

Introduction

Whence We Came?

“Whence we came?” is an aged old question. We know the Grand Lodge of England was formed in 1717, but where did the four lodges that formed the Grand Lodge come from? How far back do our traditions go? Does our ancestry really date only so far back as the age of taverns and bars? Over the next series of articles, we will explore our history and in the process, travel through time to ancient lands and rediscover ancient wisdoms. This month we explore the British Isles and the Druids.

Whence We Came? Druids

Who were the Druids and what connection could they possibly have to Freemasonry? The Druids were members of the Celtic professional class consisting of religious “clergy”, but also politicians, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals. Most Druid practices were passed on from generation to generation “mouth to ear” and not written down. They used veiled allegory to transmit their beliefs.

They worshiped outdoors under the canopy of the heavens. (As you may recall from the Entered Apprentice degree, we describe the lodge with “Its covering no less than the clouded canopy, or star-decked heaven, which constantly reminds us of that heaven which all good Masons hope at last to reach by means of that symbolical ladder which Jacob, in his vision, saw extending from earth to heaven, the three principal rounds of which are denominated Faith, Hope and Charity.” Perhaps, the Druids also met in the “highest hills and in the lowest valleys”.

According to Greek philosopher Polyhistor, the Druids believed in the immortality of the soul, a Supreme Being, and similar to Pythagorean doctrine, they believed in reincarnation. Is this why we venerate Pythagoras? The ritual never fully explains why of all the mathematicians, Freemasons should venerate Pythagoras over all others. Is Pythagoras’ belief in reincarnation our link to the Druids, and is it really an allegory for man being reborn as he strives to better himself?

Albert Mackey records that Druid initiations occurred on a quarterly basis, when the sun reached its four cardinal points or solstitial and equinoctial points. Once again, we see this theme of sun worship, as we recalled in earlier articles of how we circumambulate around the altar, the top three offices sitting in the East, South, and West, the same route as the sun travels through the day. Again, we see the link between solstice and the reverence we have for the two Saint John's whose feast days coincide with the solstices.

The initiation consisted of three degrees, Bards, Vates, and Druids. In the first degree, which required the candidate to go through a mental and physical purification (was it a Chamber of Reflection?), the candidate was clothed in white (light), blue (truth), and green (hope). In this degree, the candidate was symbolically killed, placed in a coffin, and in the third degree reborn and brought back to life as a new man. There was a Noah theme to the ritual, where the candidate in the third degree is placed in a symbolical ark and arrives to safety at the top of Mount Ararat. As we know in masonry, the ark symbolizes that "Ark which shall safely bear us over life's tempestuous sea of troubles". In addition, prior to the Hiram legend, masonic initiation was based on a Noachide ritual.

The Druids practiced a faith that worshiped the sun and nature. Could this be the link to where masonry, uses the enlightenment, science, and nature to know God? Are Celtic Druids the link to masonry beginning in the British Isles? As always, it could just be a mere coincidence, and perhaps Freemasonry has nothing to do with the Druids, or maybe not?

Next month, the Royal Society, Francis Bacon, and the New Atlantis.

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