BARDIC YOUTH COURSE

PREVIEW

ENTERING THE FOREST

BARDIC YOUTH COURSE MANUAL V1.0 BY DAVID DOM
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Grove of Dana: Bardic Youth Course Preview
Written by David Dom
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II INTRODUCTION

Floating like a boat in its waters,
I was thrown into a dark bag,
and on an endless sea, I was set adrift.

After a long walk among the trees, tapping my wooden staff many times in the sand and stone, at last I approach the grove of oak trees, hidden deep in the old forest, where I am told everyone would be awaiting me. Twelve beautiful and ancient oak trees surround the field of grass, and I can see the sun illuminating the place. From even a distance away, I could smell the campfire they set up, every time the wind would blow the smoke in my direction, as if to guide me to the right place. It is a special place, and not everyone knows where it is. Many have looked for it, and have wandered the forest from one corner to the next, and were lost, returning from it without even coming close. But there are those who did find the path to this beautiful grove, and I shall tell you how they did it, for I too once had to find it. Find the path within, for only one path is right for you and that is your own, and only you can find it. Remember, when a student is ready and willing to learn, the teacher will appear.

The last time I visited this oak grove, I was a student myself, and now I come here again, as a teacher. Or am I? Who is to say that only the student shall learn, and not the teacher as well? I believe that my teachers once learned as much from me as I learned from them.

As I appear between the trees, and step onto the field of grass, the talk between the people slowly grows silent, and although some of the murmurs still persist, soon they too fade away as the last echoes of voices die out in the air, and all eyes are set on me. All I can hear now, are some birds in the distance, singing their songs. To my surprise, many have come to hear me tell the stories of old, the stories of the Celtic people that once lived and thrived on this beautiful Earth, and of their heroes, their deeds, their Gods, and their legends. I smile as I look at the faces of the people, most of them about the same age, probably not much younger or older than you are. Oh yes, you’re among them too, I can see you now, sitting with the others in a circle, eagerly waiting to hear my tales.

Come, and sit closer to the fire, so it may warm you when the sky grows dark, for I have many stories to share with you, and we may be here still long after dark. Who I am, I hear you ask? Well, I suppose you can’t know, for if you did, you wouldn’t need to be here any more.

I am Taliesin the Bard. And if you’re wondering what a Bard really is, I’ll tell you now. In the old times, when the Celtic people lived in tribes, or clans, or little kingdoms, each chief or king had his own Bard. To be the king’s Bard was an important position, and one with great responsibility. For example, you had to be good at telling stories. Stories about your king and his great deeds and victories, oh yes, no other king was ever as magnificent as yours, after the Bard had finished his praise. But not only the kings of today were important, also those who came before him. His father, and grandfather, and all the ancestors before him, often a long way back to the times where the Gods themselves would roam the lands! And not only the Gods, but also the Goddesses were important, for they gave life to the land each year again. The Bards knew this, and often compared the heroic deeds of their king to that of a God or Goddess, and how he rode his horse in battle as only Epona and Rhiannon, the Goddesses of Horses could!

Sometimes the Bard would be telling his stories to the people, and sometimes he would sing them, or use poetry. A Bard would also be a musician, and aside from singing he would also play an
instrument, such as a harp. The Bard used many ways to express himself, except for writing. Not that nobody taught him how to write, but because he would not trust anything to the written word. So often it could be interpreted the wrong way, if he was not there to elaborate, and it would weaken his memory, for he was renown to know the whole genealogy of his king by heart! It was the Bard who was the keeper of tradition and legend, and he would make sure they were never forgotten, as they were passed on from one generation to the next. For if the ancient Bards had never done that, I would probably not have many stories to tell you today, they would all be forgotten in the mists of time.

As you probably understand by now, the role of the Bard was a very important one in the Celtic society of our ancestors, and it was a good idea to reward a Bard appropriately for his or her services, for otherwise he would swiftly change his praise for you into a satire!
CHAPTER 2: 
THE WHEEL OF LIFE

2.2 The Four Festivals

Beltane is only one of the various Celtic festivals we will come to discuss sooner or later, and is part of what we could call a Wheel of Life. Life is, in a sense, like a circle, because each year the same seasons come back: Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter. In the Winter the days are colder, darker and shorter, while in the Summer the days are warmer, lighter and longer. And this is a cycle that keeps repeating itself over and over again, forever.

In this Wheel of Life you will also find the concept of rebirth that we discussed earlier. If you look at the land, you will see that everything is in full glory during the summer… the trees are full with green leaves, the flowers grow everywhere, animals are out and about. But when Fall comes, those leaves begin to fall, the flowers wither, the animals seek shelter from the cold or prepare for their winter sleep. And when the Winter has come, most trees are leafless and bare, the green has disappeared from the land. But luckily then comes the Spring, and slowly the days grow warmer again. Slowly, the trees, plants, flowers and animals come back to life.

If you think about this, you can see that the cycle of life, death and rebirth can be found here again. Spring is the season where the land comes back to life, or in other words, is “reborn”. No matter how cold the winter may have felt, warmer days are winning from the colder ones, and the Earth gives rebirth to the land. Yes, as you can see, this never-ending circle of rebirth keeps coming back.

The Celts would divide the year in two halves: a light half and a dark half. And they have four festivals, which I will now discuss briefly.

The Dark Half

Samhain is traditionally celebrated on November 1st, and is the “Celtic New Year”. It means the end of the summer and the beginning of the dark time of the year. It is a time where the “veil” between our world and the Otherworld (the Celtic afterlife) is thinner than usual, and one of the Gods of the Otherworld, called Gwyn Ap Nudd, goes out hunting for wandering spirits of people that have died, to guide them to Annwyn, the Welsh name for the Otherworld. You probably heard of “All Saints Day” and “All Souls Day” before, which is also a feast to remember the people that have passed away, and our ancestors.

Imbolc is traditionally celebrated on February 1st and honours the Celtic Goddess Brigid, who is called upon to fertilize the land as new seeds are being sown. The hearth fire plays an important role in this festival, for it was a gathering place during the long, cold and dark winter months. The flames of the hearth would provide light, warmth and food, as well as inspiration to the Bard for storytelling, while the family is gathered around the fire. On this day candles are often lit and blessed, as a sign that this would be the last day the light and warmth of the flame would be needed to work by.
The Light Half

Beltane is traditionally celebrated on May 1st and marks the ending of the dark period of the year, as the days grow longer and warmer. It celebrates the fertility of the land that comes back to life, and honours Bel the Sun God. It is often celebrated by crowning the May Queen, by lighting large bonfires on top of the hills and by dancing around the Maypole. A more detailed description of this festival was already provided earlier.

Lughnasadh (Lammas) is traditionally celebrated on August 1st and is the Festival of Light, honouring the God Lugh. It is a feast of harvest, were thanks was given to the harvest of that year, and was often a time where people who had been married “a year and a day” before, came to renew their vows.

A drawing to illustrate springtime.
CHAPTER 3: THE HARMONY

3.4 The Trinity

When my daily time of training with Merlin was over for the day, I went to roam about in the green forests and fields. It happened that I would stray into a field of clovers, and as I picked one, I noticed that most of them have three leaves. In Ireland, the three-leaf clover is an unofficial symbol called the “Shamrock”.

Again I noticed how the Trinity aspect was present. But I learned that the Shamrock was by far the only example. The Wheel of Life and the cycle of rebirth fits in too. It is often represented by the Triple Goddess, having three faces: Maiden, Mother, Crone. The Maiden would be associated with the colour white (purity), the Mother would be associated with red (blood of life as she gives birth to new life) and the Crone would be associated with black (death, and opposite to white as to keep the balance).

Below are several examples of how else the triad or trinity aspect is used in Celtic culture and symbolism.

*The Awen symbol*
This symbol (as discussed before) stands for the divine inspiration of a Bard.

*The Triskelion*
The Triskelion or Triskele is a symbol often associated with the Three Realms of Earth, Sea and Sky (which we will soon discuss in more detail).
The Triple Spiral
The Triple Spiral or the Spiral of Life is drawn in one line, with no beginning and no end, representing the Wheel of Life.

The Triquetra
The name “Triquetra” comes from Latin and means “three-cornered”.

The Sun Wheel
The Sun Wheel is where the Celtic Cross appears to originate from. The horizontal line represents the material world (the body), the vertical line represents the spiritual world (the spirit) while the circle represents the harmony of both. The center point of the wheel is where the material and spiritual forces meet and become one, and where Balance and Harmony is obtained.

The Celtic Cross
The Celtic Cross is nowadays a Christian symbol linked to the Celtic Church, but appears to originate from the Sun Wheel of pre-Christian times.

The World Tree
The World Tree in the Celtic mind links and balances the Three Realms of Earth, Sea and Sky, aiming its branches to the sky and having its roots digging into the earth. It also symbolises the link and balance between the three worlds (our world, the Upper World and the Underworld) as we will discuss soon.
CHAPTER 4: THE LIFE OF A CELT

4.5 Celtic Virtues

So what about the Celtic Virtues? What were the virtues the Celtic people lived up to? Many I have already mentioned, although I don’t know if you noticed them, but I will discuss some of the most important ones now.

**Honour**

When in doubt, do the most honourable thing. Honour was important to the Celtic people, and it could get you the respect of others. But doing the honourable thing, beautiful as it sounds, is not always the one thing we like to do best. Sometimes, we need to do something we don’t really like to do, as there are many things in life we need to do, whether we like it or not. When you make an oath, stand by it always. When you take upon yourself a duty, carry it out until it’s completed. If you can’t keep an oath or perform a duty, then don’t accept the honour to do it either.

**Loyalty**

Loyalty is loyalty, even if you don’t always agree. People easily pledge loyalty to someone else, but often don’t really think about what it means. In good times when there are no problems, loyalty is easy to keep up. But from the moment there are problems and disagreements, the loyalty is often forgotten very fast. If you pledge loyalty to someone, then you need to keep to that. If that person one day decides or does something you don’t agree with, so be it. It doesn’t mean you should abandon your loyalty. Every friend you will have in life, no matter how much you both think alike, will at one point have different opinions that you won’t agree with, and vice versa. That is only natural, because no two people are exactly the same. We’re all individuals, and we should respect the individuality and personality of the others. If that seems impossible to do, then it is also impossible to pledge loyalty in any honourable way.

**Hospitality**

Every guest is an honour to have in your home. The Celts knew perfectly what hospitality means. If you were a guest among people, you were treated with honour. Even if your host was, in fact, your enemy, he or she would do nothing to harm you for as long as you were a guest in his or her house. If you have a guest in your house, treat them with honour, and practice generosity. One day, the same treatment may be given to you.

**Justice**

Decide and act fairly in all things. Always choose the side of justice, as justice too is part of the Balance that needs to be maintained. Don’t inflict injustice upon others, have mercy to those who are defeated, and have respect for others. The world is not always a fair and just place to live in, but that gives nobody the right to inflict the same injustice upon others.

These are just a few of the main Celtic virtues, and there are certainly more. Maybe in time you will discover more virtues yourself!
4.7 The Roles of the Druid

When Merlin told me that it traditionally took 21 years of training to become a full Druid, I was surprised. But when he explained me the different roles of the Druid, I began to understand why this long term of training was necessary.

To explain these roles, I will discuss each of them and their importance to the ancient Celtic tribal society, as well as in relation to our world of today.

The Historian
First you must understand that every role that becomes a Bard, also becomes a Druid. Being Druid is an extension of a Bard, where certain things are taken further. Thus, having knowledge of history, genealogy, and so on… was equally important for a Druid as for a Bard. Nowadays it is important too: history helps us understand a culture and its evolution. There is much we can learn from the past.

The Artist
Similar to what I explained for the Historian, both Bards and Druids had learned the arts of poetry, music and storytelling. Which skill or talent is utilized today, is often a personal choice for every one of us, but creativity can still help us gain many insights.

The Judge
The Druids of the Celtic tribes performed the task of a judge. This means that if there was a dispute that could not be settled internally, the Druid would then judge fairly and just over the situation, and his or her decision was then final. The judges of today aren’t all Druids any more, of course, and their role nowadays has little to do with being Druid. The one thing that the Druids of today retain from these ancient Druids, however, is their quest for the truth. A Druid upholds the truth above a lie at all times.

The Teacher
The ancient Druids were teachers, and they would pass on their knowledge and wisdom to their apprentice, through oral teachings. While a Druid training of today is not always oral any more, with the wide availability of books and the internet, it is still a Druid who trains another Druid. After all, how can you truly teach something to someone if you haven’t experienced it yourself first? The task of the teacher is still very important to the Druids of today, and it is utilized to help the people around you.

The Advisor
A Druid was often the personal advisor of his or her king or tribal chief. The king or chief would often first consult the Druid before making a final decision, because the wisdom of the Druid was held in high esteem. While Kings, Queens, prime ministers, presidents or other important leaders nowadays don’t employ a Druid as their advisor any more, the Druid can still act as advisor to his or her student(s) or fellow Druids, friends or family, as we all try to give the best of advice to people we want to help and love dearly.

The Healer
The ancient Druid had the needed skills of healing, thanks to the profound knowledge and understanding of nature, and thus also of herbs. A Druid knew how the human body works, and how to heal its injuries, as well as of animals and plants. But not all doctors and surgeons of today are Druids, of course, although one of the tasks of the present-day Druid could be the healing of the
spirit through Druidic and spiritual guidance. And there are those Druid practitioners today who choose to specialize themselves into working with herbs, or curing animals or plants.

**The Herbalist**
This leans somewhat closely to the “healer”. Druids studied the tools that nature offered them, such as herbs for various means. They were well aware of what herbs could cause what outcome, and how they were to be used in order to avoid creating poison. Several Druids among us still share this interest in herbs, and will study them and their uses, although a more specific training here is needed because working with herbs can be dangerous and poisonous if you don’t know what you’re doing.

**The Diviner**
Druids were diviners. Through many means, they would interpret the messages of the Gods and Goddesses, and try to understand them as well as possible. They would attempt to foresee the future (the outcome of a battle, the future move of an enemy, the harvest, …) or interpret the present. Divining is still possible today, but now we have created ourselves new means to do it by. For example, the Ogham (the Celtic runic symbols about which I will tell you more later) is often used, as well as tarot cards.

**The Shaman**
The Druid was responsible for the spiritual affairs of the tribe. They would connect and talk with the Gods and Goddesses. Several Druids of today still practice shamanism, through meditation and other means, to travel to the Otherworld by spirit.

**The Priest**
Druids were the ones trusted to carry out ceremonies and rituals for the tribe, such as the fire festivals (e.g. Beltane and Samhain) in where the blessings of the Gods and Goddesses are asked, but also for the performing of several personal ceremonies, such as the naming of an infant, the marrying of a couple, or the blessing of the dead. Druids today step in this role as well. Pagan celebrations and festival rites are often performed by Druids, and many people nowadays choose for a Celtic handfasting wedding ritual performed by a Druid. It is important to say that, while it is argued that the ancient Druids did sacrifices during their rituals (sacrifices of both people and animals), no sacrifices of that kind are performed today any more. They are now often replaced by “offerings”, in where you leave some flowers, fruit, shells or other natural objects, to a designated place as a thank you to the Earth.

I hope that this explanation will give you an idea of the complex roles of the Druid, and why the training of a Druid traditionally took 21 years to complete. That doesn’t mean that after 21 years, there was nothing more to be learned, on the contrary… wisdom is endless, and you can continue learning new things every day of your life. The journey you make is more important than arriving.
5.5 The Story of Ogma

After having travelled through the land of Gaul, I was given the opportunity to sail with a merchant to the isle of Ireland, and there I found something I had not seen anywhere else before.

It was my first visit to Ireland, although it would not be my last, and it was here that I found ancient standing stones, with unusual carvings in it... carvings of lines, that seemed to be a form of alphabet. While I was studying these inscriptions, a man came to me who introduced himself as Amergin, the Bard and Druid of the Milesians, the people who had come to live on Ireland after the Tuatha Dé Danann. And it was Amergin who told me that these inscriptions were called Ogham, and he told me the story.

Once upon a time, when the Tuatha Dé Danann ruled over Ireland, there was a champion called Ogma, son of Dagda, and he was the God of writing and education, but also a strong warrior in the service of Nuada of the Silver Hand. Ogma lived in the time where Bres was king of the Fomorians, while the Tuatha Dé Danann were suppressed. Even Ogma himself was forced to do service, and had to carry firewood. It was in this time that Ogma Sun-Face raised four pillars of equal length, and etched the characters from the alphabet he thereby invented, called Ogham. Ogma himself is considered the father of Ogham, while his hand or knife is considered the mother of Ogham.

The first thing he wrote in the Ogham alphabet, was the b of birch, for it was carved in a birch tree, and it was meant as a warning to the wife of Lugh, who would be carried away into the Land of Faerie if she was not under the protection of the birch.

The Druids then adopted the Ogham as their secret alphabet, and so did the warriors. The Ogham alphabet was not used to write down Druidic wisdom, for the Bards and Druids passed on everything orally only, but for particular secret messages.

So what does the Ogham alphabet look like, and what does every sign mean?
First of all, you need to know that the Ogham alphabet is always written (and therefore also read) from the bottom upwards. That is, if you write or read them vertically.
In the picture above, you can see which sign stands for what letter, and below I will give you an overview of each Ogham sign separately, with the name for each as well as the associated tree and month.

- **BEITH**: Birch (November)
- **LUIS**: Rowan (December)
- **FEARN**: Alder (January)
- **SAILLE**: Willow (February)
- **NION**: Ash (March)
- **HUATH**: Hawthorn (April)
- **DUIR**: Oak (May)
- **TINNE**: Holly (June)
- **COLL**: Hazel (July)
- **QUERT**: Apple (no month associated)
- **MUIN**: Vine (August)
- **GORT**: Ivy (September)
- **NGETAL**: Reed (October)
- **STRAIF**: Blackthorn (no month associated)
- **RUIS**: Elder (no month associated)
- **AILM**: Silver Fir (no month associated)
- **ONN**: Furze (no month associated)
- **URA**: Heather (no month associated)
- **EADHA**: Poplar/Aspen (no month associated)
- **IDHO**: Yew (no month associated)

There are also five other Ogham signs that appear to be a later addition. I will list them here, along with their associations and letters.

- **KOAD**: Grove (CH, KH, EA)
- **OIR**: Spindle (TH, OI)
- **UILLEAND**: Honeysuckle (P, PE, UI)
- **PHAGOS**: Beech (PH, IO)
- **MOR**: Sea (AE, X, XI)
5.6 The Legend of Brigid

Amergin, the Bard and Druid of Ireland, was so kind to guide me around through Ireland, and one day we arrived in a town called Kildare. I was no longer surprised to hear that this place, as the many others I had visited, had a legend attached to it. And Amergin told me the story.

Once upon a time, when the Tuatha Dé Danann ruled over Ireland, there was a Goddess called Brigid, and she was the daughter of Dagda. She had given the people of Ireland the arts of smithcraft, poetry and inspiration, but she was also Goddess of fire, knowledge and the hearth. She had the abilities to heal, as well as warfare skills, and had obtained much of the knowledge of the Druids. But above all, she was the Goddess of the Sacred Flame of Kil Dara, a pagan shrine of the Druids called the Temple of the Oak. The shrine of the Sacred Flame of Kil Dara was tended by nineteen Druidesses, who kept the fire going.

Brigid was also the wife of Bres, king of the Fomorians, from whom she had a son named Ruadan. You probably remember Bres, for he fought against the Tuatha Dé Danann in the Second Battle of Magh Tuiredh, and it was in this battle that Brigid’s son, Ruadan was sent by Bres to kill Goibniu, the smith of the Tuatha Dé Danann.

But then the opposite happened from what was hoped. Instead that Ruadan would kill Goibniu, he himself was killed by the smith. When Brigid learned of her son’s death, she mourned deeply, and thus she invented keening, a lament for mourning the dead. Another invention of Brigid was the Art of Whistling. When in her later days, Christianity began to take root in Ireland, she withdrew in the forests and mountains, and eventually into the Land of Faerie.

Many years later, the Goddess Brigid reincarnated in human flesh again, and as she grew up, she became one of the nineteen Druidesses who kept the fire going at the shrine of the Sacred Flame of Kil Dara. This Brigid was the daughter of Dubhtach, the pagan king of Leinster in Ireland, and Brocca, a Pictish slave whom St. Patrick himself had once baptized into Christianity.

It was in the year 468 A.D. that Brigid willingly converted to Christianity, and became a Saint later on. When she had reached maturity, she began to give away food to the poor, as well as her father’s valuable sword, where after the king decided to put her in a monastery. In the year 470 she returned to Kil Dara (now known as Kildare), where she founded a monastery of her own, on or near the ancient shrine of the Sacred Flame. It was at this monastery that later the Book of Kildare manuscript would be created. One day she converted a dying man to Christianity, by making a cross of rushes she found on the ground. This we call today Brigid’s Cross, as you can see in the image below.

St. Brigid died on February 1 at Kildare, and she is still remembered (either as Goddess or as Saint) on the feast of Imbolc on this day. You probably still remember that Imbolc was for the ancient Celts the time where the winter ended, and the spring began. It was a time where seeds would be sown in the fields for a later harvest, and the days would grow longer again. On the eve of Imbolc, people would make a Brigid’s Cross, to invite the Goddess (or the spirit of the Saint) into their house on this feast, and also to protect their house from fire.
6.3 The Tools of a Druid

I will now discuss some of the main tools of a Druid. You may freely choose whether or not to use them, as you feel fit.

The Druid Staff or Wand

The staff or wand is often a tool used in Druidic ceremonies (such as the casting and closing of the circle), but can also be a personal item. If you wish to make your own staff or wand, don’t go to a store and buy one. Go to a forest, and find a branch that you feel is meant for you. When the time is right, it will be there, waiting for you, and you will find it when you are meant to find it. It doesn’t matter from which kind of tree the wood of your staff or wand comes, as long as you feel it is the one that’s right for you. Do make sure, of course, that the wood of the staff or wand is not already rotting, or infested with mould or little animals that made it their home. Remember to thank the tree for giving you its branch, and even leave a small offering to the forest in return. Most commonly, Ogham runes are carved into the bark of the branch, but they could also be painted on it. You can select the Ogham runes by either choosing the ones you feel comfortable with, or picking them out at random. The number of runes you use, could vary depending on how many you actually feel there should be on your staff, but keep in mind what way they should be carved: the Celtic Ogham works from bottom to top, not the other way around.

Once you have decided which runes you’ll put on your staff, actually putting them on there, is your next task! To do this, you need to be spiritually open and centred, free from other preoccupations (be it in your surroundings, or in your mind), and you need to take the time to do this—it’s not a task that needs to be done in 5 minutes! It is recommended to sing the name of the rune with a tune you feel appropriate, while you are carving it, to add more strength to the runes. When you are done, show the staff to the moonlight, with the runes showing in the direction of the moon (full moon is the best time to do this). The runes on your staff could still be blessed afterwards, using a small natural stone to move over the carvings while speaking the blessing. When you’re all done, only one thing’s left to do: put oil on your entire staff, to protect the wood from the Elements. But use only natural oil, not synthetic!

The Crane Bag

The Crane Bag is a small bag made out of some natural material (such as leather, linen, wool or cotton), that could contain objects that have value to you. Not things that you buy in the store, but things that nature provides. It could contain, for example, a gemstone, a feather, a shell, a dried leaf, a peace of bark, … or it could contain stones or sticks on which the Ogham runes are carved or drawn. On the bag itself, you could also draw Ogham rules or other symbols you feel comfortable with.
ADDITIONAL CONTENTS PREVIEW

- The Birth of a Bard
- The Four Elements
- The Balance
- The Three Realms
- The Triads
- The History of the Celts
- The Roles of the Bard
- Celtic Art
- The Voyage to Avalon
- The Life Energy
- Responsibility
- The Shield
- Place-Bonding: An Awareness Practice

AND ALSO

- Meditations
- Making a harvest knot
- Creating a Maypole
- Making a Celtic knot
- Writing your name in Ogham
- Making a Brigid’s Cross
- Writing poetry and stories
- Connecting with nature