



The Old Religion and The Druids

Lesson Transcript

By: Kevin Flanagan | The Brehon Academy

As early man tries to understand the natural forces working around him, it makes sense that he would personify these forces and give them names. And perhaps there was a period in history when early man knew that these names were merely symbols and signs to signify the natural forces but over time this changed and the symbols became personified. They became real entities that people believed in.

The old Irish religion was much like comparative early religion across Europe. It had many gods and goddesses who interacted with, favoured and even had children with human beings. The stories of their death and adventures became the living myth, the common ethos and the collective story of the people. While the belief might have originated by personifying natural forces, over time the unseen forces became very real and living entities in the minds of the people. With the advent of Christianity, these great gods would be made smaller and smaller, until eventually becoming the little people, the fairy folk who lived in the hills.

Perhaps one of the most mysterious and intriguing aspects of early Irish culture, and in fact, most of early European culture, is the existence of this elusive class known as the Druids. They're mysterious because we know so little about them. They wrote nothing down themselves, we think because they believed the written word could be corruptible and that knowledge should be passed down orally from master to pupil. And they were intriguing because we cannot avoid the impact or the influence that this elusive class had on early European history.

All of the writings we have about them come from foreign, usually Greek or Roman writers. Notably, we have Caesar's descriptions of the Druids from his campaigns in Gaul. But these were not Irish druids. We know even less about the Irish druids. And what's more, much of the Irish literature that we do have was written by Christian monks, which predictably portrays them in a not too favourable light, no better than charlatans and at worst, devil worshippers.



As to what Druidism was, either in speculation or practice, we have very little information. As far as we can conjecture, their religion must have consisted of tribal divinities and local rights. As to the druids themselves, we have no distinct information. The meaning of the word "druid" is unclear, but it seems to relate to the word "oak" and also to the word "truth". They appear to have worshipped and prayed in woodland, groves and caves. But beyond all the guff and the hype, I think that the Druids were masters of knowledge who simply sought to understand the truth of the world around them. The first philosopher-scientists. They stood out from the rest of the people because they had been given the necessary mental tools to understand nature, psychology and the physical universe.

But we cannot ignore that they are invariably associated with magic, seeing of ghosts, conjuring spirits, and supernatural occurrences. Perhaps this is the uneducated or the uninitiated common people's way of understanding what were essentially scientific and psychological processes that the Druids were engaged in.

James Bonwick says in *Irish Druids and Early Irish Religions*;

"It would be interesting to know if these seers of Ireland regarded the ghosts with an imaginative or a scientific eye. Could they have investigated phenomena with a view to gain a solution to the theories around them? It is as easy to call a druid a deceiver as a politician, a traitor, a scientist, a charlatan, a saint, a hypocrite."

In earlier times, we know that the functions of judge, poet and priest were combined into this one office of druid. There was no separation of religious and civil affairs, especially when it came to public ceremonies. Whether it be the inauguration of a king, the pronouncement of a true judgement, the prediction of victory in battle, being a witness to marriages, and residing over death ceremonies, the druid class were the learned spiritual elders whose blessings and guidance were constantly relied upon.

We know they must have been highly intelligent. Their advanced mathematics and astronomical observations can still be found as a testament to their brilliance in the numerous standing stones and passage tombs that are aligned to the rising and setting of the sun at specific times of the year. These astronomical alignments shed light on their beliefs. We know that certain sites were used at certain times of the year. For example, Newgrange in the Winter Solstice. And on the Hill of Tara, the megalithic mound is known as the 'Mound of Hostages' lights up with the morning sun on November, the first. For millennia, a site for celebrating Samhain, or Halloween.



We also know that the movement of the sun through the seasons was very important to them. They knew the longest and the shortest days of the year, and they knew when night and day would be in perfect balance with each other. They personified this passage in the stories of their gods and their goddesses.

But, to quote Bonwick again,

"Judging by the Irish literature, most of which may date from the 12th century, though assuming to be the 8th or even 5th – the Druids were nothing better than spiritualistic conjurers, dealers with bad spirits and always opposing the gospel. We need to be careful of such reports, originating as they did in the most superstitious era of Europe and reflecting the ideas of the period."

Whatever the case, the Druids and their practises remain a mystery to us. And all we can do is marvel at the monuments they left behind, ponder on the rumours and speculate about how they must have been.