History

The Celts

All of the Gauls, who are called both Galli and Galatai, are absolutely mad about war. They are high spirited and quickly seek out a fight, but on the other hand, they are sincere and not at all malicious. [...] They also possess a lack of seriousness and a love of boasting along with a great affection for ornaments. They wear golden jewelry such as necklaces and bracelets around their arms and wrists, while the upper classes wear dyed clothing decorated with gold. Because of their lightness in character, they are both unbearable to be around when they are victorious, and panic-stricken when things go against them.

(Strabo 4.4.2, 5, relying on Poseidonios, trans. Freeman)

Some of the most compelling and colorful players on the stage of ancient history are peoples variously known to the Mediterranean cultures as Keltoi, Celtae, Galli, Galatai, Galatae. Non-literate, their pre-Roman Iron Age cultures are known only through the emerging archaeological record and the spotty Mediterranean sources. Much received wisdom and traditional views of the “Celts” are currently being reconsidered. It is an exciting time indeed in “Celtic” studies.

1 Were There Ancient Celts?

“The Celts were the first European people north of the Alps to emerge into recorded history. At one time they dominated the ancient world from Ireland in the west to Turkey in the east, and from Belgium in the north, south to Spain and Italy” (P. Ellis 1990: i). But contrast this with the following: “the Celts are, and always were, a creation of the human mind” (Morse 2005: 185). The former statement is typical of traditional introductions to the ancient Celts as the “first Europeans.” The latter reflects a current trend in Celtic studies to revisit the entire question of “Celtic” identity.

The ancient “Celtic” world is divided roughly into continental and insular, the latter encompassing Ireland and the British Isles. The word “Celtic” itself has too many meanings and associations to be used without qualification. There are many ancient “Celts”: the popular Celts; linguistic Celts; ethnic and “cultural” Celts; archaeological Celts; and historical and literary Celts.

1 Popular Celts. In art, music, neo-paganism, Druidism and other new age philosophies, and fictional treatments of antiquity, the ancient Celts form a complete and instantly recognizable picture. Scholars may wonder about ancient Celtic identity; the general public have no such doubts. The ancient Celts of popular culture have little in common with the picture of the Iron Age Europeans that is emerging from study of the archaeological evidence.

2 Linguistic Celts. Ancient continental Gallic/Gaulish, Celtiberian, and bilingual inscriptions in Etruscan, Greek, Latin, or indigenous scripts amount to several hundred, mostly very short, related texts (conveniently in RIG and Études Celtiques). Modern Breton, Welsh, Irish, Scots Gaelic, Manx and Cornish belong to a single Indo-European language group. The revival and preservation of the Celtic languages play a central role in the self-identification of modern Celtic populations.

3 Ethnic and “cultural” Celts. The modern “invention” of the Celts began in the seventeenth century (Collis 2003, Morse 2005). An awareness that preserved names of places and people mentioned in the classical sources bear similarities to modern Gaelic forged a link between ancient and modern. The Celtic language group was early associated with the notion of a common “Celtic culture” and “spirit.” Language was understood as an inextricable component of ethnic and even racial identity, which was to be uncovered through craniology and the like. The seductions of the idea that science can answer questions of identity have not lost their allure. Today, mtDNA and Y-chromosome studies are being performed to discover genetic affinity between ancient and modern, insular and continental “Celtic” populations. These studies usually use exclusively modern DNA samples taken from areas designated by linguistic historians as having been Celtic at some time (McEvoy et al. 2004; caveat, see Sims-Williams 1998). There are grave scientific and statistical, as well as theoretical and ideological, concerns attendant on such research models. On the other hand, very valuable work is being done on well-selected ancient genetic samples by Stefan Burmeister, Jan Kiesslich, and others, addressing specific questions of kinship within cemeteries and grave groups. Today it is clear that language is only one variable component of cultural identity; multilingualism was probably not uncommon in Iron Age Europe (Sims-Williams 2006: 2). “Race” is a construct that is continually being redefined, and exists, if at all, on a completely different plane from language.
4 Archaeological Celts. Since the early eighteenth century archaeology has been exercised to identify the material culture of “Celts” defined as such on linguistic and literary grounds. The typologies thus established were then used to identify “Celtic culture” in turn. However, we now know that “[t]here is no a priori reason to assume that ‘archaeological cultures’ correlate with socio-political or ethnic groupings; they are effectively modern constructs” (Herring, ETHNICITY AND CULTURE, p. 125).

5 Historical and literary Celts. Written sources for the ancient “Celts” fall into three main categories: ancient inscriptions, classical Greek and Latin texts, and insular early medieval literary and legal texts such as those from Ireland. Pre-Roman Gaulish inscriptions on stone are rare and fall mainly into the category of simple tomb inscriptions, dedications or religious stelae in various scripts. Smaller inscriptions such as possessives on weapons, workshop marks, winsome or erotic notes on spindle whorls, tesserae hospitalis and bilinguals are more common. A potter’s accounting on a plate at La Graufesenque gives us a set of numbers. A magical text or defixio, enchanting or binding its victims, is recorded on a fragmentary lead tablet from a woman’s tomb at L’Hospitalet-du-Larzac; mentioned are the underworld names of a list of “women of magic,” or sorceresses. A lead tablet deposited in an important spring sanctuary at Chamalières may be a curse or incantation, invoking the god Magonus, the gods of the underworld, and apparently the pan-Celtic deity Lugus/Lugh. (Meid 1994, Delamarre 2003).

Classical Mediterranean authors play an integral part in forming our picture of the “Celts.” They can tell us only about those “Celts” with whom they came in contact, or heard tell about, and only from their own cultural and personal perspectives. The labels “Keltoi,” “Celtae,” “Galatai,” etc. had to come from locals in the contact zones, speaking either of themselves or others. They may be indigenous names of what the Romans called pagi or civitates (sing. civitas), mistranslated as “tribes,” or some other communal, political or ethnic designation. Often all that is preserved are ancient place or personal names (Sims-Williams 2006). We might expect those authors who were actually in contact with the “Celts” to provide the most accurate and “objective” information. Even in our own sophisticated time, however, proximity or military contact does not necessarily produce the most historically “objective” of writings. A Greek or Latin author is dealing, often at second or third hand, with the barbarian “other,” inherently inscrutable. The conventions of literary genre, and such tropes as environmental determinism, play their parts. Often the “Celts” are spoken of in the same formulaic terms as other northern barbarians, or any other foes. A single author may portray conflicting versions. For example, Cicero vilifies the Gauls in his defense of Fonteius or his address On the Consular Provinces, but he relies on the Gallic Allobroges to betray the Catilinar conspiracy (Cat. 3) and speaks respectfully of Caesar’s friend, the Druid Divitiacus (Div. 1.41.90), and his acquaintance, the Galatian tetrarch Deiotarus (Deiot.).

The early Irish literature is based on an oral tradition that goes back as far as the first century but was first written down as late as the eighth to tenth centuries AD by Christians with strong biases, by no means flattering to the outrageously sinful pagan tales. A great deal of exaggeration and distortion is inevitable. The early Irish laws, Fénéchas or “Brehon Laws,” were codified sometime after the early sixth century AD and were already influenced by Christian doctrine. The early insular texts are often used to reconstruct pre-Roman continental conditions (Karl 2006); their context should be kept in mind (McCon 1990).

We may expect continued lively debate on the issue of Celtiocity. It is very much in the eye of the beholder. This is of course because it is a construct, imposed by outside observers on groups of ancient people who may or may not have perceived themselves as having anything in common, let alone associated themselves with any form of the term “Celtic.”

2 When and Where Were the “Celts”? 

A picture of continental “Celticity” is emerging, not as a clear-cut, uniform entity, but rather as a very mobile, permeable and constantly changing network or cline, fluid over time, and characterized by great internal local variability. If we can agree that there were European peoples producing related material cultures and associated with groups the Mediterranean authors called “Celts,” it remains to localize them in space and time. Herodotus reports that the Danube rises in the land of the Keltoi (2.33). To the west, he finds them outside the Pillars of Herakles on the Atlantic coast of Iberia (4.49). The Phokian colony of Massalia (Marseille) was founded near the Rhône delta around 600 BC in Ligurian/“Celtic” territory. The Galli are attested in western Europe and northern Italy, the Celtiberi/Hispano-Celts in Iberia, and the Galatai in Anatolia. The northern boundary of the early Keltike is shrouded in mist. “Celtic”-style material is found as far north as Scandinavia. Caesar and Tacitus describe the “Celts” in contrast to the more savage north/eastern “Germans,” although some of their Germani are “Celtic” and vice versa (cf. Strabo 4.4.2). The very existence of “Germans” as a meaningful pre-Roman category is not clear (Lund 1998).

2a Hallstatt and La Tène
The earliest Iron Age period is conventionally called Hallstatt D, after an important salt-mining site and Bronze- to Iron-Age cemetery in Austria. The continent is traditionally subdivided into western and eastern zones. The western Hallstatt zone ranges from central France and Germany southward into the Swiss Alps; the eastern zone extends from eastern Austria and Hungary and includes scattered sites in eastern Europe, primarily cemeteries and hillforts, that are distinguished by the type-find, the socketed axe, instead of the western sword. The term “Hallstatt” is used to designate, in addition to the site itself, (a) the period of the seventh to mid-fifth century BC, (b) the artistic style, and (c) the archaeological and social or ethnic “cultures.” In any one context, it can be unclear how exactly the term is being used. The same is true of “La Tène,” the designation for the Iron Age after c.450 BC, named after a submerged site on Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland, but also the common designation for (a) the style of art, (b) the “culture,” etc.

Stamped belt plates, torcs, flagons, daggers, bronze fibula types, and ornamentation in a geometric style in metal and pottery are characteristic of the sixth to early fifth-century BC Hallstatt D 2–3 assemblages found in the western Hallstatt zone. The style varies locally but is based on lines, dots and geometric shapes, except in the case of human and animal figurines, which are plastic and flowing. Hallstatt-style finds turn up in many contexts throughout west-central Europe, indicating a lively flow of information and goods. The great centers such as Bragny-sur-Saône are often strategically sited on rivers or at points of trans-shipping. The hillfort at the Heuneburg on the Danube was fortified multiple times during the Hallstatt period, including a short-lived experiment with Mediterranean-style plastered mud-brick in the sixth century. Hallstatt itself derived its wealth from salt mining and export. Preserved in the salt are baskets, colorful textiles, leather shoes, wooden tools that give insight into the day-to-day backbreaking work in the mines and the varied craft production of the town (Bichler et al. 2005). Wood-clad chamber burials under great tumuli dot the landscape in southern Germany, France and Switzerland. The conspicuous mound in the landscape is a work of considerable planning, communal cooperation and expenditure of energy. There are often secondary burials in the mound as well as remains of feasting. Associated with the mound may be a life-sized sculpture more or less anthropomorphic in style.

Around the mid-fifth century BC a new artistic style developed. It is based on individual curvilinear shapes, additively arranged. The short Hallstatt dagger grows into an ever-longer sword, and in tombs the four-wheeled wagon is replaced by a two-wheeled chariot. This period is dubbed La Tène A, or Early La Tène (LT). Scholars divide the succeeding developments into subcategories of LT, until the Roman conquests and the “Gallo-Roman” era. In the core Hallstatt zone, several hillforts were abandoned, and a general decrease in burials is seen as areas to the north and east came to the fore. Excavations, particularly in the Champagne, the Moselle–Rhine, and Bohemian areas, reveal intensification of wealth, concentrations of craft activity and elite burial, and interregional exchange of goods in the new LT style. Tumuli also gave way to flat inhumation cemeteries. Coinage, introduced in the third century, quickly caught on and was minted locally in distinctive deconstructive styles. Production of iron objects and wheel-made pottery took on industrial dimensions. Oppida, extensive fortified settlements, usually on hilltops, began to take on urban characteristics, with their own artisans’ quarters, military installations, religious facilities, perhaps coin production. They could accommodate large concentrations of population at times; suburbia and road networks could be extensive (Guichard et al. 2002).

In the second century BC the Romans expanded their territory from Massalia far up the Rhône and into Gaul. They perfected their tactics of setting the “king” of one civitas against another and exacerbating and exploiting internal rivalries by bribery and deception. The provincia of Transalpine Gaul was organized in 121 BC. A series of governors institutionalized the ruthless exploitation of the natives. The enigmatic northern Cimbri cut loose in the late second century and, gathering up several groups of Galli, cut a bloody swath through western Europe. They were finally crushed by the Roman general Gaius Marius in 101. Violence and upheaval touched much of the Keltike. In the later LT inhumation burial was largely superseded by cremation, leaving fewer artifacts to study. Mass production reduced the flow of innovation in forms, and Romanization made itself felt in anthropomorphism in sculpture and the introduction of stone architecture.

Caesar’s invasion in the middle of the first century BC was devastating. From 58 to 54 his legions were relatively free to hone their skills against the native forces, sell the vanquished into slavery, and plunder the sacred deposits. An unexpected revolt in 52 brought harsh vengeance down on Gaul. Numerous civitates, normally at odds, were driven to form an alliance, and the leaders met at Bibracte (Mont Beuvray) in a council of war. Under the leadership of Vercingetorix of the Arverni they withdrew to the oppidum of Alesia, where after a siege Vercingetorix surrendered to Caesar. The revolt was effectively over; the vanquished were either killed or sold into slavery, and Vercingetorix himself was paraded through the streets of Rome as part of Caesar’s triumph and then executed. The Rhine became the north-eastern boundary of Gaul and was fortified and staunchly defended. Roman occupation permeated every aspect of life, affecting settlements and material culture, extending even to the interpretatio Romana of the gods. Study of the final century BC in Gaul and
thereafter is generally devoted to the provincial Romans and, at best, to the process of “Romanization” (Woolf 1998; P. Wells 1999).

2b Italy

Hallstatt and in much greater numbers LT-style imports from north of the Alps, and local imitations, are found in north Italian tombs and settlements. The finds suggest a long history of settlement and gradually increasing immigration. Excavations of cemeteries such as that at Monte Bibele reveal stable local “Celtic” communities consistently burying men with LT iron weapons, helmets and fibulae (Vitali 1992). On a second-century terracotta frieze from Civit’Alba, Gallic warriors with a chariot leave the site of a raid, strewing plunder as they go. The “Celts” had become part of the local landscape. Clashes with Etruscans and Romans were inevitable.

In 390/389, or 387/386, a group of Gauls led by a Brennus defeated the Roman army at the Allia river and took the unwalled city of Rome, occupying it for several months (for delightfully imaginative accounts, Livy 5.36ff., Plut. Cam., Dio 7.25ff.). How the sack of Rome is rendered in the literary accounts reveals something of the terror with which the “Celtic” tumultus was regarded. These Gauls stand outside the order created by civilized law, custom and systems of honor. They are superstitious and sacrilegious; above all, they are invincible warriors. The vulnerability of the Romans so glaringly exposed, their radically changed self-perception and resulting new developments in military organization and internal and foreign policy are among the repercussions of the Gallic sack. The Gauls withdrew to the north, but many remained to dwell in Cisalpine Gaul. Continued clashes with the Romans punctuated the next two centuries, as the “Celts” occasionally challenged the Romans directly from the north, or in league with Italians, and as mercenaries in turn to Dionysios of Syracuse and to the Carthaginians in the course of the Punic Wars. The late third century was particularly bloody, culminating in the crushing Roman victory at Telamon in 225 (Polyb. 2.27–31). Although the north Italian Gauls attained Roman citizenship in 49 BC, the Romans continued to be harried by “Celtic” incursions into the Augustan era.

2c The Balkans and Galatia

In 279 BC a large group of “Celts” moved southward into Greece (Paus. 1.4; 10.19–23; Diod. 22.92ff.). They fought their way to Delphi via Thermopylae, committing all manner of atrocities along the way. Although they found the anthropomorphic sculptures in wood and stone risible (Diod. 22.97), they plundered the sanctuary before being driven off; some of the loot ended up dedicated in watery deposits near Toulouse, France (Strabo 4.1.13; Just. 3.3.36; Nachtergaele 1977). The remaining army was driven northward; some crossed the Hellespont into Asia Minor, where they became the “Galatians.” The brutal attack on Delphi was a shattering blow to the Greeks, no less potent a threat than the Persian invasions, and so it would enter into cultural memory and panhellenic mythology. In the Greek spin on the event, the Delphic god Apollo averted the destruction of the sanctuary with a spectacular display encompassing lightning, earthquake, snowstorm, hailstorm, rock fall, and ghostly apparitions, throwing the invaders into confusion and panic. Their departure was subsequently commemorated in the Soteria festival. The attack epitomized to the Greeks the “Celtic” threat of total, unthinkably, horrifically barbaric annihilation. It would be referred to again and again in hymns to Apollo.

During the third and second centuries, various groups of “Celts” served nearly every major power as mercenaries. When the Galatians, who had originally crossed into Asia at the invitation of the Bithynian king Nikomedes, were not fighting for the Seleukids or Ptolemies, they were raiding cities and extorting outrageous amounts of protection money. Campaigns against the Galatians are celebrated in the victory iconography of Pergamene monuments, notably the sculptures of Attalos I Soter, such as the large “Dying Gaul” and “Gallic Chieftain Kills Wife and Self,” both of which exhibit an unexpected, humanizing pathos and even dignity (fig. 26.1). Anyone wishing to attain the status of a savior need only win a battle against the Galatians (Mitchell 2003: 283–87). Strabo reports that in Asia Minor the Galatians organized themselves into “tetrarchies,” with their own leaders, judges, and generals, and that a representative council of 300 met annually (12.5.1). The main Galatian strongholds were concentrated in Phrygia and central Anatolia. These included a wide network of hillforts, built in the local style. Widely scattered finds of weapons, torcs and other adornments are tantalizing but inconclusive. Recent excavations at Gordion suggest that a portion of the Lower Town was effectively a Galatian quarter during the Hellenistic period. The excavators believe they have found not only “Galatian” architecture and minor arts, but also evidence of human sacrifice, head taking and unusual burial practices (Dandov et al. 2002). Aside from these sensational finds, little concentrated LT material culture has been uncovered. Without the Greek inscriptions and the references in ancient and early Christian texts, we would have little evidence that a large population of “Celts” invaded Greece and inhabited Asia Minor, retaining their customs and language for many centuries (Mitchell 2003).
26.1 Ludovisi Gaul Group (Gaul killing his wife and himself) in the Museo Nazionale delle Terme, Palazzo Altemps, Rome. Roman copy, found in the former Gardens of Sallust, after Hellenistic original from the Acropolis at Pergamon, c.220 BC.

(Photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons)

http://www.fofweb.com/Electronic_Images/LicensedImages/c26f001.jpg

2d Iberia

Theories abound as to the origins, locales and movements of the Iberian “Celts” and Celtiberians. A popular theory in antiquity was that they were descendants of indigenous Iberians and immigrant Celts; for example, the Latin poet Martial claimed descent from both Celts and Iberians (4.55, 12.18; cf. Lucan 4.10; App. Hisp. 2; Diod. 5.33ff.). Groups with names beginning in Celt- or Gall- (Celti, Celtici, Gallaeci, etc.) are attested throughout the peninsula, particularly in the north-western portion. Archaeologically, there is no evidence of incursions of “Celts” into Iberia. The few true Hallstatt and LT finds, typical oppidum-style hillforts and inscriptions, are concentrated generally in the central Meseta. The local versions of swords, torcs, fibulae, and pottery vary substantially from their counterparts in Gaul. Hoards contain fabulously detailed gold torcs. Horses and horsemen are popular motifs on fibulae and in sculpture. These are occasionally shown with severed heads pendant from the harness. Beginning in the fourth century BC, zoomorphic stone sculptures of cattle and pigs, called verracos, mark cemeteries and urban centers. We must rely on rare settlement and survey finds because of the dearth of inhumation burials.

The “Castro culture” of the far north-west area of the Gallaeci (Galicia into northern Portugal) persisted well into the Roman period. A lively Celtic revival movement plays a large part in modern Galician identity, whether expressed in the political or the musical/artisanal cultural arenas. Ancient “castros,” or very well-fortified hilltop settlements, preserve Atlantic roundhouse types. Life-sized freestanding stone warriors guard the entrances of hillforts; bearded and helmeted, they wear a thick buffer-ended torc and carry a small, round shield and a dagger. Decapitated heads and abstract, geometrical motifs are part of the sculptural repertoire. The inhabitants are called “Keltoi” by Herodotus and “Galli” by Pliny (HN 3.3.1; 3.20), for what that is worth. Further south lies Lusitania; the few inscriptions are in a language with Celtic and non-Celtic elements. The entire coastal area may be more closely associated with an Atlantic cultural zone than with Gaul (Cunliffe 2001).

2e Britain and Ireland

Very few Hallstatt but more numerous LT artifacts are found in the British Isles and Ireland. The LT style of art was quickly adopted and developed further in distinctive local idioms on weapons, feasting items and jewelry. However, many local traditions continued from the Bronze Age, and developed independently of the continent. The insular roundhouse types and fortified settlements became more elaborate, in places growing into brochs and hillforts, and often accruing multiple concentric fortifications or earthworks. Burial evidence, particularly of the “Arras culture” of east Yorkshire, reveals that the two-wheeled chariot did not go out of use, as it did on much of the continent (Cunliffe 2004; Caes. BG 4.33.1–3; Dio 39.51.3). Imported pottery and wine are not found until the second century BC. The insular LT style was applied to the local stone uprights, resulting in enigmatic relief sculptures such as the Turoe stone.

The ancient authors never refer to the populations of the British Isles or Ireland as “Celts.” Proto- or pre-Irish place names of “Ierne” are first recorded in Ptolemy’s Geography of the second century AD (II.1). Caesar and Tacitus describe similarities between Britons and Gauls, including parallel names of civitates (Caes. BG 5.12ff.; Tac. Agr. 11). The early Irish literature is often thought to reflect values, ideas and practices of the Iron Age in the islands and possibly on the continent (Karl 2006; but see McCone 1990). Until recently, great waves of “Celtic” migrations from the continent have been assumed. However, few people need actually be involved in the transmission of goods, ideas, styles and motifs. It is safe to think of the Channel and the Atlantic as facilitating interchange and traffic in both directions from earliest times (Cunliffe 2001; cf. Raftery 1998; Morse 2005).

3 Economy and Social Structure

Archaeology reveals habitations at the levels of farmsteads, villages, trading centers or entrepôts, mining complexes, hillforts and hilltop towns, and in the later LT periods extensive flatland towns and huge, urban “oppida.” In addition to
agriculture and pastoralism, the “Celts” favored direct acquisition of goods. They raided for livestock and plundered sanctuaries, homes, and entire cities rich in gold. Goods acquired through invasion and exploitation of newly settled territory entered into circulation. Mediterranean bronze vessels and pottery, Tyrrenian coral, Baltic amber, African ivory, rare stones and shells, Near Eastern dyes, Scythian and Thracian finds, and possibly east-Asian textiles hint at the breadth of “Celtic” exchange networks. What the “Celts” gave in long-distance exchange remains archaeologically invisible; tin from the British isles is likely, as are other ores, salt and salted meats, furs, hides, live animals, textiles, timber, honey, other perishable products, and slaves (Nash Briggs 2003). A good living could always be made by might of arms, directly by raiding, pillaging and conquest of new lands, indirectly by extortation of protection money and ransom, or for hire as mercenary soldiers.

Early “Celtic” societies have been interpreted as “chieftdoms” headed by the equivalent of Homeric basileis, or as “princely” societies on the analogy of medieval feudalism (Karl 2006). Post-capitalist world-systems theory of center and periphery as well as peer polity, central place, and various state-formation models have more recently been applied (Arnold and Gibson 1995). That these were ranked societies is indisputable; our evidence suggests great local variability and change over time. Mediterranean, particularly Greek imports found in “Celtic” contexts, have long inspired a prestige-goods economy model. This and similar diffusionist reconstructions rest on the assumption that Greek goods were privileged over all others. To the “Celts” is attributed a consciousness of peripherality and a desire to ape their betters. This is not demonstrable archaeologically. It is rather more likely that the “Celts” did not indulge in romantic philhellenism.

Much was directly or indirectly disrupted through Roman occupation. The ancients interpreted the indigenous structures they observed in their own familiar political language; thus, Latin terms such as reges, principes, equites, are opaque labels that reveal little about internal Gaulish dynamics. We are told of three groups of “Celts” that were particularly influential: the bards, vates and druids (Strabo 4.4.4, citing Poseidonios). The task of the bard was to perpetuate a leader’s immortality by praising his or her genealogy, generosity and deeds, or conversely, damning his enemies with biting satire (Diod. 5.31; Athen. 4.152; 6.246). Vates were natural philosophers and interpreters of sacrifices. Druids were keepers of the knowledge of natural sciences and moral philosophy as well as presiders at rituals (section 6 below).

4 Warfare

At Ciumes http://www.fofweb.com/Electronic_Images/LicensedImages/x15F_rn.jpg in Romania, a burial of the third century BC contained greaves, chain mail, and a helmet consisting of a cap of iron crowned with the bronze figure of a bird of prey. The wings are movable so that, as the warrior rode or ran at the enemy, his helmet produced a frightening cacophony and motion (Zirra 1991). That this helmet type was also used in the western LT zone to make “the wearer look even taller and more fearsome” is suggested by Poseidonios (Diod. 5.30). Mounted warriors, worked in repoussé on the controversial Gundestrup cauldron, wear similar helments. The innovative mail shirt is only one of several types of “Celtic” body armour found in burial and depositional contexts, depicted in art and described in the literature. The “Celtic” warrior of the third to first centuries was armed with a sword suspended on a chain, at least one spear with a wicked head, and an ovoid shield of wood and leather with a central boss or umbo. The terrifying appearance of “Celtic” warriors did not depend on their armour, however; some warriors such as the Gaesatae at the battle of Telamon in 225 BC famously rushed into battle naked save for their sword belts and jewelry (Polyb. 2.28). The Gaesatae were not a civitas, but rather a sort of shock troop of specialized itinerant mercenaries. The armies of the north Italian civitates wore trousers and light cloaks; the northern Gauls also wore shirts. The expert use of the chariot to transport the warrior into the midst of battle continued in Britain after it was superseded on the continent by the cavalry (Caes. BG 4.33; Diod. 5.29.1). Both the Gauls and the Celtiberi were revered and feared as horsemen. The Romans paid them the highest compliment in learning and imitating their exercises (Arr. Tact. 33–34). “Celtic” contingents formed the most effective of the Roman cavalry (Strabo 4.4.2).

The most potent weapon of the “Celtic” military was the headlong, furious charge. What made it the more terrifying was its cacophony, a combination of shouting and war-cries, horns and trumpets (Polyb. 2.29, cf. Diod. 5.30). As an alternative to the headlong charge, a Celtic army might assemble before the enemy. One warrior would challenge a champion from the other side to single combat (Diod. 5.29.2). In Livy’s colorful tale of the single combat of T. Manlius Torquatus, the gigantic Gaul prances about, sticks his tongue out and taunts the ranked Roman army. Manlius, the embodiment of republican Roman virtue, evoking his ancestor who had expelled the Gauls from Rome, slips his Spanish sword under the blundering Gaul’s shield and guts the brute. He then dons the dead Gaul’s bloodied torc in triumph (7.9–10, Gell. 9.13.4–19, cf. Dio 7.35). This tale illustrates neatly the popular Roman trope that the Gauls are frightening, over-life-size and hubristic, but easily defeated by the smaller, cleverer, better-armed and better-strategizing Romans.
5 Feasting

The Celts were famously prodigious drinkers (Diod. 5.26.3). Remains of beer, mead and wine have been found in preserved vessels; tomb assemblages include all manner of metal and pottery beverage containers as well as plates, knives, butchery and cooking equipment, and foodstuffs, including whole or butchered pigs. Food was consumed “cleanly, but with a lion-like appetite” (Poseidonios in Athen. 4.151). The colorful accounts of mustachioed “Celts” at banquet suggest that Mediterranean foreigners were able to interact with them in the context of the banquet setting. The convivial feast was an important venue for the formation and establishment of an individual’s identity in relation to his/her society, as well as that of the social unit itself (Dietler 1999).

An essential part of the feast is the narrative that it weaves. In the process of agonistic boasting and insults, and the recitation and singing of ancestral and more recent deeds, the identities and relationships of those present are recreated. The feast itself enters into the biography and mythology of the participants. It is tragic that we have no records of their songs and tales. On the other hand, this highly oral society would have been fundamentally altered with the introduction of writing. Our authors are impressed with the influential status and even military function of bards (Strabo 5.31, 4.197; cf. Lucian 5.1–6). It is only in early Irish texts like the Ulster cycle that we get a taste of the fabulous histories, deeds, genealogies, and interwoven epics whereby generations of heroes’ lives were shaped and immortalized.

Diodorus (5.28.4) likens the “Celtic” distribution of the hero’s portion to the situation in Homer (Il. 7.321): “Brave warriors they honor with the choicest portion of the meat, just as the poet says that the chieftains honored Ajax when he returned having defeated Hektor in single combat.” The assignment of the champion’s portion, consisting not only of food and drink but also of great treasure, is one of the great themes in early Irish literature. The implication is that the heroes’ respective standings can change from feast to feast, even boast to boast. Unlike the Iliadic episode above, where it is King Agamemnon who actually distributes the spoils, in the epic feasts the distribution is the result and instrument of agonistic exertions, verbal and physical. Outrageous boasting and sparring escalates into armed combat and real bloodshed (Poseidonios via Athen. 4.154, Diod. 5.28.5).

Women are prominent at the feasts in the early Irish tales, engaging in competitions of their own. In the foundation legends of Massalia, the leader of the Phokaian traders is invited to the wedding banquet of the local princess, Gyptis, or Petta. She selects him to be her husband by giving him the drinking cup, and thereby a form of legitimation (Just. 43.3.4; Athen. 13.576). The rich late Hallstatt and early LT female burials containing feasting vessels inspire a vision of hard-drinking female leaders hosting or receiving agonal feasts, which may sit uneasily with our entrenched stereotype of testosterone-driven “Celtic” booze-ups. The funerary assemblages may not only reproduce aspects of the deceased’s identity and defining activities in the here and now, but also give her something practical to take into the afterlife.

6 Religion

Of the three non-military classes generally named by the ancients, two, the Druids and vates, were responsible for the spiritual and ritual life of the Gauls (Strabo 4.4.4, Diod. 5.31.5). The course of study to become a Druid could last up to twenty years, and consisted mainly of memorizing an enormous corpus of verses and teachings that was never written down. The Druids thus incorporated the accumulated wisdom of their people. Caesar tells us that they also practiced divination, preached transmigration of the soul, dispensed justice, and studied the natural sciences such as astronomy (Caes. BG 6.14–16). A fragmentary bronze inscription found at Coligny, France, outlines winter and summer holy days on a combined 62-month lunar and solar calendar (fig. 3.1). Female practitioners included the black-clad furies (Druidesses?) of Mona (Anglesey) (Tac. Ann. 14.30), the maenads living on an island at the mouth of the Loire (Strabo 4.4.6), and the sorceresses named in the lead tablets from Larzac. Human sacrifice was apparently performed under all manner of circumstances, even divination (Diod. 5.31). Prisoners of war were routinely offered up. The sacrifice of criminals was propitious for the prosperity of the land (Diod. 5.32; Strabo 4.4.4). Many well-preserved bodies of tortured and killed victims have been discovered in the peat bogs of northern Europe, Britain, and Ireland – recently the well-preserved fourth- to third-century BC finds at Clonycavan and Old Croghan near Dublin. However, their relationship vis-à-vis the “Celts” is unclear.

Many of our weapons finds are from watery contexts such as rivers, streams, springs, or lakes. In the case of lakeside dwellings, some accidental or incidental loss may be expected, but some deposits are clearly deliberate, such as the hundreds of weapons and wagon fittings found at La Tène in Switzerland, or those at Llyn Cerrig Bach in Anglesey, which include such horrific items as slave-gang chains. Many weapons found in ritual deposits have been “killed,” bent
completely out of shape and rendered useless. Inscribed tablets, jewelry, textiles, coins, and anthropoid sculptures are other common watery deposits.

At a sanctuary at the center of the oppidum of Gournay-sur-Aronde, a sequence from the fourth century BC through to the Roman period has been excavated. Thousands of “killed” weapons were exposed to rust away in a ditch outside a square enclosure surrounding sacrificial pits, together with thousands of animal bones and the remains of decapitated humans. Fifty kilometers away at Ribemont-sur-Ancre hundreds of disarticulated human long-bones were stacked in a square formation, while other skeletons were merely halved and left in place. A roofed structure over a ditch displayed the bodies of dozens of fully armed warriors, decapitated and propped upright. The building, bodies and all, was left to deteriorate and collapse into the ditch below (Brunaux 1999). Ribemont is usually interpreted as a victory monument displaying the vanquished foe. Alternatively, it may have commemorated fallen comrades. An enormous amount of cooperative effort went into the configuration of these sites. We can only imagine the social and psychological dimensions.

The find contexts of “Celtic” arms and armour suggest that there was a profoundly religious aspect to the practice of warfare. Coupled with evidence from burials, these deposits suggest beliefs in chthonic powers as well as a lively afterlife filled with fighting and feasting, analogous to scenes in early Celtic poetry. Freestanding sculptures of men in armour sitting cross-legged at Roquepertuse and Entremont have been interpreted as warrior deities. Decapitated heads form part of the iconography. According to Poseidonios the “Celts” “hang the heads of their slain enemies from the necks of their horses when they leave a battlefield and then hang them up on a peg when they get home” (Strabo 4.4.5, cf. Diod. 5.29). Livy’s account of the death of Postumius explicitly makes the religious connection: “the Boii took his severed head in a procession to the holiest of their temples. There it was cleaned and the bare skull was adorned with gold, as is their custom. It was used thereafter as a sacred vessel on special occasions and as a ritual drinking-cup by their priests and temple officials” (23.24). No gilded skulls have been found in the Keltike, but there is ample archaeological evidence of decapitation, defleshing, dismemberment and manipulation of the corpses of warriors. Conspicuous display of decapitated heads is attested at various sites in France and Iberia.

Since Aristotle, the “Celts’ ” lack of fear of injury or death seemed to the Greeks to border on the insane (e.g. Eth. Nic. 3.7). This incomprehensible trait contributed to their characterization as utterly strange and barbarian. An enemy who has no thought for bodily harm is highly motivated to perform reckless feats of daring and to fight to the death (Diod. 5.29). Complete freedom from any fear of death is often attributed to a belief in quasi-Pythagorean reincarnation (Caes. BG 6.13, 6.14.5; Diod. 5.28). We are left again with a conceptual divide which the Greeks and Romans attempted to bridge in their own familiar terms.

7 Who Were the Ancient “Celts”??

Ancient attitudes toward the “Celts” were ambivalent, or rather situational. On the one hand, the irrational brutes were to be resisted at any cost; on the other, they made fine mercenaries and slaves. Some authors such as the Stoic Poseidonios occasionally counted the “Celts” among those barbarians who were untouched by the evils of contemporary civilization. Their view of the “Celts” was inevitably tinged by the topos of the northern barbarian – the unbridgeable gap between the civilized and the wild, inscrutable other who at base remains unreliable, unpredictable, untamed.

Thus, the ancient authors give us many fragmentary but vivid, often stereotyped, often propagandistic, sometimes contradictory, always constructed glimpses. Archaeology shows us an artistically innovative, lavish, stubbornly abstracting, colorful, and gorgeous craft production. In the preserved material culture, in burials, deposits, and settlements, we find unique and powerful expressions of local identities. Burials, bones, pots, coins, weapons, minor arts, tools, textiles, metals, plant and animal remains, traces of architecture, inscriptions, and above all their contexts and relationships help to flesh out our picture of the Iron Age Europeans. Whether, in any single case, they are among peoples who would have called themselves “Celts” is a question we cannot answer, and which is probably irrelevant.1

FURTHER READING

Stifter 2007 is admirably documented and brings together four volumes’ worth, primarily new translations of articles previously published elsewhere.

On “Celtic” drinking and identity, as well as further-ranging work on the anthropology of feasting, see Dietler 1999. Essential reading on gender issues is a series of articles by Arnold (e.g. 1995). On social structure, most useful in English is still the spectrum of contributions in Arnold and Gibson 1995. Brunaux 2000 describes several important excavations in France and synthesizes much of the information available on “Celtic” ritual.

Cunliffe 2001 offers a unique perspective on the “Celtic” and neighboring populations on the Atlantic coasts. Morse 2005 presents a fascinating investigation into the origins and progress of Celtic studies in Britain; much is also applicable to the continent. On the propagandistic and military roles of the Galatians: Mitchell 2003; for the Gauls of north Italy, J. Williams 2001; for Caesar in Gaul, Riggsby 2006.

McEvoy et al. 2004 is only one example of the kind of studies of “Celtic DNA” appearing steadily in scientific journals. Collis 2003 is especially relevant to the question of Celtic identity, cf. also Dietler 1994 on the role of Celtic identity in Europe and in particular France; laudably comprehensible on material culture, agency and identity is P. Wells 2001.

Websites to watch are:

Mont Beuvray (Bibracte) and the state-of-the-art European Research Center, publisher of the “Les Celtes et les Gaulois” series, among others: www.bibracte.fr

A Landscape of Ancestors: The Heuneburg Archaeological Project with excavation updates: www.uwm.edu/~barnold/arch


e-Keltoi: peer-reviewed on-line Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies, particularly Vol. 6: The Celts in the Iberian Peninsula:

www.uwm.edu/Dept/celtic/ekeltoi/volumes/vol6/index.html

Most of the translations appearing in the chapter are from P. Freeman, War, Women and Druids. Eyewitness Reports and Ear

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