uncomfortable with the conclusion that the sanctity of the number three comes from Christianity, however. Instead, they argue the notion that this sanctity is primordial and that the ancient Celts understood this long before the coming of Christianity to the British Isles. This argument is supported by

Georges Dumézil's contention that the number three was a key Indo-European concept (cf. Dumézil 1988).

Graphically, the *awen* is represented as in Figure 4-4, below. The three dots at the top of the figure represent various different concepts. First, they signify the triple aspect of deity depicted most obviously in the pairing of goddesses into groups containing a maiden, a mother, and a crone. Secondly, they are seen as the three drops of inspiration that fell from Cerridwen's cauldron. Primarily, however, they are



*Figure 4-4. The awen.*

acknowledged as the 'triad of the sunrises' and hence symbolize the position of the rising sun on the four astronomical festivals, as is related in the OBOD Bardic course materials. During the Winter Solstice, the sun rises in the east-southeast, denoted by the first dot. On the Vernal and Autumnal Equinoxes the sun rises due east so the middle dot represents both equinoxes. The third dot stands for the Summer Solstice, at which time the sun rises in the east-northeast. The second set of threes within the figure is the three lines or bars descending from each point. These lines symbolize the power of growth and

inspiration that flows from the sun. Therefore, the figure is often referred to as the ‘three bars of light’. This symbol is depicted at the center of three circles, the Welsh circles of creation, discussed below. For the moment it is only necessary to note that the *awen* symbol is in the center of this depiction, showing that *awen* radiates from Annwn, the underworld.

*Awen* is, as previously stated, inspiration received from the otherworldly realm of Annwn and can only be received once it has been searched for. Thus, it is an energy that Druids must learn to work with in order to gain a deeper understanding of the universe. Worthington explains this aspect stating that *awen*, “flows from the sacred cauldron of the Goddess...when we seek a deeper connection with the great spirit. Once we let go of our sense of a solid material world and let the world of Spirit flow through our lives the gift of Awen will inspire all we do in the world” (Worthington 1999: 76). One can only gain and use *awen* if one understands the three foundations of *awen*: “to understand truth, to love truth, to maintain truth”.<sup>67</sup> *Awen*, therefore, can be seen not only in the sacredness of the name of god but in the sacred nature of the inspiration Druids receive from the gods.

Druids can draw *awen* into themselves through the *awen* chant. As David Smith describes, it is the, “Druidic ‘sacred mantra’” (1997: 4). These syllables represent the letters o, i and u. The o represents the earth, the body and love, while the i represents the sea, the mind and wisdom. The u represents the air, the spirit and truth. Each one of these is essential to receive and maintain the flow of inspiration. Not only does this chant help to bring inspiration into the individual, but its proper performance is also a sign that the chanter has received inspiration. Thus, according to the OBOD website “it is said:

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<sup>67</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/druid-path/awen.html>.

‘No one without Awen from God can pronounce these three letters correctly’<sup>68</sup> It would be more precise, however, to state that the individual is receiving *awen* from the goddess, as Cerridwen is seen as providing the blessings and inspiration the individual receives.

*Awen* as a quality is not consistently present within an individual. It must be invoked into the individual through the use of the chant. The mantra is intoned by chanting “ah-oo-en”. As the individual chants he draws energy from the outer world into himself. As he chants the ‘ah’ he pulls energy down from the sky through his head and into his body. With the ‘oo’ he pulls up energy from the earth. As the ‘en’ is chanted he mixes these energies within his body and sends them out (usually conceived of as flowing from his stomach) into the world, with the desire that this mixture of energy will provoke beneficial results for mankind and the planet. This process is not viewed as any type of sacrifice or offering, however, as it is the energy itself which benefits the planet. In other words, there is no intermediary (such as a spirit or deity) which is conceived of as accepting the *awen* in exchange for continued good will. The energy itself is transformative.

The *awen* chant is normally intoned three times in a row in synchronization with the other individuals within the ritual. However, during ceremonies requiring a large amount of energy the chant is often repeated many times over at the individuals’ own pace. This variation is referred to as ‘cascading *awens*’. The effect of the blended voices, starting and stopping at different intervals, merges the individual voices into one, communal voice. The cascading chant is often done only at the most important of rituals or when special circumstances necessitate added energy. One such ritual occurred during

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<sup>68</sup> See <http://druidry.org/obod/druid-path/awen.html>.

my fieldwork at one of the bi-annual assemblies that will be discussed in chapter seven. During this ritual, the usual circular form of the group was discarded and, instead, the group formed a long line, clasping the hands of those to the left and right. This line began to move in an ever decreasing circle, effectively spiraling in to a coil until each participant was pushed into the circle, performing cascading *awens* all the while. At the end of the process, all of the participants unclasped their hands and were essentially in an extremely large ‘group hug’, during which time more cascading *awens* were performed.

Perhaps the most poignant example of the chant is the practice that occurs when a member or members of the group are leaving for an extended period of time (or indefinitely). The individual or individuals are directed to stand in the midst of the circle while the group holds hands in a circle and performs the chant, directing their communal energy towards those in the center. While the individual in the center sometimes joins in, more often he or she does not. During fieldwork I experienced both roles (as giver and receiver of the cascading *awens*) and the effect was extremely powerful – the resulting feeling was slightly hypnotic and on the occasion when I received the *awen* it left me quite light-headed. My informants all stated that this was a common effect. The indivisible unity of the voices produces communal energy which is believed to protect and bless the receiver on their journey, thus helping the individual to recognize that the community (while sometimes physically absent) is always spiritually with them. Whether performed in a set of three or in a cascading pattern, the effect of the chant is to invoke the sacred into the individual and work through them to effect positive planetary change.

### *The Law of the Returning Tide*

The 'Law of the Returning Tide' is modern Druidry's answer to the eastern concept of karma, and in fact many in modern Druidry prefer the eastern term. In fact it seems that this is exactly where the law came from, most likely (as mentioned earlier) through the fascination Ross Nichols held for eastern spiritualities such as Jainism. It is not, however, believed to be a survival from the ancient Dravidians (as might be assumed from Nichols' erroneous postulate noted earlier that the Celts descended from the Dravidians) but has been borrowed consciously from the eastern spiritualities.<sup>69</sup> It is a crucial concept to understand if one wants to grasp the motivations of modern Druidry. Basically, the concept states that, "whatever you cast into the sea of life returns to you – often changed, often in an unrecognizable form, but nevertheless what comes to you in your life is usually the direct result of what you have given out into the world" (Carr-Gomm 2002b: 24). This stems from the fact that Druids believe everything in the universe is connected. An action at one temporal or spatial point may affect something at a later point. This is often likened to dropping a pebble into a pool; the pebble creates ripples from the center that can disturb something at a remove from the center. Instead of exhorting its members to act in a morally correct way 'for its own sake,' therefore, Druidry tells its adherents that there are consequences if they do not act so.

### *Circles and cycles*

The symbol of the circle and the cycle pervade modern Druid belief and imagery. This is due primarily to the fact that Druidry is a nature-based religion and many cycles are seen

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<sup>69</sup> Whether or not Ross Nichols himself believed the concept to be a survival is unclear. Modern Druids believe that the ancient Celts had a similar concept but my informants have never stated that the Celtic concept was a relic of the Dravidians.

in the physical world. The orbit of the earth around the sun creates the cycle of the seasons we experience, and this cycle is used as an analogy for the cycle of an individual's life. For Druids, the time of spring is the time of birth and infancy as reflected in the burgeoning of new growth in the plant realm. Summer represents adolescence, autumn maturity. During the winter we progress through old age and eventually death. This death leads the cycle to begin again through reincarnation just as every year crops are reborn. It should come as no surprise then that the cauldron is closely related to the symbol of the circle, as it out of the cauldron that spirits are reborn. Circles convey protection, just as the child within the mother's womb is protected during its period of gestation until it is strong enough to come into the world. For this reason (as will be discussed at length in chapter eight) during the beginning of any ritual, a circle is cast around the participants.

### *The elements*

Much of the work of the Bardic grade revolves around an exploration of the elements. Opinion over the number of elements varies within the Druid community. For some, the only elements they recognize are the realms of land, sea and sky (and their concomitant elements of earth, water and air). Most Druids acknowledge the presence of a fourth element – fire. Although the fifth element, *nyv*, is often left out of this classification, it is conceived of as pervasive throughout each element. These elements permeate the universe and therefore reside within humans as well.

According to one informant I encountered at an OBOD-sponsored camp, the term 'Druid' means 'wild knowledge.' While this was the only instance of this statement I

discovered, it does point to the supposition that modern Druidry is concerned with reconciling the cultural and natural sides of man, which can be understood by studying such areas such as the elemental forces of the universe. While people will normally find themselves more drawn to one or two elements, it is the integration of all the elements within one individual that will create positive spiritual change and lead to enlightenment (which, incidentally, is another karmic idea and betrays the eastern influence of Ross Nichols). This reconciliation can be achieved in a number of ways. First, the individual is encouraged to meditate on the meaning of each of the elements and how they influence his or her personal path. In order to do this, the individual must use all of their senses to learn to feel the elements, not merely to consider them intellectually. Performing rituals and celebrating the eight seasonal festivals adds to the deepening understanding of each element. Furthermore, by attuning to the elements the individual is humbled, because if an individual is united with nature, the individual ego is precluded. The magical power of this journey is not metaphorical, but actual. As individuals receive energy from the elements, they also send energy out into the world, acting as lightning rods for the elemental forces present with the universe. Druids believe that, as the individual becomes more in tune with these elements, change is actualized within the individual's life and, thus, the lives of others and the universe.

### *Earth*

According to every one of my informants within Anderida and OBOD, for modern Druids the element of earth is both nourishing and sustaining. This element provides a sense of foundation and strength while emphasizing patience. Just like the earth itself

earth energy is resilient and enduring, therefore it is considered one of the fixed elements. This fixity means it is often equated with the home and a sense of belonging. Although the other elements of water, air and fire inhabit the world of sound, the element of earth speaks to individuals through silence and stillness and is particularly associated with the sense of touch. Stillness gives earth the power of germination and the procreative ability of the earth links its energy to sensuality and sexuality. Because of the ability of earth to bring forth new life this element is associated with the feminine principle. The objects most often associated with the element of earth are the natural and man-made features upon her surface. These include mountains, dolmens and tumuli, and caves. Additionally items removed from the earth such as rocks, crystals, and metal carry connection to the element earth. The direction of the north and the figure of the bear are connected with earth as well.

There are many ways to achieve contact with the energy of the earth. As one of the aspects of earth is her nourishing ability, growing and eating vegetables is considered a good way to commune with these energies, especially if they are organically grown. The produce does not, however, merely nourish the body but the spirit as well. Moreover, walking barefoot on the earth can allow individuals to physically feel the earth beneath them and, therefore, draw positive energy from the earth into their bodies. Because this energy can be imbibed, visiting sacred sites or walking ley-lines can also help the person receive earth energy. The flow of energy is not uni-directional, however. As positive energy flows into the individual, negative or harmful energy flows out of the individual into the earth. When asked whether this harmed the earth, several of my informants stated that because the earth is connected with birth and re-birth it has the

ability to receive negative energy and convert it into positive energy just as the carbon dioxide plants take in to create oxygen does not harm them.

### *Water*

Water in the modern Druid cosmology is the element associated with feeling and emotion, intuition and myth. Because of this emphasis on emotions, it is also related to the qualities of deep connection, passion and love. However, it also contains the qualities of calmness and gradual change. Similar to Hindu belief, in modern Druidry the element of water has the power of rebirth and regeneration. Like earth it is a feminine, fixed principle. As the Otherworld is often accessed through bodies of water in Druid cosmology, this element is connected to the search for the feminine side of the soul. Sensorially it is linked to the sense of taste and the tongue. The orality of water and the search for emotion mean that this element is often equated with poetry. For obvious reasons the items most associated with water are pools, waterfalls, lakes and wells. Because water flows from deep within the womb of the earth it is conceived of as stemming directly from the source of life. By creating a personal connection with that element, then, individuals can develop a relationship with the source of creation and symbolically with the goddess. During ritual water is linked with the direction of the west and the Salmon of Wisdom.<sup>70</sup>

Water is often used during rituals for purification and consecration. This can take place through ceremonial washing, sprinkling, or actually physically ingesting water. At the beginning of most ceremonies it is used to consecrate the sacred circle and reinforce and protect its sanctity for the duration of the proceedings. Moreover, the ritual for

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<sup>70</sup> This myth will be elaborated in the next chapter.

blessing children at their birth is aligned to the element of water. The ‘Blessing of Nine Waves’ is enacted to bring the child health, inspiration and wealth, and it is the act of laving the child nine times with water that provides these blessings. It also plays a role in divination, as a still pool or cup of water is seen as ideal for the practice of scrying.<sup>71</sup>

In order to commune with the element of water, Druids are urged to begin simply by drinking more water. Laving or anointing the *chakras*<sup>72</sup> with water is also considered a good way to commune with this element. Additionally, the pursuit of poetry can help access the hidden depths of water, as poetry is based on the expression of deeply held emotions. Poetry helps to reach our inner soul, expressing and thus feeding that soul. Similarly, dream analysis can provide insight, as the symbolic nature of dreams can often reveal the innermost emotions of the dreamer.

### *Air*

Air is one of the two masculine, mobile elements. It represents the intellect and is therefore situated in the realm of the mind. Air qualities include liberation, detachment and the ability to soar. These qualities allow individuals to gain wider perspectives and see the overview of any given situation. This element encourages people to integrate their experiences in such a way as to reframe their approaches to life. This integration leads to emancipation from negative, harmful, or un-useful perspectives. Although liberating, the element of air teaches individuals that freedom is not certain, but has to be achieved through the delineation of boundaries and structures. These then define goals

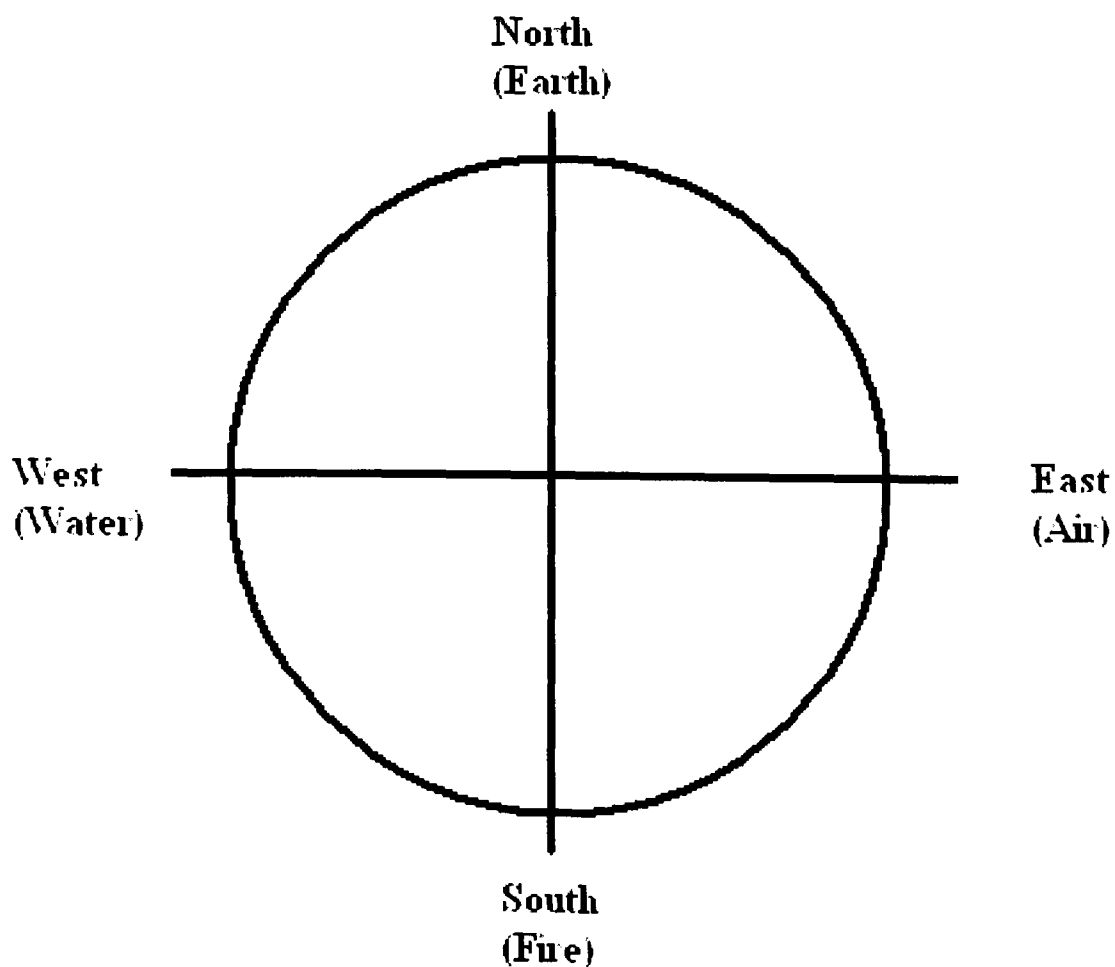
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<sup>71</sup> Scrying, “a quick look; a glance,” or “something “scried” in crystal gazing” (Webster’s International Dictionary. 1957: 2251).

<sup>72</sup> From “*Tantrik Hinduism & Theosophy*. One of six circles or centers of energy in the human body” (Webster’s International Dictionary. 1957: 445).

and help individuals to reorient themselves in new directions. The place of the element of air is in the east and it is usually associated with the ‘Hawk of Dawn.’

In Ireland the element of air has often been seen as the harbinger of change and, according to modern Druid belief, it can therefore become an ally in one’s personal spiritual transformation. According to Matthews, the Irish split the different types of wind into 12 categories that they called the ‘airts’ (cf. C. Matthews 2003). Further, she states that these were related to the cardinal directions and equated with particular colors. The relevance of the number twelve seems obscure and was not borne out in statements from my informants. Rather, they maintained that there are four cardinal directions, each equated with an element. None of my informants asserted that the directions were equated with colors, and thus the veracity of Matthews’ statement could not be verified.



*Figure 4-5. The four cardinal directions and their associated elements.*

Air is particularly related to the senses of smell and sound, as this is their method of transmission. Musical instruments including the drum (or *bodhran*), the flute (or *feadan*) and the Druid instrument *par excellence*, the harp (or *clarsach*) are all consequently associated with air. In addition to musical instruments air is associated with feathers (and birds themselves), incense, mountains, and clouds. As trees supply the world with oxygen, their leaves are also deemed as belonging to the element of air.

Mistletoe's relationship to the element of air deserves special attention. It is associated with this element, as its rootless nature and airborne method of conception makes it indicative of the male essence. Conversely, it also partakes of the feminine essence. The plant was supposedly harvested in Celtic times during specific phases of the moon and was cut from its host with a sickle, representing the moon when crescent-shaped. It is interesting to note that the host was usually the oak tree, a tree that represents for Druids the qualities of strength and eternity.

In order to attune to the element of air, Druids start by standing outside and feeling the wind blow. They then begin to concentrate on their breathing. *Neldoracht*, or the art of divination from cloud shapes can also help the individual attune to air. Music plays its role as well. The power of sound to entrance is often used by Druids to lift the veil between the worlds and thus reveal nature in its true form. Therefore, story-telling is often seen as a good way to access the element of air.

### *Fire*

The element of fire is considered by most Druids to be the most powerful. Fire is considered different from the other elements as human beings can produce it, while the

other elements cannot be manufactured. Related to the sense of sight, it is masculine and mobile in nature. Fire is associated with the sun and is therefore understandably equated with the physical qualities of heat, brightness, and radiation. It follows easily that therefore passion and love are qualities of fire. The brightness of the sun has also equated it with energy and vitality. However, these qualities are tempered by the qualities of purpose, responsibility, consciousness and awareness. It is associated with the quality of purifying and often that of transformation and change. This can be perilous though since as it transforms, so it also destroys.

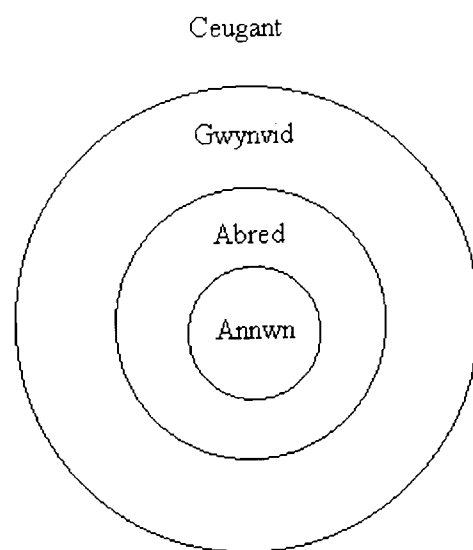
Objects associated with fire include candles, incense, the fire festivals, and the Beltane fire (which will be discussed in chapter six), according to the OBOD Bardic course. Additionally, fire is signified by mead, a drink produced from fermented honey and, when mixed with champagne, referred to as ‘Druid’s delight.’ Mead was a popular drink among the ancient Celts. According to several of my informants, the bee was considered sacred to the Druids and, in fact, the isle of Britain was once referred to as the ‘Isle of Honey.’ The bee’s connection with the figure of the Druid has lately been attested to through the phrase: “ask the bees what the Druids know.” Due to its golden color and the warmth produced by imbibing it, mead is traditionally associated with the sun, and therefore the element of fire. In order to access the realm of fire, Druids use sweat lodges (discussed in chapter seven) when they can and use the *soitheach-teine* (Gaelic ‘fire-bowl’) during their ceremonies in order to explore the qualities of this element.

### *Nwyfre and the fifth element*

In addition to the elements of earth, water, air and fire Druids believe there is a fifth element. Referred to as *nyv*, it is related to the concept of *nwyfre* (sometimes *nwyvre*), a Welsh term that roughly means ‘life force’. Its connotations include energy and vitality. It is the animating force of Spirit that flows through all aspects of nature at all times. The individual can encourage the flow of this essential element by taking care of the body through exercise and healthy eating but also by taking care of the spirit through meditation, ritual, and making pilgrimages to sacred sites. The fifth element is, therefore, the divine within and without the individual.

### *The circles of creation*

Druidic cosmology states that there are four different circles of creation, as depicted in Figure 4-4. This concept of the circles of existence is a modern invention – its first appearance occurs in Iolo Morganwg’s *Barddas*. However, he claimed that the notion originally came from Llewelyn Siôn, a sixteenth century Welsh poet. This assertion is believed to be false; as we have already seen, Morganwg’s works are widely accepted to be forgeries. Clearly, this is another example of an eighteenth century writer attempting to claim legitimacy for modern practices through reference to an earlier work. However, the circles of existence still form a basis for the beliefs of modern Druids and therefore deserve to be explored.



*Figure 4-6. The circles of existence.*

The central circle of existence is the realm of Annwn, the place from which all life is born, which is sometimes seen to represent the underworld or the sea. It is the “cosmic soup” (Worthington 1999: 72) from whence we are born and from which we will be re-born. Often depicted as a cauldron, it is the realm of creation. When we are born (or in fact re-born), Druids believe, we move into the realm of the mortal world, known as Abred. According to Worthington, this realm is, “life as we know it” (ibid) and is comprised of all life. Within this realm three states are recognized: the mineral, the vegetational (including all living creatures from algae to humans), and the perfected life. These two realms are reached by all beings, usually many times through cycles of reincarnation. However, if an individual searches for learning, understanding and experience he may reach the next level of existence, Gwynvid. This means, “white life” or “circle of light” (Worthington 1999: 72). It is the realm reached when the individual’s cycles of reincarnation have been completed. Once Gwynvid has been obtained, the soul cannot slip back to Annwn or Abred. It is important to note that unlike the Hindu

concept of reincarnation, the modern Druids do not see this process as painful, as will be discussed in the next section.

Beyond Gwynvid is the realm of Ceugant. Ceugant is sometimes referred to as the fourth dimension as it is outside of the cycle of the other three realms. In fact, these three realms exist only because they were created by the realm of Ceugant, the dwelling place of the divine, often referred to as “the great spirit, the one source of all being” (Worthington 1999: 72). It is limitless and infiltrates all the lower realms. Ceugant is the causative realm, one which humans cannot enter.

### *Reincarnation*

Modern Druids believe it can take many years and, in fact, many lifetimes to pass from Abred to Gwynvid. In fact, belief in reincarnation is one of the central tenets of modern Druidry. Worthington defines this as this belief of, “the continuing life of the soul as it travels through the worlds, in and out of incarnation” (Worthington 1999: 69). In Druidic belief everything is part of the same being or energy and, therefore, once death occurs the energy that is inherently present does not disappear but passes on to a different state. In this state there is conscious memory of the individual’s immediate past life. However, once reincarnated, the soul has no direct knowledge of their past lives. Once the soul has passed to Gwynvid it ends its cycles of reincarnation and thus cannot slip back to Abred or Annwn.

The presence of this belief in the modern tradition probably stems from Nichols’ interest in the eastern religion of Hinduism and the co-option of eastern beliefs by modern Druids themselves. Unlike Hinduism, however, the body into which one is

reincarnated is not seen as a reflection of the individual's morality or perfection. For example, a human who is reincarnated as an animal is not seen as receiving a punishment. In fact, the human ability to take on the form of an animal through shape-shifting is highly regarded, as this gives that individual an understanding of another realm of life. Furthermore, the process itself (as noted above) is not perceived as a painful one.

As reincarnation can only occur as a consequence of the death of the physical body, Druidry teaches that individuals must learn to let go and accept death. It is only through death, they argue, that humans can be reborn and through that rebirth gain more knowledge and understanding of the universe. Interestingly, this cycle provides modern Druids with a link to the ancestors. As each individual is reincarnated many times they may at one point have been their own physical ancestor. This belief allows modern Druids to argue that although they may not be ethnically or racially related to the Celtic peoples, their previous incarnations may have been. This provides a linear link through a repetitive cycle of time.

#### *The Blessed Isles, the Summerlands or Tir N'an Og*

The individuals I interviewed within OBOD and Anderida stated that between each reincarnation, the soul of the deceased travels to a place referred to as the Blessed Isles or the Summerlands. In the case of the Blessed Isles, this realm is supposedly located to the west of the British Isles and across a great sea (most likely referring to the Atlantic Ocean). In some cases, my informants related that the Blessed Isles are connected with the mythical island of Atlantis but this is by no means the prevailing view. Most informants simply stated that they are to the west in a location unknown to mankind.

Conversely, the Summerlands are traditionally related to the Wiccan movement, although some Druids do prefer the term. This realm is not conceived of as lying in a specific geographical location.

After the soul has passed from Abred (the mortal realm) over the sea to the Blessed Isles, it may rest. The time each soul spends in the Blessed Isles varies, but it is spent contemplating the lessons learned in the soul's last incarnation and preparing for the lessons to be learned in the next. The afterlife is conceived of as neither an Elysian experience nor a hellish one. Worthington describes it thus: "in this place we will know no hardship, there is no judgmental God condemning us to a life in purgatory, each soul is a spark of the great spirit and therefore knows the lessons it must learn when it returns to earth. The Blessed Isles is a place of transition" (Worthington 1999: 73). Once this period is over, the soul returns to earth to live, die and be reborn until the time when it can obtain the white life of Gwynvid.

One of the concepts aligned to that of the Blessed Isles of the Summerlands is the land of Tir N'an Og. Sometimes called Tir-na-Moe (Land of Perpetual Beauty) or Moy-Mell (Land of Honey) it is conceived of by Druids as an Otherworldly place of youth and regeneration set within the hollow hills of the Sidhe. The Sidhe are more commonly known as faeries. Originally they were the Tuatha de Danaan, the gods who once ruled Ireland but who were defeated and retreated to live in the hollow hills. This place is not, however, just a physical realm. It is a realm simultaneous to this universe and within each individual.

### *The Triune*

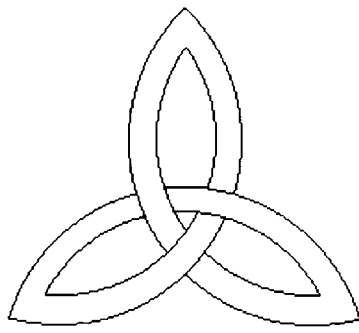
One of the most repeated themes in modern Druidry is that of the triune. Roughly, this is the belief that all things come in multiples of three. Orr states that, “the stability of a trinity is innately satisfying and threes can be found everywhere” (1999: 101). The most important triadic relationship in Druidry is arguably the relationship between the land, the sky and the sea. For modern Druids, the land represents the present, the physical world, fertility, consciousness and science. The sky is the home of the gods, the super-conscious and logic. The sea represents the temporal period right before birth, hence the realm of reincarnation. This is expressed in the statement that, “All life comes from the Sea. It is where we go at death”.<sup>73</sup> Examples of other trinities in modern Druidry include the triple aspect of the goddess depicted in the maiden/mother/crone triad, the mother/father/child, and the theory of thesis/antithesis/synthesis.<sup>74</sup> Triunes are often further sanctified by grouping in sets of three thus making a triad of triads or the number nine. So sacred is the number nine that modern Druids believe the ancient Celtic practice of exile, or casting an individual ‘beyond the ninth wave’, is the worst possible punishment.

Graphically, triunes are represented by the figure of the triple knot or *triskal*:

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<sup>73</sup> See <http://www.adf.org/about/druidism-wicca.html>.

<sup>74</sup> This theory is better known as the Hegelian dialectic and is used in anthropology most notably by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Originally it was Immanuel Kant’s distinction stating that the thesis (or original proposition) is contradicted by the antithesis; the synthesis combines elements common to both into a new theory which retains pieces of both thesis and antithesis. It is a theory not widely understood in modern Druidry and appears in modern Druidic literature only in the works of Philip Carr-Gomm. We shall return to this theory in chapter nine.

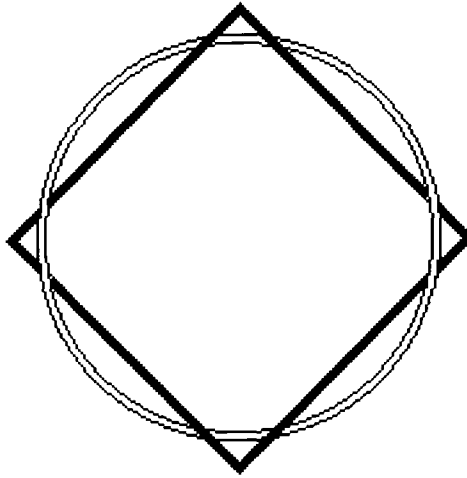


*Figure 4-7. The triune or triskal.*

This symbol is often used to depict the trinity of types of magic practiced in Druidry: ‘making magic’, ‘questing magic’ and ‘changing magic.’ This emphasis on triads extends beyond the purely ideological level, however, and encompasses certain ritual practices as well. As will be shown in the next chapter, often prayers, blessings and chants will be repeated three times or nine times (three groups of three). Additionally, many of these triunes are seen as linked. Thus the land/sky/sea triad is equivalent to the conscious/super-conscious/pre-conscious triune (which comes from Philip Carr-Gomm’s use of the modern psychological works of Carl Jung) in that the land is equated with the conscious, the sky with the super-conscious and the sea with the pre-conscious. Modern Druidry can thus be seen to involve an emphasis on the sanctity of the number three.

#### *Bardic symbol*

The teachings of each grade within Druidry are depicted in the symbol of the grade. The Bardic grade’s symbol is a circle entwined with a square and appears below in Figure 4-6:



*Figure 4-8. The Bardic symbol.*

In this depiction, the square represents the four elements of earth, water, air and fire that is the foundation of the Bardic teachings. Each side symbolizes one of these elements. Furthermore, the square represents the tangible world of which we are a part as well as the physical limits of time and space. The circle in this figure represents the opposite. Instead of firm boundaries it represents the limitlessness of infinity. It signifies the universe external to the earth: the solar system and its bodies. By depicting these two as entwined, the symbol indicates that these worlds are mutually dependent.

### *Conclusion*

From this examination of modern Druidic cosmology, it can be seen that Druidry takes its ideas from many different sources. It comes as no surprise that, although Druidry allows freedom of belief, there are commonalities between the beliefs of individuals. For anthropologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, practice is always subject to rules (cf. Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1976). However, anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz have questioned Bourdieu's assumption, stating instead that practice is inherently opposed to rules as rules

are often broken (cf. Geertz 1973). Those rules may be few and open-ended as in the modern Druid case, but they do exist and they are meaningful for the participants.

Many of the beliefs and symbols within modern Druidry are taken from evidence of the ancient Celtic cosmology. However, there is a growing trend within Druidry to include myths and themes from other traditions, albeit tribal ones. Regardless which tradition is being sourced, these myths, symbols, and beliefs come from outside the realm of the culture or identity of modern Druids. They are garnered from external cultural forms and must, therefore, be taught to its adherents. This is not a new concept, as every culture must have a way of defining and explaining its own particular world-view to its members. What *is* different about Druidry is that this cosmology is learned on top of the world-view that adherents have of their own culture. As this training is cerebral for most (including researching gods and the like), it is vital for modern Druids to stress personal experience and emotion in order to create a sense of balance within the system.

Society regulates belief, which therefore regulates reality. However, in Druidry there is little cohesion in the cosmology, so it follows not that there is no cohesive reality, but many equally valid, cohesive realities. The difference is that the drive for cosmological orthodoxy is negated, and the cosmology reifies not the society itself but the individual as a component of society. It is a cosmology that privileges truth and nature in a way that is considered highly relevant to contemporary world problems. Moreover, it is a spirituality that is growing in response to the modern Druid's perception of the failure of modernity to provide cogent systems of significance, while at the same time drawing on the past and what is known of the ancient traditions of the British Isles.

## Chapter Five

### **Myth**

The study of modern Druidry can illustrate the vital role that myth-making and myth-telling can play in the negotiation of the modern Druid world-view. The exploration of myth in the modern Druid case begins below with a brief exegesis of the various theories of myth developed by anthropologists. This chapter will then move on to discuss the modern Druid understanding of the roles of myth within their community, through which we can gain a deeper understanding of the myth-making process within this modern movement. Following this discussion I will focus on the mythological sources used by modern Druids. The ‘Tale of Taliesin’, one of the most popular of the modern Druid myths, will then be narrated. The remainder of this chapter will offer a content-based analysis and a brief structural analysis of the myth, which will provide an understanding of the world-view of this group. However, I must note to the reader that the tale as it exists in these pages is an amalgamation of the most commonly heard elements of the myth. It is almost completely taken from the OBOD Bardic correspondence course; however, I have also called the reader’s attention to variations of certain elements I have discovered during fieldwork.

#### *Anthropological theories*

Understanding myth and its role in society has long concerned anthropologists, who have approached the subject from many different perspectives. These stances are often based on their own individual assumptions about society. Thus, this section will focus on the

theories of myth espoused by the major schools of anthropology before concluding with an examination of how these theories relate to the modern Druid evidence.

Perhaps one of the most influential early writers on the subject was Robertson-Smith, who argued for the primacy of ritual over religion. While not immediately obvious, this stance infuses the current debate through the influence his work placed on Frazer, a folklorist and evolutionist who is best known for his work, *The Golden Bough*.<sup>75</sup> As an evolutionist, Frazer believed that societies move through increasingly complex stages. As this occurs, ancient practices become faint in the social consciousness, at which point they become myths. Here they can be seen to be merely stories, reflective of ancient social practices.

Frazer's theory that myth reflected an ancient social reality was furthered as well by Müller, who argued that myth occurred through a degradation of language. Originally, myth, he explains, was meant to serve as a descriptive metaphor for nature, especially those events that occurred in the heavens. Tylor's theory (1958) dovetails nicely with Müller's in that he saw myths as narratives, created by man to explain the existence of and relationship between natural features. These features, Tylor argued, were 'animated' by man and interwoven in a series of tales, which we refer to as 'myths'.

Tylor's theory that myths were a series of 'tales' illuminates one of the primary issues for the anthropological study of myth: namely, what exactly is a myth? Is it simply a fictional story or does the group regard it as history? As Lévi-Strauss once observed, "the problem is: where does mythology end and where does history start? In the case, entirely new to us, of a history without archives, there being of course no written documents, there is only a verbal tradition, which is claimed to be history at the

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<sup>75</sup> This work enjoys great popularity with modern Druids.

same time” (1995: 38). Durkheim resolves this distinction by arguing that, “the mythology of a group is the collection of beliefs common to the group. How the society imagines man and the world is expressed in the traditions whose memory the mythology perpetuates; it is a morality and a cosmology at the same time as it is a history” (1995: 379). In the modern Druid case the myths are not held to be history in the sense that the myths are not thought to capture historical events. However, the myths’ relationship to history is even more complex, for in this case they are using myths from a historically verifiable group in a modern setting. As we shall see, modern Druids imbue their own meanings into these myths and utilize them as cultural capital for the negotiation of their own world-view.

While early theorists focused on the narrative content of myths and their origins, later theorists began to view myths as the result of the evolution of society. The noted fieldworker Franz Boas argued that by studying myths we could reconstruct earlier societies, as myths were a reflection of that society’s earlier structural organization. For example, according to Boas a myth that took marriage as its theme could be studied to determine how relations of kinship were organized within the society.

Evolutionism and diffusionism in anthropology gradually gave way to a new theory, functionalism, which viewed myth in a new light. Instead of arguing that myth was merely narrative or a throw-back to an ancient ‘purer’ time, the functionalists (in particular Bronislaw Malinowski and Edmund Leach) argued that myth and society are entwined: myth provides legitimization for social change and justifies moral order (cf. Leach 1964: Chapter IX). The role of myths is therefore to sustain the social *status quo*, especially in regards to status and relations of power. Myths, therefore, justify and

sanctify the social reality of the group. Malinowski states, “myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man” (1954: 104).

The structuralists, however, argued that the functionalists’ theory of myth was inadequate. They asked: if myths sustained the social *status quo*, why was it that many inversions of the ‘normal’ appear in myths from around the world? The structuralists resolved this dilemma by arguing that by presenting an inverted reality, myths break the integrity of the social system and then reconstitute the system (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1967b). It must be noted that these inversions are always accomplished by supernatural figures. Their quasi-human status allows them to live in the world of inversions – unlike actual humans. By taking the exploits of these supernatural figures as their focus, structuralists argue, the listeners focus on the inversions inherent in their system and how those inversions are resolved by society. Lévi-Strauss, for his part, argued that as myths posit meanings that are tangential to social reality, myths must be external to society and therefore cannot be used to justify the *status quo*.

The relationship of myths to social organization is at best problematic for structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss. Myths, they argue, give no more than a partial view of society. This is reflected in Lévi-Strauss’ statement:

The myth is certainly related to given facts, but not as a representation of them. The relationship is of a dialectic kind, and the institutions described in the myths can be the very opposite of the real institutions. This conception of the relation of the myth to reality no doubt limits the use of the former as a documentary source. But it opens the way for other possibilities; for in abandoning the search for a constantly accurate picture of ethnographic reality in the myth, we gain, on occasions, a means of reaching unconscious categories. (1976: 172-3)

For structuralists, therefore, the study of myths can enhance the researcher's understanding of native classification and the worldview of the group. For Lévi-Strauss, it is not necessary to assume that myth is based on any kind of "ethnographic reality", which is also borne out by Gluckman's work regarding the role of reversals in the constitution and confirmation of the social *status quo* (cf. Gluckman 1966).

According to Lévi-Strauss, myths provide individuals with cognitive models for understanding their society. They serve to provide the human mind with patterns of psychological associations ("structures") that could be used to "think about" abstract philosophical questions. These structures were established by the concrete contrasts that were explicit or implicit in the set of myths being analyzed (his so-called "binary oppositions"). The human mind was thus a processor engaged in interpreting the information transmitted orally through the relation of the myths in a communal setting. Therefore, the logic found beneath the surface content of myths reflected patterns of thought inherent to the individual member of the given society.

However, Lévi-Strauss argues that myths, as conceptual models, must be compared only to other myths. Myth, he states, is a type of language and, "it's a problem, one might say, of translation, of translating what is expressed in one language – or one code, if you prefer, but language is sufficient – in to expression in a different language" (1995: 9). Additionally, the structure underlying some particular set of myths was related in a precise and law-like manner to the structure underlying some other set of myths. Lévi-Strauss argued for myths as a type of language but a particular type of language whose function is to harmonize the society's world-view into a cohesive and intelligible whole.

Myth has thus presented a dilemma for anthropologists since the inception of the discipline. While an argument can be made for each of these approaches, in this chapter I have chosen to focus on the emic: the function, content and structure of myth in modern Druidry as expressed and experienced by modern Druids. As we shall see, it is perhaps even more problematic in this case, as the myths that form the basis of the modern Druid corpus are external to the group itself and are not taken from one particular group or geographical region (although primacy is placed on the ancient Celtic mythological corpus). However, we will see that myths and what I refer to as the ‘myth-making processes’ in modern Druidry help to homogenize and codify the world-view of the group through the continual process of negotiation, which will be elaborated below.

#### *Mythological sources*

The mythological corpus of the modern Druid movement is split into two main parts: the Irish myths and the Welsh myths. Although tales from other areas of Celtic heritage are present, these appear in only a minor number of incidents. Thus some individual Druids may find the Scottish, Manx, Cornish and Breton tales personally relevant, but they are not well known to the majority of modern Druids and do not form part of the ‘official’ corpus.

Likewise, many individual Druids include myths from non-Celtic cultures but their influence on collective beliefs is marginal. Of the individuals that follow non-Celtic mythologies the most prevalent are the Norse or Saxon myths<sup>76</sup> and North American Indian myths, while one of my informants chooses to incorporate Japanese myths as well.

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<sup>76</sup> The classification of Norse and Saxon myths as non-Celtic varies. While some ethnographic (and in fact, archaeological) evidence places these myths within the Celtic corpus, some informants strongly emphasized their Scandinavian heritage, in opposition to the myths of the Celtic heritage proper.

This vast range of options open to individual Druids is a hotly debated topic as many feel that as Druidry's heritage is Celtic, the mythological corpus of the ancient Celts should be used to the exclusion of other traditions. Others believe that the strength and relevance of Druidry in the modern world lies in its ability to fuse elements from a wide range of traditions. They argue that Druidry as fashioned in the latter half of the twentieth century consciously drew on Eastern traditions and, therefore, there is precedent within modern Druidry for eclecticism. The use of myths from non-Celtic cultures can be problematic as they are divorced from their cultural context, and therefore Druid audiences, while understanding their content, do not often understand their form. For example, the Story of Asdiwal (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1976), if told to a Druid audience, would certainly entertain the audience, but without the association of 'proper' and 'improper' forms of marriage within Native American Indian societies, much meaning would be lost or confused.

Although these anomalies do occur, the Irish mythological material forms one of the two main branches used by modern Druids. The most influential material comes from the *Leabhar Gábhala* (otherwise known as "The Book of Invasions"), which provides the most complete form of a creation myth within the broader category of Celtic mythology (Ellis 2002: 17). This twelfth-century manuscript tells the story of the successive invasions of Ireland by mythical figures. Of the different invasions told in this work, that of the *Tuatha Dé Danaan* (or "Ever-Living Ones"; Ellis 2002: 17), the children of the mother goddess Danu, holds primacy of place in the Druid tradition. Associated with Druidical knowledge, these figures (part human and part god) received magical tutelage in Greece by four sages named Morfessa, Eseus, Usicias, and Semias.

The *Tuatha Dé Danaan* then left Greece taking with them four great magical treasures called the ‘Hallows’. According to Matthews, these were, “the kingly regalia or emblems of empowerment wielded by the king or hero, often the object of quest” (Matthews 1988: 91). These were the Stone of Fal from the town of Falias, the Spear of Lugh from Gorias, the Sword of Nuadu from Findias and the Cauldron of the Dagda from Murias. The *Tuatha Dé Danaan* ruled Ireland for many years before they too suffered defeat by an invading force. They fled to the hills where they became known as the *Sidhe*, or Faery-Folk, which explains in part the fascination many Druids hold for the figure of the Faery.

In addition to these mythological tales the heroic sagas of early Irish literature have heavily influenced modern Druidry. From the eighth-century Ulster Cycle come the tales of Cúchulainn known from the tale of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* [or the “Cattle Raid of Cuailnge” (Kinsella 1969, vii)]. The other major cycle, the Fenian Cycle, relates many tales of the hero Fionn Mac Cumhail. It was onto the myths of this hero, many folklorists argue, that the tales of King Arthur were grafted (Ellis 2002: 15 and 40). Originating in the third century AD, these tales were codified in the twelfth-century work *Accamh na Senórach* or the “Colloquy of the Ancients” (Ellis 2002: 40).

For the modern Druids the most important tale of Fionn Mac Cumhail regards the myth of the ‘Salmon of Wisdom’. Briefly, the story relates that as a young boy, Fionn met an old man named Finneces fishing in the River Boyne.<sup>77</sup> He told the boy that he was trying, as he had done for years, to catch the Salmon of Wisdom. There are five of these fish, which come from a sacred pool variously called Conla’s Well or the Well of Segais. The pool is surrounded by the nine purple hazel trees of the goddess Bo-ann. As

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<sup>77</sup> This river is located in Ireland between Kells to the north and Dublin to the south. Interestingly, it flows right by the prehistoric site of New Grange, a site considered very important to modern Druids. What relevance this geographic proximity may play I have yet to discover.

the hazelnuts fall into the pool the Salmon eats them, thus becoming wise. Finneces tells Fionn that once he catches one of the Salmon he will cook it and eat it, and the first bites will bring him all of the wisdom in the universe. Fionn stays on to watch and Finneces finally catches the Salmon. Finneces asks Fionn to stay and tend the fire while the fish cooks, but tells Fionn he is not to eat any of the fish. Three drops of juice sputter off the fish, hitting Fionn's thumb. The boy instinctively sucks his thumb and receives all of the wisdom from the fish. This myth is very similar to the myth of Taliesin which I will be analyzing in detail later in this chapter, so I will reserve comment on its form and content for the moment.

The other major mythological corpus for modern Druids is, as stated above, Welsh. These myths appear in manuscript form in four main books, referred to as the Ancient Books of Wales: the *White Book of Rhydderch*, the *Red Book of Hergest*, the *Black Book of Caermarthen*, and the *Book of Taliesin*. These tales are arguably the most relevant to current practices within the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids as the correspondence course for the Bardic grade uses a myth from the Welsh cycle throughout the year as a teaching tool. According to my informants within Anderida and OBOD, this myth, "The Tale of Taliesin", appears in many of the early manuscripts and purportedly originated around the era ascribed to the legendary figure of King Arthur. Although King Arthur's existence cannot be absolutely verified by historians, many have argued that he was a sixth-century nobleman and this view is upheld by my informants. This would then date the tale to the sixth century. Confusingly, however, the *Book of Taliesin* is ascribed to the thirteenth century. The view of this seeming discrepancy expressed by several of my informants within Anderida is that the *Book of Taliesin* was

written by a bard in the thirteenth century who co-opted the name of the earlier, legendary figure for his own purposes. Perhaps even more confusing is the assertion that the “Tale of Taliesin” comes from these early sources – it does not appear in the *Book of Taliesin* or the Welsh mythological works at all. Rather, the tale as it is told within OBOD is actually a seventeenth-century one (personal communication: Ronald Hutton, March 2009).

### *The role of myth*

According to modern Druids myths serve a variety of purposes within their community. They provide instruction about Druid beliefs and practices often through allegory. The myths not only inform Druids through their content, however, but through their form, an issue which will be taken up at length later in this chapter. Additionally, the relating of myths in collective environments creates a channel through which inspiration can flow through the bard to the audience. The dialectic between myth-teller and audience is thus perceived to transform both. Finally, the process of gathering and telling myths is seen to fulfill a shamanic function within the modern Druid community.

Myths are crucial to the teaching program of OBOD. The Bardic grade, as mentioned in previous chapters, centers on creativity and inspiration. Myth- or story-telling is therefore a crucial enterprise in this grade. In practice, the training of this grade focuses on a three-step process that is thought to create and develop this art. First, the bard is encouraged to study Celtic mythology by reading the many works available on the subject. Whenever possible, however, the student is encouraged to hear the myths told aloud. Many opportunities for this exist as modern Druid gatherings invariably have at

least one portion of their proceedings dedicated to an *eisteddfod* in which all manner of myths and tales are recounted. In addition, tapes and compact discs of the myths are available commercially. Through the study of these materials, the bard learns a range of information from basic themes such as the names of gods and goddesses, to complex allegorical references.

Once the bard has read and heard the myths, he is encouraged to choose a few myths that interest him personally and begin to learn their content and form. It should be emphasized here that memorization of the actual wording of a myth is actively discouraged. According to modern Druids, the goal of learning how to relate a myth is not to repeat an age-old formula, but rather to allow the individual's own creativity to blossom within the broader framework of the form and content of the myth itself. In fact, creative license is thought to allow the myth-teller to bring the story to life in a way that passive recitation could not.

The last step of the process is practicing his art by telling the myth in a collective environment. By doing so, the bard is perceived as channeling *awen* from the Otherworld into this world. Thus, he can be seen as the conduit through which the sacred can enter this world. Without the community's need for this channel, the role of the bard simply becomes that of an entertainer. Myth-telling, therefore, is a vital part of society in which both myth-teller and audience come together in a dialectical relationship. The bard is not perceived as creating the myth but actively channeling it; however, he uses themes and characters from a commonly recognized store. These are combined and recombined in ways that create meaning for the assembled audience.



Figure 5-1. An eisteddfod at one of Anderida's camps (photograph courtesy Nikki Draven)

Moreover, the audience is not a passive receptor for this channeled *awen*. Their responses are seen as helping to make the tale come alive. From the audience's reactions the bard discovers whether his new combinations have been accepted or rejected by the community. As bards generally tell their myths many times over, they have the opportunity to try different constructions and thus to incorporate the reactions of the audience in the constantly evolving tale. Thus there is no end product to myth-telling. It is, rather a continual, dialectical process of myth-making.

As stated above, myth-telling can be profoundly transformative for both the bard and his audience. Through his study of Celtic myth, the bard encounters particular themes about which he meditates. He examines his own life and how the tale reflects part of his own experience. Next, the bard explores how he can positively affect change in his own life through the teachings of the myth. By sharing these messages with the

audience through the medium of the myth, the bard is effectively prompting the audience to meditate on the meanings of the myth and thus to promote a deeper sense of the self. Through its engagement with symbolic images, this process can be seen to serve an allegorical as well as philosophical function. In much the same way, modern psychoanalysis argues that all dreams are symbolic and that the discovery of the meaning of these symbols can aid personal growth. As the Ovate grade is partially concerned with these deeper meanings it is reasonable to infer that this emphasis on individual psychoanalysis continues through the Ovate as well.

The last main role of myth to modern Druids is what they term the shamanic aspect. This aspect also appears to sit squarely within the Ovate grade.<sup>78</sup> Although the ancient Celts undoubtedly conceived of their myth-tellers as artists (James 1993: 52-53), their sole function (as we have seen) was not just to provide entertainment. In addition, they worked as shamans, voyaging between this world and the ‘Otherworld’<sup>79</sup>. Likewise, in the modern Druid tradition, myth-tellers are conceived of as shamans. This is mainly because the role of the myth-teller is to connect with the Otherworld through utilizing techniques such as sensory deprivation, meditation and shape-shifting. The myth-teller journeys through the Otherworld, collecting along the way the myths he will retell. In fact, myths are often portrayed in the Druid community as actual voyages through the Otherworld. They thus provide a tangible ‘map’ of the particular journey undertaken by the myth-teller.

While recounting these journeys, the myth-teller opens up a channel through which inspiration and healing can flow into the audience. He does this by creating a

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<sup>78</sup> As I have not had access to the Ovate Grade teaching program at this time, this must remain an issue for future research.

<sup>79</sup> This is the native term.

sensory experience in which the hearer is opened up to other worlds and their impossible situations. The audience is entranced through the teller's use of cadence and tone, music, props<sup>80</sup> and body movement. 'Inspired story-telling', as it is called in the modern Druid community, bewitches the audience to such an extent that they can actually 'see' the myth unfolding in their mind's eye. Through this shamanic function, myth-tellers act as conduits for *awen* to descend into this world and enter the bodies and minds of the audience. Therefore, they do not just decode or repeat traditional knowledge but actively collect and process this knowledge in a way that creates meaning for modern Druid society as a whole but which, as stated earlier, is reified by society itself.

Shamanism within modern Druidry is one of the ways that this group sees itself as being 'tribal'. As shamans are associated with 'tribal' societies, they argue, they are at home in a spirituality based on the tribal peoples of the Celtic region. Here they are referring to one of the aboriginal peoples of the British Isles. Although there is no actual evidence that shamans in the Latin American or perhaps Siberian sense existed in this region, they argue that as an aboriginal people the Celts would have had individuals who performed the same types of activities and held the same type of status. This seemingly backwards reasoning can best be explained through reference to the modern Druid's use of historical and archaeological sources in the creation of their spiritual path. As we have seen, modern Druids have been influenced by the work of comparative anthropologists such as Frazer, whose *Golden Bough* lies on many a Druid's bookshelf. Early anthropologists and folklorists studied the societies of the world in an attempt to find universals. One of these 'universals', according to many early researchers, was the

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<sup>80</sup> The ritual nature of myth-telling can be seen in the fact that props (such as musical instruments and masks) are often sanctified through naming and blessing in the same way as magical or ritual tools.

prevalence of the shaman. If, as the modern Druid logic would have it, shamans were universal, they must have been present in Celtic society as well. This lends justification to the eclectic use of many non-indigenous practices and modes of thought within modern Druidry. Once again we see modern Druids adopting ideas from other cultures and legitimizing their use through a claim to universality or cultural diffusion.

By focusing on the evolving nature of myth, modern Druidry challenges the prevailing Western emphasis on historical accuracy, arguing instead for a return to the prominence of evolving myth. History is seen here as factual ‘truth’, myth as the creative accounting of factual and mythological tales. However, as anthropologists such as Hastrup (cf. 1992) have noted, history is often mythological in practice and as such reflects the cultural stance and historical trajectory of the culture that produces it. Certainly, Druids recognize the distinction between myth and history while at the same time recognizing that history can be mythologized: the myth of the founding of modern Druidry in 1717 at the Apple Tree Tavern is recognized as a ‘mythical history’. In fact, many of my informants related that the name of the pub in question seemed a bit contrived as apple trees are laden with significance to modern Druids. In reality, this myth actually refers to the founding of a lodge of freemasonry, which was appropriated by Robert MacGregor-Reid and woven into the fictional account of the foundation of the ADO.

The role of myth-telling in modern Druidry will become clear through the relation of the ‘Tale of Taliesin’ later in this chapter. One of the main characters, Morda, relates tales to a young boy around a campfire. These tales are intended to help him grow as a

person. The emphasis on this story in OBOD's Bardic course can thus be seen as a mimetic performance of the worldview contained in the myth itself.

### *The Tale of Taliesin*

Below is a detailed account of the myth of Taliesin. It is only one of various versions of this same myth and is therefore not definitive, but has been assembled from the elements that were most often repeated to me in retellings of the tale by modern Druids within OBOD and Anderida. Furthermore, many of the events and details in this retelling as taken from OBOD's Bardic course, which (as noted earlier) uses the myth as a teaching tool. It should, therefore, be noted that some variations contain further elaborations and incidents. Additionally, some versions give emphasis to one part of the story over another, or in fact omit whole passages of the story.

Although it could be argued that this tale includes two separate myths the material should be grouped together. The first part of the tale regards the first two initiations Taliesin undergoes while the second part explains the third and final initiation. As three initiations are required to reach 'enlightenment' both parts of the tale actually appear to form one myth. Furthermore, it is important to note that neither part of the myth appears to be believed as 'fact'. Rather, the myth acts as an allegorical tale through which modern Druids within OBOD are taught by the Bardic course that inspiration can only occur after a cycle of three initiations. These preliminary notes aside, what follows is a recapitulation of the 'Tale of Taliesin'.

Over many eras, the sacred Isle of Britain has been known by many names. Some call it Albion, some Britannia. This tale comes from the mists of time when this great

land was known as Merlin's Isle, after King Arthur's wizard and Druid. During this magical time, the ancient ones still strode the land. Herne, god of the hunt could be seen darting through the foliage of the ancient forests and Rhiannon could be seen riding her great horse swiftly across the land.

Deep in the heart of this sacred land, near the great mountains of Snowdonia in Wales lies Lake Bala, known to the Welsh as Llyn Tegid. During the early years of the reign of King Arthur, years before he was slain at the battle of Camlan, a castle stood near the shimmering waters of this lake with the peaks of Caer Emrys rising to the west.



*Figure 5-2. Llyn Tegid (taken from <http://farm4.static.flickr.com>).*

The castle was home to Lord Tegid Voel, his Lady Kerid, and their children. The Lady of the house was none other than the mysterious goddess Cerridwen, goddess of the harvest and of the crescent moon.

While Lord Tegid spent his days hunting and overlooking his estate, Cerridwen spent hers tending to the needs of their twins, a girl named Creirwy and a boy named Afagddu.<sup>81</sup> Although their mother loved them both dearly, the children could not have been more dissimilar. Creirwy was the picture of beauty, her beaming face fringed with a profusion of golden curls. She was cheery in disposition and seemed to brighten the mood of even the most sullen. Afagddu, whose name means 'Utter Darkness', was the exact opposite of his radiant twin. He was physically revolting and looking upon him brought great sadness to all who met him. As the twins continued to grow, Cerridwen became more and more worried about her son. She knew that the world would not treat him kindly because of his hideous physical attributes. Although she could not give him the gift of beauty, she decided she would ask the Druids to help her bring him the gift of wisdom.

Cerridwen knew that the Pheryllt (the Druid alchemists) were the only ones who could help her bring wisdom to her son. Early one morning, the goddess called for her horse White Foam to be made ready for the long journey. Once mounted, she rode for the glittering crystal towers of the city of Dinas Affaraon, high on the mountain of Snowdonia. This was the 'Ambrosial City' where the Pheryllt made their home and near where, legend says, King Arthur and his knights are buried. In fact, the Pheryllt were said to have found the Holy Grail near where they built their city.

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<sup>81</sup> In some variations he is known as Morfan (meaning 'Sea Raven' or 'Great Crow'.) This name could be derived from the Indo-European root *mor* meaning 'sea'.

After several hard days of traveling Cerridwen finally reached the city gates of Dinas Affaraon. She knocked on the city gate and was given entrance to the city by an old woman. Inside, the old woman led Cerridwen to the center of the town where the council of the Pheryllt soon gathered to hear her plea. She spoke eloquently of her son's plight and the Pheryllt, after some debate, agreed to help her for the sake of her son. They led her from the center of the city to the Great Library of the Pheryllt, which contained all of the knowledge they had gathered over the centuries. There, in the First Book of the Pheryllt, was the recipe for *awen*, or 'bright knowledge'. This magical blend of herbs and roots was said to bring all of the wisdom of the universe to the individual who drank the first three drops of the mixture. Cerridwen was instructed to gather the herbs and roots at specific times of the day and night. She was then told to add fresh water and boil the mixture in a huge cauldron for a year and a day. After receiving these directions, Cerridwen thanked the council of the Pheryllt for their help and rode back to her castle.

Exhausted but eager, Cerridwen began her preparations. After checking to make sure her children were safe and well, she waited for the evening to fall. As the moon rose she strode down to the shores of the silvery lake, the peaks of Caer Emrys reflected in its waters. Countless stars gazed down on the goddess as she raised her arms in salutation to the moon. Nine times she raised her arms, nine times she dropped them, all the while incanting a prayer for blessing. Cerridwen began to feel the pulse of energy deep within the waters of the lake and slowly within her own womb as well. As she continued to repeat the chant she envisioned her son, the repulsive Afagddu, filled with the golden

light of wisdom and becoming the most enlightened bard in all the land. The last tones of her incantations echoing out into the landscape, she returned to her castle to rest.



*Figure 5-3. An artist's impression of Cerridwen. Note the crescent moon in the background (image by Joanna Powell Colbert: [http:// www.jpc-artworks.com/gallery/celtic/cdwen.html](http://www.jpc-artworks.com/gallery/celtic/cdwen.html)).*

The next day, Cerridwen rose and dressed quickly and once again requested that White Foam be made ready. She mounted and rode out into the quickening daylight to search out Govannon, the god of the smith. Entering the heat and steam of his workshop she saw the great god at work, his muscles undulating as his hammer struck the red-hot iron. Cerridwen approached Govannon and made her request. She bade him to cast a massive iron cauldron and asked him to have it delivered to a fisherman's hut that sat on the shores of Lake Bala. Govannon promised she would have the cauldron promptly and he began his work immediately.

Cerridwen left the god's forge and remounted White Foam to return to her castle. As she rode through the verdant forest she espied two figures approaching her on the beaten path. It was a youth leading a bent and gnarled blind man. As they walked towards her the old man, whose name was Morda (or 'Sea Father') knew who she was instantly and greeted her with all of the reverence she deserved as a goddess. The youth he introduced as Gwion Bach (or 'Little Innocent'). Cerridwen asked the old man where they had come from to which he replied that they had traveled from Caereinion in Powys. As Cerridwen needed servants to tend the great cauldron, she requested that they accept her employment. Without alluding to the contents of the cauldron, she told them that they would be required to chop and stockpile wood, tend the fire under the cauldron, and make sure that the brew did not boil over. They agreed and she instructed them to go to the fisherman's hut on the shore of Lake Bala and wait for her there.

Cerridwen spent the next few days gathering all of the magical ingredients for the concoction. Always mindful of the instructions of the Pheryllt, she assembled each of the components at the correct times. When she had completed this task, she once again walked down to the lake, bringing the necessary ingredients with her. Upon nearing the small hut she noticed the large cauldron awaiting her arrival. Morda and Gwion Bach were sitting next to the cauldron and next to the hut was a large pile of wood, indicative of Gwion Bach's industrious use of the last few days. She greeted the pair and told Gwion to start a fire under the cauldron, which he did quickly. As soon as he had completed this task, she sent him down to the lake to bring back bucketfuls of its fresh, clear water. As the water began to boil, she began adding the herbs and roots one by one, chanting the spells the Pheryllt had given her.

Her task completed, Cerridwen turned and addressed the old man and the boy. She told them that the cauldron contained a magical brew but that the entire worth of the batch was in the first three drops. Once these three drops had been imbibed the cauldron would contain only malignant knowledge and bring the imbiber nothing but despair. Nine times she instructed them, therefore, never to taste the brew. They should tend the brew and make sure it never boiled over. Wood should be added when the fire died down and fresh, clean water from the lake should be added when needed, she commanded. After her son had received the *awen*, she told them, the mixture would be allowed to boil away until nothing was left. Then she would have the cauldron melted down. After warning her two servants, she told them that she would be back in a year and day with her son. Cerridwen returned home to expectantly wait for the time to pass.

Morda and Gwion Bach spent the year and a day in pleasant company. They sat near the fire and Gwion Bach tended it when necessary, leaving the hut from time to time to gather more firewood. For most of the time, however, the two sat companionably playing a game of strategy called Gwyddbwyll or talking. Morda told Gwion Bach many tales and taught him many things during their year and a day together.

At last, on the anniversary of the beginning of the enterprise, Cerridwen strode back to the shore of the lake with her son. The moon was rising fat in the sky and the stars glimmered in the heavens. She greeted Morda and Gwion Bach and settled down by the fire to await the mark of midnight, the end of the year and a day distillation period. Morda began to tell tales and slowly the goddess and her son fell asleep.

Just at the stroke of midnight, Morda noticed that the fire had started to slumber as well, as his old frame was chilled. He told Gwion Bach to add a few logs to the fire.

Gwion Bach added too many logs and the brew boiled over, shooting out three drops of fluid, which hit Gwion Bach's thumb, scorching it. Instinctually, he put his thumb into his mouth and sucked on it to relieve the burn. In an instant Gwion Bach received all of the 'bright knowledge' that was intended for Afagddu. The cauldron screeched and split, spilling the contents, now only malevolent knowledge, upon the earth. Everything it touched shriveled and died. It ran even into the lake, poisoning its waters.

The *awen* he had received from the cauldron made Gwion Bach realize immediately that the goddess would be furious and fly at him. She had awoken at the sound of the cauldron splitting in two and within a few seconds she fulfilled his vision. She first slapped Morda across the face for allowing this tragedy to befall her before pursuing the now fleeing form of Gwion Bach. In her rage she knew that her son's loss could only be avenged by the death of Gwion Bach. Gwion ran over the rocky terrain towards the forest as quickly as he could but her fury spurred her to chase him with alarming speed.<sup>82</sup>

Just as she was about to reach him he had the sudden realization that he knew how to turn himself into an animal. He shape-shifted into a hare and used his powerful new hind legs to propel him out of the infuriated goddess' grasp. Gwion Bach looked over his shoulder as he fled, expecting to see Cerridwen's human form fading into the background. Instead, to his horror, he could see that Cerridwen had shape-shifted into a sleek greyhound, had closed the intervening distance and was now nipping at his heels.

As he hurred himself on he found himself racing towards a river. Cerridwen lengthened her neck and lunged for the fleeing hare but Gwion Bach leapt from the

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<sup>82</sup> The chase that occurs from this point on is memorialized in the traditional Scottish folk song attached as Appendix Two. This song has been recently revived by Damh the Bard in the 'Fith Fath' song on his album *Herne's Apprentice* (2002, Caer Bryn Studio.)

riverbank and changed himself into a salmon. His shimmering form moved swiftly through the water and he began to slow a little, enjoying the sensation of the cool water caressing his body. He looked behind to reassure himself that he had foiled the cunning Cerridwen but was greeted with the sight of a very determined otter plunging through the water towards him.

Once again the chase was on and Cerridwen sped closer to Gwion Bach. Finally, she was right behind him and about to sink her teeth into his tail. Gwion Bach, resolute to evade capture, leaped out of the water and shape-shifted again. As a bird he soared high into the air, reveling in the rush of the air past him as he glided over the landscape. The screech of a hawk behind him told him Cerridwen had not given up and was still in hot pursuit. They soared and dove through the air until she had almost won.



*Figure 5-4. An artist's impression of the chase (by Catriona Stamp:*

*<http://www.artistsbooks.org/products/cards/Magicians%20battle.htm>).*

Just as she reached out her talons to grab Gwion Bach, he spied a mound of winnowed grain. He shape-shifted into a grain of wheat and plummeted into the pile, sure in the knowledge that Cerridwen could never find him amongst all of the other grains. But Cerridwen would have her revenge, so she shape-shifted into the form of a hen and began to scratch around the edge of the pile. Cerridwen found the one grain that was Gwion Bach and she swallowed him whole. Avenged, she returned to the castle and her poor son Afagddu.

However, Cerridwen's vengeance was to be bittersweet as she soon discovered she was pregnant. The grain of wheat she had swallowed had begun to grow in her belly as strongly as if it had been planted in the fertile soil of the earth. She determined that as soon as the child was born she would kill it and thus be rid of Gwion Bach forever. As the baby began to grow inside of her, though, she began to lose her resolve and the day the child was born she knew she could not harm him. But she also knew that she could not keep the child, as Afagddu would grow to hate him for stealing the *awen*. Cerridwen decided to place it in a leather bag and cast it out into the river (in some versions the sea). For nine months the child floated down the river in his bag, periodically leaving his body to journey in the Otherworld where he learned many songs and poems.

Meanwhile, in the court of Lord Garanhir, the people were preparing for the great festival of Beltane. Lord Garanhir's son, Elffin, came to his father's chamber to ask his advice. The Lord was very fond of his son and when Elffin told him of the bad luck he had suffered of late and his inability to feed his wife, the old Lord was glad to help. Garanhir granted Elffin the privilege of fishing in his river, the Conwy. He told Elffin that the easiest place to fish was by the salmon weir, and that if he would fish there he

could take as many salmon as he wanted. So on Beltane Eve, Elffin went down to the river to fish. Try as he might, he could not catch a single salmon. Just as he was about to give up hope and return empty-handed to his wife he discovered a leather bag washed up beside the weir. Taking his knife in hand, he slit the bag open and found the child inside. The child smiled up at Elffin, who could see his brow was radiating. Elffin therefore named the child 'Taliesin' (or 'Radiant Brow'). Elffin wrapped the child in his cloak and took him home where his wife greeted her new foster-son with joy.

The years cycled steadily by and Taliesin's knowledge seemed to grow tenfold. By the time he had reached the age of thirteen he had gained so much knowledge that he was acknowledged as the wisest bard in the old Lord Garanhir's realm. His foster-father had learned that in the kingdom of King Maelgwn there were twenty-four highly accomplished bards so he decided to journey there to meet them. Upon his arrival, the King had Elffin ushered into the Great Hall and asked him what was his business. Elffin replied that he was the son of Lord Garanhir and he came to ask the King if his foster-son, Taliesin, could join the court, as he was the finest bard in all the land. This upset the King as he felt it was a slight to the bards of his court so he had his guards seize Elffin and throw him into the castle's dungeon.

As this was occurring in the realm of King Maelgwn, Taliesin was at home with his foster-mother. He had a vision of what was happening to Elffin and he told his foster-mother of the vision. He told her that if he used a Druid spell he could rescue Elffin. Taliesin incanted the spell and the King's bards instantly fell into a trance and were powerless to help the King. Taliesin used another spell to create a massive storm that began to wreak havoc on the lands of King Maelgwn. Battered and exhausted, the King

finally set Elffin free and agreed that Taliesin was, in fact, the most powerful bard in all the land.

### *Jung's influence*

The modern Druid retelling of 'The Tale of Taliesin' has been influenced by the work of Carl Jung. Philip Carr-Gomm used some elements from Jungian psychology in the creation of the Bardic course, especially within his analysis of the 'Tale of Taliesin'. Specifically, he places emphasis on archetypes, or 'primordial images', which exist within each human without the need for conscious recognition. Therefore, according to Carr-Gomm, myths are symbolic, encoded teachings that connect with an individual's subconscious. By meditating modern Druids can connect with this deeper level of themselves. However, the cultural significance of the symbols is defined by the Bardic course itself. Meditation on a symbol will therefore not connect the individual with 'primordial images' but with the culturally constructed symbolic associations of the community itself. As the Bardic course describes the meanings of the symbols for the individual, the process is less one of individual self-development than of inculturation. Additionally, we must remember that the sign and the signified are not equivalent (cf. Turner 1995). When Carr-Gomm argues that individual self-development occurs by meditating on the symbols he is actually encouraging individuals to meditate not on the sign but *what it signifies*, which is explained through the process of inculturation.

The inherent problem with Carr-Gomm's approach has been that he attempts to use psychological analyses, which are necessarily based on the individual, in creating a form of social organization, which must have a common set of references relevant to all

members of that society. This difficulty is perhaps why tension exists in the modern Druid community between freedom of individual beliefs and the quest for homogeneity.

Within this structure myth is taken as a symbolic structure that must be analyzed in the same fashion as modern psychoanalysts concentrate on dreams. The symbolic archetypes found in the myth give way to universal structures that are relevant in the modern world. They continue to be relevant, according to modern Druidry, because they can explain behavior. Without engagement with myth (according to modern Druid teachings) we become dissociated from the world and our mental states are adversely affected.

### *Characters*

In order to understand the relevance of the story for modern Druids it is necessary to examine the symbolic content of the myth. An appropriate place to start is with the individual characters and their interrelationships. Although each character within the tale serves a distinct function, space does not allow a detailed study of each so I will confine my analysis to the five main figures of the myth. It should be noted that this is my analysis of the evidence based on what I have learned through my informants within OBOD and Anderida. It is my own abstraction of the evidence to hand, with which I nevertheless believe my informants would be in agreement.

At the beginning of the myth we are introduced to the Lady Kerid. This name reveals her to be the incarnation of the goddess Cerridwen, meaning 'White Bent One' in Welsh. Associated with the moon (especially when crescent shaped), she is known within the modern Druid community as a mother goddess and is one of the best known

goddesses within that community. Moreover, she is closely tied to the figure of the cauldron and the brew of *awen* that it contains. Being so related to the image of the cauldron, her tale may even be related to the legends surrounding King Arthur and the quest for the Grail as the Grail's "remote ancestors are the magic vessels of immortality in the Celtic otherworld" (Cavendish 2003: 114).

The image of the cauldron is traditionally associated with the feminine aspect. It has connotations of rebirth and is closely linked to the womb. As the cauldron is the mixing and brewing place for *awen* it also represents the belief that inspiration comes through connecting with the feminine in nature, specifically the mother goddess Cerridwen. Moreover, the need to tend the cauldron in the myth creates the space for the mediation of young and old, vitality and wisdom. It is therefore the place of introspection.

Cerridwen's two children, Creirwy and Afagddu, represent opposing qualities. Creirwy, we are told, is radiantly beautiful while her brother, regarded in some versions as her twin, is repulsive. In fact, this ugliness goes deeper than his appearance as his name 'Utter Darkness' implies deep imperfection within his soul as well. These two figures, therefore, represent not the similarity implied in twinship but the opposition of the two forces of light and dark. The Bardic grade materials teach that this opposition is one which each individual contains within him or herself. They represent the two sides of man that must be reconciled in order for personal growth to occur. Although Creirwy's role in this tale is minimal, her brother's is pivotal as will be made clear.

The next two figures appear while Cerridwen is riding through the forest. Gwion Bach, a young boy, is leading an old blind man named Morda. Most obviously, the two

represent youth and old age. The deeper significance, however, lies in Morda's blindness. While Gwion Bach can see the apparent world, Morda sees the Otherworld. Similar to the blind seer in Homer's *The Odyssey*, Morda's blindness reveals him to have the gift of second sight and he therefore represents the figure of the shaman. This theme of the damaged individual with extraordinary gifts appears throughout literature. Thus when Cerridwen slaps his face, in some versions she is said to knock his eye out, symbolically representing the removal of this gift.

Morda's role is vital to the story as it is he who decides when the initiate, Gwion Bach, is ready to receive the *awen*. Morda is the instrument of fate in the tale as he instructs Gwion Bach to place extra logs on the fire, which he knows will cause the cauldron to boil over. Thus we have a reversal of action. As Gwion Bach led the blind Morda to his fated meeting with Cerridwen in the forest so Morda leads Gwion Bach to his enlightenment. In the first instance physical sight is stressed while the later sequence illuminates the importance of second sight.<sup>83</sup> The theme of the blind seer who possesses clairvoyance is well known in literature, especially in works such as Homer's *The Odyssey*. Georges Dumézil notes the connection in his statement that, "Thus Mîmr-Mîmir, one way or another, is Odhinn's instructor, his professor of runes; and the loss of a bodily eye was the means by which the magician-god acquired in exchange a spirit eye, the power of second sight, and all the supernatural powers that its possession brings" (1988: 140).

The figures of Gwion Bach, Morda and Afagddu are interrelated. The relationship between Gwion Bach and Morda is that of the dialectic between youthful

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<sup>83</sup> The opposition here is not merely between first and second sight. Afagddu also seems to play a part as he *lacks* sight.

vigor and aged temperance. As the two sit by the fire, they converse and the opposing forces they represent are synthesized. For modern Druids it is necessary for these two forces to be synthesized in each person. Gwion Bach and Afagddu, on the other hand, represent the necessity for action if transformation is to be achieved. This action can only begin by recognition of an individual's internal flaws just as the actions of the tale are put in motion because of Afagddu's flaw. Gwion Bach receives the *awen* that was meant for Afagddu, but it is only because of Afagddu's imperfections that the *awen* was brewed in the first place. Therefore, without the recognition of inward flaws, individuals cannot reach enlightenment. In fact it is these very flaws, which create the opportunity for growth.

There is a relationship between Cerridwen, Gwion Bach and Morda as well. The following figure represents how these three characters are related in respect to initiation:

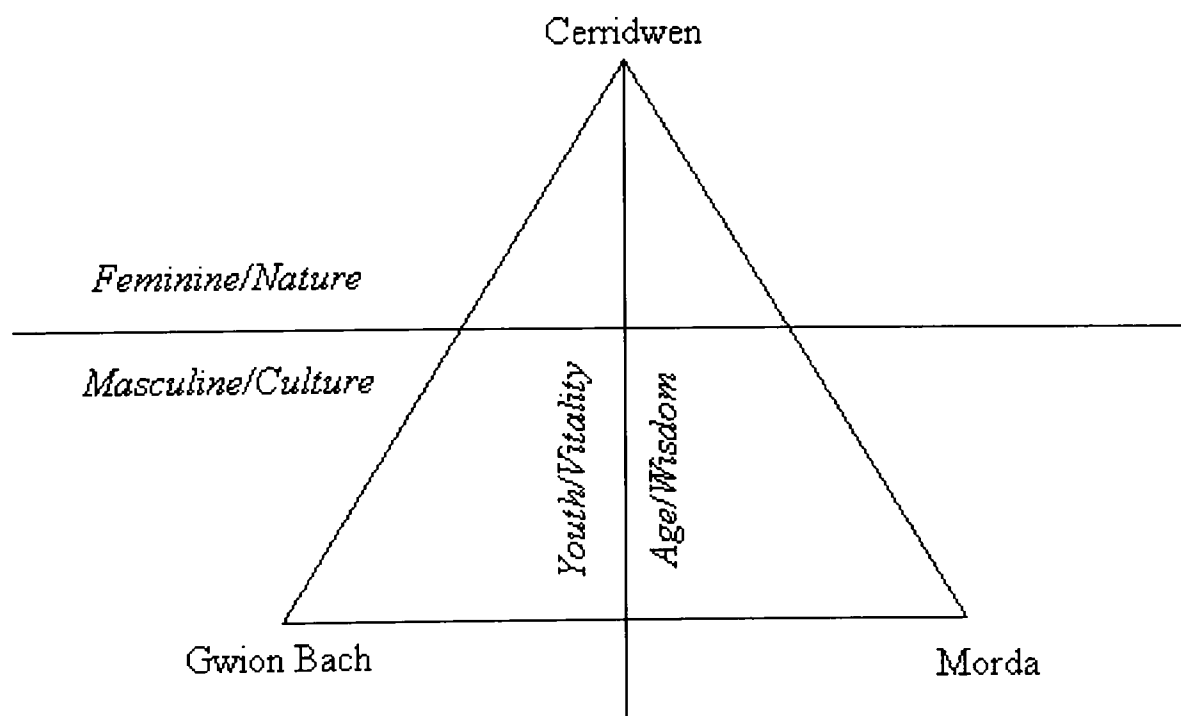


Figure 5-5. Initiation and the feminine/masculine and nature/culture distinctions.

Cerridwen, the goddess of the land, represents the feminine but also the element of nature. Morda and Gwion Bach are set in opposition to her as they represent the masculine. Their conversation by the fire is representative of the cultural element. She acts as a mediator between these two types of masculinity, as it was her chance meeting with the two in the forest that allowed the latter to come together in dialectical exchange. Without her need of their help the qualities of youth and age, vitality and wisdom could not come together to be synthesized. This synthesis is in reference to Cerridwen as it is a requirement of entry into Cerridwen's mystery school.

### *Initiation*

The myth of Taliesin contains a wealth of themes. Perhaps the most central is that of initiation, which occurs three times in the body of the myth. The first initiation (often referred to as a gestation or incubation) occurs as the young Gwion Bach and the wise figure of Morda sit by the fire and talk. They play games and seemingly are merely passing time until the *awen* has finished brewing. However, this conviviality belies a deeper meaning. The message of the tale is that without the dialectic between youth and age, vitality and wisdom, enlightenment cannot occur. It also tells us that enlightenment does not occur without patience and inner reflection. We must therefore understand Morda to be the priest initiating Gwion Bach. The mystery Gwion Bach is initiated into is clearly that of the goddess as we are told that Cerridwen employs the two *as her servants*.

This initiation is the cultural initiation that creates the bard. In modern Druidry, the significance of the three drops of *awen* is that they bring creativity to the imbiber.

The fact that Gwion Bach places his scalded thumb in his mouth represents the proposition that transformative power comes from orality, which underpins the necessity of myth for communities. The inspiration contained within the *awen* is seen as ultimately stemming from the goddess, and this seems a reasonable assumption, given that Morda and Gwion are in her service. However, the symbol of the *awen* is also a symbol of the sun god. The three bars and three points contained in the center of the symbol are all references to the sun. As stated in earlier chapters, the bars represent rays of sunlight and the point represent the position that the sun rises on the Winter Solstice, Summer Solstice, and the two equinoxes. While the goddess initiates the reception of *awen*, it is therefore the god who actually possesses this inspiration. Divine masculinity is thus born into this world through the goddess to be received by humans. This supposition is further supported by the fact that the goddess is often depicted as giving birth to the Mabon, or sun child, at the Winter Solstice.

During this first initiatory sequence Gwion Bach is not conscious of the fact that he will die and be reborn. However, in the second and third sequences, this is not the case and this allows us to see the perfection of inspiration. The second gestation takes place as the goddess consumes Gwion Bach. He dies but in so doing he becomes the manifestation of the sun god impregnating his consort. The child produced from this union is the Mabon or sun-child. As the Mabon Gwion Bach gestates for nine months in his mother's womb it is clearly the natural initiation. The instigation of this sequence was conscious on Gwion Bach's part as he chose to sacrifice himself in order to be reborn. Just as the first incubation allowed for the creation of the bard the second creates the Ovate. The sequence ends when the child is born, signifying his initiation into the

mysteries of the natural world. Additionally, he has learned the mysteries of life and death, an important part of the Ovate grade.

The third gestational period occurs a short time after the second. Cerridwen sews the infant into a leather bag (representative of the womb) and casts the child into a river. He floats downstream and eventually the bag is washed up at the salmon weir where Elffin finds it. Similar to the second gestation the child is aware during this time. When Elffin splits open the bag he can see the radiance of the child's enlightenment shining from him, thus he is named Taliesin (literally 'radiant brow'). This last initiation differs in character from the previous two. It represents an unnatural conception, as the goddess alone was generative of the child. Additionally unnatural, the child gestates not inside a woman but within the world itself. He is then born into this world by his foster-father.

The initiation theme reflects the modern Druid belief that it is only through periods of gestation that individuals reach enlightenment. As Gwion Bach received the *awen* he became conscious of his predicament and had the knowledge of how to act. But his reception of the *awen* could only occur because of the long process which created it in the first place. Just as the herbs and roots had to be gathered at specific times of night and day, so too modern Druids believe that ideas must be harvested at the appropriate times. These separate pieces of knowledge must then be mixed in a vessel specifically fashioned for the purpose. It is only when the mixture has had time to brew for a significant time that enlightenment is received.

Moreover, this myth depicts the reliance of divinity on human aid. Without the intermediary of the Pheryllt, Cerridwen could not help her son. Without Morda, Gwion Bach could not be initiated into her mystery. Morda's importance is reflected through the

fact that as soon as Gwion Bach receives the *awen* meant for Afagddu, Cerridwen turns her rage on *Morda*. After all, by telling Gwion Bach to place more logs on the fire *Morda* thwarts the goddess' goals. He must, however, as Afagddu has not fulfilled the requirements of initiation.

Therefore, like Gwion Bach, the modern Druid initiate must spend time listening to the voice of wisdom and internalize the knowledge he gleans. Through the next two stages the initiate is introduced to new knowledge from different sources and this too is internalized. The result of this process is enlightenment (seen through the figure of Taliesin), which benefits the whole of society and the universe itself.

#### *Continuum of perfection*

Within the myth a distinction is made between two different types of wisdom. On the one hand is the wisdom represented by the conversation between *Morda* and Gwion Bach. As it is based on communion between and proper reverence for the deities, it can be seen as wisdom gained through the act of socialization. On the other hand is the wisdom represented by the attempted gift of *awen* to Afagddu by Cerridwen. This wisdom is portrayed as a gift from the goddess, which was to be passively received by Afagddu without any need for preparation on his part. He thus represents nature un-socialized.

This opposition creates a continuum of perfection in which action effects transformation. The relationship of action and transformation is inherent in each character's position in the story as the following figure depicts:

	Action	Transformation
Afagddu	-	-
Morda	+	-
Cerridwen	+	0
Gwion Bach/Taliesin	+	+

*Figure 5-6. The continuum of perfection.*

Thus we can see from the chart that, as Afagddu did not act as part of a socialization process, he could not be transformed. Morda, on the other hand, does act as it is he who converses with Gwion Bach and tells Gwion Bach to put more logs on the fire. However, his role is that of a catalyst. Although he acts, his action was not at his own instigation but at Cerridwen's. Additionally, he acts not for himself but Gwion Bach. He is thus not transformed. Cerridwen acts of her own accord and, like Morda, she is acting for another. Her transformation should obviously be greater than Morda's. She is transformed, but her transformation takes her through several stages that return her to her starting point. She moves through a cycle from concerned mother to vengeful goddess and returns to motherhood again. She is, after all, a mother goddess and as such is associated with the transformative cycles of nature. She is the agent of transformation as it is she who gives birth, reclaims the dead, and then transforms them through rebirth. Thus, Cerridwen transforms, but is not transformed herself.

### *The natural world*

Myths in the modern Druid corpus often expose oppositions extant in the natural world. The tale of Taliesin is no exception. In it the cycle and relationship of the seasons is depicted through the impregnation and rebirth of Gwion Bach. Additionally, the myth contains a distinction between the masculine and feminine elements, which are opposed but interdependent. For example, the goddess must pursue Gwion Bach in order to be impregnated but equally he needs her, as without her he cannot be reborn. Furthermore, I have suggested that although *awen* is brewed in the feminine symbol *par excellence*, the cauldron, it emanates from the divine masculine.

By studying the sequence of the myth after Cerridwen's pursuit of Gwion Bach ends we can explore the modern Druid cycle of the seasons. At the conclusion of the pursuit, Cerridwen swallows Gwion Bach as a grain of wheat. The existence of a pile of winnowed wheat clearly identifies this as the end of the harvest, sometime during September or October. My informants within Anderida stated that this time of year represents a time of separation between the god and goddess, and this is reflected in the death of Gwion Bach, a fact which is elucidated in OBOD's correspondence course as well. Cerridwen becomes pregnant and all action ceases while her body gestates the child. In modern Druid tradition this is equated with the coming of winter when the earth rests in stillness. At the Winter Solstice she gives birth to the boy as the mabon, or sun-child. The myth tells us that Cerridwen suckled the child for a period of time before sewing him into a bag and placing him in the river. This period equates to the early spring and the festival of Imbolc. At this time seeds are beginning to be sown to be harvested later in the year. Gwion Bach's journey down the river is obviously analogous.

Beltane finds the bag washed up on a salmon weir where Elffin finds it and removes the child. This period of time is one of great rejoicing in the modern Druid calendar, as Elffin and his wife rejoice at their new foster-son.

The natural opposition of gender is also shown through the Tale of Taliesin. The masculine/feminine opposition is often portrayed in the myth through the relationship of the sun and the moon. Cerridwen's association with the moon is an obvious one as her name, 'White Bent One', implies the shape of the crescent moon. Additionally, the moon affects the world's tides and, as we have seen, water is associated with femininity. Gwion Bach, on the other hand, is revealed as the sun-child Mabon, which echoes the modern Druid association of fire with the masculine element.

As the myth of Taliesin regards the differing roles of the god and goddess it can be seen as a myth that combines moon mysteries with those of the sun. However, the role of Cerridwen appears confusing and this may point to a grafting of a sun god theme onto an earlier myth regarding the moon, as related to me by a handful of my informants within OBOD. She is portrayed in one instance as an all-powerful goddess capable of giving and taking life while on the other needing help from the Pheryllt (the council of Druid alchemists) in order to transform her son. It seems curious that as a goddess she must turn to human society to find divine power. Modern Druidry argues that this contradiction means that divinity cannot exist without the help of man, but I would argue that this is a later version of an evolving myth. In this case the inferiority of moon magic is stressed while the male-oriented magic of the Pheryllt is shown to be superior. This is supported by the fact that Afagddu (literally 'Utter Darkness') does not receive the enlightenment meant for him, because he is a child of the goddess. He is closely

associated with the inferior feminine principle and thus of nature.<sup>84</sup> Conversely, Gwion Bach goes through the appropriate instruction at the hands of Morda and his knowledge therefore comes from the superior masculine, cultural principles.

The importance of the goddess still resonates through the myth, however. In fact, the transgression of the ritual precautions causes direct damage to the earth and therefore Cerridwen herself. When Cerridwen received the recipe for *awen* from the Pheryllt, she was warned that after the first three drops were imbibed, the rest of the mixture should be allowed to boil away and then the cauldron should be melted down. This precaution was taken as the entire worth of the batch was within the first three drops. The rest of the cauldron contained only negative, poisonous knowledge. When Gwion Bach receives the *awen* the cauldron splits, signifying the rage of the goddess at her own son's loss.<sup>85</sup> Baleful knowledge flows out from the cauldron to poison the countryside. In this we can see that as the cauldron can provide inspiration and rebirth, so too can it kill. The message here is unequivocal. Human transgressions have a negative influence on the earth (a representation of the goddess) and Cerridwen will revenge these wounds. When she flies at Gwion Bach, we must therefore understand this action not only as rage for the harm done to her son but to her own body as well. Given that modern Druidry is a nature-based religion, this is the most powerful transgression and the most awful consequence that could occur.

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<sup>84</sup> Afagddu's name may provide a clue here. As he is associated with the feminine, natural elements he is unsocialized and thus dwells in 'Utter Darkness', a literal translation of his name.

<sup>85</sup> While it is perhaps tempting to equate the cauldron (the symbol of the womb) splitting with a miscarriage or a bad birth I have found no evidence that it is seen this way by modern Druids. As this myth is an earlier Celtic one it could be that the splitting of the cauldron was viewed this way by the Celts; however this can not be confirmed.

### *Life and death*

Contained within this myth are teachings about the relationship between life and death. As discussed in the previous chapter, modern Druids believe in reincarnation. In the most literal sense this is the belief that after physical death the soul is reincarnated. However, modern Druids believe rebirth (in the sense of spiritual rebirth) can happen many times during an individual's life span. This rebirth occurs as the direct consequence of the conscious communion with deities. Contact with divinity nourishes the soul and this is seen as rebirth as the individual is transformed.

The theme of rebirth is readily apparent within the myth. Gwion Bach, in the form of a grain of wheat, is consumed by the goddess and impregnates her. He sacrifices his mortal life to impregnate the immortal goddess. This sacrifice is crucial as it allows him to attain immortality through reincarnation. Although Cerridwen pursues Gwion Bach out of vengeance the chase is sexual in nature. She chases Gwion Bach because he is her consort and she must mate with him in order to bring forth new life. This can only occur through Gwion Bach's death though. Therefore, this myth teaches modern Druids that life and death are intimately tied; one cannot exist without the other.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter endeavored to explore the importance of myth within modern Druidry and to examine how the modern Druid 'myth-making' process aids in the inculturation of individuals. Furthermore, this section sought to illustrate how the study of modern Druid myth can expand upon anthropological theories of myth. We thus began with a look at the various ways in which myth has been approached within the discipline of

anthropology. The sources and role of myths were then discussed, followed by an iteration of perhaps the most common modern Druid myth, the 'Tale of Taliesin'. This myth served as a basis for the examination of several key concepts within modern Druid belief. Once more we have seen the confrontation of the traditional with the modern; the supposedly ancient tale refashioned in a new setting for new purposes.

Through this analysis I have attempted to depict how this group perceives and orders the world around them according to cosmological principles. As we have seen, myth in this society is constantly evolving. Through the process of myth-making and myth-telling this community constantly realigns belief through a continued connection with the sacred. By studying these principles we can begin to delve into the beliefs and practices that constitute modern Druidry and understand how the study of this group can add to continued debates within anthropology.

## Chapter Six

### **Druidry in Action I: Seasonal Rituals**

*“In Druidry divinity was seen as being in everything, omnipresent yet manifesting differently in stone and star, animal and tree. And you communed with and celebrated your oneness with nature by observing a pattern of eight special ceremonies around the wheel of the year – each one designed to help you get in touch with the rhythm of the season, and the life of the land around you” (Carr-Gomm 2002a: 89).*

Philip Carr-Gomm’s statement neatly summarizes the importance of ritual for modern Druids. As the quote above suggests, the ritual year is loosely based on what is known of the practices of the ancient Celtic Druids. These celebrations or festivals (as they are termed by modern Druids) are aimed at reconnecting humans to the cycles of nature and ultimately of the universe. This sentiment is echoed by Greenwood, who states that Druidry is one of a set of contemporary magical groups and as such their “world-view is a different way of seeing the world; it is holistic – often viewed as an interconnected web of forces and energies, which may be communicated and worked with, or controlled and directed” (2002: 216). By concentrating on the history of these rituals, their meaning and their relationship to one another, this chapter will elucidate the significance of these rituals for this world-view. Once again, I must note that these are the general types of rituals celebrated by modern Druids. Each individual or group may practice one, all or theoretically none<sup>86</sup> as they fit into the individual or group’s coherent system. However, before we can embark upon this detailed examination, it is necessary to first contend with the main theoretical perspectives of ritual espoused by anthropologists.

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<sup>86</sup> While theoretically modern Druids do not have to practice these rituals, in my fieldwork all of my informants within Anderida and OBOD practiced at least a few of them.

## *Ritual*

Before proceeding to a detailed account of modern Druid rituals it is useful to first define the term and the way it is used in reference to modern Druidry. This is no easy task as the definition of the term 'ritual' has been hotly debated within the discipline of anthropology. One of the early writers on the subject, Emile Durkheim, posited that: "rites...are particular modes of action" (1995: 34) which refer to "the special nature of their object" (ibid). Rites, according to Durkheim, are properly defined as, "rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with sacred things" (ibid: 38). Furthermore, Durkheim argues that, in opposition to the individual and voluntary practices that define magic, religious rites are corporate and obligatory (1995: 41). Rituals, he goes on to argue, are privileged occasions during which the assembled community first *feels* like they are a community. Secondly, the community is exposed to social knowledge in either a literal or symbolic form. The mechanism for this feeling is "collective effervescence". Similarly, Victor Turner argues for this in his definition of *communitas*, which, "emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals" (1995: 96).

The 'special nature' to which Durkheim refers is the fact that rites make a distinction between the sacred and the profane, while also overcoming the barrier between the two that exists in 'normal' time. The distinction, originally Robertson Smith's, is that, "sacred things are things protected and isolated by prohibitions; profane things are those things to which the prohibitions are applied and that must keep at a distance from what is sacred" (ibid: 38). Importantly, Jack Goody notes that, "Durkheim

conceives the sacred-profane dichotomy to exist within the actor frame of reference; he claims to be dealing with concepts which are present in all cultures, which are meaningful to the people themselves” (Goody 1961: 148). The modern Druid example would tend to support Durkheim’s argument about the relevance to the actor of the sacred/profane dichotomy, as this is one they themselves voice. However, modern Druids do not use the term ‘profane’, preferring instead to voice this opposition as that of the “sacred” and “mundane”. This appears to be merely a difference in terminology and not a difference of type.

Jack Goody states, “generally the term has been used to refer to the action as distinct from the belief component of magico-religious phenomena. But the word is also employed in an attempt to avoid the distinction made by earlier writers between magic and religion” (Goody 1961: 147). Indeed, the early authors to whom Goody refers (specifically Malinowski and Durkheim) distinguished the two realms in their etic accounts of these phenomena. However, in the Druid case this point is not borne out. From the emic perspective, within modern Druidry magic or more properly, ‘magic-working’ is an integral part of collective rituals and is obligatory to those who choose to practice this spirituality. As well, Frazer’s comment that ritual is propitiatory can certainly be disregarded here. A perusal of the modern Druid evidence makes it quite clear that spirits and energies are not seen as malevolent entities but rather, as beings to invoke for their ability to bless the participants. On the other hand, it can be argued that propitiation is not necessarily directed toward pacifying malevolent entities but to advancing a relationship with beneficial spirits. The modern Druid evidence is distinct,

however, in that the magical actions are not conceived of as ensuring that blessings will be bestowed; here there is no causal relationship.

Authors have also argued for ritual as a type of language. Chief amongst these is Edmund Leach, who recognized this capacity of ritual, but nevertheless recognized the potential flaw in this theory and made the reservation that it is a specific type of language. This equivalence of ritual and language would not seem to appear odd to Talal Asad, who reminds us that,

‘Ritual’...originally meant a book, a manual giving the rules for performing the liturgy, and hence helping to educate the proper dispositions of the monks and to establish the monasteries’, ‘regime of truth’. Though it retains a residue of the medieval sense, the term has spread far and wide, introducing a generalized religiosity into what were previously ‘secular’ settings. (James 2003: 124)

The modern Druid case certainly supports this claim, but this perspective appears observer-oriented and I therefore question its relevance to the participants. Even though ritual uses language and definitely relies on performance to communicate societal rules and beliefs, the analogy between ritual and language has perhaps been taken too far by Asad. Moreover, the utility of the distinction between secular and religious rituals is questionable, as both are ultimately about transcendence (cf. Durkheim 1995).

Still others (such as Parsons and Radcliffe-Brown) “are agreed that ritual is essentially expressive or symbolic in nature. And in each case the interpreter of the symbolic relationship turns out to be the observer rather than the actor” (ibid: 152). If true, this assumption begs the question of how relevant anthropological analysis is. If we believe our assessments of their symbols are the most relevant, the results of our analysis merely reflect our own society’s vision of the other. Conversely, our goal is (and should be) to understand the fundamental coherence of other societies in their own right. Moreover, this assumption necessarily privileges our own society’s views, thus

subjugating the other. In other words, members of another society clearly do not have to have their symbolism explained to them by outsiders. If this were the case we would have to question how their system developed in the first place if its members cannot understand its symbols without external exegesis. One could argue, however, with Sperber that individuals cannot always explain their symbolism. In contradiction to Turner's evidence, Sperber argues that the Dorze cannot explain the symbolism behind their practice of putting butter on their heads, but continue to do so even in the absence of a concrete explanation for the practice (cf. Sperber 1975).

This emphasis on symbols is continued through the work of Clifford Geertz, who argued that ritual involves, "the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in men and the general conceptions of the order of existence which they formulate for men meet and reinforce one another" (Geertz 1978: 112). This statement is reminiscent of Durkheim's idea that ritual is a heightened expression of society. However, this is where the accord between the two authors ends. While Durkheim posited that ritual was essentially communication between society and men, Geertz (following Weber) argued that ritual was fundamentally a communication between men (cf. Geertz 1978). The manner in which rituals are conducted, therefore, changes over time in response to the interactions between the participants. With regard to the modern Druid evidence, this interactive, emic approach is ostensibly more relevant.

Additionally, it implies that rituals are essentially performances, an argument made by Radcliffe-Brown, Victor Turner and, more recently, by Wendy James in her statement that, "whatever we mean by 'ritual', we include the idea that it is deliberate ceremonial performance, physically enacted or enactable, and transformative in intention

or in effect. Thus rituals (again however defined) entail use or treatment of the body, controlled use of space and specific timing of actions” (James 2003: 107). I would argue that it is precisely this symbolic and performance aspect which is relevant to the case at hand.

While these theories are all valid in some respects, Victor Turner has established a more relevant thesis in his research on the Ndembu. In his seminal work *The Ritual Process*, Turner explicitly states, “the Ndembu are aware of the expressive or symbolic function of ritual elements” (1995:15). Furthermore, he argues that the Ndembu are fully able to express the symbolic meanings that reside in these elements. Indeed, this is the case with modern Druidry. When asked, for example, why mistletoe is equated with the masculine element, modern Druids can clearly relate that this symbolic equivalence is due to the fact that mistletoe and seminal fluid are both milky white substances.

There yet remains one definition of ritual to consider before turning to the data itself. Arguably, it is the most important definition as it is the one espoused *by modern Druids*. To them, a “ritual is a sacred act through which we can connect with spiritual powers that not only exist in the Universe but also flow through us” (Worthington 1999: 51). This is, in fact, the essence of the emic aim of ritual: it is through rituals that access to the sacred is controlled and the relationship between the sacred and profane is mediated. These rituals may be everyday affairs or one of a number of ceremonial occasions during which modern Druids come together to practice their faith. Furthermore, the relationship between ceremony and ritual, for modern Druids, consists in a ritual being “a ceremonial act with sacred purpose” (ibid). While I certainly take this definition seriously (as it is espoused by my informants) I nevertheless argue that it is the

aspects of performance that largely define the rituals of the modern Druids. The rest of this chapter is therefore devoted to describing the ways in which these performances occur and what they can tell us about modern Druid belief.

### *History of the rituals*<sup>87</sup>

Although much of modern Druidry can be said to be an ‘invented tradition’ (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992) the eight seasonal festivals that comprise the Druid ritual year are based on what is known of the festivals of the ancient Celts. The sources for these rituals are diverse, ranging from archaeological evidence to folk survivals.

Within OBOD, the orthodox claim is that the round of eight festivals was officially created by Ross Nichols in conjunction with the founder of the modern Wicca movement, Gerald Gardner, a claim which is not substantiated by the evidence. In support of his claim, Carr-Gomm states, “both Druids and Wiccans celebrate these eight festivals, and in fact it was Nuinn and Gerald Gardner who introduced the eightfold scheme and much of the modern versions of these rites into paganism in the 1950s and 1960s” (2002a: 92). At the time Nichols joined the ADO, that organization only celebrated the equinoxes and the Summer Solstice, “leaving out the celebration of the Winter Solstice and the traditional four cross-quarter day celebrations that have been called Celtic Fire Festivals” (Carr-Gomm 2002c: 106). Nichols supposedly added the Winter Solstice to give structural symmetry to the mandala. This addition is unsurprising as the Druid movement of the Victorian and Edwardian eras had borrowed much from other traditions as well. This is perhaps best illustrated in Nichols’ own words:

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<sup>87</sup> For more on the history of the survival of these rituals through the Middle Ages I refer the reader to Ronald Hutton’s exceptional work on the subject, *The Stations of the Sun*.

From now [1245] until the mid seventeenth century at least all record of ritual Druidry appears to be blank, with one startling exception. Can we fill in these four centuries at all, or are we to agree with the many writers who assume that seventeenth and eighteenth-century Druidic reconstruction was simply based upon Roman account plus romantic ideas and a general desire to be sheeted in white – if not in Roman togas, like English statesmen in sepulchral effigies, then in white Druidic robes with Egyptian-style head-dresses? Undoubtedly this element came in; it was the age of romantic revivals already. (Nichols 1991: 77)

However, support for the inclusion of these festivals does exist. These astronomical festivals were supposedly celebrated by the ancient Celts and as evidence of this fact, Orr points to “the alignments of megalithic structures built by the predecessors of the Celts” (1999: 84). The fire festivals were added at a later date and stem from Nichols’ research into Irish folklore. The dates for these fire festivals were taken from the Coligny calendar.

Covering approximately a five year time span, the Coligny calendar, a bronze tablet found in Coligny, France in 1897, is arguably the main source of information about the ancient Celtic ritual year. Supposedly a first century AD document, Matthews states that, “J. Monard, in his interesting survey, speculates that it was compiled by druids who wished to preserve the distinctive Celtic calendar at a time when the Julian Calendar was being introduced” (2003: 138). Although some of the tablet is missing and most of the information contained within is abbreviated or obscured, it is “thought to be a table of sacred times and festivals” (Ross 1995: 433).

### *The mandala*

The ‘celebrations’ (as they are referred to by the Druids) that comprise the Druid cycle of the year are envisioned as a circle, which is graphically represented as a *mandala*<sup>88</sup>, as

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<sup>88</sup> This term is the native one, however it originates in Sanskrit.

depicted in Figure 6-4. This diagram reflects the modern Druid idea that all of life is cyclical. However, the celebrations are arranged around the circumference in a linear order and are read in a clockwise direction. For instance, Beltaine occurs six weeks before the Summer Solstice, which is in turn six weeks before Lughnasadh. Hence, the seasons follow each other diachronically, but are at the same time continuously repeated.

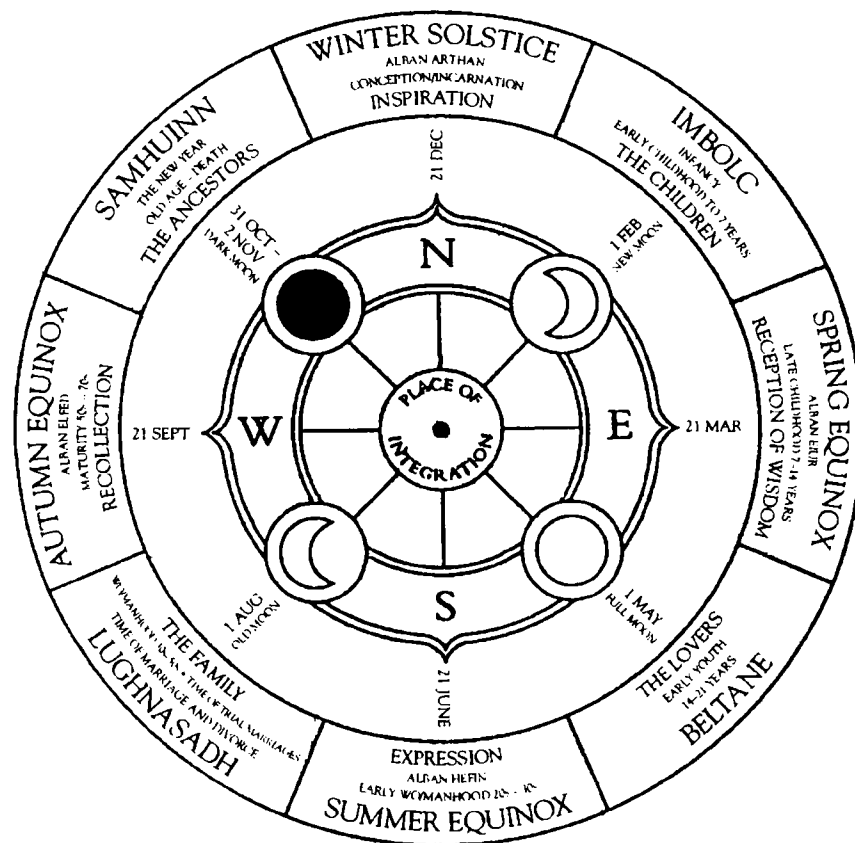


Figure 6-1. *The Druid Seasonal Mandala* (Carr-Gomm 2002a: 97).

The cycle of the year is split into two halves: the light and the dark (Nichols 1990: 299). As the terms imply, the light half of the year is influenced by the presence of the sun, the dark half by its absence. Informants differed as to the division of the year; however, the majority stated that the light half of the year begins in the northern hemisphere at the Spring Equinox, while the dark half of the year begins at the Autumnal

Equinox.<sup>89</sup> As these two festivals mark the points of balance at which the night and day are of equal duration, this appears to support the claim of the majority. Thus the light half of the year contains the celebrations of the Spring Equinox, Beltaine, the Summer Solstice, and Lughnasadh, while the dark half includes the Autumn Equinox, Samhuinn, the Winter Solstice, and Imbolc. This division is ancient, as attested to by Ross: “The ancient Celtic year was divided into two seasons, the cold season...and the warm season” (1995: 434). It continues in the survival of the Welsh terms *Calan Gaeaf* and *Calan Mai*.

The ‘wheel of the year’ (as it is often called) is further subdivided into pairs of celebrations (Nichols 1990: 299). These pairs include the Winter and Summer Solstice, Imbolc and Lughnasadh, the Spring and Autumn Equinox, and Beltaine and Samhuinn. By re-examining the illustration of the mandala at Figure 6-4 it becomes apparent that these pairs are formed by drawing a line directly from one festival through the central point to the festival immediately opposite. The coupling of these festivals reflects not only their position on the wheel but also the fact that they are mirror images of one another: they share a common underlying theme but that theme is in each case reversed. With the astronomical festivals the common themes are clear; both solstices are points of what Druids call ‘stand-still’ and both equinoxes are points of balance. In both cases the reversal regards the position of the festival in relation to the waxing or waning of the sun. Thus, at the Winter Solstice the light of the sun is beginning to wax while at the Summer Solstice it begins waning.

The themes of the fire festivals are not quite as clear but it appears that the pair Imbolc/Lughnasadh carries the underlying theme of the planting and reaping of crops. At Imbolc the seed is planted that grows into the crops that are reaped at Lughnasadh.

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<sup>89</sup> The dates are reversed for the southern hemisphere.

However, the seeds must be gathered at Lughnasadh so that they may be sown at Imbolc. A reversal does not appear at Beltaine and Samhuinn. However, their similarity is clear as they both relate to magic: the *sidhe* or faery-folk are said to roam the earth at Beltaine, while at Samhuinn spirits and the ancestors walk abroad. Beltaine and Samhuinn are therefore equivalent as they are both magically or spiritually dangerous times. Thus, Orr states that Beltaine “features in the same way that Samhain does in the Irish tradition, with demons stealing newborn children, dragons fighting each other and the gates to the faery realm standing dangerously open” (1999: 95).

In addition to reflecting the passage of the earth through the seasons the yearly cycle of the celebrations symbolize “the whole non-dualistic self, the cosmos, the wheel of the year” (Worthington 1999: 54). This concept reflects the idea that all of life is cyclical. Therefore, just as days, seasons, and years cycle so do the lives of all creatures, including humans. Each celebration is equated with the various stages of an individual’s life. Carr-Gomm argues that the observance of these celebrations allows individuals to “have a chance to invoke each of these phases of our life every year, as if each year were a microcosm of our complete lives” (1991: 75). By doing this, human beings can “attune our personal rhythm to the rhythm of the cosmos, of nature... [and] we find that we develop an increasing sense of peace and place in our world and in our lives” (ibid: 73). This is necessary as modern Druidry espouses the belief that removal from connection with nature creates alienation, a theme continually stressed by my informants both within OBOD and Anderida, and stated explicitly in the Bardic correspondence course. According to these informants this alienation began with the Industrial Revolution and

has continued to cause problems which can only be resolved through a process of reconnecting with the earth.

Following the circumference of the circle is thus a revolution in reference to a fixed center-point. The center is seen as the “point of balance, the fixed axis around which everything revolves” (Shallcrass 2000: 27). According to Carr-Gomm, (relating the teachings of Ross Nichols), “at the centre of the turning wheel of your life is your Soul. At the centre of the turning wheel of the Earth is the Sun” (1991: 68). It is the central point which creates the action of revolution and hence Carr-Gomm states, “The Sun causes the wheel to turn” (ibid). Logically, it follows that in terms of an individual’s life the Soul is the center-point around which the body revolves as it goes through the various life-stages of infancy, youth, adulthood and maturity. Like the sun, the soul is eternal and similarly it is the soul which initiates the cycle of death and rebirth. Literally, this cycle of reincarnation means that as the corporeal body dies the eternal soul is reborn in another physical body. Metaphorically, individuals are conceived of as continually going through the processes of birth and death within their own lives. For example, a writer continually creates new tales, which, upon completion, the writer must ‘let go’.<sup>90</sup>

The center-point is the point at which the spokes of the wheel<sup>91</sup> converge and is often referred to as the “Place of Integration” (Carr-Gomm 1991: 78). This is the point at which all wisdom gained is internalized and then integrated into the soul. Cosmically it is both the “Source of All Being” and the place of “Being and No-Thing” (ibid). The center-point (and the soul itself) thus transcends both cyclical and diachronic time. Carr-

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<sup>90</sup> This phrase is often used to denote at once the process of physical death and the individual’s proper action when death occurs.

<sup>91</sup> The spokes of the wheel are formed by the lines drawn from one festival’s position on the circumference of the circle to the opposite festival through the center-point. The Druid year is thus often symbolized as a wheel with spokes.

Gomm states this eloquently: “As we contemplate the festivals we shall see how interwoven is the life of our psyche and of our body, of the planet and of the sun and moon, for each festival time marks a potent conjunction of Time and Place in a way that is quite remarkable” (ibid: 70). The celebration of these festivals, therefore, serves as a powerful reminder to modern Druids of their connection to the processes of the universe.

### *Winter Solstice*

The Druid year begins at the winter solstice and is at once the first and last celebration of the ritual year. The first of the four astronomical festivals, it marks the point in the year when the earth is farthest from the sun and subsequently the shortest day and longest night of the year. Modern Druids refer to this time as one of “stand still”, a definition that clearly derives from the etymology of the term *solstice*, stemming from the Latin *solstitium* which refers to, “one or other of the two times in the year, midway between the two equinoxes, when the sun, having reached the tropical points, is farthest from the equator and appears to stand still, i.e. about 21<sup>st</sup> June (the summer solstice) and 22<sup>nd</sup> December (the winter solstice)” (*The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 1991: 1824). However, this is too narrow a definition as these dates refer only to the astronomical observances in the northern hemisphere. In the southern hemisphere these dates must be reversed, with the summer solstice falling in December and the winter in June. This clarification has occurred within OBOD in response to the rapidly expanding number of Australasians who have joined the order. Whichever hemisphere is the locus of ritual activity, modern Druids celebrate the winter solstice on or as near as possible to the astronomical observance.

Druids often refer to this celebration as Alban Arthan or Alban Arthuan while in the Norse tradition it is known as Yule. Alban Arthan appears to have come from the eighteenth century Welsh work *Barddas* by Iolo Morganwg discussed earlier in this thesis (1862: 418). Alban, according to OBOD literature, means ‘light’ while Arthuan stems from the Welsh root *arth*, meaning ‘bear’. According to Nichols, this translates as, “eyes lift to heaven, the pole star and the Bear” (1990: 299). More commonly, however, modern Druids refer to it as ‘the light of the bear’. Alban Arthuan is commonly called, “The Light of Arthur” (Carr-Gomm 1991: 71) and refers to the legendary figure of King Arthur. However, the name ‘Arthur’ stems from the root *arth* (or possibly the Celtic term *artos*) and therefore is based on the term ‘bear’. Whatever the implications, the two terms are clearly etymologically related.

The winter solstice is both a time of grief and a time of joy for modern Druids. As the solstice is the time of minimum light (and therefore maximum darkness) it is conceived of as the time when the sun god dies and is reborn. During the ceremony Druids grieve for the passing of the sun god but also rejoice in the birth of the mabon, the sun child that is the reincarnation of the dead god. Thus, “the putting into practice of the law of giving and receiving is what makes these solstice ceremonies the high ones of the year. The full cup that has been received must be emptied if it is to be refilled” (Carr-Gomm 2002c: 108-109).

Alternatively, the winter solstice is seen as the time when the Holly King (who has presided over the cold winter) dies and is reborn as the Oak King, the god of lush young vegetation. Orr depicts the importance of this in her statement that during the winter solstice, “the newborn sun returns as saviour, changing the tides, bringing light

into the darkness, in the same way that all great heroes have come into lands under threat, including Jesus and Arthur” (1999: 86). In fact, this statement can elucidate the reason for the association of the ceremony with King Arthur as he is often likened to the figure of the mabon.

The rebirth of the sun marks not only the beginning of the New Year but also the end of the old. According to Nichols this celebration is “essentially a death-birth – the death of the old sun and temporary victory of the dark, the birth of the child-sun from darkness on the horns of the moon” (1990: 93). The main elements of the ritual therefore incorporate themes of darkness and ‘letting go’ (or grieving and moving on) as well as rebirth and light. It is not surprising then that images of the womb and its fecundity abound during these ceremonies as it is through the womb (or similarly the cauldron) that souls are reincarnated. This celebration is therefore placed in the northern sphere of the mandala as it is ruled by the feminine element of earth. Other feminine associations include the inner world, valleys and chambers such as Newgrange in Ireland.

While femininity is clearly celebrated, the masculine is equally revered at this time. This can be seen in the inclusion of mistletoe in the ritual. Mistletoe is believed by modern Druids to be symbolic of sperm, due not only to its physical similarity (predominantly its whiteness) but also due to the way it grows. Sprouting from the oak tree, the most sacred tree for Druids, it is propagated through the air and therefore is not born out of the womb of the earth and does not partake of the feminine element. Often modern Druids refer to the mistletoe as *equivalent* to sperm but it is not actually treated in this manner. By equivalence they refer to its symbolic, not actual qualities.

The other major feature of this ritual is the use of light, which is hardly surprising as the winter solstice celebration heralds the sun's perseverance through the darkness of the winter. Although variation exists within modern Druid rituals most winter solstice celebrations involve the extinguishing of a fire or a candle and its rekindling or relighting from a new source. While this is often a single central fire or candle I have also witnessed a ritual in which each individual was given a candle to light at the precise moment of the solstice. In any case extinguishing and relighting a source of light is a symbolic act meant to mirror the death of the sun god and his rebirth as the mabon. This ritual is therefore constitutive of the group as it enacts the ideas of creation and reincarnation for the individual Druids. Through the ritual Druids are acculturated to the idea that life stems from the union of the male and female aspect and that life is not linear, but instead follows a cyclical pattern of reincarnation.

The winter solstice ritual, like all Druid rituals, can be celebrated in any physical location. However, two sites deserve particular mention due to their association with this time of the year. At the stone circle of Stonehenge OBOD gathers every year to greet the midwinter sun. As the sun rises over the trilithions a beam of light is cast through the southeast, falling in the inner horseshoe. This beam of light is representative of the sun god who impregnates the mother goddess, who is represented by the womblike shape of the inner horseshoe of stones. This theme is continued at the Neolithic site of Newgrange in Ireland when, on the winter solstice, a beam of light penetrates the inner, womb-like chamber and is said to impregnate the mother goddess. These are clearly sites of great importance for modern Druids because they symbolically reflect the union of the god and goddess in permanent structures. However, this symbolism can be affected in many ways

and in many different locations; therefore, the rituals at these sites are not in any way privileged. Instead they can be likened to the performance of a play: any space will suffice for the meaning of the play to be conveyed but certain spaces may reflect the themes of the play itself. These spaces will, therefore, convey an added layer of meaning to the audience who is attuned to the subtleties of the message.

### *Imbolc*

Falling on the first of February in the Northern Hemisphere and the first of August in the Southern Hemisphere is the second festival of the Druid year, Imbolc. Also known as Imbolg or Óimelc, Imbolc is a Gaelic term which “means ‘purification’” (Ross 1995: 435). Pronounced ‘im-olk’ (Orr 1999: 94), it is the first of the four fire festivals and is known in Welsh as Gwyl Fair or Gwyl Forwyn [“The Feast of Mary” or “The Feast of the Virgin” (ibid)] and in European folk tradition as Candlemas.

Imbolc is the time of the first plowing and sowing in both the literal and metaphorical senses. It is the time of the when rain clears the debris of winter and nourishes the land, germinating new life. This new life is celebrated by modern Druids at Imbolc in the form of the budding snowdrops (often the first flower to bloom in the late winter and very early spring) and the birth of the first lambs of the season. Metaphorically, new life is celebrated through the reverence of the power of inspiration that stimulates artistic creation.

The celebration of Imbolc marks the return of the sovereignty of the goddess after the reign of the Holly King. This celebration is therefore directed toward the feminine, as is illustrated by the fact that it is the only festival entirely given over to reverence of the

goddess, specifically Brighid. Sometimes known as Brigit, Brigid, Bride, or Bridie, she is revered in many aspects but is particularly associated with motherhood, poetry, healing and smith craft. Thus Carr-Gomm states, “with Imbolc ... we have the First Plough, the washing of the face of the earth and eight lights because this is a distinctly mother goddess occasion” (2002c: 103).

During this celebration fertility is celebrated and special emphasis is placed on motherhood and infancy, whether in the human domain or natural realm. Imbolc’s association with the lactation of cattle (particularly sheep) is therefore understandable. However, the association may be due to the fact that the goddess Brighid had “an interesting association with milk and dairy produce” (Ross 1995: 436) but my informants also pointed to the fact that February is the beginning of the lambing season. Additionally, many informants indicated that February is the infancy of the year and therefore properly the time of lactation. However, this explanation does not account for the specific choice of sheep, but mammals in general and therefore seems cursory. It seems more probable that the association of Brighid with lactation and the beginning of the lambing season was primary, coming to modern Druidry through literature written on the subject of the Celtic festival of Imbolc. The correspondence of this festival with the infancy of the year seems to have been added at a later point to fulfill a structural role, as is supported Carr-Gomm’s statement that when Nichols joined the ADO only three of the four astronomical festivals and none of the fire festivals were celebrated (2002c: 106).

As stated above, Imbolc is also the festival that celebrates artistic creation. Specifically, it honors the inspiration received by poets and musicians through the goddess Brighid. Her connection with divine inspiration (*awen*) clearly illustrates her

role as a mother goddess. While some of her associations display this quite obviously others require illumination. Thus her equation with childbirth and lactation are unequivocal. However, her dominion over the fields of poetry, music and smith-craft seem entirely distinct. This apparent confusion can be resolved by understanding that each of these pursuits requires a three-step process of conception, gestation and creation. Whether this process is biological or artistic the similarities are evident. By celebrating individual artistic achievement, therefore, modern Druids are at once honoring the goddess who allows them to channel inspiration into this world and becoming creators, just as Brigid is herself a creator.

Like all Druid rituals, Imbolc celebrations vary widely. Nevertheless, they usually contain two main elements: a celebration of the snowdrop and an *eisteddfod*. The snowdrop is celebrated in many different ways. For example, at one Imbolc ritual I noted their presence in small pots placed at the four cardinal directions, while in another ritual a number of the flowers were actually planted at the site. However they are used they are celebrated as the first flowers of spring and so herald the generation of new life. For its part, the *eisteddfod* normally takes places either in the middle of the Imbolc ceremony or after the ceremony itself. At this time poetry is recited, music played, and dancing (especially Morris dancing) occurs. The celebration of inspiration makes it clear that this fire festival honors not the heat provided by the fire but light, specifically the light of inspiration. Related to the element of air, this festival is symbolically correlated with light and water and is placed in the northeastern sphere of the circle.

### *Spring Equinox*

The second astronomical festival of the year is the spring equinox. Occurring on the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> of March in the Northern Hemisphere and the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> of September in the Southern Hemisphere, it is called Alban Eilir (or alternatively Alban Eiler) by modern Druids. Meaning the ‘light of spring’ or the “Light of Regeneration” (Shallcrass 2000: 36) it is one of the two times of the year when the day and the night are of equal duration.

Modern Druids believe that as at Imbolc the earth began to wake from her winter slumber, Alban Eiler sees an increase of her activity. While Alban Eiler is clearly a time of the waxing of the earth’s fertility, she has still not reached her full potential yet. This will only occur at the time of the third of the spring festivals, Beltaine. Alban Eiler therefore honors the potential blessings of spring and is understandably associated with the planting and tending of seeds (once again both literal and metaphorical) that will hopefully be harvested later in the year.

Alban Eiler, as an equinox celebration, is allied with the notion of balance. As stated above, at the equinoxes the night and day are of equal duration and are therefore equal in strength. The ritual of Alban Eiler rests on the reverence of the qualities of balance in the universe and in the lives of all creatures, including human beings. This moment of perfect balance is brief though, and from this point of the year until the zenith of the summer solstice the strength of the light of day increases.

As a festival of spring, Alban Eiler is concerned with the blessing of seeds and the fertility of the earth. Unsurprisingly, its symbolic representations include buds, blossoms and seeds (Nichols 1990: 298) as well as the smoke of incense. The emphasis of this time is on visualizing and planning for the future and is equated with the phase of early

childhood development. The symbolism of the smoke of incense confirms this festival is placed in the east, the realm of the element of air. It is therefore linked to the qualities of air including the thought and planning gained from detached observation of the ‘bigger picture’.

### *Beltaine*

Beltaine is the second fire festival of the year and the last of the three spring festivals. While the term has historically denoted the entire month of May it more usually refers to the festival held on the first of May in the Northern Hemisphere and the first of November in the Southern Hemisphere. Beltaine<sup>92</sup> is a Gaelic term meaning “the good fire” (Nichols 1990: 298). Etymologically, Beltaine stems from the root *bel*, meaning ‘bright’<sup>93</sup> and the root *taine* (or *teine*), meaning ‘fire’. *Bel* also refers to the sun and is the root of the name of the ‘bright god’ of ancient Celtic tradition variously called Bel, Beli or Balor. In Welsh, Beltaine is known as Calan Mai (‘Calends of May’) and it survives as May Day in the European folk tradition.

Chiefly concerned with rites of fertility and purification, Beltaine is unambiguously related to the celebration of love and sexuality. The central figures at this juncture are the May Queen and the Green Man, two figures who illustrate the notion that nature is renewed only through the courting and ultimate sexual union of the earth goddess and the god of vegetation. It is therefore properly a time for modern Druids to contemplate the interdependence and union of the masculine and feminine energies

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<sup>92</sup> Variant spellings include: *Bealtainne*, *Bealteine*, *Bealteinne*, *Bealtine*, *Beltane*, and *Belteine*.

<sup>93</sup> My informants also related that *bel* means ‘good luck’ but I have not found any etymological evidence for this correlation.

within the universe. Even as the fecundity of the spring is honored, though, Beltaine marks the end of this period and the beginning of the summer season.

Historically, fires were lit on hilltops to celebrate the life and fertility that came with the spring. Nichols points out that, “Bealteinne chiefly meant to the neolithics what its name implied, the lighting of fires, mainly upon hilltops as signs of rejoicing” (1991: 86). As Matthews states, Beltaine marked “the release from winter confinement” (2003: 129) and was therefore logically a time for the tribe to come together to celebrate the coming summer. While this pastoral festival involved communal celebrations, modern Druids also state that the ancient Druids believed that the lighting of these fires ensured the continuing course of the sun through the heavens. By extinguishing their family hearth fires and relighting them from the communal hilltop fire Neolithic people signified the death and ensured the rebirth of the sun.

The fires are lit not only to honor the sun but also because they have the ability to purify them and endow them with fertility. Thus, two fires were often lit at Beltaine and cattle would be driven between them (Ross 1995: 436). Meant to purify the animals and guarantee their fertility, the two fires (known as the *Cétshamain*) were thought to bring good luck to the herd by ensuring their fecundity (Marquardt and Crumley 1987: 370). Plainly, these fires were imbued with magical properties that brought good luck.

Cattle are no longer driven between the Beltaine fires. However, the Beltaine fires still play a pivotal role in the celebration for modern Druids. Individuals at the rituals I have attended often enter the sacred space where the ritual is to be held by walking through two fires. This act is performed for its ability to purify and bring good luck to the participants. At the conclusion of the Beltaine rite many members jump over

the fires singly or in couples. While this often happens on the summer solstice it is much more likely at Beltaine. Either way, this practice is meant to ensure the individual or the couple's ability to conceive. Additionally, one of my informants stated that jumping the Beltaine fire would ensure that a single person would find a mate. Intriguing as it may be, I have not found confirmation of this belief within the wider community. However, Orr's suggestion that, "the twin fires of the rite express the duality of nature, the tension of opposites craving union, the source of creativity" (1999: 95) seems to support the notion that jumping the fires will bring the individual union with his or her opposite.

Perhaps the most visible and popularly recognizable feature of the Beltaine ritual, is the Maypole and the dance that occurs at its base. Many groups do not have the facilities to erect a Maypole, however those groups that do relish the occasion. While some slight variations occur, generally this practice consists of tying ribbons to the end of a long pole and then erecting the pole in a slight hole in the earth. The ribbons are then held by individuals standing in a large circle around the base of the pole, as is evidenced by Nichols' statement that, "multiple ropes, later ribbons, were elaborately woven and unwoven by the circular dancers" (1991: 87). However, it seems clear that Nichols' assertions that the Maypole was Celtic in origin are misplaced. In fact, the Maypole first came to Britain in the nineteenth century and is probably Sicilian in origin. However, it has become widespread at modern Druid Beltaine rituals. During the dance, individuals move around the circumference of the circle, weaving in and out to create a pattern of ribbons around the pole. While some of these dances can be quite structured, they are usually frantic and chaotic affairs, with dancers trying not to bump into each other as they bob and weave.

Additionally, some Maypole dances incorporate the practice of individuals kissing each other on the cheek as they pass. The Maypole may indeed be a survival of an ancient Druidic practice, as many modern Druids argue, but may just as easily be a later European folk custom. In either case the Maypole is undoubtedly a fertility symbol, and according to Nichols it is “linked with the central cult of sun and growth” (ibid.).



*Figure 6-2. The Maypole dance at an Anderida camp (taken from <http://www.rainbowcircle.f2s.com/Mysite/Camps06/02Anderida/anderida.html>).*

Symbolically, Beltaine has many associations. These include all manner of vegetation but specifically the hawthorn tree (or ‘May Tree’) and spring blossoms. Obviously, fire and smoke play a central role as well. Residing in the southeast of the circle this festival is related to the period of adolescence, when individuals are exploring their masculinity and femininity. Therefore, Beltaine’s link with union and sexuality are explicit.

### *Summer Solstice*

Occurring on the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> of June in the Northern Hemisphere and the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> of December in the Southern Hemisphere, the summer solstice is the third of the astronomical festivals. Alban Hefin or (rarely) Alban Heruin, as it is called in Welsh, means the 'light of summer' or the 'light of the shore'. Like the winter solstice, the summer solstice marks the point at which the sun appears to stand still in the sky. However, as the winter solstice was the time of minimum light, so the summer solstice is its opposite, the time of maximum light. At this point the sun is at its highest, with the days longer than nights. The solstices represent the two points at which the tide will turn and the sun will begin to wax (as at the winter solstice) or wane (as at the summer solstice). Presumably, this is the explanation for the term 'light of the shore'.

The summer solstice marks the completion of the waxing of the sun through the year that began with the rebirth of the new sun at the winter solstice. It therefore celebrates the time when the sun's influence is greatest. While this battle is sometimes depicted as the crowning of the Oak King (a god of vegetation and thus of the summer months) who will become the Holly King at the waning of the year, it is also illustrated as the point at which the sun-child mabon has defeated the darkness of night and has reached the zenith of his power.<sup>94</sup> However, this victory over darkness is short-lived. In overcoming the night and attaining the apex of his power, he ensures his own descent towards his death at the winter solstice. This victory is therefore paradoxical as his conquest creates the necessity of his own demise so that he may rise again in rebirth at

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<sup>94</sup> This appears to have worked its way into modern Druidry through the works of Robert Graves, whose books I have seen on the bookshelves of most members of Anderida and many members of OBOD. It has become so entrenched within Anderida and OBOD that at Summer Solstice celebrations I have witnessed the battle enacted by members of the group. I witnessed this at Stonehenge (with OBOD) and at the Long Man of Wilmington (with Anderida).

the winter solstice. In essence, this festival then marks the self-sacrifice of the sun god and this may be what Nichols is alluding to in his statement that this is “the hospitable feast – the giving back of that which is freely given” (1990: 298).

The ritual of the summer solstice used to be marked by OBOD with three distinct ceremonies: a noon ceremony, a midnight vigil, and a dawn ceremony. In recent years, however, it appears that the midnight vigil has stopped being held in favor of an emphasis on the noon and dawn ceremonies. The noon ceremony is held in Glastonbury while the dawn ceremony is held at Stonehenge on the following day. This second ceremony determines the date for the first, as the Stonehenge ceremony is held as close to the solstice as possible (though usually not actually on the solstice for scheduling reasons). As the solstices are the two times of the year chosen for the international OBOD assemblies (as will be discussed further below) the membership is gathered at Glastonbury for the noon ceremony on a Saturday and then driven by coach to Stonehenge very early the next morning. Central to both ceremonies is the imagery of the Oak King and that of the sun at its maximum potency, while also alluding to the ultimate demise of that power.

The summer solstice is one of the three ‘spirit nights’ in the modern Druid tradition. Along with Beltaine and Samhuinn, the summer solstice is a time when faeries and ghosts are abroad. It is thus a time when the separation between the physical world and the spirit world is minimal and therefore communication is heightened. Although the realm of the sacred and the realm of the profane (concepts which will be discussed further in chapter eight) are distinct, the ‘spirit nights’ are times when a particularly close relationship can exist between the two. As Durkheim points out,

The sacred thing is, par excellence, that which the profane must not and cannot touch with impunity. To be sure, this prohibition cannot go so far as to make all communication between the two worlds impossible, for if the profane could in no way enter into relations with the sacred, the sacred would be of no use. (1995: 38)

This barrier between the sacred and the profane is overcome during ritual. Thus, one of the goals of the summer solstice festival is consequently to undertake divination as it will be most effective during the spirit nights, when the profane is in closer contact with the sacred and the 'veil is thinnest', as my informants related, allowing closer communication between the two worlds. Vervain is associated with this festival as this plant is considered "the most important herb for Druids" (Carr-Gomm 2002b: 97). It is "the plant of sight" (Nichols 1990: 298), more specifically the second sight of divination. The Mabon is therefore often given the gift of vervain during these rituals to provide him with visual acuity.

Residing in the southern part of the mandala of the year, the summer solstice is presided over by the element of water. Its placement on the circle denotes it as a time of early adulthood in which individuals are maturing. It is thus a time of manifestation and the integration of lessons learned in childhood and youth and is unequivocally ruled by the masculine element.

### *Lughnasadh*

Occurring on August 1<sup>st</sup> in the Northern Hemisphere and February 1<sup>st</sup> in the Southern Hemisphere is the celebration of Lughnasadh (pronounced "loo-nas-ahh"). Lughnasadh or Lughnasa is the Gaelic name for the month of August, but in the Celtic era may have been known as 'Rivros', as is evidenced by Ross' statement that it is "indicated on the Coligny calendar under the name Rivros, 'great festal month'" (1995: 433). Known in

Scottish Gaelic as *Lunasda*, in Irish as *Brón Trogain* and Welsh as *Gwyl Awst*, this festival survives in the British folk tradition as *Lammas*.

While there are two different accounts of the foundation of this tradition both involve the goddess of the land and the Irish god of light known as Lugh, from which the festival takes its name. Lugh, the god of fire and light, was the leader of the *Tuatha De Danaan*, the 'Ever-Living Ones' discussed earlier in this work. On the one hand, *Lughnasadh* is said to be held in honor of Lugh's foster-mother, *Tailtiu*. *Tailtiu* cleared the land of Ireland for agricultural use but so exhausted herself that she died shortly thereafter. She is said to have asked her foster-son to hold funerary games in her honor for two weeks each August. If this occurred she promised prosperity would reign in Ireland. On the other hand, Irish myth tells us that this festival commemorates Lugh's marriage to *Eire*. *Lughnasadh* was thus a time "when the god of light wedded *Eire*, the fair Earth" (Nichols 1990: 92). Whichever of the strains receives emphasis, this festival is clearly a time when the fruitfulness of the sun's warmth and life-giving properties are celebrated. Hence, the god's relationship with and obligation to the goddess of the land is emphasized.

At this point in the year the first harvest has been completed and therefore *Lughnasadh* is seen as a time of reaping. As the produce of the land is literally being harvested, human beings metaphorically harvest the fruits of the seeds they sowed during the spring. It is therefore linked to the themes of completion, achievement and transformation. The harvest not only marks the joyous celebration of a time of plenty but a time of preparation for the winter months in which no produce can be grown. It is, therefore, a time of storing nourishment for the time of dearth.

As a harvest festival, Lughnasadh also entails the sacrificial death and subsequent reincarnation of the Corn King. The crops, created through the successful mating of the god and goddess, must ultimately be reaped in order for bread to be baked and for seed to be gathered to sow the next year's crop. Thus, the cutting of the grain is the sacrifice as well as the assurance that the Corn King will be reborn. Lughnasadh is therefore a time for sacrifice and relates the modern Druid idea that only through 'letting go' (or sacrificing) can gifts from the god and goddess be assured to return.

Lughnasadh was also, according to modern Druids, traditionally a time reserved for the making of legal contracts, including the buying and selling of livestock, the hiring of farm workers and most particularly for the contracting of marriages. These ceremonies are known as *handfastings* denoting the custom of tying the bride and groom's hands with a length of rope or ribbon, which symbolized their union. Handfastings were originally trial marriages, which lasted a year and a day. Thus, "the marriages contracted at this time could be annulled at the same time the following year, offering the couple a sensible 'trial period'" (Carr-Gomm 1991: 73). At the end of this period if either party wanted to terminate the agreement all that was necessary was for both parties to return to the site of the agreement on Lughnasadh and announce their intention to sever the marriage ties. The couple would stand back to back and walk away from each other, symbolizing the dissolution of their trial marriage. While this is the prevailing view, it should be noted that some place the time of divorce at Beltaine instead of Lughnasadh (Matthews 2003: 130).

The chief symbols of this festival are corn, the wheel and the sun. The relation of corn to this festival is clear, as it is a harvest festival. Similarly, the association of

Lughnasadh with the sun is evident as the festival is named after the ‘bright god’, Lugh. The link between this festival and the symbol of the wheel, however, deserves special note. This connection exists because, “in some areas a flaming wheel was sent rolling down the hillside at this time to symbolize the descent of the year towards Winter, and in the Druid ceremony a wheel is passed around the circle in symbol of the turning year” (Carr-Gomm 1991: 73). This celebration is linked to the element of fire and occupies the southwestern part of the mandala of the year.

### *Autumn Equinox*

Approximately six weeks after Lughnasadh modern Druids celebrate the Autumn Equinox. The fourth and final of the astronomical observances it occurs on the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> of September in the Northern Hemisphere and the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> of March in the Southern Hemisphere. It is termed Alban Elfed or Alban Elved meaning ‘light of autumn’. According to Nichols it also connotes, “the eyes lift to the distance, the circle of the sea’s horizon” (1990: 298). Like the spring equinox, Alban Elfed is a time of balance, when night and day are of equal length. Therefore that moment represents a point at which all time is either past or present. Associated with the element of air, this festival focuses on the individual’s quiet reflection on the past and the future.

Alban Elfed is a time of thanksgiving. At this point of the year the products of the second (and last) harvest of the year are gathered. It is a time of fulfillment, of reaping what has been sown, and is therefore associated with the ripening of wheat and the fermentation of wine and mead. Alban Elfed is thus devoted to the recognition and appreciation of the gifts received throughout the year. The acknowledgement of these

gifts during this ceremony illustrates how modern Druids reflect on the past during this festival.

The future is (as stated above) also a focus of the Alban Elfed reflection. As Alban Elfed marks the end of the year's harvest it therefore represents the waning influence of the sun. At this point the year turns towards winter and the sun's ultimate death and rebirth. For this reason it should come as no surprise that Alban Elfed is equated with old age and therefore with the western part of the mandala. As Nichols attests, "here is likely to be the Dagda, the wise old man, with the gift of endless food, and undoubtedly the time of the elder sibyl-form of the Mother Goddess" (1990: 94). Thus, as the cycle of the year turns to the dark days of winter, so human lives turn towards a contemplation of death at this time.

### *Samhuinn*

Finally, we come to the festival of Samhuinn [pronounced "sow-inn" (Orr 1999: 92)], which is variously spelled as Samain or Samhain. This celebration occurs on the first of November in the Northern Hemisphere and the first of May in the Southern Hemisphere, though the festival itself is conceived of as lasting three days (from October 31 – November 2 [Northern Hemisphere] or April 30 – May 2 [Southern Hemisphere]). Samhuinn is the Irish term for the month of November, while in the Scottish tradition it refers to All-Hallows Day. In the Welsh tradition it is Calan Gaeaf but it is perhaps best known by its British folk equivalent, Halloween. The most solemn and inner of the festivals Samhuinn is said not usually to be performed in public but only open to members and invited friends. However, in the field this was not observed. Samhuinn

rituals were held in the open at the Long Man of Wilmington by the Anderida Gorsedd during my fieldwork.

Occupying the northwestern section of the mandala and associated with the element of water, Samhuinn was traditionally held to be the beginning of the new year, as attested to by Ross in her statement that, “The Celtic New Year began on the eve of 1 November” (1995: 434). While some Druids did agree with this statement, most equated the New Year with the Winter Solstice. This confusion is resolved by Carr-Gomm thus: “Samhuinn is a time which many writers have believed until recently marked the ending and the beginning of the Celtic year....This now seems incorrect historically” (2002a: 93). In its place, he argues these same scholars place the Winter Solstice. Here, Carr-Gomm seems to be referring to the work of the eighteenth century writer Sir John Rhys, which has latterly been refuted.

Samhuinn is conceived of as a time of transition from the activity of the summer months into the hibernation of winter. Suitably, Nichols states Samhuinn is a time of, “the sinister threat of the ending of vegetation and the beginning of the long sleep” (1990: 85). As such, it is a time when Druids are asked to ‘let go’ of the old year in preparation for the new. As Orr points out, “Samhain marks the end of summer and a cycle of growth. It is a time of sacrifice” (ibid: 93). This sacrifice or ‘letting go’ is not just of the old year but of anything which is stopping the individual from progressing on his or her path.

Furthermore, the three days of Samhuinn are viewed as a time outside of normal time, a time of ‘no-time’. Being the ritual that separates the old year from the new it is seen as a time when boundaries are permeable. Thus time is suspended; the veil between

this world and the Otherworld is lifted and communication can easily occur between the worlds, as discussed earlier in the section regarding the Summer Solstice. Nichols puts this elegantly in his statement that at Samhuinn, “The dominant power of darkness took over the period when there was no time, when one year or season had finished and the next had not started. In this interim the gates between the worlds were open, the dead and the living could mingle” (ibid: 90).

As the Otherworld is thought to be in close proximity to the corporeal world at Samhuinn it should come as no surprise that divination and shamanic travels in the other realm are focuses of this celebration. It is at this time, when the veil is naturally lifted, that seers have easier access to the mysteries of the Otherworld. Equally, this immediacy is thought to allow the living to commune with the ancestors (both individual and communal) as they are thought to walk the earth during this period. From this communion the living connect with the ““root wisdom of the tribe”...a source of guidance” (Greenwood 2002: 217).

However, the meeting of the two worlds is considered an extremely dangerous affair and, therefore, this festival represents madness and danger. Ross states that Samhuinn is the, “most dangerous and the most portentous of all the calendar festivals” (1995: 434). Not only can men cross the divide but spirits can as well and they are often portrayed as playing tricks on the living. These spirits do not possess humans; the danger of contact with them is the actual physical or mental effects their tricks may present.

The danger presented by the interaction of the two realms and the position of Samhuinn as occurring in ‘no-time’ means that this festival is outside the purview of accepted social behavior. It is a time of disorder and reversals as is evidenced by the folk

tradition of trick-or-treating at Halloween. This time of disorder is necessary, according to Carr-Gomm as “to allow that [normal] order to be psychologically comfortable, the Celts knew that there had to be a time when order and structure were abolished, when chaos would reign. And Samhuinn was such a time. Time was abolished for the three days of this festival and people did crazy things...” (1991: 70). This thesis is very close to the theory espoused by Max Gluckman, who argued that ‘rituals of rebellion’ foster social cohesion. He states, “hence to act the conflicts, whether directly or by inversion or in other symbolical forms, emphasizes the social cohesion within which the conflicts exist” (1966:125). Therefore, during these rituals, reversals of the traditional social order allow tensions to be expressed, which allows them to be neutralized and the status quo to be confirmed.

While Samhuinn is often marked by the lighting of bonfires and the presence of an individual dressed as the crow-faced *Calleach* (the goddess of winter and of death), perhaps the most important feature of the Samhuinn ritual is the giving of gifts to the ancestors. By giving gifts modern Druids show their love and care for those who have moved on to the other realm. Thus, “the dead are honoured and feasted, not as the dead, but as the living spirits of loved ones and of guardians” (Carr-Gomm 1991: 70). The gifts that are conferred upon the ancestors include bread, salt, honey, and wine or mead. They are not offered out of fear or a need to propitiate the ancestors but out of affection. In fact, these foods are thought to sustain the ancestors on their journey to the Blessed Isles. It follows that by feeding the spirits of those who have departed, modern Druids are ensuring that their spirits live on in the other world. Furthermore, these gifts are not given in order to ensure that the spirits remain in the other world out of some fear that the

spirits will attempt to live in this world. The gifts are not coercive in that sense but are given out of respect and a desire to aid in their sustenance just as they assist in sustaining the living.

Equally important is the fact that the gifts create a venue for communion with the sacred. The gifts are shared by the group during the ritual. Thus the group members all ingest a small amount of each substance and the rest is offered to the earth or to the fire (or bonfire) that may be lit in the center of the circle. The end result of this action of communion is that the members of the group are effectively sharing a feast with the ancestors. As Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss argue, “This procedure [sacrifice] consists in establishing a means of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of a victim, that is, of a thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed” (1968: 97). The ritual of Samhain can, therefore, be seen to be about controlling access to the sacred through the prestation of gifts to the ancestors.

### *Albans and Fire Festivals*

The cycle of the Druid year is punctuated by these eight festivals. Four of these festivals are referred to as *Albans* and four as *Fire Festivals*. These rituals are evenly spaced throughout the year, which equates to one celebration approximately every six weeks. The celebration of these rituals allows modern Druids to “have the opportunity to step out of the humdrum of daily life, to honour the conjunction of Place and Time.” (ibid: 71), thus celebrating the intersection of cyclical and diachronic time.

As the modern Druid community was originally based in the northern hemisphere, the dates for the eight festivals were calculated based on the patterns of the seasons in

that hemisphere. Increasingly, however, Druidry has come to appeal to many individuals in the southern hemisphere, particularly in Australasia. In response to the increasing demand for the observances to reflect the seasons of the southern hemisphere as well, the calendar has been revised. For example, the summer solstice occurs in the northern hemisphere on the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> of June but on the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> of December in the southern hemisphere. This opposition poses no contradiction for modern Druids as the calendar of celebrations is meant to reflect the seasons and, as these are opposed in the two hemispheres, it is logical that the calendar should reflect this. Likewise, the association of the northern and southern directions with earth and fire are swapped as in the southern hemisphere the north is seen as the place of heat and the south as the place of cold. East and west remain the same as these reference the rising and the setting of the sun. Furthermore, during Druid rituals action occurs in a ‘deiseal’<sup>95</sup> (‘sun-wise’ or clockwise) direction in the northern hemisphere and an anti-clockwise direction in the southern hemisphere. This reversed pattern becomes intelligible through the concept that Druidry is linked to the earth and therefore practice must vary in relation to the particular part of the earth that is the locus of ritual activity. Instead of showing inconsistency, it therefore depicts a consistency, which allows practice to vary in order to reflect belief.

The Welsh term *Alban* was co-opted by Iolo Morganwg. His use of the term is in reference to an astronomical festival, which marks a scientifically observable solar event. The Albans are thus the two solstices and the two equinoxes which mark the yearly passage of the earth around the sun. For logistical reasons the Albans are rarely celebrated at the exact moment of the astronomical event but are observed as near to

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<sup>95</sup> This term is from Scottish Gaelic and denotes a ‘sunwise’ path around the ritual space. Traditionally, this was considered a propitious course.

them as possible. This flexibility is one of the hallmarks of this community and is perhaps part of the reason for its rapid growth, as it reflects the realities of the sometimes hectic and segmented nature of modern life.

Modern Druids argue that these events were celebrated in ancient Celtic times, surviving through folk practice to the present day. Carr-Gomm supports this with his statement that, “these four festivals are astronomical observances, and we can be sure our ancestors marked them with ritual because many of the stone circles are oriented to their points of sunrise or sunset” (1991: 69). This certainly may be the case; however archaeological evidence places the erection of these monuments much earlier than the Celtic period. Whether or not they were used for ritual purposes is therefore debatable. Nevertheless, this statement does elucidate the commonly perceived need that emergent communities often have for a historical foundation for their practices.

The other four observances of the ritual year are known as the ‘Fire Festivals’, after the Victorian writer Charles Hardwicke’s distinction. These include Imbolc, Beltaine, Lughnasadh and Samhuinn. In opposition to the Welsh Albans, the names of the fire festivals stem from Gaelic. They are often referred to as ‘Cross-Quarter’ days as each falls directly between the quarters defined by the Albans.<sup>96</sup> The fire festivals are folk celebrations that Crumley and Marquardt state were common practice up to the 1970s. These may be survivals from earlier usage as similar festivals are alluded to in the Coligny Calendar.

The Fire Festivals are lunar celebrations. The binary pair solar/lunar may not, however, be a polar distinction, as the lunar festivals can be said to be made into solar

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<sup>96</sup> This would seem to indicate that the Albans are the earlier of the festivals but I have yet to find any supporting or contradicting evidence for this.

festivals through the addition of a bonfire (or *teine* [Matthews 2003: 133]). This does appear to be a reflection of the historical reality as Ross' argument concurs that, "All the Celtic calendar festivals were in essence fire-festivals, and the druids were much concerned with fire-magic" (1995: 437).

Carr-Gomm argues that the fire festivals are equated with the feminine principle: "Of the eight times, four are solar and four are lunar, creating thereby a balanced scheme of interlocking masculine and feminine observances" (1991: 69). Furthermore, he argues that these festivals are pastoral in nature while the Albans are associated with the agricultural cycle. However, Matthews makes a more plausible distinction in her statement that "The lunar festivals are concerned with pastoral *and* agricultural events, rather than the movements of the sun through the seasons" (2003: 127, emphasis mine).

If we take Carr-Gomm's analysis as reflective of orthodox belief (and there is every reason to do this as his work is often constituent of that belief) three binary oppositions exist with reference to the eight festivals of the Druid year: the pair solar/lunar, agricultural/pastoral, and masculine/feminine. Furthermore, these categories are equated to one another as:

**Solar : Lunar :: Agricultural : Pastoral :: Masculine : Feminine**

*and*

**Solar : Agricultural : Masculine :: Lunar : Pastoral : Feminine**

These divisions are neatly structural, but unfortunately do not entirely mirror the ethnographic data as will be shown.

A comparison of the two diagrams below can serve to highlight the differences between the ideal (as espoused by Carr-Gomm) and the actual beliefs espoused by my informants.

While these sometimes coincide the divergences are equally illuminating. First, the three

categories were found to exist in the field and were equivalent to the ideal with the exception of Carr-Gomm's solar/lunar distinction. A distinction was recognized but it was voiced as a solar/fire distinction, which does not in the first instance appear as an opposition at all. However, this was the common classification, as it related to the two named categories of ritual, contrary to Carr-Gomm's opposition, which distinguishes the class of ritual based on the celestial body that regulated the festival in question. That taxonomical difference aside, the ethnographic data for this distinction reflected the ideal. However, the category of agricultural/pastoral was not found to be equivalent. For instance, while informants clearly related that Beltaine was pastoral (as expected from Carr-Gomm's analysis), none related any clear feeling that the winter solstice was either agricultural or pastoral. Lughnasadh is particularly interesting in this instance as Carr-Gomm's analysis places it as a pastoral festival while every one of my informants discussed it in terms of the harvesting of grain, an agricultural pursuit. Similarly, the masculine/feminine distinction Carr-Gomm makes is not completely borne out by the ethnographic evidence. Carr-Gomm's ideal seems to replicate the data for the festivals of Imbolc, Summer Solstice, and Samhuinn but is in conflict regarding the other five. Thus, Lughnasadh should be feminine by his analysis but is revealed as masculine by my informants, due to the fact that the festival is named after the male deity, Lugh.

These discrepancies are, however, easily resolved. It is necessary to reiterate that these are *ideal* structural oppositions and ideals are rarely strictly borne out in practice. Additionally, Carr-Gomm's unique position as the re-founder of OBOD means that his philosophies, espoused through his voluminous writings and OBOD's correspondence

<b>Festival</b>	<b>Solar/Lunar</b>	<b>Agricultural/Pastoral</b>	<b>Masculine/Feminine</b>
Winter Solstice	Solar	Agricultural	Masculine
Imbolc	Lunar	Pastoral	Feminine
Spring Equinox	Solar	Agricultural	Masculine
Beltaine	Lunar	Pastoral	Feminine
Summer Solstice	Solar	Agricultural	Masculine
Lughnasadh	Lunar	Pastoral	Feminine
Autumn Equinox	Solar	Agricultural	Masculine
Samhuinn	Lunar	Pastoral	Feminine

*Figure 6-3. A graphic representation of Carr-Gomm's binary oppositions.*

<b>Festival</b>	<b>Solar/Fire</b>	<b>Agricultural/Pastoral</b>	<b>Masculine/Feminine</b>
Winter Solstice	Solar	Neither	Neutral (product of union)
Imbolc	Fire	Both (sowing first seeds and lambing)	Feminine
Spring Equinox	Solar	Neither	Feminine
Beltaine	Fire	Pastoral (cattle driven between fires)	Both
Summer Solstice	Solar	Neither	Masculine
Lughnasadh	Fire	Agricultural (reaping)	Masculine
Autumn Equinox	Solar	Neither	Neither
Samhuinn	Fire	Pastoral (slaughter of animals)	Feminine

*Figure 6-4. Oppositions as per field data.*

course, is taken (and often mistaken) as the orthodox view.<sup>97</sup> His position is thus problematic as Druidry advocates fluidity in belief but, like any community, demands the structure of some (albeit limited) dogma.

One further addition to the binary oppositions illustrated by the eight festivals of the Druid calendar laid out by Carr-Gomm is the distinction of nature/culture, illustrated in Figure 6-5:

<sup>97</sup> It should be noted that this reaction to his works seems to trouble Carr-Gomm as he does not want to be viewed as a guru, whose teachings are taken rigidly as dogma.

<b>Festival</b>	<b>Natural/Cultural</b>
Winter Solstice	Natural
Imbolc	Cultural (Arts and pastoral/agricultural activities)
Spring Equinox	Natural
Beltaine	Cultural (Mating relationships)
Summer Solstice	Natural
Lughnasadh	Cultural (Contracts: especially marriages)
Autumn Equinox	Natural
Samhuinn	Supra-Cultural (Human relationships with ancestors and spirits)

*Figure 6-5. The nature/culture opposition.*

While not expressed directly by my informants, structurally it appears that the underlying theme of the astronomical festivals is that of connection with and reverence for nature. Conversely, the fire festivals deal with the cultural world of human relationships. Thus, while the Winter Solstice celebrates the waxing of the sun's light and the growth of vegetation it will encourage, Beltaine (for instance) concerns the relationship between men and women. Samhuinn appears to present an exception as it regards the relationship of human beings to the ancestors and spirits, but if we take into consideration the fact that the ancestors and spirits are considered active members of the community, this presents no actual difficulty, hence my classification of this festival as supra-cultural. It would appear, therefore, that the astronomical festivals celebrate the natural while the fire festivals celebrate the cultural. Structurally then, this relationship can be expressed as:

**Astronomical: Nature :: Fire Festival : Culture**

*and*

**Astronomical : Fire Festival :: Nature : Culture**

If we incorporate Carr-Gomm's ideals (and tempered by the preceding considerations I argue we should) then we have:

**Astronomical : Fire Festival :: Agricultural : Pastoral :: Masculine : Feminine :: Nature : Culture**

*And*

**Astronomical : Agricultural : Masculine : Nature :: Fire Festival : Pastoral : Feminine : Culture**

Interestingly, in ethnographic research from around the globe the feminine has often been correlated with the natural (perhaps because of the feminine capacity for reproduction) while the masculine is commonly equated with the cultural sphere. However, this traditional equation has recently been questioned, most notably by anthropologists such as Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern in their groundbreaking work *Nature, Culture and Gender* in which they argue that these classifications (and, in fact, their opposition) are culturally constructed and thus a universal opposition between the two categories does not exist (also cf. Ortner 1974 and Rogers 1978).

The fact that in modern Druidry the distinction seems to be the reverse of the accepted anthropological equation at first appears incongruous, but may explain why so many informants contradicted the structure posed by Carr-Gomm's analysis. The confusion appears to stem from the fact that the Druid world-view stands not alone, but in conjunction with the world-view of the culture in which individual Druids were socialized. Thus, in contemporary British society the equation may follow the expected formula of masculine:feminine::culture:nature while the Druid exemplar relates the equation as masculine:feminine::nature:culture.<sup>98</sup> If this is the case the disjunction between the structural ideal and the ethnographic data would be resolved.

Furthermore, these festivals are based on what is known of the practices of pre-industrial Britain. During that time-frame the cycle of the year determined the pattern of

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<sup>98</sup> This statement is made cautiously as verification would require further research into the distinction within British society at large.

economic activity and the ritual calendar was intimately tied to these pursuits. The solar cycle of the seasons represents natural time-keeping as the cycle determines when crops are planted and harvested. As it regulates the human behaviors of sowing and reaping it could be understood as cultural. This would be misleading though, as this cycle regards the relationship between humans and the earth. On the other hand, the lunar cycle was (and sometimes still is) used as a time-keeping device and allowed communities to schedule gatherings. Thus it can be equated with the cultural element as it regulates human to human relationships. With the separation of the ritual from the economic sphere<sup>99</sup> that is one of the hallmarks of contemporary society the enmeshed lunar and solar cycles have become less of a determining factor in the daily lives of individuals in Western society. This is, in fact, one of the imbalances that modern Druidry states it is attempting to redress.

### *Conclusion*

Analysis of the modern Druid ritual year yields not only an understanding of the celebrations that comprise it, but a deeper cognizance of the cosmological truths that underpin its structure and the role of ritual within the Druid community. Although debate regarding the historical accuracy of the festivals exists within and without the community, the cycle of the year holds much importance for Druids. This significance rests on the fact that the performance of these rituals creates and defines the community. As Orr states, “Celebration strongly marks the importance of community” (1999: 82). Hence, these events act as showcases for the enactment of meaning for the established community while simultaneously providing a venue for the socialization of new

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<sup>99</sup> Here I refer to these two fields in the strictest sense as many researchers have proved that in actuality they are enmeshed and much economic activity has a ritual character (and vice versa).

members. However, Nichols notes that “the most important aspect of each observance is an atonement and recognition and celebration of the quality of the particular time and place” (1996: 297). The observance of the seasonal celebrations, therefore, allows Druids to mark the passage of their lives while at the same time marking the passage of the earth around the sun. As such it is an acknowledgment of the intersection of pre-industrial, cyclical time with modern, linear time and their relationship within the physical locus of ritual activity. This synthesis of the ancient with the modern is the trademark of the modern Druid community.

## Chapter Seven

### **Druidry in Action II : Life-Crisis Rites and Modes of Practice**

For anthropologists it is not enough merely to describe a community's beliefs: in order to fully understand it, we must also have a firm understanding of how the beliefs are enacted. Continuing from the last chapter's focus on the seasonal rituals, we turn now to discuss the other ways in which Druidry is performed. We begin with a discussion of the various 'rites of passage' (the native term) within Druidry. As discussed in previous chapters, this is a nascent spirituality and, therefore, many of these rites are continually being re-written to reflect the evolution of this path.

Additionally, one of these rites (marriage) is regulated by the prevailing national culture of which Druids form a part. This has necessarily involved a deeper sense of recognition of the perils of alignment with a minority identity. The majority, in this case the political-judicial system that embodies the prevailing values of the nation, determines the conditions under which this ritual is considered legally acceptable.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the cycle of the Druid year is punctuated by eight seasonal festivals. The cycle of the seasons created by the orbit of the earth around the sun, reoccurs every year, meaning that the cycle will continue indefinitely. Similarly, modern Druids see their relationship to the universe as a cyclical one. They will die, be reborn and go through all the various stages of development. However, merely celebrating the cyclical and unending spiral of time would detract from the role of the individual life. Therefore, Druids mark significant points in their life-cycle by holding 'rites of passage'. These celebrations are meant to mark the singular point at

which individual life goes through transition. While the seasonal rituals imply continuity, these ceremonies therefore celebrate the unrepeatable singularity of any given point in a soul's development.

Practice is not limited to these domains. The second part of this chapter will therefore focus on the ways in which modern Druids assemble for discussion and enactment of their spirituality. The variety of these categories is broad, and individual Druids can be involved in any number of these groups (or in fact none at all). Thus, the members may attend grove meetings, seed-groups, camps, international assemblies and *gorseddau* while also practising online in specially dedicated chat-rooms. It must be noted, however, that this chapter is the result of a study of the practices of only a limited number of modern Druid groups and that there are certainly groups that would differ in some respects from the following descriptions.

The inclusion of the seasonal festivals discussed at length in the last chapter within modern Druidry rests on solid evidence of these events in ancient Celtic practices and the survival of these occurrences through British folk culture. In contrast, the material in this chapter will focus on the rites of passage and modes of practice that are the result of modern developments within Druidry. These events and practices are more concerned with the collective creation of meaning and the promotion of venues of communal experience than they are with authentically reproducing historical practices. While some evidence attests to the practice of handfasting and initiations, for example, the form of the ceremonies is a modern invention. Seed groups and groves, camps and assemblies are similarly modern developments and should be seen in this light. However, these innovations are based on the premise that the ancient practices and

beliefs resonate through the inventions by their provision of a template for modern traditions. The *Zeitgeist* of the ancient Celtic past is thus infused in the present, producing consciously modern vehicles for the negotiation, assumption and display of modern Druid beliefs and identity.

### *Life-crisis rites*

Just as Druids mark the passing of the year by celebrating the eight seasonal festivals, they also mark the passage of their lives through specific ceremonies (Carr-Gomm 2002a: 105). These ceremonies mark certain specific occasions in an individual's life. As such, they can be referred to as life-crisis rites. Modern Druids, however, refer to them as 'rites of passage.' Worthington describes life-crisis rites as "ceremonies which are performed as initiations into another aspect of life and celebrate a deeper connection with and a growing understanding of that particular aspect" (1999: 52-53). With growing understanding also comes growing responsibility to the community and the world in general. Therefore, these rituals mark transitions not only in the individual's life but also in the life of the community.

These rites are a relatively new addition to the Druid corpus of ritual activity. There are therefore only rough templates available for a few of these ceremonies. Often, modern Druids write their own ceremonies and are actively encouraged to do so, as the ceremonies will necessarily reflect the particular beliefs of a given member or group. They are therefore believed to have more meaning than a standardized (and some of my informants would argue, sanitized) rite. The basic structure of the rite is studied through

the Bardic course, which results only in the need to change the parts that relate to the specific rite in question. Carr-Gomm thus states that,

Druidry offers techniques, ideas, words and imagery drawn from tradition and from nature, and one of the purposes of training in a Druid group is to learn how to create all sorts of ceremonies from these ingredients. The training program...describes over thirty basic rituals...including tree-planting, initiation, birth, death and marriage. (Carr-Gomm 2002a: 103)

In Druidry there are many different life-crisis rites, but not all are celebrated by any one person or any one group. There are life-crisis rites dealing with conception, birth, the naming of a child, the “falling of first tooth” (Orr 1999: 98), puberty (first menstruation and first manhood), menopause (and a similar change for men), dying, death and mourning. However, the two most regularly celebrated life-crisis rites are initiation<sup>100</sup> and marriage and it is these ceremonies that I will focus on before continuing to a discussion of baby-naming ceremonies.

### *Initiation*

Perhaps the most significant of the modern Druid life-crisis rites is initiation. This rite is especially important as the vast majority of Druids are not born into their faith but come to it at a later stage of life. The correspondence course provides in the first *gwerns* a template for self-initiation which serves to help the individual recognize and voice their dedication to the path ahead. However, the spirits and guides of the sacred grove are thought to hear this dedication as well.

While this is undoubtedly a rich experience, many choose to follow this with an initiation rite through OBOD or through their grove. The OBOD initiations typically

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<sup>100</sup> It is worth noting that unlike some societies, initiation is celebrated separately from puberty rites. This is undoubtedly a reflection of the fact that most members enter the group when they are well past the age of puberty. This is certainly not unusual as initiation in other societies is not always linked to the individual's physical attainment of puberty.

occur at the camps that are held throughout the year. Grove initiations can be held at any time and any place that is relevant for the participants. However, according to my informants within Anderida, at the time of the ancient Druids, dolmens (Neolithic burial chambers) were often used for initiations. The symbolism here is clear – birth follows from death and so the womb-like burial chambers serve as *loci* for re-birth.

Whichever way the individual is initiated, these group rites unequivocally serve not only as a poignant personal step but also as a rite which defines the individual as a member of the group. Almost no Druids are born into the faith (in other words, their parents were not Druids). Therefore, initiation usually provides a formal acknowledgment of group membership. As Orr points out, “many Groves and Orders offer a rite of initiation that marks the step into that group, this often being woven together with a personal commitment to the journey, a dedication to change and awaken” (ibid: 100).

During the course of my fieldwork I was initiated into the first and (recently) second of the three grades of Bards, Ovates, and Druids. As stated earlier, while these ceremonies were powerful to me and to the other participants, I have chosen to abide by the wishes of my informants and not discuss them in detail in this work. However, my informants have agreed to my discussing the basic process of initiation.

While there is no set formula for initiation, the rite generally involves several verbal challenges made to the initiate which they must answer without advance knowledge. This is to ensure that the answers come from the depth of the individual’s spirit. During the ceremony, the initiate may thank the ancestors and the gods and goddesses for the protections and blessings rendered in the past and a request for the

continuation of these blessings and protections. Additionally, the elements are often invoked at some point in the ceremony (Carr-Gomm 2002c: 59). Initiates then usually swear an oath to dedicate themselves to the ideals of Druidry, to improving themselves and to the community. However, individuals are verbally impressed with the notion that the oath they swear is to no one but themselves. Roughly, they state, “just as in freedom you joined so too you are free to leave if at any point your guides or guardians shall so advise you.” Finally, the initiate is welcomed into the community by each participant.

### *Handfasting*

Marriage is the other life-crisis rite most commonly celebrated in Druidry. Referred to as a *handfasting*, this rite was traditionally practiced in the British Isles. Historically, this rite was practiced at Lughnasadh and in fact it is still considered the most auspicious time for this arrangement, although it can be performed at any time of the year. The preference for Lughnasadh stems from the fact that during the Celtic era contracts (specifically regarding the disposition of livestock and the hiring of farm workers) were made at this time. Additionally, Lughnasadh is the height of the light half of the year and is therefore concerned with waxing energies which signify increase and plenty for the young couple. Union during the dark half of the year is governed by the waning principle and thus is considered to bring bad luck to the newly-weds. While not an out-and-out prohibition, most Druid celebrants discourage unions during the dark half of the year unless the couple feels that there are strong overriding reasons for the marriage to take place at that time.

The term 'handfasting' refers not only to the ceremony<sup>101</sup> itself but to the practice of binding the bride and groom's hands together with a ribbon or a cord to signify their union. However, my informants within OBOD stated that in the Celtic era the more usual practice was of group marriages in which the brides lined up on one side of a wall while the grooms lined up on the other. When then couple had progressed through the line to face the celebrant, they thrust their hands through a hole in the wall and held hands during the ceremony. While there is no direct evidence to support the statement, many of my informants have related that during the Celtic era, this type of marriage joined two individuals who were unaware during the entire proceedings to whom they were being wed. However, this process actually reflects the 'Teltown Marriages' performed at the festival that occurred in Teltown, County Meath, Ireland during the nineteenth century and as such is not a reflection of ancient Celtic practices, as is claimed by my informants within OBOD.

After the ceremony, in the Celtic era the couple cohabited as man and wife for a period of a year and a day. If at the end of this trial period the couple chose to continue as man and wife, they could do so without need for further ceremony (although an additional ceremony may have occurred at a later date.) In this sense, handfasting provided couples with a period of time in which to discover whether the union was tenable. If it was not, the couple returned to the site of their handfasting and announced their intention to sever the union, at which point the couple stood back-to-back and walked away from each other, signifying the dissolution of the trial marriage. Incidentally, the phrase 'a year and a day' has caused great confusion. A year and a day after the marriage would in fact fall on the same date in the next calendar year; for

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<sup>101</sup> For a full text of a handfasting ritual please see Appendix Three.

example, if the couple wed on the actual date of Lughnasadh (1 August) then they would return to announce their wish to separate on Lughnasadh the following year. It should also be noted that this type of arrangement may not have been the only ceremony for marriage but may simply have been one type of ceremony, as is evidenced by Orr's statement that,

Rites of marriage come in different forms in the tradition, from the relationship which is declared to the community, a handfasting which can be undone by simply returning to the place and walking separately away, to the life-long union blessed with binding vows of love and commitment, the latter usually going hand in hand with a legal ceremony at a registry office. (1999: 98)

Certainly this is the case at this juncture. While modern handfastings do not imply the year and a day trial period they are not considered legal by the national government of the United Kingdom. Any couple wishing to be wed in a Druid handfasting in Britain must, therefore, have a Registry Office ceremony as well if they wish the marriage to be legally recognized. This clearly depicts the conflicts of identity that modern Druids face. For a myriad of legal reasons many must succumb to the need for a national recognized ceremony, while all the while feeling that the handfasting was their 'real' union. However, both a one-year hand-fast and the declaration of a more permanent union with or without a Registry Office ceremony are seen as equally binding by the Druid community.

Certain life-crisis rites are negotiated as they are still bound by the national legal frameworks of which these groups form a minority. Marriage is just one such rite that must additionally be affirmed by the legal system. However, the importance of the legal designation is usually denied, subverted or even negated. Many couples, for example, either do not have a legally recognized union or, if they do, they consider the Druid ceremony to be the more significant of the two. The legal ceremony seems to be

undertaken because it makes living within the wider national community easier and simplifies certain everyday processes. Additionally, there is often pressure from non-Druid family members to have a legal wedding, as they do not consider the handfasting to be a 'proper' ceremony. By having both ceremonies modern Druids are negotiating their identity in recognition of their dual status – both within their Druid community and the wider national community. It is an acknowledgment of the fragmented nature of modern life in which individuals have layers of identity (often of different kinds and connected with different social roles) and are at once members of many different groups.

### *Baby-Naming Ceremony*

As more and more Druids wish to mark the most significant moments of their lives and the lives of their families, the need for baby-naming ceremonies is increasing. These rites are important as they mark the child's introduction to the group, but more importantly to the world. The purpose is similar to that of christening in the Christian Church in that the child is introduced to the congregation in a similar manner. However, the relevance of the child's introduction to the community (and therefore the Druid path) is often actually suppressed (or at least downplayed). Presumably, this is due to the belief that individuals should freely enter the group and should do so consciously, an impossibility for a child. In fact, children are discouraged from joining OBOD until at least the age of sixteen although their presence at rituals is tolerated and in some groups encouraged. Formal recognition of membership does not occur until OBOD deems that the child has reached sufficient maturity to grasp the path he or she is choosing to follow both intellectually and spiritually. The ritual of baby-naming often involves recognition that each birth is in

actuality a rebirth and the child's spirit has chosen to be reborn in that particular body at that specific time and place to a unique path.

During the ceremony the child is spoken for by a god-father and goddess-mother. The ancestors and guides of the group are often petitioned to bring blessings and gifts to the child's life. Additionally, members of the group often give the child a gift. In essence, asking for blessings can be seen as an introduction to the group as those assembled are requesting that the spirits of the group recognize the child as a member and watch over and care for that child.

### *Seed groups and groves*

We turn now from the life-crisis rites to discover the ways in which Druid ceremonies and beliefs are enacted. Druid practice varies widely but many on this path come together in groups to do spiritual work. Perhaps the most stable and regular of these groupings within OBOD are the seed groups and groves. Seed groups, as mentioned earlier, are small groups of Druids who come together often to study the *gwersu*. These groups have no facilitator to provide structure, although one or two members generally organize the meeting itself. They are not regulated by OBOD in any way and thus, a seed group does not need a dispensation from OBOD in order to form. Less intense than the groves, they also tend to lack cohesion and disband more quickly than the more stable groves. While some seed groups meet on a fairly regular basis, some are sporadic. The variation between groups is quite wide, making it difficult to make generalizations. During my fieldwork I considered joining a seed group, but some of my informants stated that individuals usually chose to be a member of either a seed group or a grove. As the

grove presented a chance for deeper study I chose to focus my attention on that community.

As stated above, my fieldwork centered on a study of one of OBOD's groves, the Anderida Grove of the Seven Hills (often simply called 'Anderida'). This grove takes part of its name from the ancient woodland that stretched from Dover to Portsmouth. This forest was so lush and dense in the time of the Celts, one of my informants related, that legend says that a squirrel could leap into the canopy in Dover and not need to touch the ground until he reached Portsmouth. Secondly, this name stems from seven hills that ring Sussex, each associated with an Iron Age archaeological site. These seven sites are Wolstonbury, Chanctonbury, Hollingbury, Cissbury, Caburn, Whitehawk and Thundersbarrow. The name of the grove reflects the members' desire to unite their reverence for nature with reverence for the ancestors.

Groves differ from seed-groups in that they must have at least two members of the Druid grade in their midst. Once confirmed by OBOD's central office, the formation of the grove is given its blessing.<sup>102</sup> In Anderida's case this occurred in the summer of 1998. Since that time the grove has experienced a schism which has resulted in a realignment of goals and values. As this schism was discussed at length in chapter three, it is only necessary here to reiterate that fragmentation and re-synthesis are not uncommon.

Like all groves, Anderida is what is known as a 'closed' group. Individuals who wish to join the group approach one or more of the members (most commonly the grove mother or grove father) to request inclusion. At the next meeting the prospective candidate is discussed and a decision is made regarding their inclusion or exclusion.

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<sup>102</sup> While groves must be recognized by OBOD the groves themselves are autonomous and self-regulating.

Generally, the grove first considers whether or not there is space within the grove – and indeed whether the grove is at a stable enough point to accept a new member. Once this has been affirmed, the group discusses the suitability of the individual for grove work. Usually, a prospective member must have attended the open rituals at the Long Man of Wilmington and/or the pub moots near Brighton and have acquainted themselves with several of the members. They must be serious about their commitment to the path and, latterly, they must have been enrolled on the OBOD Bardic correspondence course for at least three months with good progression through the material.<sup>103</sup>

Meetings are normally held once a month, with eleven normal meetings in a year. The last meeting of the year is held in December and this meeting is entirely given over to planning the next year's work. While this may evoke images of meetings around a conference table in actuality the group conducts a ritual whose intent is to reveal to the individual members what should be focused on in the next year. After the meditation, a talking stick is passed around and the members relate their experiences. Discussion occurs and the group jointly decides a plan for the year. During the year of my fieldwork the grove chose to focus on an exploration of the 'Hallows', the four treasures of the Irish myths. Working with the imagery and symbolism of these items through meditation was meant to allow individuals to connect to deeper truths with themselves and within the universe.

Grove gatherings are ritual events focused on group meditation and individual growth within a communal setting. As each member is at a different point in their own journey; for some the exploration is new while for others it is a re-exploration of

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<sup>103</sup> During fieldwork a shift occurred in the requirements of new members. This shift was previously discussed at length in chapter three.

previously investigated material. These re-explorations often allow members to view the material in a new light, adding to their experience. The engagement of the members with each other and with the material therefore allows all members to grow spiritually. This allows Druidry to incorporate new ideas and novel understandings of older material in a way that allows it to continue to be relevant for its membership

The focus of these gatherings is not merely individual growth, however. Their purpose is also to create a healing environment for the earth and for the whole of humanity. This is accomplished through the communal generation of magic and explains why these groups are often referred to as ‘magical working groups’. ‘Magic’, in this instance, is the concentration of positive communal energy that directly results in peace and healing. The universe, in the modern Druid cosmology, is envisaged as a network or web. The creation and dispersal of positive, healing energy at one node cascades through the entire web and positively affects every part of the network. While the influence of Jungian psychology in modern Druidry seems to point to these sessions as ritualized therapy, it is nevertheless clear that the goal is not for the individual to benefit (although this is seen as important as well) but for the community and the earth itself to profit from the group’s endeavor.

Perhaps the most important function of the groves, however, is to provide an intimate community for the expression of Druid identity. As much of Druidry is directed towards the individual’s singular path, it could quite easily become a spirituality in which none of the individuals have common beliefs, values or practices. However, by encouraging these groups Druidry creates an environment in which identity can be (and is

actively encouraged to be) contested and negotiated. This in turn results in cohesion and a solid foundation for this relatively new path.

### *Gorseddau*

Unlike the groves and seed-groups, *gorseddau* are not closed events. Rather, they are open to individuals from any spiritual path who wishes to attend, though most are pagan with the majority being Druids. However, as the events I attended were facilitated by a Druid grove this may have biased the data.

The plural term *gorseddau* (or singular *gorsedd*) refers to the ‘open’ rituals conducted at various sites throughout the British Isles. The alternate term ‘open’ refers to the fact that they are rituals to which any member of the public can attend. It is often through the *gorseddau* that individuals curious about the Druid path first come into contact with the Druid community. While some *gorseddau* are facilitated by the various Druid orders (such as the British Druid Order’s *gorseddau* at the stone circle in Avebury), others are facilitated by groves, though not all groves are associated with a *gorsedd*.

However, the term *gorsedd* is also used as a plural in reference to these rituals, but only when referring to a regular meeting facilitated by one grove on an on-going basis. Thus, the open rituals I attended for my fieldwork were also known as the ‘Anderida Gorsedd’. This denomination differs from the Anderida Grove as the grove is a group closed to non-members.

The setting for a *gorsedd* or *gorseddau* is always outdoors and, in fact, the term ‘open’ also connotes a natural setting. This is reflected in Carr-Gomm’s statement that

according to Ross Nichols, “in Druidry you communed with God in the ‘temple not made with hands’, in the ‘eye of the sun’, in the open air, in the environment made by God not by humans” (Carr-Gomm 1991: 66). This setting could conceivably be anywhere in the landscape but preference is given to sacred sites. Often they are performed at locations of archaeological interest such as the aforementioned stone circle at Avebury. The Anderida Gorsedd is held on a hill beneath one of Britain’s chalk figures, the Long Man of Wilmington. As the vast majority of the *gorseddau* I attended were with the Anderida Gorsedd I will confine myself to comment on this particular *gorsedd*.

Every six weeks or so the Anderida Gorsedd is held to celebrate the eight seasonal festivals of the year. As these were discussed at length in the preceding chapter a further exposition is unnecessary. The event begins with the participants gathering at the base of the hill. When all have arrived they proceed up the hill to a flat mound overlooked by the Long Man of Wilmington. Although this group procession is meant to allow individuals to mentally prepare for the ritual, it is usually a time for the often geographically separated members to chat. Individuals who are new to the *gorsedd* are welcomed through this informal conversation. Once atop the hill a few moments are taken to get ready any equipment needed for the rite and for the facilitators to ask individuals if they would like to participate in particular parts of the ceremony by either reading from a text or improvising on a basic theme. While anyone can volunteer to fill these roles it is generally the members of the Anderida Grove that do so as non-members often feel inhibited.

The structure of rituals will be discussed in the next chapter, but it should be noted that during the open rituals much more explanation is undertaken. Thus, the

purpose and significance of the ceremony are carefully described. Additionally, non-Druids are exhorted to listen to the communal prayers and join in for the second and third repetition of these prayers. For many, the *gorsedd* is the first experience they have had of Druidry and therefore the exegesis is necessary to inculcate them. For those who are already members it provides a deepening of their understanding of the path.

For the most part, participants are pagans or like-minded. The opens, while facilitated by a Druid grove, are open to those of any spirituality. The bulk of participants are Druids, although some follow the Wiccan or Norse path and join to celebrate with the *gorsedd* as an addition to their own practices. Whilst most are somewhat regular attendees often individuals come for only one ceremony. As the Long Man is a site of some interest, hikers and tourists regularly pass by during rituals and, encouraged to join in, often do so.

One such example deserves special mention. During the Samhain celebration in 2005 a man and a woman approached the circle just as the ritual began. They were asked if they would like to join and the woman replied that they would like to do so. Space was made for them in the circle and the ritual continued. In the middle of this ceremony, the facilitator asked the participants to think about the ancestors – those of the land and the individual's own ancestors. The group grew silent and thoughts turned towards those that had passed. Whilst the group was in contemplation the facilitator built a small fire onto which he placed an offering to the ancestors and stood back to watch as it was engulfed by the flames. As he did so the woman stepped into the circle and asked if she could speak. She stated that she and her husband (who she explained did not speak English) had traveled from Peru to Britain for a holiday. Her husband, she related, was a Peruvian

shaman and he wished to add an offering to the ancestors of this land. This was happily accepted and the shaman removed a small piece of wood from a pouch he had tied to his belt. He explained (through his wife) that this was the most sacred wood to Peruvians. It was placed on the fire and burned. It was, as members later stated, a poignant experience and all the more as he and his wife felt so graciously accepted.

After the *gorsedd* concludes, the members often stay on the hill and enjoy the landscape and converse for a short time. Any equipment used during the ceremony is gathered and the group walks back down the hill and into the village of Wilmington. The members then gather at the local pub and discuss the ritual.

These open rituals display the continual dual processes of inculturation and negotiation of identity. The entire process of the ritual, including all of the events leading up to and following the *gorsedd*, can be seen to create meaning. From the group procession to the exegesis of the rite, from the inclusion of outsiders to the discussions at the pub, meaning is constantly being fashioned and re-fashioned in the dialectical process of group dynamic. By actively encouraging debate over what it means to be a Druid and by displaying those beliefs to each other and the external world, Druids claim their unique communal identity.

### *Camps*

At certain times of the year individuals within the modern Druid community have the opportunity to come together for extended gatherings. Usually convened in a field rented specifically for the purpose of communal encampment, these events range in time from three days to two weeks. These events are organized by OBOD and, on a smaller scale

by the Anderida Grove. As these two types of camp are to some degree different, each will be discussed separately.

OBOD conducts four camps a year and these are scheduled to coincide with the observance of the four fire festivals of Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain. However, the regularity of these occurrences during the period of my fieldwork year is deceptive. For many years, I have been informed, the number and length of camps has varied – in large part due to the nature of the enterprise. Often having to accommodate upwards of two hundred people, the organization of these camps takes a considerable amount of time and effort. While many people choose to bring their own tents, recently OBOD has allowed individuals to book space in a shared Mongolian-type tent known as a *yurt* or alternately, a *ger*.<sup>104</sup> Vegetarian meals are also provided and this necessitates bringing all of the equipment needed (including ovens) to a rural site. Additionally, compost toilets are dug and a combination shower/sauna is erected. Attendance is at its height at the summer celebration of Lughnasadh (possibly as this coincides with the summer holidays) and at its lowest during the celebration of Imbolc in February.

Camps are not merely or primarily a social event. While providing an opportunity for the widely dispersed and international membership of OBOD to gather together at a pan-grove level, the main goal is spiritual exploration. This is accomplished through a program of lectures and workshops exploring Druid themes as well as through ritual. The use of alcohol and recreational drugs is, therefore, not endorsed as these substances impair the individual's ability to engage with these lectures and rituals.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> This shared accommodation greatly increases the feeling of community as individuals are not only spending their days with other members of OBOD but their nights as well.

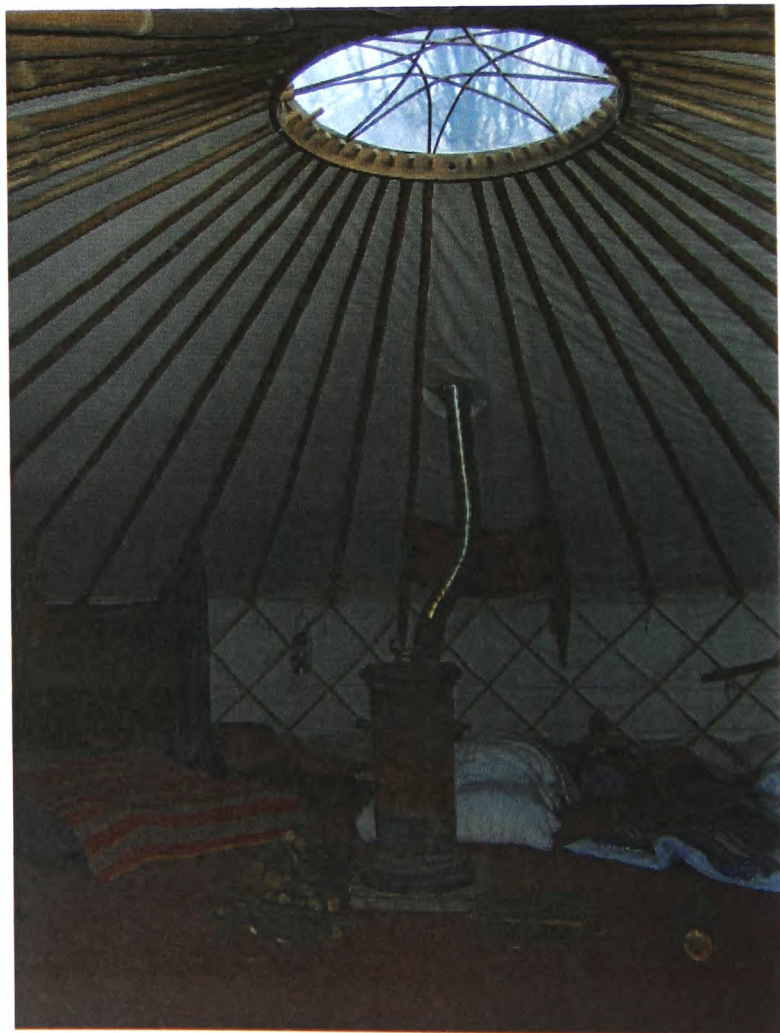
<sup>105</sup> However stringently this statement is voiced some of this activity does still occur. In past years some issues had arisen in relationship to alcohol but these seem to have been mostly resolved.

The average day on an OBOD camp begins around eight in the morning with early risers gathering around the central fire for the 'Dance of Life', a choreographed dance that is similar in movements to the practice of Tai Chi Chuan. Shortly thereafter is the ceremony called the 'Beating of the Bounds'. This process is performed at the beginning of the camp and every morning thereafter. It involves individuals walking to each of the four directions and making as much noise as possible. While some bring drums and rattles for this purpose others choose any items to hand. The most regular examples of these are the saucepan and wooden spoon combination though anything that creates a din is encouraged. The purpose of this process is, my informants have stated, to wake up the spirits and energies in the field and let them know that we are present. This process is undertaken in an area, "both to define it and to expel evil" (Nichols 1990: 84)<sup>106</sup>. Certainly, the link between percussion instruments and the other world has been well established by Needham (1967: 606-14), who argues that percussion delineates the two realms of the human and the spirit and provides for a transition between the two. This universal feature of society, Needham argues, is particularly important in ritual settings especially those in which members of the society transition from one status to another (in other words life-crisis rites).

Breakfast occurs in the kitchen tent and during or shortly thereafter is a time called the 'Rhythm of the Day', which is devoted to providing a schedule of events for the day (none requires attendance) and also allows space for individuals to voice any announcements or special concerns they may have. Workshops and lectures follow throughout the day. After the evening meal are meditations and at least one *eisteddfod* is

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<sup>106</sup> I have also been told the purpose is to scare these spirits away but as Druidry is a spirituality based on reverence for the spirits of nature I cannot resolve this apparent discrepancy.



*Figure 7-1. A communal yurt, inside and out (photographs by author).*

held during the period of the camp. Additionally, individuals tend to gravitate to the central fire and often stay up late into the night talking.

For its part, the Anderida Grove organizes two camps a year: one in May and one in September. Held in a field in Sussex they last three days and numbers are restricted to fifty. This is due to the feeling that long, large camps lose a certain amount of intimacy and, therefore, the community does not bond together as well. Short camps, my informants stated, also allow for more intense ritual. Unlike the heavily organized OBOD camps, these occasions are purposefully non-catered and no communal accommodation is offered.

The general pattern of the day at an Anderida camp is much the same as that of the larger OBOD camps. Most likely this is due to the fact that the members of Anderida who organize camps are veterans of the OBOD camps. Thus, mornings begin with beating the bounds and afternoons are filled with workshops. However, numerous differences do exist. First, Anderida camps are set around a general theme; for example, the September camp of 2006 was concerned with animal guides and totems (as mentioned earlier in chapter four). Secondly, the late afternoon of the second day is usually concerned for preparations for the most focused of the weekend's rituals. This often involves the use of fire and thus necessitates great care and much preparation. Lastly, while the OBOD camps only dedicate one night to an *eisteddfod* and do not usually command full attendance, the *eisteddfod* held at Anderida camps is held every night and invariably turnout is quite high. This is likely due to the fact that several well-loved musicians are always in attendance at the Anderida camps but not necessarily at the OBOD camps.

Central to the experience of an Anderida camp is the main ritual. As stated, often one afternoon of the exceedingly short three days is devoted entirely to setting up the camp. The main rituals during my fieldwork were a walk through a fire labyrinth, the burning of a wicker man, and a fire walk. While the main ritual is being held there will often also be a Native American-style sweat lodge ceremony.



*Figure 7-2. A fire labyrinth from one of Anderida's camps (from [www.shanegadd.com/brews.html](http://www.shanegadd.com/brews.html)).*

The sweat lodge ceremony (sometimes referred to as a steam lodge) was not performed during every Anderida camp I attended. This was due to the fact that only one individual who regularly attends these camps (here referred to by the pseudonym 'Jack') has the knowledge necessary to build a sweat lodge and lead the ceremony, so when Jack cannot attend the ceremony must be foregone. At the camps in which a sweat lodge is held the process begins generally as early on the first day of the camp as possible. First, when the group assembles in the morning, Jack asks how many people would like to take part in the ceremony. These lodges are quite small so it is considered preferable not to have more than twelve participants. If thirteen or fourteen wish to attend, generally they can be accommodated. However, if a large number wish to attend, the spirits are asked to

choose, usually through a simple process such as drawing straws or the like. In reality, if more than twelve people step forward generally a few will step back, allowing others to take their place. This happened again and again in my fieldwork and I was continually struck by how willing members of this group were to forego an experience so another who felt strongly could partake of the experience.

Once Jack has determined who will be participating in the ceremony, he instructs them to begin by hauling large amounts of wood and water to the site of the sweat lodge. At the same time, he and a few volunteers begin constructing the lodge itself. It is useful, perhaps, to note while some groups may have the luxury of having a permanent sweat lodge, the land that Anderida uses for its camps is rented from an organic farmer. Therefore, for each ceremony a new lodge must be constructed. The construction begins by shaving the ends of large willow poles into a point. These poles are then bent into a semi-spherical shape, aided by the natural flexibility of the wood. The poles are then lashed to each other with rope. This process can be seen in Figure 7-3 in which the bare-chested figure can be seen beginning to bend a new support over the structure. Additionally, in this figure one can clearly see that a hole in the ground has been dug to house heated stones during the ritual. While benches are often carved in the ground for permanent structures, in the temporary ones it is more regular for the participants to merely sit on the ground around the hole. Once the structure has been completed, layers of blankets and canvas tarps are laid over the top in order to retain heat and steam during the ceremony.



*Figure 7-3. The erection of a sweat lodge at an Anderida camp (photograph by author).*

After the structure has been completed, Jack starts a very large fire burning and when it has reached the proper temperature, stones are added. The process of heating the stones takes quite some time so at this point the participants generally go back to their tents to wait for them to be ready. Once the ceremony is ready to begin, the participants return to the site of the sweat lodge where Jack instructs them as to what they will experience. He tells the group that the lodge will be incredibly dark and always to be mindful of where they step. He also tells them that there will be three rounds of the sweat. After the first round, the participants exit and stand by the fire in silence, sometimes dowsing themselves with water, after which the pattern is repeated. The significance of the number three has been remarked upon previously (especially as

regards the three gestations in the Taliesin myth). So instructed, the participants remove their clothing and meditate for a while before entering the lodge. It should be noted that this was the only ritual I attended during my fieldwork in which it was strongly recommended that the members participate in the nude. Whether this is the case in all modern Druid sweat lodges I cannot comment.

Similar to the initiation ceremony, modern Druids do not believe that individuals should be prepared for what they will encounter during the sweat lodge ceremony. Therefore, in deference to their wishes I will not describe the process itself past relating that it was one of the most powerful rituals I witnessed during fieldwork, particularly for its physically grueling process. The stones that have been heated in the fire are brought in and placed in the hole in the ground and are periodically splashed with water, sending up plumes of steam. The heat is intense and throughout the ceremony the participants are chanting one of several chants. One in particular I feel comfortable sharing as it can readily be found in many sources including on the internet. Called the ‘Earth Mother’ chant, it is intoned as follows:

“Earth mother, we honor your body  
Earth mother, we honor your bones  
Earth mother, we sing to your body  
Earth mother, we sing to your stones”

The chant and others like it are sung repeatedly, in rounds. In conjunction with the stifling heat and the complete inability to see, these chants help to induce in the participant a sense akin to a trance. While in this state participants often have striking

visions or meditations that some of my informants have related were life-changing events.

As dramatic as these rituals are, perhaps the most potent symbol of the Anderida camps is the ancestral ashes. After every camp the grove father takes a small jar and fills it with some of the ashes from the sacred central fire. This fire is at the center of the circle formed during ritual. At the opening of the next camp the jar will be emptied over the new fire, symbolically linking the two celebrations. As the old ashes are poured over the new fire it rekindles the memory of the past ritual in the minds of the participants. Similarly, at the end of all rituals the grove mother states: “let the heart remember what the eyes and ears have learned.” In this way, even though the physical community of individuals disperses at the end of the camp, the individual is exhorted to take that community into their hearts so that it can be recalled in moments of need in the same way the ancestors remain in the memories of their descendants. This clearly points to the recognition of the impermanence of the community and the desire to allow that community to live on through the individual. Within the anthropological context this is especially intriguing as it is the reverse of what we often find; individuals are impermanent but the community continues.

As attendance at the camp removes the individual from their day-to-day routine and enmeshes them in an intimate spiritual community, it is suggested that all individuals entering the camp are ‘gated’. Not much actually occurs in this process but most still consider it a vital part of preparing to enter the camp. At the entrance to the site is an archway of wood (in the case of OBOD) next to which is placed a small tent. In the case of the Anderida camp the facilitators’ caravan acts in the same way. Having passed

through this arch the individual is greeted by a member of camp whose explicit duty it is to perform the gating procedure. This consists of making the individual a cup of tea and allowing them to sit quietly while they allow the cares and concerns of the outside world to ebb away from them. During this process they focus on putting themselves in the right frame of mind to embark upon the spiritual exploration that is the purpose of the camp.

Although the process is reversed when the camps close by walking through the gateway, many people feel dissociated when they return to the outside world. I use this term as it is the native term, which once again betrays the influence of modern psychology upon modern Druidry, as expressed through the works of Philip Carr-Gomm. Many of my informants expressed that they feel the environment created by the communal nature of the camps is the 'real world' while the world external to the camps is in many ways the false world.<sup>107</sup> This clearly stems from the desire of members to establish a permanent community based on this model. While most admit that this community would be unlikely to survive for any substantial amount of time, it is still a firmly felt wish. Therefore, leaving this community at the conclusion of the camp can lead many to feel that their ordinary lives are somewhat wanting. This can lead to feelings of depression as a result of the intense level of community achieved within these camps. The removal of that community can be jarring. I experienced this in a very real way after leaving my first camp. I had become so accustomed to the different sounds around me at camp that after camp as I was waiting for a train I heard a noise and immediately turned around expecting to see drummers strolling towards me. Instead, I discovered that the noise was produced by a man walking heavily down a set of metal

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<sup>107</sup> Here we can once again see the influence of Eastern philosophy within modern Druidry: this clearly illustrates the Hindu and Buddhist belief that the world is an illusion to be transcended. However, in this case it is the mundane world of everyday life that is illusory while communal life is transcendent.

stairs. This dissociation is common and can happen after the short camps, but is necessarily more pronounced after the longer ones.

### *International assemblies*

One of the many ways in which modern Druids within OBOD celebrate their Druidry is attending one or both of the bi-annual gatherings held by the organization. These meetings are held near the Summer and Winter Solstices in Glastonbury. Like the other types of practices we have been investigating the purpose of these rituals is to help the individual achieve spiritual growth and promote firm bonds amongst the individuals and groups that comprise OBOD. These bonds are often made between individuals from opposite ends of the earth as members come from as far away as Australia and New Zealand.

The selection of Glastonbury for the site of these gatherings was not random. Since at least the turn of the twentieth century Glastonbury has been synonymous with the new age community in Great Britain. This is in large part due to its connection with the legendary figure of King Arthur. In fact, Glastonbury is said by many to be the geographical site of Avalon. The link to Druidry is through the figure of Merlin, Arthur's advisor and Druid.

The events that comprise the gatherings cover a Saturday and half of the following Sunday. Beginning around ten in the morning individuals gather at the town hall (the site of the staging of the gatherings) for a discussion of the schedule of activities and a short ritual. The group then splits into its three constituent grades of Bard, Ovate and Druid for grade meetings. At the winter gathering there is a break for lunch after

which members return to the town hall and hear a series of lectures revolving around one specific theme. During the summer gathering individuals assemble for a ritual either on Glastonbury Tor or at Chalice Well. These ceremonies are particularly potent as they are often attended by one hundred plus Druids and seek to include representatives of as many groves as possible.

The evening is then given over to a party in the town hall. After dinner the crowd is entertained by musicians and storytellers. A few of the attendees slip out of the party early, however, as there is an opportunity to attend Stonehenge for the sunrise the next morning. OBOD charters coaches to drive the roughly fifty individuals to the stone circle and back in time for the morning meeting, but due to the distance between Glastonbury and Stonehenge, these individuals must be on the coaches by just after four in the morning. During my fieldwork I attended one of these visits to Stonehenge. Due to a special arrangement OBOD has with English Heritage (who operate the site) OBOD is allowed access to the center of the stone circle itself for the purpose of holding a ritual. Though visibly tired, all of the individuals I spoke with that morning felt awed by the experience of watching the sun rise over what many Druids consider to be one of the most sacred sites in the British Isles. Upon returning to Glastonbury, this group joins with the rest of the members in the town hall for the morning meeting and the closing ceremony.

### *Pub Moots and Message Boards*

Conflicting ideas are regularly expressed and, as stated earlier, actively encouraged within modern Druidry. The most predominant *milieux* for the debate of these variant

ideas are moots and Internet message boards. As we will see, in both of these arenas impassioned dialectics occur which simultaneously inform the group of individual beliefs and the individual of group beliefs. It is through engagement in this dialectic that what Durkheim refers to as 'collective effervescence' occurs. As such, the conflicts that are exposed and how they are resolved can do much to advance the present enquiry.

The term 'moot' is of obscure origin. According to Webster's New International Dictionary, the noun refers to a, "meeting, encounter" and additionally: "in Anglo-Saxon times the kingdom; a *gemot* ...The term moot was applied to any assembly met to administer justice or for administrative service" (1991: 1592). As a verb it is, "to argue; plead; or discuss" (ibid.) While modern Druids do not gather at moots purely for the purpose of administration, they do meet in order to discuss a wide range of topics. Thus, in this tradition the term 'moot' is an adaptation of an ancient term for modern use, a theme to which I will return below.

A *pub moot* is, as the name implies, a gathering held at a pub. Moots in the modern Druid sense are informal meetings during which the participants discuss topics relevant to their spiritual paths. Often provoking heated debate, this is one of the arenas in which Druid identity is negotiated and often re-negotiated. Themes are broad and seemingly revolve around simple questions.

The group of informants on which I focused my research holds moots in a pub in Southwick, Sussex, on the southern coast of England. While these events were originally organized by members of Anderida, they were not created purely for the members of that group. Instead, they were conceived of (as one of my informants stated) "a non-threatening way of getting pagans in the south together". This informant continued his

explanation by stating that in his experience, many non-pagans who are interested in learning more about modern Druidry often either cannot find a group to join or are nervous about entering into an unknown social situation. In fact, attendance at these events often represents the first contact many have with the pagan spiritualities. In recognition of the difficulty of this process, the moots were established in part to set potential members (of Anderida or of the broader pagan paths) at ease and provide them with a gentle introduction to the group and the ideas expressed in this communal setting.

Moreover, they were created to encourage dialogues between existing pagans, a group which comprises a wide range of individuals. While the moots were launched by members of Anderida, not all members attend (nor are they required to attend) the moots. For most of the individuals who attend moots these meetings are only one type of group activity they participate in. However, some of the participants are solitary practitioners and therefore moots present a unique opportunity for these individuals to meet with members of the wider pagan community. Most attendees are Druids but other pagan spiritualities are represented as well, most notably the Wiccan path. Thus, some of the conflicts which occurred as a result of the explorations of various topics reflected the fundamental differences between the two paths. Although disjunctions between these two paths are clearly a subject worthy of further examination, these themes are beyond the scope of this work. It is pertinent to note, though, that the Wiccans who were present often made statements that prompted the Druid attendees to examine and clarify their beliefs. The Druids who participated in these inter-faith meetings thus gained a deeper understanding of their own beliefs through debate with non-Druids. This bears out Barth's statement that it is in the apprehension of 'them' that 'we' are defined; in other

words, a group cannot define what makes it distinct without another group from which to make itself distinct (cf. Barth 1969).

Attendees gather in the agreed-upon location and begin the evening with general conversation. Once the participants (most of whom are well acquainted with one another) have completed these preliminary conversations, the moot 'proper' begins with the selection of the topics that will be debated. While on some occasions these themes are pre-determined, in most instances attendees come to the moot with suggestions for possible subjects for discussion. Each individual expresses his or her ideas and the themes are chosen from the topics raised. This is done informally, with participants often dismissing their own topics in favor of another individual's choice. These discarded themes often reemerge at later moots where they can be fully explored. The selection process completed, the group carries on to a full discussion of the topic at hand. The topics cover all manner of spiritually related topics, including 'what does it mean to be pagan and what does it mean to be a Druid (or a Wiccan)? Is there a difference?' and 'do you feel chanting is necessary and/or useful during ritual?'

The conversation proceeds in a 'talking-stick' format, with each individual relating their own assessment of the topic at hand. Often the individual's answers implicitly raise new areas for consideration and these areas are explored at length. Once each participant has had a chance to speak, the talking-stick is usually passed around again and the individuals are given a chance to add anything they may have forgotten when speaking earlier or (as is very often the case) to revise their earlier statements to reflect what they have learned through the course of the discussion. If time permits, more

than one question may be raised for consideration, at which point the above process is repeated.

The observance of proper protocol with regards to the talking-stick is essential. While an individual is holding this object<sup>108</sup> he or she is not to be interrupted. This is to encourage every individual to feel that they have not only spoken but have been heard and that their views are considered as carefully as anyone else's<sup>109</sup>. The talking-stick on one hand denotes to the group that the individual has the sole right to speak at a given time while also acting as a touchstone for the focus of the individual's thoughts.

Relaxed and informal, these meetings are often the first experience individuals have of the Druid community. For my part, they were incredibly useful as the questions and the debate often raised issues for my analysis without the need to prompt (and potentially bias) my informants. Specifically, they called into question much of the information written on modern Druids and helped me to examine the relationship between 'what is said' about and by modern Druids and 'what is actually done' by them.

In a similar fashion, the various pagan chat rooms and message boards that are available on the Internet provide a venue for modern Druids to discuss and debate their spirituality. These Internet sites are administered by a range of groups from the international Druid organizations such as OBOD and the British Druid Order to a few grove websites (including Anderida's own<sup>110</sup>). Additionally, there are many pagan websites and some general sites which devote space to religious groups. An exhaustive

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<sup>108</sup> The talking-stick is a Native American invention. However, modern Druids do not use a replica of said object but have, rather, borrowed the concept. Almost any object can be used as a talking-stick with examples being as divergent as a miniature potted cactus on one occasion and a beer mat on another.

<sup>109</sup> This stricture is followed for a vast majority of the time; however, often small editorial comments are added by others. These comments are always very brief as it is considered disrespectful to interrupt an individual when he or she is sharing their ideas with the group.

<sup>110</sup> This website can be found at [www.anderidagorsedd.org](http://www.anderidagorsedd.org).

list is impossible, as many of these sites appear and disappear on a regular basis. The broader and more well-established of these sites contain not only areas for discussion of belief but rooms specifically designated for the online rituals mentioned previously in chapter eight. Many also provide articles on the history and ideology of Druidry (as well as paganism itself) and a few have online stores where items designed for pagans can be purchased.

The message boards or chat rooms at first glance appear substantively the equivalent of the moots. Any individual may subscribe to these sites (almost always at no cost), and once they have signed on they can enter the chat rooms to discuss various topics. However, these message boards lack the structure of the moots in several vital ways. First, these boards tend to be dominated by the posts of a few individuals. These individuals will start a new thread by posting a new question to which others may answer. Unlike the moots there is no discussion of which topics are the most relevant for debate. Second, the talking-stick structure of the moots enables each individual to speak and to be recognized. This structure focuses the individuals on the topic at hand, unlike the chat rooms which often devolve into unrelated posts. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these chat rooms do not allow for face-to-face contact and, therefore, do not aid in the creation of a sense of community. As individuals often submit a post and then do not return to the website for some time, there is a lack of engagement in group debate. However imperfect these websites may be, many modern Druids do not live near a group that holds moots and the Internet often serves as their only connection with fellow Druids. Despite their deficiencies, often the ideas expressed on these websites were illuminating and of necessary importance to this work, as will be discussed below.

The types of discussions that take place at the moots and on the Internet websites are extremely similar. The themes range widely but can be roughly grouped into three types: beliefs, practices, and structures. Thus, debate often centers around such areas as whether Druidry is a pantheistic or polytheistic spirituality and what the implications of each of these views is for Druidry (both ideologically and practically). Debates regarding practical topics often center around such questions (noted earlier) as ‘should Druids have hymns?’ Organizationally, questions are raised concerning the relationship of the various orders and whether or not there can be said to be a Druid ‘church’ structure and whether this is in fact desirable.

The purpose of these discussions is not to codify or homogenize the ideology of modern Druidry. As stated earlier, within Druidry primacy is placed on heterogeneity; therefore the existence of conflicting beliefs is actively encouraged. The intention is not to resolve these conflicts but, more positively, to celebrate the diversity of individual belief. This reflects the modern Druid ideal of the necessity of tolerance. For a group that perceives its role in the world to be that of peacemakers, this positive view of conflict is essential. Additionally, it is only through the active discussion of these conflicts that knowledge can be gleaned from others. While appearing to be a purely individual path, it is therefore clear that Druidry acknowledges the necessity of a community. As we have seen in the Tale of Taliesin (related in chapter five), Gwion Bach only received the *awen* through his engagement in conversation for a year and a day with Morda. It is thus through the individuals’ active engagement in the community that a conduit is opened for the bright knowledge, the *awen*, to flow into the whole community and impart illumination.

The significance of the discussions that take place during moots and message boards rests not only in the content of the exchanges. Perhaps more importantly, it is the group's engagement in the process of exchange that is meaningful. As consensus is not the relevant goal, the purpose of these activities is not only the definition but the very promotion of the bonds that constitute and re-constitute the modern Druid community. It is through listening and speaking to one another that the community is created. An individual's active engagement in this process marks them as part of the community. In this respect, it is not just the ideological debates which create the community but the preceding general 'chit-chat' which helps to establish the personal connections that bind the group together. It is clear, therefore, that while the content of these conversations is illuminative of modern Druid belief, the process of arriving at the content is equally important. In support of this processual ideal, many of my informants related that they use the term 'path' in reference to their spirituality because a path denotes the experience of the journey, not the arrival at the destination.

Internet message boards and chat rooms function in much the same way as the moots with notable exceptions. Like the moots, topics relevant to modern Druidry are raised and heated debate ensues. Similarly, participation in online discussions signals the individual's commitment to and engagement in the negotiation of Druid ideology and identity. However, the anonymity that is a hallmark of the Internet generates obstacles for the creation of the modern Druid community. Unlike moots, the message boards and chat rooms lack the nuance of face-to-face communication and therefore meaning must be construed in a manner divorced from other content-rich signals such as body language and tone of voice. Additionally, anonymity removes the constraining force of society, as

individuals often make comments and criticisms on the Internet that they normally would avoid in face-to-face communication. The ability to mask one's identity and to come and go at any time means that the discussions that occur on the Internet do not create the same level of engagement as the moots. However, for individuals who live too far away from an organized moot (there are only a handful of regular, organized moots in the UK) and who are solitary practitioners the Internet often serves as their only connection with the Druid community. Although problematic, these venues allow individuals from around the world to come together as an 'imagined community' (cf. Anderson 2006).

#### *Solitary and Internet-based practice*

In addition to the types of practices already discussed, two other areas deserve mention: solitary practice and internet-based practice. Solitary Druids, 'Henge Druids', or 'Hedge Druids' as they are known are defined by the fact that they do not base their practice within a group. Their rituals could not therefore be analyzed. Some do attend larger gatherings (specifically the camps and bi-annual international gatherings) in an attempt to connect with the wider pagan community, but little of my data comes from this source.

Druids who are geographically isolated from the community do not necessarily have to be solitary practitioners, however. Many of these individuals access the community online through Druid and pagan websites. The online rituals themselves follow much the same pattern as other Druid rituals.

These rituals begin with the individual preparing in his or her own physical space. This includes placing a candle and a 'grounding stone' by their computer. The purpose of this stone is two fold: it provides the individual with a tangible connection to the earth

and it helps to 'ground' the experience, or make it possible for the individual to return to the physical world after the often intense journey of the ritual.

The area of the OBOD website reserved for such activities is referred to as 'NOBOD'. Upon entering this site the viewer is greeted with the image of the sacred grove, which contains a flat stone in the center. These images serve as a focus for members and are meant to remind the individuals of the purpose of their visit to the website, as well as of the fact that their ritual is directed towards a reverence for nature.

After the individual has prepared him or herself for the ritual in their physical space they proceed to log-on to the internet. Upon entering the website they assemble in a chat room which has been set aside for this purpose. When they have all agreed they are ready to begin the ritual, they all move into a second, private chat-room which has been restricted to ritual use by the website's moderator. The ritual occurs by typing in what would normally be spoken and the directions of what they are doing, much in the same manner as a play contains stage directions and dialogue. When complete, the individuals leave the ritual space and return to the first chat-room where they discuss their experiences of the ritual.

#### *Ancient versus modern*

The use of the Internet in modern Druidry presents us a fundamental conflict, namely that while it harks back to the past it simultaneously and unproblematically utilizes modern technologies. This is especially striking as Druidry is a spirituality based on the reverence of the natural world and modern technologies are distinctly the invention of the human, cultural realm. While at first glance this appears to be quite a contradiction, it

will become clear that the use of ancient and modern knowledge presents no real conflict for modern Druidry.

In order to examine this apparent contradiction we must first examine to what extent modern Druidry actually does base its ideology and practices on the ancient Celtic past. The notion that modern Druidry is defined by the ancient Celtic past would seem to be supported by the fact that all of my informants were passionate about reading archaeological and historical research regarding the ancient Celts. New or unusual research was invariably hotly debated. However, when the theories espoused by academics conflicted with modern Druid conceptions of the ancient Celtic past, the academic theories were disregarded. When asked about the history of OBOD, these informants invariably related that the organization could trace its roots (at the earliest) from the aforementioned meeting in London in 1717 at the Apple Tree Tavern. This is hardly surprising as the OBOD correspondence course does not claim a link any older than this and, in at least one instance discusses the possibility that even this date may be too early for the inception of OBOD's pedigree. How, then, can we make sense of these seemingly conflicting ideas? Simply, the contradiction can be resolved by understanding that the modern Druid perception of the ancient Celtic past serves, for modern Druidry, as a model or template for the group's world-view. By far the preponderance of modern Druids does not believe they are engaged in ancient practices, handed down in an unchanged form from the ancient Celtic era. Instead, the link with the past is one of *Volksgeist*, the spirit of the ancient Celts passed down to the modern Druids<sup>111</sup>.

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<sup>111</sup> Interestingly, this *Volksgeist* is not viewed by the modern Druids as genetic or correlated with birth in the ancient Celtic territories. In response to my questions on the matter, one of my informants stated, "even if you're from somewhere like New Zealand you could have been a Celt in one of your past lives".

The advances in our understanding of the ancient Celtic past, both archaeological and historical, form the basis of what the modern Druids know about this *Volksgeist*. However, often the research that modern Druids explore comes from non-academic sources. These works and the theories they contain are often accepted as equal in weight to theories from traditional academia. Often, in fact, these works are preferred as they omit the technical jargon of academic disciplines such as history or archaeology. Furthermore, theories regarding the ancient Celts that are written by the lay public are often seen as ‘inspired’ and therefore exempt from the necessity for the type of rigorous examination that occurs in academia.

Much of the literature available to modern Druids is of this type. However, many modern Druids do avidly read and explore the academic works that have been produced on ancient Druidry. The overwhelming majority of modern Druids who rely upon this material for a ‘factual’ rendering of the ancient Celts are not trained in these areas of research, and they are often unaware of the development of theory in these disciplines. Without a grasp of the evolution of these academic disciplines, modern Druids are often not aware of the debates regarding the interpretation of data and, therefore, are left without the tools necessary to judge how a work is received by the academic field for which it was produced. Thus, works of dubious scholarship are often widely read and accepted by modern Druids even though academia has either judged the works as wanting or has simply moved on to new theories.<sup>112</sup> Modern Druids are not alone in the

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<sup>112</sup> For example, many of my informants referred to Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* as a reliable source for the practices of ancient Europeans. While Frazer’s voluminous work still holds merit, anthropology has developed beyond the theories he used to analyse his data. Therefore, his interpretations have become outmoded.

lack of critical perspective that comes with reading an academic work out of context; the popularization of science can be said to be one of the hallmarks of modern life.

The literature on which modern Druids base their understanding of the ancient Celts is thus selective. This could lead to the assumption that modern Druidry is merely invented and has little relationship to the acknowledged ‘facts’ academics have discovered about the ancient Celtic past. However, this trap, which I confess I fell into early on during my fieldwork, obscures the vital nature of the modern Druids’ negotiation of their identity.

While I assumed the academic research was ‘factual’, in other words an undisputable truth, the modern Druids interviewed for this work perceived the theories presented by academics and non-academics as merely alternatives to one another. When faced with research which supported their vision of the Celts, they accepted it wholesale, seemingly unaware of or at least unconcerned by the possible flaws and/or inconsistencies within the theory. The accepted theory was then used to justify the antiquity of their belief. When the theory was in opposition to their views, it was either simply ignored or doubt was cast on the argument by statements such as, “it just doesn’t *feel* right” or “I just don’t believe that”. Luhrmann noted a similar phenomenon in her work with contemporary British witches:

Many magicians will say that objective truth is not accessible, because it must always be understood by people and through people, and people have limited perceptual tools. Words are tools to put a handle to reality; gods are psychological constructs, no more than archetypes; truth is relative to the believer – these remarks are as commonplace to the magician’s conversation as is his reference to science’s hegemony. (Luhrmann 1989: 342-343)

In other words, theories are accepted or rejected based on the individual's feeling that one or the other is inherently closer to the truth than the other theories available. This kind of consumer mentality pervades modern Druidry.

This picking and choosing among the various current theories about the Celts can be viewed, in the biased atmosphere of a western society predicated on 'fact', as pure invention. However, it actually displays the coherence of modern Druid belief. Modern Druidry rests on the belief that, by eclectically drawing on many sources and using them as a template or a model, modern society can gain the benefit of past history. Through meditating upon this history's relevance today, new problems could be solved with old techniques. Therefore, the eclectic nature of Druids' academic readings, instead of creating conflict, actively seeks to neutralize the conflict that could occur from continuing arguments over the nature and or relevance of the ancient Celtic past. After all, if modern Druidry had to reinvent itself after every revision of our understanding of the ancient Celts, it could not present its world-view as a stable 'truth'. Viewed in this manner it is clear that tension and conflict in modern Druidry helps to provide cohesion through the recognition of the individual's right to envisage the ancient Celtic past in a way that is meaningful for the individual.

### *Conclusion*

It can be seen that life-crisis rites, when taken together with the seasonal celebrations, form the basic units of modern Druid practice. Just like the seasonal celebrations marking the passing of the year, life-crisis rites are variable and determined by the individuals and the groups themselves, without recourse to institutional dogma. Once

again, Orr aptly states, “these ceremonies of celebration, dedication and transformation are to some extent individually crafted to be specifically relevant to the people involved. They are designed to aid processes of change, to bring confidence and affirm support” (ibid). Just as important moments in the earth’s yearly orbit around the sun are marked by the seasonal ceremonies, an individual’s life is likewise marked by life-crisis rites. The celebration of these rites creates and informs group identity through the continual process of re-negotiation.

Similarly, though forms of observation may vary amongst modern Druids these enactments bring the community together to define and create meaning. As is especially clear with regard to the pub moots, this is a dialectical process in which individuals transform the group as much as they are transformed by it. The continual process of questioning individual conceptions of Druidry and finding new ways in which to incorporate these ideas into the ideological structure is what allows this spirituality to grow and change without that change being denounced as non-traditional. Furthermore, the fact that each ritual is tailored to the specific needs of the time, place and group performing it means that this spirituality is allowed the freedom to explore novel solutions to very old problems. This engagement is a common feature of many cultures, as is evidenced by Wendy James’ statement that, “‘society’ is undeniably a thing of flux, and flow, and of people actively engaging in that flow” (James 2003: 54). This emphasis on the need for continual evolution has created a vibrantly rich path that is at once modern as well as being based on perceived ancient traditions. This melding of the ancient with the modern at first appears contradictory but, as we have seen, the

negotiation of the tensions and conflicts that it engenders helps to provide cohesion to modern Druidry.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Ritual Structure**

The last two chapters of this work discussed the types of rituals that are central to modern Druid practice. In this chapter we will focus on the mechanics of modern Druid ritual. Specifically, we will see how individuals prepare for a ritual and how they acquire the paraphernalia necessary to perform the ritual. Then we will examine the types of roles assumed by members of the group in the performance of the ritual. Next, the choice of location for the ritual is explored. Finally, we will turn to an examination of the structural components, the common elements of modern Druid rituals. This chapter seeks to provide a framework for understanding the general mechanics of modern Druid ritual practice. However, it must be noted that this chapter is the result of a study of the practices of only a few modern Druid groups and individuals, therefore practices will undoubtedly differ between groups or individuals.

#### *Preparation*

Like much of modern Druid practice, the preparation required for a ritual varies widely. The practical dictates of time, place and personnel are often determinative of the extent of preparations. While some rituals are incredibly formal and can involve weeks of planning others are impromptu, merely requiring the practitioners to find acceptable substitutes for standard ritual equipment. Though this variation appears to present issues for research, a careful analysis can serve to illuminate modern Druid categories.

Several key features can be said to be requirements of a modern Druid ritual as they appeared in every one of the rituals attended during research. Without these elements it is safe to assume a ritual would be incomplete or, in fact, not take place at all. This issue will be elaborated upon further in this chapter. For the moment though, we will consider the categories of objects used during rituals. These features fall into two main categories: ritual paraphernalia and ritual dress. The category of ritual paraphernalia can be further divided into two categories: in the native parlance known as ‘tools’ (and interchangeably as ‘magical-working tools’) and ‘props’. These items are sometimes, though rarely, referred to as ‘altar tools’, though this taxonomy is more usual for Wicca. The term derives from the fact that the objects are normally stored in an area called an ‘altar’, which is an area specifically designated for the storage of ritual paraphernalia (both tools and props). This altar can be open or closed as desired by the users, with tables, bookcases, and small chests being the usual choices.

Within the category of ritual paraphernalia the two sub-divisions referred to as ‘ritual tools’ and ‘ritual props’ are not mutually exclusive. On some occasions items may be categorized as ‘tools’, in another as ‘props’. Additionally, during the same ritual, the same item may function in one respect as a tool and in another as a prop. For instance, a drum may be classified as ‘ritual tool’ when used to ‘cast the circle’ (see below) and as ‘ritual prop’ when used to aid a meditation. The categorization of these objects therefore rests on function and not type. Furthermore, while the two categories are native ones they are not firmly entrenched and individuals often use them in different ways. However, most of my informants stated that a distinction did fundamentally exist and,

therefore, the two categories cannot be said to be interchangeable. On the other hand, my informants also stated they recognized in practice the distinction is often blurred.

The category of ‘ritual tools’ or its equivalent, ‘magic-working tools’, can be said to encompass all ritual paraphernalia that are generic in nature. In other words, these items are used in every type of modern Druid ritual and are usually the first items procured by an individual Druid or group for ritual purposes. The use to which these items are put is properly the province of the next section so it suffices here to note the types of objects included in this category. These tools always include a bowl or shallow dish of water, a fire-proof dish, incense, matches or a lighter and self-igniting charcoal briquettes. Additionally, many Druids consider it optimal to include a wand, candles, an object to focus on during meditation, an object which acts as a ‘talking stick’, and bread and wine (or a non-alcoholic substitute) in their collection of ‘ritual tools’. Particular groups often include items in this category which are idiosyncratic to that group’s practice. The Anderida Grove’s particularity is often the inclusion of a ceremonial sword.

In contrast, the category ‘ritual props’ is specific. These are items whose inclusion in ritual varies from occasion to occasion. They have a distinct purpose and are engineered to facilitate a particular goal. These items range widely, often including musical instruments, craft supplies and objects from the natural world. On one hand they may be symbolic of specific concepts or of the seasonal celebrations, while on the other hand, their function may be the generation of sensory effects. This secondary purpose is inherent in the term itself, as ‘prop’ evokes ideas of performance, especially the theatrical (cf. James 2003). Performance is quite an appropriate term in this instance as ritual in

modern Druidry is concerned with sensory experience. 'Props' are thus used to create a sensory environment which can heighten or deepen the individual's experience of the ritual, especially when that ritual involves meditation.

By far the most common ritual props are items of clothing, 'coronets' (circlets of real or dried flowers) and body paint. Although not all modern Druids utilize these props, most choose to wear different clothing for ritual than they do in their normal lives. These garments are items which are specifically produced or acquired for ritual use and are rarely worn at any other time. In fact, some informants said that they would never wear these clothes for non-sacred occasions. One of my informants stated donning ritual clothing "just made things more formal", another that it "set the tone" for the ritual. In other words, it allows individuals to mark the difference between the sacred and the profane. Clearly these statements are a perfect example of Van Gennep's 'liminal rites' (from the Latin *limen*, meaning 'threshold') or 'rites of transition', "whose purpose is to remove a person from the common domain in order to incorporate him into a special domain" (van Gennep 1960: 186). In this case, therefore, my informants are referring to the fact that donning clothes kept specifically for ritual purposes created an atmosphere that was clearly marked as different, as special. In a way, the donning of this special clothing creates a *limen* (to appropriate a term from Victor Turner), a threshold which is stepped over in preparation for the transformation that is to occur through the performance of the rite (cf. Turner 1995). The action of removing one's mundane clothes and replacing them (or merely covering them) with clothing meant specifically for ritual is a preparatory step; by consciously altering one's appearance one indicates that one is making a conscious move from the profane world into the sacred.

This preparatory step is one of the ways in which Druids delineate themselves from non-Druids. By assuming this particular style of dress, the individual is making a commitment to the community and showing that commitment. He is also showing himself to accord with the stated goals and intentions of that community. He removes his external identity and replaces it with one of 'Druid'. However, by choosing a specific style of dress, the individual expresses his creativity and reasserts his unique, individual identity in the communal setting. If every Druid wore a 'uniform', one of my informants related, "he'd just be another face in the crowd", in other words, he would lose his distinct identity within the communal setting. However, wearing robes represents the individual's statement of self-ascription but is styled in a unique way, which concomitantly reaffirms the individual's status as both a member of the Druid community and an individual as well.

Although patterns of dress are far from codified, there can be said to be generic styles. Some of these styles are depicted in Figure 8-2. The most common choice is that of a long white or cream coloured tunic, usually with a hood. Often this tunic is simply slipped on over the individual's mundane clothing, although in good weather many choose to wear this item alone. Over this, some choose to wear a coloured 'tabard' (a long sleeveless tunic whose colour often represents the Druidic grade of the individual) or a cloak. Collectively, these garments are referred to as 'robes'. However, many do not adopt any specific clothing for ritual, choosing instead to dress in a style appropriate for the potential of inclement weather (when practicing outdoors) and to maximize comfort. When questioned about this, my informants stated that they had not yet

acquired robes, were concerned about the weather, or that they preferred to be comfortable so that nothing would interfere with their experience of the ritual.

A small proportion of individuals choose to practice 'sky-clad'. This term means that the individual (or group) choose to practice in the open, clad only in the sky; in other words, nude. During regular practice with the Anderida Grove I have never witnessed this. However, at Anderida and OBOD camps nudity is present (although not common). Some of my informants stated that they liked to practice sky-clad when performing solitary rituals but were either too shy to practice this way in a group, or simply that they were aware their nudity might make others uncomfortable. Far from being sexual in nature, however, this is most often a recognition of the beauty of the human body. Additionally, some of my informants stated that it allowed them to finally accept themselves for who they really were, in the truest sense of the term "warts and all."

Ritual dress has undergone a distinct evolution throughout the course of modern Druidry (see Figure 8-1 for images of Druidic garb through the ages). Little is known of the style of dress of the ancient Druids. The earliest extant images relate to the seventeenth-century revival period, and it is from these images that modern Druids derive their style of dress. Chief amongst these early images is Stukeley's depiction of an ancient Druid, who is shown in a tunic and hooded cloak. Modern Druids of the Welsh Eisteddfod, however, still wear the style popularized by the Druids of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. This style includes a long white tunic without a hood and a headpiece clearly based on the sarcophageal masks of the Egyptian pharaohs. As there was an obsession during these two eras for all things Egyptian, this borrowing is understandable. The adoption of this style specifically by Druids bears exploration, though.



*Stukeley's depiction of an ancient Druid*



*Ross Nichols*



*Two Members of the Ancient Druid Order  
(on the right is Robert MacGregor-Reid)*



*The Archbishop  
of Canterbury  
dressed for the  
Welsh Eisteddfod*

**This page:** *Figure 8-1. Early depictions of ancient Druid dress.*  
**Next page:** *Figure 8-2. Modern Druid styles of dress.*



As will be recalled from earlier chapters, the nineteenth and early twentieth century Druids were not interested in the religion of the ancient Druids. However, they were intensely interested in their philosophy. The search for hidden, occult knowledge was a key facet of these eras in Britain (cf. Pels 2000). At the same time, the discipline of archaeology was beginning to prosper with exotic finds from around the world. However, it was the treasures of Egypt's civilizations that captured the most popular attention in Britain. Little was known of the Egyptian philosophies but within the British public was a desire to find the hidden mysteries that made this civilization thrive. By co-opting the headdress of the Egyptian pharaohs, I argue that the modern Druids of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not attempting to equate themselves with Egyptians, but with the image of a society replete with ancient (but obscured) occult knowledge. This is borne out by Tanya Luhrmann's statement that, "magical groups see themselves in a lineage of ancient priest-hoods – Eleusinian, Druidic, Egyptian, even Atlantean" (1989: 145). Having explored modern Druid styles of dress, we now turn to examine the ways in which both dress and paraphernalia are acquired by members of this group.

### *Acquisition*

Acquisition of both ritual paraphernalia and ritual dress occurs in several ways. As some of these objects are common household items they can be purchased in a range of places. More specialist items are commercially available at specialty shops and are widely available for purchase through the internet. The large number of these retailers (especially on the internet) is indicative of the widely expanding numbers of pagans and

their economic buying power. Sadly, data are lacking with regard to the actual amount spent on these sites and in fact to the number of such companies operating through the internet. However, a recent search through one internet directory service revealed 81 sites which advertised with this search engine.<sup>113</sup> There are actually many more of these sites (as any cursory examination will show) which do not advertise through search engines. The existence of a sub-directory within the “Business and Economy” directory entirely devoted to pagan ritual tools is in itself illuminating. Most of these concerns are geared toward the more publicized Wiccan movement, only rarely carrying items specifically designed for Druids. Much of the paraphernalia used by these two groups is identical and thus Druid-specific stores would be largely redundant.

While some Druids stock their altars purely with items they have purchased, most acquire their paraphernalia through a variety of alternate sources. Certainly, some objects (specifically metal items) can only feasibly be obtained through a commercial manufacturer. However, many items are gifts from others and these are often especially prized. Barter, while not usual, also accounts for the procurement of some items. This occurs mainly at large gathering such as the OBOD-sponsored camps. Furthermore, some items are gathered from the natural world.

Perhaps the objects considered by Druids to be the most ritually effective are items which have been made by an individual or group for personal or group use. These items are predominately wooden, pottery or textile in nature. The process of fashioning them for ritual use imprints upon them the energy and intent of the producer. Paraphernalia created specifically for a particular ritual event is considered highly

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<sup>113</sup> Search was completed on July 25, 2007. More information on these sites can be found at: [http://uk.dir.yahoo.com/Business\\_and\\_Economy/Shopping\\_and\\_Services/Religion\\_and\\_Spirituality/Ritual\\_Tools/](http://uk.dir.yahoo.com/Business_and_Economy/Shopping_and_Services/Religion_and_Spirituality/Ritual_Tools/)

effective when the maker performs a ritual for the sake of creating the object. The maker first creates a sacred space in which to fashion the item and then produces the article while focusing on the purposes for which the tool will be used. The object will thus be imbued with the maker's intent. This process is what makes the tool 'magical'. In this sense 'magic' is defined as the positive change that is made manifest as a result of the energy, intents and goals which are meditated upon during the manufacturing process. These items are preferred as they have a tangible link to the individual (or rarely group) that created them.

Perhaps the most poignant example of this type that occurred during fieldwork was the creation of a canopy of bunting by the Anderida Grove for my own handfasting to another member of the Anderida Grove. Members of the grove were given fifteen to twenty squares of various coloured fabrics and asked to draw or paint symbols on these squares. Symbols ranged from pictures representing the four elements to Celtic knotwork. These squares were then sewn onto eight<sup>114</sup> long pieces of fabric tape similar to flattened shoelaces. At one end these strands were fastened together and then suspended above the area chosen for the ceremony.

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<sup>114</sup> The significance of the number eight rests in its association with the eight seasonal celebrations of the year and their equivalence to the stages of the life-cycle of the year and individual, as discussed in chapter seven of this work.



*Figure 8-3. The erection of a canopy of bunting for a handfasting.*

My husband and I took our vows beneath this canopy, and therefore the union was imbued with ‘magic’, or the positive energy and intents of those that fashioned the canopy. Although created especially for this ceremony, the canopy was conceived of as a grove tool. Therefore, space was left at the end of each strand so that squares could be added at later points by new members of the Grove. The continual accretion of positive energy and intents will imbue the canopy with more potency as a ‘magical-working tool’ for use in future ceremonies.

The creation of ritual tools thus imbues them with a kind of efficacy and sanctity, commonly referred to as ‘magic’. The items made in this manner are only used for sacred events and never profane ones. However, items manufactured commercially or received through barter or gift can also be imbued with this quality of ‘magic’ through repeated usage. In this case though, the items must be prepared for ritual use through

their purification and dedication. This is accomplished most usually during a ritual specifically designed for the purpose. Purification is generally achieved through the immersion of the object in each of the four elements of earth, air, fire and water. Thus the object will often be dipped in soil (or alternatively salt), blown upon, passed through the smoke of incense and finally immersed in or drizzled with water. Once the item is purified in this manner, the individual or group will dedicate it to ritual use through meditating on the intent and purpose of the object while holding or touching the object. In this manner the 'magic' of positive energy and intent can flow from the person or persons into the item where it will lodge and accumulate alongside the natural 'magic' inherent in the item itself. If the object is to be de-sanctified for any reason (such as bartering or gifting it to another party or group) it need only be re-purified. This will remove the stamp of the previous owners. However, the object's natural energy will remain.

Two exceptions to this usual pattern exist. First, items collected from nature (such as stones and leaves) carry with them the sanctity of nature itself and therefore purification is unnecessary. Additionally, the ideal cannot always be followed due to circumstances. In this case, ordinary items can be substituted when a desired tool is not available or in fact omitted entirely. For example, during a walk through the New Forest I witnessed an impromptu ceremony in which a Styrofoam cup was used as a chalice because a sanctified chalice was not to hand. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, a ritual without at least the rudimentary ritual objects would be considered incomplete, but by no means would it be considered inefficacious. It is clear, therefore, that 'magic' or sanctity derives from the actions and intents of the individuals and group

and not from the properties of the objects themselves. While the presence of certain objects or a certain type of object is preferred, rigidity is not encouraged at the expense of the ritual experience.

### *Roles*

Within modern Druid ritual practice, it is often necessary for individuals to fill particular roles. However, specific 'ritual specialists' do not exist within this group. Unlike many societies, in Druidry these ritual positions are not the preserve of the few. The roles (and the knowledge and regalia associated with them) are not hereditary or associated with any type of corporate organization. Instead, the individual gains ritual knowledge through individual study. In the case of OBOD, this acquisition is predominantly the result of the individual's progression through the three structural grades of Bard, Ovate, and Druid. As each of these three grades requires initiation though, it can be said that like many societies ritual knowledge in modern Druidry is initiatory. The training of the three grades is thus meant to make every initiated individual a ritual specialist, what many non-Druids might call a priest or priestess. This specialist knowledge, when paired with inspiration and guidance from the individual's and group's guardians and guides creates what can be said to be 'perfect' performance and this performance can be seen as supporting the individual's assumption of the role. This in turn makes the ritual more meaningful and perhaps even more efficacious for both the individual and the community. However, while in theory any individual can take on any role within a ritual (providing all members agree) one role does deserve distinction. In order to initiate members into each of the three grades, the initiator must have reached the Druid grade.

As well, even though there is no actual rule, in practice most of my informants stated a preference for life-crisis rites to be performed by individuals of the Druid grade.

When followed to its natural conclusion, the result of the egalitarianism within modern Druidry would be the negation of hierarchy, a goal which my informants routinely expressed. Separation between clergy and congregation is tantamount to stating that some individuals are closer to the gods and goddesses than others, an assumption anathema to modern Druid belief. It can be argued, though, that if no separation (or hierarchy) was achieved, the group would be left without leadership. Therefore, individuals with a particular flare for ritual or, more commonly, senior members with greater knowledge of ritual will often fill key roles. This is particularly the case in situations where new members feel shy or reserved or simply feel that their ritual knowledge is insufficient for the task at hand. This feeling generally abates with continuing practice as the individual gains more experience and as the community encourages individuals to take on ritual responsibility. Tensions over whose experience is ‘inspired’ or ‘correct’ exist, of course, but they are negated through the belief that every individual’s experience, though different from another’s, is valid.

As I noted in chapter three, in some groves there exist the designations ‘grove father’ and ‘grove mother’. These individuals, as one of my informants stated, “hold the energy of the grove”. By this, they mean that these individuals are caretakers of the grove and help it through times of trouble or stress. However, as previously noted, the founding members of the Anderida Grove felt the term ‘facilitator’ was more neutral. They prefer this term because, as one of them put it: “we’re here to make sure everything runs smoothly and give some continuity to the grove”. There is thus a clear recognition

that in the face of a constantly evolving (and sometimes revolving) membership some form of continuity and guidance is necessary. Although these individuals give some continuity one must ask what would occur if they were to 'step down' from their positions. Such concerns are the focus of the following chapter and therefore I will leave this discussion until that point.

Additionally, groves often require members to fulfil other roles as necessity dictates. The most common of these roles are those of Pendragon and Scribe, which were discussed in chapter three. These roles are not intended to be static and, in theory at least, new members can take up empty roles or even filled ones if moved to do so; though in practice, once a role is filled it usually becomes the provenance of a specific individual.

Roles can be assumed in two different manners. First, the facilitator (or grove mother/father) may ask a specific person if they would like to take on the responsibility of filling an empty role. If no clear candidate comes to mind and the role is deemed vital, the facilitator will often ask if anyone within the grove feels moved to take up the empty post. Secondly, an individual may feel a calling to take up an empty role. In this case, the individual would explain their desire to the grove, which would meet and make a decision. This desire is usually expressed by the individual by stating that the grove's guides and guardians (or, in fact the individual's guides and guardians) have requested that the individual take over a particular role. For example, the guides and guardians may have come to the individual in a dream and told them that the grove was in trouble and needed their assistance. Whether or not this actually occurs is hard to know. It appears more likely that reference to the guides and guardians is a non-confrontational way for the individual to voice their own desire for recognition or power within the un-voiced

(but certainly present) hierarchy. For some, this is obviously not so but for others it appears to be the case. What is certain is that the veracity of the statement is not publicly questioned. In fact, I have never heard of an instance in which the grove decided the individual should not take up the role. It is felt that there must be a reason the individual felt moved to assume the role, and therefore the spirits or guides that brought this individual to this path must be respected.

These two forms of choice occur for a particular ritual as well as for the more permanent posts within a grove (if any role can actually be said to be permanent in modern Druidry). If more than one person steps forward for the role, they are expected to come to some agreement together, without recourse to any mediator. In actual fact little friction occurs over roles. I have never witnessed or indeed even heard of an argument between two or more individuals over who would take up the responsibility of a post. Invariably both sides offer to step back numerous times and eventually one person just assumes the role at the insistence of the other(s).

In the case of the Anderida Grove, however, it must be noted that perceptions of roles within the grove and within the Anderida Gorsedd (which, you will recall, is the name given to the 'open' rituals held at the Long Man of Wilmington) differ. Roles within the Gorsedd are rarely given to those who are not regular attendees. This is due primarily to the fact that casual attendees are often nervous and do not step forward to be considered for roles. Additionally, many who come to these events are not Druids and therefore have no ritual training. This lack of training would make them unable to fulfil certain roles within the ritual (although other, smaller roles require little to no ritual training and are therefore open to everyone). As one of my informants said, "you have to

know the rules before you can break them.” In this circumstance, therefore, it is vital that the Gorsedd has facilitators – individuals who have the necessary experience to lead a ritual in which many of the attendees are experiencing modern Druid ritual for the first time. In the closed grove meetings, however, membership is set and all individuals have some knowledge of ritual order and structure, although the level of this varies from individual to individual. Contrary to what might be expected, therefore, the assumption of roles within closed groups is often more casual.

During the seasonal celebrations two special forms of selection exist. First, roles that exist only for certain ceremonies (such as the role of the May Queen and King at Beltane) are often almost universally desired. In order to cope with this many groups defer to selection by the spirits or the gods and goddesses. This usually results in an element of fate as, for example, in the Beltane rituals I witnessed at the Long Man of Wilmington. Selection of the May Queen proceeded by the women drawing tarot cards from the *Celtic Tree Tarot* deck. The individual who received the Hawthorn card became the May Queen as this is the tree associated with Beltane. In a similar manner, the May King was chosen by a foot race to the bottom of the hill to search for a set of antlers (associated with the Horned God, Cernunnos or Herne) that had been previously hidden in the area. This selection process allows the roles to be awarded in an unbiased manner, thus removing any question of favouritism. However, this function is not voiced. Instead, my informants stated that it was the gods or the spirits who chose the individual who was right for the role.

Secondly, in some instances individuals are chosen for particular roles because of the group’s recognition of events in the individual’s life. However, I have only witnessed

this in the case of the seasonal ‘open’ rituals of the Anderida Gorsedd and the larger OBOD rituals performed at the bi-annual assemblies. This occurs as the progression of the seasons is represented as equivalent to the life-cycle of an individual, a theme discussed at length in chapter seven. I experienced this first hand, as the organizers of one of the OBOD events knew that I was to be handfasted in August. Therefore, the organizers asked me and my fiancé to play the roles of the Lord and Lady. In a sense, this was the group’s recognition not only of stages in our own life-cycles, but also of the change that would occur within the group as two of its members changed their status. It was a way for the community to publicly acknowledge and celebrate this change while at the same time vividly depicting for the community the equivalence between the individual’s life-cycle and the life-cycle of the earth.

#### *Location*

Modern Druid rituals are held outdoors whenever possible. Rain, stifling heat, fierce winds and snow will rarely prevent the performance of rituals. This is due to the fact that Druidry is a religion that reveres nature in all of her guises. To shy away from performing a ritual in the dead of winter or the height of summer would be, for most Druids, to ignore the fact that these harsh seasons are parts of nature, to be enjoyed as much as the finest spring day. In practice, though, some Druids do avoid ritual in inclement weather because of the risk of discomfort or the potential for ensuing illness.

While my informants stated their preference for practicing outdoors (with gardens, fields and forests being favored), this practice is not prescribed, as most Druids realize that it is not always possible to find a suitable outdoor space. If a member of the group does not own a plot of land or a large garden, public spaces are often sought.

Particularly prized locations are those marked by their connection with the ancient Celts, such as areas with stone circles, long barrows, Iron Age hill-forts or chalk figures such as the Long Man of Wilmington (where the Anderida Gorsedd meets). However, public spaces often present difficulties. First, some spaces are physically remote, which creates problems for those with disabilities. Secondly, the use of public spaces increases the likelihood that non-Druids (often referred to as ‘muggles’<sup>115</sup> or ‘mundanes’<sup>116</sup>) will be using the space for hiking, picnicking or the like. Private use of the area can therefore not be assured. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the non-Druid public is often less than supportive of Druid use of these spaces and sometimes even outwardly hostile.

During fieldwork a crisis of this sort occurred with the Anderida Gorsedd. When I first began attending the open rituals the ceremonies were held in a field adjacent to the car park designated for the use of those visiting the chalk figure of the Long Man of Wilmington (see Figure 8-4). The choice to use this field, and not the hill at the base of the Long Man, was taken, as there were several participants with disabilities. However, local landowners complained to the Wealden District Council (which owns and operates the car park) that when the Druids were holding their ceremonies in the car park traffic was congested and parking was virtually impossible. The Wealden District Council banned the Anderida Gorsedd from using the public field for its gatherings. Chief amongst its reasons for this injunction were the aforementioned traffic issues and the risk

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<sup>115</sup> The term ‘muggle’, although used earlier, was popularized by J. K. Rowling’s in the Harry Potter books. The use in this context is quite illuminating as Rowling’s use denotes a non-magical person and this is precisely the fashion in which the term is used by modern Druids.

<sup>116</sup> The term ‘mundane’ is interesting here as it is usually used in opposition to the term ‘sacred’; therefore, one can reasonably deduce that modern Druids believe those who do not practice Druidry are not enlightened, not sacred.

of fire from the incense burner used during ritual. Additionally, the Council stated that the presence of litter was noted in the public field.

Most of the Druids I spoke with expressed consternation over what they believed to be the spurious reasoning behind this decision. Primarily they stated that the field was designated for public use and they, as members of the public, should be allowed to use this space. The issue of a fire hazard was universally considered laughable as the incense burner in question is roughly three inches in diameter and holds a single charcoal. Furthermore, while recognizing that traffic congestion was problematic, my informants stated that they had done the utmost to remedy this inconvenience. All in all, my informants stated that they believe the real reason for the injunction was the result of the intolerance of the man who had recently bought the house neighboring the car park and of other residents of this exceedingly small village. The complaints received by the Council are held by my informants to be the result of non-comprehension of their rituals by the non-Druid community and hostility towards the rituals' obvious non-Christian bent. Correspondence between the Wealden District Council and the facilitators of the Gorsedd is still continuing at the time of writing and no resolution appears on the horizon.<sup>117</sup> Since these complaints have been registered, the Gorsedd has begun to meet on the hill at the base of the chalk figure (see Figure 8-5). While the parking issue has not been resolved, no more complaints seem to have been received, leading my informants to state that this further verifies their assumption that it was religious intolerance that led to the complaints in the first place.

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<sup>117</sup> See Appendix 1 for the text of these letters.



*Figure 8-4. The field adjacent to the car park in Wilmington, formerly the site of the Anderida Gorsedd rituals (photograph by author).*



*Figure 8-5. The hill under the chalk figure of the Long Man of Wilmington, currently the site of Anderida Gorsedd rituals (photograph by author).*

When public or private outdoor spaces are not available Druids do practice indoors. This is especially the case for Druids who live in urban areas where outdoor space is often at a premium. In this case, modern Druids will meet inside but then try to

bring nature indoors as much as possible. Often these indoor ritual spaces will be packed with houseplants or dried vegetation or artistic renderings of natural scenes. Additionally, any windows or doors leading outside are often opened as wide as possible in order to let the wind, rain and sun flood in to transform the indoors into a place where Druids can commune with nature.

### *Ritual structure*

Rituals begin with the gathering of participants and their preparation for the event at hand. In the case of the Anderida Grove, the group gathers at the home of two of the members, while in the case of the Anderida Gorsedd, the participants gather at the base of the Long Man chalk figure. Once gathered at the location, participants don any ceremonial garb they wish and/or paint their faces for the ritual. Various items of ritual paraphernalia are gathered and made ready for the ceremony. Once all necessary parts or roles have been filled the group then proceeds to the ceremony itself.

The first stage of the ritual consists of the creation and sanctification of the sacred circle. The participants gather together and form a circle with each participant facing inwards. One member of the group (usually one that fulfils a facilitator role) will then ask all participants to join hands. He or she then asks that all present close their eyes and become aware of the sun shining down on them (or rain beating down on them), feel the wind caressing their faces and feel the earth beneath them. The facilitator then exhorts each participant to take a slow, steady breath “with the earth beneath your feet” and then a breath “with the sky above your head” and finally, a breath “with the sea that surrounds this sacred island”. A moment passes in which each individual tries to become attuned to

the environment around them. Then, another member of the group (in Anderida's case one of the facilitators) asks that the "spirit of this time and place, ancestors and guides of the realm of Anderida join us in this, our ceremony". This process is meant to help the individual shut out mundane thoughts and to orient each participant in the time and space of the ritual, the here and now of the unrepeatable moment. At this point, the participants are exhorted to open their eyes. This process is an invocation of the sacred and is meant to help the participants orient themselves to the sanctity of the time and place in which the ritual will occur.

After the spirits of time and place and the ancestors and guides have been welcomed, a participant steps into the circle to 'give peace' or to 'call peace' to the four directions. The individual walks slowly to the center of the circle and then turns to face north. He or she takes several steps forward and, holding their right arm at roughly a forty-five degree angle with their palm parallel to their body, states, "may there be peace in the north". While this is being uttered, all participants imagine peace spreading to the north. The peace-giver then turns and walks back to the center of the circle. After briefly pausing, he or she takes several steps towards the south and states, "may there be peace in the south", upon which members imagine peace spreading through the south. After returning to the center once more, the pattern is repeated – first for the west and then ending in the east. After calling for peace in all of the four directions he or she moves to the center of the circle and says, "may there be peace throughout the whole world". All participants join in with this last statement. Once completed, the peace-giver returns to his or her place on the perimeter of the circle.

A participant (usually one of the two facilitators) then begins the part of the ceremony known as ‘casting the circle’, or alternately ‘unweaving the web’. While all of the other participants have linked hands with one another around the perimeter of the circle, the caster walks to the east and steps out of the circle, just behind the participants. He or she then proceeds to walk outside the perimeter of the circle in a clockwise direction (often referred to as sun-wise or ‘deosil’) from the eastern point to the southern point, then to the west, to the north and finally back to the east. While most of my informants did not have an explanation for the fact that the circle is cast beginning in the east, other informants stated that this point is chosen because the sun rises in the east. Furthermore, one of my informants stated that the difference between the procedure for the aforementioned call for peace and the procedure for casting the circle exists because modern Druidry is an amalgamation of the Welsh Druid movement of Iolo Morganwg (which began their procedures in the north) and the high magic societies such as the Temple of the Golden Dawn (which began their ceremonies in the east). While this may explain the divergence, only one informant ever related this detail to me.

Starting in the east, the caster walks around the circle, continuously pointing a wand or their hand toward the ground. While moving around the perimeter of the circle he or she visualizes gold or silver light emanating from the wand or outstretched hand. At the same time, the caster states his or her intention in casting the circle. Generally, the statement takes a form such as: “I cast this circle, a circle of inclusion, a circle of friendship, a circle of love.” Thus, casting the circle creates a barrier between the inner circle and the outer world. Worthington states this is done “to create a safe and sacred space in which to work” (1999: 55). For his part, Shallcrass points to this action as

demarcating the sacred from the profane. He states that, “the perimeter of the circle is the interface between the sacred space we create and the rest of creation beyond” (2000: 27). For an anthropological perspective, Tanya Luhrmann’s statement that Wiccans “say that space, too, is different, and literally draw a circle around the ritualist as a “boundary between the worlds”” is quite apt (1989: 140). Certainly, the casting of a circle can be understood as a separation of the sacred and profane but equally it is a way to separate and isolate the participants, to mark them off as engaged in a particular type of pursuit.

The continual use of the same space for ritual results in a build-up of sanctity. For this reason, many Druids feel uncomfortable about using an interior space that is also used for mundane activities as the accretion of spiritual energy could ‘seep through’ to the mundane world. This shift in energy can potentially affect all inhabitants of the space and, therefore, Druids believe strongly in obtaining the consent of all who inhabit the space before using it for ritual purposes. While this at first seems to counter the anthropological idea that the sacred generally benefits and sustains the profane, it nevertheless upholds the contention that the sacred is that which is inherently dangerous and must be kept separate from the profane (cf. Douglas 1966). In the modern Druid case it is through the actions of ‘casting the circle’, ‘calling the quarters’ and blessing the space with fire and water that the space is sanctified, thus bringing the sacred into relationship with the profane, but a profane which has been rendered neutral through the process of sanctification.

It must be noted that not all Druids visualize light. Some believe that as the universe is woven together and forms part of the same cloth, therefore the caster’s goal is to sever the threads that bind the inner circle to the outside world. The circle will then

become a bubble floating free of the time and space of the profane world. If the circle is 'unwoven' it must be 'rewoven' at the end of the ceremony so that the participants may return to the mundane world. Whether the circle is 'cast' or 'unwoven', once completed the caster (or un-weaver) returns to his or her place on the perimeter of the circle, inside the cast or unwoven boundary.

After the circle has been cast, it is considered sealed and protected. Therefore, leaving the circle before it has been un-cast (or opened) is thought to be exceedingly dangerous for the individual who leaves, the individuals still present in the circle and, in fact, the entire world. This is due to the fact that in modern Druid belief, the energy built up during a ritual is so strong that it should not be let loose into the world without a specific direction. It also serves to limit access to the sacred. Worthington demonstrates this in her scientific metaphor that un-casting the circle helps to "earth" the energy that has accumulated (1999:59). Additionally, Worthington argues that casting the circle is not just spiritually protective but acts as a demarcation between ritual life and everyday life. Once again, she creates a scientific metaphor when she states that, if the circle is left before un-casting, "it can lead to very confused dreams and to lose a conscious distinction between the worlds is the path to psychological illness" (ibid: 57).

Modern Druids do recognize that circumstances may arise in which participants must suddenly leave the circle without un-casting it. Once again, Worthington gives an apt example in her statement that, "if you are outdoors and a herd of stampeding cattle are heading towards you...leave!" (1999: 57). I have, in fact, witnessed just such a crisis that necessitated individuals leaving before the circle was un-cast. At the ritual in question a group of young boys aged eight to ten years old were climbing trees in the

field outside the circle of gatherers. They were children of members of the congregation who had expressed a desire not to be involved in the ritual, so their mothers were letting them explore the area. All of a sudden, one of the boys shrieked and the participants turned to see one of the boys hanging upside-down from a tree, his leg bent at an unnatural angle. The boy's mother and another member of the circle ran forward to grab the boy and see if he was hurt. The rest of the group hurried through the closing ceremony as quickly as possible. Afterwards, I spoke with several members of the group and none seemed concerned with the spiritual ramifications of breaking the circle. The boy's well-being was considered of greater importance than rigid adherence to ritual prohibitions.

Once cast, the circle is then purified by two volunteers. One carries a small fire-proof dish (often shaped like a cauldron) containing a piece of self-igniting charcoal on top of which is placed incense. This incense is often commercially purchased but just as often has been mixed by one of the participants from dried plants and resins. The other volunteer carries a chalice of water. The fire-bearer stands in the south (the place of the element of fire) while the water-bearer stands in the west (the place of the element of water). After the casting of the circle, one of the facilitators will say: "may the circle be blessed with fire". The other facilitator immediately states: "and may the circle also be cast with water".

The fire-bearer (or –blesser) then steps into the circle and begins to move deosil around the inside of the perimeter of the circle. He or she moves from the south to the west, on to the north, then the east, finally returning to his or her spot in the south. As the fire-bearer moves around the inside of the circle, he or she stops briefly in front of each

participant. Individuals either breathe the smoke in deeply or, more commonly, each scoops up handfuls of the smoke, rubbing it over their body. Some individuals choose only to purify their heads while others move the smoke over their faces, down their arms, over their torsos and their upper thighs. Some fire-bearers also use their hand to waft the smoke towards the participants.

The water-bearer proceeds in a similar manner but begins his or her journey in the west. From this point he or she moves around the circle in the same deosil manner, stopping in front of each participant and finally returning to his or her spot in the west. He or she sprinkles a few drops of water into the participants' cupped hands. The participant will then touch either their head or their head and chest<sup>118</sup> with this water, taking in its essence and thereby its capacity to purify. The water used in this process is not usually special in any way. It can come out of a tap or a bottle and be considered just as sacred as water taken from sacred sites such as Chalice Well in Glastonbury. In practice, water from sites such as this is only used for special occasions. This illustrates the notion that it is the water itself and not its inherent cleanliness, purity, or sanctity that brings purification to the circle. In both instances the bearers will often choose to say 'blessed be' to each participant as they are purified. If the individual so chooses (as is often the case) he or she responds in kind, saying 'blessed be.'<sup>119</sup>

While some bearers will direct the smoke and water towards the circle itself (either wafting smoke between members or drizzling drops of water on the ground) it is more common for bearers merely to purify the participants. Thus it seems that the

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<sup>118</sup> One of my informants incorporates Shinto beliefs into his Druidry and therefore touches the water to his feet, hands and mouth. This is due to the belief that these areas must be cleansed before "going to speak to the Gods". Although this is far from a common practice it does serve to illustrate the eclecticism inherent in modern Druidry.

<sup>119</sup> This statement is actually a borrowing from the modern Wicca movement.

purification rite is intended to purify the members, not the space. The space of the circle is protected by the invocation of the spirits of the ancestors and guides and therefore no further purification appears to be needed.

Once the circle has been purified, four participants make the 'call to the quarters.' These members are usually chosen in the moments before the ceremony, when the congregation is milling about and chatting. One of the facilitators announces which parts still need to be filled and volunteers are usually quickly found. New members are always encouraged to volunteer, even though their knowledge of the ritual may be very limited. Each volunteer is asked to stand in the position of the circle that corresponds to the direction they have volunteered to call. The east is addressed first, followed by the south, west and north. This pattern is observed because the sun rises in the east and since that is the proper starting place of the day, ritual practice should follow suit.

As each quarter is 'called', the congregation turns towards the direction to be welcomed. The volunteer, hands either raised above his head in a 'v' shape or by his sides with palms open, addresses the spirits of the direction and the elements that reside there. He or she also adds associations that are particular to each direction. This homologizing behavior is not specific to modern Druids. As Wendy James points out, "thus, the well-known fourfold list of the purported physical elements, air, fire, water, and earth, which dominated science through the Middle Ages, is analogous to such a sentence: each element is put in correspondence to specific cosmological bodies...to human dispositions...and sometimes also to colours" (2003: 58). In the east the spirits of the air are called, those of fire in the south, water in the west and earth in the north. Worthington gives an example of a call to the east, saying, "I stand in the east, in the

place of first light and I call upon the powers of air and clarity to bless this circle with their presence” (1999: 55). However, this call is used by the British Order of Druids and differs in pattern from Anderida’s and OBOD’s calls.

Although I have attended several Anderida festivals and several OBOD festivals, I have never heard the same call repeated twice. In fact, this is a regular feature of Druid ritual. There are no set wordings and members are encouraged to allow the *awen* to channel through them. The participant adds their own thoughts and interpretations from a set of associations learned through their study of the OBOD correspondence courses and their own individual experiences. All four calls are framed in a set form, however. The volunteer begins by greeting the spirits of the direction. Next, the individual will state several associations of the direction and the element associated with that direction. Blessing and protection form the next part of the invocation. Finally, the spirits are welcomed to the circle. One typical call from my fieldwork went thus: “greetings to the spirits of the North and the element of earth, the great bear in the starry sky and the womb of the goddess, the stillness of the womb of the earth. Join us in our circle and bring your blessings, protection and inspiration to this, our ceremony. We bid you – Hail and welcome!” After this statement the entire congregation says loudly: “Hail and welcome!”<sup>120</sup> The effect of this calling is to bring the spirits and elements into the circle and therefore into contact with the individuals present. The potential danger of this encounter between sacred and profane is obviated by the process of sanctification discussed earlier in this chapter.

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<sup>120</sup> This greeting comes from the modern Wiccan tradition.

Once all four directions have thus been called the participants turn back to face the inside of the circle. They join hands and recite the ‘Gorsedd Prayer’, written by Iolo Morganwg:

“Grant, O God and Goddess, thy protection,  
And in protection, strength,  
And in strength, understanding,  
And in understanding, knowledge,  
And in knowledge, the knowledge of justice,  
And in the knowledge of justice, the love of it,  
And in the love of it, the love of all existences,  
And in the love of all existences, the love of the,  
God and Goddess and all goodness.” (Shallcrass 2000: 126)

It must be noted that the form of this prayer sometimes varies but only with reference to the invocation to the God and Goddess. An individual may choose to speak the words that most accurately reflect their own views at this point. Thus they may invoke the God (use of only the Goddess is effectively non-existent within Druidry) or invoke the God(s) and Goddess(es), ‘Great Spirit’ or ‘Spirit’.

Once the Gorsedd prayer has been spoken, the participants proceed to the *awen* chant. As explained above, *awen* is inspiration received from the gods. The facilitators of the group first instruct the members to close their eyes. They then explain to the congregation that the chant should be articulated as three long syllables, one merging into the next: ‘aaaahh’, ‘oooohh’ and ‘wennnn’. David Smith demonstrates this by saying, “the Awen can be intoned as a single monotone note using three syllables ‘Ah-oo-en’”

(1997: 4). As the first syllable is intoned, the participants bring inspiration down from the sky and into their bodies. At the second syllable, they pull inspiration up from the earth. With the third syllable the participants mix these two energies together and push the mixture out of their bodies into the world, thus filling the world with a flood of inspiration. The individual can therefore be seen as a channel for the *awen* to flow into the world, internalizing the divine inspiration so that they can then externalize it for the benefit of the community and the planet itself. The *awen* chant is normally intoned three times in succession, although at special ceremonies ‘cascading *awens*’ are performed. These consist of the repetitive chanting of the *awen* not in concert with the other participants but at the individual’s own pace, creating a ‘round’ effect, as was discussed in chapter four. The members unclasp their hands and move on to the main part of the ritual.

If the ritual is held within one of the closed, grove ceremonies it is at this point that the ‘magic working’ is done. This often includes directed meditations on a particular theme or an activity directed towards a transformation. Additionally, members often make specific requests for healing or blessings which the group will focus on during the ritual.<sup>121</sup> Once the activity or meditation has been completed, the group uses a ‘talking stick’ to discuss their experiences. As each person finishes speaking, the ‘talking stick’ (or an object such as a crystal or feather) is passed to the next person so that they may speak. The talking-stick is not, however, obligatory. Individuals may (and often do) refrain from speaking and merely pass the object to the next person. While the individual holds the talking stick, no one else may speak. This method, borrowed from the Native American Indians, allows individuals to discuss their personal experience of the ritual

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<sup>121</sup> This type of magical working is also often done in the individual’s own private rituals.

and how it has helped them understand or explore the themes at the center of the ritual. Talking about the meditation afterwards gives not only allows the individual to gain insight from others, but can lead to an understanding of the group's journey; similarities in meditations are often portrayed as proof of a 'true' journey. If everyone experienced the same thing the participants must be tapping into the universal truth. This only occurs because of the group meditation, as an individual's meditations are individually based and therefore cannot be verified in the same manner. Additionally, if all have the same experience it verifies for the participants that they are not proceeding from rationality but from emotional experience. This is, though, shaped by the common set of symbols and knowledge accrued throughout a participant's training. It is always represented as 'pure' but can therefore be seen as conditioned by the teachings and values of the group. For example, a meditation involving a woman in a silver castle is invariably viewed as the goddess Arianrhod. One can ask whether the vision would be the same without previous knowledge of the figure and this fact betrays the communal nature of these journeys – they occur in specific ways that the individuals have learned from their studies and from their communities. Yet, the significance of each symbol or figure is based on the constant interaction between individuals within modern Druidry that created the significance in the first place. This is borne out by Geertz's statement that, "believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (1978: 5).

If it is a seasonal ritual, the next step is for one of the facilitators of the group to step into the center of the circle and draw collective attention to the portion of the ceremony devoted to the sharing of the bread and the wine.<sup>122</sup> Beer or mead may be used in place of the wine but in general groups choose to have apple juice or non-alcoholic wine instead. The bread and wine may or may not be blessed, according to the group's custom. Often, however, thanks are given to the earth for her sustenance. The facilitator asks for two individuals to come forward to share these gifts out with all of the participants. Children are often chosen for this role, as it is seen as a good way of getting them involved without the need for them to have any ritual training. The volunteers carry the bread and the wine around the circle and each member takes a piece of bread and then a sip of the beverage. As each member takes the bread and wine, the volunteers often choose to say "blessed be", and the member responds by reiterating the statement. With large groups this process can take some time, so often the facilitators will often begin their discussion of the event while the bread and wine are being shared. Conversely, the bread and wine are sometimes shared at the end of the ritual. Whichever manner is the custom in a particular group, the communal sharing of bread and wine has equivalents in many religions, most notably that of the Christian Eucharist. In both the modern Druid and the Christian example the obvious purpose of this practice is to commune with the sacred and the community of believers.

While the seasonal festivals have already been explored at length, it is worth noting here that this is the point in a ritual in which the themes of the events are explained. If, for example, the ritual is being held to celebrate the Winter Solstice, the

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<sup>122</sup> In Anderida Grove meetings the sharing of food and beverage comes after the completion of the ritual and can include all manner of food items (although usually snacks and desserts).

facilitators may come forward and state that this festival is about the rebirth of the sun after its death through winter. Additionally, short plays are often performed to elucidate the meaning of the festival. If any life crisis rites are to be performed they generally occur at this point in the ceremony as well. The goal of the ritual is fulfilled by making sure that “any vibrant energy within the circle is directed according to the purpose of the rite (or some other cause) through the focus of a prayer” (Orr 1999: 61). However, this is not completely a solemn occasion, as many Anderida-ites were fond of telling me it was important to have “mirth and reverence in equal measure”.

Once the bread and wine have been shared and the importance of the celebration and of its associations has been elucidated, there is usually an *eisteddfod*. *Eisteddfod* is a Welsh word which refers to a meeting of Bards in which the fruits of their inspiration are shared. At this point any participants who wish to share their poetry, music or dance are invited to step forward into the circle and perform for the group. These performances are usually directed towards the spirit or associations of the ritual at hand, such as the Morris dance depicted in Figure 8-6.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> While the tradition of the Morris dance is often quite touristic nowadays, a few pagan groups have formed in order to explore the incorporation of this British folk survival within modern Druidry. Therefore, groups like *Mythago*, pictured in Figure 8-6, create their dances using pagan themes, especially those from Celtic mythology.



Figure 8-6. 'Mythago', a pagan Morris dancing group, performs during a ceremony (photograph by author).

When all members who wished to participate in the *eisteddfod* have done so and the main part of the ritual is complete, the facilitators request that the participants once again join hands for the Druid prayer. Before beginning this prayer though, the facilitators always tell the gathered celebrants that this is an oath sworn only to oneself; it does not bind the individual in any responsibility to the community. The prayer is as follows:

“We swear by peace and love to stand,  
Heart to heart and hand in hand,  
Mark, O Spirit and hear us now  
Confirming this our sacred vow.” (Shallcrass 2000: 126)

The prayer is repeated three times and then the participants unclasp their hands.

The ritual ends with the farewell to the quarters and thanks to the spirits. The spirits of the quarters are addressed in the same way as before with two exceptions. First, the direction is reversed – the farewell begins in the north, proceeds to the west, then the

south and finally the east. Secondly, in place of the welcoming statement, the spirits and elements are thanked for their blessings, protection and inspiration. This is followed by the volunteer saying “Hail and farewell”, to which the congregation replies: “Hail and farewell!” After this has been completed, one of the facilitators thanks the “spirits of this time and this place, the ancestors and the guides of the realm of Anderida for their presence here in this, our ceremony”.

Likewise, the circle is un-cast in the reverse direction from which it was cast. If the facilitator who cast the circle envisions the process of casting the circle as unweaving the web, this is the time at which he will reweave the threads that bind the circle spatially and temporally to the world. During this process, the caster states: “Let the heart hold what the eyes and ears have gained”. In other words, this is a plea for the individual and the group to take their sensory experiences and internalize them not through reason but through emotion (or perhaps a better word would be feeling). It is continually stressed that Druidry is not a science-based religion – it is inspired divinely and must therefore be experienced and discovered through the senses and the emotions.

Once the circle has been rejoined to the physical world, modern Druids believe the energy built up during the ritual is unleashed into the world, “according to the intent of that prayer” (Orr 1999: 61). In other words, the energies of the sky, sea, and land are mixed together with the energies of the participants, whose goal is to spread positive energy through the world. This positive energy benefits the earth and the human community who rely on her gifts for their survival. The un-casting of the circle thus reincorporates the participants with the profane world, which has benefited through their ritual action.

The circle now open, one of the facilitators states: “the circle is open, yet never broken. So may it be!” to which the participants reply: “So may it be!”<sup>124</sup> According to Shallcrass, the final statement is often: “let the circle be opened that these blessings be shared throughout the world” (2000: 130). Like so many other parts of modern Druid ritual, these words are therefore not static, but vary with the inspiration or intention of the speaker. Within Anderida, once the final words have been spoken, the participants raise their still clasped hands and shout either “Ho!” or “Hengwha!”<sup>125</sup>

After the ritual, the congregation exits the sacred space. In the strictest terms one can argue that the ritual as such is complete. However, the participants do not merely leave the site of the ritual after its conclusion. After the open *gorsedd* meetings I attended the participants walked from the Long Man of Wilmington to a pub in the village of Wilmington where the group would gather, often for hours. Similarly, after the closed grove meetings I attended, the members remained upon the conclusion of the ritual in order to socialize. During both occasions food and drink were shared in a very real sense of the term ‘communal feasting’. Details of member’s everyday lives were shared, which in and of itself is important to the forging of cohesive communal bonds. Additionally, individual experiences of the ritual are often communicated at this time. The feasting does not only provide a venue for the establishment or strengthening of communal ties, however. It also serves the utilitarian purpose of physically nourishing the group, which is important as (in the words of one of my informants) “the amount of

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<sup>124</sup> This is, according to one of my informants, a corruption of the Wiccan phrase “So mote it be” and is consciously a borrowing from that spirituality. The change of the word ‘mote’ to ‘may’ is in response to the antiquated terminology.

<sup>125</sup> According to my informants, “Ho” or alternately “Aho” is a Native American term roughly equivalent to the phrase “I have heard and I have spoken”, which is used to end a statement. “Hengwha”, my informants state, is a new British version of this statement.

energy you take in and give off during ritual is so exhausting that sometimes the only way to revive yourself is with carbohydrates – many, many carbohydrates.” In this sense, the socializing that occurs after the ritual proper can be seen as part of the ritual itself.

### *Conclusion*

The question of what a ‘ritual’ is and what relationship exists between belief and acts has long occupied anthropologists. While various theories have been espoused to define these acts, none are without their flaws. The data provided in this chapter certainly cannot resolve these issues or provide an unequivocal definition of ritual. As I have argued, ritual has variously been referred to as a language, a symbolic or expressive system, or as performance. However, a careful perusal of the information contained in this work will serve as further support for the contention advanced by many anthropologists that ritual is concerned with transcendence and, as such, is a system of performances concerned with the relationship between the sacred and profane. This thesis has been advanced not only for its anthropological merits, however, but because it is the definition of ritual provided to me by my informants themselves. As such, it reflects the emic aim that ritual serves within modern Druidry: it is a system of meaning that is significant for the actors.

This chapter has also sought to examine the way ritual is viewed and understood in the modern Druid context. As we have seen, these rituals are not codified. Every group has their own distinctive combinations of the structural elements. Moreover, these rituals are not static entities to be enacted in a traditionalizing manner, they are constantly evolving systems of meaning. This meaning is created by the group and reified by the

practices. The efficacy of these practices resides in their ability to create these meanings for their participants. Furthermore, they reflect the realities of practice: if a ceremony must be curtailed or if an individual must leave suddenly, modern Druids have distinct ways of dealing with these contingencies which allow the integrity of the ceremonies to remain even though a breach must occur. My informants unilaterally expressed that if (as was discussed in the case of the boy hanging from the tree) an individual had to leave the circle suddenly, the gods or spirits would understand that the resolution of this immanent threat was paramount. It is in this flexibility, my informants related, that its greatest strength lies.

Rituals, as stated above, have a performative quality. Thus, I discussed the ways in which the actors prepare for their time 'on stage' with costume and the doling out of roles. They act out their dramas sometimes quite literally through short, scripted plays. Additionally, they use props to create sensory effects for the participants. Finally, after the drama of the ritual they often retire to a pub or member's home to socialize, which brings to mind the image of the cast 'wrap party' that occurs after most stage performances. The only difference, it would seem, is that the participants in this ceremonial drama are simultaneously the audience. They thus create meaning while also receiving that meaning. Perhaps it is this totality that makes ritual such a powerful experience for modern Druids. Moreover, these rituals are a locus of meaning and the primary *milieu* for the enactment of meaning. The unity created by these rituals is certainly the ideal. However, in the next chapter we shall examine the circumstances when these ideals are broken and modern Druid groups face conflict or even schism.

## Chapter Nine

### **Thesis/antithesis/synthesis**

Clifford Geertz once wrote that what anthropology needs is ‘thick description’ (cf. Geertz 1978). By this Geertz did not mean that anthropology should be purely concerned with richly describing a society, but examining the multiplicity of interpretations (and their interaction) of social belief and behaviour. Accordingly, this chapter seeks to go beyond ethnographic description and delve into the issues it evokes and underlines for anthropology. The study of modern Druidry can elucidate and expand upon several current debates within anthropology, specifically the relationship between nationalism, ethnicity, and the ‘invention of tradition’.

This chapter is entitled ‘thesis/antithesis/synthesis’ for several reasons. First, it is a term used by Philip Carr-Gomm in the Bardic correspondence course and thus can be said to be a term native to OBOD. Secondly, this term has entered anthropological discourse, notably through the works of Karl Marx and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Although usually attributed to the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel, he apparently only used the phrase once and gave credit for the theory to Immanuel Kant. The theory states that one starts with a proposition (the thesis) which is set in opposition to another statement (the antithesis). Elements common to both are found, which then form a new theory (the synthesis), which bears a relation to both the thesis and the antithesis but is a new theory in its own right. As such, it becomes a new thesis which attracts another antithesis and merges with it into a new synthesis, the process continually repeating.

It must be noted, however, that the relationship between this theory and the ethnographic evidence presented by the modern Druid case is my abstraction. While

modern Druidry discusses the thesis, antithesis and synthesis in relation to modern Druidry itself, my selection of nationalism, ethnicity, and the ‘invention of tradition’ arguments (while supported by the evidence) is not articulated by the actors themselves.

One can, of course, question whether nationalism and ethnicity constitute a viable and convincing opposition. I argue that they do as these two modes of social organization rest on opposing processes. Nationalism, for its part, is driven by the necessity to negate differences between disparate groups in order to fuse them into one homogenous polity – the state. Ethnicities or ethnic groups, on the other hand, must mark their group off from others as somehow different and therefore involve a heterogeneous process. Through the discussions of nationalism and ethnicity that follow, the opposition of these two ideas will become evident.

This chapter begins with an examination of how this theory relates to modern Druidry. Specifically, I will argue that in reference to the modern Druid evidence nationalism represents the ‘thesis’. This is opposed to ethnicity, in this case the ‘antithesis’. In modern Druidry, the two are fused through the mechanism of ‘invention of tradition’ into the synthesis of what modern Druids term ‘the tribe’. Thus the synthesis of ‘the tribe’ combines aspects of nationalism and ethnicity in a novel way, which is wholly different to their sum. After this discussion, a brief conclusion of the ethnographic evidence contained in the first eight chapters of this work will be presented along with a conclusion to the thesis.

## *Nationalism*

Nationalism is hard to define. Anthropologists have variously viewed it as a product of the evolution of societies through time, the product of inter- and intra-ethnic tension, and a by-product of colonialism. Authors have disagreed quite widely as to the definition of the term 'nation'. To Benedict Anderson a nation is an, "imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (1993: 6). It is imagined, he argues, because members of the community are at a physical remove from one another. A member of the nation does not come into contact with all other individuals but is constantly made aware of their presence. Through the medium of print capitalism, Anderson argues, the individual is made aware of the fact that this 'imagined community' shares the same society with him or her. In that sense, the nation as a community can be said to be imagined in the minds of each member. In fact, it must be imagined because nations lack unified, face-to-face relationships between their members. In opposition, Ernest Gellner postulated that communities are inherent. They exist as entities which often need to be awakened to their nation-ness (cf. Gellner 2006).

Roger Just argues, on the other hand, that the state is the political structure within a given society. In the Greek case, he states, no notion of a nation-state existed prior to the nineteenth century. Instead, a Greek 'nation' existed in the sense of a Greek people. He notes, "the problem of modern Greek history has been to create the former [the state] and extend it to embrace the latter [the nation]" (1989: 74). Furthermore, he argues that political structures are legitimized by their ability to promote growth and their ability to diffuse and protect culture. Just's crucial distinction here is between the *kratos* (the

political organization of a state) and the *ethnos*, a group of individuals who comprise a 'nation' (in a non-geographic sense).

Unsurprisingly, scholars not only disagree about the definition of the term 'nation' but also about how nations develop. Perhaps one of the best known works on the development of nationalism is Ernest Gellner's book *Nations and Nationalism* (2006) in which he postulates that nations develop through the industrialization of agrarian society. As agrarian societies are characterized by reliance on agriculture and pastoralism, they require a stable relationship between nature and society – a relationship in which there is no dependence on the theory that nature can be mastered for the good of mankind. The goal of individuals is not to create goods for consumption but to improve their social rank, and therefore social structure is based on each man 'knowing his place.' Order is maintained, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau would argue, by the 'social contract' (cf. Rousseau 1971); in other words, by each member's consent to be governed by the rules and norms of the system and by the pressure to conform exerted upon him by other members.

Agrarian societies, according to Gellner, are divided into elites and non-elites partially due to their command of literacy. As they have control over the technology of literacy, the elites dictate the values and norms that will apply to the society as a whole. The lower classes gain cultural fluency through everyday social interactions. A nation-state does not form because culture is geared towards defining (and often differs according to) social rank, not towards forming an overarching political unit. The nation in agrarian societies (if it in fact exists in this case) can be said to be the cultural elite, especially as cultural differences between classes hinder their ability to come together culturally. Here culture and politics are separate and unmediated. It isn't until the

nineteenth century that a class (in this case the middle class) has an interest in creating a nation-state.

Gellner goes on to argue that nationalism developed through the process of industrialization. In the second type of society, the “Advanced Industrial Society”, increased importance is placed on economic growth and technological innovation. Furthermore, nature is subordinate to the will of man and it no longer legitimizes the organization of society. Moreover, labour is no longer physical; it is increasingly cerebral and controlled by context-less discourse. The result is a situation where meaning is no longer construed through context-rich social interactions. This crucial distinction means that individuals within this type of society all need to gain fluency with a standardized set of meanings.

Meanings, according to Gellner, are inculcated in the populace through mass education. Since meaning is defined by the new elite behind nationalism (i.e. not the old aristocracies and rulers), their culture then becomes the operational culture of the society. Only the state has the ability to educate the masses, because of the expense involved. The elites who control the state define the rules and beliefs that need to be disseminated. Schools provide socialization, inculcating individuals into the set of national rules and beliefs. The assumption Gellner makes here is that each culture needs and wants a corresponding political apparatus called the ‘state.’ This apparatus is necessary because it is the only way for the elites to disseminate and protect the culture of the state they create. Anderson argues that Gellner’s distinction is problematic, as it assumes that a ‘true’ community exists in opposition to the ‘nation’ (Anderson 2006: 6). Roger Just, though, tends to support Gellner by claiming that not only did the ‘original’ Greek

territories need to be liberated, but culturally, the society needed to be regenerated on the model of ancient Greece. In order to do this, education was essential. Similarly, Partha Chatterjee argues that the new, native elite began to educate the colonized masses in Bengal. Language and literature (which are themselves hallmarks of nationhood or nationalist movements), therefore, were standardized in the realm of the colonized culture, not within the colonial empire.

Anderson, however, argues that the use and choice of language for a community was the relevant impetus for the formation of nations. This can be seen clearly in the present enquiry; in chapter two we explored the fact that the term ‘Celt’ was used in the Renaissance to justify uniting disparate groups under national banners with national languages. As Anderson points out, Latin was the language used by the Church and was the original language for printing. Latin, the imperial language of Rome and the universal language of the Middle Ages, was not useful in building a nation. This was due to the fact that Latin was a language known amongst the clerics and elite of all areas of Europe, but not the ordinary people; therefore it could not be used as a distinguishing marker of political identity.

Further, Anderson states that in order to build the nation a shared sense of culture was needed and therefore texts printed in vernacular languages began appear in Europe. The vernaculars, unlike Latin, were associated with particular geographical areas or populations and, therefore, provided a better basis for politicization in a way the universal language of Latin could not. This important feature of vernacular languages resulted in their increasing use in bureaucratic circles and in the print media, which was crucial for the development of nations. For the first time in history many new groups of people (for

example women) had access to literature written in their own language. This literature could then be used by the bureaucracy to indoctrinate the masses in the new 'nationalist' culture. Eventually, each emerging nation imposed an 'official' language – one which supposedly most people in the society spoke.

While Anderson's theory that nations developed in response to the decline of Latin is important, equally one could argue that it was the Peace of Westphalia that produced the modern nation. Made up of two treaties signed in Osnabrück and Münster in 1648, these documents recognized that individual states were sovereign and no longer under the direct political control of the Holy Roman Empire. Though important, one must question how much the Peace of Westphalia aided to this process, as it resulted (for a period of time) in absolutism, which did not give way to constitutional nation states until the nineteenth century. However, the ability for monarchs to choose whether their territories would continue to be Roman Catholic or would become Protestant did lead to firmer demarcations of boundaries between these early nation-states. This in turn aided in the breaking up of formerly dynastic territories, which aided the process of nation-state building and allowed for the cultural uniformity that would occur during through the inception of nationalism.

Returning to Anderson's theories we see that vernaculars were instrumental in the build-up of nations as they created a standardized field for the exchange of ideas and beliefs. However, the choice of which vernacular to use in nation-building was very important. The use of a language which was older or intimately tied to certain dynasties or empires gave a new nation a sense of legitimate continuity with the past. The closer a vernacular language was to a print language, the more prestigious it was. It appears that

the proximity of a vernacular to a print language gave it prestige because it would have admitted those who spoke the language into the unified field of discourse that was mainly inhabited by the bureaucrats and the elite (although this is never explicitly stated by Anderson). Therefore, the speakers of these languages would not have been marginalized or excluded like those who did not have access to this shared field of discourse.

Furthermore, Anderson argues that under dynastic rule, the official language of the dynasty was not chosen with any reference to the vernacular languages used within the realm. Sometimes, he argues, it was an arbitrary choice based on past use of the language or convenience for the rulers themselves. This caused tensions within empires because minorities within the empire that did not speak the chosen language increasingly felt alienated from the center of power and believed the ruling class was privileging native speakers of the official language. In an attempt to relieve this internal tension, empires began slowly to move toward nation-building. This was aided by the emergence of the 'imagined community.'

Perhaps the most compelling argument for the present enquiry is Eric Hobsbawm's contention that the use of history by nation-builders is as important as the choice and control of language. Hobsbawm argues that the centrality of history to nationalist movements lies in the fact that these histories provide legitimacy for an emerging nation. This is bolstered by Roger Just's work on Greece in which he argues that because ancient Greece is regarded as the basis of Western civilization the emerging Greek nation needed to exploit the notion of direct continuity with this past. This essential strategy of legitimization does have its drawbacks, Just tells us. The act of claiming direct descent from the classical Greeks made the modern Greeks responsible

for the preservation of 'traditional' Greek culture. Thus, the modern Greeks, as the inheritors of a static culture, were denied the right to change by the very legitimization they chose to bolster their claims to nation-hood. Clearly, this resonates in the modern Druid case, as the history of the ancient Celts has been used to infuse these modern practices with a dubious antiquity, and is perhaps the reason why many modern Druids relate that the preservation of 'sacred sites' in Britain (most notably Stonehenge) is their duty (and to some, their right).

To modern Druids, nations are arbitrary, unnatural structures. As we have seen, they believe that structures are hierarchical and non-organic and impede the creation of systems of meaning that are relevant for social actors. As Anderson and Gellner have both noted, nations were a top-down approach that was based on the diffusion of 'high culture' from the elites down to the populace. This culture was imposed on subordinated groups in an attempt to bring them in line with nationalist concerns. This in turn led to the ability to politically control these groups and to control the production of social beings as citizens of the nation, not as members of smaller ethnic or territorial groupings.

Modern Druidry has reacted to the nationalist trend by using the ancient Celtic term 'Druid'. By aligning themselves with the primordial Britons they can be seen to be reacting against the organizational hegemony of nationalism. Equating themselves with the ancient Celts allows them to separate from this national hegemony and identity which for them holds very little meaning or significance. For them, citizenship in a nation is a legal status, not a basis for a spiritual path. Thus, they can be argued to be a second Romantic Movement, evoking the purity and sanctity of the non-national British past, as seen through her 'noble savages', the ancient Celts. However, it must be noted that this

romantic motivation is not to live as the Celts did, but to be stripped of the actual and symbolic pollution of the political nation-building process. The 'thesis' that modern Druids represent a 'nation' that wishes to reclaim the primordial identity of Britain thus provides no real explanation for the construction of systems of significance for modern Druids. We turn now to discuss the 'antithesis' to nationalism, ethnicity, to discover its relevance for an understanding of this community.

### *Ethnicity*

Debates which focus on the topic of ethnicity invariably take as their starting point the definition of the term 'ethnic,' 'ethnic group' and/or 'ethnicity.' These definitions vary widely. As Thomas Hylland Eriksen pointed out in *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, the term 'ethnic' first appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1972. The word is derived from the Greek word *ethnos*, derived from *ethnikos*, meaning 'pagan' or 'heathen', though later it was used in reference to the Greek 'nation' itself (Just 1989: 76). Thus, in this definition we can see that the Greeks were distinguishing themselves as the 'civilized' in opposition to these groups. On the other hand, in *History and Ethnicity*, Elizabeth Tonkin argues that 'ethnos' is a nation in the sense of a people and not a political or territorial concern (Tonkin 1989: 73). This is supported by Roger Just's work in Greece. He concludes that in Greece the word 'nation' meant a people living within the society. These were not merely people living within a geographical territory. To be a member of the nation one has to ascribe to the Greek identity and be seen by other members of the nation as Greek, either through a legally recognized status, residence within a defined geographic territory, historical membership of the society, or by sharing

the culture of the dominant society. Just argues that these are “appealed to not as a *definition of* ethnicity, but merely as *evidence for* membership of a particular ethnic group” (Just 1989: 76). Furthermore, he argues that where these distinctions are hard to make, race and genealogical descent are used in support of a claim to membership.

Fredrik Barth tells us in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, that the traditional definition of an ethnic group is a society whose population is self-perpetuating and whose members have a common set of values. This view, which Barth rejects, is typified by Abner Cohen, who remarked:

An ethnic group can be operationally defined as a collectivity of people who (a) share some patterns of normative behaviour and (b) form a part of a larger population, interacting with people from other collectivities within the framework of a social system. The term ethnicity refers to the degree of conformity by members of the collectivity to these shared norms in the course of social interaction. It is obvious that this definition is so wide that it covers collectivities that are not usually described as ‘ethnic’. (Cohen 1974: ix-x)

Barth notes that scholars have commonly assumed that these groups are founded on communication and interaction within a shared social sphere. He argues that this definition is problematic as it impedes our ability to fully understand these groups. The assumption, he states, is based on the contention that ethnic groups are static entities whose boundaries are unchanging, not negotiated and uncontested. Conversely, he argues that, “ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but entail processes of exclusion and incorporation” (Barth 1969: 9-10).

Ethnicity has also been conceived of as a ‘cognitive pattern.’ This argument rests on the theory that individuals can be said to belong to the same group because they share common criteria for organizing social life. Thus ethnic groups can be said to persist because they give individuals ways in which to classify others into specific categories,

while allowing social actors to recognize that standards of behaviour vary from group to group. This idea is exemplified in Clyde Mitchell's *The Kalela Dance*, in which he states: "this means of classification by tribe enables an African living in a location or compound where contacts must of necessity be superficial, to fix any other African in a category and so 'define the situation' and enable him to adopt a particular type of behaviour towards the other" (Mitchell 1956: 22). However, the problematic nature of this theory is noted by Cohen's statement that, "the definition of ethnicity as cognition of identity obscures, even nullifies, the conception of differences in degree of ethnicity" (Cohen 1974: xv).

Ethnic identities thus allow social actors within the ethnic group to categorize and organize their lives around a shared set of principles. Anthropologists such as Michael Moerman have argued that ethnic identities provide the individual with a set of shared social norms that must be followed for membership to be recognized by the community. For Moerman, ethnic identities are therefore "an *emic category of ascription*" (Eriksen 1993: 11 [emphasis original]). These identities, according to Moerman, are "blueprints for living" (1965: 1220). These are incomplete identities which nevertheless communicate to the social actor an idea of what is considered acceptable within the given ethnic group. It can thus be seen as a code of conduct that allows the individual to be classed as 'us' and not 'them.'

This classification as 'us' or 'them' is one of Barth's biggest contributions to the study of ethnicity, but he is equally known for positing that self-ascription is equally a fundamental marker of membership in an ethnic group. However, individuals cannot merely identify themselves as members of the group – they must be identified as a

member by other personnel within the group. This is often contested (particularly in the case of marginalized internal minorities), as an individual may claim a membership status which the group denies to him.

For Barth, ethnic groups form through two groups' mutual recognition of otherness. The differences that are exposed in this engagement allow an ethnic group to designate criteria that enable the group to define what is distinctly 'us' versus what is different, or distinctly 'them'. Importantly, Barth notes that distinctions emerge through social interactions that involve a dialectic between the groups in question. This idea is implicit in Eriksen's statement that, "if no such principle exists there can be no ethnicity, since ethnicity presupposes an institutionalised relationship between delineated categories whose members consider each other to be culturally distinctive" (Eriksen 1993: 18).

The classification of 'us' and 'them,' according to Barth, occurs as boundaries are drawn around those traits, actions, values and characteristics that are distinctly significant to one ethnic group and not another. This assumption is questioned by Cohen, who states: "Barth's conception of ethnic categories as organizational *vessels* that are fixed, static, always there even when not relevant to behaviour, suffers from the same difficulties. His separation between 'vessel' and 'content' makes it difficult to appreciate the dynamic nature of ethnicity" (Cohen 1974: xv). However, Barth notes that it is the boundaries themselves, not what they encircle, that are relevant (1969: 15). Thus Cohen fundamentally misses Barth's point – Barth firmly asserts that ethnicity is not static but constantly in flux.

The idea of 'us' and 'them' is not, however, absolute. There are shades of 'us'-ness or 'them'-ness. While some groups would be considered as 'them' in relation to 'us'

in one situation, they very well may be considered as 'us' in another situation. For example, during the period of British Imperial rule in India, Hindus and Muslims banded together as one group ('us') to expel the British ('them'). When the external 'other' left the subcontinent the differences between the internal groups came to the fore. Thus, the Hindus and Muslims became variously 'us' and 'them' to one another. Furthermore, a group may consider it is in an 'us' relationship with another group while the second group conceives of the first as 'them,' resulting in the need to negotiate the relationship. This exposes the true nature of ethnicity: it is "essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group" (Eriksen 1993: 12).

Perhaps the most pertinent example of the negotiation of 'us'-ness and 'them'-ness that occurred during my fieldwork was an incident at the Long Man of Wilmington that helped to highlight for me the ways in which modern Druidry negotiates its relationship with modern British society. Modern Druidry should not be viewed in a context-less frame but as an integral part of the wider British society of which it forms a part. Furthermore, the areas of contest shed much light on why modern Druids are a distinct group. Two incidents occurred during my fieldwork, an examination of which can aid in understanding the way conflict occurs and is resolved within modern Druidry.

The first of these incidents, the conflict over the use of the Long Man of Wilmington for modern Druid ceremonies has been discussed earlier in this work. Its impact was slight and only a few external parties were involved. Primarily, this was a local issue and was dealt with at the local level. Additionally, it had not been resolved at time of writing and, therefore, further exegesis at this juncture is unwarranted.

Conversely, the second of these events played itself out on the national stage. Briefly, on July 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> 2007, the popular ITV hosts Trinny and Susannah decided to film a piece for their upcoming special “Trinny and Susannah Undress the Nation” at the site of the Long Man of Wilmington chalk figure. In this segment they planned to use about one hundred female volunteers dressed in white jumpsuits to create a “Long Woman” of Wilmington. The piece was intended to focus on women’s self-images and the way they dress in an attempt to empower them.

The Long Man of Wilmington is of uncertain date. The first references made to it all originate in the eighteenth century, although the presence of long barrows on the ridge of the hill attests to the site’s ancient use. Since 1925 the Sussex Archaeological Society (or ‘SAS’) has owned the site and has functioned as its caretaker. Their role is thus the preservation of the site and to this end they have posted signs asking the general public not to walk on or over the chalk figure. When Trinny and Susannah decided to use the site they therefore approached the SAS and asked for their permission, which the SAS granted. Some confusion exists regarding what the original proposal entailed. It has been claimed that the individual Druids who spoke with the SAS regarding this grant were told that the SAS gave ITV permission to create a ‘Long Woman’ on the hill *next to* the Long Man.

The segment was scheduled for rehearsal on July 1<sup>st</sup>, with filming to occur on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. While the SAS had known about this upcoming filming the pagan community only discovered it a day or two in advance. The overwhelming majority of my informants whom I spoke with in this brief time span all related that they were shocked and outraged. Primarily, these feelings stemmed from fears over damage to the figure, which

is a recognized archaeological site. Equally, many were upset over what they viewed as the 'trivializing' of a site that to them is sacred. Furthermore, there was great consternation over the SAS's grant of permission for these activities. Several members of the modern Druid community therefore contacted the SAS to find out what was going on. One of these individuals is the facilitator of the Anderida Gorsedd, which has an ongoing and positive relationship with the SAS. In fact, when the Long Man needed to be repainted in 2003 it was members of this group that did the necessary work. After pleading with the SAS and ITV it became apparent that the filming would go ahead as planned, regardless of the protests of the pagan community.

Hastily, therefore, the pagan community mobilized for a protest at the site. Pagans began calling English Heritage and the media to spread the word about what they viewed as a stunt that was destructive and a desecration. Leaflets were printed that explained the potential harm this event could cause to as yet undiscovered archaeological remains. Furthermore, the leaflets attempted to explain that for the modern Druids this is a sacred site. On July 1<sup>st</sup>, pagans attended the rehearsal for the event. To their collective horror they saw the volunteers form the figure of a 'Long Woman' not *beside* the Long Man of Wilmington (as they had been told was the plan) but *on top of* the chalk figure itself. Furthermore, members of the crew were seen to mark each volunteer's position with a stick embedded in the ground so that in the morning all of the volunteers could easily find their places. As the SAS did not send any of their staff to oversee the rehearsal or the filming, the first they heard of this event was when a member of the pagan community called to complain. The SAS, to their credit, immediately called the producers at ITV and told them to remove the sticks. As regards the fact that the

volunteers had formed the figure on top of the Long Man, however, the story becomes hazy. Some members of the modern Druid community claim that the SAS had known all along that this was the plan but misled the pagan community so there wouldn't be any protests or alternately, that Trinny and Susannah had misled the SAS. In either case, the pagans present felt that they had been deceived.

The morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July roughly twenty pagans (mostly modern Druids) arrived at the Long Man of Wilmington to protest. They lined the path that leads up to the chalk figure, attempting to hand out the leaflets they had written. They did not know at the time, however, that the volunteers had been strictly warned not to take any of the fliers. As the filming began, they watched the volunteers walk over the figure and take their places. After they completed the segment the volunteers walked down the path past the protesters, who all turned their backs in silent protest. Unfortunately, this silence was broken by at least one of the volunteers shouting insults at the silent protesters, which they later related to me both saddened and angered them. What would happen, one of my informants queried, if a television program tried to do the same thing with a sacred site or image from a recognized religion such as Christianity or Islam? "They just wouldn't do it – it would be seen as so un-politically correct no one would dream of it. But we're unimportant so they can just ignore us," he went on to state.

The events that occurred regarding the 'Trinny and Susannah' filming are not the first instance of protest by the modern Druid community, nor will they probably be the last. Notably, the modern Druid community has been involved with many protests against road works projects. These projects are often planned with little regard for



*Figure 9-1. Trinny and Susannah transform the Long Man of Wilmington (from <http://flickr.com/photos/47486902@N00/714095531/>).*

wildlife or for sites sacred to the pagan community. Several of these protests have received national attention, such as the Newbury road protests of the late 1980s that saw protesters climbing to the treetops and the police cutting branches until the protesters had nowhere to go but down. Perhaps better known are the incidents surrounding King Arthur Pendragon's<sup>126</sup> quest to get English Heritage to recognize pagans' rights to use Stonehenge for their rituals. In 2000, after sixteen years of conflict, English Heritage finally allowed Stonehenge to be used for public ceremonies, largely due to the efforts of King Arthur and others like him.

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<sup>126</sup> This progenitor of the Loyal Arthurian Warband (discussed earlier in this work) has legally had his name changed to King Arthur Pendragon.

The presence of conflicts between modern Druidry and the British society of which they form a part are thus not veiled – they are real and tangible. These conflicts are rooted in the collision of two different systems of meaning. Specifically, the conflict is between Druids and an urbanized world that modern Druids argue has alienated itself from the sanctity of the natural landscape and lost its reverence for the ancestors. By harkening back to the primordial Britons (the Celts) and the mythic defender of Britain (King Arthur) modern Druids are not attempting to change the dominant society of which they form a part. Rather, they are trying to get their views recognized and trying to carve out a niche within the poly-spiritual society that is modern Britain. Even though they are different, they want their views to be treated with the same legitimacy which is accorded to other spiritual paths. In the case of the ‘Long Woman of Wilmington’, conflict was not avoided, it was highlighted.

By shining a light on the real beliefs of modern Druidry, modern Druids hope to remove some of the stigma attached to their beliefs. Certainly the media have had much to do with this stigma through its demonization of pagan practices (see *The Wicker Man*, discussed earlier in this work). Conversely, the media has often trivialized pagan practices, making them out to be a sort of fantasy, as can be seen in such television programs as *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. Within this context, conflicts occur which modern Druids attempt to reconcile while retaining their distinctness from prevailing British society. As such, conflicts are an arena where values and representations are contested, which results in the uniting of the modern Druid community and helps it to negotiate its beliefs.

Returning to Barth, we see that boundaries between two ethnic groups, Barth argues, are maintained through dichotomizing new behaviours. If a behaviour is not seen as distinctly 'us' the individual who behaves in this way will be sanctioned. Ethnic groups therefore maintain their boundaries by exerting constant pressure on the individual to conform to standardized values and beliefs, which keeps the group homogenous. Social changes therefore come from within the ethnic group itself. However, when an ethnic group changes its boundaries, it can lead to tensions with other groups. At this point, a renegotiation of the boundary can occur, but only if the shifted boundary is recognized by the second group. It is important to realize that there is always movement of personnel across these boundaries, but this movement does not in and of itself cause the boundary to shift or the social actors to lose their membership in the group.

Although identity may be retained, assimilation or incorporation into another group may also occur. Peter J. Newcomer discusses this process in his article on the Dinka and the Nuer populations. He argues that the Nuer were not actually a group that invaded Dinka territory, they were actually Dinka that went through a "social mutation" and became a distinct ethnic group. Newcomer argues that the difference in ecology in the Dinka areas and Nuer area has nothing to do with this mutation. The Nuer have, instead, chosen to redefine the boundary of what is 'us' and 'them.' Newcomer notes that, "they attribute their superiority to moral factors...They are Nuer; others are only Dinka" (1972: 9). Newcomer realizes that the importance lies in discovering why Nuer consider themselves different from Dinka, not what labels they use to differentiate themselves.

Conversely, Maurice Glickman posits an ecological theory for the difference between Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups. He argues that in Dinka territory the settlements are more autonomous due to the need to move during the wet and dry seasons. Nuer settlements are more permanent as a result of access to more pasturage and easy access to water (1972: 587). This has led to a more stable social system, which allows the Nuer to be more proficient cattle raiders. As the population expands, Glickman argues, defeated groups are not just surrounded by Nuer tribes, they are absorbed into Nuer society. They are in every way Nuer – they even participate in cattle raids against the Dinka, their former ethnic group. The essential problem with Newcomer's argument, according to Glickman, is that Newcomer posits the Nuer ethnicity as merely a degeneration from a previous Dinka past. In fairness, Newcomer does also posit an ecological determinism argument, although this theory is problematic.

All of these theories point to the highly contested nature of this debate. In fact, anthropological understandings of the term ethnicity are, to quote Anthony Cohen, “so vague, and variously used, a term that its definition can only be stipulative and arguments against its definition only sterile” (1985: 107). In relation to the modern Druid evidence explored in this work, one could argue that the Druids are an ethnicity or ethnic group. They are a bounded group that shares cultural traits and values, they have a ‘cognitive pattern’ for categorizing social life, and they are increasingly in a relationship with several categories of ‘them’ from which they are distinct. It is even possible to assert that to some extent they are becoming biologically self-perpetuating. However, they do not conceive of themselves as forming a distinct ethnicity, potentially as the colloquial usage of the term often equates it with a biological, racial or territorial meaning. Instead, they

refer to all modern Druids as comprising a group they refer to as ‘the tribe,’ a point to which we shall return in the next section of this chapter. Clearly, therefore, while both nationalism and ethnicity provide certain analytical tools for understanding the modern Druid evidence, a ‘synthesis’ of the two can provide a deeper understanding of this case. We turn now to look at the mechanism for this synthesis, the ‘invention of tradition’ and how it applies to modern Druidry.

### *Invention of tradition*

The ‘invention of tradition’ argument has engaged anthropologists since the appearance in 1983 of a collection of essays predominantly written by historians, entitled *The Invention of Tradition*. This work, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, has proven incredibly popular: 2006 saw its fourteenth printing. The book explores traditions which claim ancient origins but which are nevertheless modern inventions. In the introductory chapter to this volume, Hobsbawm defines an ‘invented tradition’ as,

A set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.” (1983: 1)

According to Hobsbawm, invention occurs as a result of the inability of old models to work in new situations. The more quickly things change, he argues, the more likely there will be invention. However, he argues that often old models are not rejected wholesale but merely reworked to serve new purposes. Conversely, more archaic models can be used to build these new traditions. These models are essentially cultural capital that has lain dormant until needed. Once need arises, the ideas can be reworked, resulting in what is often referred to as a ‘revival.’ The modern Druid evidence clearly supports

this contention. After all, the modern movement is based predominantly on eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century revivals of the ancient Celtic past.

Furthermore, invention, according to Hobsbawm, is more likely to occur at the hands of one individual: “it is presumably most clearly exemplified where a ‘tradition’ is deliberately invented and constructed by a single initiator” (ibid: 4). Likewise, in the same volume, Trevor-Roper discusses this point through the example of the Scottish symbol par excellence, the kilt. He argues quite convincingly that the modern kilt was invented in the early eighteenth century by the English industrialist Thomas Rawlinson. Rawlinson ran a factory and wanted to increase efficiency so he shortened the traditional Scottish garment, had the pleats sewn in and removed the cumbersome upper piece. Therefore, Trevor-Roper argues, “it was bestowed by him [Rawlinson] on the Highlanders in order not to preserve their traditional way of life but to ease its transformation: to bring them out of the heather and into the factory” (1983: 22). Modern Druidry is not an attempt to transform a traditional people. However, it is a conscious invention of Ross Nichols (and latterly Philip Carr-Gomm). Nichols incorporated elements from different traditions such as modern ceremonial magic and Hinduism in order to create a unique, new tradition based on old models.

Hobsbawm continues his argument by positing that the reason invention seems so threatening to society is that society must present itself to its members as static and unchanging. Presumably, this is due to society’s need to assert control over its members. By representing a tradition as being connected chronologically to an archaic (and supposedly more authentic) tradition, society can maintain this sense of invariability. Thus, modern Druids may recognize that their traditions were invented by Nichols in the

twentieth century but they present their tradition as having an unbroken, continuous existence. As noted earlier in this thesis this is, however, a problematic contention. Hobsbawm illustrates his theory with an example from the Celtic past: “it is clear that plenty of...ideological movements and groups...were so unprecedented that even historic continuity had to be invented, for example by creating an ancient past beyond effective historical continuity, either by semi-fiction (Boadicea, Vercingetorix...) or by forgery (Ossian...)” (1983: 7).

Hence modern Druids often argue, for example, that the continuity of their tradition remained unbroken after the Roman Conquest and merely went ‘underground’. It was then reflected in the work of midwives, herbalists and supposed witches in the Middle Ages. It is precisely this link with the past which creates “group cohesion” (ibid: 12). The crux of the matter is most eloquently expressed in Hobsbawm’s statement that, “where the old ways are alive, traditions need be neither revived nor invented” (ibid: 8). The invented nature of this spirituality, modern Druids claim, does not make it any less valid. Whether a ‘genuine’ tradition (a contention problematic in itself) or an invented one is immaterial, as clearly this path creates communal meaning for modern Druids. The ‘invention of tradition’ discourse acts in the modern Druid case as a mechanism for fusing the thesis and antithesis of nationalism and ethnicity into the synthesis of the ‘tribe’. The next section of this chapter will therefore elaborate on how this term is used within modern Druidry and its relevance for this discussion.

### *The tribe*

As noted earlier, reference to the community of modern Druids as 'the tribe' is the result of the synthesis of the concepts of ethnicity and nationalism. It should be noted here that this group cross-cuts the boundaries of the individual orders themselves, such that a member of OBOD and a member of the British Druid Order can both be said to be members of the larger corporate group of 'the tribe.'

This designation is in itself fascinating, as within anthropology the term 'tribe' was (to some extent) replaced with the term 'ethnicity' or 'ethnic group.' Along with early anthropological designations such as 'primitives,' 'tribe' was a word that provoked unease in anthropologists for its potentially pejorative meaning and its unproblematic treatment of boundaries (at least before the work of Barth). However, within modern Druidry this term is not equated with any sense of negativity. Their choice of the term appears to come from their search for an alternative to the increasing fragmentation of Western society. In response they have sought to find a way to unite, even across national boundaries. Their use of this term underscores not their attempt to return to archaizing forms but their romanticism. As such, their use of the term 'tribe' reflects not the classical anthropological sense of the term, but rather a move toward 'neo-tribalism', a phenomenon attested to by theorists such as Maffesoli (cf. 1991) and Bauman (cf. 1993).

As we have seen, the phenomenon of nationalism rests on the notion of the imposition of homogenized 'high' culture from the top downwards. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is a bottom-up approach. These two phenomena are therefore structurally opposed in their approaches, a fact which creates tension within modern society as the

two levels compete with each other for primacy. As a result, in the post-modern era, individuals and groups are increasingly left to resolve the conflicts between these two levels by themselves. On the one hand, they are asked to adopt ideas and behaviours which may hold little significance to them personally but which seek to meld large 'imagined communities' into one homogeneous whole and therefore allow the individual to function in the wider society. On the other, they are encouraged to privilege 'primordial' identities, which are fostered through the affectual experiences of ethnicity. In essence, this bottom-up approach relies on emotional experiences of transcendence, while the top-down approach of nationality requires the internalization of societal rules which offer no venue for the 'true' experience of spirituality. Neo-tribalism seeks to resolve the conflicts inherent in the clash of these two levels. It at once rests on a primordial and traditionalising concept, while at the same time being in direct opposition to the modes of identity creation in modern life (e.g. ethnicity and nationalism). It is the negotiation between these two approaches which spawns neo-tribal movements. Furthermore, neo-tribal movements are not based on innate membership. Rather, by requiring that the individual or group ascribe to the status to be recognized as a member of the group, neo-tribal movements present another option for members of society. Namely, they allow the individual or group to 'opt out' – not of society but of the conflict that these two levels engenders. In its place, neo-tribal groups seek to foster the individuals' and groups' emotional and spiritual needs and engender a sense of community. As we shall see in this section, modern Druidry's use of the term 'tribe' is clearly a reflection of neo-tribalism.

By focusing on the archetype of the tribe of 'noble savages' who lived in a closed and static system, modern Druids can create a new 'golden age of man,' where man is not

alienated from nature and identities aren't fragmented. This too is reflective of the concept of neo-tribalism. According to the evidence I gathered, most modern Druids believe that a reinvigoration of the idea of tribalism with its emphasis on community and reverence for nature would ameliorate the woes of modernity. This is striking as much of modern Druidry rests on individual choice. However, it can be understood that the interface between the collective and the individual is not conceived of as a clash but as a continual process in which the needs of both must be met. Instead of returning to the golden age (and one can argue that the ancient Celts were not 'noble savages' living in what was considered a golden age), however, modern Druids appear to be advocating a return to the Romantic Age of the late nineteenth century.

What most modern Druids are unaware of is that the knowledge we have of tribal societies comes from disciplines that grew out of modernity and the West's quest for alternative solutions to the problems posed by modernity. The research done by anthropologists, folklorists and ethnographers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries informs much of the modern Druid world-view but, as a group, they have little understanding of the context of these works. As such, their beliefs are not counter-cultural (as some would claim), but are a clear reflection of the struggles that have faced Western society throughout the process of modernity. Their beliefs are a reaction to the current historical situation but have only been able to develop *because of that situation*. Rather than being opposed to the processes of modernity in Western society, they are therefore a product of those very processes.

Indeed, the modern Druid emphasis on the individual's ability to choose can be seen as an outgrowth of the development of individualism. The self *is* sacralised, as

Durkheim would argue, because there is a recognition of man's social nature and therefore it *must* be. Modern Druidry, therefore, does not present us with a new set of issues and solutions, rather it is a recapitulation (albeit in a different language) of the struggle modernity has faced for over two centuries. Furthermore, it is no mistake that the history of this order stemmed from organizations in the eighteenth century, many of whom have gone on to be involved with the plight of the poor. These 'friendly societies' may have used the 'Druid' as an archetype, but they were actually aimed at ameliorating the appalling conditions created by modernity (mainly the poverty and disease that resulted from the overcrowding of cities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.) In sum, modern Druids could not become a 'tribal' society as they are clearly products of their own Westernised cultures. In reality, few see this as the end goal of the modern Druid path. Instead, they seek to incorporate the romantic notion of the tribe with the modern, Western cultures of which they are members and thus create a kind of 'neo-tribalism'.

One of the criticisms often leveled at modern Druids is that they have invented their spirituality and, in fact, do not really practice the religion of the ancient Druids. Therefore, many non-believers seem to regard this 'invention' as somehow false and misleading. In fact, modern Druids do recognize that their spirituality was invented, but believe that its invented quality does not render it inauthentic in any sense. However, modern Druids do use the term ancient Celtic term 'Druid' to mark their identity. By defining themselves in this way they are seeking to create a unified group who share the *Zeitgeist* of the ancient Celts. In this way, the ancient Celtic ancestors are also envisaged as members of 'the tribe.' The tribe is therefore a supra-cultural phenomenon that

connects all adherents through space and time via an intangible web. Furthermore, this connection aids in the establishment of a more permanent community that can survive the deaths of its personnel. However, as Hobsbawm notes: “it is evident that not all [invented traditions] are equally permanent, but it is their appearance and establishment rather than their chances of survival which are our primary concern” (2006: 1).

This negotiation of boundaries and identity is in opposition to national identities and is an attempt to construct meaning. Further, it is an attempt to create structure and modes of action that are viewed as positive and relevant for the actors themselves in a separate venue, for modern Druids are keenly aware of their dual status as citizens of nation-states (on the one hand) and members of the tribe on the other.

Modern Druidry presents us with a confrontation of two modes of social organization which it seeks to resolve. On the one hand, ethnicity and on the other, nationalism. These models have been seen as competing, as if it is an ‘either/or’ proposition. Ethnicity is seen as archaic and primordial, based on inherent differences (either racial or cultural) that are considered inherent to the group. On the other hand, nationality is seen as a model that is imposed without reference to group or individual identity. Modern Druidry is responding to the lack of significance of national structures and arguing instead for organic structural forms based on primordial factors.

As we have seen, the nation is an invented tradition, albeit of a specific type. Modern Druidry is also a consciously invented tradition that uses some of the same processes as nationalism, such as the imagined community and the invention of tradition. It uses these processes in much the same way but reaches different conclusions, and arguably conclusions that are more meaningful for the members of the group. Perhaps

the most obvious difference between the two is that unlike the processes of nationalism, modern Druidry does not seek to create a homogenous culture based upon the culture of the elites, which is then distributed to the lower orders. Instead, their invented tradition rests on the idea that individuals should be encouraged to develop their own beliefs, and thus the culture will spread from the bottom-up. While modern Druidry is a bottom-up approach, nationalism is a top-down approach. For modern Druids, the top-down approach imposes forms which are, for the social actor, alien and imposing. By allowing a bottom-up approach, modern Druidry creates an environment where individual actors and the community can negotiate meaning in a way that is significant and meaningful for all. This is perhaps why the continual negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in forums such as the pub moots and *gorseddau* is so important – it allows for contestation of meaning while at the same time managing the conflict that can occur between opposing viewpoints. It then synthesizes these viewpoints in a way that is relevant for all members of the group.

Another major difference between the modern Druid approach and nationalism is that modern Druidry relies heavily on the interaction between its all of its members (either face-to-face or through media such as the internet). According to Anderson, before nationalism communities were structured around face-to-face social communication. Because nations as territorial units are so large and contain individuals who will never come into contact with each other, the process of nationalism had to create what he calls ‘imagined communities.’ These imagined communities allow members of a nation to conceive that there are other members of the community which hold the same values and norms, but whom they will never actually meet. However, in

modern Druidry this process is seen as removing the crucial element of social interaction. Modern Druidry attempts to re-institute this social component. It seeks a return to the pre-national era when social bonds were cemented and culture was transmitted through communication between members. It is in situations where contesting views can be negotiated between individuals and groups that society can change and adapt as a response to the interaction between individuals. Therefore, members of the group are fully engaged in the processes of society. This then leads members to feel that their ideas and in fact very existence are important to the group. Nationalism, on the other hand, with its top-down, homogenizing approach is seen to alienate the individual, making him or her nothing more than a passive receptor for a culture which may not be personally relevant.

Nationalism is perceived to be based on ideas of rationality, the scientific method and progress. It also privileges the group over the individual. Thus, the nation was heralded as the triumph of the modern over the traditional. On the other hand, ethnicity is often represented as sentimental; it is rooted in the antiquated ideas of the past. Folk traditions are often represented as superstitious and irrational ideas, and are therefore placed in opposition to the modernizing progress of nationalism. However, modern Druids question this assumption. The idea that ethnic groups are backward or irrational and nationalism represents progress is founded on an ethnocentric bias. Modern Druids question why rationality and science have been privileged over the experience and meaning that individuals should acquire from life and society. Therefore, they contend that nationalism, by attempting to erase distinctions between individuals and groups actually removes layers of significance and meaning. They are not contending that

overarching political units are unnecessary or irrelevant, though. Instead, they advance the notion that nationalism effectively sterilized the significance of the ethnic groups that comprised the nation.

Therefore, modern Druids seek to define a middle ground – one where the benefits of nationalism are not relinquished, but one which reminds members of the importance of engagement and modes of significance. It is in the melding of the spiritual and scientific that true progress occurs. By uniting the two, modern Druids seek not to convict their ancestors of irrationality or view them as unsophisticated, but instead to see their ideas and structures as imbued with meaning and intelligence. This union, modern Druidry shows us, can borrow in a way that both respects the contributions of the past and adapts these traditions for modern uses. In this way modern Druids are not merely inventing traditions, but using them as cultural capital.

By using the term ‘tribe’, modern Druids meld the ancient and modern, the ethnic and national, the spiritual and scientific. ‘Tribe’ is used here not in the classical sense of a group tied by a culture and genetic inter-linkages, but instead as a term to delineate the multiplicity of interactions that comprise the social group. It is a term specifically adopted to reflect back to an earlier form of social organization, and by using it modern Druids are attempting to negate the pejorative meaning of the term and the accusation of that tribal cultures are irrational, unsophisticated or primitive. Instead, modern Druids choose to focus on what the term meant in the first place – it referred to a community, a group that relied on one another. Therefore, the group needed to foster bonds between individuals, but also to allow individuals a certain amount of choice within the system. Additionally, the tribe is seen as the *über* imagined community – it crosses national and

ethnic boundaries, but also can penetrate the boundary between living and dead, such that the ancestors are also conceived of as part of 'the tribe'. In this way, the past is not distinct from or distant from the present.

The relevance of the modern Druid evidence for anthropology is not that this case solves the dilemmas posited by analysis of nationalism and ethnicity. Rather, it highlights their engagement with these dilemmas and how this engagement allows them to contest and negotiate systems of meaning which are relevant for the actors themselves. In other words, the modern Druid evidence shows that it is not through the passive reception of homogenized meanings that significance is found. It is through active engagement in the process. The actual consensuses reached as a result of this engagement in many ways is unimportant. It is the process that binds individuals together and provides them with meaning. Perhaps this is why they refer to their endeavour not as a religion or a movement but as a 'path.'

### *Conclusion*

The substantive part of this thesis began, in chapter two, by attempting to place the phenomenon of modern Druidry within its wider historical context. It is only through contextualizing this phenomenon, after all, that we can begin to understand how it works and why it is relevant to the study of anthropology. Therefore, this section of chapter two discussed the evidence of the ancient Celtic past that has consciously been used by modern Druids as a basis for what I have termed their 'creation myth.' In this sense, 'creation myth' was used not in its usual sense of a myth concerned with the origin of the universe or of mankind. Instead, the term was used to connote the myth of the origin of

modern Druidry. The focus was therefore on the classical sources and archaeological evidence that has been used by modern Druids to support the myth of continuity with the ancient Celtic past. Next, the discussion shifted to an exploration of the impact of the Renaissance and the early British antiquarians on our vision of the ancient Celtic past and how Celticism was resurrected through the Romantic Movement. Following this historical trail led to a critical analysis of the impact of Rosicrucianism, freemasonry, and the high-magic societies that proliferated in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Further, we explored the way modern Druidry moved from these fraternal *milieux* to embrace a new pattern of spirituality, highly influenced by the eastern philosophies of OBOD's founder, Ross Nichols.

The result is a truly modern phenomenon which justifies itself through the evocation of a link to the past. This link is sometimes viewed as tangible but more often it is seen as an ephemeral link through the *Zeitgeist* of the ancient Celts. This is not, however, merely archaizing. The myth of the ancient Druid past has been co-opted in support of a modern creation. This quest for new models and modes of action that allow social actors to adapt to changing social situations and to the individual's place within the cosmic order is one of the hallmarks of modern Druid identity. It is a way of using the past for the present (cf. Bloch 1977; James 2003). The fundamental contradiction of using ancient templates to create modern techniques is not seen as a contradiction within modern Druidry, but rather it speaks to the group's ability to find ways to create meaning that is relevant for the actors. This can be seen as a result of modernity's challenge to the individual to actively participate in the construction of networks of significance. Even though they admit the constructed nature of their beliefs, they do return to the need to

legitimize their co-option by reference to the ancient Celtic past, either through a dubious actual historical connection or through the evocation of spiritual kinship.

Once the historical development of modern Druidry was explored, the discussion turned to focus on the broad structures that comprise the movement. As stated in chapter three, Druidry is organized into orders without an umbrella structure. The investigation was centered on one of these orders, OBOD. This order, as we have seen, is further subdivided into the grades of Bard, Ovate and Druid. Furthermore, we have seen that members of all three grades regularly come together in groups called seed-groups and groves. The relationships between these levels of organization were studied in an effort to discover the relevance of hierarchical structures within modern Druidry. The end result was the discovery of a fundamental contradiction between the espousal of a fluid, organic organization and observed hierarchical strata. The contradiction is resolved through the under-communication of hierarchy which negated the need for structure and denies the relevance of the historical legitimization that was the focus of chapter two.

Furthermore, I began to explore how knowledge is discovered and circulated within modern Druidry. The influence of modern psychological theory was noted especially in its influence on the Bardic course. This course, I argued, is not a body of knowledge but a stream. Moreover, it is a tool to aid in the discovery of new knowledge and provides a template for the incorporation of this knowledge within modern Druid belief. I argued for the use of the term 'discovery' in this instance as in modern Druidry it is believed that knowledge is not acquired. The truth is always present for modern Druids; what is needed is to discover an inspired way of tapping into this resource in order to discover and express the individual and collective reality.

The examination of the structures within modern Druidry logically led to an analysis of some of the most common beliefs within this movement. Although there is no written or codified dogma in this spirituality, some beliefs are common and, it was argued, without at least these basic beliefs, the community may not recognize the individual as a Druid. For example, primacy in this belief system is given to reverence for nature. This either leads to or is the result of the environmentalist leanings of modern Druids.<sup>127</sup> The meaning of several key symbols was discussed, which resulted in the conclusion that the modern Druid evidence lends support for Turner's contention that social actors such as the Ndembu understand and can actively communicate the meaning of these symbols (cf. 1967: 20-1).

Chapter four sought to advance the proviso that this is an eclectic spirituality in which no tradition is privileged. In other words, truth and inspiration are not seen as the domain of one or another spiritual path but are repositories to be mined for meaning relevant to the modern Druid path. Additionally, engagement with the sacred is different to every individual and thus, personal experience has a transformative effect on the individual, which also transforms collective belief. Therefore, chapter four helps us to locate the interface between the collective and the individual, as for example in the consideration of the cascading *awens* that unite many voices into one, communal voice.

The exploration of modern Druid belief led to a discussion of the importance and role of myth within this spirituality. First, the production and re-production of myths was discussed. Primarily, I focused on the process of myth-making (as opposed to myth-telling) and the active encouragement of constant evolution and variation of myth.

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<sup>127</sup> Trying to discover whether an individual was a Druid first and then an environmentalist or vice versa is virtually impossible. Rather, this is akin to the tautology "which came first: the chicken or the egg?"

Instead of being a static process, this dialectic between bard and audience has no end-product. Additionally, it displays the importance of the role of the bard: he is the shaman who can access the sacred and channel it into this world for the benefit of the planet and humanity. Secondly, the types of mythological cycles that are relied upon were discussed. Thirdly, one of the most popular modern Druid myths, the ‘Tale of Taliesin’ was related. Through discussing the myth of Taliesin, we have discovered several binary oppositions and the ways in which those oppositions are mediated and resolved in a coherent manner that has significance and meaning for modern Druids. Furthermore, the recognized distinction between myth and history was explored.

In chapter six the regular seasonal rituals that make up the *mandala* of the Druid ceremonial year were investigated. These seasonal festivals are based on what is known of the ancient Celtic festivals and comes to use through British folk-survivals (such as May Day and Halloween) and through ancient Celtic archaeology evidence such as the Coligny calendar. The two categories of ‘fire festival’ and *alban* were elucidated, as was the relationship between the two categories. The modern Druid emphasis on cycles and their equivalence to the human life-cycle was elaborated, which led to the proposition that the ancient and the modern are synthesized in modern Druidry through the synthesis of linear and cyclical time. Additionally, this chapter focused on an exegesis of the relationship between several pairs of binary oppositions, most notably masculine/feminine and natural/cultural. However, it was noted that these abstractions are neat structural divisions that unfortunately do not entirely mirror the ethnographic data. Lastly, I examined the fact that a difference exists between orthodoxy and practice, which can be seen as the opposition between the set of beliefs espoused in OBOD’s

correspondence courses and the way modern Druidry is practiced 'on the ground'.

Following this progression, chapter seven turned to look at the life-crisis rites of modern Druidry. This section discussed the modes of action of modern Druidry, in other words how modern Druidry is practiced. I explored the ways in which life-crisis rites are important; for example how initiation acts as a formal acknowledgement of a new member's status as member of the group. Further, it was proposed that rituals are the locus of creation of meaning and the venue for the promotion of communal and individual experience. Different levels of practice each have their own place, but these levels are combined to create an environment in which identity can be contested and negotiated. This is a dialectical process in which individuals transform the group as much as they are transformed by it. The investigation accordingly focused on issues such as the opposition between the 'real world' as represented by communal ritual experience and the 'mundane world', the illusory world of everyday life. The impermanence of the community and the desire to allow the community to live on through the individuals when they are separated from the community was discussed. The importance of this idea was stressed as it is the opposite of what we normally find: normally the communal survives the demise of or separation from the individual.

Chapter eight revolved around a study of ritual structure. Specifically, I looked at some of the many ways the term 'ritual' has been employed, finally settling on the use espoused by my informants themselves. Thus, the focus was squarely on the emic aims of ritual. Additionally, Durkheim's, Van Gennep's and Turner's theories of ritual structure were considered. Importantly, this chapter also focused on the sacred/profane dichotomy and how ritual helps to construct the world order and create reality in

communal action that is ultimately about transcendence. Therefore, much of this section related to the interface between the collective and the individual as seen through such discussions as how the symbolic content of meditations is conditioned on a common set of images and references that are the basis of communal knowledge.

The ethnographic data explored in chapters three to nine of this thesis provide a snap-shot of a rapidly-growing modern movement that contains many contradictions as well as novel solutions to the problems (or perceived problems) of modernity. In and of itself this justifies the lengthy and detailed study which I have undertaken. However, perhaps equally important is the light that this investigation can shed on certain themes within anthropology. Thus, I have argued that nationalism and ethnicity are synthesized together in the notion of the 'tribe' through the mechanism of the 'invention of tradition'.

What this all points to is the increasing trend of individual actors to argue that national or ethnic identities do not go far enough towards explaining the webs of significance that comprise social realities. In the current atmosphere of the freedom of information (though one could argue much is still obscured) the individual can see or believe he is seeing beyond the veil of authority. Modern society has asked that we 'keep ourselves informed' and that we don't just accept what we are given but actively question it and change our practices in response. Here we see the contradiction – the West, based on the principle of an informed Democracy, asks that we challenge and question the authority of power structures. One can argue (and should, I think) that challenging is allowed by the authority and encouraged in specific ways in order to hide what they are actually doing. However, no matter what, it has created a cultural belief in individual choice within Western society. The modern Druid movement clearly makes sense in this

respect. This spirituality would only really be counter-cultural if it asked its adherents *not* to listen to their individual voices.

Clearly, nationalism and ethnicity have been very relevant for the study of group identity and cultural change. However, increasingly these categories are either unimportant or fractured in western society. One can ask as well how much they ever really could have been relevant for social actors with all of the inherent difficulties even researchers have with defining a term like ethnicity. It would be easy to say that this is the result of globalization, but this appears too neat. It is rather that the individual crosses boundaries and has situational identity. Taken together these situational identities form a whole, while nationalism and ethnicity (often at war with one another) can be said to reflect only part of the individual's identity.

Movements such as modern Druidry seek to sacralise the self in an effort to react against this fragmentation or compartmentalization. Instead, they actively encourage the individual to be holistic and in theory accept him or her as such (although in practice one can argue this has problems). It can thus be seen as the movement's attempt to encourage a holistic view of society where all traditions are options available for incorporation. This underscores the trend within Western culture as a whole – we increasingly see 'alternative' medical techniques like acupuncture being made available by the National Health Service in Great Britain and educational institutions in the US often claim to offer students high levels of choice in an effort to make them 'more well-rounded', that is more of a whole person.

Understandably, the reaction to this process of fragmentation has been holism. Increasingly, many seek to form utopias where this holistic life can be led and this is

noteworthy as many feel they have to remove themselves as much as possible from the prevailing western culture in order to achieve holism. They grow their own food and cut off the services. In fact, the lectures at the 2007 Glastonbury international gathering of OBOD focused on these ideas through (for example) discussions of permaculture dwellings<sup>128</sup>.

Whether modern Druidry will survive past its current membership is anyone's guess. What is certain is that the adherents of this spirituality find significance and meaning in its practices. This meaning is created not through a reliance on archaic models but on a reworking of the romantic past of the ancient Celts. This thesis has sought to depict the vibrancy and fluidity of this group and follow their quest to negotiate and renegotiate their communal beliefs and identity. It has also sought to advance our understanding of how the modern Druid evidence can shed light on the relationship of several current debates within anthropology. Truly, the *Zeitgeist* of this group is aptly depicted in the quote that began this thesis in chapter one: 'The Spirit of Albion is calling you home'.

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<sup>128</sup> 'Permaculture' refers to the theories espoused in the 1970s by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in their book, *Permaculture One*. According to Mollison and Holmgren, modern agricultural practices are inherently destructive to the planet and the human community. Therefore, their work has centered on developing practices which are environmentally and socially beneficial. Their work has spawned a 'permaculture movement' in which individuals and groups seek to develop self-sustaining and self-sufficient agricultural and social practices.

## Appendix One :

### **The Wealden Letters<sup>129</sup>**

#### Text of First Letter

*Written by Wealden District Council*

*Received by facilitators of the Anderida Gorsedd*

Sirs

I have been informed that your organisation have a programme of events at the Long Man of Wilmington , meeting in the Long Man car park , and that on previous occasions considerable problems have occurred due to traffic chaos both in the car park and in the car park (*sic*). In addition it has been reported that activities have been held in the adjacent picnic area. Both these areas are operated by the District Council and permission should be sought before any such activity takes place.

I would therefore appreciate a written application in order that the granting of permission can be considered. In consideration of an application we would have to have regard to any impact on neighbouring property, other users of the car park or picnic area, impact on adjacent highways (in consultation with the police and the Highways Authority) and evidence of public liability insurance (minimum £5,000,000).

#### Text of Second Letter

*Written by facilitators of the Anderida Gorsedd*

*Received by Wealden District Council*

Following your email of 29th January 2004, I am writing to you to tell you a bit about our activities at the Long Man of Wilmington. We have been meeting for the 8 seasonal Druid ceremonies at the Long Man since the Spring Equinox 2000. The Anderida Gorsedd began as a simple meeting of 7 friends to celebrate the turning wheel of the seasons. In the Druid calendar that is:

Spring Equinox – 21st March  
Beltane (May Day) – 1st May  
Summer Solstice – 21st June  
Lughnasadh – 1st August  
Autumn Equinox – 21st September  
Samhain – 31st October  
Winter solstice – 21st December  
Imbolc – 1st February.

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<sup>129</sup> The letters were taken from <http://www.bardicarts.com/anderidagorsedd/openritualnews.html>.

We meet on the nearest Sunday on or after the dates above. We meet in the picnic area between 1.30-2pm, and the ceremony begins about 2.15ish. The complete celebration lasts about 45 minutes, and afterwards some of us go to continue a social celebration at the Giants Rest public house down the road, to which we recently awarded 'The most Druid-friendly pub in Sussex' award. The average turnout is 45 - 55 people. We had an exceptional turnout for the Winter Solstice of 95 people, but this is not the norm. And having had this experience, we are now in a better position to organise this quantity of people in the future. In the Winter, we tend to stay in the picnic area and hold the ceremony there, as it is cold and there is always the potential of rain. In the dryer months we walk to the flat hill beneath the hill figure for the ceremony. When there have been tourists at the site, they have often joined the ceremony, and said how lucky they felt to be 'in the right place at the right time'. It really does add to the colour of the Long Man. I have not witnessed any of the 'considerable traffic chaos' you refer to in your email, but if this is of concern to you, we can organise parking marshals to keep this in order. We also always have at least one qualified nurse there for any potential emergency. If you have any other safety concerns, I am sure that we can also address these. As I said above we are only at the site for about 2 hours, 8 times a year. We do not charge any money, nor sell tickets, we do it from a love of the land, and of Nature. If you are concerned that we are publicising it on our website, it can be removed. The Gorsedd is a wholesome thing. It is spiritually uplifting for people who attend, and has become an important part of their spirituality, and way of celebrating the seasons. In a world that seems sometimes out of control, the Anderida Gorsedd is an oasis of peace, respect, openness and friendship.

Something I must stress is that the Long Man of Wilmington is considered by us to be a sacred site. Druids have a deep reverence for our ancestral heritage. Last year on 1st June, in conjunction with the Sussex Archaeological Society, we re-painted the Long Man, paying for all of the paint and equipment ourselves. We are currently in discussions with English Heritage about plans for us to do structural repairs to the hill figure, as he is gradually slipping down the hill, and needs underpinning. So I hope you can see that what we take from the site, we put back in constructive energy.

Yours Sincerely,  
The facilitators of the Anderida Gorsedd<sup>130</sup>

*Text of Third Letter*

*Written by Wealden District Council*

*Received by facilitators of the Anderida Gorsedd*

I will be writing formally, however the owners of the land (we do not own this site but are the leaseholder), have instructed us that we are in contravention of the lease in allowing such activity in the car park and on the adjacent picnic area. I recognise that it is not practical to cancel your Spring Equinox activity this Sunday however subsequent

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<sup>130</sup> The signatories' names have been omitted throughout and replaced with this phrase to provide my informants with a modicum of anonymity.

ceremonies cannot be held on the car park or picnic area. Whilst your (*sic*) and your friends are at liberty to use these areas as any other members of the public it must be within the terms of the Off Street Parking Order as it applies to all Council car parks.

Text of Fourth Letter

*Written by Wealden District Council*

*Received by facilitators of the Anderida Gorsedd*

Dear Facilitators of the Anderida Gorsedd:

re: Wilmington Priory Car Park

Subsequent to my email dated 19<sup>th</sup> March 2004 I am writing to confirm that we are unable to grant permission for you to hold your Druid ceremonies in the Wilmington Priory Car Park or adjacent picnic area.

As you are now aware, the Council does not own this site and the lease specifically states that we cannot permit anything to be done “*which may be or become a nuisance or annoyance or cause damage or inconvenience to the landlords or the owners or occupiers of the adjoining land.*”

We have received a written instruction from the landlords to ensure that your activities cease with immediate effect.

As I stated in my e-mail, you and your friends are at liberty to use the car park or picnic area as any other members of the public; however, it must be within the terms of the Off Street Parking Places Order 1990 as it applies to all Council car parks.

I am however concerned to see that although I had informed you that permission would be refused, the programme of events on your website has not been amended and still refers to the car park. I would be obliged if reference could be made, both on the website and any other publicity, to our decision in order to avoid future inconvenience to the landowners.

Text of Fifth Letter

*Written by facilitators of the Anderida Gorsedd*

*Received by Wealden District Council*

Greetings,

Thank you for your letter we received this morning. After reading through the letter I must say I am very surprised that we have been refused the permission based on the reasons you have given. As far as I am aware we have never caused a nuisance, any damage, or any of the other details from the letter. I am surprised because we are a group

of people who consider 'care for the environment' to be paramount and we spend time after our ceremonies tidying up anything we have left plus any additional litter left by other members of the public. In your original email you wrote of your concerns regarding the car park

"....meeting in the Long Man car park , and that on previous occasions considerable problems have occurred due to traffic chaos both in the car park and in the car park."

You made no reference to 'nuisance', 'damage' or 'considerable problems' concerning the picnic area in your original email to me but implied that you were far more concerned with the disruption in the car park. So, I have to assume you have received complaints in this regard as we have been meeting there, with no problem, for the past 4 years. I would very much like to see any letters or evidence that you have, as I believe these accusations are unfounded. If you believe we have caused this disruption, I believe I have a right to see the evidence. Presumably you can show me any written evidence that we have caused this trouble, so we can take the matter further. Alternatively, if you are purely surmising about disruption you expect us to cause, I would like to speak further so that you are happy with the systems we put in place to reassure you. Simply saying, "You can't do this because we think you might cause disruption" is simply not good enough, considering how long we have already been meeting on the site. After all we are talking about a public place and as far as I am aware we are still members of the public. When I told people about our negotiations with you at our last gathering, I was amazed to be approached by three local councillors, a solicitor and a journalist, who all offered their services for free. So we will be seeking legal advice regarding this. Also, if necessary, we would be happy to talk to the press about these problems as at the moment none of the objections seem to be backed up with any evidence from your end.

We will continue to try and negotiate the picnic area's use for the forthcoming Winter months. We are putting in place stringent checks on parking to make sure that if any congestion is caused within the car park, we can rest assured that it is not anyone who is attending our ceremonies.

We will be publishing our entire conversation so far on our website, to keep people informed on how things are going, and we would like to formally invite you to come along to our next meeting to see for yourself what we do and how we conduct ourselves.

As I'm sure you know, this is not a new problem. English Heritage have had to negotiate use of Stonehenge for many years, and have now accepted the Pagan's right of open and free worship in accordance with the Human Rights Act 1998. Particularly Article 9 on Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion and Article 11 on Freedom of Assembly and Association. Not that we ever envisage our gatherings getting to the size of the one at Stonehenge. Our small gathering of 50 or 60 people for one and a half hours eight times a year is just a drop in the ocean, but the principle is the same.

Peace,

The facilitators of the Anderida Gorsedd

Text of Sixth Letter

*Written by Wealden District Council*

*Received by facilitators of the Anderida Gorsedd*

I have made further enquiries and can now reply to your e-mail of 2nd April 2004. My initial contact made with you was as a result of complaints, largely at that time relating to traffic chaos. Subsequently via the local District Councillor, the parish council and the landowner a range of additional complaints have been received including parking on the grass area, noise (including banging drums, blowing horns, shouting and chanting), litter and lighting fires. This, as I stated in my letter of 30th March 2004, contravenes the lease, and gives us no alternative but to refuse permission to use the car park and the picnic area for your ceremonies.

I have sought advice from the Council's Legal Services who have advised that neither article 9(1) or 11 have been breached by this decision.

Text of Seventh Letter

*Written by facilitators of the Anderida Gorsedd*

*Received by Wealden District Council*

Dear Wealden District Council and land owners of Wilmington car park and picnic area,

In response to your email, and our telephone conversation I would like to address the concerns you have listed below.

A) Parking on the grass area: the Gorsedd is attended by environmentalists, conservationists and people of many walks of life who view the landscape as sacred. I completely understand your concern if people park on any other area except the car park or on the road. We do not park on the grass.

B) Noise (including banging drums, blowing horns, chanting and shouting): On the whole our ceremonies are peaceful, with much more time spent on inner contemplation and appreciation of the place, time and season than with loud outward expression. A Morris group once attended and asked if they could dance as part of the ceremony - as this is a part of our English rural heritage, we thought that this would be appropriate. If this is against the land owner's wish, we will in future make it clear that it is not appropriate to Morris dance within the picnic area. We will also refrain from blowing any horns.

C) Litter and lighting fires: As mentioned above ALL of the people who gather to celebrate nature and the seasons are following a path that is inseparably linked with care for our environment. I have mentioned in a previous email that we always clear up after us, and indeed clear up any additional litter left by other members of the public. We have occasionally arrived at the site where other people have lit fires, and we have done our

best to clear this also. Three times since March 2000 we have lit a controlled fire within a very small disposable barbeque-sized vessel (as it is a picnic area, we didn't think this would be a problem). This fire has been contained, and left no trace on the site. Therefore I can say with total truth that any fire or litter that appears within the picnic area is not due to our ceremony.

We should make it clear why we wish to continue holding our ceremonies on the picnic area. As we have said before we have been gathering at the Long Man since March 2000. We have more often than not held the ceremonies up on the Downs, only staying in the picnic area should the weather not permit us to walk all that way. Last year the Summer was incredibly hot, so we took shade under the old Ash tree in the picnic area for more ceremonies than usual.

The essence of Druidry is the connection with the natural world, therefore most Druid ceremonies are held outside, and as most of our ancestral sites are on the top of hills, people have to walk a long way to get to them. For physically challenged people we were a wonderful gift. All they had to do was park their cars, walk behind the wall into the picnic area and, in all weathers, they could practice their spirituality. With the confidence that if they got tired, all they had to do would be walk back behind the wall and into their cars. These people can no longer celebrate with us, and it is really for them that we are trying to re-negotiate our use of the site. If you are a spiritual person who is physically challenged, and you develop a connection with others through ceremony and celebration, it is a crushing blow if that is then taken away from you - that the ceremonies are continuing, but you cannot walk to them. My partner, is one of these people, so I hope you understand my commitment here.

We do also understand the land owner's concern, and I would love to discuss this directly, as I believe that we both have the same aim, and that is the continued enjoyment, and care, of this place. I also understand that the land owner would not want any activity that contravened the lease. We were not aware of the lease until we began our discussions. Now that we are, we would like to reassure that if permission were given to continue to hold our ceremonies there we would follow the lease to the letter. We would keep all noise down, we would continue to look after the site regarding litter, and we would no longer light any fires, no matter how small or contained. We will keep an eye out while people arrived to make sure that traffic is not a problem, and we would be there and gone within an hour and a half, as we always have been.

The Long Man is used by many Pagan groups, and these people also celebrate the same 8 seasonal festivals as us. Sometimes they join with us, sometimes they arrive at different times. I guess what I'm trying to say is that we are not \*the\* Druids. We are just \*some\* Druids. We can work as closely with the land owners as needed to ensure that we keep to any agreement, but there will always be others who light fires, and leave litter. This will not be us and never has been.

This is an organic celebration, with no central organisation, or organiser, and no money ever is charged. All we facilitators do is write the ceremony for the day. That means we

never know who will turn up, but on the day, we control the ceremony, and therefore can let people know of our agreements about our use of the site.

I ask you to please re-consider your decision and look towards a partnership where we can, wherever possible, help to let others who might not be so aware of your lease, to honour it, and share the space with respect and trust.

In Peace,  
The facilitators of the Anderida Gorsedd

**Author's note: As stated previously in this work, to date there has been no resolution to this issue and the Anderida Gorsedd are still attempting to get permission for the use of the picnic area.**

## Appendix Two:

### **Taliesin – a tradition Scottish song**

“I will go as wren in spring,  
With sorrow and sighing on silent wing,  
And I shall go in Our Lady’s name,  
Aye, till I come home again.

Then we shall follow as falcons grey  
And hunt thee cruelly for our prey,  
And we shall go in the Good God’s name,  
Aye, to fetch thee home again.

Then I will go as a mouse in May  
In fields by night, in cellars by day,  
And I shall go in Our Lady’s name.  
Aye, til I come home again.

Then we shall follow as black tom cats,  
And hunt thee through the corn and vats,  
And we shall go in the Good God’s name,  
Aye, to fetch thee home again.

Then I shall go as an autumn hare,  
With sorrow and sighing and mickle care,  
And I shall go in Our Lady’s name.  
Aye, til I come home again.

Then we shall follow as swift grey-hounds,  
And hunt thy tracks by leaps and bounds.  
And we shall go in the Good God’s name,  
Aye, to fetch thee home again.

Then I shall go as a winter trout,  
With sorrow and sighing and mickle doubt.  
And I shall go in Our Lady’s name.  
Aye, til I come home again.

Then we shall follow as otters swift,  
And snare thee fast ere thou canst shift,  
And we shall go in the Good God’s name,  
Aye, to fetch thee home again.” (Matthews 2001: 154-5)

*Mickle*: from the Middle English ‘great or much’ (Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language 1957)

## Appendix Three

### **Handfasting Ritual**

The following text is from my actual handfasting to a member of the Anderida Grove of the Seven Hills, which was performed at Lughnasadh in 2006. While it was my own handfasting, with the exception of the personal vows it was entirely written and arranged by members of the Anderida Grove on a pattern common to other Druids. The handfasting began by members of the Grove, family and friends gathering in a woodland owned by three members of the Grove. As the sun was setting, the rite began with the bride and groom being separated from each other and the group in order to meditate on the commitment they were about to undertake. The rest of the party gathered beneath the oak tree that is the site of all of the rituals held within the wood. What follows is the text of the handfasting itself.

#### *Ceremony of Handfasting*

##### **Grove Mother:**

Welcome to this space and this time, under the vast skies and in the protection of this wood and Sacred Oak, we stand supported by the Earth. We are gathered together in this place to bear witness to a ceremony of handfasting, the joining of the spirits of two people in love and honour. Here before this circle they will declare their vows to one another. Let us join hands to form a circle of friendship and love.

##### **Grove Father:**

Spirits of this circle, spirits of this space, ancestors and guides of this Grove and this land, we ask for your blessings, guidance, protection and inspiration on this celebration of love, and ceremony of handfasting.

We will begin by giving peace to the quarters, for without peace can no work be.

##### **Grove Mother:**

May there be peace in the North  
May there be peace in the South  
May there be peace in the West

May there be peace in the East

**All:** May there be peace throughout the whole world.

*The circle is cast by Grove Father*

**Grove Father:**

May the circle be blessed with fire

*The circle blessed with fire*

**Grove Mother:**

And may the Circle also be blessed with Water

*The circle is blessed with water*

**Grove Father:**

The joining together of two people in this sacred right of handfasting brings together great forces.

**Grove Mother:**

Within every masculine nature lies the feminine, and within every feminine nature lies the masculine. The interplay of the masculine and feminine forces when flowing freely in a union based upon true love finds many expressions. This union is what makes us whole.

**Grove Father:**

Let the four directions be honoured that power and radiance may enter this circle for the good of all beings.

**East:**

In the name of the Hawk of Dawn that flies in the clear, pure air, we call upon the powers of the East to bless us with their presence on this day of celebration. Hail and Welcome!

**South:**

In the name of the Great Stag in the heat of the chase and the inner fire of the Sun, we call upon the powers of the South to bless us with their presence on this day of celebration. Hail and Welcome!

**West:**

In the name of the Salmon of Wisdom who dwells in the sacred pool, we call upon the powers of the West to bless us with their presence on this day of celebration. Hail and Welcome!

**North:**

In the name of the Great Bear in the starry heavens and the deep and fruitful Earth, we call upon the powers of the North to bless us with their presence on this day of celebration. Hail and Welcome!

*Grove Mother and Grove Father go to collect the groom and the bride, who then stand outside the circle in the West while Grove Father and Grove Mother return to the East.*

**Grove Mother:**

Let the couple who wish to be joined enter our circle and walk the paths of the Sun and Moon.

*The bride walks anti-clockwise to stand in front of Grove Father in the East and the groom walks clockwise to stand in the east in front of Grove Mother.*

**Grove Father to the bride:**

Who has walked the path of the Moon to stand in this place of beauty and wonder and declare her sacred vows?

*The bride answers*

**Grove Father:**

Do you do this of your own free will?

*The bride answers*

**Grove Mother to the groom:**

Who has walked the path of the Sun to stand in this place of beauty and wonder to declare his sacred vows?

*The groom answers*

**Grove Mother:**

Do you do this of your own free will?

*The groom answers*

**Grove Father:**

We have asked the ancestors of the Grove to enter. Now is the time to ask the ancestors of this couple to join us in this sacred circle to bless their union.

**The bride:**

Ancestors of my line, I greet you and ask that you be present here today with me, your daughter, to witness and bless the union of our line with another.

**The groom:**

Ancestors of my line, I greet you and ask that you be present here today with me, your son, to witness and bless the union of our line with another.

***Offerings from place:***

**Grove Mother:**

As the groom and the bride each descend from separate lines so too they come from different places. Each of them has brought an offering to honour the spirit of the places from which they hail.

**The bride:**

I speak for the spirit of the place I was raised.

The gently rolling hills at the heart of Texas

Called Tejas or 'friendship' by the Hainai who called it home

I speak for the spirits of the mesquite, the agave and the bluebonnet which carpet the ground

For the coyote, the armadillo, and the jackrabbit who roam the earth

I bring to this sacred circle a piece of my land

The bark of the Alamo tree

Whose branches still shade my childhood home

As I add this offering to the fire I call upon the spirit of my native home to come into this sacred circle and bless this union

**The groom:**

I speak for the spirit of the place I was raised

The thick woodlands and wide heath of the New Forest

I speak for the spirits of pine, gorse and heather which spring from the ground

For the horse, the warbler and the deer who wander the earth

I bring to this sacred circle a piece of my land

The bark of the Redwood

Who stands strong and tall

As I add this offering to the fire I call upon the spirit of my native home to come into this sacred circle and bless this union

**The bride:**

As the fire unites these offerings in its burning embers

**The groom:**

So too may we be joined

**Grove Mother:**

You have made your offerings, you have walked the circles of the Sun and Moon, will you now walk the circles of time, journey through the Elements and Seasons?

**The bride and the groom:**

We will.

*Grove Mother, Grove Father, the bride and the groom walk around the circle to each quarter, beginning at the Southern quarter.*

**South:**

You have traveled here to the South, the place of Summer. Should you be faced with fierce fires of change, I ask, how will your love survive?

*The bride and the groom answer individually.*

**South:**

Then accept the blessings of the element of fire. May your home never be in want for warmth and glow of a healthy hearth.

*South gives blessing of Fire*

**West:**

You have traveled here to the West, the place of Autumn. As feelings ebb and slow on the great tides of life, I ask you how will your love survive?

*The bride and the groom answer individually.*

**West:**

Then accept the blessings of the element of water. May your lives and dreams be ever filled with love.

*West gives blessing of Water*

**North:**

You have traveled here to the North, the place of Winter. In times of stillness and restriction, I ask, how will your love survive?

*The bride and the groom answer individually.*

**North:**

Then accept the blessings of the element of Earth. May your love be strengthened.

*North gives blessing of Earth*

**East:**

You have traveled here to the East, the place of Spring. In the crystal clear light of day, I ask, how will your love survive?

*The bride and the groom answer individually.*

**East:**

Then accept the blessings of the element of Air. May each new day bring you the clarity and vision to always see the path ahead.

*East gives blessing of Air*

*Turn to stand in front of Grove Mother and Grove Father who binds their right hands with a length of cord*

**Grove Father:**

You have traveled the circle of time and have returned with its blessings. Now it is the time to declare your vows of love to one another.

*The bride makes her vows. Then takes the groom's ring and places it on his finger.*

**The bride:**

Accept this ring as a token of my love.

*The groom makes his vows. Then takes the bride's ring and places it on her finger.*

**The groom:**

Accept this ring as a token of my love.

**Grove Mother:**

You have made your solemn and binding vows of love and honour to one another. Let them be sealed with a kiss.

We now invite the bride and the groom to bless this circle with the sharing of cake and wine.

*Cake and wine taken around circle.*

**Grove Father:**

Let us now recite the prayer of the Druids.

**All:**

Grant, O God and Goddess your protection  
And in protection, strength  
And in strength, understanding  
And in understanding, knowledge  
And in knowledge, the knowledge of justice  
And in the knowledge of justice, the love of it  
And in the love of it, the love of all Existences  
And in the love of all Existences, the love of God, of Goddess and all Goodness

*3 x Awen*

**Grove Mother:**

It is the time of recall as the fire of the day dies down let it be rekindled in our hearts. May your memories hold what the eye and ear have gained.

We will now thank the four directions for their presence.

**North:**

In the name of the Great Bear in the starry heavens and the deep and fruitful Earth, we thank the powers of the North for their presence and blessings on this day of celebration. Hail and Farewell!

**West:**

In the name of the Salmon of Wisdom that dwells in the sacred pool, we thank the powers of the West for their presence and blessings on this day of celebration. Hail and Farewell!

**South:**

In the name of the Great Stag in the heat of the chase and the inner fire of the Sun, we thank the powers of the South for their presence and blessings on this day of celebration. Hail and Farewell!

**East:**

In the name of the Hawk of Dawn that flies in the clear pure air we thank the powers of the East for their presence and blessings on this day of celebration. Hail and Farewell!

***Grove Father uncasts the Circle.***

**Grove Mother:**

This celebration began with a circle of love and friendship and so it ends. Let us go as we came with love and joy in our hearts. This circle is open and yet never broken. So mote it be.

**All:** So mote it be.

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