

Verbeek, Julia

Austrian druidry and its understanding of sacred places

Sacra. 2024, vol. 22, iss. 2, pp. 56-74

ISSN 1214-5351 (print); ISSN 2336-4483 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.81092>

Access Date: 09. 01. 2025

Version: 20250108

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Austrian Druidry and Its Understanding of Sacred Places

Julia Verbeek, CTF, University of Vienna, Department of Religious Studies
e-mail: julia.verbeek@univie.ac.at

Introduction

We find ourselves in the hiking region Ysperklamm in Lower Austria on a trail called Druidenweg ("Druids-path"). The gigantic rune "Man" is its entrance point, setting the tone for what the four-hour trail through woodland and next to waterfalls has to offer: a walk that transports us into Austria's past and heritage, by guiding us to sacred ancient stone formations that are ascribed to the Celts intellectual elite – the Druids – and display some of their activities.

The Druidenweg is one of many places in Austria that act as a testimony to its Celtic heritage, like for example a multitude of excavation sites. These spots not only serve as a way of remembering this part of the nation's history, but at the same time can tell us a lot about the values and practices of contemporary Druids in Austria today, who connect to and build upon the ancient traditions that are displayed in such historic places.

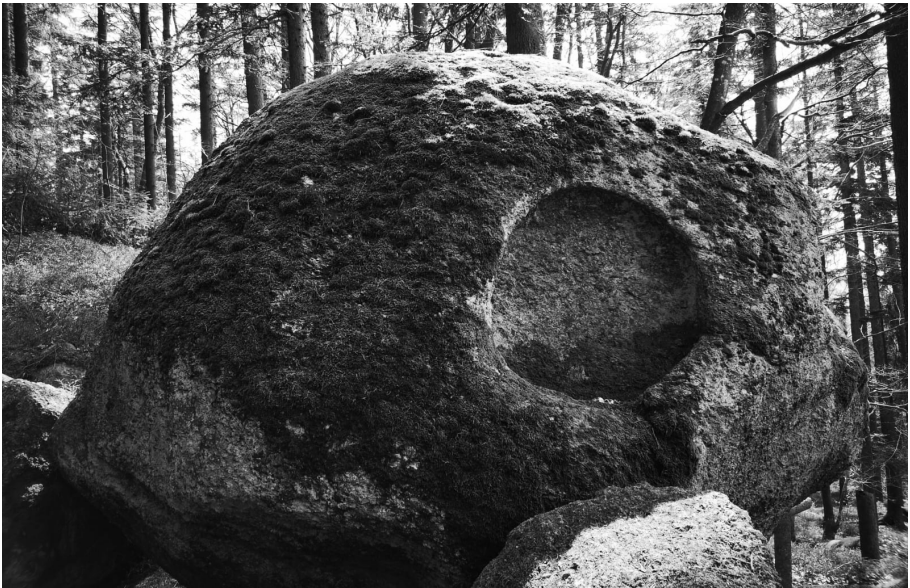


Fig.1. The stone called "Standing shell" was possibly a sacrificial altar, overthrown in the course of Christianization.



Pic. 2. The entrance gate is shaped as the rune “Man”, meaning mankind. It symbolizes power and is ought to protect hikers on the trail.



Pic. 3. The “Druids meeting point”, showing an altar stone in the middle of a stone circle.

This paper aims to shed light on the different processes and dimensions through which contemporary Austrian Druids construct and identify places as sacred. For this endeavor, Lane's (2001) theoretical framework on the sacredness of spaces, encompassing and combining ontological, cultural, and phenomenological approaches, will be used as a tool of analysis. First, after giving a short explanation of what we mean by Druidry and Druids, an overview of their history – with a focus on contemporary Druidry in Austria – will be given, starting in the Celtic times and finishing in the 21st century. For the purpose of this paper, the (conflicting) discourse around the revival of ancient Druidry in contemporary times will be highlighted.

The second part of the paper will dive into the role of sacred places for Austrian Druids today by answering the question of what constitutes these sites and how they are described and used. Here, Lane's theoretical framework will be presented at the beginning, as it will be employed throughout the further argumentation of the paper, which comprises two main topics. At first, the sacred character of nature within contemporary Austrian Druidry will be delved into, showing how different elements of nature play into the sacred character of places. Secondly, the ways through which claims to Celtic heritage and performative acts, like rituals, are attributed with sacralizing powers in relation to places will be discussed.

Who Are the Druids (Now)?

Even though reports on the ancient Druids are fairly slim, with most references coming from Caesar, they are understood as the cultic and spiritual elite of the Celts, who were present in Western Europe. From Ireland to Portugal in the west and from France to Austria in the east. Druids, often also referred to as Celtic priests, united wisdom from various disciplines (philosophy, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, politics, amongst many others – see Resch-Rauter, 1999: 14). Encountering modern Druidry, however, one needs to conceptualize them as a distinct phenomenon with its connections to ancient Druidry, to be able to study it.

Druidry today, whose historical roots will be outlined in the following chapter, is commonly regarded as within (Neo-)Paganism, referring to contemporary nature-based spirituality and religions that are based on pre-Christian traditions. In this context, Druidry (commonly) draws upon a Celtic heritage and the wisdom and practices of ancient Druids. However, the definitions of and identifications with Druidry are manifold, as is its form of practice: from solitary practitioners to belonging to a grove (Druidic group) or order (Butler, 2005: 87–88). Nonetheless, when referring to Druidry as a spiritual path, some generally shared elements like a spiritual connection to land and nature, an emphasis on healing practices, having a polytheistic belief system or following the Pagan calendar (also known as the wheel of the year) can be named. The learning course, or hierarchy, within Druidry normally encompasses the following three stages and associated roles: the Bard (focusing on art, guarding tradition), the Ovate (healer, oracle) and the Druid (teacher, ritualist, philosopher – see OBOD 2021a; ÖDO n. d. a).

Druidry in Austria – From the Iron Age to the 21st Century

An overview of the Druids' general historicity, with references to the region of nowadays Austria, will serve to embed contemporary Austrian Druidry in a broader context.

Historical Background

The ancient Druids didn't have a place in the political structure of the Roman Empire, into which nowadays Austria (Celtic kingdom Noricum) was incorporated in 15 BC (Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv & Wienbibliothek im Rathaus, 2021), and their workings got prohibited. Druids were bloodily persecuted in the Gallic Wars and Druidry became (almost) eradicated. Ireland and Scotland however were operating as places of refuge, where some Druids were able to continue their work and even influence Christianity as it emerged. At the same time, knowledge about Druidry stayed in the European mainland memory but was increasingly labeled as superstition and devalued by Christian missionaries and thus Druidry, as such, ought to have disappeared. Nevertheless, Celtic and Druidry heritage (meaning their related cultural aspects and Pagan beliefs) was able to re-emerge in Europe in the 17th century (Resch-Rauter, 1999: 29–36), as the following chapter will demonstrate, tackling the contesting arguments that contemporary Druidry is either a form of continuity of its ancient heritage or that contemporary Druidry is merely inspired by it (Kienzl, 2017).

Contemporary Druidry

Modern Druidry as of today has to be understood as within the umbrella term of (Neo-)Paganism: a multitude of new religious movements (in the West), that consciously set themselves apart from Christianity and draw upon pre-Christian traditions (Kienzl, 2017).

When discussing modern Druidry, we are talking about a revival of interest in the topic that found its beginning in the so-called "Druidry Revival" of the late 17th century and blossomed specifically in the Romantic Revival of the 18th century (Byghan, 2018: 89). Influenced by the Enlightenment which diminished the necessity to conform with Christian doctrines, coupled with the facilitation of print and translation of classical texts, interest in pre-Christian traditions arose – leading to a revival of Pagan literature (Celtic, in regard to the region of nowadays Austria).

Until the 1960s contemporary Druidry was, however, mainly limited to cultural efforts in Great Britain. Interest in megalithic sites emerged, as well as an interest in Britain's ancestral heritage, which was proclaimed to be Druidic (Jones & Pennick, 1995: 210). The so-called Church of Universal Bond (then Ancient Druid Order) was an exemption, as it declared Druidry as a spiritual path that emphasized uniting different faiths. This movement attracted the prominent (Neo-)Pagan figures Gerald Gardner and Ross Nichols, who operated as catalysts for the explosion of interest in Paganism. However, current Druidry properly evolved only in the 1960s due to the two groups The Reformed Druids of North America and The Order of Bards, Ovates & Druids in England, who gradually influenced the emergence of Druidry as a viable path. Another factor that led to the rise of interest in Druidry

is the New Age movement (starting in the 1970s–80s) that with its alternative approaches to healing and spirituality fostered Celtic spirituality (Kienzl, 2017).

Contemporary Druidry as shown draws upon an ancient heritage. However, it (commonly) doesn't understand itself as being identical to the Druidry of 2 500 years ago. (Neo-)Pagan studies commonly argue that continuity from ancient Druidry to its contemporary form is not possible, with scholars such as Whitmore (2010) giving similar statements as Ronald Hutton (1991: 337) who says: "The paganism of today has virtually nothing in common with that of the past." Focusing on Druidry, Byghan (2018) states that while some practitioners claim direct descent from ancient Druidry, the general standpoint is that such connections are rather vague and lacking proof. Furthermore, according to Byghan (2018), the revival of Druidry suffered from a form of ignorance from revivalists of the Romantic period, leading to speculations and inventions regarding the understanding of their ancient practice (see also Kienzl, 2017). Still, contemporary Druidry is highly tinted by the attempt to reconstruct or reinvent the practices of ancient times. As Issitt and Main (2014: 480, 491) state:

Neo-pagans are also united by an interest in history and often by the desire to connect with the roots of their cultural ancestry. [...] Modern Druidism is less a continuation of Druidic culture and more a reimagining of the faith that pays homage to European cultural history.

However, I argue that we must not only deal with the continuity between the ancient and contemporary forms of Druidry in a historical approach. While the question of whether ancient practices have been directly passed down or not is of significance, the ontological viewpoint, especially from an emic perspective, shall not be neglected. Lüdeke (2008) describes such ontological connections between the past and present. He argues that within contemporary Druidry, the philosophy of such a connection is central: a connection that can be enlivened via rituals, through the establishment of a linkage to the "ghost of the ancestry". These "ghosts" provide access to ancient knowledge and can be found especially around spaces used for rituals by ancient Druids that operate as knot points, connected via Ley-Lines (Lüdeke, 2008: 123). Contemporary Druids can thus claim access to ancient Druidic knowledge via the "ghost of the ancestry" around knot points, regardless of the historical continuity and transmission of knowledge.

Contemporary Druidry in Austria

Austria offers a rich Celtic heritage as seen in folk tales, natural formations, excavations sites, adventure trails, museums, etc. that keep the knowledge about Druidry alive in contemporary times. Yearly Celtic festivals transport the visitors into the past by recreating the life of the Celts: from clothing to activities like sword fights or working with ancient tools like looms, to creating flower wreaths and drinking mead. One example is the yearly festival in Schwarzenbach (one of the biggest ancient Celtic settlements in the Eastern Alps) at the summer solstice (Verein Tourismus Bucklige Welt, n. d.). Austria however doesn't only keep the Celtic heritage alive in a sense of tourism, education, and remembrance. Contem-

porary Austrian Druids are also trying to keep the ancient Celtic traditions alive through their lifestyle and practices by reconstructing or reviving Celtic Druidry and, depending on the grove or order, adapting it to the 21st century. As Druidry isn't recognized as a religious community in Austria and most groves are private without any websites, there aren't any estimated numbers on how many Druids (or Pagans in general for that matter) Austria currently has. Nevertheless, by presenting three major Austrian Druidry Orders/Groves, an image of the current regional situation can be conveyed. Austria is the home of two major offshoots of Druidry orders. First, the Celtic Druid Temple (CDT) can be named. As an Irish Charity Society, CDT gained recognition as a religious community in Ireland in 2015. Next to the CDT Tara Grove near Dublin, there is also the CDT Vienna Grove close to Austria's capital, where full moon ceremonies and other Celtic ceremonies like handfasting (marriage), annual celebrations, and baby naming are conducted by Ard Druí /i\ Karl Novotony (CDT, 2022).

Another offshoot is the one from the already presented British Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids (OBOD). The bilingual (English/German) DANU grove in Vienna, founded in 1993, is just one of the many international OBOD groves present today. DANU got named after the Danube that runs through Vienna, referring to the Celtic goddess Danu "a goddess of the flows of the cosmos, the Milky Way, and the life-giving rivers of the earth" (OBOD, 2021b). The grove welcomes any Austrian Bards, Ovates and Druids to join their ceremonies, as well as any OBOD members passing through the area. The ceremonies conducted by DANU are mostly related to the Pagan calendar festivals. Even though the DANU grove doesn't publicly provide accounts about the number of its members, its Facebook page with 209 followers can give an estimated feeling for its magnitude.

Lastly, the Österreichischer Druidenorden (ÖDO), which can be translated to "Austrian Druidry Order", has to be mentioned. This Order was founded in the year 2000 and is based in the region of Vorarlberg and currently has 19 official members. It is connected internationally with other Druids and Druid federations. ÖDO is for example a member of the European Council of Druids (France) and participates in the yearly "Dach-Triaden-Treffen" – a get-together of practicing Druids in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein. ÖDO understands itself as reviving old Celtic traditions and Druidry knowledge while at the same time adapting it to the 21st century since Druidry is regarded as a "living religion" by this group. ÖDO offers Celtic ceremonies and festivals, Celtic pilgrimage, as well as a Druidry school, where members can climb up the ladder from Celtic-Hermetic students to Bards, Ovates and finally Druids (ÖDO, n. d. a).

In comparison to the CDT and DANU, who both stem from British Orders and to a certain extent stand in their traditions, ÖDO (as inherently Austrian) focuses more on the revival of the Celtic heritage specific to Austria, by relying on Austrian folktales, genealogies, and archeological sites, in order to construct their beliefs and practices. This showcases that even within a country like Austria that isn't regarded as a melting pot of contemporary Druidry, we can't talk about Druidry as one homogenous phenomenon but have to highlight its diverse character.

Understanding and Use of Sacred Places

After giving an overview of Druidry in Austria, we now take a closer look into how sacred places are perceived, established, and used by contemporary Druids in Austria. To do so, the theoretical framework for approaching sacred spaces as proposed by Lane (2001) will be used as a model of analysis that focuses on ontological, cultural, and phenomenological approaches. In the light of this framework, a historical perspective that connects today's understanding of sacred places to ancient Celtic times will be unfolding, with a focus on its expression within contemporary Druidry. One source, adding to existing literature, is an interview I conducted in 2022 with Uthar Ariwinnar – head Druid of the ÖDO. With Druidry being a diverse faith, his contributions shall be viewed as only one, not authoritative, voice within this spectrum. Due to his high position within the Austrian Druidry circles, however, he does operate as a vital addition, since his teachings are passed on to students of the prominent ÖDO.

Lane's Framework for Sacred Spaces

Belden Lane provides us in his essay *Giving Voice to Place: Three Models for Understanding American Sacred Space* (2001) with the reflection and critique of three models of understanding what makes a space sacred and argues for the need to include all three models in one's theorization, instead of regarding them as counter gazes.

The first model is the ontological approach, implying an inherent sacred quality of sacred places. Heavily based on Mircea Eliade's academic contributions to Indigenous people and their mythic tales and tribal wisdom, the sacredness of a place is attributed to its inherent power, setting itself apart from the profane (Lane, 2001: 57). He states: "Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different." (Eliade, 1961: 26). The ontological approach focuses on the experience of the practitioners/believers. However, this gaze lacks the recognition of the potential of sacredness being overlapping with the profane, as something deemed sacred isn't completely detached from the everyday. Sacred places aren't inherently transcendent spaces but are embedded in cultural, historical, and social processes.

The second model is the cultural approach. Advocates of this gaze argue that sacrality is always a social construction that leaves places themselves empty of intrinsic meaning. Leaning on the Durkheimian school of thought, the sacred character of a place stems (solely) from socio-cultural and historical factors. Here, conflicts about competing narratives surrounding the sacrality of a place can become pressing. We see these issues for example regarding sacred Pagan places that have been taken over and adapted by Christian churches.

The ontological and cultural approaches can be regarded as counterparts regarding a sacred character, relating a space's holiness to either interior (ontological) or exterior (cultural) causes. Lane argues that both approaches lack the particularities of the place itself. Hence, a third model comes into play.

The phenomenological approach now relates the sacredness of a place to its own attributes like its topography and material character. This approach highlights

the participative power a landscape/place holds in its interaction with people, as perception isn't only a cognitive process, but an interactive one. The focus thus lies on the embodied experience a person holds when getting in contact with a (sacred) place (for the overview of the three approaches, see Lane, 2001: 57–67).

Lane states that each approach on its own has blind spots. Therefore, intercepting a space via a framework using all three approaches has the potential to erase each other's downfalls.

Throughout this essay, the presented framework will be used to analyze the emic narratives around processes by which contemporary Druids make space sacred. One of the biggest strengths of this framework is its ability to regard sacralization processes from different angles, that otherwise are often framed as counter positions. Human life and mind are complex, and therefore, processes of sacralization themselves are complex, embodying not only ontological but also phenomenological and cultural layers. Through Lane's approach, one is able to delimit different strands of argumentation about the sacred character of a place.

One of the shortcomings of Lane's framework is that it doesn't provide us with a tool on how to balance the three presented models. Because, not in every case cultural, phenomenological, and ontological influences are of the same strength. Furthermore, cognitive and psychological aspects are not taken into consideration. Another critique is that Lane doesn't substantially approach how his framework is embedded in the etic-emic dichotomy of discourses around sacrality. My argumentation envisions the three "approaches" of Lane as "dimensions" of emic meaning and clearly situates these as discursive strategies within the emic understanding of "sacred space making". By situating Lane's approaches as dimensions of meaning in emic narratives, Lane's call for combining all three approaches can be fulfilled while the a-theological orientation of religious studies remains. Furthermore, as will be shown below, this approach to Lane's framework can better grasp the inner dynamics of emic discourse on the sacrality of spaces, with its internal logic and (possible) contradictions. This provides an analysis of emic narratives around sacred spaces, rather than offering "objective truths". Overall, I argue that Lane's framework is a promising starting point to look at the multifaceted phenomenon of making places sacred within the understanding of contemporary Druidry, while not operating as a given formula that can be posed onto any sacred space uniformly.

Druidry and the Sacredness of Nature

When asking Druid Ariwinnar about what places are considered sacred to him and his Order (ÖDO), he first of all pointed out that nature as a whole is regarded as sacred and that therefore all of their rituals, ceremonies, and gatherings take place outdoors. He goes on to say that a vital part of a Druid's life is to connect with nature. This core aspect of the sacralization and high stance of nature within (ancient and contemporary) Druidry, and Neopaganism as a whole, has been acknowledged in various academic writings (see Patzer, 2010; Jones & Pennick, 1995; Issitt & Main, 2014). For example, Byghan (2018: 194) says:

For most Druids, the purpose of ritual is to restore our connection with nature, indeed with life itself. We also know that ancient Druidic practice was to worship in the open air, [...] very often in places which were perceived as being charged with natural energy (particularly from rock or from water, or powerful trees), or places at which the spirits of the ancestors might gather, [...] or places guarded or sanctified by a particular spirit, God or Goddess. [...] The word *nemeton*, often translated as “sacred grove,” was used anciently to indicate such places.

Ariwinnar exemplifies this connection of humans with nature through the so-called vision quest that ÓDO offers, typically as part of the training of its members. During the vision quest, the person is practicing and learning through means of meditation and contemplation to connect to the otherworld (encompassing the realm of Gods, spirits, ancestors, etc.) and to nourish the established connections, as well as get a grip on one’s purpose in life and within Druidry. For Ariwinnar, the person tries to get in contact with the otherworld while being in nature and more specifically on sites that resonate with their own energy and temperament. For example, some people feel more comfortable in caves, while others might feel freer on a field. However, rituals, ceremonies, and a connection to the other world (as an individual or as a community) can principally be made everywhere in nature. Still, not every place is equally charged with the same energies or the equal quality and potential to make a connection to the other world. So, what does influence the sacredness of a place in this regard?

Approaching a sacred place through an ontological lens as shown by Lane (2001) is helpful here. Within this perspective “a sacred place is radically set apart from everything profane, a site recognized as manifesting its own inherent, chthonic power and numinosity. It is a place of hierophany, where supernatural forces have invaded the ordinary” (Lane, 2001: 57). In this regard, places are sacred because of their infusion with extranormal powers. Nature in itself is regarded by Druids now and then as sacred, but in some places, the sacred character is enhanced, because they are filled with energies of certain spirits. Then, we can see Lane’s ontological approach unfold. One example here is the mountains. Dated back to Celtic times or even prior, mountains were often regarded as creations and seats of Goddesses (also called Earth Mothers), and the otherworld was typically perceived as being hidden beneath them. Because of these attributions, mountains became places of worship and gatherings (Rohrecker, 2005: 47). Till today we can see in the blog posts of various Druid orders, such as the Order of Bards, Ovates & Druids, entries about their rituals within mountains and their connection to the Earth Mother Goddess – which becomes especially prominent when celebrating Imbolc (Carr-Gromm, 2006).

Not only is the presence of spirits relevant in this ontological context, but also the energetic grid system that ought to expand over the whole world, is often referred to in this context. This grid system can be understood as energetic pathways that cross on certain points that are called nodes. These nodes are thought to hold highly charged energies within them, making them into places of power and healing and thus acupuncture points where cult and ritual places often find their home – Stonehenge and Machu Picchu just being two of many examples (Wallis & Blain,

2004). Ariwinnar explains the construction of sacred places on these nodes with people in ancient times being able to feel such energetic places, as they were more connected to nature than most people (at least in the Western realm) are today. He also points out that we can still see this ability in animals, who are also thought to be able to feel the energetic pathways and due to that choose places suitable for sleeping etc.

Solely the ontological approach of ascribing places with sacredness because of their inherent powers isn't sufficient to grasp the concept of these sacred places, as more layers come into play and interconnect with each other. The question arises as to why spirits choose certain places – for example mountains – to reside in and so forth. Why are some places, and not others, home of inherent powers? At this point, we can see how Lane's proposition to combine the different models is fruitful, as phenomenological elements are, as shown, included in ontological discourses. Within the phenomenological approach the place itself and "its own topography and material character are suggesting affordances of their own" (Lane, 2001: 58). From this perspective, a sacred place is analyzed through its components and characteristics (material, visual, olfactory, etc.) and how people interact with them (Lane, 2001: 67). Byghan (2018: 9) gives a fitting contemporary emic perspective:

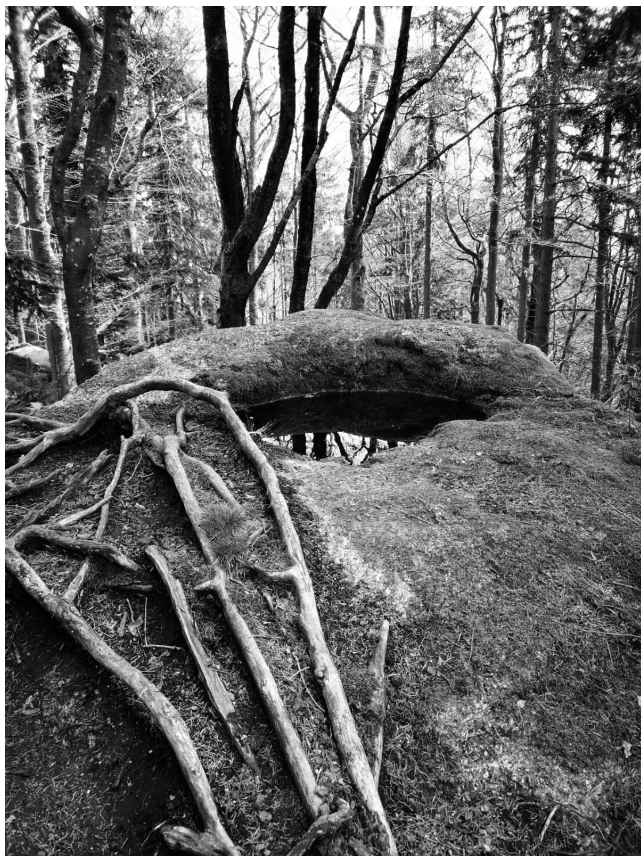
Lakes, rivers, springs and wells were also powerful places [...] and estuaries, ridges, hills, escarpments, even individual rocks and trees would also all have had their own *anam* [purposeful identity – author's note] or identity, and open-air worship may have taken place in a wide variety of locations and settings. That is still true of modern Druidism. By and large, we do not meet in churches, temples, halls, or religious buildings. Most ceremonial is conducted outdoors, usually in a natural setting, and usually in close proximity to water, rocks, trees, or any combination of those. For some groups, a ritual is not valid unless a living tree makes up part of the sacred ceremonial space or *nemeton*.

To exemplify this phenomenological perspective, we will take a closer look at stones, trees and springs, as they play a vital role within Druidry – then and now.

Stones have been regarded as lifeless objects already before Celtic times, with death being seen as an integral part of the cycle of life, one step before birth. Stones have thus been considered as holding the prenatal concentrated power of life, encompassing thus entities pertaining to Lane's ontological dimension. Through that association stones were considered sacred, but also because of their various practical uses like grinding wheat, making fire or holding water. Stones also play a vital role in magic associated with touch, like drawing energy from the stones, or transition (to the otherworld). The stones' versatile use – attributed to its materiality and symbolism – thus places stones in the center of Druidry workings (Rohrecker, 2005: 55–58).

The Celts adapted this understanding and use of the stones and implemented them within their practices, for example as an altar or a seat in rituals (as seen in one of the pictures in the introduction, see also Rohrecker, 2005: 55–58). A claimed – and to some extent contested – testimony to the centrality of stones are stone circles that can operate as prayer and ceremonial spaces (Byghan, 2018: 196).

Within the reaffirmation of Paganism in the 18th century, scholars attributed megalithic sites like Stonehenge to ancestral Druidic heritage (Jones & Pennick, 1995: 210). However, due to little confirming resources and especially confirming sources of places like Stonehenge being built thousands of years before the Celts (Patzner, 2010: 89), contemporary scholars often view this linkage as rather hypothetical or imagined. Despite the contested “realness” of the historical connection between the usage of stones in ancient and contemporary times, contemporary Druids to this day are drawn to such places. The project *Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights: Contemporary Pagan Engagements with the Past* (2004) concludes that practitioners feel a connection to nature, ancestors, and gods within the stone circles and that stones transmit the notion of calmness and power (Wallis & Blain, 2004). Furthermore, some contemporary Druids hint at the argumentation that it was not the Druids that built the stone formations, but that they have used them because of their calendrical significance and spiritual potency (Byghan, 2018: 9).



Pic. 4. Big stone bowl holding water throughout the year.

In Austria, stone formations to this day play a crucial part within Neopagan religions, including Druidry. Some examples of megalithic constructions that are used for rituals today are the Fehlhaube and the Kugelsteine in Lower Austria, which operate as a megalithic observatory, including the notation of the main Celtic festivities. Another contemporary example is the 2010 erected stone circle in Klagenfurt, a ritual place consisting of 13 marble steles, representing qualities of life and landscape (Heigl, 2011: 52, 80).

Trees and forests are other elements contributing to a place's sacredness as specific topographical attributes. Deciduous trees represent the cycle of the year and the cycle of life (Lüdeke, 2008: 101) and especially bigger trees operate as places providing shelter and shadow. Also, trees and woods are vital suppliers – from food to firewood, etc. Due to these attributes that trees and forests bring with them, they became important symbolic and practical elements within the Druids' life. In forest clearings ceremonial places are often constructed and also "Druidry-schools" take place in such locations (Rohrecker, 2005: 65–68). This sacred understanding of the flora prevails in contemporary Druidry. We can see this when looking at current blogposts of the ÖDO, where nature spirituality becomes a common term and nature with its plant kingdom is referenced as a source of healing for humans, and thus as a place for ceremonies with contacting the spirits (see ÖDO, n. d. b). The British Order of Bards, Ovates & Druids highlights the importance of trees in their practice: as a source of divination, herbalism, and meditative and ceremonial places. They list trees that are regarded as sacred on their web page, outlining their symbolism and usage. To name one: the birch. It represents birth and is linked to Pagan cosmology, bridging the underworld, the earth, and the heaven (OBOD, 2021c). This means that sites can become of sacred use due to the topographical element of trees being present, embodying ontological dimensions within.

Another example of a place that encompasses both the ontological and phenomenological approach is springs. Ariwinnar describes these water sources as transition locations to the other world, making them the home of many spirits. Not only are these energies making springs an important sacred location, but it's also the water itself and its attributed symbolism and usage. Water within Druidry is regarded as the element of life that functions as a transfer of the immortal soul of the divine womb into humans. Women who wanted to get pregnant in Celtic times therefore drank water from springs. Connected with these symbolic connotations, springs were (and still are) places of healing, leaning on the quality of the water itself as a necessity for survival and the (sensory) experiences people had when getting in touch with it. This manifold connection to water manifested itself in the bathing culture of the Celts, which prolonged into today's Austrian culture of thermal and medicinal baths (Rohrecker, 2005: 62–64).

Putting all these elements together it can be said that even though nature is regarded as sacred in its totality within Druidry, making a clear Westernized distinction between sacred and secular, spiritual and material, difficult (Byghan, 2018: 6), some places in particular are holding a higher sacred quality or are especially used for sacred means, serving for example as places for rituals or ceremonies. This can be due to a higher presence of spirits or energy flows (relating to the ontological dimension), that are at the same time linked to the properties of the places' topography, in which said spirits/energies manifest or reside – for

example, trees, springs, stones, etc. (relating to the phenomenological dimension). The symbolic meaning of said elements within contemporary Druidry is commonly derived from the reconstructed knowledge about Celtic beliefs – the ontological and phenomenological dimensions can thus be intertwined and supported also by cultural dimension, highlighting the agency of culture in making the space sacred. The intricacies of the cultural dimension in the narratives about sacred spaces in Austrian Druidry will be discussed in the next section.

Sacredness through Performance

On the one hand, contemporary Druids deem places as sacred by referring to ancient Celtic culture and knowledge. On the other hand, places maintain and/or gain a sacred character for Druids through the expression of Druidic culture made today. To illustrate the latter, we will look at the culture's manifestation through performativity.

According to Ariwinnar, apart from nature being sacred in itself, a place's sacred qualities can be enhanced through activities taking place there. Performance has thus to be added as another layer to the establishment of sacred places. The significance of ritual performance and claims to Celtic heritage thus leads us to the cultural approach to sacred spaces as proposed by Lane (2001: 57) which states that "every human attribution of sacrality is always a social construction of reality". This perspective points out that a space obtains its sacred value through its use being made of it, connected to its political, religious, national, regional, ethnic, and class backgrounds (Lane, 2001: 63). Through performative examples carried out by the Österreichische Druidenorden, this dynamic of Lane's cultural dimension shall be illustrated.

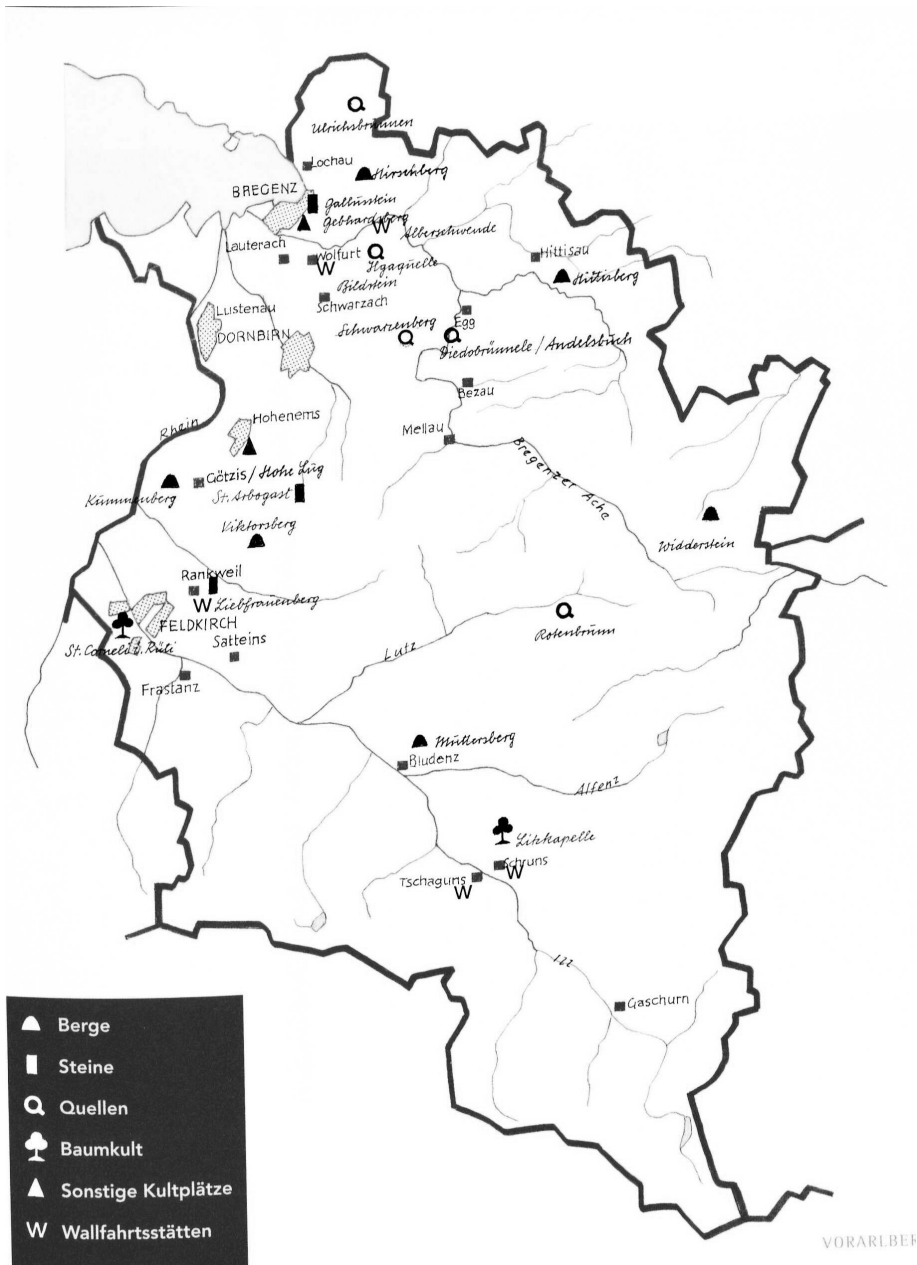
First, we take a look at the Order's construction of a "holy district" that operates as a site for gatherings, rituals, and ceremonies. In the image of Stonehenge (again showcasing how contemporary Druidry draws upon ancient heritage) their holy district is constructed by virtually making a circle with four stones, each aligned to one of the cardinal points. Other than that, the place gets ritually inaugurated and hedged in, as well as symbolically decorated. The holy district functions as a protected bubble that shall not be left during a ritual. To provide that safety, Gods are invoked with a horn at the beginning of a practice. The holy district finds itself in nature, which is in itself regarded as sacred, but gets its sacred qualities enhanced because of the activities that the Order executes there: the construction and consecration of the place and the rituals being performed in it. Not only does the place then symbolically reach a sacred character for contemporary Druids, but also inherently. Ariwinnar explains this dynamic as follows: if a place is commonly used, the energies resulting from that accumulate.

Not only can a site's energy be raised by human activities, but also the existence/intensity of spirits there through peoples' interactions with them. "If I don't call a friend for years, he won't answer either. [...] The more I am in contact, the more I get back", Ariwinnar says as an analogy, pointing to the understanding that spirits are more present when being worked or in contact with. Staying in touch with spirits, Gods, ancestors, and so on, therefore keeps the bond between them and the individual or community alive and strengthens it.

Here, the interconnectedness of Lane's approaches becomes pressing, as the presence of spirits within performative cultural acts comprises the ontological, as well as the phenomenological dimension by being situated in a holy district made of stones. Different approaches to sacrality formation thus don't represent separate processes of sacralization but can only be understood in combination.

If a place is thus regularly used by the community or an individual, performative in a ritualistic sense or in a meditative sense, its sacred qualities (the level of energies or the presence of spirits) get enhanced. Based on the interview with Ariwinnar, this dynamic can be depicted as adding more and more layers of forces of different kinds to the already sacred essence of nature. The potential of adding sacrality to spaces points to the understanding that not every sacred place is considered sacred in the same quality. To analyze these differentiations, Lane's three-fold framework comes in handy, as it allows us to shed light on the presence of multiple factors that can (at different sites with different presences) deem places as sacred. I argue that these analyses don't reflect objective-universal truths, but "only" represent respective emic understandings. Viewing the sacredness of places as an emic attribution is especially pressing regarding an ethical responsibility, in order to produce academic knowledge that refrains from providing tools or frameworks to "measure" sacred qualities of places that can then be used for ranking them across traditions. A ranking of or competition upon sacred places could (and historically has) easily turn into conflicts, such as property claims. (We can here think of churches that took over and converted Pagan sites – a point that will still be further elaborated upon in this essay.)

The second example of a performative activity by ÖDO that enhances the sacred qualities of a place is the Celtic pilgrimage, which encompasses hiking to local cult sites and (re-)activating them. To find former cult places of the Celts the Druids of today rely on the multitude of Austrian legends but also on the findings of archeologists.



Pic. 5. Map depicting sacred places of the Celts in the region of Vorarlberg, Austria.

The Celtic pilgrimage, which can either be done alone or with the community, includes the following meanings for the Order: to keep the ancient Druid tradition of walking in nature alive and to establish a connection with the cult sites and the spirits they are inhabited by. This shall be achieved through meditation, which enables skilled members of the Order to get in touch with the spirits and energies of the place. It can also happen that old memories with these places get to the surface through such practices, as Druids believe in reincarnation. Visiting ancient cult places as a community can thus bring forth a collective memory (here, the mentioned notion of having access to ancient knowledge without historical transmission is visible.) According to Ariwinar, the Order however doesn't only want to reactivate its communities' collective memory but that of Austria's population as well and therefore visits such places also with schools.

The visited cult sites can be stone formations, but very often we find churches constructed on these ancient sacred places, as during Christianization this was a method of destroying the Celtic heritage. Other times, stone formations that show a linkage to Celtic heritage are re-used by the church. An example is the stone circles in Seefeld. Opened in 2000, the priest in charge adapted the stone formation to a "Way of the Cross" (Heigl, 2011: 73). This is a common feature of Lane's described cultural approach/dimension, as it talks about the conflicting character of sacred sites since they are in this dimension "most readily defined, culturally at least, as a site over which conflicting parties disagree – a place about which people are willing to fight and even die" (Lane, 2001: 58). Ariwinar states that visiting such places can be challenging at times, as the cruel history that the Druids experienced during the times of Christianization comes up. The question of how a place can be reactivated if it has been filled with a new history and meaning arose. Ariwinar explains to me that it is part of the learning curve within the Order to learn to distinguish different energies and to be able to handle them. Here, cultural, and ontological dimensions meet again, as the place is thought to be filled with energies stemming both from Celtic and Christian practices. The Druid can then learn how to navigate these different energies. The cult sites visited within the Celtic pilgrimage are therefore reactivated in a sense of (collective) memory and as already discussed above, regain their power because of the practices that are being performed there.

Sites can thus be enhanced in their sacred qualities through performative acts like rituals or meditation and through that obtain special value or regain (with regards to spaces taken over by the Christian Church) their ancient meanings for contemporary Druids. All of this is together with other claims to Celtic heritage part of the specific manifestation of the cultural dimension present in the emic narratives about sacred spaces in contemporary Austrian Druidry.

Conclusion

When looking at what constitutes a sacred place for contemporary Druids in the Austrian context, Lane's model can be amplified as a useful tool to look at the manifold factors that play into this process. Rather than viewing Lane's framework as a formula, I think of it as a useful map, guiding us and hinting us toward different angles through which we can start to investigate the sacralization process of a pla-

ce and space. Not only does its framework provide us with different dimensions (cultural, ontological, cultural), through which emic claims about sacred places can be investigated, but its application also allows us to see how these different dimensions inform each other and work together.

In that light, the sacralization of spaces by contemporary Austrian Druids can be concluded to the following points:

- a) Nature itself is regarded as sacred, but certain places contain a higher sacred quality than others, in relation to both
 1. spirits or energies being present (ontological dimension).
 2. topographical components being present, like stones or trees that receive value due to their ascribed symbolism, practical use, and sensory properties (phenomenological dimension).
- b) The sacred qualities of a place – being thus usually described by intertwined ontological and phenomenological logic in contemporary Austrian Druidry – can also be performatively enhanced (which is discerned in the cultural dimension of Druids' accounts), as
 1. working with a place (e.g., through rituals) animates it and increases the present energies, indicating that the use of a place contributes to its sacred character.
 2. being in contact with spirits strengthens their presence and the connection to them.
- c) Sacred places often show a conflicting character, as various parties (in this case Celts/Druids and Christians) want to claim them (cultural dimension). This applies not only when looking at it from the “outside”, but also from an emic point of view, where conflicting dimensions are part of their narrative surrounding respective sacred places.
- d) Contemporary Austrian Druids draw upon their Celtic and regional heritage when it comes to the use and symbolism of sacred places and their components (cultural dimension).

A place can thus become of sacred character to contemporary Druids through a variety of influences. The combination of them not only presents us with an understanding of the sacrality claims of a place but also hints at the question as to why certain places are “more sacred” than others. Given that nature in itself is regarded as sacred, the presence of spirits (to give only one example) at a certain place elevates its sacred character and even more so, if rituals are employed there as well and the place is made connected to the ancient Celtic past. Sacredness in this context is thus intersectional.

Bibliography

- Butler, J. (2005). *Druidry in Contemporary Ireland*. In M. Strmiska (Ed.), *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (pp. 87–126). Oxford: ABC-Clio.
- Byghan, Y. (2018). *Modern Druidism: An Introduction*. Jefferson: McFarland.
- Carr-Gromm, P. (2006). *What do Druids Believe?* London: Granta.
- CDT. (2022). *Wer sind wir*. Found [22.4.2022] at <http://www.cdtviennagroove.at/celtic-druid-temple/wer-sind-wir/>.
- Eliade, M. (1961). *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Heigl, O. (2011). *Gestaltung rituell genutzter Landschaft*. Wien: AV Akademikerverlag.
- Hutton, R. (1991). *Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Issitt, M. & Main, C. (2014). *Hidden Religion: The Greatest Mysteries and Symbols of the World's Religious Beliefs*. Santa Barbara: Bloomsbury Collections.
- Jones, P. & Pennick, N. (1995). *A History of Pagan Europe*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Kienzl, L. (2017). *Druiden heute: Modernisierungskritik und geheimes Wissen*. Found [19.4.2022] at <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000064789709/druiden-heute-modernisierungskritik-und-geheimen-wissen>.
- Lane, B. (2001). Giving Voice to Place: Three Models for Understanding American Sacred Space. *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 11(1), pp. 53–81.
- Lüdeke, A. (2008). *Von den magischen Kräften der Kelten*. Dortmund: Tosa.
- OBOD. (2021a). *The History of Modern Druidism*. Found [19.4.2022] at <https://druidry.org/druid-way/what-druidry/recent-history>.
- OBOD. (2021b). *Groves in Europe*. Found [22.4.2022] at <https://druidry.org/get-involved/groups-groves/groves/groves-in-europe>.
- OBOD. (2021c). *Tree Lore*. Found [14.7.2024] at <https://druidry.org/druid-way/teaching-and-practice/druid-tree-lore>.
- ÖDO. (n. d. a). *Startseite*. Found [22.4.2022] at <https://www.oesterreichischer-druidenorden.at/>.
- ÖDO. (n. d. b). *Blogseite oder auch Internet-Zeitung des österreichischen Druidenorden*. Found [1. 8. 2024] at <https://oesterreichischer-druidenorden.blog/>.
- Patzer, S. (2010). *Druiden. Ihr Imagewechsel von der frühen Neuzeit bis in die Moderne*. Wien: Praesens.
- Resch-Rauter, I. (1999). *Auf den Spuren der Druiden: Landschaft und Steine, Festtags-Bräuche und Märchen als Zeugen der großen europäischen Vergangenheit*. Vienna: Tele Tool Productions.
- Rohrecker, G. (2005). *Heilige Orte der Kelten in Österreich: Ein Handbuch*. Vienna: Pichler.
- Verein Tourismus Bucklige Welt. (n. d.) *Keltenfest Schwarzenbach*. Found [22.4.2022] at <https://www.buckligewelt.info/keltenfest-schwarzenbach>.
- Wallis, R. & Blain, J. (2004). Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights: Contemporary Pagan Engagement with the Past. *Journal of Material Culture*, 9(3), pp. 237–261.
- Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv & Wienbibliothek im Rathaus. (2021). *Kelten*. Found [16.4.2022] at <https://www.geschichtewiki.wien.gv.at/Kelten>.
- Whitmore, B. (2010). *Trials of the Moon: Reopening the Case for Historical Witchcraft*. Auckland: Briar Books.

List of Illustrations

- Pic. 1. *The stone called "Standing shell" was possibly a sacrificial altar, overthrown in the course of Christianization.* Visualization by Julia Verbeek.
- Pic. 2. *The entrance gate is shaped as the rune "Man", meaning Mankind. It symbolizes power and is ought to protect hikers on the trail.* Visualization by Julia Verbeek.
- Pic. 3. *The "Druids meeting point", showing an altar stone in the middle of a stone circle.* Visualization by Julia Verbeek.
- Pic. 4. *Big stone bowl holding water throughout the year.* Visualization by Julia Verbeek.
- Pic. 5. *Map depicting sacred places of the Celts in the region of Vorarlberg, Austria.* Visualization by Rohrecker, G. (2005). *Heilige Orte der Kelten in Österreich: Ein Handbuch* (p. 81). Vienna: Pichler.