

Druidry and Shamanism

Working with animal powers is a central feature of shamanism, and we can find many shamanic elements woven into the philosophy and practice of Druidry. Michael Harner, a world authority on shamanism, speaks of the shamanic way as one which is best defined as a method to open a door and enter a different reality. Much Druid ceremony and meditation has as its goal journeying into other realities, and the word 'Druid' is related to words meaning both 'oak' and 'door' - with the symbol of the door or gateway being central in Druidic teaching. Joseph Campbell, the great mythographer, has shown that there are a number of key features which distinguish a shaman's art. These include: ritual dance, the possession of a wand or staff, ecstatic trance, the wearing of animal costume, identification with a bird, stag, or bull, becoming master of game animals and initiations, and the control of a magical animal or familiar. Traces of possible ritual dances exist in the old folk dances, and there are numerous references to Druid wands and staffs and ecstatic or altered states in the literature of Druidry.

The remaining features listed by Campbell all relate to animals, and are all known to exist within the Druid tradition. We have already discussed the wearing of animal costume, as stag or bird. Druids were often identified as animals: they were called adders or piglets, they were said to possess "crane, raven, or bird knowledge" or were given such names as Mathgen, meaning Bear-Born. Stags and bulls are particularly important in Druidry - the stag is a messenger from the Otherworld ridden by the sage Merlin, and the bull is sacred to the god Taranis, beneficent sky god of thunder and lightning and the oak tree. The bull figures prominently in the sacred music of Druidry - bronze rattles shaped like bull's testes were used ritualistically, as were the bronze horns that have been found throughout Britain and Ireland and which often look like bull's horns. When played with the circular breathing method used by didgeridoo players they sound like the roaring of bulls.

We find the image of the "master of game animals" in Celtic iconography and literature. Images of Cernunnos or of Lords of the Hunt can be seen in both Britain and France, and the striking image of the master of all animals appears in the Welsh Mabinogion. Finally, control of a magical animal or familiar is commonly related as an attribute of the witch in British folklore, with the hare, toad, and cat being cited as the most common familiars. In summary, we can say that some elements of Druidry are certainly shamanic, but Druidry is not exclusively so - it has alchemical, magical, and philosophical dimensions too.

Check out [The Druid Animal Oracle](#) for more on the sacred animals of the Druid tradition.

[The Druid Path](#)