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Mages of the Isles: Some Remarks on the Esoteric Inspirations in British Druidry

ABSTRACT

This article is a short presentation of the connections between the Western esoteric tradition and Druidry, as demonstrated by the British Druidic traditions. The Druids, described in the classical sources as mages, philosophers and sages, have become an icon for the paramasonic organisations of 19th century Great Britain. The image of the Druids as those initiated and learned in secret, arcane knowledge is alive in the 21st century as well, especially among the sympathisers of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, the largest organisation of those interested in Druidry.

KEYWORDS

Druidry, Druids, Esotericism and Druidry, Contemporary Paganism

Druidae – ita suos appellant magos
Pliny the Elder

“Druids, as they [Gauls] call their *magos* [mages/magicians]”¹ are the words of Pliny the Elder, as he begins what is probably the best known description of a supposed religious ceremony of the Gallic people – the ritual cutting of mistletoe with golden sickles, accompanied by a sacrifice of bulls. Pliny was

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¹ Plinius Secundus, *Historia Naturalis*, XVI.95.

not the only one to compare the social class of *druidae* to mages or wizards: other authors of Antiquity, such as Diogenes Laertios,² Dio Chrysostom³ or Clement of Alexandria⁴ have equated the Druids not only with the Persian mages, but with the Hindu Brahmins or Greek philosophers. These comparisons are proof that the classical authors saw the social function and importance of the Druids as something much broader than that of the Roman and Greek priests (it should be noted that the Latin word *sacerdos*, meaning priest, is never used in a direct reference to the Druids in classical sources). The mystical and secretive nature ascribed to the Druids' knowledge is especially interesting: historical sources describe them as learned in the laws of nature, the movement of celestial bodies, but also as knowing the will of the gods, and there is even some mention that the idea of soul transmigration (reincarnation) was known to the Druids of Antiquity. They were said to practice magic as well, since – according to Pliny the Elder – it was especially popular in Britain.⁵ Pliny refers to magic as understood by the Romans, meaning practices and beliefs close to *superstitio*, a harmful superstition.

The image of Druids as presented by the classical sources is interestingly dualistic: on the one hand, they are seen as sages and philosophers, while on the other they are accused of vile sorcery and human sacrifices. This could be the result of a politically-motivated campaign, of Roman propaganda, but a more probable cause might seem to be the complicated and multi-faceted process known as culture clash.⁶ The poetic description of the Druids performing their rituals in dark forests, supplied by Lucan, is an apt representation of this joined feeling of fascination and dread:

While you, ye Druids, when the war was done,
To mysteries strange and hateful rites returned:
To you alone 'tis given the heavenly gods
To know or not to know; secluded groves
Your dwelling-place, and forests far remote⁷

According to Julius Caesar, the Druids were a social class, organised in a fraternity of sorts, which could be accessed after many years of education. He

² Diogenes Laertios, *Vitae, intro*, I, 5.

³ Dion Christostomos, *Orationes*, XLIX.

⁴ Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata*, I, XV, 71, 3.

⁵ Plinius Secundus, op. cit., XXX, 13.

⁶ A. Anczyk, *Druidzi i ofiary z ludzi: krótka historia mitu*, "Przegląd religioznawczy" 2012, 3/245, pp. 21–32.

⁷ Lucan, *Pharsalia*, I, 450–4 (quoted according to the English edition by E. Ridley, London 1905, Longmans, Green, and Co.).

suggested that the Druidic teachings were partly, or even entirely, confidential and not committed to writing, even though he claimed that the Druids used the Greek alphabet in their everyday dealings.⁸ This account makes it easy to associate the Druids with a secret, initiatory society that admits its members to a succession of positions over the years, rewarding them eventually with mysteries inaccessible to the uninitiated. Such an association has an obvious mythopoeic potential, especially since the classical sources themselves already shroud the Druids in myth and make it very difficult, if not impossible, to discern the historical facts.

The cultural image of the Druids has over the centuries taken many shapes, one of which is the most vital for the subject of this article. The very idea of “Druidry” was an important part of what can be called the “esoterisation” of the Druids; an idea that has its roots in the classical sources themselves. It was Suetonius who coined the idea of *druidarum religione*, “the religion of the Druids,” which was said to have been outlawed by the reign of Claudius. This “religion,” in the minds of many authors, became a system of beliefs and practices that was quite separate from any known faiths of the Celtic peoples; there were even suggestions that the “religion of the Druids” had a universal, pan-Celtic character. These claims cannot be proved, of course, but the accounts of classical authors, mentioning the Druids’ considerable philosophical knowledge, suggest that it was by their education that they differed from other shamans or seers. Naturally, this approach to the Druids also has its opponents, such as Stuart Piggott, archaeology professor, who saw these descriptions as romanticised examples of the “noble savage” myth in action.⁹

Despite the classical sources mentioning the alleged bloody rituals performed by the Druids, their image as respectable philosophers attracted European intellectuals of the centuries to come. In later iconography, representations of Druids would draw upon that image, as demonstrated by the bearded hermit in Aylett Sames’s *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata*.¹⁰ It brought, in a way, the pagan Druid closer to the medieval mage archetype – the sage learned in the occult. An additional advantage of the wise Druid image was its patriotic quality, as the Druids were a part of the cultural heritage of the British Isles.¹¹ This vivid myth became the icon of many esoteric and para-masonic organisations, and modern Druidic groups do still retain a certain esoteric character:

⁸ C. I. Caesar, *De bello Gallico*, VI, 14.

⁹ S. Piggott, *The Druids*, London 1996, p. 133.

¹⁰ A. Sames, *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata or the Antiquities of Ancient Britain*, London 1676, p. 101.

¹¹ R. Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain*, New Haven 2009, p. 139.

their members cultivate mystical and magical practices, study aspects of nature and the human condition that are usually ignored by rational science, and are interested in the spiritual side of existence in general. Modern Druidry is too diverse to be easily classified as an esoteric or occultist movement, but it does have something in common with them, as shall be demonstrated via a short insight into British Druidry.

DRUIDS, MASONS, OCCULTISTS

The beginnings of organised Druidry in Great Britain are strongly intertwined with the various self-help, fraternal or esoteric organisations, which had been particularly popular in Britain since the 18th century. The newly founded organisations such as the Ancient Order of Druids (founded in 1781) had a paramasonic character (for example, using the word “lodge” when describing organisational units). The members of the AOD had initially met for social reasons – music, poetry recitation or discussion – but, in the early 19th century, suggestions were put forward to reconstruct the ancient Druidic tradition and to include some ceremonial practices, such as initiation rituals.¹² (This “reconstruction” would be also based on literature, in which fantastic claims of the Druids being the founders of Oxford university, the inventors of gunpowder, heirs of the ancient Egyptian priesthood or believers in a proto-monotheistic religion that expected the coming of Christ, and similar ideas, are found.)

An important date for the history of Druidry is the year 1912 – it was then that the Universal Bond was founded, during a ceremony in Stonehenge, and the Druid myth entered into the British esoteric tradition for good. The majestic Stonehenge had lent its power to the Druids, and the ritual performed in the shade of the tall stones had fulfilled its purpose: the Druids won the interest of the general public. The Universal Bond was founded by George Watson Macgregor Reid (born between 1854 and 1865 in Scotland, deceased in 1946).¹³ Between 1907 and 1909 he was the editor of *Nature Cure* magazine, where he had published his treatise “Umvali – Universal Majesty, Verity and Love Infinite,” combining Eastern religious ideas (Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, the religions of Ancient Egypt) and the Christian worldview. His book *Path that is Light* (1910) was similar in tone, and was designed as a sacred

¹² Ibidem, p. 137.

¹³ For more details of his life see: A. Stout, *Universal Majesty, Verity and Love Infinite: A Life of George Watson Macgregor Reid*, Lewes 2005, or in *The Mount Haemus Lectures vol. I.*, 2008; also available online on: <http://www.druidry.org/events-projects/mount-haemus-award/fifth-mount-haemus-lecture> [accessed: 17.08.2014].

scripture for the religion he proposed in Umvali. Reid claimed that the text was a translation of the works of a secret society called the Wandering Brothers of the Universal Bond, and that its content was the legacy of a centuries-old mystical tradition.¹⁴ Any scholar learned in the history of occult organisations will see the similarity between these and the scriptures of the Theosophical Society, the group founded in 1875 and immensely influential in esoteric circles. Its founder, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, also claimed to have access to the secret knowledge of the Eastern spiritual masters. It should also be mentioned that Reid was a member of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Even though George Macgregor Reid did not anoint his son as his successor – in fact, he disowned him¹⁵ – the son, Robert Reid, had nevertheless acted to bring fraternal Druidism close to the occultist organisations. Druidry, as seen by Robert Reid, was also inspired by the Golden Dawn doctrine, Hermeticism and esotericism. It was due to Robert Reid's managerial talent that The Universal Bond gained new sympathisers, mostly in the ranks of occultists and esotericists. Perhaps, apart from effective advertising, Reid also had more to offer than the "old" Universal Bond; certainly his teachings were far more syncretic. Robert had departed from the ideas of his father, who saw the Bond as an universal religion, and seemed to have acquired some taste for the occult from the Druidic Hermeticists. Initiation rituals were organised, based on those of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, during which the initiated swore to study the secrets of nature and pursue the secret sciences, as well as receiving a magical name that was only known to other initiates. These Druids were therefore akin to mages, studying the secrets of the material world, rather than priests of a universal religion. Although this change made the organisation more popular and brought in new members interested in esotericism, it may have also distanced it from other forms of Druidry. However, it may have also been the aspect that best differentiated the Bond from them, especially the traditional rites of bardic organisations. Druidry as performed by *eisteddfod* and *gorsedd* was mostly a cultural organisation, promoting artistic endeavours and gathering members active in artistic fields.

Robert McGregor died suddenly of a cardiac arrest, leaving no appointed successor to the leadership of the organisation. Two candidates emerged quickly, Thomas Maughan and Philip Ross Nichols. Thomas Maughan was voted the new leader of the Universal Bond; he was an active member of organisations dealing with natural medicine, as well as a practising physician, and in

¹⁴ R. Hutton, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

¹⁵ A. Stout, *Creating Prehistory. Druids, Ley Hunters and Archeologists in Pre-War Britain*, Oxford 2008, p. 151.

his work he included the findings of Indian and Tibetan medicine (he had travelled to both India and Tibet, where he met the Dalai Lama in the Fifties and allegedly had helped Buddhist monks escape persecution to India.)¹⁶ His idea of Druidry can – with due care, of course – be compared to some ideas of the New Age movement, that emerged later in the history of Western esotericism. Under his guidance, the tradition, rites and myths of the Universal Bond became chiefly a path towards self-improvement. The Universal Bond represented the old initiation tradition, whose adepts were to learn the secrets of the universe and the unknown powers of mankind. Maughan also attached great importance to the symbolism of light – both the outer light, the everlasting sun, and the inner light, the holy fire of the human soul. It was through the union of the macro- and microcosm, through attuning oneself to rhythm of the Universe, that the natural secrets were revealed. The chief practice advised by Maughan was meditation, and the main source of instruction and information on these practices was the Universal Bond, whose members were gradually schooled in the arcane knowledge as they attained higher distinctions. He arranged the traditional division into three circles: the Outer Order, the Inner Order and the Sanctuary, to which only the highest ranking members were admitted. The practices and teachings of the Outer Order were universally available, while further knowledge was only imparted to the initiated and as such remain mostly unknown. The highest authority in the organisation was the Archdruid, and Maughan himself was authoritarian indeed, disliking opposition and pertinent questions.¹⁷ His teachings were principally syncretic, joining the esoteric tradition of the West with the philosophy of the Far East. This seems to have been a very modern approach, since similar movements grew at the time, and perhaps, it could have been successful. Interest in the Universal Bond dwindled, however, which can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the form of a secret society was becoming increasingly anachronistic, and certainly incompatible with an increasingly globalised culture. A secret society, though potentially attractive with its promise of secret knowledge, has a limited scope, since its teachings are perforce secret and thus can mostly be promoted through direct contact with already-initiated members. Maughan had also tried to compete in a “spiritual territory” that had been claimed for quite some time by other groups, such as the aforementioned Theosophical Society or Aleister Crowley’s magical order, *Argentum Astrum*.

¹⁶ P. Morell, *Thomas Maughan*, [in:] *British Homeopathy During Two Centuries*, 1999, online, <http://homeoint.org/morrell/british/maughan.htm> [accessed: 29.12.2014].

¹⁷ P. Morell, *Thomas Lackenby Maughan*, online, http://www.homeoint.org/morrell/articles/pm_maugh.htm [accessed: 29.12.2014].

THE ORDER OF BARDS, OVATES AND DRUIDS: A MYSTERY SCHOOL

The most popular organisation that attracts Druidry supporters in the UK – the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids – was founded in 1964 by Ross Nichols. Thus, the Order did not come to existence *ex nihilo*, but was on the one hand a continuation, and on the other a transformation of a group that had operated for over fifty years previously. During his Cambridge years, Ross Nichols (1902–1975) was very interested in pacifist and naturist ideas, which – as his disciple Philip Carr-Gomm writes – were an expression of his love for the wild, the natural world, and which enabled him to meet people of a similar disposition who also wanted to escape city life and return to nature.¹⁸ Nichols remained a naturism activist all his life, and it was during his stays in naturist colonies that he met Gerald Gardner, the precursor of modern witchcraft and also a dedicated nudist. During World War Two and afterwards, Ross Nichols had been publishing poetry, prose and essays: “Sassenach Stray” (1940)¹⁹ “Prose Chant Poems” (1941), “The Cosmic Shape” (1946) “Seasons at War” (1947).²⁰ Between 1949 and 1950 he was one of the editors for an esoteric magazine, “The Occult Observer,” and it was then that his first articles on the Druids appeared. Initially, Nichols’ interest was in esotericism and the occult in general, but in the fifties he began concentrating on Druidry. In 1954 he became a member of The Druid Order, or the Universal Bond. He was fifty-two, and his interest in Druidry was reinforced by years of interest in esotericism, as well as pacifist and naturist activism.

Druidry remained for Nichols an initiatory esoteric tradition, but he encouraged the members of OBOD to focus, in their spiritual pursuits, on ideas and traditions native to the British Isles, though he did not demand that it be a historical re-enactment. The Druidic ideas of Ross Nichols have been condensed into his “The Book of Druidry,”²¹ on which he worked towards the end of his life. It was probably finished around the year 1974, but he had not managed to publish it before his death on 30th of April 1975. The manuscript

¹⁸ P. Carr-Gomm, *In The Grove of a Druid Chief – The Life and Legacy of Ross Nichols*, [in:] idem, *In the Grove of the Druids: The Druid Teachings of Ross Nichols*, London 2002, p. 7–8.

¹⁹ R. Nichols, *Sassenach Stray: A Set of Eight Variations and Tailpiece*, London 1942. G. Gardner quotes this work of Nichols in *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, cf. G. Gardner, *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, [contemporary edition] York Beach 2004, p. 67.

²⁰ *Prophet Priest and King – The Poetry of Philip Ross Nichols*, ed. J. Ramsay, London 2001.

²¹ R. Nichols, *The Book of Druidry*, eds. J. Matthews and P. Carr-Gomm, London 1990.

was found in 1984, and Philip Carr-Gomm tasked himself with its edition. The book is divided into three parts: the history of Druidry, a description of British archaeological sites that Nichols associated with the Druids, and a lecture on Druidic lore, partially in the form of a master-apprentice dialogue.

The “Book’s” chapters on the history of Druidry, despite frequent citations of historical and archaeological sources, are chiefly a presentation of Druidry as seen by Nichols. His vision of Druidry is a romantic attempt at establishing the continuity of Druidic tradition from Antiquity to modernity. He accords equal importance to various data on the Druids – classical sources, Celtic literature, Irish and Welsh folklore, poetry and later writings are all equally included in his vision, and coupled with his own ideas. He also made use of esoteric methods to decipher the supposed “secret code” of myths, stone circles or poetry, all the better to prove that various separate works are in fact parts of a Druidic lore system. Nichols made use of graphs to illustrate this, inscribing the names of elements and Celtic deities into pentagrams²² or creating graphs of ceremonial stone circles.²³ The chapters on archaeological sites and megalithic monuments are also illustrated with geometrical and esoteric schemas. In summary, Nichols’ vision of Druidry is much closer to esoteric and occult fraternities than to most modern Neo-Pagan movements.

Ross Nichols’ work made a huge impact on the British Druidic movement, mostly through the efforts of his disciple, Philip Carr-Gomm who, in 1970, was accepted by Nichols himself into the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids at the age of eighteen. Carr-Gomm had initially followed the teachings of a Macedonia-born Bulgarian spiritualist, Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov,²⁴ who was in turn the disciple of Peter Deunov, founder of the *Fraternité Blanche Univeselle*.²⁵ The most important spiritual practice, according to Deunov, was *paneurythmy* – a form of ritual dance mixed with meditation, visualisation and poetry recitation that was supposed to tune the performer into the rhythm of nature.²⁶ Carr-Gomm was the one to reactivate the OBOD, which had lain dormant since Nichols’ death, encouraged to do so by a religious experience (a vision in which he saw Nichols). As of today, Gomm remains the leader of OBOD and the author of best-selling books on modern Druidry, and thus his

²² *Ibidem*, p. 130.

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 121–122.

²⁴ R. Oppiére, *The Solar Revolution and The Prophet*, Fréjus 1980.

²⁵ J. Gordon-Melton, *Fraternité Blanche Univeselle*, [in:] *Religions of the World. A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices*, eds. J. Gordon-Melton, M. Baumann, Santa Barbara 2010, pp. 1138–1139.

²⁶ See: *The Circle of the Sacred Dance: Peter Deunov’s Paneurythmy*, ed. D. Lorimer, Shaftesbury 1991.

views influence the whole Druidic movement, views which, in turn, were influenced by the ideas of Nichols and of the British esoteric Druidry. His writings also are affected in many ways by the New Age and neo-shamanic movements, as seen in his *The Druid Way: A Journey Through an Ancient Landscape*, a book detailing his personal spiritual experiences.²⁷ References to transpersonal psychology and Buddhism can be found in his works as well.

The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, as an organisation, also makes use of esoteric language in its self-description – “The Order is essentially a Mystery School and community, and the term ‘order’ is derived from the tradition of magical orders rather than from the tradition of religious orders.”²⁸ The definition found on the Order’s website is consistent with Nichols’s vision – the OBOD is an initiation-based society whose members are interested in Druidry defined as a spiritual way for personal development. Interestingly, it is a pan-religious group, admitting members of various creeds, not only practitioners of modern Neo-Paganism.²⁹ Thus it can be useful to define Druidry as a form of spirituality and not religion, since spirituality is understood as a collection of ideas and experiences that surpass the traditional understanding of religion. Such ideas bring the OBOD’s Druidry closer to the views of many esoteric societies, which accept the existence of one path of initiation, which – though it can manifest itself in different ways – is the sole way towards a mystical insight into the nature of man and the universe.

The principal means of educating new members in the OBOD is their correspondence course, which was established about twenty five years ago. At the beginning, the organisation offered the title of Bard to course graduates, but nowadays courses are available for all three levels of Druidic progress, and thus conform to the division that can be found in classical sources. The course is available in print or in an audio version (the Druid course is text-only at present), and obtaining any of the titles takes at least one year. This period can be modified individually, so an extension is possible. Each person signed up for the course has an individual tutor to oversee them and guide them, and obtains materials and assignments via correspondence. Thus, the course closely resembles distance learning methods well-known to teachers and academia. It is organised in numerous *Gwersi* (“lessons” in Welsh), four of which are

²⁷ P. Carr-Gomm, *The Druid Way: A Journey Through an Ancient Landscape*, Shaftesbury 1993.

²⁸ *About the Order*, online, <http://www.druidry.org/about-us/about-order> [accessed: 14.08.2014].

²⁹ A. Anczyk, *Dwa oblicza współczesnego druidyzmu: druidyzm jako denominacja i pan-religijna forma duchowości*, “Ex Nihilo. Periodyk Młodych Religioznawców” 2009, 2, pp. 10–34.

sent to a participant every month; they also receive a textbook, *The Bardic Companion*, and *The Book of Ritual* which describes rites appropriate for various holidays. The contents of a first-degree course mostly deal with the history of Druidry (including the modern revivalist traditions), an introduction to Celtic mythology, and a lot of poetry (or music, in the audio version) – thus, the first course is an introduction into bardic arts and lore. The second degree, that of the Vates, is obtained through learning the arts of divination, herbalism, and Druidic magic: a Vates/Ovate could therefore be described as a kind of shaman, someone who contacts the supernatural world. A person studying to become a Vates/Ovate learns various methods of divination, the word being understood by its classical, Latin meaning – the art of learning the future as well as contacting supernatural forces.³⁰ Thus, Bards operate within the scope of conscious activities – art, creation, myths and lore – while Vates deal primarily with the subconscious or non-conscious activity, and both courses reflect this: the Bard course teaches practical artistic and creative activities, while the Ovate course teaches spiritual practice, which means working on one's own psyche and with the forces of nature as well as with other people, offering healing, herbalist or divination services. The third title, that of a Druid, describes a practitioner similar to those shown in the classical sources (at least, those that included favourable representations of the Druids): a teacher, a philosopher and a conductor of rituals. It should, however, be remembered that even though the courses are hierarchised – meaning that a Bard course is a prerequisite to the Ovate course and the Ovate to Druid – the titles themselves are not hierarchised in the organisational structure.

The OBOD also organises regular rituals, as well as Druidic festivals, which are a kind of gathering or get-together of group members and supporters. These take place mostly in the UK, during one of the eight main Druidic holidays, but there are also international gatherings in other European countries, for example in Germany or the Netherlands.³¹ While parts of the celebrations are reserved for members, there is usually a number of open attractions, where one can participate in rituals, lectures and workshops on various topics: a visitor can learn the history of Druidry or natural medicine, take part in shamanic initiations, enjoy a sweat lodge, watch artistic performances (music, singing, poetry recitation), trade in hand-craft and try various foods or drinks. In short, these occasions have all the necessary ingredients of a pleasant Village fête, and not only for Druids. These regular meetings are an im-

³⁰ P. Carr-Gomm, *Druid Mysteries: Ancient Wisdom for the 21st Century*, London 2006, pp. 66–68.

³¹ *OBOD Dryade Camps*, online, <http://www.obod.nl/dryade/camp/index.html> [accessed: 29.12.2014].

portant integrative event, but they are also an opportunity for the general public to learn about the contemporary Druids. These kinds of gatherings are similar in content to the so-called New Age Fairs, events where the participants can find out about alternative medicine, have their aura examined or try hatha yoga. In events of this kind, the idea of free choice is very important: participants choose what they want from a wide array of spirituality-related offers. The Western esoteric tradition is a good background for this kind of activity since it affirms individualism, personal freedom and concentrates on one's own development and spiritual quest.³² These values are known and affirmed also by the members of the OBOD. In this context, a comparison of modern Paganism to the New Age movement is understandable, since New Age, as Wouter Hanegraaff states, was at the same time a continuation and a new form of the Western esotericism, where elements of Eastern religions were introduced and made to fit the Western traditions.³³ However, the Neo-Pagan movements, including Druidry, were not part of the New Age *sensu stricto*, for many reasons, the most important of which is the fact that neopaganism, both as a cultural and religious phenomenon, has never had any unified form. It would be very difficult to place Polish *rodzimowierstwo* with Wicca or the OBOD's Druidry, and it seems that the esoteric tradition (and its descendants, if one was to accept the New Age as such) had the most influence on British Druidry, especially as practiced by the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids.

BRITISH DRUIDRY AND THE ESOTERIC: A (SHORT) SUMMARY

The threads presented in this article definitely do not portray the full panorama of mutual relationships between esotericism and Druidry. Researchers interested in the history of British Druidry³⁴ as well as modern Druidry³⁵ will find additional information in relevant books. However, in order to conclude this introduction to the topic, some arguments could be made in favour of including studies on Druidry within studies on contemporary Western esoteri-

³² F. Jespers, *The paranormal market in the Netherlands: New Age and folk religion*, "Fieldwork in Religion" 2010, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 58–77.

³³ W. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, New York 1998, p. 517.

³⁴ R. Hutton, *op. cit.*

³⁵ A. Anczyk, *The Golden Sickle: An Introduction to Contemporary Druidry*, Katowice 2014; M. T. Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry: A Historical and Ethnographic Study*, Salt Lake City 2010.

cism. Starting with the accounts of Antique authors, the Druids have been portrayed as sages, learned in the secret knowledge of the world. This mythical image, which had quite naturally been linked in popular literature with the legendary wizard Merlin,³⁶ and which was reproduced by later sources, had become a sort of prototype or – to use the term proposed by Max Weber – the “ideal type” of Druid, and a model that generations of Druidry followers sought to emulate. The Druid archetype had many traits in common with the Mage: the scholar whose knowledge and means allowed to transcend the conventional, empirical perception. Thus, the mythical Druid could be thought of as the ideal occultist. The classical sources further describe Druids as people who studied the secrets of the gods, stars and nature, an idea that has been developed by esoteric tradition as well. They could definitely be seen as kinds of proto-scientists, and therefore, as Stuart Piggott wrote, “our own age too may have the Druids it desires, who, white robes exchanged for white laboratory coats will be astronomers writing computer programmes in Gallo-Brittonic.”³⁷ However, mythical tradition had placed the Druids among the adepts of the arcane arts. Exclusive societies only open to the chosen ones – those who have the desired qualities and managed to pass a long, exhaustive recruitment process – is a description of a magical order or an occultist organisation, and it fits the *druides* of Caesar’s description as well. References to Druidry found in some of the fraternal and para-masonic organisations, were not only an attempt to legitimise their own tradition but could also have been an expression of patriotism as well – proof that the Brits have their own mages and are just like (or even better than) other cultures in that regard.

Influences from other esoteric ideas, namely those gathered under the umbrella term ‘New Age’ and the neo-shamanic movements, can also be found in Neo-Druidic groups. The British Druid Order is especially influenced by modern forms of shamanism: the BDO’s founder, Philip Shallcrass, is a known sympathiser of various ethnic religions and shamanic practices, though he does not use the term in reference to the BDO, considering it to be culturally appropriate mostly to the shamanic traditions of Syberia.³⁸ He does, however, find similarities between the two in both beliefs and practices, while respecting the cultural separation of Druidry from, say, Native American religions. In his interview with a neo-shamanic scholar, Robert J. Wallis, Shallcrass had

³⁶ E.g. in the novels of Marion Zimmer Bradley or Bernard Cornwell’s Arthurian trilogy, see: M. Z. Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, New York 1983; B. Cornwell, *The Winter King*, London 1995.

³⁷ S. Piggott, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

³⁸ R. J. Wallis, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archeology and Contemporary Pagans*, London 2003, p. 85.

insisted that Druidry is a form of spirituality native to Britain, referencing the beliefs of its ancient people – hence the preference for the term “British” (related to the Picts) as opposed to “Celtic” which he finds culturally dispersed, and the presence of “British” in the organisation’s name.³⁹ Two important ideas can be traced here: firstly, an association of Druidry with other ethnic or tribal religions (and with modern movements which refer to such a heritage), and secondly, the idea of cultural identity, an attachment to the cultural heritage of the Celtic tribes, the original inhabitants of the British Isles, as opposed to the Anglo-Saxons, who invaded them in the 5th century. This proves the strength of the Druidic myth, how it was integrated into British culture and how it still influences it (on this subject, it should be noted that the closing ceremony of the 2012 London Paralympics, included elements of a Druidic ritual written by members of the BDO, Philip Shallcrass and Emma Restall Orr).

The association of the Druids with mages, which originates from Antiquity, may have been the most important reason for their connection with the history of esotericism and occultism. The various data on the Druids is strongly mythopoeic, and has been used by many adepts of the arcane arts as a model, especially in the British Isles. Modern Druidic movements from the UK, such as the OBOD or BDO, legitimise their endeavours by referring to this centuries-old myth, which doubtlessly belongs to the widespread phenomenon known as the Western esoteric tradition.

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³⁹ Ibidem, pp. 85–86.

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