

The Druids, ca. 54 BC

Their history is cloaked in mystery. The ancient Druids were members of the priestly class of the Celtic society that originated in Britain and migrated to what is now central France. The Druids occupied a revered social status among the Celts due to their service to the community as priests, teachers, diviners, and magicians. Two of the significant attributes of the Celtic religion were the veneration of the oak tree and the ritual of human sacrifice in ceremonies supervised by the Druids.

Among the major religious tenants emphasized by the Druids was the belief in the immortality of the soul. Historians, however, are unclear as to how this immortality was actually realized. Some posit that the Druids taught that the soul escaped the deceased's body at death and immediately occupied the body of a living person. Others declare that the Druids believed that the human soul escaped the body at death to forever occupy an Otherworld similar to that experienced by the deceased in life.

"At a fixed time of year they assemble at a holy place in the territory. . ."

Julius Caesar described the Druids he encountered while serving as Governor of the Roman province of Gaul:

"The Druids are in charge of all religious matters, superintending public and private sacrifices, and explaining superstitions. A large crowd of young men, who flock to them for schooling, hold the Druids in great respect. For they have opinions to give on almost all disputes involving tribes or individuals, and if any crime is committed, any murder done, or if there is contention about a will or the boundaries of some property, they are the people who investigate the matter and establish rewards and punishments. Any individual or community that refuses to abide by their decision is excluded from the sacrifices, which is held to be the most serious punishment possible. Those thus excommunicated are viewed as impious criminals, they are deserted by their friends and no one will visit them or talk to them to avoid the risk of contagion from them. They are deprived of all rights in court, and they forfeit all claim to honors.

There is one arch-druid of supreme power. On his death, he is succeeded either by someone outstanding among his fellows, or, if there are several of equal caliber, the decision is reached by a vote of all the Druids, and the election is sometimes managed by force. At a fixed time of year they assemble at a holy place in the territory of the Carnutes, which is thought to be the center of Gaul. Anyone with a grievance attends and obeys the decisions and judgments which the Druids give. The general view is that this religion originated in Britain and was imported into Gaul, which means that any keen student of Druidism now goes to Britain for information. . .

The whole Gallic nation is virtually a prey to superstition, and this makes the serious invalids or those engaged in battle or dangerous exploits sacrifice men

instead of animals. They even vow to immolate themselves, using the Druids as their ministers for this purpose. They feel that the spirit of the gods cannot be appeased unless a man's life is given for a life. Public sacrifices of the same sort are common. Another practice is to make images of enormous size, with the limbs woven from osiers [willows]. Living human beings are fitted into these, and, when they are set on fire, the men are engulfed in the flames and perish. The general feeling is that the immortal gods are better pleased with the sacrifice of those caught in theft, robbery or some other crime. But if a supply of such criminals is lacking, then they resort to the sacrifice of completely innocent victims. . . "

References:

This eyewitness account appears in: Workman, B.K., (ed.) They saw it Happen in Classical Times (1965); Hutton, Ronald, Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain (2009); Green, Amanda, J., The World of the Druids (1997).

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