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What We Think to Know About Druids & the Depiction of Merlin in the TV series *Merlin*

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1 Introduction

Do you believe in magic? Realistically speaking, there is no evidence that something of the sort exists, and we people of the modern world very much rely on hard-hitting facts since we are trained to sense fake news at every corner. As a result, believing in magic would be no sensible decision. However, let us just for a moment assume it exists anyway. Who practices magic? The probably best-known magician Harry Potter does, yet he belongs to the fictional world. Another undoubtedly famous wizard named Gandalf does too, but although J. R. R. Tolkien aimed to create a history of Great Britain, Gandalf clearly originated from the author's fantasy. What about Merlin? He, as King Arthur's advisor, is at the center of many legends, and he, furthermore, is said to be the "reflection of the ancient druids" (Malcor 2000, 4). While Merlin may or may not be real, druids did exist. They belonged to the ancient Celtic culture in which they held positions of great importance because, more often than not, the chief druid of a tribe advised the chieftain (von Pfluck-Harttung 1893, 59-60). Moreover, druids are said to have possessed "heavenly powers" (Piggott 1968, 119) and to have made use of "[m]agic spells" (Rutherford 1978, 71). These records would suggest that those ancient people were, in fact, able to work charms. According to the legends, Merlin was too. However, if the depiction of the magician aims to be the 'reflection' of an ancient culture, stories about Merlin should incorporate as much truth about druids as possible. The TV series *Merlin* or *The Adventures of Merlin* (2008-2012) is one adaptation of the legend. In the following, the profession 'druid' will be examined to compare and contrast the authenticity of the fictional character Merlin in the first of five volumes of the TV series *Merlin*.

2 What We Think to Know About Druids & the Depiction of Merlin in the TV series *Merlin*

Since the Celts had an oral tradition, there are few trustworthy sources on their way of living and especially on the ancient druids. What we know about the Celts has been recorded by Greek philosophers, Roman authors, Christian monks, and only a few tiny pieces of information do we have from archaeological evidence such as Celtic art pieces (Piggott 1968, 16). This means that the majority of data on the Celtic culture has been collected by people who certainly had an agenda. Caesar, for example, depicted the Celts as brutal barbarians which should enhance his “[achievement] in conquering them” (Freeman 2002, ix). Hence, the sources need to be analyzed cautiously and at times must not be taken literally.

Druids had several functions in the Celtic culture, but most importantly, they were the “memory of the people” (Rutherford 1978, 72). Since the Celts did not write down much, they relied on someone to memorize their (hi-)story: druids. The knowledge transmission took place “from one ear to another” (Piggott 1968, 113). Fully trained druids taught the next generation of druids. For facilitation purposes, the druids and those to be took advantage of mnemonic devices such as rhyme and alliteration (Rutherford 1978, 71). The ritual sayings, law recitations and the like which druids practiced may have been mistaken by people unfamiliar with these linguistic tools as “magic spells” (ibid.). As a result, “an intriguing mixture of fact and fantasy” (Piggott 1954, 140) has taken place during the transmission process. Although druids did employ their own memory to store the history of their people, their memorizing techniques were so mysterious to people that they perceived them as magic.

Another competence of the druids was the mediation between the Celtic gods and the people (Freeman 2002, 46). Druids did conduct ceremonies to interpret the will of their gods. Oak trees on which mistletoes grew were believed to be especially sacred. But not only was the mistletoe used (for medical purposes), the oak tree itself was honored as well since they thought it was selected by the gods. Hence, the area around such a tree was holy and *the* place for ceremonies and sacrifices (44). To be precise: Druids have been entrusted with the execution of human and animal sacrifices to please their gods. This was a crucial part of their religious culture (Piggott 1954, 138). How the victim died indicated whether the future would be bright or not (Freeman 2002, 38). In rendering the judgment of the gods, druids served as intermediaries between Celtic people and their gods.

Moreover, druids did glean knowledge in general, not only in natural sciences but also concerning legal issues. Druids possessed a considerable treasure of practical knowledge in the areas of astronomy, calendrical computation, physics, and medicine (Piggott 1968, 122-5). As a consequence, they could predict certain natural phenomena as a result of their analysis of nature or they could interpret symptoms and treat them with herbs and simples (ibid.). Again, for uneducated people, this

application of knowledge could have been taken as magic. Another task the druids were charged with was the administration of justice (Rutherford 1978, 78). They were not only contacted to settle “public and private disputes” (Freeman 2002, 39), but also to judge on cases of murder (ibid.). Some sources even claim that they had the power to stop “battles which were about to begin” (ibid.) and to end wars. However, there is no united position on the extent of the druids’ powers (Piggott 1968, 115). Generally, the druids were held in high esteem by the Celtic people due to the druids’ substantial knowledge, which empowered them to perform various social roles; simultaneously, that particular knowledge made them appear like magicians.

That level of proficiency could not be acquired along the way, but after arduous training, a prestigious profession awaited the Celt. The mentioned druidic training could last up to 20 years and it took place in sacred and remote places (Piggott 1968, 113). According to Caesar, the druids (to be) were “not permitted to write down any of these sacred teachings” (Freeman 2002, 41). While the Irish druids could be identified by their “white robes of office and a peculiar tonsure”, the druids of Gaul wore colored and gold-embroidered garments (von Pfluck-Harttung 1893, 59). Also, druids of Gaul often featured gold necklaces and bracelets (ibid.). That latter rather expensive wardrobe might be due to the fact that druids were often relatives of the chieftain or did stand “in the closest possible relationship with the king” or queen (74). But generally, the class of druids was open to all free and land-owning people (Piggott, 1968, 48). This was quite an attractive opportunity since after their ‘graduation’, the druids held “an unrivalled and in many ways unassailable place in Celtic society” (Rutherford 1978, 73).

However, it did not dismiss them from the necessity of making a living. Druids were expected to find a wife and set up a household. Somewhat difficult was their finance management as it was forbidden to demand payment for their services. Druids could only accept gifts that were “governed by a strict tariff” (Rutherford 1978, 73). Even in the position as counselor and chancellor of the chieftain (von Pfluck-Harttung 1893, 60; Rutherford 1978, 74), which chief druids often occupied, it is questionable whether they had some sort of income (Rutherford 1978, 73). Luckily, they did not need to pay war taxes (Freeman 2002, 41). Furthermore, druids were exempt from serving in battles (ibid.); some did still bear arms despite that (Rutherford 1978, 73). At any rate, druids also needed to farm or pursue a trade to earn a living. A profession “with strongly magical associations” (ibid.), which they gladly chose, was the one of a smith. Druids were said to be able to manufacture ‘magical’ blades that needed no straightening (82). Of course, they did not produce supernatural artifacts, but knew that the right tempering of the metal and plunging it into a liquid afterward was crucial (ibid.). This does not mean that they did not fuel the belief that they worked magic. They did. It benefited them if people thought they were capable of doing something that nobody else could. It made them indispensable, which granted them immeasurable power (83). Although druids enjoyed great prestige, they ensured by keeping their knowledge secret that their special status persists, even while executing profane activities.

The consequence was that after the Roman attack on Anglesey, where the druids hid at last, most knowledge was lost. However, through Irish and Welsh mythology, some pagan heritage has survived, which, for example, manifests in the supernatural elements in the Arthurian legends (Loomis 1991, 22). In the 12th century, Geoffrey of Monmouth developed the story around the druidic figure Merlin who stands by King Arthur's side (Malcor 2000, 3). That legend was adapted in 2008 for television. In the following, the character Merlin from that TV series called (*The Adventures of*) *Merlin* shall be analyzed as regards his druidic authenticity.

First and foremost, the authors of the TV series had a completely different understanding of magic than the ancient druids demonstrated. The series starts by showing the audience a young man called Merlin who is sent to Camelot so that the court physician there, Gaius, can take the young man under his wings. While this development can be compared to the beginning of the druidic education, Merlin becomes Arthur's servant at the end of the first episode, which puts an end to any serious druidic training. Furthermore, it is revealed that Merlin was born with a special talent for magic. It becomes apparent in the series that magic takes years to be studied, but to Merlin, it just "happens" (Merlin, episode 1, 12:18-13:00). The Celtic druids, too, had to be instructed in their profession since no one can just be born with knowledge – and their knowledge was their magic. Additionally, Gaius points towards the fact that magic normally requires magical spells. Merlin, by contrast, is able to perform it with pure will only (ibid.). So, what Gaius does is help Merlin to become an even better warlock by providing him with literature on spells and by guiding him (42:00-42:35). With success. Already in the second episode, Merlin demonstrates that he has further developed his skills when he speaks a magic spell to save Arthur's life. Thus, in the series, Merlin actually works charms, whereas Celtic druids' recitations just *appeared* to be magical. What is similar is that the magical knowledge is kept a secret, but the reason for this differs once more. The druids kept their magical knowledge a secret to secure their position. The sorcerers in *Merlin* do so to save their lives since magic is forbidden in Camelot (20:09-30). Magic is taken literally in the series, while the druids just made their practices look magical.

A further parallel but also a severe difference can be found by contrasting position and status. Merlin occupies one of the closest positions to Arthur. As his servant, he spends a considerable time of the day with Arthur. In doing so, Merlin advises and protects Arthur (episode 2, 22:49-23:52). As stated above, druids also cultivated a close relationship with the ruler for similar purposes – although their status was completely divergent. Merlin's life is seen as less worthy than Arthur's, which becomes evident in the fourth episode when King Uther is more than willing to let Merlin die to protect his son. Furthermore, Merlin is not allowed to speak when knights have a conversation among themselves (episode 2, 26:17-27:30). This is in stark contrast to the ancient scenario where druids did speak even before the king had his say (Rutherford 1978, 74). While druids were highly valued by the Celtic people in power, Merlin has to stand his ground at Camelot.

This dynamic can also be identified in Merlin's clothes. Merlin's appearance is neither ceremonial such as the modest and simple white robes mentioned above, nor does he wear something precious such as the gold-embroidered garments. His rarely changing wardrobe consists of brown trousers, a blue T-shirt, a red scarf and a thin, brown jacket. He is dressed as an ordinary, but rather poor man – fitting for a servant, but not for a druid. This may be due to the reason that the religious notion of his character is missing. While the druids interpreted the will of the ancient gods, Merlin dedicates himself wholeheartedly to magic and his great destiny of which the dragon told him (30:50-31-57). Whereas the Celts needed their druids for religious purposes, the people of Camelot are not even allowed to know about Merlin's power. Additionally, since there is no religion involved, there are no sacrifices to perform for any gods either. Hence, the modern adaptation of the Merlin legend features more differences than resemblances as regards the druidic culture.

3 Conclusion

Based on the arguments above, it can be concluded that the character Merlin in the TV series does not reflect the druidic life of the ancient Celts. Only one aspect in connection with druidism has been picked and incorporated into the TV series: magic. Although the figure Merlin by Geoffrey of Monmouth may feature several characteristics that Celtic druids did too, *Merlin* is designed to entertain people and not to educate them about ancient druidism. Particularly, this can be seen in the vastly divergent construction of magic. In the druidic sense, mystically deploying knowledge was magic (which would mean that we university people are all magicians – yes!). In contrast, the audience of the TV series witnesses how Merlin can make supernatural things actually happen. Furthermore, druids are often titled as 'priests of the Celts' since a considerable percentage of their duties was connected to religious practices. On the contrary, Merlin does not believe in gods; he believes in himself and in his magic. He is aware that his magical talent is not highly appreciated, but he uses it despite that for good purposes. There is also a scene where Merlin fulfills his servant duties in a similar manner as the sorcerer's apprentice (Merlin, episode 2, 09:56-10:17), which highlights the comedic and entertaining character of the series once more. In fulfilling this purpose, Merlin is a cheeky, clumsy, and genuine servant, which is far from a highly respected (wo-)man of knowledge such as the druids were. However, the original Merlin legend itself dates back to a time where druids did not exist anymore. Consequently, Merlin was already an adaptation in that time. Screenwriters as well as any author of an adaptation are free in picking and omitting pieces of the original as they see fit as long as it matches the medium. And *Merlin* matches television no matter if druid or not.

4 References

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