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ICONS OF THE IRON AGE:

THE CELTS IN HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

COURSE GUIDE

Professor Susan A. Johnston
GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Icons of the Iron Age:
The Celts in History and Archaeology

Professor Susan A. Johnston
George Washington University

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The Celts in History and Archaeology

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Photo courtesy of Susan A. Johnston

About Your Professor

Susan A. Johnston

Susan A. Johnston is a part-time faculty member in anthropology at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C. She teaches a variety of courses in anthropology and archaeology, including the archaeology of the Celtic peoples, archaeological myths and mysteries, and the anthropology of religion.

Professor Johnston has carried out archaeological research in Ireland since the 1980s, when she did her Ph.D. dissertation on Irish rock art of the Neolithic and Bronze Age. She has also done archaeological work in such varied places as India, England, and Rhode Island.

She is currently conducting research at the site of Dún Ailinne, County Kildare, Ireland. This site, which saw a variety of uses between 3500 BCE and 400 CE, was one of the royal sites of the Irish Iron Age, and in that period was the ceremonial center of the rulers of the ancient kingdom of Leinster. She has published a number of articles and research reports, but her most recent publication, with Dr. Bernard Wailes, was on excavations carried out at Dún Ailinne, a book entitled *Dún Ailinne: Excavations at an Irish Royal Site, 1968–1975.*

Introduction

Among the most famous peoples in ancient times were the Celts, who lived in Europe during the Iron Age, from about 600 BCE into the early centuries CE. They fascinated ancient Classical writers of Greece and Rome, who wrote about them often. They left behind an intriguing record of physical remains that have been recovered by archaeologists, and they have continued to hold our attention as modern populations claim a Celtic identity. This course considers who the people known as the Celts really were, based on history and archaeology. Some of the questions considered:

- Where does the name "Celt" come from, who does it apply to, and what other names were used for the people of the Iron Age in Europe, Britain, and Ireland?
- What did Greek and Roman authors say about the Celts and how far can we trust their descriptions of the various peoples to their north?
- What do we know about the lives of these Iron Age peoples from the physical remains they left behind, and does it confirm or refute the historical record?
- What evidence lies behind the popular view of such exotic aspects of their cultures as druids, Celtic women, human sacrifice, and naked, painted Celtic warriors?
- How does our knowledge of the Celtic past affect those in modern countries for whom Celtic ancestry is a centerpiece of ethnic identity?

Using historical, archaeological, linguistic, and anthropological evidence, we will consider these questions and others in our discussion of the ancient Celtic peoples of Europe, Britain, and Ireland.

Lecture 1:
The Creation of the Celts

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapter 1.

Imagine an ancient "Celt" (and yes, it's pronounced with a hard "C," unless you are talking about the Boston basketball team). I'm guessing that, if you're inclined to think about males, you thought of a warrior. Maybe Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*, or one of the many versions of King Arthur. He is probably wearing leather armor, and he has a sword. He may have long hair, be tattooed or painted blue, he may be in a chariot, or he may be wearing a kilt. But I'm guessing that you probably didn't think of a farmer, or a metalsmith. If you thought of a woman, well, that can go either way—Alex Kingston in the BBC miniseries *Boudica* or maybe Juliana Margulies in *The Mists of Avalon*. If she is a warrior, she looks a lot like the men, but with somewhat smaller weapons and somewhat greater coverage of body parts (though often not much more). If she's more along the lines of a priestess, then she may be wearing something white and diaphanous, or maybe plaid, or maybe something a little more peasant-like. But I'll bet you she has red hair.

Where do these images come from? Do they have any basis in fact? And who were the Celts? This course explores all of these questions using history, archaeology, linguistics, and even a little anthropology. What we will find out is that, while the Celts are in some ways like their modern image, in other ways they are even more complex and interesting than the stereotype.

So who were the Celts? Well, the archaeological answer is that they were a group of related cultures that lived in Europe (including Great Britain and Ireland) during what archaeologists call the Iron Age. This period, when iron became the standard metal for both tools and weapons, began about 800 BCE. It ended in most places with the Roman conquest; this happened at different times in different places, but it started at the end of the third century BCE (when they invaded Iberia) and finally ended with the consolidation of Britain in the first century CE. In Ireland and parts of Scotland, which the Romans never incorporated into the Empire, the Iron Age ends in the fifth century CE, with their conversion to Christianity.

But the question "Who were the Celts?" can also be asked in different ways. Archaeology, with its focus on material objects, doesn't preserve the name "Celt," so in some ways the Celts are only borrowed into archaeology and attached to sites and artifacts of the Iron Age. The name "Celt" properly belongs to historical documents, and only appears beginning perhaps as early as the sixth century BCE. We'll talk more about those sources later. But in a real way, the Celts as we think of them were actually created in the seventeenth to eighteenth century by a linguist named Edward Lhuyd.

Edward Lhuyd was one of many linguists who understood that languages are related. These relationships are identified through shared elements, including sounds and meanings, like the fact that English “mother” is similar to Spanish “madre” and Latin “mater.” Previous linguists had put together a number of languages into a large group they called “Indo-European,” which includes most of the languages of Europe and also those of northern India, parts of Iran, and much of central Asia. Lhuyd had been inspired by the work of Paul-Yves Pezron, who had argued that Breton, the language spoken in Brittany, was a descendant of the language spoken by the people who had lived there during the Roman conquest. And since those people had been identified as Celts in Classical documents, then Breton must be a Celtic language. Lhuyd, in turn, noted that there were many similarities between Breton and the surviving indigenous languages of Britain and Ireland—Welsh, Irish, Scots Gaelic, Cornish, and Manx. Lhuyd, looking for a word to apply to this language group, also chose “Celtic,” presumably because Pezron had used it for Breton and these languages were part of the same group.

So now we had a language family of so-called “Celtic” languages, which was analogous to something like Romance languages or Germanic languages. But who were the people who had spoken these Celtic languages? While Pezron and Lhuyd were doing their work, archaeologists had been busily excavating sites in Europe, Britain, and Ireland. By the nineteenth century, two sites had been discovered that would have a big impact on the study of the Iron Age. The first was the site of Hallstatt, in modern Austria. Hallstatt was a salt mine that had been exploited for salt at least since the seventh century BCE. As a means of preserving food, salt was a precious commodity, and could be lucrative, as evidenced by the cemetery associated with the site. More than one thousand graves of people from this early period, associated with the salt mine, were excavated, and the graves contained a wide variety of metal goods, including swords, shields, axes, jewelry, and many other objects. These artifacts, and in particular the metal ones, were in a style that was later to be seen in many sites across continental Europe. In this way, the Hallstatt style of metalwork came to define the earlier part of the Iron Age, which became known as the Hallstatt period.

Bronze Razor from the Hallstatt Culture

Likely an early razor, this bronze Hallstatt tool has two circular holes on the shaft and one circular hole in the blade body that indicate the possibility it may also have served as a spear head.

The other site is on Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland and is called La Tène. This part of the lake, like Hallstatt, produced hundreds of metal objects, including swords, jewelry, shield parts, tools, parts of chariots, and horse gear. Later investigations showed that there had been a wooden platform, apparently at the lake's edge, and the artifacts had been placed, or thrown, into the lake, presumably as part of a ritual dedication. This metalwork had the graceful, curvilinear decoration that has become synonymous with the Celts. As with Hallstatt, the La Tène style of metalwork began to turn up in many sites in Europe and also in Britain and Ireland, but it was dated later than Hallstatt. So La Tène came to define the second part of the Iron Age, as the La Tène Period.

It only remained to connect the linguistic dots with the archaeological ones. Although the correlation wasn't perfect, it seemed that the distribution of La Tène metalwork corresponded roughly with the distribution of what had been identified as the Celtic languages. In addition, what was known of life in the Iron Age, their living sites, their artifacts, their religious behavior, their society, suggested that they were similar in many ways from Spain to Ireland, and from Italy to France. And so the term "Celtic" began to be associated, not just with a group of related languages, but also with the La Tène part of the Iron Age, which began about 450 BCE.

And so the Celts were born. We will talk more about the historical documents next time. But it's worth noting now that, properly, the term Celt should be understood to mean a group of related cultures and languages, not a single culture. This is the basis of a current debate in archaeology, which at times has become surprisingly heated. We'll talk about that later on, too. But for now, "Celt" should be thought of as analogous to "European" or "African." There are times when it's appropriate to talk about "the Celts," just like there are times when it's appropriate to talk about Europeans. But you should always keep in mind that the people in, say, Wales, two thousand years ago, would have been very surprised to hear that, today, there are some who seem to think that they were the same culture as people in Italy, Portugal, France, and even parts of Turkey. Instead, we should probably think more about Celtic *cultures* rather than a single Celtic culture. And for me, given the fact that the people in the Iron Age were also quite handy with a sword, I'd want to be careful what I called them.

The Battersea Shield

Discovered in the River Thames at Battersea Bridge in London in 1857, the bronze Battersea Shield dates from 350 to 50 BCE and was probably used for ceremonial purposes rather than as actual protection. It features designs that have been found in several La Tène Period sites on various pieces of metalwork.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did Edward Lhuyd “create” the Celts?
2. Why does it make more sense to think of Celtic cultures rather than a single Celtic culture?

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Chapman, Malcolm. *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992.

Collis, John. *The Celts: Origins, Myths, and Inventions*. London: Tempus Publishing, Limited, 2003.

Lecture 2:
The Documentary Sources

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapter 1.

If the creation of the Celts as we know them is a product of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, our knowledge of the Celts is at the same time rooted in ancient historical documents. It is in these written works that we get the name "Celt," and it is here that we need to look if we have any hope of fleshing out what we know from archaeological remains. However, in order to understand how to evaluate the information that documents provide, we need to think of when they were written, who wrote them, and what their intention in writing might have been. In the same way that we think differently about information we get from TV news, Internet blogs, daily newspapers, and things our friends tell us, we also have to consider the source when we read what has been written by and about the Celts.

There are three sources of written information that might relate to Celtic society. One of them is the epic stories, mythology, and legal tracts written by the ancient Irish. This includes things like the *Táin Bo Cuailgne*, or the *Cattle Raid of Cooley*, and the *Dindshenchas*, a collection of place-name lore. The very earliest of these may date to the sixth century CE, although the copies we have are much later in time. There has been considerable debate about whether these are transcriptions of oral histories and stories or whether they were composed much later about the past. They clearly are about a pre-Christian society (Christianity having come to Ireland in the fifth century), but many of the elements of the stories, such as the types of objects people use, date to later periods. Current scholarly opinion, on the whole, is that while they may incorporate some early elements, they mostly belong to the sixth century CE and later, and don't reliably describe life in the Iron Age, the time of the Celts in the ancient sense of the term.

The second source for written evidence is inscriptions that the Celtic cultures themselves left behind. There were many Celtic languages in the Iron Age—Gaulish in modern France, Celtiberian in modern Spain, Lepontic in the Alps, and the ancestors of modern Irish, Scots Gaelic, Welsh, and others. We don't really know whether speakers of these different languages would have been able to understand each other or whether they were different enough to prevent easy communication. But a few of them

Cúchulainn in Battle
An illustration from T.W. Rolleston's *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race*, 1911 (illustrator unknown).

have left scattered remnants of written versions of their languages. Most of these are very short, not more than a few lines, and they generally don't provide much detail useful for understanding Celtic life. For example, the Lepontic inscription on a stone slab from Italy reads: "Deu built this tomb and raised this monument to Belgos." Another, from the site of Botorrita in Spain, written in Celtiberian, appears to be a series of land regulations, though it hasn't been fully translated. I'll talk about the Coligny Calendar later on, but it is a calendar written in Gaulish, and it is designed to help keep track of the seasons, days, and times. While these do give a voice to the otherwise silent Celtic peoples, what they have to tell us doesn't really help us understand much about their lives.

So that leaves us with Classical sources. From at least the sixth century BCE, people referred to as Celts are mentioned, often in passing, in documents written by Greeks and later by Romans. Before we look at what they say, though, we need to think a little bit about the context in which these documents were written. Probably most important is that the idea of objective history, of trying to record events in an unbiased way, was not part of their mindset. Reporting things secondhand without worrying about whether it was true or not, borrowing information from other authors without saying you had done so, and flat out making things up was all part of the literary traditions of the time. So in some ways, calling this "history" is kind of misleading, because it implies for us something that simply wasn't typical for them. In addition, most of what we have are copies of copies of copies, sometimes decades or even centuries after the originals were written. There was no printing press back then, so if you had a copy, it had been written by hand, perhaps from the original but perhaps from a second- or third-order copy. Remember the game "whisper down the lane" and what often happened by the end? That's probably relevant in some cases here. And finally, it's worth mentioning that, while we know Greek and Latin well, these are still translations. Even under the best of circumstances, translations are not always exact, and can affect what might have been the original meaning of a document.

Some of the earliest mentions of the Celts illustrate what I've been saying. For example, Stephanus of Byzantium, writing in the later fifth century CE, says that Hecataeus, who wrote in the sixth century BCE, wrote that the Celts lived inland from Massalia, modern Marseilles, in south or central France. We don't have the original writings of Hecataeus, but we know about when he lived, and if he really said this, it makes it one of the earliest references to people called Celts. Similarly, a poet named Avienus, writing in the fourth century CE, quotes a Carthaginian named Himilco, again in the sixth century BCE, as saying that the Celts lived somewhere on the Atlantic coast. Again, we don't have Himilco's work, so we can only assume that this quote is accurate.

The situation gets somewhat better with time, as we have greater numbers of original documents to look at (though remember, they are still copies of copies). But there is still a certain amount of confusion about the exact location of the Celts, and you might want to get a decent map of Europe before going on. Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, says that the ancient city of Pyrene lies near the source of the Danube, which he notes in passing is "in the territory of the Celts." But he later also says that the Celts are the

most westerly people in Europe, and they live outside the Pillars of Hercules, the ancient name for the Straits of Gibraltar. This puts them on the Atlantic coast again, perhaps in Iberia, but nowhere near the Danube.

For Britain, the earliest description of people there probably comes from Pytheas, a Greek who sailed from southern Gaul along the Atlantic coast in the fourth century BCE. He actually visited Britain, and may have gone as far north as Iceland before returning to Gaul. Again, we don't have his original book, but it was quoted extensively in ancient times as part of an ongoing debate about whether he had really done the extraordinary things he claimed to have done (in a wonderful book by Barry Cunliffe, called *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek*, Cunliffe argues convincingly that he did indeed sail at least as far as Britain). Pytheas describes the people of what were then known as the "Pretannic Isles," which he locates just north of the land of the Celts. As such, he is probably the earliest person to write about the peoples to the north who had actually met them in person.

Ireland was even more remote from the Classical world, and there are few references to it before Julius Caesar's in the second century BCE. Avienus, the fourth-century CE poet, who I just noted as using many early sources, mentions an island populated by the "Hierni," which may be Ireland. But he says nothing further about it. Similarly, other early authors who talk about the "Pretannic Isles" may have been including Ireland by implication. But there is no description of any of the peoples who might have lived there.

By the second century BCE, we get what are the most important written sources on Iron Age peoples, the books of Posidonius and of Julius Caesar. These are important enough to warrant their own section, so I won't say more about them here, except to note that they had, like Pythias, actually met Celtic people, and wrote about them extensively. After these two, in the first few centuries CE, those historical sources that write about the Celts and other Iron Age peoples are now mostly writing about cultures severely impacted by the Roman occupation. It isn't that they are no longer Celts, but rather that their culture has changed in important ways from its Iron Age roots. And since we have to draw the line somewhere, we'll draw it there. After the sixth century CE, the term "Celt" pretty much disappears from the written record, not to be discovered again until another one thousand years have gone by.

So do these earliest sources from the sixth to the fourth century BCE tell us anything interesting? Obviously they are very general, but there are several points worth noting. First, when the Celts make their historical debut, they appear to be a people only dimly known. They live in the north, maybe in central France, or maybe on the Atlantic coast, or maybe at the mouth of the Danube—but somewhere, vaguely, "up there" relative to the Classical world. Second, it is probably significant that they are not described in any detail, but only mentioned in passing. This suggests that, however dimly, they were known, so there was no need to add any further commentary as to who they were. Finally, it is clear that the Celts, whoever they were, were not in Britain or Ireland. Whatever their exact location, the Classical consensus is that they belonged on the European continent, and no ancient source places them on the islands to the north. It is only our modern usage that calls the Welsh, British, Scots, and Irish "Celts." But that is a subject we will return to later.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why is it important to take into consideration the idea of objective history when examining classical sources?
2. What is notable about the writings of Pytheas?

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Collis, John. *The Celts: Origins, Myths, and Inventions*. London: Tempus Publishing, Limited, 2003.

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Extraordinary Voyages of Pytheas the Greek: The Man Who Discovered Britain*. Rev. ed. New York: Walker & Company, 2002.

Freeman, Philip. *Ireland and the Classical World*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

———. *War, Women, and Druids: Eyewitness Reports and Early Accounts of the Ancient Celts*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

Lecture 3:
Caesar and Posidonius

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapters 5 and 12.

As we noted last time, the vast majority of people who wrote about the Celts in ancient times fall into one of two categories. The first group is those who had never laid eyes on a Celt, and were mostly reporting what their friends, neighbors, and others generally "knew" about them. They represented this information as though it was fact, but it wasn't. It was gossip, rumor, and travelers' tales. The other group is those who wrote after, and sometimes long after, all the places where the Celts and other Iron Age people lived had been incorporated into the Roman Empire. The subject of exactly how much these groups had been changed by that is hotly debated (we'll talk about this a bit later on). But at the very least it would be misleading to use their information to say anything about Iron Age cultures in the centuries before contact with the Romans. It would be like using what we know about Americans now to talk about people during the Revolutionary War.

Two major exceptions to this, however, are Julius Caesar, the famous Roman general, and Posidonius, a writer of the first century BCE. While there are lots of issues that have to be kept in mind when using what they wrote to talk about the Celts, at the very least they can claim to have met living Celts. And while they may also have added stuff that was part of the general Classical rumor mill of the time, they at least had the option of comparing it with what they knew about these peoples and hopefully weeding out the more bizarre stuff.

Of the two, Caesar is the more famous, but Posidonius is probably the more important, so we'll start with him. Posidonius, who lived from 135 to 51 BCE, was Greek, but was born in Syria. He was educated in Athens and followed the Stoic philosophy, which emphasized reason and self-control as a way to overcome what they saw as the destructive power of emotions. Posidonius wrote extensively on a wide variety of subjects and is said to have produced a history of the world that ran to fifty-two volumes. Within this history was his account of his travels in Gaul, the homeland of the Celtic people. He wrote vividly about what he observed of their culture and also what he heard and what people told him about it. He also often noted when he had actually seen something and when he had only been told about it, something other writers rarely, if ever, did.

Because of his interest in describing the life of the Celts, Posidonius is often described as an "ethnographer," the term now used for those anthropologists who do research on other cultures. However, it is important to remember that Posidonius was *not* an ethnographer, at least in the way we now use the

term. Ethnographers are interested in trying to maintain what is known as "cultural relativism," which means being sympathetic enough to try and understand another culture in its own terms. But this idea wasn't even remotely conceived in the last few centuries BCE. A better term for Posidonius would be a travel writer, someone who had been to exotic places and wrote about them for the entertainment of others. That doesn't mean what he wrote was wrong, but it almost certainly means that he tended to emphasize what was different and interesting about the Celts; no one wants to read a travel piece that says, "Well, I went to this exotic place and guess what—they were pretty much ordinary, just like us!"

It's also possible that his Stoic philosophy played a part. One thing that Posidonius notes frequently is how emotional the Celts were. Now, they may well have been, but I wonder when I read his descriptions how much is his own dismay at people who seemed totally controlled by emotions, and how much is also an object lesson to his readers—"see what happens when you give in to your emotions, you drink too much, give away all your stuff, and end up committing suicide." I didn't make that up; it's one of Posidonius's more famous stories about a Celtic feast he witnessed. Now, no one says that this didn't happen. But was it typical? Had it ever happened before? Did all the other Celts condemn it privately, amongst themselves, afterwards? We don't know, because Posidonius wasn't an ethnographer; he was a travel writer, and that was just too good a story to pass up.

The other thing to keep in mind about Posidonius is that none of his original writings survive today. What we have are a variety of people who wrote in the first century BCE, the most important of which is Diodorus Siculus. He used Posidonius extensively, and often attributed information to him, as in "Posidonius says that the Celts are very warlike." However, just because Diodorus used Posidonius sometimes, it doesn't necessarily mean that everything he said about the Celts was from Posidonius. Sometimes he may have been reporting rumor or things that were generally believed to be true. By piecing together what is directly attributed to Posidonius, however, and comparing it to other things that were written about the Celts, we also believe that many other writers used Posidonius, but without saying they got it from his writings. It has been suggested that Julius Caesar may be in this group, but that is a hotly debated topic. In any case, the point to remember is that what we now have in terms of Posidonius's information about the Celts can be thought of as a series of nested boxes, each one holding less than the one before. In the largest is Celtic culture in Gaul, whatever that was, independent of anyone who wrote about them. Within this is what Posidonius observed and what he chose to write about, both of which are only a subset of the first box. Within this is what others chose to quote from Posidonius, again only part of the box before it. And finally, there is what has survived today, because of course we don't have everything that people like Strabo wrote either, what with some two thousand years having gone by. So while Posidonius is an important source on the Celts, there are limitations to how we should apply the information we have from him.

Julius Caesar is another story altogether. His information about the Celts, like Posidonius's, is mostly about the inhabitants of Gaul, though he does

mention others like the Britons and even makes a passing reference to Ireland. Before he became an emperor, Caesar was a general, and as part of being a general he did a considerable amount of conquering. One of the groups he conquered was the Gauls, between 58 and 51 BCE; he also fought the Britons, and while he didn't conquer them, he did fight some battles and make some treaties, at least enough to feel that he'd shown the locals a thing or two about Romans. Like Posidonius, he then wrote about his exploits in a book called *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, usually referred to as *The Gallic Wars*. Unlike Posidonius, we have Caesar's full text, in which he talks about Celtic life, culture, society, and religion, as well as military aspects and battle tactics.

On the plus side, as I noted, Caesar had extensive contact with Celtic peoples, over much of Europe and in Britain. It is Caesar who says that one of the three groups of people who lived in Gaul called themselves Celts, suggesting that this was their own preferred name. However, it's important to remember the context of that contact—he had spent some nine years fighting them. On the one hand, it is hardly surprising that he emphasized things like weapons and battle tactics, and said things like "they are very warlike." I'd be warlike too if someone was attacking my home, but it doesn't mean that I am generally a warlike person. On the other hand, war is generally not conducive to the observation of everyday society. It's hard to imagine Caesar approaching a Celtic farmer and saying, "I know I just burned your village, killed your men, and took your women and children to sell as slaves, but would you have time to tell me about your customs and rituals?" That's one of the reasons some have argued that he borrowed much of this kind of information

Vercingetorix Surrenders to Caesar
by Lionel-Noël Royer, 1899

from Posidonius. Yes, he probably had intelligence reports, but these were about people who had been under military pressure from Roman expansion for many decades. So while Caesar may well have accurately described the various peoples he was conquering, it's important to remember that his information may not be relevant to the Celtic cultures of previous centuries.

We also know that Caesar reported things that are simply wrong. For example, he says that the people living in the interior of Britain knew nothing of agriculture, but lived on meat and milk and dressed in skins. However, ample archaeological evidence of domestic grains, plowed fields, and equipment for spinning and weaving shows us that this is incorrect, and it seems that Caesar should have known this. So it should make you wonder what else he might have got wrong, despite his direct contact with Iron Age peoples. One of his observations that has come under such scrutiny is that the Rhine River formed a significant boundary between the people he called Celts and the people he called Germani, the basis of our modern "Germans." There is little archaeological evidence that the cultures on either side of the river were significantly different, and while there are linguistic differences between the two areas, language and culture aren't the same thing. We don't know if Iron Age peoples saw the Rhine as a significant boundary, but based on archaeology, it's unlikely that we would see it that way if not for Caesar. So why would he say it was important when it wasn't? Well, Caesar had a tough time making any headway in the territories on the east side of the river, and it has been argued that the reason he said it was a boundary was that, having conquered the groups on the west side, he could claim to have achieved his goal of conquering all of Gaul. The next nation over, east of the Rhine, could be left to others.

In the end, we don't really know what's accurate in the descriptions of Posidonius and Caesar, but since their documents are all we have that's written down about the Celtic peoples, it seems too severe to ignore them altogether because they might not always be right. So I will use information from both sources, as well as other sources, but I want you to remember what I've said about them when I do. Because there's no way to know if the piece of information I'm describing at that moment might be the one thing that neither really knew to be true, but was just too good a story not to pass on.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why is “travel writer” a more accurate description of Posidonius than “ethnographer”?
2. What factors might have influenced Posidonius’s view of the Celts?

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Caesar, Julius. *The Conquest of Gaul*. Ed. Jane F. Gardner. Trans. S.A. Handford. New York: Penguin, 1983.

Freeman, Philip. *The Philosopher and the Druids: A Journey Among the Ancient Celts*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.

Lecture 4:
Archaeology and Identity

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapter 1.

In a fundamental way, it is likely that archaeology, in the literal sense, will never recover direct evidence of the Celts. That's because, unlike history, which deals with written sources, archaeology is the reconstruction of ancient cultures through physical remains, what we sometimes call "material culture." It's not that archaeology can't contribute significantly to the understanding of the Iron Age, in ways we will be discussing through most of the future lectures. But archaeology can only recover names and such if they are recorded on objects recovered from archaeological deposits. And for the Celts, who had very little in the way of written language, there are very few potential places where the name "Celt" could appear. So in a direct way, we are unlikely to find "the Celts" in an archaeological sense.

That said, archaeology provides an invaluable source of evidence for the Iron Age, when the Celts would have lived. On the one hand, it provides direct evidence of the things people used, the kinds of places where they lived, what sorts of work they did, what they left behind in their rituals, how they buried their dead, and anything that potentially leaves behind physical traces in the earth. Also, archaeology, when combined with history, allows us to cross-check each with the other. Remember how I said that Caesar claimed that some of the Britons didn't know anything about agriculture and only wore skins? Archaeology provides us with lots of evidence showing this was wrong. We have preserved domestic grain and surviving artifacts in the form of tools used for agriculture and for both spinning and weaving. At the same time, archaeology alone wouldn't tell us that the name "Celt" even existed, much less the other group names that Caesar and others give us for the various peoples of Iron Age Europe.

Iron Age Artifacts

An iron sickle, neck torc, and adze found in a burial site on Ham Hill, an Iron Age hill fort near Taunton in Somerset County, in southwestern England. The site was later used by a Roman garrison.

So in studying the Iron Age, we are fortunate in having both sources of evidence to give us a fuller picture of what life was like in this ancient time.

As with history, however, we need to talk about the various ways in which archaeology can be biased, and how we need to think about the ways archaeological evidence can and can't be interpreted. One of the hardest things to explain to people who don't do archaeology for a living is the idea that there are lots of potential ways to explain material culture. But I'll do my best, and we'll see if I can convince you. The most important idea that I need to convey is that what may seem "obvious" to someone looking at archaeological evidence was not necessarily true for the people who did the depositing. As an example, suppose I find two burials. The soil they are in is very acidic and there are only very tiny fragments of the skeleton surviving. However, one burial has earrings and bracelets, while the other has swords and a dagger. I'll bet the first thing you thought of was that the first one was female and the second one was male, right? Now that's not wrong, but anthropology, which studies living people in other cultures, tells us that this kind of pattern, women with jewelry and men with weapons, is nowhere near universal, and people can display gender in all kinds of ways. Also, Caesar and Posidonius both tell us that Celtic women could be very fierce and sometimes fought alongside the men, and that both genders were very fond of jewelry. So now how do we think about our two burials? As archaeologists, we'd have to say that it is possible that we have two different genders represented here, but we aren't sure which is which, and we can't even be sure that they aren't both male or both female.

Turning to the idea of the Celts gets us into even trickier areas. What people call themselves has a lot to do with context, identity, and personal choice. When I'm in Ireland, I call myself an American, but when I travel to other parts of the United States, I say I'm from Maryland. When I'm at work in Washington, I might say I'm from Prince Georges County, and when I'm at home I'm in Belair Greens. It depends on who I'm talking to and what level of identification is relevant. In the same way, we don't really know how the various Iron Age people thought of themselves in all these various contexts. Caesar says that "Celt" was a term used by one of three groups of people who inhabited Gaul. He also says that it is a term the people called themselves (and he notes that they are the same people the Romans called Gauls). But he's the only one who says this. He and other writers also note a variety of other names for groups of people (sometimes called "tribes" in modern translations). These include the Iceni, the Catuvellauni, the Belgae, and the Helvetii. Now we know that Caesar and others can be wrong, but at the same time it's unlikely that they made these names up just for kicks. So from history we know that there were various names that people might call themselves, though we really don't know when, in what context, people might have used these various names. We also have to consider the fact that there might have been reasons to deliberately confuse the Romans about names, particularly Caesar. Don't forget that whole "burning village" thing I mentioned before.

Does archaeology help at all with this problem? Well, yes and no. On the one hand, ideas of group membership, or "ethnicity," are complicated. Think again of an example. Let's say future archaeologists find a burial where the

body is draped in the flag of the Irish Republic, the one with the green, white, and orange stripes. Now that flag can mean many things to many people. In the Republic of Ireland, it might be a simple declaration of national pride. If the person was from Northern Ireland, however, it might symbolize a Catholic, someone who wanted to unite Northern Ireland with the Republic, and perhaps worked against the Northern Irish government. It could also mean the person was American, but had ancestors who were from Ireland and who were important to his or her identity. Or it might mean someone who didn't really have any Irish roots, but saw themselves as generally Celtic, which is now typically associated with Ireland. Pity the poor archaeologist—would she have any idea which of these related to her burial?

Or think of another example. Imagine a band of musicians who play what we now think of as Celtic music and who generally see themselves as Celtic, but who are from a variety of different backgrounds and mostly see themselves as American. Our future archaeologist finds their remains. One is wrapped in a fragment of plaid tartan, one wears a pendant that shows the red Welsh dragon, and the third lies in a casket decorated with complex interlace designs. We know that these are all symbols of a general Celtic identity, and in that sense all represent the same thing. But what about our archaeologist? Is there anything useful she can say, or should she give up, go back to school, and become a lawyer?

Don't give up yet. While we might not know the exact meaning of these various examples, it doesn't mean we can't say anything. For one thing, we do have evidence, and while we can't choose one particular interpretation, we can offer several possibilities. For example, for our burial wrapped in the Irish flag, we might note that there are a number of potential interpretations of the flag's specific meaning, but obviously the person found the Irish flag significant enough to be buried with it. That would be noteworthy if the burial was found in the United States, or Guatemala, or Ethiopia. We can also argue that the person, or the culture they came from, had some kind of contact with Ireland, since they were familiar with the flag, indicating that they weren't isolated, and perhaps had an international worldview. And since burials are often not alone, but instead occur in cemeteries, we might be able to compare this burial with others found in future research. Was everyone buried with an Irish flag? That might suggest a community of immigrants, or people of Irish ancestry, or people with a Celtic identity. Or was everyone buried with a flag, but each one was different? Or was this the only person buried with a flag? Our interpretations would then change accordingly as we recovered new evidence.

Now this might seem annoying for those of you with a low tolerance for uncertainty, but I would argue that it's actually something interesting. We were able to say some things fairly surely about the burial that we didn't know before, and we were able to offer some other possibilities that might be tested against future evidence. And if, let's say, some historian had a document suggesting that, during this time period, Ireland had stopped all international contact and was largely unknown in the outside world, we would have evidence to prove that document wrong.

Archaeology is the only discipline that analyzes the actual physical remains of people and their material culture, and uses these to understand ancient cultures. When combined with history, we can say a lot about those cultures that either alone might miss. When we are talking about something flexible, like who might have considered themselves a Celt, when they might have used that identification, and how it might have been expressed through material remains, we have to be cautious. But being uncertain doesn't mean we have to be silent, and as long as we keep in mind the complexities of human identity, we can say a great deal about the Iron Age peoples in the time of the Celts.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are the limitations of archaeology when studying the Celts?
2. In relation to a study of the Celts, what are the complexities of names and what people choose to call themselves?

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Jones, Sian. *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Wells, Peter S. *Beyond Celts, Germans and Scythians: Archaeology and Identity in Iron Age Europe*. London: Duckworth, 2001.

Lecture 5:
Celtic Art

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapter 6.

In one sense, as we have already noted, the Celts can be thought of as a series of cultures who spoke related languages. In another way, particularly in terms of archaeology, it was the distinctive style of art that suggested a relationship between otherwise scattered groups in the European Iron Age. This is one characteristic that many people think of when they think of the Celts—call it interlace, knot work, or curvilinear, it's one of the most recognizable aspects of the Celtic cultures that still survives today.

The exact origins of this art style are a matter of debate, but most agree that it was ultimately inspired by motifs in Greek and Etruscan art. Wherever it came from, though, it emerged as a uniquely Iron Age European style in the early fifth century BCE. The style is based on plants, which curve and intertwine over the surface of whatever object is being decorated. Typically, there is very little empty space, something art historians call the *horror vacui*, literally "horror of the vacuum," or basically that they don't like empty space. It is usually asymmetrical, though it looks balanced nonetheless, and it is most commonly aniconic, meaning that it uses nonrepresentational decorative elements rather than human and animal figures. The style is named after La Tène, the ritual site that I talked about earlier. Although we now know that this isn't the earliest place it appeared, this is the first place it was recognized archaeologically, so it is usually called the La Tène art style.

Detail of a typical "Celtic knot" design from a grave marker in Ireland.

By far the most common place this style is seen is on metalwork, and it seems that it also typically occurs on objects owned by elites, people with enough wealth to commission finely made things. In Europe, copper was the first metal to be used to create objects, and it was first developed in the fourth millennium. It was followed by bronze (a combination of copper and tin) in the third millennium. Other metals, in particular gold, which is very soft and easily worked, appear in tandem with these. To the modern eye, metal seems a superior material for making tools and weapons, but in the early stages, people had not yet developed the means to make metal really hard, and so many of the earliest metal objects were for display rather than for work. So the earliest metal objects are actual display items, like flashy jewelry, bronze shields, and copper daggers that can be shined to look much like gold. Eventually smiths worked out ways to make bronze hard enough for efficient tools, and metal became the preferred material for these and for weapons. By the time iron came along in the eighth century BCE, this new material replaced bronze without much fanfare. But the tradition of shiny metal objects used for display carried on unabated.

There is some evidence to suggest that craftspeople were held in relatively high esteem. Both Caesar and Posidonius group them with druids, the religious specialists of the Iron Age. We'll talk more about them later, but for now it can be said that they seem to have held relatively high status in Celtic society, and if craftspeople are ranked with them, then the same can be said for those who made La Tène metalwork. It can also be argued by inference, though this is less certain, that the skill and knowledge required to produce these objects would have provided a basis for higher status in any society, the Iron Age included.

La Tène metalwork takes a large number of forms. You can find photographs of many of them by using Google Images and searching for objects like the Battersea Shield, the Loughnashade Trumpet, the Snettisham Hoard, and the helmet from Agris (Charente, France). All of these are typical of items that carry La Tène motifs. The Battersea Shield was dredged from the Thames in the nineteenth century. It is made of sheet bronze, not very useful as a shield because it would have torn quite easily if struck with a weapon, and at 77 centimeters in length it wouldn't have protected much of its user anyway. But it is a very pretty thing, with its curvilinear designs and its red glass inlay, and it would have been very impressive to look at. Somewhat more robust and therefore more directly functional is the helmet from Agris. It is made of iron and bronze, and is covered with gold and inset with coral. It seems perhaps too elaborate for ordinary warfare, but at least it would have withstood a heavy blow.

The Loughnashade trumpet, made of bronze with the bell covered in La Tène decoration, represents an interesting class of object, relatively rare in the Iron Age but nonetheless known. It was apparently one of four (three of which are now lost) found in 1798 in the lake now called Loughnashade, in County Armagh, Northern Ireland. It was said to have been found with human skulls and other bones, but this can't be verified. While the original shape of the trumpet is uncertain, depictions of similar instruments and also several experimental attempts to play replicas suggest that it was originally S-shaped. The

trumpet is large, well over a meter in length if straightened, and again, would have made an impressive sight. As to its function, it may have been used in a ritual context, or it may have been part of warfare. We'll talk more about these possibilities later.

One of the more interesting examples of Celtic metalwork is what is known as a torc, represented abundantly in the Snettisham Hoard from Norfolk, England. A torc is a necklace, or perhaps more descriptively a neck ring, which was worn by some individuals in Iron Age society. They are circular with a gap along the circumference to allow the wearer to put it on. Torcs range from relatively wide examples with elaborate decoration (such as the one from Broighter, County Derry, in Northern Ireland) to simpler and lighter versions made from a delicately twisted, thin ribbon of metal. The Snettisham Hoard was recovered from at least eleven small pits that contained a large amount of jewelry, including one hundred fifty torcs, about seventy of them complete. Most were made from gold and silver. Torcs are mentioned in many Classical sources as being worn by Celtic elites, and they are shown on statues of Celtic peoples, both those made by Iron Age artists themselves and by Classical artists. An example of the former is the life-sized statue of a man from Glauberg, in Germany, while a more famous example is the Roman copy of the Hellenistic statue from Pergamon known as *The Dying Gaul*. Both of these figures are shown wearing torcs around their necks. One of my personal favorites, however, is the torc from Trichtingen, Germany. On each terminal end of the torc is an animal head, and each of these animals is wearing a torc. Three torcs for the price of one!

A somewhat unusual example of Celtic art is the Gundestrup Cauldron. It is a large bowl, about 70 centimeters in diameter and 42 centimeters high, made of a series of silver plates that, unusually, carry images of humans, animals, and some figures that probably represent deities. It was recovered from a bog in Denmark and was probably a ritual deposit. The techniques involved in making it are not typically Celtic, but the motifs clearly belong with the European Iron Age, and most people think it was commissioned by someone from a Celtic culture. We will talk more about the Cauldron and about bog deposits when we talk about religion.

You may have noticed a pattern in the find spots of the objects I've been talking about. While we assume from documentary sources and general human patterns that these La Tène objects were owned and used by elites in Iron Age Celtic society, the fact is that they are never found in the remains of settlement sites. Unlike many other cultures, where the residences of the wealthy in society are marked archaeologically by the presence of expensive things, we rarely find such objects in what are otherwise arguably the residences of elites. Instead, we typically find them deposited in water, like lakes, rivers, and bogs, or buried in the ground. Such deposits are arguably religious in nature (and we will talk about religion later, I promise!), which could mean any number of things. It may be that we are wrong altogether, and La Tène objects were only produced to give to the deities. Or it may be (and I think it's probably more likely) that this was the most appropriate way to dispose of expensive items when they were no longer needed or wanted. Or perhaps this was simply a good way to impress the deities, by giving them

your most expensive possessions, when asking them for a favor or thanking them for help.

Regardless of what the ultimate fate of these objects meant to those who left them there, they can tell us a number of interesting things now. First, the similarity of the style of La Tène art indicates that, at least among the elites who bought these things, there was a shared idea of the best way to display their high status. Jewelry, weapons, shields, and ritual objects, all made of gold, silver, and bronze and decorated with curving lines and sinuous plants and animals, seem to have been the yachts and designer clothes of the Iron Age. It also shows that the elites, at least, were in close contact through trade, such that people knew what others were buying and sought to "keep up with the Joneses." While, at the local level, there were differences in house types, pottery, burial customs, and language, at the level of the wealthy, there was a certain similarity among the patterns of material culture. It is this similarity that allows us, in some sense, to talk about "the Celts," and it is in many ways this shared distinction in art that has survived to the modern era.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are the characteristics of the La Tène art style?
2. What is somewhat surprising about the find spots for the La Tène objects discussed in this lecture?

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Green, Miranda, ed. *The Celtic World*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Kruta, Venceslas, ed. *Celts*. London: Hachette Illustrated UK, 2005.

Lecture 6:
The Celtic Core

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapters 1, 2, and 14.

While we can debate whether it is technically correct to call the Iron Age peoples of Britain and Ireland "Celts," there is no dispute that Celts is a legitimate term in some sense for the peoples of central and western Europe. This was the area known to the Classical world as Gaul, which comprised France and Belgium, and also parts of Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, and probably northern Italy. Caesar and Posidonius place them squarely here, and this is where the earliest appearance of La Tène art occurs. Archaeologically, there are some regional differences within this area, but the cultures here do form a relatively coherent group in terms of sites and artifacts, and so in this sense they can be considered the "Celtic core." This is the location of your garden variety Celt, the baseline against which we can compare other places that have been called Celtic.

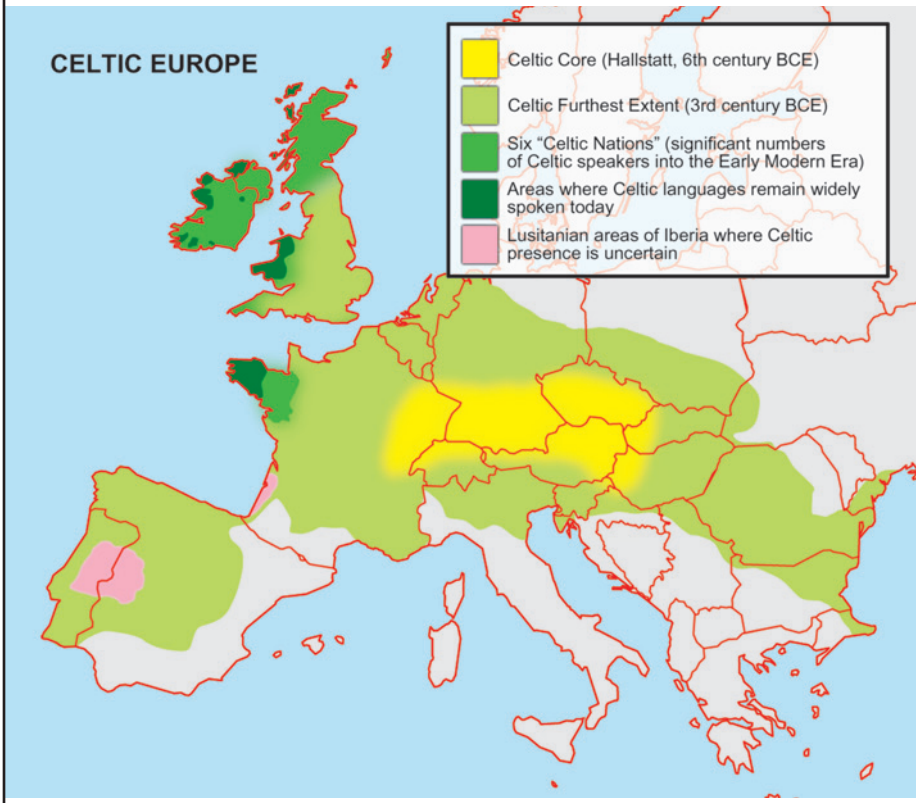
It is impossible to know when exactly the Celts as such emerged in this area. Our knowledge of the name is dependent on documents, as we've already discussed, and Classical sources place Celts perhaps as early as the sixth century BCE. Archaeologically, this puts them in what I earlier called the Hallstatt period, the early part of the Iron Age, which is about 800 to 450 BCE. However, using material culture as a guide, archaeologists typically equate the appearance of La Tène art with the appearance of the Celts, which means they put them in the La Tène period, beginning around 450 BCE. But whether they appeared in the sixth century or the fifth, there probably wasn't a distinct "origin" for these groups. Instead, they emerge gradually out of earlier peoples, retaining some things and adding new ones, until they finally are distinct enough for archaeologists to call them a new culture.

There are any number of ways to think about this Celtic core, and indeed whole books have been written about it. And it also depends on when we are talking about. A hundred years before Roman expansion began, their culture would be different than it would be in the middle of the conquest itself, or after it had been completed. Here, I'm going to try and give you a picture of what the Celtic core might have looked like, say, on the former end of this span of time. Later on, we'll talk about the conquest itself, and how it might have affected the Celtic cultures that survived it.

Probably the first thing a modern person would notice, if we could go back in time, was the general emptiness of the landscape, at least in terms of people. Our evidence for settlements is not very good. This is partly because much of the attention has been focused on larger sites, and partly because all that is left of settlements are the remains of the postholes that held up the buildings

in which people lived and worked. But although they are hard to find, they are not unknown. Archaeology tells us that most people in the Celtic core lived in small farmsteads or scattered villages. They raised crops like wheat and rye (despite what Caesar said) and kept domestic animals, and they used iron to make tools and weapons. The weapons tell us they engaged in warfare, not surprisingly since all ancient peoples worldwide seem to have done so, but they also lived ordinary, everyday lives.

In some cases, they lived in much larger settlements. Most of these are called hill forts because they were defended with formidable walls and ditches, and because they were typically located on hilltops. That's another reason we know that warfare was a way of life. The largest of these were called *oppida* by Caesar. We're not sure exactly what he meant by this, but he distinguished them from villages and farmsteads, and also from a few very large settlements that he called *urbs*, that is, cities (I'll mention one of these, the site of Alesia, when I talk about the Roman conquest). One of the *oppida*, Bibracte, was located in Gaul; its 5 kilometers of walls defended an area 135 hectares in extent. Caesar says that this was a place where the tribal council met, and leaders received envoys. Another one, Manching, in Germany, was



A diachronic map (overlaying a modern map of Europe) showing the distribution of Celtic-speaking people. (Diachronic pertains to the changes in a linguistic system between successive points in time.)

surrounded by a massive timber rampart 7 kilometers in extent surrounding 380 hectares. The nails alone for the ramparts would have required sixty tons of iron. Inside, buildings were laid out along streets and around the edges was an open area, presumably for livestock. Excavations revealed evidence for manufacture in iron, bronze, pottery, glass, and coins. The site of Kelheim, also in Germany, extended over a whopping 630 hectares. It had a massive gate and walls on three sides; the fourth side was defended by the Danube and Altmühl rivers. Evidence for glass, iron, bronze, and coin manufacturing was also found there.

There has been considerable debate about whether the *oppida* can be considered cities. Certainly they were centers of economic activity, with manufacturing evident at all of them. There is some evidence, as in Caesar's description of Bibracte, that they also had a political function. And they were certainly large. Estimating past population numbers is difficult, since we don't know how many people might have lived in an average house, and we can't always tell how many houses were occupied at the same time. However, estimates for the populations of the *oppida* range anywhere from five thousand to twenty thousand people. Even at the lower end of the range, these were very large settlements, and if they weren't technically cities, they would seem to have fulfilled a similar function.

At the same time, one of the interesting things about these large sites is that there is no obvious evidence that they provided residence for the elites. We know there were elites, because of the La Tène objects I mentioned before, and because we have a number of wealthy burials from this area. For example, the burial under a large mound at Reinheim, Germany, contained considerable amounts of jewelry and other personal possessions, including gold torcs, bracelets, and rings; glass beads; and a bronze mirror and drinking flagon. Nothing of the skeleton survived, but since mirrors are often associated with female skeletons, the burial is usually argued to be a woman. Not far away, the burial at Glauberg, also in Germany and also under a large mound, contained swords and other weapons, a gold torc, and a bronze jug. Just outside the mound was the life-sized statue of a man (he appears to have a beard) I mentioned before as an example of someone wearing a torc. The statue was recovered lying down, but it may have stood with several others in a nearby enclosure.

We also know we have elites from documentary sources. Both Caesar and Posidonius describe people generally thought of as chieftains, who were the leaders of their people. They were sometimes described as "kings," but this is probably the wrong image to have. Their power was based on alliances and other social relationships like marriage, and these in turn were based partly on kinship and partly on personal abilities. Sources talk about a variety of named groups that people belonged to—the Brigantes, the Aeudui, the Veneti. These groups were presumably based on kinship, divided in various ways into various clans and lineages, and some of these were arranged hierarchically. If you were in the right lineage, you had a leg up on claiming a leadership position. But that wasn't enough. You also had to demonstrate that you made good decisions, were a good fighter, and were generous to your followers, all the things that people looked for in a leader. If you had these

things going for you, then people would want to be connected to you. But if you lost them, there were others who could legitimately claim your loyalty, so nothing was set in stone. It was a flexible system, designed for a society that was not hardened into hierarchies, at least not the kind where it didn't matter what kind of person you were; if your father was king then you were king when he died, period. Instead, leadership was a negotiated thing, and you had to keep active in maintaining it.

So we know we have elites, but what we lack is anything analogous to a palace, a residence for high-status people, the leaders of society. There are some apparent wealth items in the *oppida*, but they aren't concentrated anywhere in particular, which might suggest the location for a high-status residence. Since they mostly built in wood, we have little knowledge of what buildings looked like above ground; maybe they were far more elaborate than others, painted in elaborate colors and covered with intricate carving. Or perhaps elites lived elsewhere, in places we haven't found yet, and only came to the hustle and bustle of the *oppida* for special occasions. We simply don't know. All we know is that, whatever the exact nature of society in the Celtic core, it seems to have lasted for centuries in various forms, only becoming strained to the limits under the force of the Roman invasion.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Where did most people in the Celtic core live?
2. What were the requirements of leadership and the nature of hierarchy among the Celts?

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Green, Miranda, ed. *The Celtic World*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Kruta, Venceslas, ed. *Celts*. London: Hachette Illustrated UK, 2005.

Lecture 7:
The Atlantic Celts

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapter 8.

One of the most interesting aspects of the whole Celtic story is that the people now most associated with the name, the inhabitants of the Atlantic islands, Britain and Ireland, were never referred to as Celts by any ancient author. Indeed, it is probably Ireland that is now most commonly considered Celtic, and yet there is virtually no pre-Christian historical information about the people who lived on that island and what they might have called themselves. Archaeologically, however, it is clear that the ancient British and Irish shared certain cultural similarities with the other peoples of the European Iron Age, that they were in contact with them through trade and other means, and that they spoke several of the Celtic languages that survive in modern Irish, Welsh, Scots Gaelic, Cornish, and Manx. However, it is also clear from documentary sources that the term "Celt" was never applied to them in ancient times.

As the cultures farthest from the Classical world, the peoples of Britain do not appear frequently in ancient documents, and the Irish even less so. For example, I noted Avienus before, who wrote in the fourth century CE but may have used material from the sixth century BCE. He notes in passing a people called "Hierni," the ancient form of "Ireland," as living on "the Sacred Isle" somewhere to the north. Most of the early mentions of Ireland are along these lines, or more obviously exotic stories about how they were all cannibals. For Britain, there is of course Caesar, keeping in mind all the caveats about the context in which he wrote. His information on Britain is mostly about military things, but at least we assume it was based on some kind of direct knowledge. There is also Diodorus Siculus, who wrote a fair bit about the "Pretani," the ancient form of "Britons." Diodorus himself had never been anywhere near Britain, but based on what he wrote, it is thought he may have used information from Pytheas, whose northern voyage in the fourth century BCE I described earlier. For example, Diodorus describes the busy tin trade that was carried on in southern England. He goes into considerable detail about how the tin was extracted, processed, and sold, noting that the inhabitants of Britain were "especially friendly to strangers" who came to trade. If this is from Pytheas, then it may be a reasonably accurate portrayal of this aspect of Iron Age life.

Caesar is also the person who started the idea that the ancient British painted themselves blue. In his *Gallic Wars*, there is a passing comment that translates roughly as "all the Britons color themselves with 'vitro,' which produces a blue color." We don't know what the term "vitro" actually refers to, though the consensus is that it refers to a type of blue-green glass that was popular in Roman culture. Obviously this is not entirely accurate, since glass

isn't a coloring agent, and some people have suggested that the British used woad, a blue dye derived from the plant of the same name. There is evidence from seed remains that woad was cultivated in Europe in the Iron Age, and so it may have been available to the Britons. However, there is some doubt that woad would leave a permanent blue color on human skin, and the prevailing view is that it probably wasn't woad that Caesar was referring to. If his description is accurate, however, then perhaps there were other dying agents that they could have used to tattoo or simply paint their bodies.

From archaeology, we have evidence similar to that in the Celtic core about daily life. Compared to that region, the Atlantic groups were more likely to live in individual homesteads rather than villages, and their houses were often, though not always, round. The walls were made of branches and twigs, called "wattles," woven around the posts that formed the base, with clay, or "daub," worked in to make the house waterproof. The roofs were thatched. Experimental re-creations of Iron Age houses, like that at Pimperne, in England, show how snug they could be. There are also hill forts in this area, such as the site at Danebury in southern England, and a few *oppida*, though these are far less numerous than in the Celtic core. Also like the core, there is little direct evidence of elites at these sites. There is evidence for an economic purpose, with sites like Danebury showing evidence of grain storage, metalworking, and textile production. Large fortified sites like Dún Aengus, in Ireland, or the Scottish "brochs," which are fortified houses, suggest the need for defense as well, but they are not obviously elite residences.

Many of the La Tène objects I mentioned in the discussion of art were from the Atlantic region, so elites were clearly around. Some of the most spectacular gold pieces, such as the Broighter torc from Ireland and the Snettisham Hoard from England, show the presence of elites and their desire for rich goods. But unlike the Celtic core, there are no wealthy burials known from the Irish Iron Age and few from Britain. One exception is in Yorkshire, where there is a group of burials that includes whole chariots as well as swords, scabbards, shield fittings, and personal items such as an iron mirror and a bronze case. Many were decorated in the La Tène style and enhanced with red enamel, coral, and gold. But though their position in society was likely similar to that described on the Continent, the role of elites is, if anything, even more elusive on the Atlantic coast.

This discussion raises an obvious question—why do Atlantic cultures look similar to those on the Continent? One of the common answers in archaeology, up until perhaps fifty years ago, and one that I still hear a lot in popular accounts, is migration. There are a number of reasons this is so. First, it makes logical sense. If cultures change, one possibility is that a new group of people arrived and had some influence on the existing societies in the area. The second reason is more complicated, and is rooted in the history of archaeology and of history itself. Although we should know better, there is a tendency to assume that what is written down is likely to be true. In the study of the ancient European past, this is seen particularly in the idea that whatever Classical authors wrote about (except maybe for the stuff that sounds just too outlandish to be true) is accurate. You can see this in a lot of books about the Celts in particular. Authors make all the standard statements that I made

in the beginning of the course about not assuming that ancient writers are right. They then proceed to blatantly ignore what they just said and use those writers willy-nilly to describe those cultures, without any consideration of when they wrote, why they wrote, and why we should believe what those ancient writers said.

Now, one of the things that ancient authors wrote about the Celts was that they moved around a lot. One of the most commonly cited is Livy, who described the migration of the Bituriges, a group of Celts he identified as living in Gaul. As Livy tells it, their leader, Ambigatus, wanted to relieve the overpopulation of his region, and so he sent his nephews out with as many people as they wanted (another writer numbers them at three hundred thousand) to find new lands. They ended up in northern Italy, attracted by the rich resources available, and settled there. Livy gives us no word on the reaction of those who already lived there to the arrival of several hundred thousand foreigners asking for a new place to live.

Classical sources are full of such stories, and it is likely that there is a grain of truth in them. That's why archaeologists and others often assume migration was common, widespread, and large-scale in the past. But there are a few things that should make us pause in taking them at face value. First, Livy was writing at the end of the first century BCE about an event he believed to have occurred around 600 BCE, some *five hundred years* before he lived. It's easy to get lost in numbers, but think about it—that's like someone now describing events in North America in the 1400s. And what was Livy's story based on? He says nothing about where he got the information, so we assume that he was simply passing on something that was commonly believed. Now that doesn't mean it didn't happen, but personally, I'm skeptical of the details.

More recent understandings of the complexities of migration in living people, the possibilities for different ways for groups to move, and the application of these ideas to the past have suggested other ways to think about the Celtic migrations. This is also necessary because the archaeological evidence simply doesn't support the idea of new influxes of large numbers of people everywhere so that we can talk about "Celtic cultures." While there are new things, such as La Tène artifacts, in most of these places, Iron Age material culture looks a lot more like the previous indigenous culture than it does anywhere else in the "Celtic" world. Migration certainly happened, but it was often piecemeal, a few families here, a warrior band there, and perhaps the occasional party of colonists. But the idea that there was a single Celtic culture, formed in central Europe, that expanded and migrated out, replacing the population in places as far flung as Ireland and Italy, Spain and Turkey, simply doesn't hold water.

So why do these cultures look similar? It's probably a complex combination of reasons. We know they look similar partly because elites all had those La Tène artifacts that were just the thing for showing how important and well-connected you were. So trade was happening, probably on many levels—remember the tin trade described by Diodorus. And that's one way that objects, styles, and even ideas can move through space, not to mention the occasional person. Such contact is also a way that languages can become

more similar, hence the shared Celtic languages. Iron Age cultures were far from isolated, and it would actually be more surprising if they weren't at least somewhat similar. But we should also keep in mind that similarity is in the eye of the beholder. I could easily choose a group of everyday things from Britain and Ireland that don't look anything like those on the Continent, like pottery or pins or forms of burial. If we had focused on those things instead of what is shared, then we might not be here talking about Celtic cultures at all. So perspective is everything, in archaeology, in history, and especially in the Celtic Iron Age.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What were the living arrangements like for Atlantic group Celts?
2. Why might Livy's writings on the Celts be called into question?

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Green, Miranda, ed. *The Celtic World*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Kruta, Venceslas, ed. *Celts*. London: Hachette Illustrated UK, 2005.

Lecture 8:
Eastern and Iberian Celts

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapters 7 and 9.

While the people most often identified now as Celts, the inhabitants of Britain and Ireland, were never called by that name in antiquity, there are others who are not often thought of as Celts who were. Ptolemy was a general under Alexander the Great, and he wrote about Alexander's campaigns in the third century BCE. As reported by Strabo in the first century BCE, Ptolemy notes that a party of Celts living near the Adriatic Sea came to see Alexander to seek a treaty of friendship with him. They shared a drink, and during the conversation Alexander asked them what they feared most. While Alexander wasn't yet known as "the Great" at this point, he was pretty successful in his conquests, and he assumed that they would say they feared him. Instead, they answered that though they valued his friendship, they were afraid of nothing except the sky falling down on them.

We don't know enough from this story to say where along the Adriatic Sea they lived, but there is good evidence that people known as Celts lived in the eastern Mediterranean region. In contrast to the situation in the Atlantic, where archaeology suggests that Iron Age cultures there were similar to the Celts in Europe, the archaeology of the eastern Celts is significantly different. Here, it is the documents that allow us to group these cultures with the Celts. Unlike most of the Celtic areas, archaeology does support the likelihood of a Celtic migration into Thrace, on the Black Sea, which followed their attack on Delphi in 279 BCE (we'll talk about that later). There is a scatter of La Tène–style artifacts in the eastern Mediterranean, which could indicate that Celtic peoples brought their unique style with them; of course, they could also have come via trade, theft, or gift giving, so it isn't certain. Overall, the peoples of Thrace look more like the indigenous people in the area; they don't have hilltop settlements, or chariot burials, or any of the other things we found in the Celtic core that define the Celtic cultures. But there are hints in the archaeology. For example, there is a tomb at Mezek, in Bulgaria. It contains two burials, and the earlier one is likely to be a local Thracian prince. The tomb itself is in a Mycenean style and contains the typical artifacts of the region. But there is a second, more recent burial, and included among the grave goods of this burial is a set of bronze chariot fittings that are clearly Celtic in style. It is uncertain if this means there was originally a whole chariot in the tomb or not, but the presence of the fittings suggests the possibility that the occupant was of Celtic ethnicity.

The other notable group of Celts in the eastern Mediterranean are the Galatians. This name, derived from "Gauls," provides the only indication of Celts in the Bible. As in Thrace, the Galatians were said to be an offshoot of

the force that attacked Delphi in 279 BCE, but they had left the main group before the attack. This group ended up in Anatolia, largely modern day Turkey. As reported some two hundred years later by Livy, the Galatians were used as mercenaries by various cultures in the region, and also raided the surrounding territories. They were mostly controlled by being bought off, but in 233 BCE, Attalus I, the ruler at Pergamum, decided to fight instead. He won the day, and his victory was commemorated in the famous frieze that includes the sculpture known as "The Dying Gaul," which I mentioned before. This shows a dying Celtic warrior, naked but with a torc around his neck. He has a mustache and his hair appears to be stiffened with lime, something that Classical authors commented was common among Celtic warriors. A second statue also shows a Celtic warrior, this time accompanied by a woman. She appears to be dead or dying, but is being propped up by the warrior, who is looking fearfully over his shoulder, apparently preparing to commit suicide. These figures are clearly Celts, or at least reflect the image that the Classical world had of the Celts.

The last that we hear of the Galatians in the context of the Celts is from St. Jerome. He wrote, in 387 CE, that the language spoken by some of the Galatians was very similar to that spoken by groups in Trier, Germany. Trier is west of the Rhine, near the Luxembourg border. Since the language spoken in this area was probably descended from pre-Roman Gaulish, it is likely that the Galatians described by St. Jerome were also speaking a Celtic language, at least in some sense of the term.

The other place identified by several authors as inhabited by Celts is in Iberia, the peninsula comprising modern Spain and Portugal. While the archaeological connections between the Celtic core and Iberia are much closer, the latter is not identical in terms of sites, artifacts, and styles. For example, torcs are found in Iberia, such as the two in the British Museum that were found on the Spanish-Portuguese border, but they are somewhat different in style from those I talked about with La Tène art, and the characteristic curvilinear decoration is not typically found. Also, there are rich graves with short swords, spears, and round shields in Iberia, but unlike the chariot burials of the Celtic core, the bodies are cremated and placed in urns. There are also

The Dying Gaul

Detail (below) clearly showing the neck torc and stiffened hair, and a more complete view (right) of the sculpture.

hilltop settlements here, commonly called “castros,” though some are large enough to be considered *oppida*. Several are well-known from excavation, including Los Cogotas and Citañia de Sanfins. Both sites have the typical round, stone-built houses, organized streets, and evidence that at least some residents lived there year-round. Castros are well-defended with complex earth and stone walls, which may also suggest that people went there when the countryside was under attack.

The archaeology of Iberia, therefore, shows some affinities with the Celtic cultures of Europe, though it is not identical. However, the linguistic evidence places their language squarely in the larger Celtic family. While other languages were spoken in Iberia, there is a broad zone in which something known today as “Celtiberian” was spoken. This is indicated by a few inscriptions, such as the bronze plaque from Botorrita, Spain. The language can’t be read fully, but it seems to be a contract of some kind relating to land ownership. There are also place names, particularly in the central and northwestern parts of the peninsula, which incorporate Celtic elements.

This Celtic linguistic presence may be part of the reason that ancient authors also consistently described the people of Iberia as Celtic. As I noted in talking about the classical sources, Herodatus, writing in the fifth century BCE, described the Celts as being the westernmost people in Europe, living beyond the Straits of Gibraltar. Since he also said they lived at the source of the Danube, which would be in central Europe, he obviously wasn’t paying attention to the details and so this may be wrong. But if the first part of his description is right, then he could have been referring to Iberia, which does extend to the west, beyond the Straits of Gibraltar.

Other writers imply that the Celts arrived in Iberia as the result of migration and combined with existing peoples there to create a group they referred to as “Celtiberi,” usually translated as Celtiberians. Diodorus Siculus, who sometimes used Posidonius, a writer of the first and second centuries BCE who had traveled in Gaul, as a source, describes the Celtiberians as a fusion of two groups of people that was only achieved after a period of violent warfare. Diodorus doesn’t say he got this from Posidonius, and other writers at the time also expressed a similar notion of cultural fusion. So Diodorus may have been passing on the general opinion of the Classical world, or he may have been drawing his own conclusions based on his assessment of the nature of Celtiberian culture. Or he may have had access to Posidonius, who in turn may have had direct knowledge of some indigenous history of the Celtiberians themselves. Certainly, writers from much later periods, such as Martial, who wrote in the first century CE and was himself born in the Celtiberian territory, reflected this idea of fusion; Martial described himself and his people as descended from Celts and Iberians.

So this idea of cultural fusion may have been accurate, or it may have reflected some kind of local origin story, or it may have been a later explanation for a culture that was perceived as having mixed elements. Or it may have been some combination of all three. But whichever is the case, it is clear from both archaeology and history that, like the Galatians and the group in Thrace, these people were seen as Celts, and so anchor the western and eastern boundaries of what might be seen as the Celtic world.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How are the Celtic graves in Iberia different than those of the Celtic core?
2. How did Diodorus Siculus describe the Celtiberians?

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Green, Miranda, ed. *The Celtic World*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Kruta, Venceslas, ed. *Celts*. London: Hachette Illustrated UK, 2005.

Lecture 9:
Celtic Gender Roles

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapter 5.

One of the aspects of Iron Age society that Classical writers commented on was the roles of men and women. Much has been made of the idea that Celtic women, in particular, had greater social power than was typical in Classical societies, and this isn't entirely wrong. But there are both conflicting accounts and complexities that show these societies to be far from the model of gender equality that they are often described to be by modern commentators.

For this kind of discussion, archaeology isn't sufficiently precise to be of much help. We know that there are burials, for example, from early in the Iron Age (the Hallstatt period, which precedes the Celtic period proper), in which both men and women are accompanied by rich grave goods. One of the best of the latter is the Vix burial, from France, in which a woman about thirty-five years old was buried in a wooden chamber under a mound. Her body had been placed in the compartment of a wagon whose wheels had been taken off and stacked to one side. She was accompanied by many items of jewelry, including a gold torc, a bronze torc, and bracelets and pins of bronze, slate, and amber. There were also a number of artifacts that had been imported from the Classical world, including a large bronze vessel called a krater. This is a vessel designed for mixing wine with water, a common practice in Greece and Rome. The Vix krater, however, unlike the table-top vessels it is modeled after, stood over five feet high, making it the largest example of its type.

A Gallo-Roman bronze bust of a Celtic woman, from Finthen (near Mainz), Germany.

This pattern of rich burials continued into the Celtic period, as noted for the burial at Reinheim, and may mean that women enjoyed high status in life, including the ability to accumulate wealth. However, as we talked about in the discussion of archaeology and identity, burials can be tricky to interpret. All we really can say for sure about wealthy female burials is that the people who buried those women included expensive objects in the tomb. We don't know whether the occupants actually owned these objects, or even had access to such goods in life. Wealthy men, for example, typically have wives who use expensive things, but that doesn't mean that they owned those things and it doesn't mean that they had any particular power in society. The queens of England who were

married to kings had many expensive things, but in most cases they didn't rule the country.

So we are left with documents to try and understand the roles of men and women in Iron Age society, and it's important to keep in mind all the ideas of context and intention that we've talked about. For example, Classical writers thought that Celtic women had a lot of social power, but that was in comparison to Greek and Roman women, who typically had relatively little. If we were able to observe Iron Age society ourselves, we might not be impressed with the social position of women at all given our own. So it's all about interpretation.

A good example of some of the difficulties in this endeavor is the idea of homosexuality. Diodorus Siculus, possibly using information from Posidonius, says that men in Gaul slept with other men, and in fact preferred them over women. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when people were less tolerant of homosexuality, this was usually dismissed by historians as an attempt to slander the Gauls by showing them engaging in barbaric behavior. Now, with a more tolerant attitude to this role, such information is given more serious consideration, and many people think that homosexuality might have been a normal part of life in Gaul, at least for some men for some part of their lives. Nothing in the documents or the evidence has changed—what has changed is our attitudes. You can see the danger, then, of deciding that some things are too outlandish to be true simply because we don't like them. The same ideas should be applied to other ideas about Iron Age life. While there are ways to think about some of the things described, some of it may as easily be hearsay, intended to make Celtic cultures seem more exotic and barbarous, and therefore more interesting and also more legitimately given over to the "civilizing" influence of the Classical world.

In general, Iron Age men are portrayed as aggressive and violent, but loyal and concerned with honor. Diodorus Siculus, perhaps using Posidonius, says that both men and women wore a lot of jewelry, including the torcs we've discussed before. Caesar says that Gaulish men won't be seen in public with their sons until they are of an age to fight, and that they have the power of life and death over their wives. Diodorus Siculus, again, says that men were very concerned about establishing paternity, and that they carried out rituals to be sure that they were the fathers of their children.

Women are also described as strong and beautiful, and sometimes aggressive. They fought alongside their men when asked; Ammianus, who wrote in the fourth century CE, several centuries after the Roman conquest, says that "not even a whole troop of foreigners" could stand up to the women who fought. However, there are no reports of women warriors per se in the usual Iron Age fighting force, and the impression is that women only fought when pressed or when directly threatened. Diodorus Siculus also wrote that women in Gaul gave up their virginity early and easily, and Caesar says that wives in Britain were shared among several men, particularly fathers and brothers.

How we should understand this last observation isn't certain, but it's worth pointing out that there are societies known in the world (though none from Europe) in which more than one man (sometimes brothers) marry one woman. It's called "polyandry" in anthropology, and has been documented for cultures in Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal, and India, among others. It is also

possible that there were different rules for sexual behavior for single versus married people, which Caesar wouldn't have been in a position to determine. Single people may have been given greater latitude, which was only curtailed when there was the potential for children who needed to be legitimate for social reproduction.

Some of this information seems contradictory, and so it may represent rumor rather than fact. It is hard to imagine, for example, women who could stand up to any warrior submitting to a husband who had the power of life and death over her. Similarly, if some women were married to more than one man, then paternity shouldn't have been an issue; it isn't a concern in the societies I mentioned that practiced polyandry because it's usually impossible to determine. It may also be, however, that Classical sources were conflating different societies into a single "Celtic" culture. It is quite possible that these observations actually pertain to different societies in different parts of the Celtic world, and so while they are accurate, they don't all describe the same society.

We also have some evidence that women could be leaders. They are not common, but a few are mentioned in what appear to be more fictional tales, while others are historically documented. Boudica of the Iceni is famous for leading a rebellion against the Romans in Britain, while Cartimandua of the Brigantes drew the Romans into her internal political troubles. We will talk about their particular stories later, but it is worth noting here that both women led their respective groups, and the Classical sources make no observations that would suggest that it was considered unusual for a woman to do so. We don't know the basis on which either claimed leadership; Cartimandua seems to have held it in her own right, while Boudica claimed it after her husband, the leader of the Iceni before her, died. Interestingly, both women were Britons, and no historical sources reliably describe female rulers on the Continent. So it's possible that it was something typical of Britain rather than the Celtic world as a whole. It's also important to emphasize that this does not appear to have been common, even in Britain, and it says nothing inherently about the status of women in general. Female leaders occur, such as Elizabeth I of England, in societies where women otherwise have little social power, without changing the position of women in the larger society.

Finally, there also seems to be a religious role that women could occupy. There are no sources that say directly that women could be druids, the religious specialists of the Iron Age. In 60 CE, Tacitus, for example, describes the British forces before the battle for Anglesey as being encouraged by druids and women, but he clearly distinguishes these as two separate groups. However, there are sources, albeit late ones, that describe women as seers and oracles. There are several stories from the third and fourth centuries CE in which women foretell the future, and these women are referred to as *dryas*. This word may be connected to druid, but it isn't a direct translation of the term in female form.

So while there is a range of ideas reflected in Classical sources about the roles of men and women in Iron Age society, one thing was certain—both women and men behaved in ways the Greeks and Romans found surprising.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are the factors that make burials so hard to interpret?
2. How did the roles of men and women in Celtic society contrast with their respective roles in Greek and Roman society?

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Freeman, Philip. *War, Women, and Druids: Eyewitness Reports and Early Accounts of the Ancient Celts*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

Hingley, Richard, and Christina Unwin. *Boudica: Iron Age Warrior Queen*. London: Hambledon & London, 2006.

Lecture 10:
Celtic Religions

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapter 10.

Ancient religions are one of the more difficult areas to understand in the past. If we think about religion as having an ideological component and a material one, we can use historical documents, if we have them, to examine the former and archaeology to examine the latter. However, it's never that simple. For one thing, historical documents are often written by foreigners, who usually have particular agendas with regard to indigenous beliefs. They either see them as somehow getting in the way, and so portray them negatively, or find them exotic, and so romanticize them beyond recognition. And even if they are trying to be objective, they often don't understand them, or worse, think they do and don't bother to verify their impressions. For material aspects, the usual archaeological problems apply—we have to be able to distinguish what is ritual from what isn't, and then try to understand the meaning of something for which we only have physical remains.

All of these difficulties apply to understanding religion in Iron Age Europe. All of the descriptions we have were written by Classical authors, and we've already talked about the issues involved in interpreting these. We also have some inscriptions, which include things like the names of deities, and since some of them are clearly Celtic in terms of language, we can argue that these are indigenous in character. But we also have to keep in mind that virtually all of these inscriptions were written down in the post-conquest period. It doesn't mean that they aren't legitimately Celtic, but there should be some question in your mind about exactly how the conquest affected religious ideas, and so how far back we can push these names in terms of pre-conquest cultures. As for archaeology, I'll talk more about the specific issues when we get there. But in general, the problem is one of interpretation—apart from the more obvious things like burials, how do we identify religious or ritual sites?

Let's start with the easier aspects. One thing that we can always assume reflects religion and ritual is burial of the dead. Our knowledge of burial ritual from the Iron Age is somewhat patchy, but there are some things that can be said. In general, we can say that funerary practices were varied. In some areas, people were buried intact, while in others they were cremated. Elite burials, which I've already talked about, sometimes were accompanied by rich goods, including gold and bronze jewelry and weapons, chariots and wagons, and imported goods from the Classical world. We have less knowledge of how ordinary people were treated in death, though there are burials whose weapons and jewelry are made of less opulent materials and are less numerous overall. In some places, like Ireland, we have virtually no burials, and we can only assume that funerary practice was of the kind that doesn't survive, such as scattered cremation or the exposure of bodies in the open.

For non-funerary ritual, we have evidence in the form of temples and also other less structured kinds of sites. Although several Classical sources say that people worshiped in natural places without any buildings, we know of a number of temples from the Continent and from Britain. The sites of Roquepertuse and Entremont, both in France, give us some idea of the kinds of activities that happened in temples. Roquepertuse produced a statue of a seated figure, which may be a deity, since it is human in every way but its feet, which end in hooves. Interestingly, the figure also wears a torc, the neck ring that we talked about before. Both this site and Entremont also had pillars that were fitted with niches. The oval shape of the niche and the fact that traces of human skulls were found at both sites suggest the niches were intended to hold human skulls. In Britain, Iron Age temples are often found under Romanized versions. These are typically relatively small and are sometimes rectangular, in contrast to the typically round houses. By contrast to the smaller temples in Britain and Europe, ritual sites in Ireland can be quite large, for example at Dún Ailinne and Emhain Macha. These sites were probably used for large-scale ritual gatherings, rather than the more individual rituals suggested by the smaller British and European temples. So they may have met in groves and other wooded settings, but they also did so in more conventional buildings.

Other types of sites are more difficult to interpret, but seem to indicate that various objects were sometimes offered to deities. Collections of artifacts, sometimes large, have been recovered from the earth, in pits or in deliberately constructed shafts, and from rivers, lakes, and bogs throughout Europe, Britain, and Ireland. What has survived is often expensive, such as the rings, bracelets, torcs, weapons, and shields found at sites like Llyn Cerrig Bach in Wales, Snettisham in England, and La Tène in Switzerland. But we can't rule out that other, more perishable things might also have been there, such as food, milk, or wooden items. Where these were deposited in watery places it seems fair to assume that they were intended to stay there, perhaps as offerings to deities. When they are in pits, however, we can't say for sure—are these offerings too, or were they being hidden, and their recovery was prevented by unforeseen circumstances? Posidonius is quoted by Strabo (first century CE) as saying the Gauls made deposits of "treasure" in lakes and in temples, but he too seems unclear whether these are for storage or ritual.

One thing that fascinated Classical writers was the idea of human sacrifice. There are many descriptions of rituals in which people were sacrificed for various reasons, as offerings to deities or in order to read omens in their death throes. There is considerable gruesome detail provided about how these people were tortured and killed, showing that prurient interest isn't a modern invention. The most famous is the report from Caesar, in which a large figure was built and filled with living people. This was then burned, killing those inside; the occupants were preferably criminals, but if these were in short supply, then innocent victims were obtained. While it is clear that no one who reported human sacrifice for Iron Age peoples had actually witnessed it, we do have some evidence that it may have occurred. There are a number of bodies (for example, Lindow Man from England and Clonycavan from Ireland) that have been recovered from bogs. These people were deliberately killed and sometimes tortured, and then deposited in the bog. There is some room

for debate, however—are these just human versions of the swords and jewelry offered to deities, or were they criminals, perhaps executed for some particularly heinous crime? Archaeology doesn't allow certainty, though I favor the former overall.

The identities of the deities who received such offerings are equally problematic. Again, we have a variety of names that are from Celtic languages—Taranis, Sequana, Epona, Lugh—and these names may predate the typically Latin inscriptions in which they are found. Since there are many names and many representations to match, it's obvious that the Celtic religions were polytheistic. Using general ideas about the types of deities typical of such religions, it seems fair to assume that these represented a variety of aspects—the natural world, domestic concerns, healing, fertility, and success in warfare. The Romans often paired their deities with indigenous ones that they thought had similar functions, or simply used Roman names for them. How accurate they were is anyone's guess, but since we know they could be wrong, there's no reason to assume they got this right.

The most famous practitioners of Iron Age religions were, of course, the druids. Several sources, including Caesar and Posidonius, talk about them, naming them as one of several kinds of religious specialists. Others were seers and readers of omens, as well as those who did things not typically considered religious in modern culture, such as bards. Druids were responsible for keeping track of the calendar and also for reading omens, something which might not have been as simple as it sounds. A copper calendar, found at Coligny in France, is a complex table that was designed to distinguish auspicious from inauspicious days. They also acted as judges (particularly in murder cases), and taught the young. They were exempt from taxes and military service, and could excommunicate anyone who didn't abide by their rulings. It was said to take twenty years to master all of the knowledge required of a druid, which was made more complicated by their being forbidden to write anything down. Diviciacus, a leader of the Aedui in Gaul, claimed to be a druid, and was personally known by Caesar and by Cicero, the Roman statesman.

So overall, Celtic religions were pretty much like others in the ancient world. Classical writers often seemed to think that they were fascinatingly exotic, but stripped down to their basics, they are not all that different from what others at the time believed. The belief in reincarnation is described by several authors, and Diodorus (possible using Posidonius) says that the Gauls sometimes threw letters to the previously dead onto funeral pyres. In this regard, they are described as sharing this belief with Pythagoras. Also described frequently is the idea that omens could foretell the future, something shared by most of the ancient world, including Rome. Deities pervaded both the natural and cultural worlds, and could be approached for help in dealing with the ups and downs of life, a ubiquitous notion in all religions. Illness and injury were some of the most common problems for which deities were invoked, though a few written curses suggest that curing them wasn't always the main concern. So while the Celts had some aspects of their ritual life that were unique to them, they also shared the same hopes, fears, worries, and joys that have always prompted humans to seek help in the supernatural world.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is known about burial rituals in the Iron Age?
2. What were the roles of the various practitioners of Iron Age religions?

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Brunaux, Jean-Louis. *The Celtic Gauls: Gods, Rites, and Sanctuaries*. London: Seaby Numismatic Publications, 1987.

Chadwick, Nora K. *The Druids*. Rev. ed. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000.

Piggott, Stuart. *The Druids*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1985.

Webster, Jane. "Sanctuaries and Sacred Places." *The Celtic World*. Ed. Miranda Green. London: Routledge, 1996.

Articles of Interest

Webster, Jane. *Interpretatio: Roman Word Power and the Celtic Gods*. *Britannia* 26:153–61, 1995a.

Lecture 11:
Celtic Warfare

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapter 5.

One of the aspects of the Celtic image that has survived the longest is the ferocity of Celtic warriors. Caesar, who wrote extensively about military tactics, weapons, and equipment in Gaul and Britain, comments that their belief in reincarnation prompted them to be especially fierce in battle. Strabo, more bluntly, says that all of the Gauls are "absolutely mad about war," tempered somewhat by also observing that they are sincere, and not malicious. This idea that the Celts were unusually warlike has become iconic in modern culture, appearing in movies like *Braveheart* and in the Kevin Costner movie *Robin Hood* (where they are portrayed as barely human in their desire to kill). By now, however, you should be wondering—is this accurate? Were they unusually warlike? Was this always typical of Iron Age culture? And what is our evidence for the warlike Celts?

First, let's dispense with the idea that they were in any sense pacifists. For all ancient cultures, pretty much everywhere, conflict was a way of life, and all adult men (and sometimes women) were warriors. So even if there wasn't any evidence, it would be safe to assume that Iron Age people in Europe were also engaged at times in armed conflict with their neighbors. That said, we do have direct evidence of this. Burials, of both men and women, contain varying numbers of weapons, including daggers, spears, swords, and shields, and this suggests that, at least in the context of burial, the idea of going to your grave armed was important. Also, some of these weapons, as well as those found in ritual deposits, show nicks and breaks indicating that they had been used. Sites such as hill forts and the *oppida*, while perhaps situated to be impressive, are also clearly structured for defense. So the archaeological evidence indicates that the potential for conflict was a way of life in Iron Age Europe.

This is supported by the documentary evidence, where it features prominently in Classical descriptions. As I noted, the majority of Caesar's writings are on the subject of warfare, hardly surprising given that's why he was there to observe them in the first place. His comments are too extensive to detail here, but he describes their tactics, their weaponry, their armor, and their merits as soldiers, providing what appears to be a relatively balanced view. The Romans generally are presented as superior; for example, Caesar notes with surprise that the Britons were still using chariots in warfare, something no longer done in the Classical world, and typically the Roman forces are able to scatter the Gauls without too much difficulty. But Caesar does give the various Iron Age groups their due when they merit it, noting their bravery overall and how tenacious they could be in battle. Diodorus Siculus (who

often used information from Posidonius) emphasizes how quickly and easily the Gauls were tempted to fighting amongst themselves. One particularly famous story is related from Posidonius by Athenaeus, writing at the end of the second century CE, in which competing claims for the best portion of meat at a Gaulish feast sometimes ended up in a fight to the death.

Some of the more exotic aspects of Iron Age culture are also wrapped up in warfare. Diodorus says that head hunting was a standard part of warfare in Gaul, and that the heads of enemies were preserved and kept, shown to guests, and passed down to descendants. Polybius, writing about one hundred years after the Battle of Telemon (where the Gauls were defeated by the Romans in 225 BCE), reports that the Gauls on the front lines were naked, wearing nothing but gold torcs and bands on their arms. This was said to have been a gesture of contempt to their enemies, who weren't threatening enough for these warriors to wear armor. Those who were wearing armor are sometimes described as having elaborate gear; Diodorus reports that their helmets had large figures on top, sometimes birds or four-footed beasts, and horns projecting from them, which made them look taller and more fearsome. The sacrifice of enemies captured in battle is also reported by a number of authors, some of whom give gruesome details.

That the skills of Iron Age warriors were widely known and valued is also attested by the presence of Celtic mercenaries in many Classical armies. They are reported frequently, fighting alongside Spartans, Greeks, and even Romans, and evidence for them is found as far afield as Egypt, where they served several of the Ptolemaic kings. A wooden shield of Celtic type was recovered from the Fayuum region there, preserved by the desert environment, and probably originated with a group of Celtic mercenaries who were given land there as payment for services rendered. A small terracotta figurine in the British Museum, which clearly represents a Celtic warrior, was also recovered from Egypt; whether this was a mercenary's personal portrait or a souvenir of a respected (but dead) enemy is unknown.

So the Celts were warriors, mostly feared by Classical writers. But to think about the significance of this, we need to consider the context in which these various documents were written. Of primary importance in the Classical view of the Celts was the sack of Rome and the attack on Delphi. These both loomed large in the minds of people who had never met a living Celt, but nevertheless talked and wrote about Celtic culture. In 391 BCE, negotiations between the Iron Age Senones and the Romans broke down when the latter's negotiators were seen by the former participating in a battle against them while they were in negotiations. Their envoy complaining of the betrayal was rebuffed in Rome, and so they attacked, defeating the Romans outside Rome itself in 388 BCE. The Romans retreated to the Capitoline Hill, leaving the rest of the city open for plunder. The Senones obliged, and after several days of pillaging attempted an assault on the Hill. They were repelled several times, once apparently because the defenders were warned by the honking of geese, and eventually the two sides agreed to negotiate. The Senones accepted a ransom and left. The attack on Delphi was the end of the larger migration I mentioned before, which began in 278 BCE. Again, the Celts won some early battles against the Romans and then attacked Delphi, the site of the famous

oracle. During the battle, as described by much later writers, there were several mystical appearances, including phantoms, snow, and earthquakes. The Celts, whose leader was killed, eventually gave up and retreated.

The fact that these two revered locations, Rome and Delphi, could be threatened, left a lasting impression on the Classical psyche in terms of the Celts. From then on, the idea of ferocious Celtic warriors was a stock Classical theme, appearing again and again in various authors' works. But were the Celts really any more ferocious than anyone else, and was this an intrinsic part of their culture? This is a complicated question, and I only have time here to raise a few things to think about. But the first is that all of the descriptions we have of the Celts, including those from Caesar and Posidonius, were written after the effects of Roman expansion were already being felt. From its very beginnings as a Republic in the fifth century BCE, Rome was characterized by continuous and inexorable conquest. As it grew larger, it both gained a reputation for its military goals and put pressure on the inhabitants who stood in its way. It is likely that the Iron Age groups who migrated were responding to this pressure in part, and obviously those described by Caesar and Posidonius were feeling the direct effects of Roman territorial aggression. So it is hardly surprising that the Celts behaved in warlike fashion. I'm not saying that this was outside their usual behavior, but given the presence of a warrior capability, it's to be expected that they would react aggressively.

Also, the idea that Iron Age peoples were mindlessly violent and delighted in war is not supported by even a cursory glance at Classical sources. I mentioned the British tin miners described by Diodorus as especially friendly to strangers, and trade contacts are attested by large numbers of imported and exported goods. This could hardly have taken place with people who would rather fight than talk. There are also numerous descriptions of Iron Age peoples negotiating with Classical groups. In the attack on Delphi, described by Classical writers, the Celtic forces were said to have tried to negotiate, but were rebuffed by the Romans. So it seems that warfare was only one of several options for the average Celt, and in many cases it was one that was not their primary choice.

In comparison, the Romans were just as warlike, if not more so, and yet history overall is far kinder to them. This is the culture that invaded others without cause and invented gladiatorial games and crucifixion, both offered in part as entertainment for the masses. While this is rarely discussed by modern historians with approval, it is often minimized as less important than the fact that Rome imposed urbanism, writing, roads, and the state, all things that are valued by modern cultures. Roman violence is typically portrayed as the unfortunate price that the conquered had to pay to become, and I use the word with some irony, "civilized." But I often wonder—what would we think of that era of history if we had documents written by the Celts, describing their own culture, how they felt about being "civilized" by Rome? Would we now be discussing the Romans as "absolutely mad about war"? Remember—history is always written by the winners, and in this case they became winners by the sword.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What archaeological evidence is there to support the idea that conflict was a way of life in Iron Age Europe?
2. Why might history view the Romans as "civilized" and the Celts as "mad about war"?

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Caesar, Julius. *The Conquest of Gaul*. Ed. Jane F. Gardner. Trans. S.A. Handford. New York: Penguin, 1983.

Freeman, Philip. *War, Women, and Druids: Eyewitness Reports and Early Accounts of the Ancient Celts*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

Wells, Peter S. *The Battle That Stopped Rome: Emperor Augustus, Arminius, and the Slaughter of the Legions in the Teutoburg Forest*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

Lecture 12:
The Roman Invasion

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapter 12.

In the fifth century BCE, what had been a small and relatively insignificant village on the Tiber River began to see a different future for itself. The expansion, which ultimately produced the Roman Empire, is one of the most remarkable processes in European history, both in itself and in the impact it had on its neighbors around the Mediterranean. There are many books that detail the ways in which Rome negotiated with, cajoled, and conquered its way to empire status, including that written by Caesar of his own wars of conquest. There are equal numbers that discuss the various reasons why such expansion happened. These range from fears of attack from those on its borders to large-scale territorial aggression resulting from simple greed for land and resources. But whatever the reasons, the impact on the Iron Age world of the Celtic cultures was significant and lasting. Starting in the third century BCE with incursions into Iberia and ending in the first century CE when Britain was finally brought under control, the Romans forced the Celtic world to become part of its empire. While this didn't erase the Celtic cultures, they were forever changed in deeply meaningful ways.

Given the number of books that tell the story of the Roman conquest, I only want to give a brief outline here. As I noted, the beginning of the story is in Iberia. Given their geographic proximity to the Straits of Gibraltar, the Iberian Celts typically allied themselves with the Carthaginians, whose state was centered in modern Tunisia on the north African coast. There had been numerous conflicts between the various Mediterranean and Aegean states over control of the shipping lanes in the western Mediterranean, resulting in a number of colonies being established to control trade in the region. Gades (modern Cadíz) in southern Spain was a Phoenician colony, and it became absorbed into the Carthaginian empire as the empire expanded north. Rome was unhappy with the state of affairs, and in 206 BCE it captured Gades. This is the formal start of the annexation of Iberia. Rome moved into the peninsula and established provinces over the next decade, which was followed by more than sixty years of constant warfare, some of it notably violent even for the time. For example, a Roman commander in 179 BCE reported that he had destroyed three hundred Celtiberian hill towns. The end of the Iberian conquest is usually marked by the siege of the *oppidum* at Numantia, which ended in 134 BCE; all of those who survived the siege were sold into slavery.

The conquest of Gaul is, of course, the best-documented series of military campaigns because of Caesar's book detailing his accomplishments there. In 59 BCE, Caesar, who at that time was only a general, was given command of the province of Cisalpine Gaul (that is, Gaul on the Roman side of the Alps).

The next year, he launched an invasion into Transalpine Gaul, supposedly because he had been asked by the Celtic Aedui (who were Roman allies) to help defend them against attack by several other groups. His subsequent campaign lasted some seven years, and was a combination of negotiation, the manipulation of internal conflict, and outright military conquest. Caesar also attempted to move into Britain. In 55 BCE he attempted to land on the southern coast, but was rebuffed by bad weather and an unexpectedly aggressive defense by the inhabitants. In the following year, his landing was successful, but when the defenders again proved difficult to defeat, he negotiated a treaty with them and left. The conquest of Britain was ultimately accomplished under the emperor Claudius, beginning in 43 CE and ending finally some forty years later.

It is a source of some national pride that Ireland never came under Roman domination. There are a number of Roman artifacts known from several dozen sites, and there is the site of Drumanagh, which may be a Roman trading emporium located not far from Dublin. These all suggest that the Romans were in contact with Ireland, probably through trade and perhaps through some Roman expatriates living on the island. Tacitus, who wrote about Roman Britain in the first century CE, and whose father-in-law was Agricola,

This map is based primarily on Roman records from approximately 60 BCE. It includes some historical information for highly mobile tribes such as the Boii, who also had territory in Cisalpine Gaul (Italy) before they were subdued by Rome. Many of the Gaulish tribes were a confederation rather than a single group. There were numerous other smaller tribes whose existence was known and who were isolated geographically from the larger tribes, but are not shown here.

the general responsible for most of the conquest of Britain, says that he often heard Agricola say that he could take Ireland with a single legion and a few auxiliaries. But it never appears to have happened. There may have been some Roman presence in Ireland, but there is no evidence to suggest a significant occupation or that it was ever considered part of the empire.

Thus, by the first century CE, most of what had once been the Celtic world had become the occupied Celtic world, part of the Roman adventure in empire building. While the popular impression seems to be that the Roman conquest was somehow inevitable, it is worth considering why it happened. Why weren't the Iron Age cultures of Europe able to fight off the Roman incursion? Neither side had inherently superior weapons, and there were probably more of the indigenous people than Roman forces. So what tipped the balance?

Probably most importantly, the overall goals of warfare in these two groups were quite different. Certainly the Celtic groups fought, and apparently they fought hard and often. But they fought for different reasons. For the Iron Age cultures, there doesn't seem to have been any notion of territorial acquisition, no aim to amass ever greater lands under the control of a single center. Instead, war was fought largely on an individual basis, for what could be gained. Of course, people also fought to defend their homes and families from those attacking for other reasons. But personal gain was an important motivation that could mean a number of things. First, there was a straightforward goal of getting stuff. Booty appears to have been a primary aim of the attacks on Delphi and Rome, described earlier, and there is reason to think that this was a common goal. Also, personal status was important. Proving your ability to best someone in combat was a means to acquiring followers, and this was significant both for personal status and political power. Diodorus Siculus, possibly using Posidonius, describes battles in which an individual warrior stepped out and taunted the other side. If someone came out to confront him, they would fight. This might happen again, and the battle might then proceed as a series of single engagements. Eventually there might be all-out combat, but sometimes these individual encounters proved enough.

By contrast, the Romans were building an empire, and toward that end, Rome had a professional standing army. While this didn't necessarily ensure their dedication to battle, there were severe penalties for not standing their ground. They were trained to fight in groups, and to adjust to changing battle conditions by obeying orders. Even their weapons reflected these differences. While the Celts had longer swords designed for a wide, sweeping, slashing motion, lethal in individual combat, the Romans had shorter swords, better for maneuvering in crowds of armed combatants. When the Romans had the ability to choose their place for battle, and the time to set up their forces, they had a clear advantage over their Iron Age enemies. This is most clearly seen in those notable occasions when the Romans lost, such as the Teutoberg Forest in 9 CE. In this battle, the Romans were caught unaware in heavily forested, swampy terrain by forces under the command of Arminius, leader of an alliance of Germanic groups. The Romans were never able to effectively regroup after the initial onslaught, and in the end, three legions, three detachments of cavalry, and six cohorts of auxiliaries, perhaps twenty thousand men in all, died.

It is also the case that, while we now think of the Romans as being in opposition to a single group, the "Celts," in fact the latter saw themselves as distinct cultural entities. This is evidenced in many different ways—by the variety of group names, by differences in the details of artifacts and styles, and by documentary sources that describe the variations on their cultures. It's also evidenced by the frequency with which sources report various Iron Age groups inviting the Romans to support their side of an otherwise indigenous conflict. Caesar said he moved into Transalpine Gaul at the invitation of the Aedui, who were fighting a coalition of the Suebi and the Sequani, and Claudius invaded Britain at the request of the Atrebates for aid. While it would be an exaggeration to say that they sometimes saw little difference between the Romans and their Celtic enemies in the neighboring region, it does appear to be the case that they didn't anticipate the consequences of involving the Romans in internal warfare. We can look back now and observe that this was a really bad idea, but at the time, it is likely that the various Celtic groups had no basis on which to assess the extent or the avariciousness of the Roman Empire.

This is also why they didn't band together to confront the invading armies of Rome. Iron Age people did sometimes band together for the purpose of warfare. Arminius led a coalition; so did Vercingetorix and Boudica, whom we'll talk about later. And it was often the case that the Romans were invited in because neighboring groups had joined together and so presented a more-than-usually formidable foe. But these coalitions didn't last long, and fell apart when individual goals conflicted with those of the group. So the idea of everyone, all of the Celtic peoples, banding together to repel the Romans probably wouldn't have been workable, even had someone conceived it. It probably would have worked. But hindsight is always 20/20, and if they knew then what we know now, things might have been different.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why weren't the Iron Age cultures of Europe able to fight off the Roman incursion?
2. How did the Romans and Celts differ in terms of their overall goals of warfare?

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Caesar, Julius. *The Conquest of Gaul*. Ed. Jane F. Gardner. Trans. S.A. Handford. New York: Penguin, 1983.

Wells, Peter S. *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

———. *The Battle That Stopped Rome: Emperor Augustus, Arminius, and the Slaughter of the Legions in the Teutoburg Forest*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

Lecture 13:
The Occupied Celts

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapters 12 and 13.

The Roman invasion of Europe and Britain was one of the most significant things to happen in the Iron Age European world, perhaps *the* most significant thing. On the one hand, it led to the documentation of the Celtic cultures (albeit filtered through foreign eyes) in ways that had not happened before, and so paradoxically may have contributed to its survival, in a sense. However, the overall impact on the indigenous cultures has to be seen as negative. This viewpoint may find some detractors in modern times. The Romans had writing, urbanism, a state bureaucracy, and many other things that are now valued in our culture, and those things were imposed on the indigenous cultures that they conquered. Thus we may see the changes experienced by groups like the Celts as ultimately beneficial. However, the fact that the Romans had to impose their culture mostly through military conquest suggests that most of the indigenous cultures didn't particularly want those things, and as an anthropologist as well as an archaeologist, I have to side with them.

That said, however, since there was no single Iron Age central government in Europe, and no single Celtic culture, there was also no single Celtic response to the Roman conquest. Responses instead crossed the board, from apparent enthusiasm for all things Roman, to fighting to the death against Roman domination. Some of the evidence we have for these various reactions comes from documentary sources, which always must be treated with care. Other evidence comes from archaeology, though there are typically multiple ways to read this record. On the whole, however, it seems clear that there were as many ways of reacting to the Roman arrival as there were people to react to it.

On one end of the continuum, there is the obvious and undeniable evidence of indigenous military resistance to Roman occupation. One of the most memorable visual images of this is from Maiden Castle, an *oppidum* in southern England that was attacked sometime after 43 CE. In addition to some fifty-thousand sling stones hurled in defense of the site and recovered in the excavations, one individual whose skeleton was excavated had a Roman ballista bolt still embedded in his spine. Similarly, I already mentioned the battle at Teutoberg Forest, where excavations again turned up hundreds of weapons, whole and fragments, in one of the battles that Rome famously lost.

In addition to considerable archaeological evidence, various Classical accounts describe the military conquest of Europe and Britain. For example, Caesar himself is said to have had four legions, each with three- to four-thousand troops plus auxiliaries, in his initial campaign in Gaul, and this force was met by any number of indigenous defenders. One of the more famous is Vercingetorix, a leader of the Arverni of Gaul, whose story is told by Caesar.

In 52 BCE, Vercingetorix began a campaign against Caesar and won several of the initial engagements, including a major battle in that year at Gergovia. However, intensified Roman assaults resulted in his retreating to the *oppidum* at Mandubii, now known as Alesia, where he was besieged by Roman forces. Despite calls for reinforcements, no effective help arrived, and Vercingetorix was forced to surrender. After being held in prison for six years, he was publicly executed as part of Caesar's triumphal ceremonies in 46 BCE.

Another famous resistor was Caratacus, who fought against the forces of Claudius, who invaded Britain in 43 CE. Caratacus was a son of the leader of the Catuvellauni. Although they were unsuccessful in defeating the invading forces, Caratacus fled to Wales and mounted a guerilla war against the Romans. In the end, however, he was captured and sent to Rome, presumably intended for execution. But as the story was told several decades later by Tacitus, the speech he was allowed to give before his execution was so moving that he was pardoned and allowed to live in Rome.

Probably the most famous of those who rebelled against Rome is Boudica (popularly, but incorrectly, also known as Boadicea). According to accounts, again by Tacitus, Boudica was the wife of Prasutagus, the leader of the Iceni, in eastern Britain. Although Prasutagus was friendly to Rome, after his death around 60 CE, the Romans invaded the Icenian territory and took it over. In the process, Tacitus says, Boudica was flogged and her daughters were raped. This was the culmination of a number of grievances the local population had against Rome, and Boudica was able to bring together several Iron Age groups, including the Iceni and the Trinovantes. Her forces destroyed Camulodunum (modern Colchester) and Londinium (modern London), and inflicted serious damage on the town of Verulamium (modern St. Albans). In her final battle, however, where the Romans were able to choose the time and place, Boudica's forces were defeated by Roman forces under Suetonius Paulinus. Boudica's fate is not known for certain, but one source says she died from illness while the other suggests she took poison to avoid being taken to Rome and publicly executed.

Other indications that there was resistance, though in a less direct fashion, against Roman government is seen in archaeological evidence from burials and other kinds of evidence. There are several cemeteries, for

French Memorial to Vercingetorix

In 1865, French Emperor Napoleon III erected a seven meter tall statue of Vercingetorix (right), who is considered by many in France to be a folk hero. The sculptor Aimé Millet erected the memorial on the purported site of the Battle of Alesia.

The inscription (translated into English) on the base of the statue reads:

United Gaul
Forming a single nation
Animated by the same spirit,
Can defy the Universe.

example, that show a combination of indigenous and Roman elements in the associated grave goods. In one Iron Age cemetery in Luxembourg, there are several burials that have typically Roman goods, several that have no Roman goods at all, and some that have a mix of the two. Does this reflect differences in the degree to which that particular individual (or at least the people who did the burying) embraced the presence of Roman culture? That's certainly one interpretation. Similarly, there was a resurgence of metal objects made in the La Tène style of the pre-conquest years that became popular again in the centuries following the conquest. Is this an attempt to reclaim an indigenous identity, and thereby resist Roman domination? Perhaps these are ways that people could rebel against Rome in a way that was not overtly confrontational, but nevertheless clear.

So it seems that many of the Celtic groups were unhappy at the arrival of the Romans and expressed this both during and after the conquest with different degrees of intensity. Yet at the same time, there is equally clear evidence that

Statue of Boudica

In 1782, English poet William Cowper wrote a popular poem entitled *Boadicea, An Ode*. It was in the Victorian era, however, that Boudica's fame took on legendary proportions, as Queen Victoria was seen as Boudica's "namesake." Victoria's Poet Laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, also wrote a poem, *Boadicea*, and several ships were named after her. The bronze statue of Boudica (above) with her daughters in a war chariot (furnished with scythes after the Persian fashion) was commissioned by Prince Albert and executed by Thomas Thornycroft. It was completed in 1905 and stands next to Westminster Bridge and the Houses of Parliament, with the following lines from Cowper's poem, which refer to the British Empire:

Regions Caesar never knew
Thy posterity shall sway.

It was noted by some at the time of the statue's dedication that the great anti-imperialist rebel Boudica had been identified with the head of the British Empire and stood guard over the city she razed.

some tolerated the Romans and even welcomed them. Classical writers report any number of situations in which the Romans were asked to support one indigenous group against another. Caesar was ostensibly invited to support the Aedui against a coalition of their enemies, and this was his reason for invading Gaul. A century later, a similar invitation from Verica of the Atrebates resulted in Claudius's invasion of Britain. And the leader of the Atrebates ultimately changed his name to Tiberius Claudius, presumably signaling his approval of all things Roman.

Other rulers, while perhaps not inviting the Romans in per se, nevertheless accepted what they saw as reality and allied themselves with Rome, becoming what are known as client rulers. Prasutagus, the husband of Boudica, was one such client ruler. Another was Cartimandua, the leader of the Brigantes in northern England. She and her husband Venutius were initially friendly to Rome, and in 51 CE it was Cartimandua, according to Tacitus, who turned Caratacus over to the Romans after he had sought sanctuary with her people. But domestic troubles resulted in her divorce from Venutius, and in 57 CE their differences broke out in war, Venutius attacking first Cartimandua's forces and then those of her Roman allies. Additional Roman support kept Cartimandua on the throne for some years after that, but eventually Venutius prevailed and defeated her. After this, Cartimandua no longer appears in historical records.

So the evidence suggests a complex and nuanced response to the Roman conquest. Some rebelled and some resisted the occupation, while others tolerated and even welcomed it. I suspect it depended on a combination of factors—was there any real possibility of choice, was there some perception that at least stability and perhaps even greater power would come from accepting Roman ways, or was the injury too great to forget who had caused the deaths of thousands and the breakdown of traditional culture? Whatever the particular situation, the Romans occupied most of the Celtic lands for centuries, and while their cultures weren't eradicated, they were changed in fundamental and long-lasting ways. By the time the western half of the Roman empire began to collapse, beginning in perhaps the fourth to fifth centuries CE, the Iron Age cultures were no more. It is perhaps telling that King Arthur, the semi-legendary figure who is often seen as synonymous with all things Celtic, may have borne a Roman name.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was the range of Celtic response to the Roman conquest?
2. What archaeological evidence exists to support Celtic resistance against Roman government?

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Hingley, Richard, and Christina Unwin. *Boudica: Iron Age Warrior Queen*. London: Hambledon & London, 2006.

Wells, Peter S. *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Websites to Visit

Historia, a commercial website, provides an article and images of the Maiden Castle (Dorset, England) hill fort, including an image of the skeleton with the Roman ballista arrow bolt embedded in the spine — http://www.forumancientcoins.com/historia/sites/maiden/maiden.htm

Lecture 14:
The Modern Celts

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts*, chapters 13 and 14.

There are any number of places to note the beginning of the end for the Roman Empire. In the early centuries CE, it was plagued by attacks on its borders and corruption at its center, and in 395 CE it was permanently split into two halves, the Eastern Empire and the Western Empire. In 410 CE, the peoples of Britain were told to "look to their own defenses," a not-so-subtle indication that Rome was no longer going to be protecting them. After that, there was a gradual disintegration in Britain and Europe, followed by the formation of the kingdoms of the early Middle Ages.

As we noted in Lecture 13, the peoples of what came to be called the Celtic world had taken on or rejected Roman ways to varying degrees. In the literal sense, they no longer existed, but certainly aspects of their cultures remained. For later historians, the most notable aspect was their languages, many of which survived into modern times. We have already talked about the realization of Edward Lhuyd and others that various languages spoken in the seventeenth century were related, and the subsequent use of the term "Celtic" to describe these languages. The connection of these languages with earlier cultures that had existed on the edges of the Roman Empire was the final piece that allowed various cultures to be labeled as "Celtic."

Since these languages were also being spoken by modern peoples, it then became possible to label these modern cultures as descendants of the Celtic peoples. While there is some debate about exactly who among living people qualifies as Celtic, the most widely accepted list seems to be those where Celtic languages survived into modern times. This would include the people

of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Brittany, Cornwall, and the Isle of Man. Cornish is largely a revived language; there is some dispute as to who the last official native speaker was, but the latest candidates died in the nineteenth century. Manx, the Celtic language of the Isle of Man, is also to some extent a revived language, though the last native speaker there only died in 1974. Breton, the Celtic language of Brittany, was officially suppressed at various points by the French government, and now has few native speakers (probably less than 1 percent). Though supported by local governments to varying degrees, Scots Gaelic also survives in relatively low rates, with estimated numbers of speakers ranging from 1 to 2 percent of the Scottish population. Irish and Welsh have the most robust numbers, with competence reported in 22 percent in Wales and 37 percent in Ireland. Ireland is also an officially bilingual country, with both English and Irish being recognized languages. Although there are relatively few monolingual Irish speakers, everything that comes from the national government must be bilingual, including road signs, museum story boards, and government offices and documents.

However, language is not the only marker of Celtic identity. There is also a more nebulous notion of a culturally Celtic identity. People who participate in Celtic music festivals, take language classes, and participate in Celtic cultural events may also consider themselves descendants of the Iron Age cultures. This group may be somewhat larger, and include all those who were conquered by the Romans and/or remained in its geographic fringes in Europe. Indeed, if archaeology and history are considered in the definition, we would also have to include the Spanish and Portuguese (descendants of the Celtiberians) and perhaps even some peoples in northern Italy, various parts of northern Europe, and even some groups in modern Bulgaria and Turkey (any descendants of the Galatians). As far as I know, the latter don't typically claim Celtic ancestry, but the former, particular those from Iberia, often do.

A thatched-roof house in a modern neighborhood in Dublin, Ireland.

So as an ethnic identity, the modern Celtic one is a complicated phenomenon. There really is no single way to determine actual Celtic ancestry, and even having deep roots in Ireland or Wales isn't automatically valid from a literally historical point of view. There are, for example, many Irish people whose ancestors derive from the various groups who have invaded Ireland in the past—the Vikings, the English—but who would be considered by most to be solidly Irish. Yet in some sense they aren't really, or even mostly, descended from Iron Age, "Celtic" peoples. At the same time, I could also imagine people in England whose ancestors didn't intermarry with the Romans and who managed to stay separate from the Anglo-Saxons and Normans, and so in some sense are more directly descended from Iron Age cultures than some people in Wales or Scotland. And yet the English are not traditionally seen as Celtic. And this doesn't even begin to factor in the complexities of the archaeological and historical situation that we've talked about. Technically speaking, no one outside of an ill-defined area in central and/or western Europe was really a Celt. In this relatively narrow sense, both our use of the term Celt for all Iron Age peoples and, by extension, all modern claims of Celtic descent, are problematic at best.

This latter point was made in the 1990s in several books, most famously by archaeologists Simon James and John Collis, and anthropologist Malcolm Chapman. The argument made by them and others is basically the one that has been made in this course—that, in ancient terms, the Celts as we think of them never really existed. There was no unified, single culture that characterized all of the peoples of the Iron Age, and to that extent it is inaccurate to use a single term, Celts, for them. At the same time, as long as we are very careful to remind ourselves that we are never talking about a single culture, occasionally substituting "Celtic" for "Iron Age" is perfectly reasonable. This point seems relatively benign, and yet the firestorm that was ignited when these books came out was truly remarkable. James, in particular, was in essence accused of racism, and it was implied that his desire to "erase" the Celts from history stemmed from his English nationality. At its most extreme, their work was equated with modern genocide. Even some more recent books that seek either to go back to the old ideas of ethnic homogeneity or perhaps simply to make money on the popular image of the Celts, ridicule the more nuanced and sophisticated approach to history and archaeology of the Iron Age. It should be obvious that I think this is well over the top. It's clear to me that the people who actually lived in the Iron Age would have been totally confused by our modern usage of "Celt," and as an archaeologist, I see it as my job to represent them in the most accurate way that I can.

But in some ways, this is irrelevant to modern identity. As an anthropological concept, the idea of ethnicity is always somewhat fluid, open to interpretation, and to some extent self-defined. It is sometimes difficult to reconcile our modern identifications of ourselves, which are very much based on the recent history of bounded nation-states, with what were certainly far more flexible notions of identity in the past. And indeed, the idea that there is some kind of "pure" ancestry for modern people is belied by pretty much every category of evidence you can name. Humans simply don't stay put for very long, and, to paraphrase my physical anthropology professor from years ago: where people go, genes flow. The same thing is true of culture, which never stays the

same for very long, changing because of outside influence, internal flux, and the simple passage of time. This is true now, and it was true before, during, and after the Iron Age as well.

Equally universal is the desire of human cultures to root themselves in their past. And since the past is no longer directly accessible, there is always an element of interpretation in our stories of the past. Is it valid for some of us now to take these stories from the past and use them to fashion a modern identity that is labeled “Celt”? Absolutely. Life, culture, these are constructed through processes of selection from a vast array of possibilities. And the past, as analyzed and reconstructed by archaeology and history, is one source of such possibilities. As an archaeologist, I can’t ignore my understanding of the evidence, and so my selection process requires that I take account of it. But in the end, everyone fashions the identity that they find most satisfying.

Yes, there were people who called themselves Celts, a group of people who lived in the Iron Age. We know something about the various cultures of that period, we know something about how they interacted with the other cultures to the south, we have some ideas about what other things they might have called themselves, and we can loosely identify how far we can push all of these observations. The Iron Age was a fascinating period of time, in which many of the patterns of life that have survived into modern times originated. While our knowledge of the peoples of that time grows greater with time, there is also a lot we don’t know, and probably will never know. Call them Iron Age cultures or Celtic cultures, they had a significant impact on the history of Europe, Britain, and Ireland, and for that matter Greece and Rome. Whatever we call them, I would argue that the important point is that we keep looking for evidence so that we can continue to understand them to the best of our abilities.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did similarities of language allow various cultures to be labeled “Celtic”?
2. Other than language, what are the markers of Celtic identity?

Suggested Reading

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Other Books of Interest

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