

# Chapter Two

## Where Does It Come From?

Let us begin our journey by stopping, as we step onto the path, and looking out over the landscape from which the path emerged.

### **The Winding Path**

It is not possible to see the path as one unbroken track all the way back to the distant horizon. We might believe or sense that the path of the tradition is not broken, but its course is not consistently clear. There are Druid groups which have records which are said to carry their own threads of the tradition back to the beginning of time, but generally it is understood that these are not factual histories so much as stories that guide the student deeper into the mystical experience of her faith. So the path that we see bends out of view, emerging elsewhere before disappearing once again. At some points there appear to be two or three distinct tracks, then none at all.

For those entering an old tradition with great enthusiasm reined to the belief that there is a strong and continuous line from ancient Druidry to the present day, being faced with this broken path can be disenchanting. Yet Druidry exists as a growing tradition. How can this be so?

*Looking over the track, consider how important the issue of continuity is to you. Does it feel necessary for your commitment to the journey to know that the tradition has a documented history? Why?*

### **The Sources**

For some modern Druids, searching for the sources of the tradition is an important part of their spiritual adventure. Yet as more information spills out – from both academia and the Earth herself – the facts become less clear. The romantic veils which were spread over the uncertainties during the last 200-300 years have been slipping off, revealing the gaps in sharp focus.

From prehistory there is virtually no evidence that might allow us to piece together the spiritual practices of these islands. Despite the wealth of New Stone Age and Bronze Age sites scattered all over the land, there is nothing from that period that gives any true clarity in terms of deities revered or ceremonies performed.

With the spread of Iron Age culture across Europe we find a little more, though in comparison with the Continent there is still almost nothing to go on in the British Isles. It is not until the Romans first arrived in the middle of the first century BCE that a clearer picture emerges about the religions of these lands. Yet as Druidry has long been connected with Celtic culture, Classical sources tend to have been overlooked in the favour of medieval Irish and Welsh literature. For some Druids, the work of eighteenth and nineteenth century scholars, itself built on many different roots, is

sufficient as a source for modern practise. In the same way, there are many today whose understanding of Druidry is sourced in the work of modern writers and researchers who have created a tradition in their own style.

Yet Druidry is not necessarily based on any of these sources. As spirituality deeply rooted in the land, it has evolved through the needs of the land and the people who have relied upon that land, shifting, adapting, balancing, just as our environment does. The Druidry of 420 BCE, when the iron-working culture was spreading into Britain, would have no doubt been very different from that of 580 CE, when the first poems were being written by the Bard Taliesin and the tribal battles between the Saxons and the British were occurring. Another 1200 years on and the land, the culture is very different again, with the rise of a romantic Celtic identity and the Industrial Revolution at 'full steam ahead'. Viewing the landscape and the various stretches of track in search of the nature of the tradition, what appears most important is not the continuity but the colours, the detail and images that catch our eye.

### **The Earliest Traces**

The earliest images date back to a time when the climate of Britain became gradually warmer and the period which we call the Neolithic began. This provided the first evidence of a spiritual practice. The Neolithic long barrows, chambered passage graves dating as far back as 4400 BCE, are now thought to be the oldest human-made monuments on Earth. Though thousands still exist across western Europe, each one differs sufficiently to blur any attempts to focus on a pattern. Each one was used over many hundreds of years, with the cleaned bones of the dead being placed in the tomb, but as to the rites that accompanied the task we have few clues. The bodies, men, women and children of all ages, were excarnated in half a dozen different ways, even those placed in the same long barrow, such as the use of fire or carrion birds. The area in front of the entrance to the barrows was a place of ritual, but what was done and by whom we can only search for within our soul memories.

Whoever the priests were, the elements they were dealing with would have seemed powerful indeed. The energy of these graves is rich, dark, earthy, born out of a time with few certainties when the world was vast, and nature wild and hungry. We can imagine more: that language was rough, sickness fatal and deeply feared, the air thick with smells and alive with colour, our bodies critically dependant on instinct for survival. Any measure of understanding about the mysteries of the stars, the seasons and the tides, the patterns of growth, the movement of the wild herds, about birth and death, would have been deeply honoured. Those who held the knowledge, however sketchy or superstitious, would have been revered – and feared.

*Take some time to go to an ancient long barrow. If there are none accessible, take yourself there in your imagination. Either way, be sure to take with you an offering for the spirits, for the ancestors, their gods and the guardian of the site. Remember that offerings should be quickly biodegradable or edible for local wildlife: ideally there should be no trace left after just a few days.*

*Before you approach the grave, sit quietly and relax, calming yourself to a point that you will be able to listen. Then, quietly and with respect, walk up to the barrow. Walk around it, down its length, sitting relaxed, listening. Spend time in the area before the*

*entrance and allow your mind to drift, envisioning what might have happened there. What would the role of the priest have been? If the barrow is open, when you are ready and if you wish, enter the passageway. What do you feel?*

*Leave your offerings, in peace and with thanks. As you leave the site, do so consciously, disconnecting from its energy with respect.*

The weather continued to grow warmer. Over the next 1500 years, our ancestors began to develop an understanding of agriculture, felling trees to make fields, working with different crops. With the stability of farming, the population began to increase and spread. By 3200 BCE the climate was almost Mediterranean. Yet around that time, something shifted, and there followed about 200 years of tremendous upheaval which seems to have been caused by violent intertribal conflict.

The circular bank and ditch earthworks which were once considered to be later Iron Age hill forts are now thought to have been constructed during this time of instability. The old long barrows across most of the island were carefully blocked up, using massive and unmovable stones, perhaps to seal in the power of the old ancestral spirits, perhaps to ensure they were not disturbed, perhaps through fear. In Ireland and the north-west reaches of Britain, some of the old barrows were built upon with new tombs, creating developed passage graves such as Newgrange, implying that here there was a different attitude towards the old religion.

Around 3000 BCE stability returned, yet things were changed. After a millennium and a half of the oval or rectangular barrow focus had altered, taking us into the era of the circle. Bank and ditch structures became common, many developing into circles of wooden poles and, later, stones. Some of these have survived or been recreated, such as the huge Avebury ring in Wiltshire or the smaller darker circle of the Rollrights in Oxfordshire. Throughout this time, too, round barrows were built, each the tomb of one person, no doubt a prominent figure in the social structure, the bones being buried and the barrow closed, not to be reused.

The priests of these people would have had a very different task from those of the earlier Neolithic period. The energy or atmosphere of these sites is lighter, more open; the weather was warm and nurturing. It was a period of growth and change, with new pressures arising within a growing population.

Some of these may be expressed in the building of Stonehenge, probably the most astounding accomplishment of the period. While the open circles seem to have been made to hold many hundreds of people, with all who gathered, perhaps from far and wide, having a chance to watch the proceedings, it was quite different at Stonehenge. Here the rituals would have been difficult if not impossible to observe in detail from anywhere but within the confines of the small inner circle. The final stages were completed around 2000 BCE, obviously by a ruling elite which effectively wiped out the religious practice at all the other main sites throughout a significant stretch of the country.

*Take yourself to an ancient circle, in body if you are within reach, or within your imagination. Either way, remember to take appropriate offerings. It may be a stone*

*circle, or a bank and ditch earth work, or perhaps a place where a circle of wood or stones used to stand but where now only a faint impression remains in the landscape.*

*Once there, relax, letting go as you sit by a tree, lie in the grass or just meander, feeling the touch of the earth beneath your feet. Allow impressions of the place to seep into your senses.*

*What do you think caused the period of disturbance? What would have been the role of the priest during the 1,500 years of the circle era? What were the needs of the people? What were the needs of the land?*

*Present your offerings, in peace and with thanks, before you leave, disconnecting from the site with respect.*

The arrival of bronze appears to have had no major impact on the spiritual practices of the island, nor indeed did the coming of iron. It was before the iron-working culture found its way into Britain that another change occurred and the circles were abandoned around 1200 BCE. The cause of this appears to have been the weather.

The temperature had suddenly begun to fall, reaching its lowest point around 1000 BCE. The clear skies and starry nights which so beautifully attuned with the stone temples built on the moors and meadows were a thing of the past. It rained. The temperature plunged to around that of southern Sweden – and with no clear predictability in the weather, any solar, lunar or stellar alignments in a temple or tomb became a virtual irrelevance.

The cause of this climate change is debatable. Volcanic activity in Iceland may have added to the problem, but perhaps more interesting for us nowadays is the issue of just how much the first farmers had cleared the forests that had previously covered the land. Certainly we know huge tracts of deforested land were reclaimed by nature, becoming bog, which, to the Iron Age farmer, was not only useless but also dangerous.

The spiritual focus shifted from the point within the circle where the brilliant sky touched the Earth to the new elemental force which was driving through the lives of the people: water. Archaeological evidence now reveals for us the wealth of metalwork, jewellery and weaponry that was offered into the rivers, lakes and wells at this time, as people called out to the spirits of the water.

What of the priests of these people?

*After the dark era of the tombs, then the warmth of the stone circle era, we come to the era of water.*

*This time take a walk to the nearest or most powerful source of fresh water to your home, and there allow yourself to understand its energy, its power and presence. Feel something of all that it gives you. Throw your offerings into the water with thanks and with respect.*

## Who Were The Celts?

It is often declared that Druids were the priesthood of the Celtic people. If this were so, where are the Celts in the changing colours and climate of these islands?

The term *Keltoi* was first used by the Greek historians writing in the fifth century BCE to refer to some of the peoples living north of the Alps. It was this reference that archaeologists of the last century recalled when uncovering evidence of a tribal culture in early Iron Age Austria. The finds, from almost a thousand graves, were dated to around 800 BCE, and were the oldest iron artefacts, tools and weaponry to emerge out of the Bronze Age culture that existed across Europe. This iron-working culture also appeared to be the first to use horses in warfare extensively. Bronze objects and pictures inscribed on pottery of the era give us an impression of the lifestyle, with representations of what seem to be musicians, Bards, dancers, priest figures and deities.

The culture spread, no doubt in part because of the natural movement of peoples who were strengthened by skills both in battle and in agriculture, but also through trading and the dissemination of those skills. Then first traces are found in southern Britain from the early sixth century BCE and thereafter it appeared to move slowly south-west to the Iberian Peninsula, eastwards to Turkey and north to Scotland and Ireland. When Julius Caesar referred to the *Celtae*, 400 years after the Greeks, he was describing a people of central and southern France. It's difficult then to be distinct about who the Celts were. Celtic culture is simply that of the Iron Age people of Europe.

When that culture began to find its way over to Britain, the focus of spiritual practice was on the water spirits that were holding the weather reins and soaking the Earth.

## The Classical Sources

For many modern Druids it is the ancient tombs and circles, together with nature's forests and rivers, mountains and meadows, that are the focus of their spirituality, giving them a doorway into the mysteries. Anything human-made after the time of the Roman invasion is seldom held to be sacred in its own right, for now the people themselves appear and a bridge is made through a human connection. Perhaps this is due to the change in the clues – from now on it is the people who supply them.

The writings of Roman warriors and historians give us the first evidence (if politically biased) of the ancient religions. The picture they paint is of Druids being the educated elite in the society the Romans encountered, influential in political and legal affairs, in philosophy and learning, healing and magic, as well as overseeing or carrying out religious ceremonial.

Some writers, such as Tacitus and Strabo, writing at a time when Gaul was under Roman rule and Britain almost defeated, emphasized the barbaric nature of the culture, its laws and religion. With an almost missionary zeal they urge that the tribes be 'civilised' into a Roman sense of order and principle, and abhor the apparent use of human sacrifice (though it might be noted that at the time this was said to be happening in Gaul the blood thirsty games in the Circus at Rome were still in full

swing). Other writers, however, such as the Greek Hippolytus, were more concerned with the Druids' philosophy and learning, which seemed to them honourable beyond the decadent degeneracy of their own culture.

## **The Word 'Druid'**

Julius Caesar was one of the first to write about the Druids, in the first century BCE, and was one of the few who actually knew a Druid: the tribal chief Divitiacus. It is through Caesar's work that we first find the Gallic word 'Druid', implying that they were not simply priests, but also held significant political power. The origins of the word itself, however, are debated.

It is generally thought that the first part comes from the word for 'oak', which in many European languages is close to *drui*: *drus* in Greek, *daur* in Irish, *derw* in Welsh (where the word for Druid is *derwydd*). The latter part may come from the Indo-European root word *wid*, meaning 'wisdom'. The druid then is suggested to be the one who holds the wisdom of the oak.

## **The Oral Tradition**

One of the clues we are given by Caesar is that the centre for Druid training, at the time of his writing, was Britain, where it was understood the philosophy and the religious practice had originated.

Yet this provokes more questions, for if Druidry emerged from Britain and the Celtic culture came from eastern central Europe, was Druidry the spirituality of Britain before the Celts arrived? Were the priests known by a different name, though their ideology was still the source of later Druidry? Did the practice develop out of the merging of the Celtic culture and the land of Britain?

For many Druids these questions are, however, irrelevant: Druidry is a spirituality of the land and the people, both of which change, evolve, adapt. Many believe that the faith was inspired by the landscape, the climate, the tribes and their ancestors of Britain. Yet there was never a beginning point, only a gradual evolution.

We do know that the Druids never wrote down any aspect of their religion. One reason for this was, no doubt, to reduce the risk of their teachings being desecrated and misused, but also, as an oral tradition, it held in the highest esteem the power of the mind and the memory, yet never risked the fate of being tied down to one scripture or set of prophecies. It remained alive, evading containment, moulding itself around each new influence that proved worthy.

*Many are drawn to Druidry through a deeper connection with the word 'Celtic' or 'Keltic'. They may have a blood link to Gaelic Ireland or Scotland, or to the old British people of Wales or Cornwall. What is your connection?*

*Find an hour or two of quiet and sit down with a piece of paper. In the middle write the word 'Celtic', allowing your creativity to flow, decorating the word until it becomes a focal image. Use colours if it helps you to express all that you want to.*

*From that central word, allow your mind to flow freely, writing down words in a web of connecting associations.*

*What does the page reveal to you?*

## **The Roman Contribution**

The Romans did attempt to eradicate the Druids, yet it was not their religion which threatened the polytheistic and Pagan Roman imperialists, but the political power they held over the tribes. Many ideas and assumptions have been offered about this issue, with various emotional and intellectual investments weighing the arguments, but we have no clear historical facts.

We do know, however, that the Druids' influence was significant, over leaders and kings, trade routes and disputes, and attitudes towards the incoming peoples. The Romans didn't come for the purpose of settling, though, they came to take control, and everything of value to each British kingdom, their natural and human resources, trade links and knowledge, was overseen by the Druids. It isn't surprising, then, that the Druids were often at the heart of insurrections against the conquering armies.

As the Roman forces moved across Britain, the influence of the druids diminished. Their role was never quite the same again, although in Ireland and the farthest reaches of Scotland, which the Romans never reached as a conquering army, their work did continue. In Ireland, there is mention of a druid still working as an advisor to the King of Cashel as late as the tenth century, but by then the next force of Rome had swept through: Christianity.

The Roman invasion wasn't objected to across the board. After all, it was a strong culture, rich with learning, literature, art and technical advances. There were many tribal kings and, indeed, Druids who welcomed it. Over the 400 years that Rome ruled in these islands, a blended Romano-British culture evolved, which before the coming of Christianity was a wonderful Pagan mixture.

In terms of sources for modern Druids to understand their spiritual ancestry, the Romans did not only leave their writings, but also pictures and inscriptions about the nature of the gods. As good Pagans, the pre-Christian Romans who arrived on these shores automatically looked to the spirits and deities of the land to guide and help them as they walked upon its soil: without the protection, the nourishment, the acceptance of the land, the Romans knew they would not be able to survive.

There are many examples of Roman-built temples which are simply a development of a previous Celtic shrine. There are examples, too, of Romans who honoured on their altars the spirits of the land, whom they considered to be the local deities, as well as the god or gods brought with them from their homeland. It is through these inscriptions that modern Druids are discovering the names of the old gods.

*Spend some time considering the influence of the Romans, as you did with the Celts.*

*Find out where your nearest Romano-British site is. Your local library will help. If possible, go there. Spend some time freely wandering, relaxing, listening. What do*

*you feel, what do you envision? Remember to take an appropriate offering to leave as a gift of respect and thanks, and to disconnect fully and consciously whenever you leave an old or sacred site.*

*If you cannot find or visit a site near you, arrange a trip to a well known site, such as the Roman baths in the Somerset town of Bath, sacred to the British goddess Sulis and the Roman goddess Minerva.*

When the empire was under attack from the barbarians in the mid-fifth century, the Roman withdrawal from Britain was only in effect a removal of military and governing bodies. Those who had come with the empire and settled in Britain remained in what was now a richly multicultural land, the diversity of influence having been nurtured by the free movement of people and trade throughout the Roman world. It was a land, though, which by the fifth century had a strong ruling class who were mainly Christian.

That mix of influences made its mark on the native religion of the islands, but when the Roman armies left it wasn't long before new invaders were landing on the eastern shores, beginning with the Saxons and followed by the Viking Danes, both of who arrived as Pagans into a Britain ruled by mainly Christian kings.

## **The Medieval Tales**

With the Druids' influence diminished under Roman rule, then the tyranny of the new Christianity, the essence of the faith survived most strongly through the art and craft of the Bards. The first written source for the Druid tradition from a non-classical origin dates from the late sixth century onwards: the medieval Bardic literature of Wales and Ireland.

Bards were a part of the druid caste and, though clues are sparse, it is thought that the process of becoming a Druid involved many years in Bardic training, learning the histories and ancestry of the people the druids served. The role of the Bards was to affirm the identity of the tribe and the strength of the king, often with genealogies that reach back to the gods. With tireless eulogies the Bards praised the courage of the warriors and the beauty of the women, entertaining and richly painting the virtues of those who supported them.

The Bards were deemed no threat to the Roman invaders, and they continued as entertainers and storytellers, now not only keeping the wisdom of their craft but also carrying much of the Druid wisdom, wrapped in a different cloth. Where their colleges were not changed into something unrecognizable by Roman or Christian development, they continued with the old teachings. Indeed, it wasn't until the seventeenth century that the last Bardic college was closed in Ireland and not until the early eighteenth century in Scotland.

By the sixth century the Saxons were moving west in search of land on which to settle, and those who could not or would not tolerate the change were being driven west before them, into Wales and Southern Scotland. This evoked two strands of interest in the people who were under this pressure: first, from the incomers who were curious about the culture which their presence was diluting, if not destroying; and

second, from within these people themselves who felt rising need to preserve that culture.

Who were these people? They were the Romano-British with, at the fringes, the tribal British who had been slightly less affected by the 400 years of Roman civilisation. As for their culture, by now the British language had taken on a good deal of the Roman Latin, in structure, sound and vocabulary, on top of the Celtic influences which had spread across Europe prior to that. With the new invasions, it was now encountering the language of Germanic Saxons, and it was around this time, as an assertion of British identity, that the language which we now call Middle Welsh was created. It was an extremely complex language which perhaps was never meant to be freely spoken, but was devised by the Bards as a language of poetry to be chanted or sung, and as a medium for retaining an ancient culture which was under threat.

In Scotland, the Pictish people had been driven north by invading Irish around 300 CE and the Irish Gaelic language and culture became dominant, effectively wiping out that of the earlier Picts.

So the majority of early Irish and Welsh literature developed not as a natural progression from oral tradition into literacy, but as an assertive expression of cultural identity.

Some historians would claim that the tradition which these books so beautifully express had already died and the writers were reaching back through a gap of some few hundred years into a culture about which they had little understanding. Certainly, the stories, poetry and songs are not a pure rendition of the old tales. They are written with a distinct if beautifully creative overlay of both Graeco-Roman influences and the Christianity which was the active faith of the majority of the writers. The latter not only slid in by being merely the mentality of the writer, but also as a conscious censoring hand, changing the focus and reworking the tales to include their own god(s).

For many modern druids, these tales are of exquisite value as sources of their own spiritual inspiration and are not diminished in value because of the mix of cultures. They are another expression of the evolution of a spirituality which honours the creativity and the gods of all creation.

## **Sources Of Inspiration**

So the historical sources of Druidry are not entirely clear. The track is winding and appears from a distance rather haphazard. Yet for those who stand upon it, who feel the Earth, its pebbles and grass beneath their feet, it is a blaze of wild colours.

As a religion of these islands, of their flora and fauna, and the power of the gifts that every spirit has bought to their shores, the deep wisdom of their priests, the tradition offers the person who stands looking back for inspiration thousands of places to dive into and breathe deeply. And if we understand Druidry to be a spirituality whose focus is the search for divine and perfect inspiration, inspiration that gives us a profound knowing and freedom, a true creativity, we must also accept that each soul will find that source in her own way.