The Foundations of Modern Druid Spirituality

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Summary

This study explores the phenomenon of modern Druidry, one of the most rapidly-expanding forms of alternative spirituality in Britain today. It investigates why, despite the fact that there is so little verifiable evidence relating to the spiritual practices of the ancient Druids inhabiting Britain prior to the Roman invasions of the first centuries CE, modern Druids continue to look to their forebears as a source of inspiration and guidance. I argue that modern Druids tend to have a much more sophisticated grasp of the foundations of their spiritual practice than many academics claim. This attitude to the past has much in common with recent developments in post-modern historiography, including a realisation that it is impossible to isolate a single, objective past without relying on written accounts, which are in turn subject to the politics of representation. Using Horkheimer and Adorno’s concept of disenchantment, I argue that this attitude has been marginalised since the onset of the Enlightenment project, when the separation between history and myth was consolidated, and the latter came to be regarded as little more than a poetic lie about what really happened. Since that time, the texts surrounding Druidry have proliferated, to the extent that the connection between the Druid mythos and the true past has been lost. As a result, the mythos exists today in something akin to what Baudrillard terms hyperreality, in that it represents not the historical Druids but the tradition of representation itself. This recognition renders a conventional mode of assessing the past obsolete. A more sophisticated attitude is required, and is demonstrated by members of the modern Druid community.

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Introduction

Academics, sceptics and journalists are amazed when I laugh, admitting that we make it up as we go along, yet this is the very nature of the tradition. Every text, ancient and modern, every archaeological discovery, is explored with studious discipline, but not for fine-tuning our authenticity: our quest is for inspiration to enable us to live in sacred relationship now, and that inspiration is found in history, in mythology and in nature...

Emma Restall Orr, Living Druidry

Attitudes to the past among modern Druids are varied, ranging from those who believe that they are part of an unbroken hereditary tradition stretching back to before the Roman invasion of Britain, to those who believe that contemporary Druidry is an entirely modern phenomenon – unable to claim direct descent from the Druids of antiquity but able to draw inspiration from them nonetheless. A third strand of thinking is that the foundations of Druidry lie not in the past at all, but in the non-ordinary realm of archetypes or spirits, providing a flow of inspiration that manifests itself in the mundane world to those who are receptive. Most Druids hold a combination of these beliefs, each to a greater or lesser extent, forming as many varieties of Druidic spirituality as there are Druids themselves.

In this study, I will argue that these beliefs are the product of three primary modes of representation – historic, spiritual and mythic. In the historic mode, the past is understood to be accessible through the conjunction of empirical evidence and scholarly endeavour. As this conjunction is constantly at the mercy of academic trends, as well as the natural degradation of evidence over time, a common preoccupation of proponents of this idea is the fear that the past is forever on the verge of being irrevocably lost. The historic mode represents a firm conviction that at
the foundation of any investigation into the past lies a truth preserved in time, incorruptible by the modern observer, though not necessarily always accessible to her.

The spiritual mode, while not reliant on the past, is often used alongside the historic mode to fill the gaps that remain when the surviving source material has been pieced together. At its crux lies a belief in one or more non-ordinary realms of existence, often described in spiritual terms, which inform the apparent world though inspiration, channelling or simply a close observation of nature. Both historic and spiritual modes have at their core a single metaphysical truth, thought by those who uphold them to be independent from the beliefs of the observer. In the case of the historical mode this is the irrefutable truth of what really happened; in the spiritual mode it is the non-ordinary reality that exists regardless of events in the apparent world.

The majority of written accounts of the foundations of modern Druidry have, from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century, been expressed in the historic mode, by Druids and non-Druids alike. Academic historians have looked at the Druid past and concluded that little or nothing of any certainty can be said about them due to the lack of surviving evidence. However, they have rarely wavered from the belief that there is a single truth (regardless of whether it proves or disproves the existence of the ancient Druids) that could be accessed if only there were more evidence.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, moderns Druids largely followed suit with this common-sense approach, albeit with a greater degree of trust in the ability of the existing evidence to illuminate their true past. In the 1960s, however, a great deal of
their corpus of evidence was discovered to have been forged by eighteenth century Welshman Iolo Morganwg.\footnote{Born Edward Williams, 1747-1822.} To look solely to the past without the aid of such illuminating documents as those of Morganwg was an unenviable prospect for modern Druids, despite the fact that, as proponents of the historic mode, their belief in a single true past was not reliant upon there being evidence to corroborate it. In the second half of the century many contemplated whether history could ever provide an indisputable past upon which to base a spiritual tradition. Even the most trustworthy sources, such as the accounts of Julius Caesar, gave rise to a hugely diverse and irreconcilable variety of interpretations.

If Druids wanted firmer foundations upon which to base their spiritual practice, they would have to look elsewhere. It was at this time that Druid Orders such as the Ancient Druid Order began drawing parallels between their own practice and the mystical traditions of the East, and the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids developed a new emphasis on archetypal psychology under the chieftainship of Philip Carr-Gomm.\footnote{1988 to date.} Druids looked to other cultures, the subconscious mind and principally nature for evidence of a universal force or inspiration that would connect them with the Druids of the past while bypassing the need for surviving accounts. Like the historic mode, the spiritual mode was, in essence, a search for an objective foundation for modern Druidry.

The third primary mode of representation, the mythic, is, unlike the other two, not subject to a single metaphysical truth. Rather, it is based on the belief that the past is indivisible from our representations of it. The mythic mode states that an objective
past can never be isolated from the process of human understanding and its communication through chronicles, archives and other forms of recorded history, as well as the myths, legends and folk-tales of popular culture. According to this interpretation, the only past available is that which exists in the now, in the complex discursive structure that governs representations of the past at any one time. The mythic mode, like much post-modern theory, considers the past to be located in the interaction between contemporary texts.

In recent years, modern Druids have developed a much more sophisticated grasp of their foundations than either academia or popular understanding credit them with, combining all three modes of representation. Rather than simply being ‘a compelling magnet for many a psychological misfit and lonely crank’, as the most influential history of the subject in the past seventy years describes the ancient Druids, they have come to be regarded by their modern counterparts in an increasingly thoughtful and rigorous way. As I will demonstrate during the course of this study, many descriptions of Druidry’s foundations are expressed in what resembles the mythic mode, in that they recognise a permeable boundary between history and myth. Some even go so far as to suggest that the process of interpretation is not merely supplementary to a sovereign past, but that the past is crucially and inescapably dependent upon the interpretative process.

In The Elements of the Druid Tradition, Philip Carr-Gomm states that ‘[a] study of Druidry which fails to make the author’s ideological stance clear from the outset will

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inevitably be misleading. This at once demonstrates a sophisticated grasp of the process of history-making, echoing reflexive trends in modern scholarship that draw attention to the fact that history-making is not impervious to the politics of the history-maker and that there is no such thing as a truly independent observer who does not in some way influence that which she is observing.

In response to this recommendation, I will attempt here to set out my own ideological stance by explaining that, while greatly sympathetic and supportive of modern Druidry, I do not believe there is sufficient historical evidence to suggest that it bears any more than a passing resemblance to the Druidry of antiquity, whatever that may have been. Instead, modern Druidry is an imaginative and perfectly legitimate response to what I will call the Druid mythos, that corpus of literary, historical and archaeological narratives that has been constructed around the figure of the Druid since he first appeared in writing. As such I believe that a radical methodology, namely the mythic mode, is necessary to fully appreciate the relationship between modern Druidry and its foundations.

In chapter one I will suggest that the distinction between the historic, spiritual and mythic modes arose at the onset of the Enlightenment era, when the past became, in the terminology of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, disenchanted. Disenchantment of the past was the result of a polarity between opposing modes of representation, a polarity that would obliterate the (albeit imperfect) coherency of medieval historiography and influence representations of the past from the seventeenth century to the present day.

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Chapter two will demonstrate how Druids were central to the way in which the
British\textsuperscript{5} past was represented at the onset of the post-Enlightenment era, in the conflict
between antiquarianism and monumental history. I will investigate the way in which
elements of this conflict remain to this day, limiting the efficacy of the historic mode
and the ability of modern historians to get to grips with the fact that modern Druidry
has experienced such a fundamental revival despite the fact that the beliefs of the
ancient Druids remain largely unknown.

Chapter three will argue that when the sources are considered and discounted, what
remains is a contemporary mythos demanding a mythic approach. I will outline this
mythos as it exists today, looking at the factors that have helped shape it, suggesting
that it functions in much the same way as Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality, a
self-referential discursive corpus that is no longer reliant upon that which it is
supposed to represent.

In chapter four I will consider my claim that the majority of modern Druids have a
more sophisticated grasp of the foundations of Druidry than might otherwise be
expected. Though not always articulated in the mythic mode (and in many cases
tending to the spiritual mode), certain Druid attitudes to the past demonstrate a
tendency towards this more radical mode of representing the past. The most notable
example of this, I will demonstrate, can be found in the writings of Emma Restall-Orr,
former Joint Chief of the British Druid Order and founder of The Druid Network.

\textsuperscript{5} In order to limit the scope of this study, I will focus on Druidry in Britain rather than continental
Europe or America, although I do acknowledge that such a distinction is not necessarily reflected in the
evolution of Druidry, and references to other countries will be used to illustrate my arguments
throughout.
In the concluding chapter I will argue that the proper foundation of Druidry is the mythos, and that it is the mythos that has been the defining influence upon Druidry as far back as it is possible for us to know. The negative associations of myth today were formed at the time when representations of the past became disenchanted at the onset of the seventeenth century. By re-appropriating myth we can unravel the opposing modes of representing Druidry’s foundations, and consider a possible re-enchantment of the past, centred on the figure of the Druid.
Chapter 1

The Enlightenment project

Of the three modes of representing the foundations of Druidry – historic, spiritual and mythic – the latter is perhaps the most ambiguous. In modern parlance, the word *myth* has two main definitions. Firstly, it refers to a popular story or corpus of stories that have come to define the fundamental beliefs or identity of a community. Secondly, it is defined as the opposite of history, for instead of telling the truth about reality, myth is considered little more than a poetic lie about what really happened. While, in Rebecca Collin’s words, ‘[h]istory is popularly conceived of as an account of what really happened, ... myth is construed as the false version of that same event.’6 The polarisation between history and myth apparent in this second definition can be considered a product of the Enlightenment.

In Horkheimer and Adorno’s collaboration *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published in 1949, the authors describe the definitive outcome of the Age of Enlightenment as the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for imagination.7 Within a period stretching from the early seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, Enlightenment reason had become pivotal to Western thinking, as had the concept of liberal humanist subjectivity, the freedom of the individual subject to contemplate supposedly universal truths and respond accordingly.

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Horkeimer and Adorno use the term myth to describe one of three successive stages in the evolution of understanding: ‘[o]ne after another, mimetic, mythic and metaphysical modes of behaviour were taken as superceded eras...’ The type of myth they refer to as their intermediate stage corresponds to that of the first definition, as a story or stories that help define a people. The second definition – of poetic lie – establishes myth in relation to a history based on reason, which only emerged in Horkheimer and Adorno’s metaphysical era. For myth to constitute the primary epistemological attitude of pre-Enlightenment representations of the past, as they suggest, it is logically inconceivable that the mutual dynamic between historic truth and mythic fantasy had yet arisen.

This pre-Enlightenment definition of myth, devoid of many of its later negative connotations, can be termed _indiscriminate_, in that it includes, as well as orally-transmitted folk-tales and divine revelation (the importance of which cannot be overestimated when considering how mediaeval thinkers represented the past), a prototype narrative style that would later be formalised as history, but prior to the Enlightenment had not yet been fully distinguished from other modes of representation. Indiscriminate myth was the melting pot in which nascent historic, spiritual and mythic modes all resided prior to the seventeenth century. It was, according to Jürgen Habermas, a ‘totalising force of myth, incorporat[ing] all phenomena into a network of correspondences, similarities, and contrasts.’

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8 Ibid., p. 31.
As Horkheimer and Adorno’s metaphysical era came to dominate thinking in the seventeenth century, history – based on the metaphysical premise of a hidden truth waiting to be uncovered by free and uninhibited scholarship – became the most authoritative means of representing the past. Indiscriminate myth gave way to a kind of myth that was defined precisely in terms of its opposition to history. This new incarnation of myth, which I will term dialectic, was very different from the indiscriminate myth from which it evolved. No longer a neutral form of representation, myth became a powerfully negative term, in stark opposition to the noble pursuit of history. And while religion was increasingly confined to issues of personal morality, myth ‘entered the profane’, creating an unassailable opposition of terms that has remained in place to this day.

When Horkheimer and Adorno state that the Enlightenment was a time in which myths were dissolved, they are referring to indiscriminate myth. I would, however, describe the process less as dissolution and more as transformation, as myth grew to be associated with ignorance and superstition in contrast to a history that signified intelligence and reason. In terms of its second definition, as an antonym to history, it was at the time of the Enlightenment that dialectic myth was formed. Before reason emerged as the liberal humanist subject’s defining principle and before history was established as a profession, the boundary between history and myth was a relatively

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10 Robert Graves, himself hugely influential in the formation of modern Druid spirituality, laments the dissolution of myth in his book *The White Goddess*, stating that “[i]t is unfortunate that, despite the strong mythical element in Christianity, “mythical” has come to mean “fanciful, absurd, unhistorical””; for fancy played a negligible part in the development of Greek, Latin and Palestinian myths, or of the Celtic myths until the Norman-French *trovères* worked them up into irresponsible romances of chivalry.’ *The White Goddess: a historical grammar of poetic myth* (London: Faber, 1952), p. 13.
11 Habermas, op. cit., p. 28.
unimportant part of the mediaeval mindset. After the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, it was critical.\textsuperscript{12}

It is interesting to note that the first citation of the word ‘myth’ in its modern sense in the Oxford English Dictionary is not until 1669, when it is used as a synonym of ‘fabulous’. The majority of citations after this time are variations of ‘an untrue tale’. Prior to the seventeenth century, however, the only occurrences of ‘myth’ are those which are used in ways that are now obsolete, meaning ‘gentle’ or as a verb to ‘show’ or ‘measure’.\textsuperscript{13} It seems as though ‘myth’ was rarely used in the period preceding the Enlightenment, and was only applied to that period retrospectively by modern historians.\textsuperscript{14} This would support the theory that narrative representations of the past were relatively undefined prior to the seventeenth century and such qualifying terms were not required. It was only with the emergence of history that myth (that which was not history) required a name, appropriated accordingly from a related linguistic field. The idea that the myth we understand today was ever anything other than a negative term seems itself to be little more than a poetic lie, the wishful thinking of a romantic sensibility.

The transition from indiscriminate myth to the separate and opposing discourses of history and dialectic myth is perhaps best understood in terms of representation and its relationship with reality. Whereas at the height of the Copernican revolution the marriage of object and meaning was considered entirely dependent on the human

\textsuperscript{12} Collins provides a more detailed analysis of the way in which ‘myth and history are typically construed as antithetical approaches to the past’ and goes on to consider the dissolution of myth and history as separate categories in postmodern thought in op.cit., p. 341.


\textsuperscript{14} Including, in the case of indiscriminate myth, myself.
subject in his God-like capacity as universal sovereign,\textsuperscript{15} prior to the seventeenth century meaning was generally assumed to reside in the external world. There was, in the words of Horkheimer and Adorno, ‘…no radical distinction between thoughts and reality.’\textsuperscript{16}

According to Michel Foucault’s description of medieval epistemology,\textsuperscript{17} knowledge was attained through a series of similarities or ‘resemblances’ between worldly elements. Just as the names of rivers and hills were indistinguishable from the entities they signified, so they had a direct and equivalent relationship with the story of the land and its people. As Horkheimer and Adorno make clear, ‘[o]n the magical plane, dream and image were not mere signs for the thing in question, but were bound up with it in similarity or names.’\textsuperscript{18} This was an introspective world, where the internal patterns of sympathy and antipathy provided the basis for all knowledge, apparent in ‘signatures’ or marks on the face of the world that allowed these resemblances to become visible.

It is my belief that this absence of separation between signifier and signified, this ‘interweaving of language and things, in a space common to both,’\textsuperscript{19} not only coincided with indiscriminate myth, but was a fundamental pre-requisite for it. Had it been common knowledge in the mediaeval period that representations of the past were just as contingent upon the human subject as they were upon nature or God, then it is

\textsuperscript{15} In the words of Horkheimer and Adorno, ‘Man’s likeness to God consists in sovereignty over existence, in the countenance of the lord and master, and in command…’ Horkheimer and Adorno, op.cit., p. 9.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{17} Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970).
\textsuperscript{18} Horkheimer and Adorno, op. cit., pp. 10-11.
\textsuperscript{19} Foucault, op. cit., p. 38.
unlikely such an uncritical narrative hotchpotch would have been allowed to remain unregulated. It was the emergence of history from indiscriminate myth that finally facilitated this process of regulation, allowing human institutions to take responsibility for that which was previously considered divine. As the source of knowledge shifted from that which was manifest in the external world to that which was implicit in the process of human understanding, so the idea arose that certain modes of representation were more reasonable than others.

As the Enlightenment took hold, the spheres of representation and reality became increasingly divided. In Foucault’s words, ‘[t]he profound kinship of language with the world was thus dissolved.’ Horkheimer and Adorno explain that, for the emerging methodology of science, words had become signatory (imposing meaning from without) rather than integral elements of reality (constituting meaning from within). Consequently, ‘[a]s a system of signs, language [was] required to resign itself to calculation in order to know nature, and … discard[ed] the claim to be like her.’

It was precisely the claim of indiscriminate myth (that language was like nature) that history attempted to deny through new scientific methods such as archaeological fieldwork and statistical analysis. ‘With the move beyond magical/mimetic relations to the world,’ states James Schmidt, ‘language [renounced] the claim to be like nature and instead [limited] itself to the task of calculation and control.’ In the new cosmology of the Enlightenment era, language became ‘rote formulae ... before a

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20 Ibid., p. 43.
21 Horkheimer and Adorno, op. cit, pp. 17-18.
reality that has become impenetrable.’\textsuperscript{23} The formulae used to calculate the impenetrable past became the discipline we now know as history, and ‘[m]athematical procedure became, so to speak, the ritual of thinking.’\textsuperscript{24} Habermas categorises this period as one of demythologisation, while Horkheimer and Adorno use the term disenchantment to describe the time when the world lost its inherent meaning and became objectified, only meaningful as a result of the relationship between the human subject and a single metaphysical truth, that pot of gold that lay at the end of history’s rainbow. ‘The disenchantment of the world’, they declare, ‘is the extirpation of animism.’\textsuperscript{25} In the process of transition from indiscriminate to dialectic myth the spirit of the world was renounced. Culture and nature became irrevocably divided. As Habermas concurs, ‘[t]he process of Enlightenment leads to the desocialization of nature and to the denaturalization of the human world...’\textsuperscript{26}

**Disenchantment and the history/myth dialectic**

Many post-modern theorists of the twentieth century have expressed particular interest in the human tendency to conceptualise the world through mutually exclusive binary pairs. While philosopher Jacques Derrida has commented prolificously on the dialectic speech/writing,\textsuperscript{27} others, depending on their their political leanings, have chosen to focus their studies on man/woman, white/black, mind/body, and so on.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 819.
\textsuperscript{24} Horkheimer and Adorno, op. cit., p. 25.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 5.
\textsuperscript{26} Habermas, op. cit., p. 19.
\end{flushleft}
A common observation that has arisen is that not only is one term always privileged over the other, but that different pairs often correspond closely with each other, creating an axis of difference that underpins many of our most widely-held beliefs and values. History and dialectic myth are prime examples of this, for the relationship that defines them bears a strong resemblance to that which separates fact/fiction, science/art, light/dark, and reason/intuition. Once such a dialectic has arisen, it is the correspondence with other value-laden pairings that informs and sustains it. Derrida identifies logocentrism (the privileging of presence over absence, manifest most commonly in the dialectic speech/writing) as a defining trait of Western cultures from Plato onwards, reaching a peak in the modern period, with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose beliefs on the fundamental divide between nature and humanity were a defining step in the process of Enlightenment disenchantment.

One of the techniques used to consolidate the binary pairing history/myth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was to ensure that representations of the past prior to the onset of the Enlightenment project were perceived as dialectic rather than indiscriminate myth. Tales of the ‘supernatural’ were no longer accepted at face value, but imbued with the negative connotations of dialectic myth, at best acknowledged for their aesthetic appeal and at worst condemned as irrational. In this transitionary period, the idea that history and its oppositional counterpart dialectic myth might have had a shared origin would have jeopardised history’s exclusive claim to truth. As history gained power, it dictated the terms by which dialectic myth,

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28 Similarly, the difference between historical character and folk hero – a division based on the connotations of history and dialectic myth – is, according to N J Higham, a modern phenomenon, which would have had very little relevance in the central Middle Ages. *King Arthur: myth-making and history* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 6.
and hence (as a result of the disavowal of indiscriminate myth) myth in general, was defined.

Obvious cases of indiscriminate (as opposed to dialectic) myth would simply be regarded as a confusion between genres on the part of the pre-modern scholar. Habermas describes this as ‘that spell which appears to us today as a confusion between nature and culture.’ A similar example provided by Foucault concerns the naturalist Aldrovandi, writing in the 1590s. His ornithological and zoological works contained as many quotations from myth and fable as they did anatomical observations. This is a prime example of indiscriminate myth, an ‘unbroken tissue of words and signs’, which would have been condemned by subsequent historians as inadequate and naive. It is similar to how modern authors, such as Jorge Luis Borges, deliberately confuse recognised genres in order to unsettle the reader and force her to re-examine the means by which knowledge is conventionally imparted.

In the eighteenth century, the notion of ‘history for history’s sake’ began to gain prominence. This was partly due to the mapping of politics onto the history/myth dialectic. For while history was considered apolitical, founded on an empiricism that precluded politic bias, myth (especially in the guise of monumental history) was seen as particularly susceptible to it, in that it had little or no basis in the real to prevent it being employed for all manner of partisan, even nefarious, ends. Academic history, as an independent pursuit separated from both the Church and the State, provided the perfect environment for the notion of history for history’s sake’ to spread unabated. It

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29 Habermas, op. cit., p. 19.
30 Foucault, op. cit., p. 40.
was not until the twentieth century that historians began questioning in earnest their ability, and that of their forebears, to maintain political neutrality. Keith Jenkins discusses in some depth the way in which the historic mode (what he calls ‘History with a capital H’) negates political responsibility by attributing the beliefs and values of its proponents to the past itself. According to this understanding, the study of ‘history for history’s sake’, far from being objective and universal, proves to be just as susceptible to political interests as myth. When such interests do occur they are presented in the historic mode in such a way as to appear as if they ‘grew out of’ the past itself rather than being retrospectively applied to it. Druid history, as the following chapters will demonstrate, is particularly susceptible to this.

Chapter 2

**History and the Druids in the seventeenth century**

In an article on Michael Drayton, John E Curran Jr describes the way in which the Elizabethan poet associated bards and Druids with the preservation of a prehistoric British culture at the onset of the seventeenth century. At the same time, these ancient figures also signified to Drayton his ‘anguished sense that this culture had not been preserved at all.’ Curran describes Drayton’s claim that, as a result of the ancient Druids’ reliance on an oral (rather than a written) tradition, the link between the past and present was very much alive. Rather than a liability, the Druidic policy of not committing anything to writing aided historical continuity, for books, according to Drayton, are ‘vulnerable to the ravages of time…’ The implication is that Druid lore was preserved to this day in the form of folklore and bardic verse.

In spite of this, and to the poet’s frustration, his understanding of Druids was fundamentally reliant upon sources outside of his proposed tradition of oral continuity. For without the accounts of Caesar and other classical historians of the Roman and Greek world, he would have no way of knowing that Druids, or their secret oral tradition, had ever existed. The argument for continuity, centred on the figure of the Druid, is at once undermined.

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34 Ibid., p. 499.
Drayton, like other proto-historians of the early seventeenth century, was preoccupied with the fear that the past was, at this time of intellectual and political upheaval, on the verge of being irrevocably lost. This unease would never have come about were it not for the conviction that the past constituted a single metaphysical truth that could, when accessed, yield a definitive history. In this respect, Curran characterises Drayton as an antiquarian, a term developed by Richard F Hardin, another Drayton scholar. Antiquarians are those with ‘that serious, methodical mindset we associate with William Camden and his followers, which privileges documented and documentable, verified and verifiable historical sources.’ The outlook of this kind of historian, according to Curran, was essentially pessimistic.

Antiquarianism is a prime example of the historic mode of representing the past as it emerged at the beginning of the seventeenth century. ‘The antiquarian,’ explains Curran, ‘concerned with the tangible and findable, is willing to concede that there is a point in history beyond which he knows nothing...’ The past is essentially split into two parts, that which is known and that which is not, with a strict dividing line between the two. The antiquarian historian is primarily concerned with the part that is known, documented and catalogued, but also disturbed and fascinated by that which is not. This unknown part is doubly elusive, for even if the dearth of evidence is alleviated by an unexpected discovery, the dividing line merely shifts to a new position. As much as his knowledge is expanded, so is his realisation that there is even more that he does not know. It is this perpetually unknowable element that constitutes the metaphysical truth that is the ultimate motivation of every proponent of

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36 Cited in ibid., p. 499.
37 Ibid., p. 499.
38 Ibid., p. 500.
the historic mode, the Derridean *logos* that marks the ‘end’ of the unending chain of
signifiers that is the modern Druid mythos.

The antiquarian’s counterpart in Hardin’s scheme is the monumental historian. The
monumental historian refuses to accept that there is a dividing line between the
knowable and unknowable: ‘[c]harged with glorifying the history of their people and
with conveying of all their deeds to posterity so that the great may live forever,
monumental historians cannot brook large gaps in their nation’s history, … they
cannot admit to a forgotten past.’ Monumental history, instrumental in the formation
of the nation states of Western Europe, is expressed less in the historic mode, and
more in the mythic mode, albeit an unconscious mythic mode little evolved from the
indiscriminate myth that defined medieval narratives of the past. For monumental
historians, the emphasis was not the pursuit of a single, metaphysical truth, but in the
creation of an altogether more fluid narrative, informed more by contemporary need
than by historical fidelity. The dividing line that preoccupied the antiquarian was
largely irrelevant to them.

A qualifying note is necessary, however, for although I have argued that monumental
history was produced in something resembling the mythic mode, its reception was
intentionally historic. Whether they were meant to deceive or not, histories such as
Geoffrey of Monmouth’s were calculated to compel the reader into believing that
there was a single past, accessible only through the virtuoso account of that particular
historian. Similarly, antiquarianism also contains elements of the mythic mode, in that
it acknowledges the impossibility of accessing the true past, the only difference

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39 Ibid., p. 500.
between the antiquarian and post-modern proponents of the mythic mode being that while the former mourns this fact and tries to circumvent it, the latter accepts it as a basic principle, focusing her attention on manifestations of that past through the textual accounts of others.

Drayton was, like Geoffrey of Monmouth, a monumental historian, but he also felt the pull of the antiquarian point of view. For him bards and Druids provided a solution to the problem of antiquarianism, in that they represented what was believed to be the only continuous hereditary tradition to have survived from antiquity, through the Dark Ages and into the modern era. At the same time, they demonstrated at every turn how the trail of evidence is always subverted by monumental history. Druids, perhaps more than any other figure, had been appropriated for political ends from the Greeks and Romans in the last centuries BCE to just about every Western European nation from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. In this way, Druids became central to the dynamics of representing the past in British history. While the fate of history-making became bound up with whether or not the Druids would provide antiquarian historians with the means to access the past, so the figure of the Druid was interpreted and reinterpreted in the debate between the historic and mythic modes of representation.

It is my belief that even if a true representation of ancient Druidry could exist in the historic mode, by the time the mode had assumed the incarnation of antiquarianism, the Druid had long since crossed Drayton’s dividing line into the unknowable. Despite the antiquarian’s best efforts, he would eventually discover that Druidry would never yield the knowledge he so desperately desired. What this demonstrated, of course, and what proponents of the historic mode fail to grasp to this day, is that
the mode is fundamentally flawed. It is impossible to separate the reality from the myth for these two concepts are inextricably bound.

**The limits of the historic mode**

The actual historical Druids are notoriously difficult to isolate, as most of the early sources are heavily indebted to earlier unacknowledged texts and most of the archaeological evidence is purely speculative. Certain historians, for example, acknowledge that the existing classical corpus (from which much of our knowledge of the Druids derives) is largely dependent upon an unidentified second-century BCE manuscript which later commentators failed to identify.⁴⁰ This, combined with the mis-translation of certain monumental inscriptions by archaeologists already invested in the Druidic narrative, calls into question the veracity of these early accounts, suggesting that even from the very beginning, the foundations of Druidry had more to do with interpretation than reality, the records being, in the words of A L Owen, 'a self-evidently incomplete and external version of Druidism.'⁴¹

In his influential 1968 work,⁴² Piggott states that the classical sources ‘can be best understood only by a conscious and sometimes difficult effort of mental adjustment, and may lie beyond the range of such possibility.’⁴³ It is my belief that such an adjustment does indeed lie beyond the range of possibility. Post-structuralist theory,

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⁴⁰ There have been suggestions that references to the Druids in the works of Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Dion Chrysostom, Athenaeus and, to a lesser extent, Caesar are borrowed from an earlier account, possibly Poseidonius’ Histories, written at the end of the second century BCE and surviving only in second-hand quotation. See T D Kendrick, The Druids (London: Senate, 1994), footnote to p. 98 and Piggott, op. cit., p. 96.
⁴² Piggott, op. cit.
⁴³ Ibid., p. 18.
rooted in the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, suggests that every language community constructs their own representation of reality as a result of a self-referential signifying structure. Moreover, translating signifying elements from this structure to the structure of another language community is an imperfect process; meaning is always lost as original word-meaning relationships are substituted with the nearest modern equivalent. In short, a perfect understanding between one language community and another (from the difference between Latin and English right down to the language differences between two segments of a single community or even two individuals within the same segment) is unattainable.

Piggott talks about environmental conditioning and how the classical scholars were limited by the influence of their contemporary culture. The Celtic social structure was different from the classical one and there was a danger of these differences being over emphasised in the classical texts. Magic, for example, was deplored in Roman culture, and so the Roman scholars were more likely to comment on this aspect than ritual sacrifice, which to them was a commonplace. Piggott’s point is that the classical commentators could not help but be subverted from the truth as a result of their culture. What he fails to consider is how he, as a modern reader, is similarly limited, not only from occupying the same critical position as the classical scholars, who he infers are somehow at fault for letting their cultural conditioning interfere with their historical observations of the Druids, but also, as a result of his own conditioning, from direct access to the Druids themselves.

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44 Ibid., p. 18.
46 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
The ideology of Julius Caesar is not merely an unfortunate obstruction in an otherwise clear line of sight between us and the Druids; Piggott invests too much in the historic mode to recognise that cultural difference is a necessary and insurmountable barrier between the modern observer, the ancient Druids, and every other contributor to the speculative tradition that has come between. ‘In considering our documents’ he writes, ‘we must first look for the context and the culture of the writers and of their audience, and the ideological and social framework within which they fitted.’ He is correct that we must make every effort to concede that our understanding is limited by virtue of cultural difference, but how can a solution be achieved when our only access to the ideological and social framework of those writers is through other texts? Modern texts that coincide broadly with our own structure of understanding are not party to the reality of the Romans and Greeks. Conversely, texts that have survived from antiquity to the present day are equally inaccessible to us. There is no way to bridge the gap between our understanding and theirs, no way to isolate their particular contributions to the Druid mythos and so remove them from an otherwise unimpeded line of sight.

According to Ronald Hutton, the early literature of Ireland and Wales, probably composed between two and five hundred years after paganism had died out, did not represent inherited pagan oral traditions as much as it did the influence of Christian, Greek and Roman literature. It was not, as Kenneth Jackson believes, a clear window on the Iron Age, but more like one ‘stained and frosted, in gorgeous colours and

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47 Ibid., p. 18.
48 In accordance with the current convention, I use paganism with a lower-case ‘p’ to refer to the indigenous practice or belief system and Paganism with a capital ‘P’ to refer to what is otherwise known as Neo-Paganism or the Pagan revival.
patterns, and overlaid with many reworkings and repairs.49 Hutton refers here to foreign interpretations ‘through’ which native traditions become apparent from a modern perspective.

The implication, similar to that of the antiquarians referred to in the previous chapter, is that the main obstacle preventing us from accessing our native traditions is not that those traditions lack their own comprehensible meaning, but that they are obscured by the inaccurate or misleading interpretations of others. These interpretations, however ‘gorgeous’ they may be in their own right, distort the meaning that would otherwise provide us with a clear and irrefutable knowledge of our pagan past. If what we see is not the ‘found’ fact, but a corrupted image of it, we can never be sure ‘whether what we are seeing is through the window or wrought ingeniously into the glass...’50 Hutton’s window is, in all but name, the dividing line between the knowable and unknowable past that so vexed antiquarians such as Drayton.

Roland Barthes has written of historical facts as only having a linguistic existence, as terms of discourse. The way they are treated by historians, he argues, is ‘as if this existence were merely the “copy,” purely and simply, of another existence situated in the extra-structural domain of the “real.”’51 Barthes writes from a post-structuralist position, his implication being that there is no such extra-structural domain, no place for the fact to reside, other than in the interpretative linguistic framework within which all meaning is constructed. Elizabeth Tonkin similarly writes that historical facts and opinion ‘do not exist as free-standing objects, but are produced through

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50 Ibid., p. 24.
Neither writer is suggesting that there is no such thing as a past – a set of events that actually happened – but rather that as soon as this past enters our understanding, within the domain of language, it is at once subject to interpretation, or, more appropriately, mis-interpretation, since no interpretation is exempt from the corrupting effect of the interpreter’s own discursive position. The consequence of this for the historic mode is that the sanctity of what its proponents perceive as objective fact is undermined.

Barthes paraphrases Nietzsche when he states that ‘“[t]here are no facts in themselves. It is always necessary to begin by introducing a meaning in order that there can be a fact.”’ As facts are by definition meaningful, and as meaning is located within the realm of language, so their meaning must be determined by the distorting lens of linguistic interpretation. Despite their best intentions, historians find themselves engaged not in the process of uncovering the true meaning of historical sources, but in plotting the best path they can through an infinite array of imperfect meanings. What Hutton acknowledges as the failings of mythology (that it is subject to the ‘conscious or unconscious transformation of the past into an artefact of maximum significance and utility to the present…’) must also be accepted as the failing of history itself, or at least the historic mode.

The point is not that each of these potential meanings is equally valid; it is that no one meaning has ultimate validity. It is not that the belief that the Druids were immigrant Atlantians is equally as valid as the belief that they were an educated class of native

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inhabitants; it is that neither belief can ever claim ultimate truth. Varying levels of validity are dependent on a range of factors including third-party agreement and the extent to which proposed interpretations provide an aesthetic fit with neighbouring elements of a coherent signifying system. Hutton explains how ‘most structures of religion, magic and old-fashioned science include symbolic conceptions of reality [which are based on beliefs that are not empirically valid]… Within their own parameters, they are entirely sensible and logical.’ This raises the issue of how one evaluates interpretations of the past, if the reality with which one must compare them is not accessible without recourse to further interpretations. From the sources cited in this study, there does not appear to be a simple answer. While certain interpretations are undoubtedly more valid than others, the conventions that govern validity are complex, relying not only on what actually happened, but on the beliefs and desires of the interpretative community. The cultural and political assumptions of the controlling party (in this case the institutions of the historical mode and the liberal-humanist world in general), while not necessarily as important to the development of history as what actually happened, do play a role. That the objectivity of history is so often universally accepted, however, is testament to the efficacy of the historic mode’s ability to encode its own values with the past and so bypass the domain of language.

In Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*, the simulacrum is the copy for which there is no original, no real referent that exists prior to the production and dissemination of the representation. Just as the limitations of the historic mode have problematised the way in which representations of the past are evaluated, so Baudrillard’s hyperreality, a condition in which simulacra are the dominant cultural 

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55 Ibid., p. 28.
currency, is similarly problematic. There is no way of accessing reality without recourse to the rhetorical discourses that shape our understanding of it. Hyperreality is a useful concept when contemplating the foundations of Druidry, attesting to the realisation, in antiquarian terms, that the knowable side of the historical dividing line is all we have, that Hutton’s stained-glass window is all that we will ever see. It is this realisation that brings the mythic mode to the fore, this state of hyperreality that defines the foundations of modern Druidry, manifest in the Druid mythos.
Chapter 3

**An introduction to the Druid mythos**

The Druid mythos is a collective term for every representation of Druidry, both ancient and modern, that has survived to this day. In Baudrillard’s terminology, the mythos exists in a state of hyperreality, in that the reality of what is being represented is no longer fully accessible. Those parts which may be ancient and authoritative are impossible to isolate from the other parts that make up the representative mythos. As a result, the mythos has become its own source, evolving into a highly complex self-referential narrative, not immune from outside influence (for it continues to be used by monumental historians and myth-makers for every purpose from nation building to the commercial heritage industry⁵⁷), but always keeping at its core the matrix of popular and literary connotations that precedes it. This chapter will look in more detail at this mythos, focusing specifically on major turning points in its development.

Studying the Druid mythos does not automatically mean employing the mythic mode of representation as described in chapter one. A recognition of the mythos is fully compatible with the historic mode, providing that it is treated as a *supplement* to the historical foundations of Druidry, rather than the only remaining alternative to it. The latter half of Piggott’s *The Druids* details the mythos in very much a historic mode, in a tone that suggests the author considers recent representations of Druidry as interesting, but distracting from the much more serious and important task of uncovering the real historic Druids.

⁵⁷ Salisbury Museum’s Stonehenge display, for example, includes many citations and pictures of Druids, whilst stating that they have nothing to do with the monument’s construction.
He refers to the way in which these representations have transformed a body of evidence ‘neither very edifying in content nor elevating in character’\textsuperscript{58} into a portrayal of ‘barbarian sages, primeval Christians, champions of liberty, [and] repositories of mysterious wisdom…’\textsuperscript{59} He criticises the increasing multitude of (unfounded) theories pertaining to the Druids, leading them in later days to ‘offer themselves as symbols within a non-rational universe in which every form of belief and unreason may meet.’\textsuperscript{60}

As a professional historian, Piggott remains committed to the historic mode, pursuing the historical foundations of the Druid narrative rather than analysing the peculiarities of the narrative tradition itself. Similarly, T D Kendrick dismisses the many theories concerning Druidism, setting out his intention to produce a ‘sober outline of facts’.\textsuperscript{61} While perfectly legitimate, their approach relegates a great deal of potential scholarship to a marginal or para-textual status, for, as both accounts go on to testify, the quantity of interpretative material emerging between late antiquity and the present day has been disproportionately vast in comparison with the amount of reliable first-hand evidence upon which it is based.

On the other hand, Owen, in an antiquarian account notably lacking in pessimism (and therefore verging on the mythic mode) states that ‘[i]t is hard to see what else [the Druids] could be [other than literary figures], for those who attempted to

\textsuperscript{58} Piggott, op. cit., p. 10.  
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 10.  
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 165.  
\textsuperscript{61} Kendrick, op. cit., p. vii.
rediscover the Druids of history had set themselves an impossible task.\textsuperscript{62} Other than Owen’s monograph, relatively few academic works attend primarily to the Druid mythos,\textsuperscript{63} as either a supplement to the historic mode or in a true mythic mode. This is an unbalanced situation, for it is my belief that the Druid has developed a far greater cultural significance than a mere historical figure could ever have. The scholars who focus exclusively on the Druids of antiquity are telling only half the story. In the second half of this chapter, I intend to refocus the debate on the Druid mythos, temporarily putting aside the preoccupation with historical foundations in favour of the speculative tradition itself, unravelling what Piggott refers to as the ‘[entangled] strands in the twisted Druidic skein’.\textsuperscript{64}

The reasoning behind this text-based methodology is three-fold. Firstly, and as has been stated above, existing scholarship is heavily weighted towards the foundational end of the spectrum, where the lack of evidence means that scholars, in the words of Kendrick, are forced to ‘grop[e] feebly and uncertain in the gloom.’\textsuperscript{65} Some parity needs to be established between the importance of the Druids as mythic and historical figures.

Secondly, there is a need to properly assess the role of the professional historian in the creation of the Druid mythos. Referring to the way in which the Druid commentary of the classical literati were coloured by contemporary modes of thought and philosophy, Piggott states that it is important that we detect which concepts have been

\textsuperscript{62} Owen, op. cit., p. 3.
\textsuperscript{63} Notable exceptions include Morgan Prys’s work on the role of the Druid narrative in the construction of a Welsh national identity, and recent and forthcoming works by Ronald Hutton, none of which could fairly be described as post-modernists.
\textsuperscript{64} Piggott, op. cit., p. 10.
\textsuperscript{65} Kendrick, op. cit., p. 211.
unconsciously imposed on the Druids by those who first wrote about them.\textsuperscript{66} His own methodology is based, first and foremost, on avoiding such impositions by limiting conjecture to a necessary minimum, remaining chiefly within the epistemological bounds of the original source texts. In a rare admission of the limitations of this methodology, however, Piggott describes the tendency of archaeologists to shape their findings based on a pre-conceived idea as a problem ‘inherent in the process of human apprehension’\textsuperscript{67} Owen, on the other hand, has no hesitation in conceding that the Druids’ creation ‘owes as much to widely held assumptions that coloured the thought of the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries as to historical fact.’\textsuperscript{68}

While Piggott draws attention to the unconscious impositions of the classical literati, the more recent subversions that Owen alludes to are often overlooked by proponents of the historic mode, who too often assume a position of universal detachment, whereby the assertion of objectivity grants them (and their colleagues) exemption from any accusation of active political involvement with their subject.

Not all the theories imposed on the Druids, however, are unconscious. Some commentators, notes Piggott, found in them ‘convenient vehicles for the exemplification of a philosophical concept.’\textsuperscript{69} Posidonious, for example, was ‘looking hopefully for confirmation of his ideas of an age of innocence and virtuous law-giving philosophers in a landscape gilded with reflections from a Golden Age…’ while Caesar was ‘also looking hopefully, but over his shoulder to his political prestige in Rome.’ Berresford-Ellis concurs, stating that in the Roman case the account of an

\textsuperscript{66} Stuart Piggott, op. cit., p. 10.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p. 12.
\textsuperscript{68} Owen, op. cit., p. 1.
\textsuperscript{69} Piggott, op. cit., p. 10.
invading civilisation on a native culture is bound to be influenced by propaganda. Monumental historians such as Geoffrey of Monmouth have taken this to the extreme, taking liberties with the facts, while presenting their chronicles in the historic mode.

The methodology of focusing solely on the mythos, a prerequisite of the mythic mode, means that no one manifestation of it – be it monumental history, archaeology or fiction – is more or less representative of the mythos than any other. This forces us to suspend our disbelief and to abandon the historian’s central argument that it is always possible to maintain a separation between historical reality and subsequent interpretations of it. It is only after examining the Druidic mythos in this state of suspended disbelief that the influence of history-makers and myth-makers as contributors and as critics can be fully assessed, not by comparing their testimony with that of the source material, for if the mythic mode is to be employed properly then it must be accepted that there is no way to access this material without recourse to other historians’ accounts. The only recourse is to compare that contribution with the only remaining accessible source – the mythic tradition itself – and ask what the historian brings to that interpretative corpus: what, how and why?

Thirdly, and as will be examined in greater depth in the next chapter, the current academic debate goes little way to account for or justify the re-emergence of Druidry as a modern Pagan spirituality. The surviving sources are vague and prosaic, and do not fully account for the emergence of a thriving Druid spirituality. That the Druids

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71 As well as the Druids, other figures such as King Arthur or Robin Hood are also commonly appropriated by monumental historians for political purposes. N J Higham, notes how each manifestation of Arthur ‘reflects the way in which a particular author and his or her audience thought to fashion their own conceptions of the past, so as to benefit their own positioning in the present.’ Op. cit., p. 3.
provide fundamental spiritual inspiration for so many people is, therefore, a result of a more complex structure of meaning than can be attributed solely to the historical evidence.

As has been demonstrated in the previous chapter, it is impossible to separate concrete historical evidence from what has arisen as a result of appropriation, mistaken interpretation and blatant fantasy. The only legitimate response, therefore, is to assert that the most reliable evidence about the mythic tradition is the tradition itself. From a modern perspective, the real Druids cannot be isolated from their mythos in anything other than the most speculative manner. Owen states that ‘the shadow claims as much attention as the substance.’ In fact, in the absence of evidence, it is the shadow itself that has become substantial, the only truly verifiable foundation upon which to construct a past.

**A short overview of the Druid mythos**

Many volumes could be written on the Druid mythos from antiquity to the present day, particularly its development in the Enlightenment era, when between 1514 and 1744 there were at least 261 authors who wrote about the Druids – more than one a year. Due to the limitations of the present study, I will confine myself to some of the most notable examples, including those turning points in which the self-referential narrative of Druidry was impinged upon by outside influences that sought to hi-jack the mythos for its own ends.

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72 Owen, op. cit., p. 1.
Identifying the sources of information accessible to the ancient Greek and Roman commentators on the Druids (writing from the end of the third century BCE to the fourth century CE) remains highly problematic. It is not clear which, if any, were based on the first-hand experience of the author, which were second-hand inscriptions of the first-hand oral accounts of others, and which were unacknowledged literary quotation.\textsuperscript{74} This uncertainty, while a major stumbling block in the historian’s attempts to verify the early accounts, is of little consequence for the description of the Druidic mythos as an evolving narrative.

The most influential of the early references to the Druids is that of Julius Caesar, writing in the first century BCE. In the sixth book of \textit{The Gallic War}, Caesar describes the public function of contemporary Gaulish Druids. Their role, he observes, was to preside over divine worship, act as legal arbitrators and as teachers, and officiate at ritual human and animal sacrifices.\textsuperscript{75} Perhaps the most striking image emerging from his account is that of the giant figurative structure, woven of branches, filled with human sacrifices and set alight.\textsuperscript{76} Pliny, writing in the second half of the first century CE, also draws attention to the bloody religious practices of the Druids, claiming that ‘we cannot too highly appreciate … our debt to the Roman for having put an end to this monstrous cult, whereby to murder a man was an act of the greatest devoutness, and to eat his flesh most beneficial.’\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{74} See Piggott, op. cit., p. 18.  
\textsuperscript{76} Caesar, \textit{De Bello Gallico}, VI, 16, cited in Kendrick, ibid., p. 78.  
\textsuperscript{77} Pliny, \textit{Nat. Hist.}, XXX, 13, cited in Kendrick, ibid., p. 90.
In Caesar’s account the Druids were hierarchically structured, with one chief ‘who has the highest authority among them’, and upon whose death a successor was decided either by a vote of the Druids or by armed force. Although they usually held aloof from war and were exempted from military service, they were, according to Diodorus Sinculus at the turn of the first century, able to appease two opposing armies on the field of battle. Tacitus also emphasises the defensive role of the Druids at the turn of the second century CE, describing a Druid-assisted army resisting the invasion of the island of Anglesey by Suetonius Paulinus in 60 CE, while Dion Chrystostom, writing around the same time, stresses the vital part played by Druids in matters of warfare, describing them as the power behind the throne of kings, who in turn became ‘mere ministers of the Druids will.’

The first writer to depart from the basic narrative established by Caesar was Pliny, writing in 77 CE. He expands the mythos, introducing many of the elements recognised today, including worship in forest groves, the ritual importance of oak and mistletoe, and white robes. The Druids, he explains, ‘held nothing more sacred than the mistletoe and the tree that bears it, always supposing that tree to be the oak.’

Developing Lucan’s observation that Druids gathered in forest groves, he states that it was specifically the oak grove that was chosen, the oak being a particularly sacred tree. The white-robed Druid bearing a golden sickle for the ritual gathering of mistletoe is also introduced in this the most explicit description of a Druid ritual of all

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79 Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, VI, 14, cited in Kendrick, ibid., p. 78.
81 Tacitus, *Annals*, XIV, 30, cited in Kendrick, ibid., p. 92, from the translation by Church and Brodribb.
the classical sources, as well as the idea that the Druid calendar is based on a lunar cycle.\textsuperscript{85} Pliny emphasises the ritual and magical practices of the Druids rather than the solely civil functions attributed to them by Caesar, and suggests that Britain is so fascinated by magic that it is almost as though it was from there that the cult was imparted to the Persian Magi.\textsuperscript{86}

The Druid mythos falls silent for two centuries after Tacitus, the next significant developments coming towards the end of the third century CE, when Vopsiscus recounts two instances of the prophecies of Gaulish Druidesses, the first documented occurrence of female Druids.\textsuperscript{87}

From this point onwards, there is a significant gap in the surviving mythic tradition, stretching from the Roman accounts of the fourth century CE, through the Teutonic and Norman invasions, to the medieval Irish and Welsh tales.\textsuperscript{88} Piggott claims that these latter works, inscribed by Christian scholars, represent earlier oral traditions dating from a time prior to the introduction of Christianity into Ireland in the fifth century CE.\textsuperscript{89} This claim is highly speculative, for there are few pre-sixteenth-century sources in existence to prove any continuation of the mythic tradition. The textual gap, from the fourth to the sixteenth century, represents a significant shift in the fundamental elements of the Druid mythos, as, in Kendrick’s words, ‘the original druids of antiquity had wellnigh passed from man’s memory.’\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{85} Pliny, \textit{Nat. Hist.}, XVI, 249, cited in Kendrick, ibid., p. 89.
\textsuperscript{86} Pliny, \textit{Nat. Hist.}, XXX, 13, cited in Kendrick, ibid., p. 90.
\textsuperscript{87} Vopsiscus, \textit{Numerianus}, XIV and \textit{Aurelianus}, XLIII, 4 and 5, cited in Kendrick, ibid., p. 95.
\textsuperscript{88} Where, according to Kendrick, the word (Druid) ‘had in all probability never ceased to circulate in the vulgar tongue.’ Ibid., p. 16. Kendrick provides no evidence for this other than the assertion that it may have remained current in common Keltic (sic) speech to refer to a person pre-eminent for magic or poetry.
\textsuperscript{89} Piggott, op. cit., p. 100.
\textsuperscript{90} Kendrick, op. cit., p. 17.
Whereas the classical sources of Caesar and Dion Chrystostom describe the Druids as holding positions of authority, the Druids of the vernacular sources are no longer so highly exalted. Neither is the distinction between Druids, bards and seers as clear cut as in the account of Strabo. In both the Irish hero-tales and the law tracts, ‘Druids share with poets and other men of learning a place in the social hierarchy immediately below the nobility.’

By the sixteenth century, attitudes towards Britain’s native population were influenced more by the discovery of ‘primitive man’ in the New World, than by contemporary Irish Celts. Native Americans produced reactions of both hard and soft primitivism, typified respectively by stereotypes of bloodthirsty savagery on the one hand, and pastoral innocence on the other. The rise of soft primitivism marked the beginning of an era of romanticism – influenced by colonial encounters and the works of writers such as Rousseau – which celebrated the ‘Noble Savage’ as a prototype of humanity unfettered by civilisation and essentially good. Piggott notes how, on the whole, sixteenth century antiquaries were quite prepared to accept the view that the customs of the Indians were those of Ancient Britons.

When the Druid mythos re-established itself on British shores from the continent in the sixteenth century, the growing mood of soft primitivism and the need of the inhabitants to establish a nation rooted in the past meant that, come the turn of the seventeenth century, the Druid (English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish or British) had become the Noble Savage par excellence. This usurping of the mythos for nationalistic

91 Piggott, op. cit., p. 100.
92 Ibid., p. 127.
93 Ibid., p. 128.
purposes was nothing new. From the time of the ancient Greeks, when the Celts, along with other tribal groupings such as the Scythians, functioned as a barbarian ‘other’, the development of the mythic tradition has been inextricably caught up with a politics of nation.

Ronald Hutton observes that the Druid revival of the Renaissance formed part of a new sense of national identity, with Germany reacting to the perceived cultural supremacy of the classical world by claiming the Druids as ancestors of their own civilisation, in what Hutton describes as ‘a piece of large-scale cultural larceny.’ For, ‘if there was one thing on which the ancient writers had agreed about Druids, it was that the Germans didn't have them’. The works of monumental historian Annius of Viterbo, published at the end of the fifteenth century and censured as fiction by subsequent scholars, provided the French and German territories with a past to fill what had up to that point been a historical vacuum: the period between the Old Testament accounts and the arrival of the Romans. Annius’s history was, according to Hutton, ‘led by Druids and bards, who taught people like the Greeks all that they knew…’, a fitting past with which to identify at the time of the Italian Wars and the rise of the Huguenots in France, and immediately prior to the Protestant Reformation of Martin Luther in Germany, underscoring the divisions between the northern European states and Rome.

Despite Caesar’s claim that the Druids’ ‘rule of life’ originated in Britain and was afterwards transferred to Gaul, and that ‘those who would study the subject more

94 Ibid., p. 91.
96 Ibid., pp. 6-7.
97 Ibid., p. 7.
accurately,’ would journey to Britain to learn it, it was relatively late before the Druid mythos finally returned to mainland Britain. Bypassing England and Wales, the mythos next passed to Scotland via Parisian scholar Hector Boece, where, according to Hutton, the Scots ‘were going in for some uninhibited historical mythologizing of their own, involving the invention of scores of non-existent kings.’

The Welsh, meanwhile, centred their own mythologising on the figure of the bard, who, according to Hutton, ‘had defined their national identity in the course of resistance to the English.’ This was all to change in later centuries, particularly the eighteenth, when Wales underwent what Prys Morgan describes as a crisis of identity. This resulted in a ‘sea-change’ in the figure of the Druid, ‘from the arcane obscurantist, who indulged in human sacrifice, to the sage or intellectual defending his people’s faith and honour.’ It was then that the ‘Welsh began to see that they had a special relationship with him that was different from Druidism in England.’

In 1586 William Camden published Britannia, which proved immensely popular and was revised by William Gibson in 1692, rooting Druidry in the landscape of a newly imagined British state centred on England. The Druids provided a much-needed common past to a United Kingdom with no obvious history to support it. This past, however, was presented in such a way as to appear exclusively Christian. Indeed, in one of the most fundamental shifts in the direction of the Druid mythos in modern

100 Ibid., p. 8.
102 Ibid., p. 63.
times, Druids were not only absolved of their pagan past, but were held up as models of Christian piety. William Stukeley’s treatises on the ancient megalithic monuments of Britain, was intended, according to Piggott, ‘as a complicated religious tract, the Druids-as-wished-for by an eighteenth century clergyman.’¹⁰⁴ This is perhaps a simplified version of Holinshed’s Chronicles of the late sixteenth century, which, as Hutton has observed, resolved the conflicting accounts of the classical writers by presenting a story of degeneration from the ‘wise and pious people’ of pre-historic Britain to ‘bloodstained witch doctors’.¹⁰⁵ In the religious turmoil of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, notes Hutton, this scheme would have had particular resonance for Protestants who saw it as a prototype for the corruption of medieval Catholicism.¹⁰⁶

The mid-eighteenth century saw a dramatic turn in the Druid mythos, with the emergence of the concept of Druids worshipping in stone circles rather than forest groves. Works by John Aubrey, John Toland and William Stukeley established for the first time the connection between Stonehenge and the Druids, capturing the public imagination in such a way as to thrust what had been up until then an academic revival into the public sphere, where it has remained to this day. By the end of the century, Druids were, according to Piggott, well established in more than one role. They could, according to taste, be seen as ‘Patriarchal pre-Christian Christians; savages reflecting either the good or the bad qualities of Polynesians real or imagined; ... fierce anti-Roman champions of liberty as in Mason’s play Caratacus (1759) or as

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 10.
the colourless and rather gentlemanly priests envisioned by Pope in his projected

*Brutus* (1744).\(^{107}\)

The mythos took a further turn in the latter half of the eighteenth century, when Iolo Morganwg introduced a number of new elements, including the Druid’s Prayer and the Invocation to Peace, two constituents of Druid ritual still widely practiced today.

The novelty of Morganwg’s contributions was, of course, never revealed by him or his companions. Instead, he declared that his whole corpus of Druidic teaching had been preserved, virtually intact, as ‘a continuous tradition of lore and wisdom going back to the original prehistoric Druids.’\(^{108}\)

By the nineteenth century, today’s Druid mythos was all but complete, and began to feature more widely in popular culture, in fiction, theatre and opera. Its legacy continued well into the twentieth century, and was only interrupted by the emergence of a British counter-culture in the 1950s and 60s. This, the most recent shift in the Druid mythos, centred on Ross Nichols, educator, naturist and friend of Gerald Gardner, founder of modern Wicca. Their friendship gave rise to, among other things, the adoption of the eight-fold wheel of Druidic festivals, combining the solstice and equinox celebrations already observed by the major Druid Orders with the Celtic fire festivals used to mark significant points in the agricultural calendar.

It was as a result of this union, and Nichols’ subsequent Chieftainship of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids that the Druid mythos finally shook off its Christian mantle and came to be associated with a growing Pagan revival, under the twin influences of

\(^{107}\) Piggott, op. cit., p. 159.

\(^{108}\) Ibid., p. 160.
the Western Mystery Traditions, such as that of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and a growing awareness of Native American and Eastern religious practices. It was during the decades of the 1960s and 70s that Druidry gained serious notoriety, thanks to much-publicised confrontations with English Heritage and, to a lesser extent, the National Trust over the right to observe the solstice festivals at sites such as Stonehenge and Avebury. This in turn gave rise to perhaps the most recent manifestation of the Druid mythos, the Druid as political activist. The most widely-regarded Druids of the past few decades, such as Arthur Uther Pendragon, are known as much for their campaigning, on issues such as environmentalism, free speech and individual liberty, as they are for their spirituality.

These are just a few examples of the Druid mythos as it has survived to this day. This study, written mainly to highlight some of the ways in which modern Druids root their spiritual practice in the past, in the spirit world, or in the mythos itself, is not the place for an in depth investigation into the mythos’ constituent parts. Such an investigation, a natural progression of the present study, is, however, long overdue.
Chapter 4

**Grouping modern Druids**

As mentioned in the introduction, attitudes to the past among modern Druids are varied. While some persevere with the historic mode, ignoring many of the later additions to the Druid mythos, others turn to the spiritual mode to augment the metaphysical foundations of their spirituality, while a third camp view the past with something very much resembling the mythic mode. In general, however, it is my belief that the majority of modern British Druids have a much more sophisticated attitude to the past than professional historians such as Piggott suggest, more sophisticated in some cases than that of Piggott himself. The basis for this claim lies in the fact that, although attitudes to the foundations of modern Druidry are widely varied and often at odds with each other, there is an identifiable trend towards the mythic mode of interpretation.

In *The Druid Renaissance*, Philip Carr-Gomm echoes the concerns of historians such as Piggott when he describes the historical basis of Druidry as ‘some lines from the classical authors, whose accounts are probably inaccurate anyway, a few inferences drawn from linguistic and archaeological research, which could be wrong, with the rest of the cloth woven from material written from the seventeenth century onwards, replete with speculation, forgery and fantasy.’ He sympathises with the inquisitive newcomer, who, expecting to find a solid historical foundation to underpin the

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extensive mythos, ends up feeling tricked and defrauded and liable to leave Druidry behind for something more substantial and serious.

Despite the likelihood of such a disappointment, an increasing number of individuals are identifying themselves as Druids and are therefore having to come to terms with the apparent contradiction between the lack of historical source material on the one hand, and the fact that modern Druidry continues to draw so much of its inspiration from the past on the other. They must accept this contradiction or attempt to resolve it; either way, their response can be categorised as belonging to historic, spiritual or mythic modes. These three categories are, in the long term, an inadequate means of measuring such a complex set of beliefs, and others will be required as a clearer picture begins to emerge. Even within the limitations of this study, however, they are considerably more sophisticated than Piggott’s reckoning that modern Druids are simply deluded.

There are currently over two dozen recognised large Druid Orders operating in the British Isles,¹¹⁰ and countless smaller Groves, Gorseddau and seed groups. In the last England and Wales census, over 1,600 individuals cited Druidry as their religion,¹¹¹ although this by no means represents the total number identifying with the term Druid in these regions in either a religious or a non-religious sense.¹¹²

¹¹² In a poll conducted by Philip Carr-Gomm in 2004, only 9% of the 116 respondents who identified with the term Druid stated that Druidry was their religion. The majority (76%) described Druidry as a ‘spiritual and philosophical approach’, while the remaining respondents (18%) referred to it as a ‘magical/discipline/path’. Admittedly, this poll is neither scientific nor large enough to draw any absolute conclusions, and as the poll was hosted on the online message board of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (an international organisation which promotes the practice of Druidry independently
Modern Druids are notoriously difficult to categorise, the structure of British Druidry being open, de-centralised and non-hierarchical. The only organisation resembling a governing body is the Council of British Druid Orders, established in May 1989 as a forum for discussion and co-operation between the numerous Druid Orders. However, in 1995/6 three Orders resigned from CoBDO in protest at political engagements, particularly in relation to public access to Stonehenge. It seems that modern Druids neither want nor need an umbrella organisation, nor desire the uniformity that this would entail.

Despite the diversity of modern Druidry, it can, for simplicity’s sake, be roughly divided into three broad categories – fraternal, cultural and spiritual. Fraternal Druidry, thought by Michel Raoult to derive from Henry Hurle’s formation of the Ancient Order of Druids (AOD) in 1781, developed into a system of mutual insurance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, like Freemasonry, spread rapidly throughout Europe and America. Unlike Freemasonry, however, the AOD was open to working-class and lower middle-class initiates as well as the merchant and upper classes. Although religion was rarely discussed at AOD meetings, the underlying attitude was devoutly Christian. As a result, fraternal Druids were sufficiently removed from the pagan Druids of antiquity for such historical considerations to have little impact on their contemporary practice. Nevertheless, Raoult attributes the survival of the Druid name into the twentieth century to fraternal

or alongside other religions) the respondents do not represent a true cross section of Druidry in the British Isles. [http://www.druidry.org/board/viewtopic.php?t=7473](http://www.druidry.org/board/viewtopic.php?t=7473)

Druidry, where it was taken up by the emerging spiritual movement of (Neo-) Paganism.

Cultural Druidry stems from the re-appropriation of cultural events such as the Welsh Eisteddfodau as part of a nationalistic or patriotic celebration. At the end of the eighteenth century, Iolo Morganwg’s forgeries – a combination of Welsh folk tradition, Unitarianism and the prevailing Druidic mythos – were employed to revive the traditional Eisteddfodau by combining the event with his own Gorsedd of Druids whereby the Druids became the judges of the bardic competition, creating a marriage between Druidry and Welsh culture that has lasted to the present day. Like their fraternal cousins, cultural Druids tend not to require a pre-Christian past in which to root their Druidic practice and so Morganwg’s writings have remained central to this distinctly modern tradition.

Spiritual Druidry derives mainly from The Druid Circle of the Universal Bond (An Druidh Uileach Braithreachas) thought to have been founded by John Toland in 1717, and which came to be known as the Ancient Order of Druids. Although, as Raoult notes, there are no contemporary documents to prove the existence of the AOD prior to the twentieth century, tradition states that the Order has not ceased its activities since its inception in 1717.115 Offshoots of the AOD include the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids founded by Ross Nichols and now headed by Philip Carr-Gomm, the British Druid Order founded by Philip Shallcrass, and the Druid Network run by Emma Restall Orr. It is spiritual Druidry that forms the subject of this study.

Following the discrediting of Morganwg’s scholarship from the 1960s onwards, cultural and spiritual Druidry have had to come to terms with the accusation that modern Druidry is based on fantasy and fabrication. Cultural Druidry, itself a largely Christian pursuit, continued to use Morganwg’s materials, while at the same time reasserting its foundations in bardic tradition and the role of the early Church, both of which enjoyed a less problematic history. Spiritual Druidry, however, based closely up to that time on Morganwg’s *Barddas*, faced a more uncertain past. It required, suggests Carr Gomm, ‘a new impulse for spiritual Druidry to start taking on board, in any quantity, material which would free it of the stigma of being an invented tradition based on a literary fraud.’¹¹⁶

This impulse came in the form of a new focus on Celtic sources, as manifested in Britain by Ross Nichols’ break from the AOD in 1964 in order to form the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, replacing much of the esotericism of Morganwg with the vernacular folk histories and myths of the Celtic people. OBOD added to this foundational corpus even further under the Chieftainship of Carr-Gomm with elements of shamanism and archetypal psychology, whilst retaining parts of the Druid revival that were felt to be effective. Meanwhile, others, and especially those in America, rejected the previous four centuries of revivalism as ‘aberrant’, and in the words of Carr-Gomm ‘tried to create a Druidism based solely upon historical authenticity.’¹¹⁷ American groups such as A Druid Fellowship focused on Celtic literary and archaeological sources at the exclusion of the revivalist’s contributions.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 95.
It is not too much of a generalisation to say that if American Druid organisations tend towards reconstructionism, a predominantly historic mode of representing Druidry’s past, British Orders are much more likely to acknowledge the other aspects of the Druid mythos in something resembling a mythic mode. This is complicated by the fact that the majority of the British OBOD’s members are American, whilst a large number of the American ADF’s members are based in Britain and mainland Europe. Although the relationship between these two approaches is not uncritical – in The Druid Mythos, for example, Carr-Gomm asks whether ADF leader Isaac Bonewits’ need to ‘slough off’ what he calls ‘Mesopagan’ (i.e. revivalist) Druidry is possible, or even desirable\textsuperscript{118} – opinions tend not to be prescriptive and there remains an open dialogue.

British Druidry, therefore, while encompassing a range of beliefs, does tend towards the spiritual or mythic modes at the expense of the historic mode. This is attested to by Emma Restall Orr, former Joint Chief of the British Druid Order and founder of the Druid Network:

‘There are ... those within the faith for whom the journey is an intellectual quest to discover the authentic nature of Druidry. These Druids mainly reject any work later than the medieval texts, ... creating a modern Druidry which is deemed to have an authentic ancient base... A greater proportion of those within the Druid tradition relate to the Celtic literature as works of creativity, not potential sources of authenticity, content that modern Druidry needs no validation from the past, having evolved naturally into its present state, always existing on the inner planes.’\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{118} Carr-Gomm, The Druid Renaissance, p. 13.
The remainder of this chapter will focus on how and why the majority of British Druids are able to overcome this apparent lack of authenticity and embrace a past that is as rich in myth and speculation as it is in empirical history.

**Responses to the foundations of Druidry**

John Michael Greer, Grand Archdruid of the Ancient Order of Druids of America, suggests that it is odd that, over the last few decades, questions of Pagan origins have been framed in terms of bare historical fact. On the contrary, he claims, in discussions of Pagan origins within the Pagan community the issues arising are invariably mythic rather than merely historic. It is his belief therefore that it is important to untangle Pagan historical narratives by approaching them at least partly from their mythic side.\(^\text{120}\) Greer writes from an American perspective, where representations of the Druid past have tended towards the historic rather than the mythic mode. He draws attention to the fact that some post-modernist theorists claim that history and myth are not categorically different, but agrees with critics of this position that these claims are overstated.\(^\text{121}\) British writers Carr-Gomm and Restall Orr provide a perspective more closely akin to the mythic mode.

Carr-Gomm articulates the apparent contradiction between the lack of historical source material on the one hand and the fact that modern Druidry continues to draw so much of its inspiration from the past on the other by describing a battle between two ideologies, the materialist and the spiritual, a battle we must face if we are to understand who the Druids are. As an example of a materialist ideology, he cites


\(^{121}\) Ibid., p. 46.
Piggott, who, adamant in his reliance upon material evidence such as that provided by first-hand documentation and archaeology, fails to consider other alternatives – in this case divine or otherworldly sources of inspiration and knowledge. ‘Unfortunately for Professor Piggott,’ he argues, ‘but fortunately for us, it is possible to understand that the conclusions he has drawn from his study of Druidry are dependent almost exclusively on his particular ideology and when presented as “history” become in themselves dangerously misleading.’¹²² We must acknowledge, Carr-Gomm suggests, the way in which different ideological stances affect the way in which the past is interpreted. Piggott’s book, while attempting to pass itself off as an objective ‘scientific’ study, ‘fail[s] to make it clear from the beginning that the author takes a particular view of history which, when understood, is seen to be limited and prejudiced.’¹²³ Carr-Gomm advocates a kind of critical reflexivity uncommon at the time in which Piggott was writing, observed only by those that were aware of the implicit contribution of their own personal or cultural attitudes to the perceived objectivity of their writing.

This at once suggests that Piggott and Carr-Gomm should be located at opposing ends of the spectrum that separates historic and mythic modes, the academic historian tending towards the historic mode, an objective past immune from the interference of the observer, and the Druid tending towards the mythic mode, openly sceptical of historical accounts that presume to convey a single and irrefutable version of the past. This does not mean, however, that Carr-Gomm’s version of the past is any more authentic than Piggott’s, merely that he makes the technology of authenticity, in both cases, apparent. Neither does it mean that he necessarily considers a single version of

¹²³ Ibid., p. 3.
the past ultimately unattainable; he may just disagree with Piggott’s particular version. Further investigation into the writing of Carr-Gomm is needed in order to define his position with more accuracy.

Carr-Gomm’s chieftainship of OBOD, since he was appointed to the role in 1988, has been deeply influenced by his training in archetypal psychology. He believes that insights from historical sources are ‘elaborated in modern Druidry by the workings of the unconscious mind.’\textsuperscript{124} He summarises the way in which the notion of psychological archetypes corresponds with the way in which he responds to the past, stating that while many commentators see Druidry as ‘a human creation, with a gap in linear time creating an unbridgeable chasm between “real” Druids who lived thousands of years ago, and “fake” Druids who have lived from the eighteenth century onwards...’, he prefers to see Druidry as existing in the spiritual or archetypal world as a source of inspiration.\textsuperscript{125} It is this universal essence of Druidry, regardless of time and human interference, that informs how Druidry is manifested in the real world; an ideal that ‘each generation must attempt to connect with.’\textsuperscript{126} He maintains what is essentially a spiritual mode of representation.

While providing a neat way of relating both ancient and modern Druidry to a common source and explaining the lack of continuity in Druidry in the mundane world (‘never... lost as a tradition – only hidden from the public gaze.’),\textsuperscript{127} Carr-Gomm is in danger of replacing one metaphysical foundation (the ‘real’ past) with another (archetypal Druidry). For unlike a true proponent of the mythic mode, he believes in a single

\textsuperscript{125} Carr-Gomm, \textit{The Druid Renaissance}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{126} Carr-Gomm in Matthews, \textit{The Druid Source Book}, p. 6.
metaphysical truth that underpins all manifestations of it in the real world, advocating what is known in psychology as a ‘top-down’ theory that religion emanates from the divine, rather than a ‘bottom-up’ theory that religion is an ideological superstructure created by man out of his own needs.\textsuperscript{128} Unlike the proponent of the historic mode, however, who believes that a true history can be written, Carr-Gomm neither believes that the foundation of Druidry is achievable in the mundane world, or that certain manifestations of it more accurate than others. His archetypal Druidry is more of a guiding inspiration than an ultimate aim to which Druids should aspire. This, combined with the fact that he also believes that history is imbued with the politics of the observer,\textsuperscript{129} shifts Carr-Gomm’s spiritual stance closer to the mythic mode than the historic mode.

Another point to raise about Carr-Gomm’s archetypal Druidry is how far it is synonymous with the Druid mythos itself. For what is the mythos other than the accumulative construction of an archetype in the realm of imagination? This idea implies that Druids, both ancient and modern, have always drawn their defining inspiration from the mythos to which they themselves have contributed, a truly post-modern concept. In post-structuralist terms, the archetype/mythos becomes the \textit{langue} that each manifestation of Druidry, or \textit{parole}, falls within the boundaries of, while simultaneously re-defining those self-same boundaries. Manifest Druidry is therefore, a supplement of archetypal Druidry, both additional to it and yet central to its development.

\textsuperscript{128} Carr-Gomm, \textit{The Elements of the Druid Tradition}, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{129} ‘[W]e would be making a great mistake if we thought the “objective” books presented the true case, because the underlying ideological stance of the historian intimately affects the way he presents and interprets his data.’ Ibid., p. 1.
The only thing distinguishing Carr-Gomm’s archetypal Druidry from the Druid mythos is the fact that while his is divine and independent from human experience, the Druid mythos is wholly human-made, constituted of nothing other than textual re-interpretations of itself. It is clear that today’s Druids are responding to an archetype of Druidry recognisable in the Druid mythos. The question is at what point did this process of introspection begin? Were the ancient Druid’s responding in a similar way to a cultural mythos, a language of Druidry to which they themselves contributed? At what point did Druidry become introspective and self-generating? The truth is that we can never know whether Druids were aware of the Druid mythos prior to the seventeenth century. At some point between the onset of the Enlightenment and the present day, the Druid mythos became the foundation upon which further manifestations of Druidry were based. In other words, Druidry entered the hyperreal.

Like Carr-Gomm, Emma Restall Orr uses the concept of inspiration as a way of incorporating history into her particular brand of druidic practice, exploring the way in which ‘Druidry has always continued, evolving through the millennia, existing on the inner planes of the human collective psyche and in the worlds of spirit beyond the mist…’\textsuperscript{130} Insisting that her own contemporary practice requires no historical justification,\textsuperscript{131} she nevertheless shows a profound reverence for the historical roots of the Druid tradition.

On closer investigation, however, we can see that Restall Orr’s description of Druidic inspiration subtly differs from Carr-Gomm’s explanation, an explanation in which

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  \item \textsuperscript{130} Restall Orr, \textit{Principles of Druidry}, p. 32.
  \item \textsuperscript{131} ‘Its validation comes solely from its effectiveness, now, as ever… I don’t claim my practice to be identical to that of a Druid priest five millennia ago, or two millennia, or five hundred years, or even ten.’ Emma Restall Orr, \textit{Living Druidry}, (London: Piatkus, 2004), p. 19.
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Druidry operates both as a source of inspiration in the spiritual or archetypal world and as the embodiment of that inspiration in the corporeal world. For while both accounts are similarly ahistorical, Restall Orr’s version diverges from that of Carr-Gomm in that it is centred not on divinity, but on the relationship between human and non-human spheres, ‘evolved through the needs of the land and the people that have lived on the land.’ This is one step further from the metaphysical foundation rejected by Carr-Gomm in its historic form, but somehow reproduced by him in a spiritual guise.

The main feature of Restall Orr’s writing that differentiates her from other Druidic authors, however, is her questioning of the fundamental reality upon which any objective historical account is reliant. It is this aspect that makes her one of the most radical voices of modern Druidry. The first clue to this more radical strand of thinking is Restall Orr’s continual emphasis on personal, rather than universal accounts of history. In Living Druidry, she introduces Druidry as ‘a spirituality that emerges and grows from a different foundation for each person, according to their own bloodline, family and community history.’ The notion of multiple foundations and the emphasis on family or community histories suggests that Restall Orr is sceptical of the notion of a single overarching history implicit in the historic mode. For her, the common ground between people is not the reality of a unified past, but the language with which each individual constructs her own past.

She argues that Druidry does not support the need for an external or social affirmation about what is reality, truth or imagination. Instead, ‘there is an acknowledgement of

133 Restall Orr, Living Druidry, p. 6.
each individual’s subjective experience of the world, and an understanding that, based on their own perception and acceptance, that experience might well be radically different for each and every one of us. What common ground can be found comes not from shared experience, ‘but through the value of a shared language, the language of our spirituality.’ This language is the *langue* of the Druid mythos, the self-reflecting narrative corpus that informs each Druid *parole*, each successive re-interpretation of the tradition that influences its future development. It is interesting to note how Restall Orr chooses language, the medium of the textualist mythic mode and the focus of much of post-modern theory, as a fitting metaphor for the foundations of her Druidry.

According to Restall Orr, it is through language that Druidry is brought to life, by the ‘emotional input and word magic of the specific bard who tells his story in the context of the here and now. There is no pretence about objective truth.’ The context of the here and now is the sole province of the mythic mode: the *langue* or Druid mythos in existence when the story is told. Whereas in the historic mode language is little more than a means of accessing a truth that exists in the domain of the real, in the mythic mode the domain of language is the only place where meaning can originate.

The bard is indeed the magician of the mythic mode, in that the stories he tells are not mere representations of reality, they go some way to reconstituting it, or at least that much of it that is meaningful. In the words of Philip Shallcrass, founder and Joint Chief of the British Druid Order, he ‘remodels’ history so that it is transformed into ‘the myths and legends that inform our sense of personal and cultural identity,

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134 Ibid., p. 25.
135 Ibid., p. 25.
136 Ibid., p. 90.
providing the backdrop to our existence, our beliefs, our sense of self, our connection with the past and the sacred land.’ While he is limited by the constraints of the Druid mythos, and other discourses that define what is possible, acceptable and popular, these constraints are not totally prohibitive. He reflects the mythos in the truest sense, providing a representation of it as it exists in the here and now, while at the same time contributing to the mythos of the future through his own impositions, both conscious and unconscious. How much he is able to influence the Druid mythos (and reality in general) is, of course, dependent upon his power and influence among the mythic community and the utility and aesthetic appeal of his particular telling. Nevertheless, as language returns to the status it once had before the Enlightenment project, so myth, in the true mythic mode, is re-enchanted.

Like other examples of the mythic mode, Restall Orr’s interpretation of the foundations of Druidry raises a number of ethical considerations that she only partially answers when she states that ‘[w]e learn that to judge another’s reality as unreal is not just ignorant and narrowminded; it is also dishonourable.’ Like her Druidry, Restall Orr’s ethics are not based upon a universal foundation of truth or divinity, but upon each person’s response to the particular reality that is apparent to them, thus breaking down the division between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour that has come to be seen as natural in liberal Western cultures. To my mind, there is something lacking, even dangerous, in an ethics of the personal, although it is clear that a universal ethics is precluded in the mythic mode, one reason why post-modernism has often been criticised as bordering on nihilism. It is not sufficient to state that a hyperreal Druidry is exempt from ethical considerations, for this is merely

138 Restall Orr, Living Druidry, p. 57.
an abdication of responsibility. Without recourse to further study, however, it is enough to say that Druidry, represented through the mythic mode, is not in itself an ethical (or for that matter unethical) practice. Whether it is Druidry’s role to provide ethical guidance is a question that exceeds the remit of this study.

Testifying to the theory that modern Druids reject the historic mode, Restall Orr explains how, to them, linear continuity is not as important as the inspiration that underlies it, how ‘[v]iewing the landscape and various stretches of the track in search of the nature of the tradition, what appears most important is not the continuity but the colours, the detail and the images that catch our eye.’\textsuperscript{139} She even goes so far as to suggest that continuity with the ancient Druids would mean that we would not necessarily consider them as sacred, stating that ‘[a]nything 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.’\textsuperscript{140} This implies, quite reasonably, that what constitutes something being sacred is not its inherent worth or divinity, but the fact that it is strange, distanced or alien. It also suggests, however, that sacred practices, such as Druidry, are a product of human observation, a belief based firmly in a mythic rather than a spiritual mode of representing the foundations of modern Druidry.

The range of responses to Druidry’s foundations is often most apparent in internet fora, some of which have memberships in the hundreds and thousands. The following example demonstrates the way in which a direct relationship with the Druids of the

\textsuperscript{139} Restall Orr, \textit{Principles of Druidry}, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., p. 24.
past via the historic mode remains of great importance to many of those who identify
with the term:

I need to believe that the druids really existed. I don’t know why, but the idea of
them not existing really bothers me... I never even considered it. If some day we
ever find the truth conclusively, I hope it shows the druids were real, because if
they’re not, then maybe I’m not real...141

Others demonstrate an approach to the past that acknowledges the rhetorical nature of
the tradition as a legitimate foundation:

For me, I know that the ‘druid’ that I am does not require a historical example. I
simply believe and follow the ideas and ideals proposed in those stories about
them... That’s who I am, regardless of anyone else, historical or not.142

In the majority of cases there appears to be a widespread tolerance of both
approaches, as exemplified by one member of the OBOD message board, who
explains how ‘[s]ome prefer to build on a foundation of what existed before, [whilst]
others will wipe the slate clean and begin again. Which is more valid? ... [It] depends
on your interests doesn’t it?’143 Neither of these positions, however, are exclusive to
the mythic mode, for despite stating that historical fact is not essential to modern
Druidry, they do not go so far as to assert that such facts are only available to us
through a mythos that necessarily obscures our vision of them.

Nevertheless, examples of the mythic mode are to be found; the author of the previous
post states that ‘[h]istory as we would call it … is a series of facts in a narrative that
reflects the observers view of a given event, person [or] country over a period of time.

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141 Underground River, ‘Were the ancient druids ever real?’ on the OBOD message board, 5 October
142 Azrienoch, ibid., 6 October 2004.
143 Beith, ‘Druid representations of “the past”’ on the OBOD message board, 23 May 2006,
but even “verified history” evolves with each new study, re-reading, [and] reinterpretation by different observers and with the emergence of new evidence over time. This critical attitude to history-making appears widespread in modern Druidry, a possible legacy of its rapid expansion amidst the counter-cultural influences of the 1950s and 60s. Other examples give a better insight into the awareness of the rhetorical nature of Druidry’s foundations. As one member puts it, ‘since we know very little of the wisdom of the ancient druids, the knowledge we have comes from the idea of the Druids.’ It is within the realm of ideas, within the Druid mythos, that Druidic knowledge is constructed.

Despite the variety of approaches to the foundations of Druidry, and such a range of meanings attributed to the figure of the Druid, it is clear that Druidry continues to be a powerfully inspirational term. The author of two of the quotations cited above explains this most succinctly:

[I] you want to use the term ‘druid’ as a modern description of a person practising a ‘neopagan’ philosophy/spirituality with Celtic leanings then that is fine... But [it] begs the question[:] why use that distinct term? [W]hy not make up a new one? ... People who call themselves ‘Druids’ today, I would imagine, do so for the reason that they are attracted to this mysterious term and its connotations...

Druidry’s power derives from the matrix of associations that make up the Druid mythos. For those who wish to access this power, Druidry provides an instantly recognisable social and spiritual reality, a rich seam of tradition to tap into. Modern Druids are able, as Carr-Gomm explains, to ‘enjoy Druidry’s evocative power, and ...
approach its history with discernment.\textsuperscript{147} Many are able to do this in quite radical ways, destabilising conventional concepts of the distinction between history and myth, and between reality and representation.

While Enlightenment ideologies form the basis of their thinking, modern Druids are more likely than not to entertain a view of the past that is tolerant of multiple ‘truths’, both historical \textit{and} mythical, co-existing alongside each other. This is a much more sustainable attitude than the historic mode, which remains the preoccupation of historians such as Piggott. With its tendency towards the mythic mode, Druidry provides a suitable platform from which to contemplate a potential restoration of indiscriminate myth, and a possible re-enchantment of the past.

\textsuperscript{147} Carr-Gomm, \textit{The Druid Renaissance}, p. 120.
Conclusion

As has been demonstrated throughout the course of this study, the historical Druids are not the only legitimate foundation of modern Druidry. Rather, it is the mythos that has been the defining influence upon Druidry as far back as it is possible for us to know. The negative associations of myth today were formed at the time when representations of the past became disenchanted at the onset of the seventeenth century. By re-appropriating myth and by asserting that it is not fundamentally inferior to history, we can unravel the opposing modes of representing Druidry’s foundations, and consider a possible re-enchantment of the past, centred on the figure of the Druid.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s central thesis in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that despite its project of disenchantment, Enlightenment is destined to fall back into myth. The intention to demystify the world, to gain a better understanding of its true workings, is undermined by the very separation between representation and reality through which meaning was constructed by the liberal humanist subject. In Derridean terminology, Enlightenment faces the realisation that the chain of signifiers separating representation from the logos of ultimate truth is unending. As meaning is deferred from text to text along the chain, as definitions are supplemented, expanded upon, elucidated, so ‘enlightenment with each step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology.’

148 Horkheimer and Adorno, op.cit., p. 12.
The critique of Enlightenment as internally contradictory has been championed both by traditionalists such as Kenneth Burke as well as more radical thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and later twentieth century post-modernists. As Schmidt explains, the latter have ‘basically agreed with their conservative brethren that reason has undermined its own foundations – though, less concerned about the results, they have been inclined to endorse Nietzsche’s dictum: “That which is falling... Push!”’149 Like the post-modernists and Restall Orr’s bard, there is scope for modern Druids to accelerate the process of destabilising the Enlightenment project (which is still in effect at the onset of the twenty-first century), by demonstrating how reality can be influenced through storytelling, and by re-appropriating myth as other negative terms such as ‘witch’ have been re-appropriated in order to destabilise the mechanisms through which that negativity arises. There is an opportunity to re-enchant history, to reconstitute indiscriminate myth, and to explore an idea of the past that may better explain the pull of Druidry on the sensibilities of its modern-day devotees.

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I have already mentioned some of the limitations of this study, and the long overdue need for a lengthy and detailed investigation of the Druid mythos as the true foundation for modern Druid spirituality, as well as an ethics of subjective history-making in Druidry and elsewhere. Such works form a natural progression from the current study and I would very much like the opportunity to undertake them.

149 Schmidt, op.cit., p. 827.
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