

Neopaganism

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Neopaganism is a series of **religious** beliefs, often **polytheist**, **animistic** or **pantheist** in nature. Although some Neopagan practices draw inspiration from pre-Christian **European** religions, essentially all of it was **dreamt up** since the late 19th century. Prominent Neopagan **faiths** include **Wicca**, some variants of **Asatru**^[note 1], and neo-Druidism. Due to its syncretic, anti-dogmatic, and highly personal nature, Neopaganism can be seen more as a subculture than as a religion.

As a general rule, faiths such as **Hinduism**^[note 2] and **vodun**^[note 3] are not considered part of the Neopagan community; rather, the term is usually understood to refer to any sort of mish-mash of ideas that are mostly from pre-Christian European religious traditions. **Amusingly**, some Neopagan beliefs are based on false Christian propaganda about "heathen" practices.

Neopagans (at least the ones who aren't connected to the **neoreactionary movement**) are usually pretty tolerant, because they aren't that keen on convincing you or your children (or even *their* children) to follow their religious beliefs. And, they will only turn you into a newt if you *really* piss them off. (Also, more often than not, they're fighting amongst themselves anyway, if only to try to get rid of the crazies like **Kevin Carlyon**.)

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I'd rather be a
Pagan



Suckled in a creed outworn

- Animism
- Easter
- Eye of Woden
- Fluffbunny
- Marija Gimbutas
- Mark Taylor
- Paganism
- Silver Ravenwolf
- Varg Vikernes
- Woden's Folk

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Beliefs

There is a wide range of beliefs within Neopaganism, depending on which path is being followed. Neopaganism is not based on doctrine. Most Neopagans follow the code 'if it harms none, do what you will'. Their beliefs tend to centered broadly around these concepts:

- **Pantheism** - the belief that the universe is equal to divinity. Neopagans are deeply aware of the natural world and often try to live in an environmentally friendly manner.
- **Equality** of the sexes is strongly emphasised. In many Neopagan festivals, **Goddess worship** takes place.
- Certain holidays are celebrated, such as Samhain, which is one of the origins of **Halloween**. These holidays are all nature based, and create awareness of the passing seasons.
- Belief in the **Gaia hypothesis** as a literal truth rather than a philosophical viewpoint.
- Respect for other lifeforms, including their **oppressors**.

Practices

Neopaganism is a very diverse religion, so practices are specific to the individual. It must be noted that not all Neopagans believe in the value of **Tarot** card readings, **crystal** metaphysics, or the significance of horoscopes. Naturalistic Paganism, for example, supports science and is skeptical of the supernatural.

Some (but not all) Neopagans may take part in the following practices:

- Rituals for worship and celebration
- **Witchcraft**
- **Herbalism**
- **Sexual** acts with people they like. Guess it turns out I'm a Neopagan after all...
- **Tarot** card reading
- **Astrology** and the reading of horoscopes
- **Numerology**
- Various forms of meditation
- Rune symbology and magic
- Reiki healing practices
- Belief that **crystals** have metaphysical properties



Nature is an important part of Neopaganism.

The attraction of Neopaganism

It is often said within Neopaganism that "you don't become a Pagan, you realise you are one". Therefore, in the spirit of public education, here are some signs it may be of interest:

- You feel inspired by trees, mountains etc.
- You feel that there's some spiritual aspect to life, but the main religions have nothing to offer you.
- You are a **vegetarian**, **environmentalist** and/or a political radical.
- You like quite a few of the following: being outdoors, bonfires, **cats**, nature, **herbal remedies**, **sex**, **Stonehenge**, Vikings.

Druids

A **druid** was a leather-wearing caste class with strong ties with Nature and that can turn into animals a pre-medieval **Pagan priest**. They were a learned class in Celtic culture but mostly disappeared by the end of the 2nd century CE after being suppressed by the pre-Christian **Roman Empire**. They lived in trees and are claimed to have built **Stonehenge**, even though it was built thousands of years before the first druids arrived in that region.

Many **New Agers** and/or Neopagans^[note 4] like to imagine that they are also magical druids; this is known usually as "neo-druidism" or "druidry". Well, there's no problem with that, since the Druids were just normal, imaginative, power- and spiritually hungry people, too — and their occasional use of **human sacrifice** was just a minor character defect.

The question of whether Druids practiced human sacrifice or even cannibalism is a contested one. The Romans claimed they were bloodthirsty: Julius Caesar wrote that they offered human sacrifices to get the favor of the Gods, and **Pliny the Elder** said they were cannibals, although throughout history we find people claiming their enemies were cannibals with uncertain evidence. Archaeological finds such as Lindow Man (c. 60 CE) seem to provide evidence of ritual killing, although they can't answer how common the practice was.^{[1][2]}



As far back as the 17th and 18th centuries, groups of self-described Druids held rituals at Stonehenge, based on a mistaken belief that Druids had once worshipped there, although Stonehenge was built 1000-2000 years before the Druids existed. A link between the Druids and Stonehenge was proposed by the antiquarians John Aubrey and William Stukeley in the 17th and 18th century: their only knowledge of British prehistory came from Roman texts which mentioned the Druids they had encountered (perhaps not accurately) but obviously didn't say much about Neolithic Britain thousands of years before the Roman invasion. Stukeley (druid name Chyndonax) was an Anglican vicar and believed that the Druids were Phoenician (descended from Hercules) and practiced a form of Trinitarian Abrahamic religion; these ideas are not widely shared by modern neo-Druids.^[3] Early investigators guessed that stones at the site might have been used for human sacrifice (principally the so-called Altar Stone), although later studies found no evidence.^{[4][5][6][7]}

An entire subculture has grown out of the Neopagan movement to recreate the religion of the druids, casting them into this innocent, apolitical, nature-worshiping farce of a group, when in reality the druids, like the Sadducee of ancient Palestine, and the Brahmins of India, were in fact part of the ruling class, and held great political control for generations.

We know very little of them, except what is written about in texts by the Greeks and Romans - but those are potentially biased, as both groups wanted to destroy the Celts at various points.

There is, however, one surviving ritual, *The ritual of oak and mistletoe* that modern "druids" the world over hang their hat on, as the centerpiece of the druid religion. Of course, there's no reason to think this one ceremony was the equivalent of **Easter** or **Christmas** or bedtime prayers, and not, say, of St. Sebastian day.

Mesopaganism

Some groups, particularly [Asatru](#), "[Hellenic Reconstructionist](#)", and "[Celtic Reconstructionism](#)" prefer the term "Mesopaganism", to denote the fact that they try to reconstruct (as much as possible) the ceremonies and faith of older, "Paleopagan" faiths (such as the ancient Norse and Greek religions.) The term "Mesopagan" is used to denote the fact that they know they are not fully the same as the old groups (due to the loss of so much information), but to also distinguish themselves from the Neopagans who instead prefer to forge a completely new path. Most Neopagans consider Mesopagans to be further members of the overall umbrella term, but there is sometimes tension between the two groups as well.

It should be noted that owing to the necessity of hewing as closely as possible to historically attested rituals, Mesopagans do not adhere to most of the beliefs and practices enumerated above (there's no record of crystals or tarot in any record of Greek religious practice, although oddly sex and wine do figure into a lot of practices).

Neoshamanism

Neoshamanism is a form of neopaganism in which the practitioner fancies him/herself a bridge between the material and spirit worlds. Most neoshamans know something about the popularized version of [shamanism](#), but have done very little real study into the spiritual beliefs of actual shamans, instead focusing on "spirit animals" and "vision quests." Despite the Manchurian roots of the word [shaman](#), most neoshamans describe themselves as continuing a Native American tradition. Most [Native Americans](#) are not amused,^[8] hence terms like "plastic shamans".

Others, largely involved in [Nordic reconstructionist paganism](#), practice a variety called *seiðr*, about which little is known historically, except that it was [taboo](#) for men to practice it. Modern-day practitioners typically borrow from Finnic and Turkic elements instead.^[9]

Celtic Neopaganism



More nutters, in the early morning glow of the sun. That hat looks especially traditional.

"Celtic
religion
and
"Celtic



Some nutters Celtic druids.

Neopaganism" is an attempt by those practising [new age](#) "religions" to show that their beliefs stretch back

to the dawn of time and not to, for example, Victorian [romanticism](#). This is a variation on the [noble savage](#) where the beliefs of an ancient peoples are given credence because they were "closer to nature". Generally "facts" are [cherry-picked](#) or made up. Notable beliefs are:

- [Stonehenge](#) was built by the [druids](#)
- Random geographical features are aligned along [ley lines](#)
- One looks cool in a long white robe.

Notable things overlooked:

- It is likely they had **some** level of human sacrifice. Little evidence has been found that suggests they were the massive murderers the [Romans](#) claimed. But a man here or there, especially if he also was a criminal - what harm was there in that?
- They didn't use [runes](#), that was somebody else. ^[10]

The facts

The Celtic culture spanned roughly 1,000 years and was widely dispersed, from [Spain](#) and [Ireland](#) in the west, across [France](#) and central Europe to parts of modern-day [Turkey](#).^[11] Though the religions of Celtic cultures shared some aspects, they were varied and specialized. And we know virtually nothing about them.

One of the observers of the tribes of Celtic Britain was Tacitus who wrote on historical events in Britain during the Roman conquest. Another was a Roman geographer called Ptolemy who wrote a description of Britain, listing the names of 27 British tribes and their distinct customs and material culture. ^[12]

- We do know that they did not build, nor likely even use Stonehenge, which was built around 2500 BCE. And though modern revisionist "Druids" worship there, there is little to no evidence that the ancient Celts ever did. ^[13]
- We know trees were sacred to them, but not precisely why or how.
- We know they had no concept of "ley lines", as this is a new invention.

Celtic Reconstructionism

The above should not be confused with "Celtic Reconstuctionism" (see [Mesopaganism](#)), which puts more emphasis on historical documents (the relatively few that exist anyways) and tries to recreate Celtic Paganism closer to its original form. As such most Reconstructionists show little interest in runes, tartans,^[14] the Stonehenge, and tend to frown on more New Age practices being conflated with Celtic Paganism.

As it's difficult to be a Celtic Reconstructionist without being familiar with at least *some* Celtic history. Most Reconstructionists tend to get annoyed by the misconceptions perpetuated by the group above, seeing them as ranging from [being simply ignorant](#) to being opportunists trying to rip off [tourists](#).^[15] While this may appear to be bordering on [Judean People's Front](#) territory, the distinction is important for distinguishing between somebody using it purely as an excuse to push woo or somebody who is actually trying to honor long-dead ancestors and [cultural](#) practices.

Beltane and Samhain

Because parties are fun, one of the main manifestations of this interest in the Celtic is the celebration of Beltane and Samhain (on April 30 and October 31). These are promoted as an alternative to other celebrations with which they coincide in the calendar: May Day and [Halloween](#). The historical evidence for these is limited, and largely from Ireland, but that doesn't stop Celtic Nationalists and Pan-Celticists from celebrating elsewhere, particularly in [Scotland](#). Partly because it's fun to have bonfires and get drunk (please, don't do both at the same time), and partly because anything which differentiates you from the English appeals to [some people](#) on the impoverished, enslaved northwestern fringes of the [British Empire](#).

There is some archaeological evidence of tombs in Ireland oriented with the position of the sun at Samhain^[16]. This indicates that the approximate date had some significance, but tells nothing about how they celebrated it or what it meant to them. What accounts exist come from Christian monks and other Christian writers.^[16] Such writers are not a terribly reliable source: they would tend to be hostile to pagan practices, and other contemporaneous Christian documents such as the legends of [Saint Columba](#) contain a large amount of implausible and nonsensical material.

There are many Irish legends of violent death, sacrifice, and other bloody happenings on Samhain. The legendary kings Diarmait mac Cerbaill and Muirchertach mac Ercae reportedly both died on Samhain, fulfilling a prophecy. King Crimthann of Munster was murdered on Samhain by his sister. Accounts of Samhain celebration are more recent. A week-long festival of drinking, gathering, and contests is described in *Serglige Con Culainn* (*Cúchulainn's Sickbed*), which survives as a 12th century manuscript (apparently edited from earlier texts) and a 16th century copy. Geoffrey Keating's *History of Ireland (Foras Feasa ar Éirinn)*, completed in the 1630s, is also often cited as an authoritative source despite its extreme distance in time and a lack of clarity about Keating's sources.^{[16][17][18]}

Beltane is mentioned in old legends as a time of bonfires and celebrations; it corresponds with celebrations of the coming of spring such as the English May Day. Again Geoffrey Keating is considered a prominent source for Beltane. The [Welsh](#) celebrated Calan Mai around the same time, which was considered a time for divination and contact with the dead (much like the autumnal [Halloween](#), the Day of the Dead, etc). All these celebrations of spring involve common springtime motifs like flowers, and generally drunken dancing.^[19] It also seems to have some resemblance to the Slavic feast of the dead, Dziady, celebrated twice a year at the start of May and the end of October in regions of Poland, Ukraine, and Russia, all far from Celtic realms.^[20] This timing in spring and autumn is linked to events in the agricultural and pastoral calendar, and it is hard to tell which motifs are coincidental and which were transmitted.

There are attempts to claim that Celtic holidays such as Samhain are part of an underlying Celtic culture found in large parts of north-west Europe.^[21] This appeals to Pan-Celticists who seek community between nations and personal identity in claiming to be part of a Celtic people. However the historical evidence is that Samhain in particular was solely an Irish thing.^[22] Beltane was marked not only in Ireland but also apparently in parts of Scotland and maybe elsewhere in the British Isles; certainly there were fire festivals in spring, although their origin and meaning remains mysterious.^[23]

See also

- [Robert Graves](#) if you like your "academic" served up with a bit of manipulation.
- [Margaret Murray](#)

- Crystals
- Ley line
- New Age
- Native American woo sometimes seeps into the fringier parts of Neopaganism, which is similar to the appropriation of ancient Celtic culture above but currently with more immediate damaging side effects to local communities.
- Pagan survivals

Notes

1. Though most Asatru hate the term, and prefer "Heathen"
2. Though there have apparently been some strong negotiations between Neopagan groups and the mainstream Hindu groups to form a polytheistic alliance.
3. Though Neopagans are shameless at appropriating vodoun ideas and *loa*, without necessarily understanding any of it
4. In a parallel to **crank magnetism**, the eclectic religious/woo mix that is New Age can encompass Neopaganism, while some Neopagans will definitely *not* see themselves as New Agers.

References

1. Druids Committed Human Sacrifice, Cannibalism? (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2009/3/druids-sacrifice-cannibalism/>), National Geographic, Mar 20, 2009
2. Lindow Man: Gruesome discovery who became 'international celebrity' (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-28589151>), BBC News, 2 Aug 2014
3. See the **Wikipedia** article on **William Stukeley**.
4. Research on Stonehenge (<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge/history-and-stories/history/research/>), English Heritage
5. Did the Druids really build Stonehenge? (<https://history.howstuffworks.com/history-vs-myth/did-druids-really-build-stonehenge.htm>), HowStuffWorks
6. Did the Druids or Celts Build Stonehenge? (<https://www.digitalmedievalist.com/opinionated-celtic-faqs/stonehenge/>), Digital Medievalist
7. Who Built Stonehenge? (<https://www.aboutstonehenge.info/who-built-stonehenge/>), Stonehenge.Info
8. The Plastic Medicine People Circle (<http://www.sonomacountyfreepress.com/features/spirg-hagan.html>)
9. Jenny Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic: Ecstasy and Neo-Shamanism in North European Paganism*. (Routledge, 2002; ISBN 0-415-25650-X).
10. "Celtic runes" are all over the web, from tourism sites to Flickr. However, "Runes" used formally, describes the particular writings system of the Germanic tribes, whereas Primitive and (to a lesser extent) Old Irish were written using a superficially similar-looking but unrelated alphabet known as Ogham. Sorry, tattoo artists and sun worshipers. (<https://thingsmedieval.wordpress.com/2011/06/24/the-truth-about-celtic-runes/>)
11. **Map of the Celts in Europe**
12. http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/british_prehistory/
13. <http://www.digitalmedievalist.com/opinionated-celtic-faqs/stonehenge/>
14. Some even see it as offensive (<http://www.paganachd.com/faq/misconceptions.html#tartan>)
15. <http://www.paganachd.com/faq/intermediate.htm>
16. See the **Wikipedia** article on **Samhain**.
17. See the **Wikipedia** article on **Serglige Con Culainn**.
18. See the **Wikipedia** article on **Foras Feasa ar Éirinn**.
19. See the **Wikipedia** article on **Calan Mai**.
20. See the **Wikipedia** article on **Dziady**.
21. See the **Wikipedia** article on **Pan-Celticism**.
22. Samhain Past: History, Myth, & Mystery (<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/panmankey/2014/10/samhain/>), Jason Mankey, Patheos, October 2014
23. See the **Wikipedia** article on **Beltane**.

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