

NEODRUIDRY: SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES ON CONVOLUTED BELIEF

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Abstract: The history of Neodruidry is a convoluted journey from antiquity to social media. This research assesses the establishment and development of Neodruidry and examines how TikTok created and continues to create new versions of the religion. The main objective examines whether the TikTok portrayal of Neodruidry is a continuation of the historically broad religion or if the TikTok representation is a new version of Neodruidry. There is a clear ideological difference between the TikTok version of Neodruidry and the formal religious ideologies. Nevertheless, the Neodruidry of TikTok still fulfills the same functions of the online Neopagan religions despite its perpetuation of false Druidic information.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to assess the establishment and development of Neodruidry and examine the effect of social media transmission of knowledge on the modern, public image of Neodruidry through the social media platform of TikTok. Neodruidry is a Celtic Neopagan religion, meaning it is a revival of a perceived pre-Christian pagan belief system. It is founded on an envisioned connection with the ancient Druids of the Celtic world and a core belief in the respect and reverence of nature. The history of Neodruidry is a convoluted journey from antiquity to social media. Since its religious founding in the eighteenth century, a vast array of beliefs and practices developed based on the needs and social realities of its founders and adherents. The main objective of this research is to examine whether the TikTok portrayal of Neodruidry is a continuation of the historically broad religion or if the TikTok representation is a new version of Neodruidry by analyzing posts with the hashtags, *#neodruid*, *#druidry* and *#neodruidry*. The introduction of TikTok in the twenty-first century allowed for the creation and spread of misinformation regarding Neodruidic ideologies. Based on the findings of this research, there is a clear ideological difference between the TikTok version of Neodruidry and the formal religious ideologies. Nevertheless, the Neodruidry of TikTok still fulfills the functions of Neopaganism despite its perpetuation of false information.

The two main scholars on the ancient Druids and Neodruidry are Ronald Hutton and Michael T. Cooper. Ronald Hutton (D.Phil. Oxford.) is a professor of History and Early Modern Studies at the University of Bristol. He is the leading expert on Druids. He provides insight into the history and modern perception of the ancient Druids and traces their development and reimagination through Neodruidry. Michael Cooper (PhD. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is a professor of Religion and Culture who conducted extensive historic and ethnographic research on modern Druids.

Neopaganism consists of a wide array of beliefs, traditions, and histories that aid in the process of reviving, perpetuating, and creating religious identity for Neopagans. Neopagan religions emphasize individualism and diversity. Sabina Magliocco is a researcher on Neopaganism. She has conducted extensive ethnographic research on Neopaganism, particularly Wicca, and published numerous articles and a book, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*, where she studies Neopagan religions as experienced by their adherents. She defines Neopaganism as a “folk religion,” as it lacks a codified doctrine, has a vast variation of belief across the many individuals and folk groups that identify as Neopagan, and has never been part of mainstream Western culture.¹ Neodruidry is one of the many Neopagan religions in modern society and encompasses these values and overall structure.

Within the folkloristic study of religion, Leonard Primiano introduced the term and concept of “Vernacular Religion” to redirect the aim of folkloric religious studies to include traditions and beliefs as they are created and experienced by individuals. Vernacular Religion is “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it.”² It

¹ Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 25.

² Leonard Norman Primiano, “Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife” *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (1995): 44.

includes any adaptation of religious tradition made by an individual. Neopaganism became a primary example of the theory and concept due to its stress on individuals and their social agency within the broader Neopagan communities. My research on Neodruidry is highly dependent on this understanding of religious studies, as Neodruidry developed based on the revival, adaptations, and the social needs of its adherents outside of any formal institution. Marion Bowman conducted extensive research on Neopaganism, including Celtic Neopagans, and stressed the importance of Neopagan social agency in opposition and negotiation with institutional organizations of religion.³ As we will discuss in chapter four, the TikTok version of Neodruidry perpetuates misinformation on the traditions and belief of the historic Neodruidry, often creating new beliefs. This version of Neodruidry still qualifies as a vernacular religious occurrence, but as I will demonstrate, it should not be labeled “Neodruid,” but rather the broader “Neopagan.”

TikTok Neodruidry is a form of digital folklore that can be studied as a performative experience.⁴ The communication between posters and viewers of posts creates a performative dialogue that expresses and builds identity for participants. Post with the hashtags, *#neodruid*, *#druidry* and *#neodruidry*, on TikTok collectively form a digital folk group labeled as Neodruidry using the hashtags. Hashtags can be viewed a field site for ethnographic inquiry, as they serve as a marker of grouped performative expressions of individual experiences and practices.⁵

³ Bowman, Marion. “Vernacular Religion and Contemporary Spiritualities: Tribute to Leonard Norman Primiano.” *Approaching Religion* 4 no. 1 (2014): 102.

⁴ Anthony Buccitelli, “Performance 2.0: Observations toward a theory of the digital performance of Folklore,” in *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction*, 62. Utah State University Press, 2012.

⁵ Bonilla, Y. and Rosa, J., “#Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States,” *American Ethnologist*, 42 (2015): 6.

In chapter one, I explore the three main sources of the ancient Druids, Classical sources, Welsh and Irish literature, and archaeology, in order to understand the historic foundation upon which Neodruidry is built. Extremely little information survives on the ancient Druids and all sources are second-hand descriptions. The ancient Druids belonged to an oral culture and none of their knowledge survived their disappearance in the 400s C.E. In modern culture, they are ambiguously depicted as a mysterious notion of philosophers, politicians, religious leaders, healers, magicians, teachers, and poets; they rarely possess a clear definition beyond a mysterious class of people. What can and cannot be known of the Druids based on the scarce evidence available is crucial in understanding the development of Neodruidry, as many modern druids justify Neodruid faith as a continuity of antiquity despite the lack of any credible evidence.

In the second chapter, I outline the structural and ideological components of Neodruidry as a formal religion outside the influence of social media. It is highly eclectic in nature and encompasses a wide array of variations across the globe, making it difficult to definitively define its doctrine. I outline ideological commonalities of the religion that broadly define beliefs and practices and highlight how the beliefs developed out of the perceived understanding of ancient Druidic culture.

Chapter three outlines the functions of Neopaganism as they relate to Neodruidry in our modern society and assesses how online communications influence said functions. The public image of Neopagan religions commonly presents all Neopagans as the same, but each religion possesses distinctive ideologies. This chapter outlines how the unique beliefs and functions of Neodruidry make it appealing to adherents by allowing people a broad space in which to construct individual religious identity.

The fourth chapter analyzes how engagement with TikTok aids in the development of the public image of Neodruidry and asks if the misinformation perpetrated on the platform can still qualify as Neodruid. I analyze posts on TikTok using the hashtags, *#neodruid*, *#druidry* and *#neodruidry*, to better understand how information on Neodruidic belief is presented to the general public on TikTok. I examine the engagement of posts in relation to the accuracy of the content in the post and the presentation of the content. Using the most popular posts and the least popular posts with the hashtags. I examine the effect of presentation on popularity. A new version of Neodruidry exists on TikTok that values popularity and aesthetic stimulation over credibility. The TikTok version originates from the interspersal of misinformation and credible information in posts, all labeled as *#neodruid*. Neophytes of Neodruidry or the general public possess no feasible way to filter fact from fiction. I conclude that the TikTok version of Neodruidry still meets the functions of Neopaganism as a Vernacular Religion despite ideological changes from the infusion of posts lacking credibility or accurate information.

CHAPTER ONE

History of *Druid*: Ancient to Neo

The chronicle of the ancient Celtic Druids consists of much mystery. Extremely little is known of the ancient Druids and mystery is alluring to humans because it needs constant interpretation and imagination. The few sources in existence combine to form a mysterious notion of philosophers, politicians, diviners, religious leaders, healers, soothsayers, magicians, teachers, barbarians, and poets alike. In this chapter, we will discuss the history and development of the image of the Druids in order to better understand the foundations upon which Neodruidry exists. Druidic history grew from an elusive ancient social class to a nationalistic movement, a religious reconstruction, and a popular culture character comparable to a modern wizard. Despite the reality that this elite social class of Celtic society lived roughly two thousand years ago, the construction of the Druid image in modern perception through legends and assumed history occurred almost entirely in the modern age. The historic analysis of Druids is less an investigation into their culture as it is an investigation in the world's attempt to encapsulate an unknown, an ideal. Ronald Hutton put it best when he stated, "The Druids may well have been the most prominent magico-religious specialists of some of the peoples of north-western Europe

just over a couple of thousand years ago; and that is all we can say about them with reasonable certainty.”⁶

The Ambiguity of the Sources

What is known of the Druids comes from three non-direct, main sources: Classical sources, Irish and Welsh literature, and archaeology. As an oral culture, the Druids transmitted all knowledge orally. Therefore, no written physical documentation survives from the Druids themselves, leaving it to second and third person voices to tell their story and define their identity. Historian and philosopher Tom Duddy discusses the phonocentric nature of early Celtic society and how it defined the culture experientially. A common misconception of cultures dependent on oral transmission of tradition is that they are uncivilized or undereducated, as exemplified through most Classical references.⁷ Duddy argued that the Celtic commitment to oral culture was a strategic choice, as it enhanced the value of knowledge and the skill of those that shared it. As the Druids were the elite, educated class of early Celtic society, orally transmitting knowledge enhanced their social position and privilege because it exemplified their intellectual skills of memorization, recollection, and oral narration. “Power was exercised exclusively through the oral media of incantation, invocation, curse, blessing, lore, poem, and story.”⁸ The act of the spoken word encompasses a level of social connection and understanding between the narrator and the listener that is lost when written down.⁹

⁶ Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain*, (Yale University Press, 2009). 1.

⁷ Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 7-17: Classical sources generally provide an unfair interpretation of the Druids, as they viewed them as an uncivilized, primitive people. Tacitus, Pliny, and Julius Caesar describe highly morbid practices and people when discussing the Druids. These sources were also recorded in the Early Medieval Period, a time in which the Druids were not at the height of their power.

⁸ Tom Duddy, “Derrida and the Druids: Writing, Lore, and Power in Early Celtic Society,” *Religion & Literature* 25 no. 2/3 (1996): 17.

⁹ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 44-46: Early scholarship, such as the work of Eoin MacNeill (Former Minister for Education of Ireland), argue that Druids used *ogam*, a ceremonial script of grooves and notches carved in wood and

The perceived knowledge of the Druids includes two areas of focus; the metaphysical and the practical, natural knowledge.¹⁰ Their prestige and high status as a social class required much study and preparation in order to encompass all the knowledge required of a Druid. Caesar claimed that students of the Druidic schools took twenty years to complete their training. The reason schooling took so long results from the fact that they memorized all knowledge and wrote nothing down, though they allegedly used Greek script for other translations. One educational subcategory construes them as the historians of the Celtic world, aiding in the advisory role. As the class that held all information of the past, as well as the future, the Druids dominated the world of knowledge in Celtic society. Nevertheless, oral tradition was passed down through the Celtic culture and eventually partially recorded in mythic tradition. Nothing of the oral tradition made it to physical writing until the fifth century CE.¹¹

The Classical references to Druids are largely commentaries on various encounters with them and provide the most evidence into the daily life and description of the Druids as a people. These sources are notably lacking in sound credibility due to limited references, uncertain authenticity, and apparent justification for fabrication for the purpose of sociocultural gain. The Graeco-Romans provide second-hand accounts from an etic perspective. Nevertheless, they provide the foundation for the image of the ancient Druid upon which the popularized lore expanded through elaboration and modern imagination. The most notable and reliable of the Classical sources are Julius Caesar, Pliny, and Tacitus. All three of these commentators describe the functions and characteristics of the Druids. Their words are elaborated upon and as will be

later inscribed in stone found throughout Ireland and western Britain. Eoin MacNeill, argued ogam was used as a mode of communication for the Druids and was later adopted and used by the Christian Irish. Each of the 25 letters are thought to be associated with trees; today it is sometimes referred to as the “Tree Alphabet.” Recent scholarship, however, points out that druidic use of ogam cannot be proven or disproven. There is no evidence to support Druidic use or that every letter represents a tree, despite modern claims.

¹⁰ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 2.

¹¹ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 2.

discussed later, exaggerated in the creation of symbols of Druids based on vague and brief references.

An example and analysis of Classical commentary is Celticist John Carey's analysis of two excerpts from Tirechan's *Collectanea*, a document dealing with the Christian Saint Patrick. Tirechan was an author in the seventh century, a time in which the ancient Druids were likely still present in Ireland, though not at the height of their power. Both excerpts demonstrate the scarcity, ambiguity, and bias behind any sources referencing the Druids. In the first excerpt, Druids are mentioned in reference to the druidic term for the end of the world. Tirechan writes, "Face to face until the day of *erdathe*-as the Druids say; that is, the day of the Lord's judgement."¹² Saint Patrick allegedly preached Christian eschatology to the pagan Irish in his conversion efforts because the end of the world narrative was already familiar to the pagan religion and Christianity offered a solution to the end of the world. This demonstrates the biased function of the druidic reference leaving historic accuracy uncertain.

The second excerpt on which Carey focuses states, "He [Patrick] came to the spring of Findmag which is called Slan, because he was told that the Druids honoured that spring and sacrificed gifts to it as if it were a god."¹³ This quote is commonly used to reinforce the notion of ancient druidic worship of nature. This single quote references it only briefly, and yet is the origin of many modern depictions of Druids and frequently cited to exemplify their religious reverence of nature. This demonstrates how a brief and vague reference can serve as a foundation of belief and practice through the process of elaboration and a growing perpetuation of that elaboration. Interpretational bias must be addressed with every brief mention of Druids, as most of what is known is third hand knowledge.

¹² John Carey, "Saint Patrick, the Druids, and the End of the World," *History of Religions* 36 no. 1 (1996): 42.

¹³ Carey, "Saint Patrick, the Druids, and the End of the World," 42.

The second main sources, Irish and Welsh literature, are less precise and originate from significantly older oral traditions.¹⁴ They also describe an elite social class of philosophers, political advisers, and poets that mediated between this world and the other. These oral traditions references, however, were not recorded until centuries after the Druids lived. Welsh references to Druids are far smaller in number and detail than Irish references. Ireland, therefore, provides the strongest record of the Druids through mythic traditions and the lives of Saints, such as Patrick or Brigid. The earliest Irish oral reference dates Druids back to an estimated third century BCE and depicts Druids as disappearing around the fifth century CE.¹⁵ It is important to note the striking variations in timelines between sources, as they commonly contradict each other, even within one genre of sources. For example, while most Classical sources claim the Druids disappeared around the fifth century, Pliny claimed they remained in society as healers and diviners, and only their political and religious role in society disappeared.¹⁶ This furthers the point that Classical sources lack proper credibility and exemplifies the sociopolitical function of biased claims in that the only aspect of Druids that disappeared were the threatening religion and political influences, leaving the societal, nonthreatening benefits of worldly and medicinal knowledge for the use of the Graeco-Roman world.

The final source, archaeology, provides a significantly less direct source of ancient Druid life. Archaeological material that is indisputably of Druid origin does not exist. Archaeologists use two strategies to approach druidic research: 1) assume Druids were so integral to the structure of ancient Celtic society that any findings associated with the larger society can be connected to them, and 2) identify specific archaeological artifacts and features with direct

¹⁴ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 30.

¹⁵ Stuart Piggott, *The Druids* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), 25.

¹⁶ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 21.

druidic association.¹⁷ Neither strategy provides concrete evidence. The prior relies on unreliable literary sources to justify an integral social position. The latter only offers possible association to druids and must compete with varying scholarly hypotheses explaining the origins of a given artifact and feature. The vast amount of origin hypotheses surrounding Stonehenge illustrates this issue. While the hypothesis that the Druids built Stonehenge has since been overwhelmingly disproved in academia, William Stuckeley famously claimed Druids built it as a place of worship using evidence from his excavation of Stonehenge.¹⁸ Despite a lack of any evidence to support this theory, Stonehenge is still frequently cited as being of druidic origin among modern adherents of Druidry.

Religion, Ritual, and Sacred Spaces through the Eyes of the Other

The following is a brief summary of the most commonly cited descriptions of Druid practices by the aforementioned sources used as foundation and validation for modern belief. The religion of the Druids defines them in the modern world. They are perceived as the religious caste of the Celtic society, performing rituals, and holding knowledge of the religion. Unfortunately, they never wrote down the knowledge and all that can be inferred is what is known of Celtic religion. The pagan Celts of Britain, Ireland and the Continent had a wide and malleable pantheon of gods, varying by place and time; in total, 374 named gods were recorded in late antique and early medieval Celtic society. The identities and relationships of and between the gods varied over time; any hierarchy would have been specific to time and place in the Celtic world. The gods in Celtic society, however, are not viewed as creators. Rather, they are the ancestors. Druids possess the ability to “know the will of the gods,” therefore acting as mediums

¹⁷ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 23.

¹⁸ Ronald Hutton, "Modern Pagan Festivals: A Study in the Nature of Tradition," *Folklore* 119, no. 3 (2008): 253.

between the worldly and otherworldly planes.¹⁹ Specific information beyond named gods and the myths associated with them are unknown to the modern world, as that knowledge disappeared with the original Druids. It is important to note, however, that the Celtic pantheon is not the only pantheon found across the many Orders of Neodruidry.

Caesar described the function of Druids within this religious world less disparagingly than other Classical sources by stating, “The Druids are concerned with worship of gods, look after public and private sacrifice, and expound religious matters.”²⁰ Conversely, Tacitus and Pliny clearly demonstrate a view of the Druids as an uncivilized, barbaric people. Caesar respected their power, if not still describing the morbid practices.²¹ Caesar also claimed that they maintained knowledge of the stars and the earth.²² This is a fair description of the Druids, but undeniably one of the least offensive descriptions of Druid practices. Other commentators clearly demonstrate a distaste for abhorrent Druid rituals and practices, most noteworthy being that of human sacrifice.

Sacrifice is amongst the most commonly referenced ritual of ancient Druids. It's embedded so deeply into religious and political matters; it grew into a defining characteristic. According to Caesar, sacrifices served as a highly important ritual within Druid society to the extent that if a member disobeyed a rule or law, either politically or religiously, the harshest punishment possible was banishment from the sacrifices.²³ Sacrifices appeased the gods. Caesar claimed Druids believed the gods found satisfaction in slaughter of flesh and, therefore, humans could influence them through this act. Sacrifices served to promote worldly changes, such as

¹⁹ Peter Ellis, *The Druids* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 115.

²⁰ Caesar, *The Gallic War VI* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), 13.

²¹ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 7-9.

²² Caesar, *The Gallic War VI*, 13-14.

²³ Caesar, *The Gallic War VI*, 13-14.

political and war victories, or to gain the power of divination. The victims of these sacrifices were typically people that suffered from severe illness or prisoners/criminals, as the belief stood that the gods found more satisfaction in the slaughter of these particular victim types. Healthy and innocent victims, however, were said to be used as sacrifices if they had a limited supply of criminals or the sick.²⁴ Methods of these ritual murders included hanging, shooting with bows and arrows, burning, drowning, and stabbing. The belief stood that the different methods of ritualized murder bought about different effects.²⁵

It is important to note that evidence of human sacrifice comes solely from Classical sources. One must carefully assess these sources at face value. The Celts believed in capital punishment and carried it out through a religious means.²⁶ Hutton points out that accusations and elaborations of human sacrifice against other cultures allowed Greeks and Romans to assert their superiority over other cultures.²⁷ As pointed out in the above discussion of Saint Patrick using eschatological beliefs to encourage conversion, commentaries on the Druids are commonly used to suit the author's needs. Nothing within the sources available clearly speaks to the moral beliefs of the Druids. The accounts of a barbaric and uncivilized people occur nowhere else in history other than the Classic commentators. Furthermore, archaeological evidence, while demonstrating violent deaths through analysis of human remains, cannot indefinitely conclude that the deaths were due to ritualized murders.²⁸ This is not to say that sacrifice did not occur. Rather, one must remember there is a sense of the other that accompanies Graeco-Roman descriptions of the Druids. For example, Tacitus stated, "The groves devoted to barbarous

²⁴ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 2.

²⁵ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 7.

²⁶ Ellis, *The Druids*, 144-146.

²⁷ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 17.

²⁸ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 25.

superstitions he demolished. For it was their [the Druids'] religion to drench their altars in the blood of prisoners.”²⁹ He describes them as “barbarous.” Throughout history, terms such as “barbaric” and “uncivilized” originate from a sense of unfamiliarity, a lack of comprehension, and the desire to subjugate. One should carefully consider to what extent concepts of gruesome practices and morality can be accurately constructed from what and who remains of past peoples and cultures.

Sacrifices alone, however, did not define ritual amongst the Druids. Two of the most prominent symbols in modern association to ancient Druids are oak and mistletoe and are emphasized in modern Druidry. The idea that oak was of special importance to Druids likely started with the idea that oak provided food and wood for dwellings and fire and was therefore immensely valued. Druids grew to be associated with the oak forests and oak veneration. Pliny stated, “The magicians perform no rites without using the foliage of those trees [oaks]...it may be supposed that it is from this custom that they get their name of Druids, from the Greek word meaning, ‘oak.’” Pliny’s claim that “Druid” means “oak,” however, is false. The name actually comes from the Celtic word for wisdom. Early Celtic societies associated oak with wisdom, likely explaining why Pliny came to that assumption. There are even fewer references to the ritual of using mistletoe. In fact, there exists only one account total, also from Pliny. He describes the ritual as, “Cutting the mistletoe from a sacred oak on the sixth day of the moon and the sacrifice of two white bulls.” Pliny’s brief reference inspired the modern belief that because of the rarity of mistletoe in nature, if found on an oak tree, mistletoe held value and played an important role in healing and promoting fertility and referred to it as “the all-healing.”³⁰ This belief lacks any evidence to support its premise beyond anachronistic reimaginings of Pliny’s

²⁹ Tacitus, *Annals XIX* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 30-31.

³⁰ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 14.

brief comment. Mistletoe exemplifies how the modern image and symbol of Druids originate from scarce references.

While oak and mistletoe were likely valued in ancient druidic culture, rowan held greater significance based on what evidence survives. Whereas association with oak and mistletoe comes entirely from brief references of Pliny, numerous Irish sources describe the rowan tree as likely far more prominent in comparison among the Druids. For example, Irish stories such as *The Siege of Drom Damghaire* depict rowan as a magical tree used in spells and rites of divination.³¹ Despite the elevation of importance of oak and mistletoe in modern depictions of Druids, the frequency of use of rowan and lack of reference in Irish stories suggests rowan held a higher value in ancient druidic culture.

The belief in immortality and soul rebirth represents another aspect of the perceived druidic religion. Reincarnation allegedly played a large role in druidic religion and pervades modern belief in Neodruidry as well. Understanding how Druids viewed transmigration of the soul, however, as with all perceived knowledge of ancient Druids, originated from misinterpretation and misassociation of vague sources; the modern understanding of reincarnation likely varies from what Druids believed. When classical authors recorded druidic information, they tended to compare Druids with the known Greek and Roman world. As a result, Caesar and Diodorus coalesced druidic belief in transmigration of the soul with Pythagorean belief in their accounts of the Druids.³² Pythagoreanism holds that the soul transfers from one body into another, either human or animal depending on how good or evil a person acted in their life.³³ Classical authors, such as Pomponius and Lucan, however, recorded

³¹ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 45.

³² Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 20-21.

³³ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 20.

numerous Gallic tribes that believed in reincarnation of humans in their own bodies in parallel worlds.³⁴ Archaeological evidence in Gallic graves of grave goods suggesting preparation for use in another world further supports this claim.³⁵ It is therefore highly unlikely that Druids believed in the Greek philosophical model of reincarnation despite their representation as such by Caesar and Diodorus. Today, neodruids mix beliefs of Hinduism and Native American beliefs in reincarnation which will be explored in the next chapter.

Sacred space represents another crucial part of the image of an ancient Druid and is where archaeological evidence becomes more prominent. Druids likely maintained shrines and sanctuaries, generally in remote locations.³⁶ The problem with archaeological evidence, however, lies in the inability to definitively determine Druid origins of, for example, a Celtic image engraved on a slab of stone used to argue a space was ceremoniously used by Druids. As Stuart Piggott stated, “Even if one is reasonably certain in interpreting a structure as a temple or a shrine, one cannot then relate them to the beliefs held by the ministrants.”³⁷ For example, one prominent example is the aforementioned claim of William Stuckely on the origins of Stonehenge. This megalithic, circular arrangement of stone is believed by some Neodruid adherents to have served as a temple and possible educational center for the Druids and is still viewed as a sacred space in Neodruidry despite the lack of any evidence.³⁸ Archaeologically and historically speaking, this hypothesis is but one unlikely suggestion among many regarding the function of Stonehenge, as no decisive evidence exists to indisputably determine the function of Stonehenge in ancient times.

³⁴ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 20.

³⁵ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 20.

³⁶ Piggott, *The Druids*, 62.

³⁷ Piggott, *The Druids*, 48.

³⁸ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 307-308.

Society and Female Druids

The social order of the Celtic world is best described as tribal chieftainships that would later come to be called kingships.³⁹ As previously stated, Druids belonged to an elite class. Within society, they likely served as mediators between this world and the other world and as political advisors to leaders.⁴⁰ They were highly respected within society and sought after for advice and aid. The Irish Ulster Cycle frequently features one super-Druid called *Cathbad* who is held with the utmost respect. For example, in *Mesca Ulad*, even the highest king could not speak until after Cathbad had spoken his advice.⁴¹ In Celtic law courts, they were said to be entrusted with all legal decisions, as they are considered the most just of men. These references serve as believed evidence and alleged proof of their wisdom, but again prove to be varied and vague when assessing the totality of references.

The cycles of nature and the land held great significance in festivals and rituals for the ancient Celts and Druids, but a detailed understanding of dates and practices cannot be inferred from the scarce evidence available in modern times. Nevertheless, festivals and rituals are a large part of Neodruidry. Scholarly arguments supporting the significance of ancient druidic festivals surrounding nature originate from the discovery of the Coligny Calendar in 1897. The calendar is an ancient Celtic large bronze tablet discovered in Lyon, France that marks important days and festivals in the Celtic year.⁴² While the exact function remains unclear, the tablet suggests that ancient Celts marked the passage of natural time with festivals. Two festivals are named on the

³⁹ Piggott, *The Druids*, 41.

⁴⁰ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 2-3.

⁴¹ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 39.

⁴² Michael T Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry: A Historical and Ethnographic Study*. Sacred Tribes Press, 2010, 107.

fragmented tablet, Beltane and Lughnasad, but no description of rituals is recorded.⁴³ Festival rituals of ancient Druids are unknown to the modern world, as all inferences originate from biased sources and generally highlight negative portrayals. Modern descriptions are often created by referencing equally scarce and biased sources on general Celtic rituals.⁴⁴ Modern adherents of Neodruidry follow what is called the Wheel of the Year, which includes the Imbolc festival in the spring, Beltane as a summer festival, Lughnasad as a fall festival, and Samhain as a winter festival.⁴⁵ The Wheel pulls on numerous sources to create dates, names, and rituals including the Coligny Calendar and Irish folk stories; modern druids generally consider the festivals a direct descendent of historical druidic practice despite the scarcity of sources.⁴⁶ Chapter two will discuss the festivals in Neodruidry in greater detail.

While women were not socially equal to men within the society, they held a significant amount of respect and ability. Modern beliefs commonly claim that Druids were both male and female, despite the male Druid being significantly more prominent in both the medieval and modern depictions. While fewer in number, the priestess and sorceress maintained a presence in the Celtic world, sometimes reported in the Classical record as even presiding over religious ceremonies.⁴⁷ This is celebrated in numerous Neodruid Orders. Nevertheless, this is yet another reference to the past that is not supported by fact. While the notion of a female sorceress is

⁴³ Michael T Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry: A Historical and Ethnographic Study*. Sacred Tribes Press, 2010, 107.

⁴⁴ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 41: One example comes from a collection of lore surrounding places compiled in the eleventh or twelfth century, called *Dindshenchas*, that describes rituals involving a place called *Maigh Sletch* (located in modern county Cavan in Ireland). A large idol of Ireland called *Crom Croich* was said to have stood there where the Irish people would offer sacrifices on Samhain (identified as November first in the passage) and prostrate themselves before it, often with enough force to cause their death, hence the name *Maigh Sletch*, which translates to “Plain of Prostration.”

⁴⁵ Michael T Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry: A Historical and Ethnographic Study*. Sacred Tribes Press, 2010, 108-9.

⁴⁶ Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry*, 108-9.

⁴⁷ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 9-10.

present, the female status as Druid is not. For example, in *Torchmarc Etaine* (The Wooing of Etain), a woman trained in druidic ways learns and uses spells from a Druid and thus wields the power of the Druids. Stories such as this are the primary evidence used to support the celebrated notion of female Druids. However, as argued by Ronald Hutton, wielding the power does not grant the social label.⁴⁸ While neither proving or disproving the existence of female Druids, this example again demonstrates how the development, celebration, and perpetuation of key symbols of Druidry originate with vague references falsely used as proof.

Neo-Druids

After the disappearance of the druidic class, the topic of Druids faded from interest for hundreds of years. Interest reemerged as a nationalistic effort alongside a rediscovery of Classical texts and eventually developed into Romanticism. For the purpose of this research, the focus of the re-emergence takes place in the eighteenth century with a man named Edward Williams. Modern Druidry with a religious connotation originated in the United Kingdom as a revivalist and reconstructionist movement with Williams, but the history of rediscovery started in the early modern period with a convoluted development that is outside the scope of this research. Renewed interest in Classical sources had already spread through Europe along with the development of Romanticism in the eighteenth century. Romanticism stressed worship beyond the restrictions of the realm of society and highlighted the beauty, numinous knowledge, and virtue of wild nature.⁴⁹ Druids became a bridge to that part of human desire and instinct and represented an historical imagination for Britain.

⁴⁸ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 43-44.

⁴⁹ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 111.

The Welsh Renaissance in the eighteenth century ignited the reemergence of druidic popularity. In the eighteenth century, Methodism and Anglicanism threatened the Welsh national identity, prompting an antiquarian movement. Antiquarians began to uncover, translate, and publish ancient Welsh manuscripts and invoked the image of the Druids to help establish the credibility of their cultural heritage. Edward Williams, the self-proclaimed last living Druid, claimed to maintain the knowledge and wisdom of the traditional ancient Druids.⁵⁰ Williams, commonly referred to by his bardic name Iolo Morganwg, forged information on druid knowledge, belief, and ritual, claiming he found the information in ancient Welsh manuscripts, when in reality he tainted the already questionable credibility of references. It was not until the twentieth century that Williams' fraud was discovered.⁵¹ The research that disproved it, however, was published in Welsh books and has yet to be translated to English. As a result, many English and Americans still believe the claims of Edward Williams.

In 1792, a group of newly claimed Welsh Druids led by Williams performed a public ritual on Primrose Hill in London. This ritual included creating a circle of stones, sheathing a sword, and reciting poems in Welsh and English. This action served the purpose of reviving Welsh cultural identity through the medium of the Druids to the world. According to Lichtenwalner, the revived version of Druidism founded its ideals on the virtues of truth, intellect, egalitarianism, pacifism, and social responsibility. The revived ancient religion, called the Order of the Bards of the Isle of Britain, claimed three branches: The Bards who ruled, the Druids who focused on religious knowledge, and the Ovates who circulated knowledge.

⁵⁰ Shawna Thorp Lichtenwalner, "In the Eye of the Light: Ancient Druids and International Influences," *The Wordsworth Circle* 36, no. 1 (2005): 9.

⁵¹ Ronald Hutton, "Modern Pagan Festivals: A Study in the Nature of Tradition," *Folklore* 119, no. 3 (2008): 254.

Many modern Orders of Druidry are based on the lies of Williams. The extensive vernacular authority of Williams allowed him to obtain the credibility he needed to create the religious movement of modern Druidry in Wales. Modern Orders have one main difference from the initial revival in the eighteenth century; the modern orders have a distinctly pagan identity instead of a system of social philosophy and ritual that might accommodate a variety of faiths. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, new pagan religions throughout western Europe developed, all claiming a connection to an ancient cultural religion for credibility. By the twentieth century, the diffusion of pagan religions spread to America.

Druidry spread through the United Kingdom, into Europe, and eventually to the United States. The invention of the internet allowed it to spread across the globe developing into an official Neopagan religion with over 20,000 adherents worldwide. Druidry is divided into dozens of official groups, or Orders. Within these Orders, adherents can meet in smaller groups called groves. Additionally, many individuals that identify as a druid practice solitarily and belong to no Order or grove. Each Order, grove, and/or individual defines their beliefs and practices differently, drawing on numerous cultures and mythologies. Modern druidic belief and practice is highly eclectic in nature drawing on Celtic culture as well as Slavic, Norse, Eastern Asian, and American Indigenous cultures. Shawna Lichtenwalner describes Neodruidry as embodying a complex set of cosmopolitan influences. Nevertheless, the connection to the ancient druids remains an important part of the religion.

The problem with most revivals of the medieval period or antiquity is that in attempting to capture an abstract idea of the past, the true nature of the past is often lost through interpretation. For example, the use of Irish literature during the Celtic Revival demonstrates a dilemma of trying to capture the essence of Celtic culture from verbal lore. In the process of

attempting to capture the ancient stories in literature, something is lost in translation. Part of the experience is the act of storytelling. This ideal is transferable to other revivalist movements. "In their [Irish writers] efforts to preserve the Gaelic culture, they have the sympathy of everyone who has witnessed a similar movement...there seems something strangely lacking in the work of these authors, who, with all their ability, their poetic feeling, their enthusiasm, have failed to do that which far less pretentious writers of their race have done, to touch the heart."⁵² This concept can be related to the attempts of modern Druidry to capture, revive, and reconstruct the culture of the ancient Druids. In the situation of oral antiquity, the essence of the past can never truly be captured. In reference to the Druids, this fact is increasingly true. Despite the desire to revive the past, whether it is born of nationalism or human reverence of the past, the ancient Druids cannot be truly captured.

It is important to note, that before Williams, using Druids to promote nationalism emerged in Germany, France, Italy, and Scotland in the fifteenth century. The allure of the Druids as a source for validation of identity is a pattern in history, starting in the fifteenth century and repeating itself into modern day society. The image of a Druid was the closest thing Europe had to ancient philosophers of their own, only the knowledge was lost. That did not mean, however, that their lasting influence and symbol lost its effect. For example, In the fifteenth century, Conrad Celtis, a German humanist scholar, wanted to connect German antiquity and identity to the Germans to promote nationalism through a German historical imagination using the Druids. He claimed the Druids fled persecution from the Romans and came to Germany, where they thrived as religious scholars and experts on Greek Philosophy. He connected his tale to the German landscape by claiming he saw seven statues of Druids holding staffs and Greek

⁵² Mary K Ford, "Is the Celtic Revival Really Irish?" *The North American Review* 183, no. 601 (1906): 775.

philosophy books erected at a monastery in Regensburg, but they vanished with time.⁵³ There is no evidence to support any of this claim. By reimagining Druids as part of German history, however, Celtis connected people to an ancient past of an envisioned people symbolizing reverence, wisdom, and a connection to the landscape of the nation. When looking at the very extensive and intricate history of the development of the modern notion of Druids, the pattern of using them as a bridge of connection appears to be their one static characteristic.⁵⁴ This bridge and nationalistic tool did not fully form in Ireland or Southern Britain until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but followed the similar pattern.

The history of Druids would not be complete without a mention, if however brief, of the popular culture manifestation of Druids through films, television, and literature. Druids have come to be synonyms to wizards in modern society. As a character in *Dungeons and Dragons*, druids are sorcerers that harness the power of nature to cast spells and have the ability to shapeshift into animals. In a recent television series, “The Shannara Chronicles,” based on the book series *The Sword of Shannara* by Terry Brooks, a druid character comes back to life to use his magic and knowledge of the ancient days to help fight evil. Druids are portrayed as magical, nature bound, wise warriors in popular culture. One could argue they are a personified ideal and connection to the earth’s innate wisdom, an argument that applies to the entire history of development. Historicity aside, the image of a Druid comes from the needs and desires of people. This is reflected in every stage of development. Druids as barbaric others served the needs of the Classical world. Druids as emblems of national pride connected to the landscape served sociopolitical needs.

⁵³ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 50.

⁵⁴ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 51. A Dominican Friar, Giovanni Nanni, also provided this national historic connection to the Druids in France in 1498 when he wrote an early history of the people claiming a direct descendent of Noah founded the Druids in their lands to teach Greek literacy and poetry.

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In the next chapter, we will explore the development of the religious Orders of Neodruidry, the vast variations of belief and practice, and how adherents share knowledge of the ancient past. We will explore how Druids, as spiritual gurus and a bridge to reconnect to the past, serve as a means to reconnect to an identity lost to a modernized, rationalistic society. Regardless of historicity, Druids exist as an image of and for others.

CHAPTER TWO

Neodruidry: Structure, Belief, and Practice

In this chapter, I explore the fundamentals of Neodruidry in the modern world. As a formal religion, it is highly eclectic in nature and has a wide array of variations across the globe, making it difficult to definitely define its doctrine. Since its emergence in the eighteenth century, Neodruidry looked to antiquity to legitimize beliefs with the authority of the perceived past. Over the course of hundreds of years, it evolved as a folk religion into a large web of ideologies, but commonalities can be used to categorize foundational beliefs. I begin by describing the structural definitions of Neodruidry and its adherents. I then analyze ideological influences and the general ideologies found throughout Neodruidry in order to better understand the values of Neodruidry. Before we can analyze the functions of Neodruidry and the effects of social media in the next chapters, a broad comprehension is required of the fundamentals of the religion.

The Basics: Structure and Membership

There are two forms of Neopaganism: revivalist movements and reconstructionist movements.⁵⁵ The prior uses history as the starting point but adds new aspects to fit the needs of the movement. The latter attempts to rebuild ancient religions exactly using archaeology,

⁵⁵ Outlined by Monica Emrich in Michael T Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry: A Case Study of Ár NDraíocht Féin," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 12, no. 3 (2009): 43.

historical records, folk traditions, and the early literature of the United Kingdom. Most forms of Neodruidry claim to be a reconstructionist movement, but clearly contain aspects of revivalism as well.⁵⁶ Modern Druidry relies on the general history of the Celtic culture, but specific information on the elite social class of the Druids within Celtic society is limited by a lost oral history. Therefore, Neodruidry cannot ever be a pure reconstructionist movement despite any claims.

Neodruidry is divided into official groups, called Orders, each with a specific name and founder. Most modern Orders come from the influence of three original branches of Neodruidry in the 1700s.⁵⁷ The first branch is the Welsh followers of Edward Williams as mentioned in the previous chapter and his Celtic Nationalism in the eighteenth century. The second branch, called the Ancient Order of the Druids, was founded in London by Henry Hurle in 1781. It was a social movement primarily concerned with social welfare advocacy and had little spiritual teachings.⁵⁸ The third branch is the English Order of the Universal Bond, founded by John Toland in 1717.⁵⁹ English Neodruidry started with the Order of the Universal Bond and most modern druidic Orders originate from this society.⁶⁰ Adherents of this order claimed to be directly related to the ancient Druids, relied on the scholarly works of William Stuckeley, revered megalithic sites as connections to the past, and maintained a sense of kinship with nature.⁶¹ Through time, the three branches split repeatedly, forming new Orders with slightly different ideologies. Other prominent Orders include: The Order of the Bards, Ovates, and Druids (OBOD) (founded 1954),

⁵⁶ Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry," 43.

⁵⁷ Within Orders, adherents can meet in smaller groups called groves.

⁵⁸ Michael T Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry: A Historical and Ethnographic Study*. Sacred Tribes Press, 2010, 76-77.

⁵⁹ Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry*, 76-77: This date is uncertain, but is presumed to be a fair estimate.

⁶⁰ Ronald Hutton, "Modern Druidry and Earth Mysteries," *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness, and Culture* 2 no. 3 (2009): 315.

⁶¹ Ronald Hutton, "Modern Druidry and Earth Mysteries," 315.

the Ancient Order of Masonic Druids in America (founded 1912), and the Ancient and Archaeological Order of Druids (founded 1874).⁶² After its initial revival and reconstruction in Wales in the eighteenth century, Neodruidry spread through the United Kingdom, into Europe, and eventually to the United States by the end of the nineteenth century, both continuing existing Orders and creating new Orders.⁶³

If one wishes to be trained in Neodruidry, most twenty-first century Orders offer training programs, notably OBOD. In the early stages of Neodruidry, adherents learned the druid way under the tutelage of an Order's founder. As Neodruidry spread across the globe, adherents remained students in Orders. Generally speaking, each formal Order is led by an Archdruid who leads meetings, gatherings, and rituals. Today, however an individual person need not formally obtain membership in a grove or an Order to call themselves a druid. These lone druids identify as "solitaries" and belong to no Order or grove.⁶⁴ Solitaries that identify as a Neodruid hold great agency in choosing their precise belief system and are often self-taught. In the Western world, anyone can be a druid and in certain Orders, such as The Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids, adherents can be a druid and still belong to another religion like Buddhism or Christianity.⁶⁵ This allows for a large range of beliefs within one religion. The exact number of adherents worldwide is unknown, but in 2001 Neodruidry had an estimated 33,000 adherents worldwide with an annual growth rate of between 14 and 35 percent.⁶⁶ Each Order, grove, and/or individual typically defines their beliefs and practices differently, drawing on numerous cultures and

⁶² Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry*, 77-79.

⁶³ Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry*, 79.

⁶⁴ Sabina Magliocco, "Neopaganism" chpt. in *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, 157, Cambridge Companions to Religion. Cambridge: Cambridge.

⁶⁵ Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry*, 81.

⁶⁶ Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry*, 26-27.

mythologies in the process. This eclectic construction of beliefs makes a definitive description of the beliefs and practices a highly difficult task.

Ideological Origins: Early Influences

Early Neodruidry originated from a socio-political attempt to recapture Welsh identity in opposition to the world.⁶⁷ Despite its nationalistic function, however, in its early years through claims of continuity with antiquity, “Ultimately the new Welsh Druids embodied a complex set of cosmopolitan influences.”⁶⁸ Christianity and Hinduism in particular influenced the early creation of the religion alongside the nationalist goals. Efforts to connect the ancient Druids to Christianity by early Druid revivalists, notably Edward Williams and William Stuckely, led to numerous legends placing Druids in Biblical stories. For example, Druids being present at Jesus Christ’s Crucifixion and Druids as the direct descendants of Noah.⁶⁹ Furthermore, early Christian ideals of morality, universal peace, and goodwill were reflected in Neodruid belief. For example, Williams claimed ancient Druids strove for individual virtue through public service that produced peace and equality. Hinduism influenced Neodruidry through concepts of death and rebirth, as early Neodruid belief claimed all life starts at the lowest point of existence and humans must work their way up through humanity.⁷⁰ The early years of the religion aimed to highlight heritage using the name and authority of the ancient Druids and a hodgepodge of varying cultural beliefs.

⁶⁷ Shawna Thorp Lichtenwalner, "In the Eye of the Light: Ancient Druids and International Influences," *The Wordsworth Circle* 36, no. 1 (2005): 10.

⁶⁸ Lichtenwalner, "In the Eye of the Light," 9.

⁶⁹ Copper, *Contemporary Druidry*, 72-74.

⁷⁰ Lichtenwalner, "In the Eye of the Light," 10.

As Neodruidry continued to grow in space and number into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the concept of individual religious identity in relation to nature, deities, and ancestors/ancient Druids became a prominent component of the religion.⁷¹ The connection to the ancient Druids remained an important aspect of the religion, but individuality became a growing influence in constructing beliefs. Neodruidry continued with a developmental path of cultivating an ideology using an eclectic combination of cultural influences while still embracing a perceived continuity with the ancient Druids. Druidry is syncretic in nature and blends assumed historic understanding with a desire for individual religious identity.⁷²

Druidic Ideology: Common Beliefs

Three main themes, or commonalities, can be used to summarize druidic belief broadly across Orders.⁷³ First, modern Druids focus on a connection to nature, mirroring natural life cycles through an eight-season festival pattern throughout the year called the Wheel of the Year.⁷⁴ The Wheel originates from Ross Nichols, the founder of the Order of the Bards, Ovates, and Druids, and Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca, who combined solar festivals and seasonal festivals to create the eight-festival Wheel.⁷⁵ Second, most adherents believe in deities or spirits usually associated with natural elements. These deities are generally inspired by the

⁷¹ Outlined by Michael Cooper, in "The Roles of Nature, Deities, and Ancestors in Constructing Religious Identity in Contemporary Druidry," *The Pomegranate* 11 no. 1 (2009): 65-7.

⁷² Cooper, "The Roles of Nature," 60.

⁷³ Cooper, "The Roles of Nature," 65-7.

⁷⁴ Ethan Doyle, "Devil's Stones and Midnight Rites: Megaliths, Folklore, and Contemporary Pagan Witchcraft," *Folklore* 125, no. 1 (2014): 60-79: The eight-cycle festival pattern found in most Neopagan religions comes from Wicca and Neodruidry: four from Wicca and four from Neodruidry. The solar festivals come from modern Druidry and the quarter festivals come from Margaret Murray and Gerald Gardner and Wicca. Druidry and Wicca practice all eight. Both religions take their respected beliefs and interpret it to fit the needs of the respected rituals and beliefs of the religion.

⁷⁵ Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry*, 52.

Celtic pantheon but can come from other pantheons throughout the world.⁷⁶ Knowledge of the deities provides individuals with a sense of cosmic belonging that attributes to personal religious identity. Gods are often believed to be physically present and imminent, as opposed to transcendent, and adherents claim to experience their presence in the comings and goings of daily life.⁷⁷ Finally, there exists a general belief that the ancient ancestors provide a connection between the present and the past.⁷⁸ Ancestors can be cultural ancestors to promote heritage, such as Arthur Pendragon or the ancient Druids themselves, or personal genetic ancestors of individual adherents.⁷⁹ Additionally, I suggest a fourth common theme of a desire to learn and share knowledge of the world and nature. While these four themes are common, they are by no means universal beliefs across Neodruidry. In an ethnographic study conducted by Michael Cooper, he asked interlocutors the question: “What is the meaning of life in your understanding of contemporary Druidry?”⁸⁰ Overwhelmingly, answers highlighted an individual sense of satisfaction from knowledge of Druidry and a sense of identity from the experience of participation in rituals involving nature, deities, and ancestors. Whether in an official Order or as a solitary, each adherent chooses the specifics of how to define their own beliefs and practices within the confines of these broad categories.

Due to the strong reverence for the natural world, Neodruidry and its adherents often advocate for ecological movements. Druidic belief and knowledge of plants, as well as the druidic trend toward using revived folk botanical knowledge, combined with Western science to

⁷⁶ Michael T Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry*, 113-114: Ancient writers often related Celtic deities to gods of their own culture, especially Roman, in an attempt to enumerate them. Celtic deity names are usually associated with a specific place or landscape. The ancient Druids had no recorded pantheon, so modern adherents borrow and mix from other pagan traditions.

⁷⁷ Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry*, 114.

⁷⁸ Michael T Cooper, “The Roles of Nature,” 65-71.

⁷⁹ Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry*, 117.

⁸⁰ Cooper, “The Roles of Nature,” 61.

promote ecological ethics and conservation.⁸¹ In a large survey across different Orders, 95 percent of druids reported a belief in the existence of tree and plant spirits.⁸² This druidic animism is experienced through experiential individual existence and folk knowledge; these are then applied to a code of ecological ethics and conservation efforts by the druids of the study. Folk knowledge of plants is both gained from referencing Western botanical knowledge and by gaining wisdom from the plants directly as most Druids believe plants can communicate directly with humans if allowed the chance. This aspect of Neodruidry focuses on modern realities more than the ancientness of the Druids and is an example of the varied beliefs within the religion. This variance leaves the question of why the connection to the past is crucial to some and not as prominent with others.

Another common component of Neodruid belief is the value of the pursuit of knowledge. The construction, transmission, and use of druidic knowledge is viewed as a sacred act in Neodruidry.⁸³ Druidic knowledge is “The crucial bridge between the state of consciousness in which humans generally operate and a state of being in right relationship with all beings.”⁸⁴ Knowledge is acquired from historical works, archaeology, ecological literature, and often the notion of Native American indigenous animism.⁸⁵

Perhaps the most engrossing common belief of Neodruidry is the myth of Atlantis. Atlantis is thought to have been an intrinsically good civilization that was morally corrupted and destroyed due to moral failings: a cautionary tale. The belief in Atlantis is frequent across

⁸¹ Kimberly D Kirner, “Pursuing the Salmon of Wisdom: The Sacred in Folk Botanical Knowledge Revival among Modern Druids,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 9 no. 4 (2015): 450.

⁸² Kirner, “Pursuing the Salmon of Wisdom,” 454.

⁸³ Kirner, “Pursuing the Salmon of Wisdom,” 450.

⁸⁴ Kirner, “Pursuing the Salmon of Wisdom,” 455.

⁸⁵ Kirner, “Pursuing the Salmon of Wisdom,” 450-451.

Neodruid groups.⁸⁶ As a society, Atlantis progressed beyond morality, strayed too far from its roots, and was destroyed. A realignment with ancient values recentered societal goals.⁸⁷ The moral of the story highlights a need to return to the past to realign morality, further legitimizing the desire to look to the ancient Druids.

Connection to Land and Monuments

Neodruidry holds great reverence for the land, particularly tree groves and megalithic structures. As described in the previous chapter, Classical sources described ancient Druids as worshipping and conducting rituals in forest clearings with special mentions of oak-trees and mistletoe.⁸⁸ Neodruidry believes that groves were temples of the Druids and view them as sacred spaces. For Neodruids, megalithic structures are archaeological proof that Druids existed, as Druids are said to have built them for altar and places of worship in the groves.⁸⁹ In the ancestral Celtic lands, the connection to the Druids through physical space can be experienced through the land and structures by conducting rituals in the same space as the ancient Druids.

The appeal of modern Druidry is the connection to the past and that it is enhanced through megalithic monuments, most notably Stonehenge. Starting in the 1920s, crowds gathered at the site to watch the sunrise at the Stonehenge Free Peoples' Festival.⁹⁰ The English Heritage eventually fenced the site due to vandalism, banning people from the site, including practicing Druids. Modern Druidry negotiated with the government to gain access to the site to perform

⁸⁶ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 310.

⁸⁷ Hutton, "Modern Druidry and Earth Mysteries," 315.

⁸⁸ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 14.

⁸⁹ Stuart Piggott, *The Druids* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), 133134.

⁹⁰ Carole M Cusack, "Charmed Circle: Stonehenge, Contemporary Paganism, and Alternative Archaeology," *Numen* 59, no. 2/3 (2012): 147.

their rituals, claiming that it was part of their religion.⁹¹ While Stonehenge is the most famous, many megalithic monuments scattered across the British Isles hold special significance to Neopagan religions.

Other Neopagan religions besides Neodruidry view the megaliths as sacred, and numerous Neopagan groups often lay claim to the same site. Both Neodruidry and Wicca believe in their inherent right to the use of Stonehenge. Each group possesses legends and lore that legitimizes the claims that the monuments originated with their respective religious history. The lore behind megaliths ranges from the idea in the 1600s that they were humans that turned to stone, to the antiquarian theory of William Stuckeley that the ancient Druids built them.⁹² Margaret Murray theorized that Celtic fairies are actually diminutive humans that were displaced when the Celts invaded in the Iron Age. These fairies lived in the woods in witch cults, connecting witches to the Celtic fairy. Gerald Gardner expands this theory by stating that these fairies, or witch cults, dwelled in the megaliths.⁹³ This lore gave credibility to adherents of Wicca that enhanced their inherent right to use the sites.⁹⁴

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⁹¹ Carole M Cusack, "Charmed Circle: Stonehenge, Contemporary Paganism, and Alternative Archaeology," *Numen* 59, no. 2/3 (2012): 147.

⁹² White, 64-66: By the twentieth century both the Neodruids and Wiccan groups used megaliths for ritual purposes as they represented a physical representation and connection to the ancient past. Druids generally used larger megaliths like Stonehenge and Avebury because their rituals were meant to be public to celebrate nature. Wiccans typically used the smaller sites, as Wiccan rituals are generally more surreptitious.

⁹³ Ethan Doyle White, "Devil's Stones and Midnight Rites: Megaliths, Folklore, and Contemporary Pagan Witchcraft" *Folklore* 125, no. 1 (2014): 64.

⁹⁴ Cusack, "Charmed Circle," 152: Cusack argues that "The false association of the monument with the Druids has persisted to the present day and has become a form of folklore or folk-memory that has enabled modern Druids to obtain access and a degree of respect in their interactions with Stonehenge and other megalithic sites." Modern Druids negotiated the right to perform rituals at Stonehenge without any objective proof of the connection to the religion. The legal right obtained by modern Druidry to practice rituals in the assumed sacred space, while based purely in an imagined history, was obtained due to the social desire of a religious tradition and the modern idea of respecting religious practices. They obtained the right to practice as they desire, even though outsiders viewed it as an unrealistic historic reality.

Adherents of Neodruidry maintain much religious agency and are able to design a fairly personalized and syncretic belief system as a result. In the next chapter, we will look at the functions of Neopagan religions and how the beliefs and practices of Neodruidry accomplish those functions. We will explore how Neodruidry falls into the umbrella religious category of Neopaganism and what makes it distinct.

CHAPTER THREE

Functions of Neopaganism: The Age of Social Media

In the modern world, the relationship between humanity, knowledge, and the process of learning is changing with the impact of and access to the internet. From businesses targeting communities through online media to people sharing deeply personal information about themselves on their social media platforms, the internet is the nexus of modern society. The economy, news outlets, entertainment industry, and even schools are dependent on the internet. In this chapter, we will discuss the original functions of neopaganism in society and explore how these functions are changing in the modern age of technology. Furthermore, we will look at how the influence of this change impacts the knowledge sharing and creation process of Neodruidry. The nuanced history and development of Neopaganism has a dark side and a light side, and extreme public views tend to create a false dichotomy of good and bad religion as a result. In truth, Neopaganism serves countless functions across the many religions and individual adherents across the globe. In this chapter, we will focus on the main functions, but it should by no means be considered a complete list.

Main Functions of Neopaganism

Neopaganism serves numerous functions in society, namely nationalism, social agency, and spiritual re-enchantment. Firstly, as we discussed in the previous chapter, various neopagan

religions began as nationalistic efforts, and despite the dwindling of nationalistic objectives as neopagan religions spread across the world, nationalism remains a core function and motivator for many neopagans.⁹⁵ Within Neodruidry, the nationalistic motives were relatively unmalicious throughout their origin, use, and development over time.⁹⁶ Historically, however, nationalism far too frequently produced hateful ideas and actions, and neopagan efforts easily became associated and used for sociopolitical gains. As a result, modern neopagan religions often maintain a stain of malicious nationalism. Due to the public misconceptions of paganism that tends to group the many religions under one misunderstood term, the stigma of one neopagan religion blends with the many other religions defined as neopagan.

A prime example of the negative connotation that accompanies this function of paganism is Heathenry, the Norse neopagan religion. Heathenry has a strong historic connection to racist doctrine and white supremacy groups that is essential to understanding its sociocultural identity and function.⁹⁷ Nationalistic socialism perpetuated the belief in distinct ethnic bloodlines that became a criteria for membership into Heathenry.⁹⁸ Additionally, NeoNazis and other white supremacist groups appropriated Norse symbols and beliefs into the public image as a means to validate outward racism under the guise of religiosity.⁹⁹ This act highlighted already racist doctrine. Modern Heathens face the difficult task of balancing the desire to channel a personal,

⁹⁵ Brett H. Furth, "Ethnic Neo-Pagan Altars and Ancestors in Texas: An Ethnoreligious Strategy to Reconfigure European Ancestry and Whiteness," *Western Folklore* 76, no. 3 (2017): 318.

⁹⁶ Ronald Hutton, "Modern Druidry and Earth Mysteries," *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness, and Culture* 2 no. 3 (2009): 313-332: English Druidry with a religious connection began in 1912. Prior to that date, other orders of Druidry existed in England, but none were spiritual in nature. Rather, they focused on social realities and national identity. In Wales, however, modern Druidry as a religious expression began as early as 1840. Both countries had secular druidic groups that strove to elevate ancestral and national identity prior to the religious connotation, but Wales led the transition by seventy years.

⁹⁷ Egil Asprem, "Heathens Up North: Politics, Polemics, and Contemporary Norse Paganism in Norway," *The Pomegranate* 10 no. 1 (2008): 42-45: Heathenry started with the nationalistic goals of reviving Germanic cultural identity in the early 1900s, as Heathenry developed out of and alongside the *völkisch* movement in the 1980s

⁹⁸ Asprem, "Heathens Up North," 45.

⁹⁹ Asprem, "Heathens Up North," 52-53.

cultural identity through religion with constant public accusations of racism. As a result of moral panic and the religion's influence on black metal music, Heathenry became associated with Satanism in the public eye, further advancing its negative public image.¹⁰⁰ The stigma of Satanist accusations plagues many neopagan groups.

The negative ramifications of the politically charged use and history of some neopagan religions did not disappear in the modern age, as some neopagan groups continue to perpetuate dangerous doctrines. For example, within the two main neopagan structures, reconstructionist and eclectic, reconstructionist refers to the attempt to revive ancient pagan ways and reconfigure them for modernity. Reconstructionist neopagans tend to stress the importance of bloodlines and ancestry.¹⁰¹ In interviews with various adherents of a variety of Neopagan groups, many refer to a "blood memory" wherein your blood feels a special connection to the cultural heritage of the religion's members. Some neopagan religions require adherents to have blood memory in order to gain membership, while other neopagan religions do not require blood memory for admission into the group. This requirement distinction for membership is a key difference between neopagan religions. Druidry tends to avoid drawing these lines of membership, whereas many (but not all) Heathenry groups require a claim to blood memory to maintain cultural distinction. Carl Jung's *collective consciousness* is commonly used to validate the idea of a Germanic soul among Heathens wherein ancient deities exist within the soul of adherents.¹⁰² This delineating doctrine on its own is not viewed as being innately supremacist, but it has been used historically to justify supremacist movements.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Asprey, "Heathens Up North," 53.

¹⁰¹ Furth, "Ethnic Neo-Pagan Altars and Ancestors in Texas," 314: Eclectic refers to a more inclusive and individualized practice that focuses less on bloodlines and more on the natural and personalized religious practice.

¹⁰² Furth, "Ethnic Neo-Pagan Altars and Ancestors in Texas," 318.

¹⁰³ Stefanie von Schnurbein, "Contested Fields I: Race and Ethnicity," in *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism*, Brill, 2016, 123-27: Overtly racist beliefs founded on the idea of that ethnic distinction

Neopaganism often functions as an attempt to reestablish white cultural identity, but inaccuracies and politically charged history and motives often tarnish the attempt with negative social ramifications. In Western society, neopagan adherents use Indo-European symbols and beliefs to revitalize and reconstruct their believed European identities and must avoid accusations of white racism. The purpose is to use symbols of old pantheons and mythologies to reestablish white identity. Heathenry, Druidry, and a few examples of Wicca encounter a balancing act between wanting to adopt symbols to help reconstruct or re-establish identity and wanting to avoid the racist stigma that accompanies the symbols due to their historic use.¹⁰⁴ The cultural appropriation of Native Americans and African American cultural heritage also played a role in developing neopagan beliefs and combined with the revival of Indo-European sources.¹⁰⁵ The convoluted web of history and ideologies makes the process of understanding the inherited identities that accompany the appropriation.¹⁰⁶ Neopagan origins in the U.S. started as a way for white people to rediscover and reinvent their cultural background in an attempt to revitalize identity, but they found that a nationalistic and political history accompanied the reclaiming of the cultural roots.

[blood memory] alone granted acceptance into the cultural heritage of Norse ancestors fell into step beside Germanic National Socialism in the late 1900s, tainting belief and practice and promoting white supremacy. Questions of immigration and ethnicity were not confronted until twenty years after the founding of Ásatrú. The main argument in support of non-supremacist Heathenry was the desire to connect to the cultural past to increase individualistic identity without any supremacist undertones. Unfortunately, religious choices in society rarely exist independently of sociopolitical realities.

¹⁰⁴ Furth, 314.

¹⁰⁵ Danny L. Jorgensen, and Scott E. Russell, "American Neopaganism: The Participants' Social Identities," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 3 (1999): 331-333.

¹⁰⁶ Miller, 16: It is important to remember that neopagan beliefs can and are used purposefully to validate racist ideologies. For example, in the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, the rioter Jake Angeli became a symbol of the riot while dressed in "Viking" horns, fur, and sporting numerous tattoos of Heathen symbols. Angeli is better known as the "Q Shaman" and seems to identify with Christianity, but he used a tainted form of Paganism stressing the Wild Hunt and Norse deities. The Heathen community's reaction overwhelmingly condemned the actions and distanced themselves from any association with the rioters, but the event impaired the public image of Heathenry and Neopaganism as a whole.

The second primary function to explore is social agency, as underrepresented and marginalized groups find a voice, power, and freedom through neopagan religions. Social agency through neopagan religions comes in many forms. Statistically, neopagans tend to be college educated individuals, members of the LGBTQ+ community, vegetarians, and are slightly more commonly women.¹⁰⁷ Neopaganism is highly connected with femininity and feminism in that it served as an alternative to patriarchal religions and allowed women the freedom of expression and resistance to the sociocultural male dominance found in the Western world.¹⁰⁸ The desire to push against the institutional patriarchy through neo religions allowed a space to capture more female agency. This is why the majority of early adherents to Neopaganism were urban, middle-class females.¹⁰⁹ The emergence of Neopaganism was not revolutionary, however, but a reform-centered alternative to mainstream culture.¹¹⁰ In this way, Neopaganism is a form of resistance to modernity. Simultaneously, however, it is a result of the individualism, activism, and liberties born from modernity.

The final primary function of neopaganism we will explore is that of spiritual re-enchantment. This re-enchantment takes many forms throughout the broad expanse of neopagan religions. Neopagan religions focus on connecting with nature, the immanent and transcendent sacred, and community relations. Adherents strive for a personal embodied spirituality and to “re-enchant the world” as they imagined it in ancient times.¹¹¹ In order to better understand this

¹⁰⁷ Sabina Magliocco, “Neopaganism,” chpt. in *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, 156-158, Cambridge Companions to Religion. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Magliocco, “Neopaganism,” 152.

¹⁰⁹ Jorgensen, “American Neopaganism,” 331-333.

¹¹⁰ Jorgensen, “American Neopaganism,” 331-333.

¹¹¹ Magliocco, “Neopaganism,” 160.

highly loaded concept, we must break it down into manageable parts: the societal lacking and longing, the fulfillment through Neopaganism, and the authority of the ancient past.

As the modern world grows increasingly rationalistic, there is a growing desire fostered by an inner lacking and longing in society to return to the simplicity of the past through natural connectivity. This is exemplified in a study of the *Ár NDraíocht Féin* (ADF), a prominent modern druidic order in the United States. In the study, the Lofland-Stark model of religious conversion is used to identify two factors that lead to religious conversion of the adherents: predisposing conditions and situational contingencies.¹¹² Predisposed conditions include a person feeling tension between their personal beliefs and their current religion, leading them to a new religion that soothes the feeling of deprivation. Situational contingencies include that a person has reached the point of wanting to change when exposed to the new religion, an effective bond is created, competing social networks are reduced, and that there is interaction with other recent converts.¹¹³ In other words, there is a lack, an inner need that is not being met by the existing rationalized world and society and an inner need that longs for more connectivity that fills that lacking.

ADF initially evolved from a group of students at Carleton College, a small Lutheran college in Minnesota in 1963. The students grew frustrated with the demands of the Christian college, particularly chapel attendance requirements, and formed The Reformed Druids of North America (RDNA) in opposition to Lutheranism.¹¹⁴ RDNA eventually caught on in other locations. This matches the aforementioned conversion theory, as the students felt deprived and were looking for a change. Since founding, ADF has had two archdruid leaders and has over

¹¹² Michael T Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry: A Case Study of *Ár NDraíocht Féin*," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 12, no. 3 (2009): 46.

¹¹³ Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry," 46.

¹¹⁴ Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry," 44.

1000 officially recorded adherents.¹¹⁵ According to adherents, the appeal of ADF lies in the religious deprivation of other religions, most prominently Christianity in the Western world. Christianity felt oppressive, misguiding, and unsatisfying.¹¹⁶ Followers also reported a desire for a religious identity. Lastly, followers reported a desire for religious legitimacy based on the perception of antiquity.¹¹⁷

Once faced with the lacking and longing in society, neopaganism provides fulfillment for adherents. Throughout modern history, we can track the rationalization of the world and its relation to paganism and neopaganism to better understand the desire for re-enchantment. The general historic line of European progression shows that Christianity replaced pre-Christian paganism, and the scientific revolution and modernism developed into a less religious, more modernized society. Max Weber theorized there is a declining influence of religion in modern society as a result of a Western monotheism that abolishes spirits and magic in common belief.¹¹⁸ Simply put, he believed rationalization was progress that led to a decline in magic and spirituality. The equation unfolds as: Spirituality to Christian dominance, to scientific discoveries, to a rational world. Weber's oversimplification of the general Indo-European world is highly flawed and disputed. We are living in a modern rational world, but the growing emergence of Neopagan religions in the United States and Western Europe is one of many social realities that challenges Weber, as exemplified through the growing Neopagan desire to reconnect to the ancient, pre-Christian worldview.¹¹⁹ Neopaganism is, "a mode of perceiving the world that is entirely contrary to the rationalistic orientation of the West."¹²⁰ Weber's progress

¹¹⁵ Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry," 43.

¹¹⁶ Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry," 50-52.

¹¹⁷ Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry," 50-52.

¹¹⁸ Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry," 40.

¹¹⁹ Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry," 40.

¹²⁰ Murray L. Wax, "Magic, Rationality, and Max Weber," *The Kansas Journal of Sociology* 3, no. 1 (1967): 14.

through rationalization has seemingly reached its pinnacle in society for Neopagan adherents, as they want to return to the simplicity and fulfillment found at the start of the equation.

The ancient past is an idealized and enchanted image in the modern mind and the ultimate aim of re-enchantment through neopagan beliefs is to recapture that ancientness. At its core, Neopaganism is about the illusion of returning: returning to nature, returning to cultural roots, returning to an ancient authority, returning to the perceived simplicity of the past. The strongest appeal of Neodruidry is the association with the ancient authority of the Druids because it is easier to trust from a distance. Perhaps that is why there is a rising number of neopagans in modern society. When we look at the world around us, the sociopolitical turmoil, the corrupt institutions, the dying culture, and the dying world, we see and experience the failures of humankind immediately before our eyes. When we look to the past, across the vast distance of time, we struggle to see those failures as clearly because we are not experiencing them. The space gifted by time allows people to create an idealized image of the past, uncorrupted by society and humans. The ancient past has so few sources, it is easier to create this image, dismiss any social deficiencies that may or may not have existed at that time, and highlight the perceived good in this illusion of enchantment. Trust in the ancient is created, not earned, and a lack of trust in the present cannot be ignored. You can, however, re-enchant the present by channeling the past.

Why Neodruidry?

Hitherto in this chapter, I've been discussing Neopagan religions broadly using examples of Neodruidry, but we must also consider what makes Neodruidry unique in comparison to other neopagan religions. Neodruidry offers an extra appeal that sets it apart from other neopagan

religions in that it carries a certain mystery that accompanies the druids of the ancient past. The idea that some mysterious people lived and maintained secret knowledge of nature and the world is beguiling; the notion that the secret and mysterious knowledge can be obtained is alluring. Why are people so drawn to mystery? Whether it be the druid character in *Dungeons and Dragons*, a druid character in a television show, or an adherent to Neodruidry longing for a connection to the ancient group, people associate “druid” with mystery. They are a porous people in their portrayals, abilities, and loyalties. Ronald Hutton describes them in literature by stating:

Druids operate like wizards in stories all over the world: they perform feats physically impossible to humans in the apparent world, by uncanny means. They curse and blight humans and districts, raise storms and fogs, cause glamour and delusion, confer invisibility, inflict thirst and confusion on enemy warriors, transform people into animal shape or into stone, subdue and bind them with incantations, and raise magical barriers.¹²¹

From Irish stories to a druid warrior in a modern television series, Druids are depicted to modern observers as magical and/or highly wise. This is not unlike other magical beings in mythic traditions. Mystery engulfs any magical abilities. Unlike the magical wizards, or fairies, or even gods, however, people know Druids existed as tangible people in human history. This creates a unique connection. The fact that nobody can confidently say exactly who they were, what they believed, or what their role was in society adds to the mystery and possibilities of Druids.

But why are people so readily engrossed by mysteries? People are drawn to the mysterious because it offers a concluding explanation that categorizes unknowns. It labels the uncomfortable feelings of not knowing. Neodruidry offers a space to organize inexplicable thoughts as much as it offers validation of identity and or escape from society. The reasoning behind mystery categorizes mysteries into the taxonomic distinction of unknown and known

¹²¹ Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain*. (Yale University Press, 2009), 33.

mysteries.¹²² These two distinctions divide human fascination with the concept of mysteries. The unknown mysteries are investigative, like detective plots. These unknowns can be solved and are therefore appealing to humans as an active, intellectual pursuit with an achievable and satisfying conclusion. The second distinction of known mysteries, however, applies to religious and philosophical fascination with the abstract.¹²³ This type can be applied to eternal or heavenly secrets that religions such as Neodruidry offer to humans in response to a mystery that is known. The notion of Druids is a known and enchanting mystery. We know that we cannot know who exactly they were, what exactly they believed, or how exactly they lived. The religion of Neodruidry not only functions as other neopagan religions by offering spiritual fulfillment, re-enchantment, connectivity, and a better understanding of the universe as an unknown, but it also provides an added satisfaction through its connection to the now more comprehensible mystery of the ancient druids.

There are three sub-distinctions of the above described “known” mysteries: extensive, facultative, and dimensional mysteries.¹²⁴ Extensive mysteries have no solution, as no more can possibly be known. For example, conceptualizing the extent of outer space beyond a broad concept is an extensive mystery.¹²⁵ Facultative mysteries have no rational or objective solution and require a non-rational approach to negotiate meaning from it. Lastly, dimensional mysteries are mysteries that cannot be mentally perceived in physical space.¹²⁶ Modern Druidry falls into the category of both an extensive and a facultative mystery. The mystery of the ancient druids cannot be known beyond a certain point. No clear record exists and yet the fascination continues.

¹²² Steven D Boyer, "The Logic of Mystery," *Religious Studies* 43, no. 1 (2007): 94-96.

¹²³ Boyer, "The Logic of Mystery," 94-96.

¹²⁴ Boyer, "The Logic of Mystery," 94-96.

¹²⁵ Boyer, "The Logic of Mystery," 94-96.

¹²⁶ Boyer, "The Logic of Mystery," 94-96.

In order to solve the mystery of the lost knowledge and culture, an irrational approach is needed in the form of imagination and fabrication through Neodruidry. When faced with unknown phenomena of nature, history, philosophy, and mental capacity, the human brain strives to reimagine the problem within the confines of mental ability to subdue the agitation born from the unknowability. Ancient druids hold an idealized ancient authority, and that stamp of authority is only heightened by a seemingly solved mystery. It offers a sense of esoteric mystery that lures people to the concept, regardless of veracity. The mystery of the ancient Druids cannot be known beyond a certain point. No clear record exists and yet the fascination continues. In order to solve the mystery of the lost knowledge and culture, an irrational approach is needed in the form of imagination and fabrication.

Known mysteries are an origin point for what I call psycho-philosophical-agitation. In modern times, our understanding of natural science tends to distract from the marvelous sensation of unknowing. In the natural world there exists intangible, inexplicable phenomena, questions, and sensations of everyday life and nature. It is a friction, something you cannot quite put your finger on in the universe that lies just beyond your mental reach. This subconscious abstraction, be it existential, transcendental or otherwise, is engraved in the unconscious effort of humanity to create a comprehensible outlet within the boundaries of the human mind. Neodruidry functions as a means to pacify psycho-philosophical-agitation by offering an outlet of explanation through practice and belief.

Two prominent names contribute to the discourse on psycho-philosophical-agitation in relation to Neodruidry: Herbert Spencer and Immanuel Kant. Spencer's philosophical theory of the "Unknowable" and the "Absolute" are critical. He argues that all knowledge is relative, and that which religion and science typically regard as the ultimate truth concerning the nature of

things is in reality unknowable. The truth of the nature of things "remains forever inscrutable."¹²⁷ Spencer further argues that there is an absolute reality or truth in existence, proven by the logic that there is an untrue reality that humans perceive. It logically follows that humans can then hypothetically envision the possibility of a true reality in turn. He states, "In contemplating the process of thought, we have equally seen how impossible it is to rid ourselves of the consciousness of an actuality lying behind appearance; and how, from this impossibility, results our indestructible belief in that actuality."¹²⁸ In other words, what is actually seen in the natural world by the human eye, possesses a truth behind it unreachable by the human mind, but its concept [The Absolute] is understood as existing. In relation to the druids, the agitation is born from time as much as reality. The frustration of the unknowability strengthened by time combines with the naturalistic desires to connect to nature beyond the normal capacity of the human mind. Neodruidry soothes this frustration by providing answers to multiple agitations at once.

Immanuel Kant's theory of noumenal reality and the phenomenal provides additional support of the underlying premise of psycho-philosophical-agitation. Phenomenal reality is that which humans perceive as it appears in the natural world. Noumenal reality is how things exist in and of themselves regardless of how they are perceived by the human mind. The noumenal is essentially Herbert's Unknowable.¹²⁹ The human mind, with a combination of cultural sources, personal relationships and reflection on the natural world, and the instinct to solve mystery, is the birthplace of concepts, neo religions, and learned or created knowledge - "Things as intangible as

¹²⁷ Elijah Jordan, "The Unknowable of Herbert Spencer," *The Philosophical Review* 20, no. 3 (1911): 291.

¹²⁸ Jordan, "The Unknowable of Herbert Spencer," 292.

¹²⁹ GERAL FIGAL, "Words and Changing Things: Grasping Fushigi in Meiji Japan," in *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan* (Duke University Press, 1999) 43.

a cloud.”¹³⁰ Neodruidry alleviates psycho-philosophical-agitation whether said agitation is conscious or unconsciously experienced by solving the mysteries of the unknown and assuaging the frustration of not knowing through connectivity and re-enchantment.

Online Neodruidry: Three Themes of Function

With the primary functions of Neodruidry understood, we will now turn to exploring how the internet changes the existence of Neodruidry, specifically on social media. Let us begin by reviewing what we know about Neodruidry: it is impossible to know anything concrete about the druids, forged documents served as the foundation of belief for decades, it is an eclectic religion that pulls from numerous cultural influences, and it consists of a wide array of beliefs and practices. Throughout its history, it has struggled with creating authenticity and consistency in its knowledge sharing process. As a neopagan religion, it serves to fulfill a lacking and longing in society of its adherents, to enhance perceived individual cultural identity, to re-enchant the world typically using an ancient authority. In short, it is highly appealing to those who wish to learn about it and possibly become a practicing neodruid, leaving the question of where to begin? Where do people go when they want answers and to learn about anything in the modern day and age? The internet. Google. Social Media. As already discussed, problems of authenticity plagued neopagan belief from the origins of the movements, but the issues are only heightened by the internet.

In our modern world, people, especially younger generations, turn less to formal institutions and tend to look for an easier way to access information. Humans generally turn to the answers of google and trust social media for information anywhere from world news to new

¹³⁰ Figal, “Words and Changing Things,” 39.

ways to style one's hair. It is becoming instinctual to reach for a phone or computer and see what others have to say. The start of the pandemic in 2020 heightened this beyond an instinct to a necessity of society. Society relies on the internet at almost every social level, but as a result of the pandemic, use of the internet is crucial to societal survival. It solidifies the instinct to use social media as the starting point to access information.

Returning to the notion of psycho-philosophical-agitation, consciously or otherwise it is the plight of human existence to accept the unknowable and either ignore it, analyze it, or give in to it. Social media has developed into an effective tool to assuage the agitation, whether to quiet or stimulate the mind. The debate whether social media is overall good because it connects people and offers increased access to information or bad because it creates shallow communication and leans towards reductionist lessons aside, social media is a platform for sharing information without any checks and balances for accuracy. It simplifies our world by expanding it.

Online communication provides a wonderful platform for neophyte adherents with many benefits to aid in sharing and building identities. William Bascom identifies four main functions of folklore broadly as a sociocultural phenomenon: escape, validation, education, and social control.¹³¹ As a folk group, online Neodruidry expresses these four functions through the performance of engaging with online communication within the group. Online knowledge is an easily accessible place to escape the rationalized society, validate the desire to re-enchant, and educate people on neopaganism.

In many ways, this access to information is excellent, especially when the sources are researched and reliable. Conversely, many sources are not researched, unreliable, and even

¹³¹ Elliott Oring, "Three Functions of Folklore: Traditional Functionalism as Explanation in Folkloristics," *The Journal of American Folklore* 89, no. 351 (1976): 71.

fabricated. The struggle for the modern world is recognizing the reliable from the unreliable on the internet. Social media is where the unreliable thrives, as few if any filters of accuracy exist and people can post seemingly anything and present it as truth. Add a fancy picture to a post with incorrect information, and any fallacies can be pandered to the masses easily. Neopagan groups are no exception to the dark side of social media, especially within the neodruid community. How do you filter through the filters, can you filter through them, and what does this mean for the religion? Everything is mixed together, particularly on social media where nothing has order beyond hashtags and profile names; there is a difference between systems of belief and idealized, romanticized information that is aimed to cater to and entertain the masses. The perilous aspect of using internet searches in an effort to build identity is the exposure to misinformation that is misidentified as authentic and missing the deeper meaning of something because only the key words show up without a deeper history and understanding of the words.¹³²

I identify three themes of function within online Neodruidry as digital folklore based on my fieldwork on TikTok #*Neodruidry*. The first theme of function is *validation of personal religious identity through performance and participation*. As a form of digital folklore, online Neodruidry is a performative experience where individuals interact by sharing information and individuals can gain validation through the reaction of their audience, or those with whom they communicate.¹³³ Due to the diverse system of beliefs within Druidry, adherents use online groups as a means to express themselves and their personalized beliefs, rituals, and/or ideas. It is a platform people can use as an outlet for social validation and community belonging. A sense of belonging can be difficult for a druid due to the geographically widespread nature of the religion.

¹³² Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 229.

¹³³ Buccitelli, "Performance 2.0." 62.

The sense of community provided by these groups fulfills the desired belonging and inclusiveness of a religion.

The second theme of function is the *negotiation of identity through exposure to varying beliefs*. Beyond validation of self-expression, online druid communities provide access to knowledge of others that prompts the process of building identity through reiteration, reflection, and revision. Individuals may share comparable beliefs to information shared by other individuals in a digital community. These varying perspectives and/or parallels to beliefs as presented through comments not only allow the commenters a platform for expression and validation, but additionally provide a working archive of knowledge and perspectives for other members to learn from and study.

People are able to negotiate identity through exposure to varying beliefs online. Robert Glenn Howard uses the term, “Vernacular Web,” to describe how online communication offers individuals a possibility for transformation of identity through participation and exposure to a variety of discourse on a topic.¹³⁴ This aligns with the differential identity theory that argues that individuals with differential identities participate in performance through communicative interaction and that, “[an] identity feature which is relevant to the participation of one party in a social relationship may be the same or different from that of the other parties to a relationship.”¹³⁵ When people go online to learn about Neodruidry, they have access to a myriad of different identities, cultural and personal knowledge, and interpretations. The virtual stage allows people to engage in communication with people possessing a wide array of beliefs. Individual identities are not melted into a collective representation of Neodruidry. Rather, they

¹³⁴ Robert Howard, “The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 5 (2008): 490.

¹³⁵ Richard Bauman, “Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 84, no. 331 (1971): 34.

are validated and negotiated through exposure to differential identities. In this way, the eclectic nature of social media represents the core of Neodruidry. With the appeal of Neodruidry as an eclectic system of belief that allows individuals the space to construct their own religious identity, however, comes the reality that from the growth of individual identities rises the growth of individual changes in history, doctrine, belief, and/or practice based on personal bias and religious desires that are unbound by accuracy.

The third and final theme of function is *the creation of space enacted by images*. Space is an incredibly important aspect of Druidry. Originally, a large part of Druidry focused on the notion of existing in the same forests as the ancient Druids and respecting the trees and knowledge of old while embracing the connection to the ancients. This created a connection to the past through space. Additionally, many seasonal festivals are held at megaliths, most commonly Stonehenge, as a means to connect to the ancient druids.¹³⁶ Modern Druidry views the general woods and nature as its sacred space. While historically this space was felt by physically being in the same place as the ancient Druids, this sense space is virtually created and enacted through the posts and through sensory memory.

Religious Market Theory is the idea, developed by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, that modern religions use a capitalist design to spread information, with a consumer and producer of religious knowledge.¹³⁷ Within neopagan communities, this creates a commodified religion with social media as its headquarters. Social media succeeds based on likes, shares, and comments. The more compelling a post, the more attention it receives. The

¹³⁶ Carole M Cusack, "Charmed Circle: Stonehenge, Contemporary Paganism, and Alternative Archaeology," *Numen* 59, no. 2/3 (2012): 147-152.

¹³⁷ Ross Downing, "Hashtag Heathens: Contemporary Germanic Pagan Feminine Visuals on Instagram," *The Pomegranate* 21, no. 2 (2019): 191.

more attention it receives, the more people it reaches. Ideologies are then built upon what is most engaging, not necessarily what is accurate. You buy and you sell. People absorb compelling information and strive to make their own information click bait. To make a product more compelling, however, producers often have to change details to better meet the expectations and demand of the public. This is just as true with details of Neodruidry as it is with items you buy at retail stores. Things change with societal norms. The argument could be made that this adaptation with the times better reflects the people, but the fact remains that informative statements are left unchecked, leaving those who seek to learn at the mercy and merits of those who share posts.

. . .

The following chapter analyzes the hashtags, *#neodruid*, *#druidry* and *#neodruidry*, on TikTok to assess how the ideologies of Neodruidry as described in the previous chapter are being labeled, created, and shared on social media to create a new version of Neodruidry. We step outside the formal orders of Neodruidry and consider how information about Neodruids is presented to neophytes and to the public.

CHAPTER FOUR

Social Media: The TikTok Version of Neodruidry

This chapter explores how Neodruidry is represented on social media through the platform of TikTok. Using the hashtags *#neodruid*, *#druidry* and *#neodruidry*, I analyze how information on hallmarks of Neodruidic belief, as outlined in chapter two, is presented to the general public on TikTok and assess any changes in those foundational beliefs of the religion. All the data presented is public facing and labeled as Neodruidic with a stamp of authority in the form of the hashtag. Social media is a primary step in initial contact to new information in the modern age. The instinct of the young and modern society to go to social media for convenient access to information promotes a TikTok version of Neodruidry in the eye of the public that blends the authentic religion, historically developed in the eighteenth century and onwards, hitherto described with unreliable information constrained by no credible authority.

In the chapter, I demonstrate how this new version of Neodruidry, through the lens of social media, mixes the components of formal Orders, the perceived ancient history, and beliefs of adherents of Neodruidry with any fabrication or misinformation posted on TikTok. The oscillation of credible posts leaves no feasible way for neophytes of Neodruidry or the general public to filter fact from fiction when searching to learn about the religion. Given the ambiguous and broad origins and development of Neodruid ideology described in the previous chapters, should the unreliable information on social media be called Neodruidry? Should a line be drawn between the helter-skelter of Neodruid information on TikTok and the historic Orders of

Neodruidry or does the ambiguity of the religion allow for the infusion of misinformation into an already wide web of beliefs? While there is ample unreliable information diffused on TikTok, based on post engagements, I conclude that the TikTok version of Neodruidry still meets the functions of Neopaganism despite ideological changes from the infusion posts lacking credibility or accuracy of information.

Methodology

In order to better understand the changes of ideological portrayals of Neodruidry on TikTok, I track the hashtags *#neodruid*, *#druidry* and *#neodruidry* on TikTok and analyze the engagement of the posts in relation to content and presentation. When one types the above hashtags into the search bar on TikTok, all posts with the hashtag appear on the page, with the high engagement posts near the top and low engagement post toward the bottom. I use some of the most popular posts and some of the least popular posts with the hashtags and examine how content and presentation relate to engagement.

TikTok and Misinformation

Since its founding in 2016, TikTok, developed into one of the most popular social media platforms for younger generations. In 2019, TikTok was the third most commonly downloaded non-game app in the world.¹³⁸ Furthermore, posts from TikTok can be shared on other social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, expanding its influence beyond the single platform. The TikTok app allows users to post short video clips to their profile with captions underneath the media. The contents and subject matters of TikTok are wide-reaching and the information is organized by hashtags. A user simply types the key word or hashtag they desire to

¹³⁸ Spandana Singh and Koustubh “K.J.” Bagchi, “TikTok: How Internet Platforms Are Combating Disinformation and Misinformation in the Age of COVID-19,” *New America* (2020): 17.

learn about into the search bar and scroll through the many posts that appear for that hashtag. The posts that appear first on the page are the posts with the most engagement.

When the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, TikTok grew in popularity, but it also called attention to the dilemma of spreading misinformation through the app. In order to combat this issue, TikTok added a “Misleading Information” feature to the app allowing users to report what they believe to be false information.¹³⁹ COVID-19 related misinformation even received a special subcategory within the reporting options.¹⁴⁰ With attention to the problem of misinformation highlighted, however, the issue was far from resolved and TikTok continues to perpetuate false information alongside vetted information. With popular topics such as COVID-19, people are more inclined to question the veracity of posts when reading them, but inaccuracies that occur with less well-known topics like Neodruidry are more difficult to identify, especially to people simply wanting to learn about it as a neophyte.

In a study on Norse Heathenry on Instagram, adherents of Heathenry used Instagram as a tool to educate the public on Heathenry through the use of hashtags.¹⁴¹ Credibility of sources, however, in such dispersion of information and Nordic knowledge proved to be highly unstable. Within all Neopagan communities, social media commodifies religion. Adherents of Neopaganism can use social media as a means to get the true message out and correct misinformation and misconceptions of Neopaganism, using hashtags as a tool. As the Heathens in the study realized, any credible information put on social media fights for the attention of consumers against posts with unreliable information.¹⁴² Nevertheless, the problems of

¹³⁹ Singh, “TikTok,” 17.

¹⁴⁰ Singh, “TikTok,” 17.

¹⁴¹ Ross Downing, “Hashtag Heathens: Contemporary Germanic Pagan Feminine Visuals on Instagram,” *The Pomegranate* 21, no. 2 (2019): 186-209.

¹⁴² Downing, “Hashtag Heathens,” 191.

consuming information regardless of veracity and perpetuating false information alongside credible information on social media continue to pose a problem for adherents of Neopagan religions.

The Neodruidry of TikTok

When one types the hashtags *#neodruid*, *#druidry* and *#neodruidry* in the TikTok search bar, thousands of posts become available to scroll through, with the most popular posts appearing first. The most common type of posts on TikTok using the hashtags are educational posts meant to teach users about Neodruidry. They typically follow a “question-answer” template. Following the template, posts commonly paste a question asked in the comments of a previous post superimposed over a video of the poster answering the question (figure 2). The other type of posts found using the above

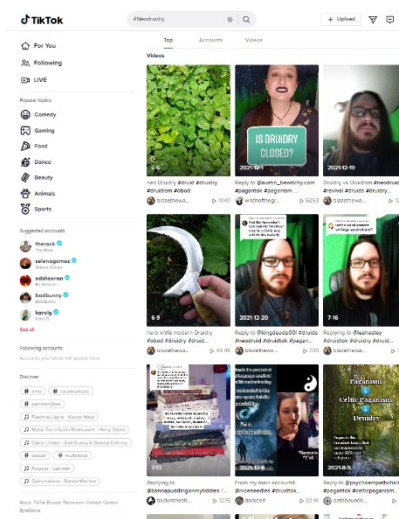


Figure 1: #Neodruid Results Page on TikTok, August 2022:
<https://www.tiktok.com/search?q=%23Neodruid&t=166106>

hashtags are typically aesthetic videos of nature that do not directly share knowledge. Rather, this second type of post captures the sensations of and connection to nature. They are aesthetically engaging and reflect the core of Neodruidry - the veneration of nature - but do not offer information alongside the visuals. Posts with videos of nature provide a connection to space that captures the attention of viewers through the beauty of nature while also reflecting values of Neodruidry. For the purpose of this research, however, purely aesthetic posts are unimportant, as they do not directly share knowledge. The focus here is the more common, educational posts and

the information they share. As demonstrated below, however, the most effective education posts combine the aesthetically stimulating with the educational posts.

The “question-answer” posts are a primary focus of my analysis, as they serve to perpetuate druidic knowledge through TikTok. This section analyzes posts relating to main druidic ideologies as outlined in chapter two. While many posts align with the historic ideologies of Neodruidry, others diverge. Even within a single post, credibility often oscillates. In these cases, some of what a given poster says accurately describes Neodruidry, but some of what a poster says in that same post strays from foundational druidic ideologies. In these cases, the poster presents fact alongside fiction, further blurring the line of authenticity.

An excellent feature of TikTok is the relationship between the posters and the public through comments, as a dialogue exists where people can ask questions and receive the answers. The relationship can be beneficial, as it allows people a space to ask for the exact information they want and ask for clarifications if something is unclear. It aligns with the Religious Market Theory. There is a consumer and producer of religious knowledge based on the demands of the public that is made clear to producers/posters through the comments of the viewers.¹⁴³ The relationship between the poster and the public

can also be harmful, as the communication and the process of sharing knowledge depends on trust in the poster. A power dynamic is at play when one engages with TikTok. Trust in a poster depends on the veracity of the poster through their presentation, how much engagement a post



Figure 2: Example of Question-Answer Template: https://www.tiktok.com/@underthebardicmoon/video/6927740863971953926?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679

¹⁴³ Downing, “Hashtag Heathens,” 191.

receives from other users, and the categorization of the hashtags. In order to better understand this process, I analyze the relationship between the accuracy of information using the outlined descriptions in previous chapters, the presentation of the post through visual and audible effects, and the amount of engagement a post receives. Posts will be numbered in parentheses as they are introduced for the sake of clarity.

One popular post (post 1) from August 9, 2021 is a video answering the question, “Is celtic/pagan/druid similar/the same type of belief or separate beliefs?”¹⁴⁴ The video answered the question by explaining a “Druid” is part of the larger “Celtic paganism,” which is part of the still larger “paganism.”¹⁴⁵ The information is very broadly correct, despite the nuanced and incorrect terminology of “pagan,” as opposed to “neopagan.” Unless the question is to be taken in a literal sense, wherein the answer should explain “Celtic” refers to the language family, “pagan” refers

to a broad umbrella term for pre-Christian religions, and “Druid” refers to a class of people. Either way, the response to the question is incomplete. The video was highly engaging and involved. It featured a slow-moving shot panning over a still and peaceful river surrounded by green trees on its shore

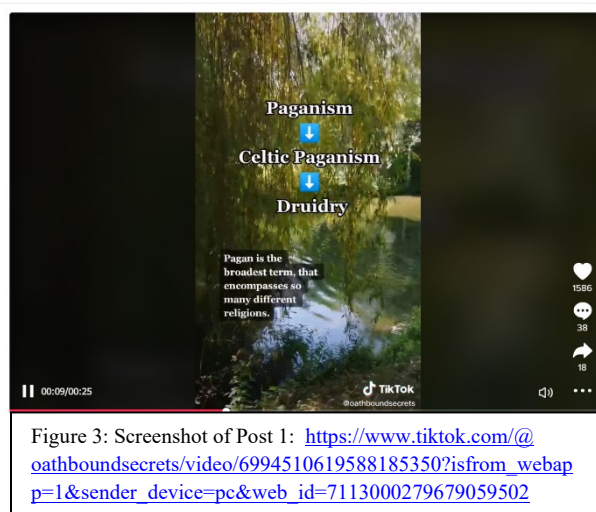


Figure 3: Screenshot of Post 1: https://www.tiktok.com/@oathboundsecrets/video/6994510619588185350?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502

(figure 3).¹⁴⁶ In the background, serene music played quietly as the poster answered the question in a voice-over. The presentation of the post invokes a connection to nature that reflects its veneration in Neodruidry. The calming music and serene scene create a reference to Neodruidry

¹⁴⁴ TikTok, Aug, 2021: https://www.tiktok.com/@oathboundsecrets/video/6994510619588185350?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

that enacts space. This high engagement post exemplifies the combination of educational and aesthetic posts.

Post 1 received 1,586 likes and 38 comments as of August 2022, one year after its posting.¹⁴⁷ The comments section featured an assortment of responses, including a few simple grateful users thanking the poster for the clearly presented information. The comments also contained seven clarifying questions from users asking for elaborations such as, “can someone not of celtic descent be a druid?” and “Can I be a Norse pagan, Celtic pagan, Roman pagan, and Italian pagan?”¹⁴⁸ The comments section demonstrates the beneficial aspect of TikTok and its use as median of communication and knowledge sharing. The questions also reflect a trust in the poster to answer questions based on the content of the video.

Another popular post (post 2) from April 22, 2021 responded to the question, “Can you go farther into the idea of reincarnation?”¹⁴⁹ The post reports, reincarnation never happens in Celtic Neopaganism, unless it is a really important person like King Arthur, adding “even fairies don’t reincarnate.”¹⁵⁰ As discussed in chapter two, from its early years in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, a common belief of Neodruidry pulls from the Hindu understanding of reincarnation with the belief that all life starts at the lowest point of existence and humans must work their way up through humanity.¹⁵¹ The poster is sitting in a car with light music in the background, has dyed green hair, and two lips rings, creating a visual and audible effect that captures the attention of consumers. The post received 1,192 likes and 24 comments as of

¹⁴⁷ TikTok, Aug, 2021: https://www.tiktok.com/@oathboundsecrets/video/6994510619588185350?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

¹⁴⁸ TikTok, Aug, 2021: https://www.tiktok.com/@oathboundsecrets/video/6994510619588185350?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

¹⁴⁹ TikTok, April, 2021: https://www.tiktok.com/@dust_hallow/video/6954034130468261125?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Shawna Thorp Lichtenwalner, ""In the Eye of the Light:" Ancient Druids and International Influences," *The Wordsworth Circle* 36, no. 1 (2005): 10.

August 2022. The comment section consists of comments on the poster as opposed to the content of the post. The comments reflect a trust in the poster as a reliable source. For example, two comments read, “Thank you so much I’ve been using your videos as a source for the story I’m writing in school,” and “I seriously love your work and look up to you.”¹⁵² These comments exemplify the process of perpetuating misinformation found on TikTok as well as a trust in those who post regardless of accuracy of content.

A moderately popular post (post 3) from February 10, 2021, answered the question, “Could you talk more about Druidry as an ideology? I’m new into learning and super curious & interesting but I’m not super religious.”¹⁵³ The post stated, “Simply put, Druidry is not a religion. It’s more of an ideology...the founding core of Neodruidry is the respect and veneration of nature.”¹⁵⁴ This post is an example of a post with oscillating credibility. Neodruidry is a Neopagan religion. It is diverse with origins in social movements. While a modern druid may choose to view it as a way of life over a religion, Neodruidry is a recognized world religion.¹⁵⁵ The identified founding core of nature reverence described in the post, however, is a fair statement. It is one of the three main commonalities of Neodruidry as outlined in chapter two.¹⁵⁶ The video is a person standing in front of a white wall talking to the camera and it received 375 likes and 18 comments as of August 2022. The comment section consists of viewers appreciating the description and reflecting its usefulness, but contains not further inquiries for more information.

¹⁵² TikTok, April, 2021: https://www.tiktok.com/@dust_hallow/video/6954034130468261125?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

¹⁵³ TikTok, Feb., 2021: https://www.tiktok.com/@underthebardicmoon/video/6927740863971953926?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Michael T Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry: A Historical and Ethnographic Study*. Sacred Tribes Press, 2010, 26-27.

¹⁵⁶ Michael Cooper, “The Roles of Nature, Deities, and Ancestors in Constructing Religious Identity in Contemporary Druidry,” *The Pomegranate* 11 no. 1 (2009): 65-7.

An unpopular post (post 4) from November 2020 featured a person describing why they changed from referring to themselves as a “druid” to a “neodruid.” The video superimposed the phrase, “Spilling the tea,” at the bottom of the shot.¹⁵⁷ It describes how Neodruidry uses biased, Classical sources and vague ancient history to claim a connection to the ancient Druids. The post notes that it is important to include the “neo” in order to differentiate between those who believe Neodruidry is a continuation of the ancient Druids and those who recognize it is a revival of a perceived past. The poster states, “We don’t have enough information to make absolutes.”¹⁵⁸ The video features the poster standing in front of white wall with a shaky camera shot as a result of holding the camera. The post received only 30 likes and 1 comment as of August 2022 even though it was posted a year earlier than the above posts. The single comment merely states, “THANK YOU FOR THIS.”¹⁵⁹ In this example, we see a detailed and accurate account of Neodruid information, but the poster demonstrates little thought to the presentation of the information through the video. The result is extremely low engagement.

Another unpopular post (post 5) from December 20, 2021, responds to the superimposed statement of a comment, ““Druids can only be the Celtic way and deity worship.”¹⁶⁰ The post offers a clarifying explanation of “Celtic” as a language family with a variety of regions, tribes, and deities. It also comments on the syncretic nature of Neodruidry. Additionally, the post discusses the biased and unreliable Classical sources, offering a list of said sources included

¹⁵⁷ TikTok, Nov., 2020: https://www.tiktok.com/@poison0ak/video/6890596388732701957?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502

¹⁵⁸ TikTok, Dec., 2021: https://www.tiktok.com/@blazethewanderer/video/7043909657861131526?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502

¹⁵⁹ TikTok, Dec., 2021: https://www.tiktok.com/@blazethewanderer/video/7043909657861131526?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502

¹⁶⁰ TikTok, Dec., 2021: https://www.tiktok.com/@blazethewanderer/video/7043909657861131526?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502

Julius Caesar and Pliny.¹⁶¹ The video is the poster sitting in front of a plain green wall. The information is accurate, researched, and fair in accordance with the historic development of the religion. It received 45 likes and 6 comments as of August 2022. The scarce comment section offers few observations. One comment, however, exemplifies a key component of Neodruidry as outlined in chapter 2: the desire for a connection to ancient Druids as ancestors. It states, “It’s so sad to me how much of druidic culture was lost. If I could go back in time to any era it would be to connect with my celtic ancestors.”¹⁶²

The above examples describe two of the most popular posts that appear with the hashtags on Neodruidry, a moderately popular post, and two unpopular posts within the hashtag category. The point is not to demonstrate that all high engagement posts are false and interestingly presented and all low engagement posts are accurate and boring, for correlation does not equal causation. The point is to demonstrate that when one searches for information on *#neodruid*, *#druidry* and *#neodruidry*, the list of posts one encounters contains prominently placed misinformation among any posts providing accurate Druidic information.

The amount of engagement a post receives within the *#neodruidry* posts of TikTok depends on presentation, not necessarily who posts the information. Posts of the same individual may receive significantly different engagement between posts based on presentation of content. For example, post 5 from above was an extremely low engagement post eight months after its initial posting. The same poster, however, posted another *#druidry* post (post 6) on June 9, 2022,

¹⁶¹ TikTok, Dec., 2021: https://www.tiktok.com/@blazethewanderer/video/7043909657861131526?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

¹⁶² TikTok, Dec., 2021: https://www.tiktok.com/@blazethewanderer/video/7043909657861131526?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

that received 9,174 likes and 139 comments as of August 2022.¹⁶³ The video is filmed outside and features the poster walking on grass up to a tree, holding a crescent-shaped steel knife (figure 4).

When the poster reaches the tree, they demonstrate how to use the knife to cut herbs. The video offers no information on the use of the herbs. After the cutting demonstration, the poster discusses the



Figure 4: Screenshot of Post 6: https://www.tiktok.com/@blazethewanderer/video/7107268054278491434?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

steel-knife stating, “When we talk about ancient Druidry, we don’t know a lot about it. But there of course are stories, legends, lore that we have been inspired by... traditional, as I understand it, the ancient Druids may have used bronze possible copper. They wouldn’t want to use iron [steel] because it was allergic to creatures of the fey realm.”¹⁶⁴ Here, the poster is careful not to present the information as fact, using the phrase “as I understand it” and reminds viewers nothing can definitively be known of the ancient Druids. The post is therefore moderately reliable, as it does not present the information as an absolute. Comparing it to post 5, posted months earlier by the same individual, why should post 6 receive nine thousand more likes in less than half the time when both posts use the same hashtag? The presentation of post 5 lacked any visual or audible effect that made it stand out from other posts. It merely featured the poster sitting in front of a plain green wall talking. The presentation of post 6, however, included a moving shot outside and a knife demonstration. The visual stimulation increased through colors, nature, knives, and

¹⁶³ TikTok, June, 2022: https://www.tiktok.com/@blazethewanderer/video/7107268054278491434?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

¹⁶⁴ TikTok, June, 2022: https://www.tiktok.com/@blazethewanderer/video/7107268054278491434?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

movement. Post 5 offered well-researched information and explained historically accurate and clarifying information on how to define and understand the ancient Druids. Post 6 discussed the ancient Druids as inspired from lore, defined what might have been, and included a reference to the realm of the fey. It stressed lore over religion. While both posts convey reliable information, the information of post 5 offers important information to better understand Neodruidry and post 6 offers only a broad possibility that has little to do with the actual religion. Nevertheless, viewers must scroll through dozens of posts before reaching post 5, and post 6 is one of the first that appears from the *#neodruidry* search because of the difference in post engagement.

On social media, people are drawn to interesting posts that cause mental stimulation. When assessing the relationship between the accuracy of information, the presentation of the posts through visual and audible effects, and the amount of engagement a post receives, it is clear that posts need to present information in a stimulating way in order stand out from others. The posts that receive the most engagement are the posts that offer an aesthetic channel to nature through the presentation. Again, this is not to say that credible posts are never engaging, only that popularity is not determined by credibility. TikTok is a popularity contest. The Neodruidry of TikTok is a popularity contest of knowledge based on factors that have little consideration for accuracy. The result is a TikTok version of Neodruidry built from both fact and fiction.

The Pursuit of Knowledge

The ironic part of the Neodruidry of TikTok is the educational component. The construction, transmission, and use of druidic knowledge informed by the ancient past is viewed as a sacred act in Neodruidry.¹⁶⁵ It is a hallmark of the religion and, regardless of credibility, is

¹⁶⁵ Kimberly D Kirner, "Pursuing the Salmon of Wisdom: The Sacred in Folk Botanical Knowledge Revival among Modern Druids," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 9 no. 4 (2015): 450.

enacted in the “question-answer” template of the educational posts. The best example of the pursuit of knowledge, however, is the recurring request among the *#neodruid* posts by consumers of the posts for resource recommendations for further reading on Neodruidry.¹⁶⁶

Some posts offer excellent suggestions while others take more liberties. For example, one post (post 7) from February 17, 2022, swore by Ronald Hutton’s comprehensive history of the druids, *Blood and Mistletoe*, a trusted scholarly work.¹⁶⁷ The video is the poster talking in front of a bookcase and the post received 288 likes and 24 comments as of August 2022. The comment section offers only gratitude. One comment, however, demonstrates how TikTok functions as a source of education. It reads, “Thanks for the suggestions, it’s what I come to TikTok for.”¹⁶⁸ Another post (post 8) from March 9, 2021, recommended the *Druid Magic Handbook* by archdruid John Michael Greer. The video is the poster talking in front of a blank wall and it received 725 likes and 67 comments as of August 2022.¹⁶⁹ Again, the comment section offers mere remarks of gratitude for sharing.

Simultaneously, some posts offer less reliable reading suggestions. For example, a popular post (post 9) from May 5, 2020, recommended an assortment of books, leading with *Druid Magic*, by Amber Wolfe.¹⁷⁰ *Druid Magic*, among other things,

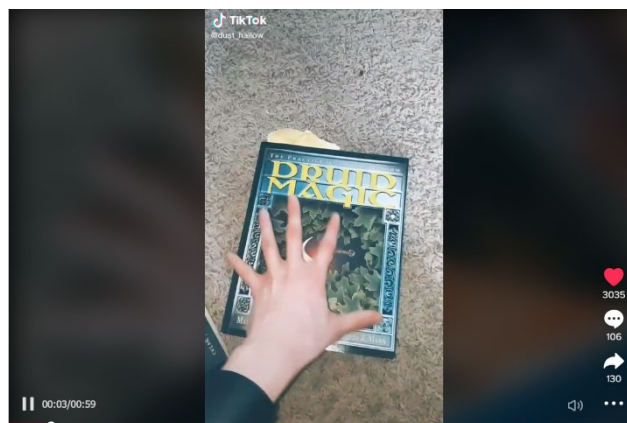


Figure 5: Screenshot of Post 9: https://www.tiktok.com/@dust_hallow/video/6823480259862646022?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

¹⁶⁶ TikTok, Aug., 2022: <https://www.tiktok.com/search?q=%23Neodruid&t=1661068513652>.

¹⁶⁷ TikTok, Feb., 2022: https://www.tiktok.com/@kristofferdruid/video/7065594568930069765?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ TikTok, March, 2021: https://www.tiktok.com/@witchofthegrove/video/6937727122165271813?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

¹⁷⁰ TikTok, May, 2020: https://www.tiktok.com/@dust_hallow/video/6823480259862646022?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

teaches readers how to call forth a dragon and channel fairies. While some of the books recommended held merit, they were presented as equally reliable to the less credible books. The video panned over a table with the books spread out on it and used a voiceover of a man chanting something in another language while a hand waved over the books (figure 5). The post received 3,031 likes and 106 comments as of August 2022. Regardless of the fact that it was posted for the longest amount of time, since May 2020, it still received a significantly larger number of likes than the other two and shows up first due to the popularity. Here again presentation takes precedent to accuracy and misinformation is interspersed with credible sources.

As with posts 7 and 8, the comment section of post 9 reflects gratitude. Of the 106 comments, there is not one negative comment. As demonstrated in posts 1 and 2, the comment section of post 9 also reflects a strong sense of trust in the poster. One comment states, “I’ve been wanting to expand my library but I’m always so worried I’m going to buy from a bad author, like the fakes out there just trying to profit.”¹⁷¹ Another comment reads, “So glad you made this video, I’ve been wanting to learn more, but had no clue where to even begin.”¹⁷² Both examples demonstrate viewers looking for knowledge, not trusting their own ability to find accurate sources, and placing trust in the poster to offer credible sources.

Defining a Neodruid: Ideology Versus Function

From its founding, the eclectic nature of Neodruidry defined the religion almost as much as the perceived ancient continuity and the veneration of nature. It contains highly syncretic ideological influences and allows adherents social agency. People can choose their own path,

¹⁷¹ TikTok, May, 2020: https://www.tiktok.com/@dust_hallow/video/6823480259862646022?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

¹⁷² TikTok, May, 2020: https://www.tiktok.com/@dust_hallow/video/6823480259862646022?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

particularly solitaires, but this assumes everyone has access to reliable information as a starting point. At the origin of Neodruidry, adherents became druids by learning from the founders of Orders who studied the Classical and medieval sources discussed in chapter one.¹⁷³ Today, formal training of Neodruid knowledge is still available in modern Orders.¹⁷⁴ Solitaires, however, can self-teach and perpetuate any misinformation they absorb as part of the religion. TikTok is a stage where anyone can teach, where credibility of information oscillates, and where the first posts that pop-up when searching are the posts with the most engagement. The effect of social media on druidic knowledge is the inclusion of additional and unreliable sources of information from which people can choose to create a religious identity within Neodruidry. People identify as a Neodruid if they learn from Orders directly and people identify as a Neodruid if they learn from social media influences. Given the syncretic history of Neodruidry and its own use of unreliable sources in the eighteenth century, is social media the newest syncretic stage of Neodruid development or is it something else within Neopagan communities?

A telling component of *#neodruid* posts is the number of other hashtags on a given post, as it exemplifies the blurred lines of authenticity by combining numerous neopagan religions together in association to information. The more hashtags on a post, the more people will see and consume the post because it shows up in more searches. *#neodruid* almost always accompanies the following hashtags: *#pagan #paganism #neopagan #wicca #wiccan #witch #shaman #shamanism #nature #spirituality #magick #spiritual #magic*. Even though the information shared in the posts are about druids specifically, it is grouped with other concepts and other Neopagan religions. There are clear lines between Neopagan religions. Nevertheless, they are

¹⁷³ Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain*, (Yale University Press, 2009), 321-323.

¹⁷⁴ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 321-323.

often presented on social media as one universal neopaganism to the public. Each religion holds a complex history, doctrine, and/or association of its own that is misconnected with Neodruidry through the addition of hashtags. While Neodruidry remains a syncretic religion at what point does eclectic end and chaos begin when defining Neodruid adherents? Magliocco describes the construction of Neopagan religious identities as a process of cultural borrowing where individuals “may combine material from a number of different cultural and historical traditions within a single ritual to construct an aesthetically pleasing whole. It is an aesthetic impulse.”¹⁷⁵ As a folk group, TikTok Neodruidry creates a new religious image with varying belief and traditions where individuals engage with information based on the aesthetics of post presentation regardless of ideological credibility and can culturally borrow and synthesize broader Neopagan beliefs within the label of *#Neodruidry*.

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When approaching the question of defining a Neodruid from an ideological perspective, the answer seems clear: the Neodruidry of TikTok cannot be defined as the historically established Neodruidry outlined in previous chapters because it perpetuates misinformation about the religion alongside accurate information, therefore distorting the historically developed Neodruid ideologies. Access to a wealth of information, whether it be fabricated, dramatized, or mixed with other Neopagan ideologies, creates a version of Neodruidry where people can pick and choose beliefs based on what information is most engaging and then self-identify as a Neodruid. Additionally, it is not a closed process. Anyone who self-identifies as Neodruid based on TikTok depictions can continue the process of diffusing misinformation through their own TikTok posts if they so choose. Not all solitaires or Neodruid posters on TikTok obtain and

¹⁷⁵ Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 209.

diffuse misinformation, as many are well-learned in the religion. As with the issues of Heathens attempting to spread truths about their beliefs via Instagram in competition of untruths using the same hashtag *#Heathenism*, credible and unreliable Neodruidic belief are also in competition in the eye of the public.¹⁷⁶

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When approaching the question of defining a Neodruid from a functional perspective, the answer grows unclear. As outlined in chapter three, the overarching functions of Neodruidry are nationalism, social agency, and re-enchantment. All three main functions are exemplified through social media and the hashtag *#Neodruid*. Nationalism, however, is perhaps no longer the right or complete word. The search for and pride in cultural heritage is a more fitting description in the modern, spread-out religion that is Neodruidry.

We see through TikTok people searching for information due to a perceived loss of identity they feel in modern society. Neopaganism functions as a means to reclaim identity through cultural heritage. White Americans in particular struggle with reclaiming ethnicity and heritage in the multiethnic society where white ethnicities are subsumed as a broad “white culture.”¹⁷⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought this to the surface for many people and it manifested in various ways. At this time, people looked to social media because in-person socializing was forbidden and found information that allowed people to build identity. One post (post 10) from March 16, 2021, featured a young girl talking about why she started practicing Neodruidry. She said, “I started practicing Druidry in the pandemic ‘cause I was looking to connect to something bigger, bigger picture to get me through...Some white folks struggle with not having a culture and if you dig a little deeper you find you have wonderful cultures that are

¹⁷⁶ Downing, “Hashtag Heathens,” 191.

¹⁷⁷ Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 210.

ancient.”¹⁷⁸ She used TikTok as a means to expose herself to how other people handled this issue. This exemplifies psycho-philosophical-agitation and its mitigation through Neodruidry. The pandemic brought psycho-philosophical-agitation to the surface. By looking to past heritage and a perceived ancient Neodruidic system of identity, this poster resolved identity struggles and re-enchanted the world through connectivity to the past. The instinct of the young and modern society to go to social media brought her to TikTok. The access to information found on TikTok and the lessons available helps educate those who seek convenient access to information.

Themes of function of online Neodruidry specifically from chapter three are to: *validate* personal religious identity through performance and participation, *negotiate* identity through exposure to varying beliefs, and *create virtual space* enacted by images. We see these three themes enacted in the Neodruidry of TikTok. Post 10 featured a girl validating her discovery of cultural heritage through Neodruidry. The interactions in the comment sections feature clarifying questions that aid in negotiating belief through exposure, such as post one asking if you need to be Celtic to be a druid. The comment sections also reflect appreciation and sense of trust in the information of belief shared by a poster, such as in the post 2 comments section with the response stating they use the information of the poster as a main source of information and respect the dialogue. The visual and audible effects in presentation create virtual space that channel an aesthetic connection to nature. The creation and perpetuation of beliefs stresses what individual people want to gain from the information regardless of accuracy. This is not to say people actively seek out misinformation because they feel their needs will otherwise not be met. Rather, the general public receives misinformation alongside authentic Neodruid ideologies and have no means by which to filter. It follows a capitalist design and delivers to the people what

¹⁷⁸ TikTok, March, 2021: https://www.tiktok.com/@nancy_druid/video/6940414253547441414?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7113000279679059502.

they want outside of the already ambiguous doctrine of Neodruidry. Social media reflects those who use and absorb it. Users seek validation and are influenced by what they view from other users, whether it be similar or different from themselves.

Conclusions

Is the presentation of Neodruidry on social media platforms, the credible and noncredible posts combined, the evolution of an eclectic religion or is it a new version of Neopaganism? Even though accurate information remains alongside the bastardized forms being created online, should the changes in Neodruidic belief and practice that arise within the folk group of TikTok Neodruidry from erroneous social media posts only be viewed as perpetuating falsehoods? Ideologically speaking, the Neodruidry of TikTok is not the historically established Neodruidry discussed in previous chapters. Yet, this new portrayal still fulfills the functions of Neopaganism communities.

In his argument for vernacular religious studies, Leonard Primiano describes religions as a form of art, stating “This human artistry is as meaningful as the creation, performance, and communication of any number of folklore genres.”¹⁷⁹ Sabina Magliocco furthers this description of religion as art and offers the comparison of music genres. She argues that just as American hybrid music genres of jazz, blues, rock, and bluegrass, combine elements from African and European traditions, so too can Neopagan religions.¹⁸⁰ Magliocco refers to Neopaganism broadly, however, when making this comparison, not necessarily specific Neopagan religions. These hybrid forms of music all have a specific name. They do not identify as the traditions from which they draw inspiration. While the comparison holds when TikTok Neodruidry is viewed as

¹⁷⁹ Primiano. “Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife,” 44.

¹⁸⁰ Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 236.

a broad Vernacular Religion, it does not mean it is specifically Neodruidry. New beliefs cannot replace existing beliefs and present the new form as historically founded. Granted, the initial creation of Neodruidry did the exact same process in claiming beliefs as ancient Druid beliefs. The difference is Neodruidry is an established religion, whereas the ancient Druids disappeared with their beliefs. TikTok Neodruidry often does not merely expand upon traditions and beliefs of the past but offers opposing history and or beliefs such as the example of post 2 regarding reincarnation. This example does not offer an adaptation or new invention, but it rewrites the roots of the religious belief. The poster of that post and the individuals who engaged positively with it experience the information as tradition through the performative experience of the online communication and it functions as a vernacular manifestation of religion, but it does not signify that it belongs to the category of Druidic. Reincarnation is a part of the historic ideology of Neodruidry. If the post stated, however, that an adherent need not believe in reincarnation to call themselves a Neodruid, then the argument for a vernacular continuation and adaptation of Neodruidry would hold. The post, however, presented the information by saying there was no reincarnation belief in Neodruidry. The post rewrote past belief instead of adding to it.

I cannot indefinitely argue that the TikTok version of Neodruidry is not a continuation of the historically established Neodruidry, as many of the shared posts and information qualify as a vernacular manifestation and continuation of Neodruidry. Additionally, the TikTok version still meets the functions of Neopaganism for those who engage with the posts and experience religiosity through them. Based on post engagement, we can see that the functions of online Neopaganism, validation of identity, negotiation of identity, and enacting space, are met regardless of authentic dispersal of Neodruid specific information. Further research is needed to better understand exactly how social media is changing Neodruidic ideology for adherents and

how significant the effect of misinformation is on individual beliefs. Additionally, no research into the connection between formal Orders and solitaries exists. No clear line exists that defines a follower of Neodruidry, making the latter research extremely difficult despite its potential to help define what it means to identify as a Neodruid. The purpose of this research is not to shame misinformation, but rather assess what it means for defining Neodruidry. Some information is misidentified, falsely claiming to be an already established religion and blurring public perception of ideology. There is a disconnect between the historically established Neodruidry and that of TikTok representation. When the public image of Neodruidry as presented on TikTok is assessed, all of the posts, the historically accurate, the Hollywoodized, the overly mystical, the fabricated, blend together and are labeled and grouped together under *#neodruid*: a stamp of authority for the public.

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