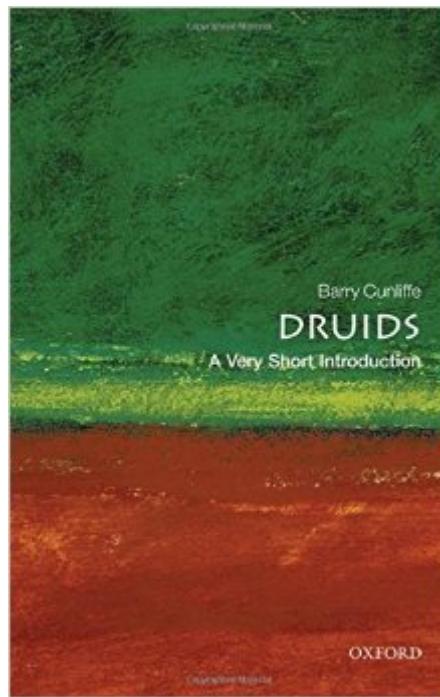


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Druids: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

The Druids have been known and discussed for at least 2400 years, first by Greek writers and later by the Romans, who came in contact with them in Gaul and Britain. According to these sources, they were a learned caste who officiated in religious ceremonies, taught the ancient wisdoms, and were revered as philosophers. But few figures flit so elusively through history, and the Druids remain enigmatic and puzzling to this day. In this Very Short Introduction, one of the leading authorities on British archaeology, Barry Cunliffe, takes the reader on a fast-paced look at the ever-fascinating story of the Druids, as seen in the context of the times and places in which they practiced. Sifting through the evidence, Cunliffe offers an expert's best guess as to what can be said and what can't be said about the Druids, discussing the origins of the Druids and the evidence for their beliefs and practices, why the nature of the druid caste changed quite dramatically over time, and how successive generations have seen them in very different ways.

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Customer Reviews

The book is a great introduction to the mysterious and fascinating Druids. What I like about Cunliffe's take in the book is that he lays out all the sources of information we have about the Druids from texts, archeology and folklore. He explains the textual traditions and their sources and how they developed over time, which is vital. He also goes deep in the archeology and shows how there was a long continuity of beliefs in prehistoric Britain and how truly ancient the Druidic tradition may have been. Even more intriguingly he explores the remarkably short time it took for the Druids to collapse as a political, social and religious force. Then however he moves on to how the Druids

developed a more modern mythology and how they came to capture a vivid place in the imagination of modern man. *Druids: A very short introduction* lives up to its title it is too short but what a wonderful introduction it is! After reading this book you will be able to sort through fact and fiction and come a much better idea of what and who the Druids really were. As I have often found fact is far more interesting than fiction.

I have mixed feelings about this book. First, like many of the Very Short Introduction books, it is well-written and has a nice physical design - I always appreciate having flaps on the covers, so I don't have to dog-ear pages. (I find the text a tad small, but that's my problem, not the author's.) The caveat, though, is this: About half of the book is devoted to a discussion of the various sources of information (Greek and Roman, predominantly) that have survived about the Druids. Of course, when studying history (and particularly ancient history), it's important to understand what information we have and where it came from. However, the first half of the book generally seems to avoid answering the basic who/what/where/when questions that I expected to be the focus of the book. That being said, at no time does it become boring, and once the author gets into a discussion of the Druids, rather than their chroniclers, it becomes quite interesting, and I particularly found the discussion of Druids in more modern culture (circa the 16th-18th centuries) and Druidic neopaganism to be fascinating. In short, this is an interesting book, at a good introductory level. As another reviewer pointed out, we have relatively little contemporary information about the Druids, and the author does a good job of knitting together the information we do have.

Barry Cunliffe's *Druids* does a good job surveying the relatively sparse information on the Druids from literary and archaeological sources and how the understanding of who they were has been interpreted by different societies. Neodruuids and neopagans starting back in 1772 created societies under the influence of late 18th century "Romanticism" that relied upon overactive imaginations and was loosely connected with the past understandings of Druidism. A worthwhile read that is slow going sometimes, parsing the ambiguous archaeological evidence but satisfying to this reader because of the helpful analysis of what is actually known about Druids as "philosophers and theologians" and as present at sacrifices.

I was a bit curious how an entire book would be written about a topic that so little is known about. The written record of druids is limited to a few mentions greek and roman texts. The author's solution is to dig heavily into the atlantic cultures of western europe (the gauls/celts) and provide

archeological evidence to their religious practices. Thus, the title of this book could also be Celtic Religion: A Very Short Introduction, which is fine, because it's a great read. I'd suggest reading The Celts: A Very Short Introduction first, because this book will reference terms and concepts that the reader who hasn't read that book may be unfamiliar with (Hallstatt culture for example). Also, because it is written by the same author, it will reinforce themes that he discusses in Druids (such as the atlantic culture theory of the celts). The only drawback is there will be some overlap, particularly between chapters about the modern day celtic identity in Celts VSI and the chapters about Neodruidism in Druids VSI. This is fine, I just skimmed the stuff that was a recap.

Druids are one of the most unknown groups in the world. Little is known about their traditions simply because it was a vocal tradition. It's a short, but very good introduction.

This book was an enjoyable and illuminating look at a group that has been shrouded by the mists of time. Good information in a easy to swallow package.

This book is answering the questions I've had about the Druids and is just what I was looking for. It's uncomplicated and easy reading.

Tremendously helpful, authoritative, and although a "very short" book, dense with essential information that helps readers better differentiate between the fact and the fiction.

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