

Druids of the Old Faith

Power Groups

by Eric Menge

The sun rises and the sun sets, the two moons dance across the heavens, and the seasons pass. Since the earliest days, the druids of the Old Faith have watched the Eternal Circle of Nature. They know the ways of nature and the mysteries of Oerth, but they are not its master. Instead, they are servants of nature and tend to the needs of the land and its creatures. Only the foolish would underestimate their power for they have mastered the secrets of the world itself.

Gods of the Old Faith

At the core of the Old Faith is Beory the Oerth Mother. She is the wellspring of all life and some druids consider her the manifestation of Oerth itself. Additionally, the Old Faith believes that each season has a deity who acts as steward for that portion of the year. The identities of these gods vary, depending upon the faithful. Like nature, the Old Faith is very adaptable.

Among the Flannae, Ehlonna is the Spring Maid, Obad-Hai is the Lord of Summer, Berei or Beory is the Lady of Autumn, and Nerull is the Winter King. At the center of the yearly cycle is the sun, symbolized by Pelor, who ensures the change of the seasons. When the Old Faith spread among the Oeridians, Procan birthed five children to assume these roles – Atroa (spring), Sotillion (summer), Wenta (autumn), and Telchur (winter) – while Velnius, lord of the sky, fills the same role as Pelor. Though the Old Faith has only a small following among the Suel, Bralm (spring), Llerg (summer), Phytan (autumn), and Vatun (winter) are the stewards of seasons among communities with significant Suloise presence, while Lendor keeps the cycle. Other nature gods have devotees among the Old Faith, as long as the druid remains of purely neutral alignment.

Beliefs of the Old Faith

The Old Faith of the Flanaeess is not about the temporal power of a church but about truths present in nature. The druids seek to understand these truths, internalize them, and preserve them. Four truths permeate the philosophy and teachings of the Old Faith.

The Eternal Circle: The central belief of the Old Faith is that of the Eternal Circle. Spring blooms into summer, which fades to autumn and then descends into winter before winter gives rise to spring. The moon waxes, wanes, and waxes again. Life gives way to death, which leads to rebirth. The root of all druidic philosophy is grounded in the belief that the Eternal Circle continues without end, and all that is will pass away before being reborn.

All Things in Balance: For the Eternal Circle to turn, all things must exist in Balance. There is a place for everything natural somewhere in the world. Death exists because it must, and winter comes because it is part of the cycle. Nature is wild and dangerous, and the predator is just as much a part of the world as the prey. Old Faith druids constantly strive to maintain the Balance of nature through their actions and in their thoughts.

Symbolism through Nature: The druids of the Old Faith hold great store in symbolism and respect oracles, auguries, and omens. Animals and plants both represent philosophical truths, and druidic auguries are centered on observing natural phenomena – such as what kind of birds fly overhead or the pattern formed by dropping a stone into a still pond – and interpreting the meaning rather than asking a god's servants directly. Druids often keep oracular animals to assist with the divinations. The elemental weirds (described below) are greatly revered, and many druids seek their advice.

The Power of Four: The number four has powerful significance in the Old Faith traditions. There are four seasons in the year. The family has four roles – mother, father, daughter, and son. There are four great celestial bodies – Oerth, the Sun, Luna, and Celene. The four elements – fire, water, earth, and air – are the foundation of nature.

Legends of the Old Faith

The Old Faith druids first arose among the Flannae of Oerth, a human tribe with a proud tradition of storytelling. Below are two of the most prominent myths of the Old Faith.

The First Dance of Beory: Long ago, Oerth was naught but lifeless stones and dust. Beory arose from the essence of Oerth itself, looked over the windswept, broken land, and saw promise. Hope and the desire to give of herself filled her, and she danced across the barren land. As she danced, she cut her foot on the sharp rocks of the young world, and her blood sprinkled the ground where she stepped. Far above, Pelor turned his eye to the dancing goddess, and he fell in love as he watched her dance. Beory's blood mingled with the soil and Pelor's light shone from the heavens. Living things grew in the wake of Beory's dance, and the world blossomed for the first time.

Obad-Hai and the Summer Tree: Each spring, Obad-Hai is born and grows into an eager and daring boy. At the threshold of summer, Ehlonna comes to him and guides him to manhood. In the summer, Obad-Hai becomes the Stag King and leads the Wild Hunt. His strength withers in the autumn until he is the Shalm. At the last breath of the year, Nerull comes and slays him with a single stroke and hangs the corpse from the Summer Tree for seven days, at the end of which Pelor cuts him down and buries him so that he is in the embrace of his mother, Beory. Ehlonna comes to the grave and waters it with her tears. From that grave sprouts a sapling that gives forth a single fruit. The fruit ripens, falls to the ground, and splits open to reveal the boy – Obad-Hai – beginning the circle anew.

Friends of the Old Faith

The Old Faith does not exist in isolation. As an ancient religion, the Old Faith has made numerous allies over the centuries. The tenet of All Things in Balance allows the druids to accept the widely varying customs and faiths of people across the Flanaess. However, a few friends bear special mentioning.

Elves: The cordial relations between the elves and the Old Faith stretch over millennia. When the elves first encountered humans, they interacted with the Flan tribes who were devout followers of the Old Faith. The elves were impressed by the level of understanding and reverence of nature possessed by the druids and that friendship continues to this day. The wood elves and the snow elves are the friendliest toward the druids, while the grey elves are the most reserved. The valley elves are the exception to the rule, but their antipathy is a recent development that began with the arrival of the Mage of the Valley. While the drow worship a demon, they do revere spiders, and the neutral live-and-let-live stance of the Old Faith makes interaction between dark elf and druid a complex one.

Fey: The Old Faith druids have long had relations with the fey. Because of the druids' strong connection to the land and nature, they seemingly understand the capricious fey and can treat with them without dire peril. The fey, in turn, respect the druids and deal with them in preference to other mortals. However, a faerie's definition of respect and dire peril are often far different from a mortal's. Some groves sacred to the Old Faith have a dryad's tree among their number or a pool that lairs a nymph. Satyrs and sprites roam and do not settle in one place for very long but often visit with the druids to share tales or receive advice.

Old Lore Bards: The Old Lore is a select order of bards affiliated with the Old Faith. Originally chosen from among the Flan nobility, today's bards must be human or half-elfen and of noble descent. The bards have a long tradition of scholarship and are organized into seven colleges, which are scattered throughout the Flanaess. The druids entrust the Old Lore bards with many of their secrets. In return, the bards serve the often anti-social druids as messengers and ambassadors.

Rangers of the Gnarley: Numbering roughly 200, the Rangers of the Gnarley are an independent faction who strives to bring the good folk of the forest together and keep the forest independent of outside influences, such as Greyhawk, Dyvers, and Celene. The strict neutrality of the Old Faith keeps them from becoming fast allies of the good-aligned Rangers, but the Ranger Knights often seek out the druids for counsel and the druids rely on the Rangers to eliminate threats to the Balance.

Foes of the Old Faith

The druids of the Old Faith have gained their fair share of enemies as well as allies over the years. The clerics of St. Cuthbert are often rivals with the Old Faith for the devotion of the common folk but this competition is mostly a peaceful one. The druid's conflict with the followers of Pholtus is not heated enough to rise to the level of a foe, but there is little love lost between them.

Aerdi and the Great Kingdom: When the Aerdi, the largest of the migrating Oeridian tribes, arrived in the eastern Flanaess, they encountered decadent Flan tribes who had forsaken the Old Faith and had embraced the worship of Ahmon-Ibor the Sibilant Beast (who would later be known as Demogorgon the Prince of Demons.) Not every tribe was in the thrall of demons, but the Aerdi made no distinction in their destruction between the Old Faith and demonic cults. By the time of the establishment of the Great Kingdom, the Oeridians had completed the obliteration of the Flannae culture. The Old Faith druids retreated to the depths of the great forests, as their circles were systematically destroyed, but prophesized that this was but a winter and they would outlast any nation that the Oeridians could devise. With the fall of the Great Kingdom, their words came true, and the druids have begun to emerge from their forests.

Elder Elementalism and Tharizdun: In the past, the Old Faith did not consider the cults of Elder Elementalism a danger. Even at the height of the Temple of Elemental Evil, the Old Faith only had one druid, Jaroo Ashstaff, in Hommlet to watch the cult. However, the Old Faith's attitude changed when the druids learned that the Elder Elementalism was a plot by the followers of the Tharizdun. The Old Faith considers the Unmaker the greatest of all threats because he plots to completely destroy the Eternal Circle. The druids aggressively seek to undo any attempts by the followers of Tharizdun to unleash their dread deity.

The Far Realms: Beyond the fabric of reality are the Far Realms. This horrific place is the home of aberrations that are not part of the natural order of Oerth. Normally, the Old Faith would not concern itself with the matters of another plane, but sometimes the barriers between planes wear thin and things seep across the boundaries. The

gruesome might of the incomprehensible beings from the Far Realms warp nature in disturbing and impossible ways by their very presence. This perversion to nature is anathema to the druids of the Old Faith, who constantly attempt to destroy the intruders and seal the breaches between the worlds.

Vecna and the Ur-Flan: The Ur-Flan were a mysterious group among the Flannae about whom little is known for sure. It is known that several of their number, Vecna and Keraptis among them, made themselves overlords of pre-cataclysm empires and these Ur-Flan empires were quite evil. The druids did not concern themselves with the Ur-Flan as long as they were not a threat to the Balance or the Eternal Cycle. This passive acceptance allowed Vecna and others like him to flourish, and some held whole tribes in bondage to their evil. When Vecna betrayed the druids and twisted their power over nature into a source of undeath, they were completely unprepared. Some druids fled, many died, and the few who remained served the Whispered One. A number of scholars believe that the druids who served Vecna rescued many of the Ur-Flan secrets and the Old Faith preserves that knowledge to this day.

Places of Power

Worship of the Old Faith always takes place outdoors. Instead of temples, the druids and their followers gather at places of natural significance. The druids often accentuate the power of these sites through additions of stones or carefully chosen trees.

Elemental Weirds: The druids believe that elemental weirds are either manifestations of Beory's will in Oerth or reflections of her consciousness. Either way, these cryptic beings are powerful diviners that dwell in remote and hidden locations. The air weirds specialize in exploration and can be found on windy plains or mountaintops. The earth weirds speak of death and fate and live in soft earthen pools of mud or clay. The fire weirds keep ancient lore and give guidance to the suffering and ignorant, and their essences are bound to pools of fire or lava. The water weirds speak words of healing and hope and dwell only in the clearest springs.

Megalithic Circles: The great megalithic circles are the heart of the Old Faith. The druids erect standing stones on prominent hilltops or other places of natural power. The massive stones are either solitary (a menhir), arranged to form a doorway (a trilithon), or a covered room (a dolmen). The stones commonly are arranged in circles, but the exact arrangement varies widely.

Sacred Groves: The sacred groves act as centers of worship for the Old Faith. They are the lesser of the two worship sites and are much more common than megalithic circles. Oak groves are the most prevalent, but other trees are used, such as the massive deklo or the fruit-bearing usk. The choice of trees in a grove is crucial as every tree has symbolism to the Old Faith.

Ways of the World: The Ways of the World are a secret means of travel for the Old Faith druids of the Flanaess. They access a portion of the Ethereal Plane, which allows the druids to cover long distances on Oerth by walking a short distance in the Ethereal. The Ways open to Oerth between the stones of a trilithon at a megalithic circle and are guarded by a fey spirit bound to that gateway. Every gateway has a different guardian with a different personality, and the druids must bargain with the fey for passage into the Ways. Common prices are a bit of gossip, a song, or a flower, but sometimes the fey demands a difficult or valuable gift for passage.

The appearance of the Ways changes drastically depending on the season and the whim of the natural world. Sometimes it resembles islands of stone in a thick sea of mist connected by narrow stone bridges. Other times, it is twisting network of caverns or raised causeways through endless mire. The one constant are the menhirs located at any crossroads in the Ways. Markings written in the Druidic language cover these stones to guide the druids through the Ways.

The Ways of the World are not without danger. Centuries ago, vargouilles crept into them and flourished. The druids consider them an unnatural parasite and try to eradicate them at every opportunity, but they have met with little success. Because there is no sunlight in the Ways, once a victim is bitten, the corruption into one of these aberrations continues unabated. The druids often take an Old Lore bard with them to counter the vargouilles' scream, but travel through the Ways is extremely hazardous.

Hierarchy of the Old Faith

Druids enter the Old Faith as Ovates, where they assist more senior druids much as acolytes assist priests. Above the Ovates are the Nine Circles of Initiation. When druids first become Initiates, many take an appellation based upon an aspect of nature that speaks to them (for example, "Dorendel the Hawthorne" or "Jolene the Hare") and symbolizes their dedication to the neutral path of the Old Faith. Above the Ovates and the Initiates are those with the title of Druid, who hold responsibility for a grove or a megalithic circle. The Druids must answer to the nine Great Druids who each oversee one of the nine geographical regions of Oerth. Because of the vast distances involved, each Great Druid is assisted by three Archdruids. The near-legendary Grand Druid stands at the ultimate head of the Old Faith.

Druids arise from the rank of Ovate through the Nine Circles of Initiation by means of a series of trials and ceremonies that test their wisdom and understanding of druidic lore. The ranks of Archdruid, Great Druid, and Grand Druid are determined by challenge. Challenges must be made and resolved on the equinoxes and the

solstices, and a druid may only challenge the rank directly above her current one. The challenge is determined by the incumbent but must involve some sort of contest between incumbent and the challenger. Common challenges include riddles, races, wrestling while in wildshape, or chess-style games, but any form of challenge is possible as long as both contestants face the same danger. If successful, the challenger ascends in rank and cannot be challenged that season while the incumbent is reduced to the challenger's rank. If a druid dies while holding a rank determined by challenge, the druid of the next higher rank sets the challenge and all claimants must compete with each other. If this happens to the Grand Druid, Beory sets the challenge, providing details of this through divinations and visions.

The Great Druid for the region that encompasses the Dominion of Greyhawk is Hildefer Paravis (Paravis being Ancient Suloise for "the Feathered") (N female human druid 15). She makes her home in the Gnarley Forest, where she is on excellent terms with the rangers, swanmays, and fey. She is known to use her *thousand faces* ability to take a variety of guises. Her favorite is a half-elven bard who travels throughout the lands on the border of the Gnarley, carrying news while collecting tales to preserve the oral history of the region. Until this year Hildefer held the rank of Archdruid, but she won the challenge against the former Great Druid at the summer solstice, when she collected more fireflies (1,526 to be exact) in a single night.

As her first act, Hildefer has reclaimed several megalithic circles in and around the Gnarley Forest. She has ordered the druids to cull back the bracken and restore the menhirs to their former glory. This activity has attracted a lot of attention among the fauna and fey of the Gnarley, who have been gathering at these points. The Greyhawk militia is watching these events carefully for fear that she make take a strong stand against their incursions into the ancient forest. So far, Hildefer has been content to reclaim the old places of power and to watch those who enter her forest.

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