



A man wears a decorated headband on this silver coin, produced by Danube Celts. By the time the coin was minted in the first century BC, Celtic tribes had made their presence felt everywhere from the British Isles to Asia Minor

WHO WERE THE CELTS?

Historians have been puzzling over this most enigmatic of ancient peoples for centuries, but are we any closer to establishing their origins?

Barry Cunliffe investigates

Accompanies a new BBC Two series *The Celts*



“The whole race... is war-mad, high-spirited and quick to battle... And so when they are stirred up they assemble in their bands for battle quite openly and without forethought.” So wrote the Greek historian Strabo about the Celts at the beginning of the first century AD. It is a generalisation that has coloured our view of the northern neighbours of the Romans and Greeks ever since.

Celts first came into the consciousness of early modern historians in the 16th and 17th centuries when the works of classical writers like Strabo, Caesar and Livy were becoming widely available. These texts describe how the many barbarian tribes of western and central Europe came into conflict with the Roman and Greek worlds. The writers called these disparate peoples ‘Celts’ or ‘Gauls’ – a tradition that is at least as early as the sixth century BC, when the ethnographer Hecataeus of Miletus wrote of Celts living in the hinterland of the Greek colony of

Massalia (Marseilles). Later, in the fourth century BC, the Greek historian Ephorus of Cymae believed that barbarian Europe was occupied by only two peoples, the Scythians in the east and the Celts in the west, and Strabo adds the gloss that Ephorus considered Celtica to be so large that it included most of Iberia as far as Gades (Cadiz). These early generalisations were accepted by the later Roman authors when they came to write about their growing contacts with the peoples of central and western Europe.

In the fifth century BC, quite possibly as a result of an exponential increase in population, the tribes occupying a broad arc including the Loire valley, the Marne region, the Rhineland and Bohemia began to take on a new mobility, thousands of people moving en masse out of their homelands. These were the Celts. One of the migrating hordes thrust southwards through the Alpine passes to the Po Valley, where the disparate tribes settled down in reasonable harmony. Another moved eastwards to the fertile country of Transdanubia (Hungary) and beyond that

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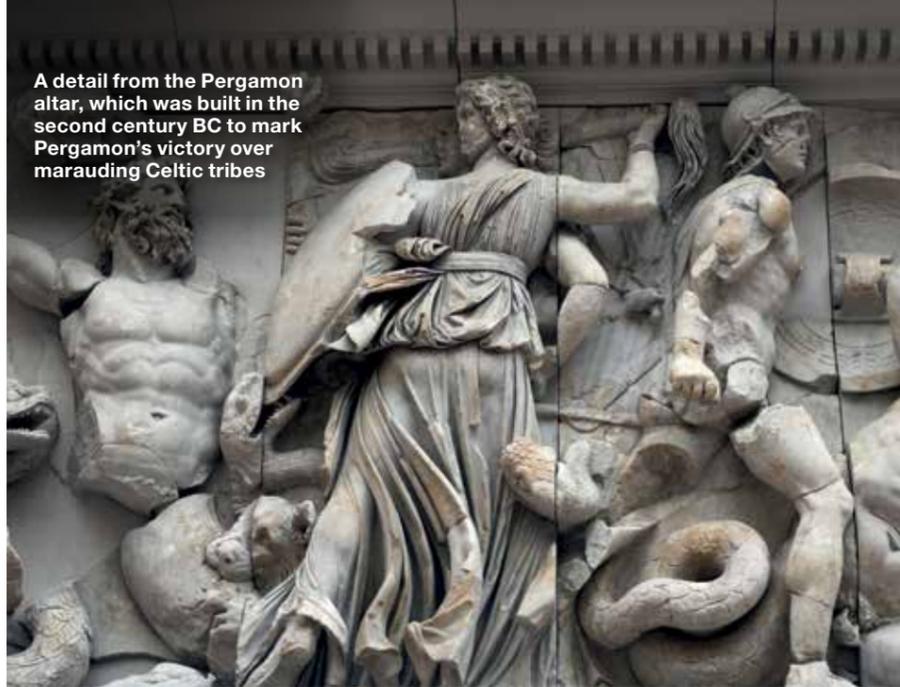
to the middle and lower Danube region (Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania). Once settled in their new homelands, the various Celtic tribes could indulge in raiding – a socially embedded system that enabled individuals to display and enhance their status. From the Po Valley, raiding parties swept across the Apennines deep into the Italian peninsula, confronting Roman armies and, in 390 BC, besieging Rome itself.

Later, from the middle Danube, other tribes penetrated Greece, ravaging the temple of Apollo at Delphi in 279 BC. Deflected from Greece, these migrating bands later crossed the Dardanelles and the Hellespont into Asia Minor and eventually settled in the vicinity of modern Ankara, from where they began to raid the Hellenistic cities of the Aegean coast. The raids lasted until the powerful state of Pergamon successfully defeated the marauders in a series of engagements. To commemorate these campaigns, a victory monument was erected at Pergamon depicting the defeated enemy. The famous statue of the Dying Gaul, now in Rome, is a copy of one of the figures.

Image problem

The classical world, then, came into conflict with Celts in Italy, Greece and Asia Minor. As victors, they wrote of these strange barbarians, carefully depicting them as ‘other’ by emphasising the characteristics that distinguished them from the civilised Mediterraneans: the Celts were brave fighters, but lost heart and ran away – unlike the steadfast Romans; the Celts drank wine undiluted and got drunk – unlike the Romans, who diluted theirs and remained sober; the Celts fought naked in battle – unlike the well-armed Romans, and so on. It was a biased picture – a caricature almost – but, like any good caricature, it had within it some elements of the truth.

Much of our popular picture of the Celts comes from these very biased sources. Later, in the middle of the first century BC, when Julius Caesar campaigned in Gaul, we get from his *Commentaries* a rather more balanced picture of many different tribal groups, often centred on well-established towns, in various forms of alliance, with stable systems of government, able to come together to act in unison against the external threat posed by Rome. Caesar was reluctantly impressed by the belief systems of the Gauls and the centralising power of the druids. One tribe, the Aedui, sent their chief magistrate, Divitiacus, who was also a druid, to seek Roman aid against their enemies. Divitiacus addressed the Roman Senate and met Cicero, who wrote that Divitiacus “declared that he



A detail from the Pergamon altar, which was built in the second century BC to mark Pergamon's victory over marauding Celtic tribes

“Cicero paints a picture of a sophisticated people quite different from the **stereotype of the hairy, naked savages rushing blindly into battle**”



The ancient Roman statue of the Dying Gaul, which reinforced the traditional idea of Celts as savage, naked warriors

was acquainted with the system of nature that the Greeks call natural philosophy and he used to predict the future both by augury and inference”. The orator was impressed. The picture we can glean from these engagements is of a sophisticated people, quite different from the image of hairy, naked savages rushing blindly into battle.

The archaeological evidence too offers a far more reliable and unbiased picture of tribal societies at the time and also enables us to understand the earlier formative centuries. By about 1000 BC, much of western and central Europe shared a broadly similar culture and set of belief systems, reflecting a society in which warrior prowess was important. The foundation of Massalia around 600 BC saw Mediterranean luxury goods, such as wine vessels and wine itself, being traded northwards to the chiefdoms (called Hallstatt) occupying a wide zone north of the Alps. Much of this exotic material was eventually buried in the graves of the elite, so is well known to us from the famous burials of Vix

in Burgundy and Hochdorf near Stuttgart. In return for the luxury goods, the Hallstatt chiefs in all probability offered raw materials such as gold, tin and amber, as well as slaves, which were becoming increasingly important to the Mediterranean economy.

Such a system depended on the co-operation of tribes living around the Hallstatt chiefdom zone, who acquired and supplied the raw materials and the slaves. The market for slaves encouraged raiding in these peripheral zones, creating instability that led to the breakdown of the system in the early fifth century BC. As a result, the old Hallstatt chiefdoms collapsed, while the peripheral groups occupying that arc from the Loire to Bohemia became increasingly dominant.

These societies shared cultural aspects – both in burial rites, now focusing on the warrior, and in a highly original elite art style expressed mainly in metalwork. In the archaeological terminology, this cultural manifestation is called *La Tène* (after a site in Switzerland) and the decorative style is often



Men slay bulls in a detail from the Gundestrup cauldron, which dates from between c100 BC and AD 1. Though discovered in Denmark, this vessel is believed to be the handiwork of Thracians in contact with Celts

referred to as Celtic art. It was from these *La Tène* tribes that the migratory movements which impacted on the classical world came.

Given this archaeological background, it is reasonable to argue that the Celts, as defined by the Hellenistic and Roman writers, developed from a cultural tradition that can be traced back in west central Europe well into the second millennium BC.

When, in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, antiquarians began to take an interest in the Celts and Celtic origins, they had no archaeological evidence to inform them, but instead had to create hypotheses based partly on interpretations of the Bible and partly on the classical sources then available. The general view to emerge was that the Celts must have originated somewhere in the east and moved westwards across Europe, eventually crossing into Britain and Ireland. The idea was taken up by a brilliant antiquarian and linguist, Edward Lhuyd, keeper of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, who in 1707 published his great work *Archaeologia*

Britannica, in which he set out details of his study of the native languages of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany, recognising them as belonging to the same family, which he called Celtic. Later, in letters to friends, he speculated that the languages had been introduced into Britain, Ireland and Brittany by waves of Celtic migrants coming from western central Europe. In this he was simply following the theories then current. Lhuyd’s work was to form the cornerstone of Celtic studies for the next 250 years and provide the predominant model, which later scholars were content to follow.

Challenging the consensus

From the mid-19th century, archaeological evidence began to appear in increasing quantity and was at first interpreted in terms of the accepted hypothesis, but by the 1960s archaeologists were finding it difficult to force the increasingly sophisticated data set into Lhuyd’s old linguistic model: there were things that simply did not fit. Most notably,

there was no convincing archaeological evidence of migrations from central Europe into Britain and Ireland, or into Iberia – regions where the Celtic languages were known to have been spoken. It was time to take a new objective look at the evidence.

Out of this has grown a new theory: that the languages we call Celtic originated in the Atlantic zone of Europe (Iberia, western France, Britain and Ireland) as a *lingua franca* among the maritime communities who can be shown to have been in active contact with each other along the Atlantic seaways from the fifth millennium BC. Belief systems, artistic styles and a sophisticated knowledge of cosmology were shared along this Atlantic facade, implying that people could communicate with one another in a common language. But if the Celtic language developed in this zone (where, in some areas, it is still spoken), then how and when did it spread eastwards into central Europe? The simplest hypothesis consistent with the archaeological evidence is that the advance took place in the second

Were the Britons Celtic?

The inhabitants of the British Isles spoke the same language as their continental cousins. But did that make them Celts?

The word Celtic was loosely used by the classical writers and has continued to be loosely used in more recent times to such a degree that some commentators question whether it has any value at all. Julius Caesar, however, very specifically said that the region between the rivers

Garonne and Seine was known to its inhabitants as *Celtica* and this is supported by a late fourth-century BC writer, Pytheas, who refers to the projecting mass of the Armorican peninsula as *Keltike*. But no ancient writer refers to the Britons as Celts.

The poem *Ora Maritima*, which makes use of sources going back to the sixth century, calls Britain “the island of the Albiones”, adding that Ireland was inhabited by the Hierni, but the more widely used name was Prettanike or Pretannia whence came the name Britannia, familiar to the Romans. Prettanike may come from the word ‘painted ones’, referring to body decorations of the natives. If so, it may not be an ethnonym (the name people called themselves), but a description of the islanders reported to Pytheas by the neighbouring inhabitants of Gaul.

So can we call the Britons and Irish Celtic? That they were indigenous people and not immigrants is now broadly agreed, but they were bound to continental Europe by networks of

connectivity across the English Channel and southern North Sea and along the Atlantic seaways, and through these connections they shared aspects of their culture with their continental neighbours. The most dramatic is ‘Celtic art’, which developed in western central Europe and was being introduced into Britain and Ireland by the fourth century BC to be copied and developed by local craftsmen. The motifs of Celtic art were redolent with meaning and reflected belief systems that the Britons must now have held in common with their continental neighbours.

More telling is the fact that the Celtic language was used in Britain and Ireland as well as across much of the continent – and there is good reason to suggest that the language first developed in the Atlantic zone. If so, then the Irish and the Britons, as early Celtic speakers, have a strong claim to be classified as Celts.

That said, while the tribes in regular contact with the continent will have recognised their similarities with their continental neighbours, they will also have been conscious of their differences. They will have seen themselves as first and foremost a member of their tribe, but they will also have recognised an affinity with those across the Channel. Whether they regarded their common language and traditions as part of a broader Celtic heritage, we will never know.



ABOVE: Part of the Celtic ‘Battersea shield’, which was found in the Thames in 1857 RIGHT: A 19th-century illustration shows early Britons, who were known as Prettanike, possibly meaning ‘painted ones’

millennium with the spread of the Maritime Bell Beaker phenomenon – a time of complex movements of people, beliefs and knowledge associated with the rapid development of copper and bronze metallurgy and the exploitation of a wide range of raw materials.

By the end of the second millennium, the Beaker phenomenon embraced the whole of western and central Europe and provided the basis from which subsequent Bronze Age cultures, including those of the early Hallstatt culture, emerged. The new hypothesis neatly explains how the Celtic language may have spread and why the earliest identified Celtic inscriptions, dating to the seventh century BC, are to be found in south-western Iberia. If we accept that speakers of the Celtic language can be called Celts then, by this hypothesis, the Celts originated in Atlantic Europe long before the Greeks and Romans first encountered them in the mid-first millennium BC.

Whether the new hypothesis will stand the tests of time remains to be seen, but powerful new techniques of scientific analysis are being developed to create entirely new data sets to put alongside the archaeological and linguistic evidence. The most promising of these, the study of ancient DNA derived from human bone, will enable us to chart the movements of populations and to see if the ancestors of the Celts really did come from the west.

In 1963, despairing at the fragmented nature of Celtic studies, JRR Tolkien wrote: “Celtic of any sort is... a magic bag into which anything may be put, and out of which anything may come... Anything is possible in the fabulous Celtic twilight, which is not so much a twilight of the gods as of the reason.” He would, I think, be reassured that Celtic studies are now in vigorous good health and are at last emerging from the dimly lit realms. **H**

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TELEVISION

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EXHIBITION

▶ The British Museum’s **Celts: Art and Identity** exhibition runs until 31 January 2016. Find out more at britishmuseum.org

ON THE PODCAST

We’ll be exploring the British Museum’s Celts exhibition on our weekly podcast ▶ historyextra.com/bbchistorymagazine/podcasts