

AN AGE OF MYSTICISM

In the final centuries of the first millennium BC, the new technologies of the Iron Age fanned out to put all of Western Europe on the anvil. They hammered their way to Spain and France, Britain and Germany, Denmark and Norway, in the hands of an emotional, energetic, creative people, who in the following seven hundred years would lay the political and economic foundations of European civilisation: **the Celts**.

That was written by Robert Raymond (1984) 'Out of the Fiery Furnace'

So who were these emotional, energetic, creative people, and where did they come from? They were a group of related tribes, linked by a common culture, language and religion and, though they never formed a united empire, in their heyday they were influential from Spain to the Black Sea and from the Mediterranean to the Baltic.

The Greeks used the name *Keltoi* meaning other, different or barbarian (though the Greeks tended to think that anyone who wasn't Greek was a barbarian) to define a people or peoples inhabiting the region to the north of the Greek colony of Massalia (now Marseille) and the term came to be applied to all European peoples not part of the literate and more politically advanced societies of the Mediterranean world. The name was first used by Greek writers in the sixth and fifth centuries BC making the Celts the first historically documented civilisation on a European scale, therefore the first Europeans. The Romans referred to the Celts as Gauls.

The smelting of copper was one of the great discoveries of prehistory and the experience of working the metal led to the knowledge of other materials, but copper was soft and was mainly used to make ornaments, cult objects and status symbols. Bronze came into existence when it was discovered that copper was hardened by the addition of tin, which opened up the possibility of making weapons and tools. This exploitation was undertaken by peoples of the Urnfield culture, a culture which made its appearance in central Europe, around the area which is now Hungary, by the late Bronze Age 1200 – 700 BC. The culture was so named because the Urnfield People cremated their dead and placed the ashes in urns. It is generally accepted that the Hallstatt culture of the early Iron Age 700 – 500 BC, evolved from that of the Urnfield people. By around 750 BC the technique of iron-making had reached central Europe and many of the artifacts excavated from the graves around Hallstatt correspond with what the

Greek writers had described as the trappings of the people they called Celts. Above the village of Hallstatt in Austria lie the salt deposits laid down there by the great sea which covered the region in the Permian era, some 260 million years ago. It was in order to exploit the salt deposits that the Celts originally settled at Hallstatt and it is the effectiveness of salt as a preservative which gives the place its significance. In the late Bronze Age, around 1000 BC, Hallstatt was already a centre of importance, producing the salt which ensured that people over a wide area of central Europe could eat palatable meat following the autumn cull of cattle, sheep and pigs. Salt was considered so valuable that the Roman armies were paid in it or in *sal dare* (salt money) to purchase it.

By around 500 BC the Hallstatt culture was waning and the centre of Celtic influence had shifted to the area around Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland. This was the La Tène culture and was to continue until the Roman Empire started to move north and invaded the area known as Gaul. The Celts were both practical and artistic. They were the first to fit shoes to horses and iron rims to their chariot wheels (whose span of four feet eight and a half inches was to become the standard railway gauge in Britain two thousand years later). They designed the chisels, files, saws and other hand tools we still use today and pioneered the use of chain armour, the iron ploughshare and the flour mill. They maintained specialised workers in all the crafts: weaving, pottery, glass making and above all metal working. In burial mounds, peat bogs, river beds and lakes right across Europe and Britain a steady stream of Celtic masterpieces in gold, bronze, silver and iron have been found. They range from magnificent ceremonial cauldrons to sacred collars or torcs worn by the elite warriors, from richly decorated two-handed long-swords to exquisitely wrought filigree brooches and clasps, the forerunners of the safety-pin. Celtic metalsmiths borrowed elements of design from classical and Near Eastern art and with their own imagination and craftsmanship produced a style of abstract decoration which has lost none of its originality or impact over two thousand years. They were also lovers of the good life, both Greek and Roman authors write of the Celts insatiable appetite for wine and they were also noted for their hospitality and open-handedness. From the Mediterranean they introduced into Northern Europe the habit of wine drinking and the fashion of personal ornament and fine clothing and they enjoyed music and poetry – eloquence was valued more highly than bravery.

With the ability to make iron tools and agricultural equipment more cheaply than with earlier metals they became available to many of the subsistence farmers, resulting in increased food production and population, and an expansion of the Celtic culture. They migrated west into Gaul, Spain (where they gave their name to Galicia) and Britain, where they became the Insular Celts. Eastwards they moved through Thrace (now Bulgaria) into Anatolia and the area which became known as Galatia.

In the record of the Celtic world provided by archaeology and by written sources, it is religion which looms largest. Celtic religion was pantheistic, they worshipped a myriad of deities; the names of some 400 individual gods have been recorded in various places but many are thought to be of relevance only to a local area or tribe. There are about 30 whose names were known and venerated across most of the tribes. The prominence of some gods may well reflect the power of the tribe whose gods they originally were; after all, there are many examples, in the Old Testament and elsewhere, of a conquering people imposing its gods on the conquered. Many of the Celtic gods were believed to be shape-shifters, they could assume a variety of guises, and in many cases, were capable of inflicting similar changes upon mortals. Often the transformations involved animals, humans being transformed into swans, snakes or boars and the Scottish mythological water sprite the Kelpie which had a horse's head and a fish's tail was believed to be able to become mortal, though it still retained its horse's hoofs. Links with water, trees and groves suggest gods were viewed as chthonic, that is earth gods, as opposed to the sky gods of the Greeks and Romans, which may be the reason the Celts paid scant attention to the megaliths like Stonehenge and Carnac.

The reluctance of the practitioners of Celtic religion to commit to writing anything relating to their rites and beliefs means there is a total absence of the litanies, incantations and supplications used by them. Archaeology can provide evidence of cult centres, sacred images, ritual offerings and liturgical regalia along with inscriptions revealing the names of deities, and it is thought that a certain unity of belief existed throughout the Celtic world. One aspect of Celtic ritual practice which supports that is the prevalence of images of the human head at cult sites in virtually all the regions believed to have been inhabited by Celts. Amongst the Celts, the human head was venerated above all else, since the head was to the Celts the soul, centre of the emotions as well as of life itself, a symbol of divinity and the powers of the Otherworld. They believed in a life

after death, for they buried food, weapons and ornaments with their dead to provide the sustenance they would need for their journey to the Otherworld. Human sacrifice was practised, the classical writers all refer to it, and Pliny the Elder wrote that it occurred in Britain. Yet wholly persuasive evidence of it is rare and it is possible that it took place only at times of tension and danger. The priests who served the Celtic gods and presided over the ceremonies were the Druids. It was the study of the prescribed methods of ritual which presumably constituted the greater part of the twenty-year training undertaken by apprentice druids. The name means 'knowing the oaktree' and may derive from Druidic ritual, which seems in the early period to have been performed in forest sanctuaries, as the Celts did not build temples before the Gallo-Roman period. The Druids taught the doctrine of the transmigration of souls and discussed the nature and power of the gods. The Celts' reverence for the number three extended to their religious practices, for as well as Druids there were seers who could foretell the future by watching the flight of birds or observing the animals slain in sacrifice, and bards who sang the praises of men just as the Druids sang the praises of gods.

The Celtic year was divided into two periods of six months by the feasts of Samhain (November 1) and Beltane (May 1) and each of these periods was equally divided by the feasts of Imbolc (February 1) and Lughnasadh (August 1). Samhain was an important fire festival when old fires were extinguished and had to be ceremonially relit from a sacred flame, tended by Druids. Samhain marked the beginning of the New Year and it was also a festival of the dead. At the turning of the year the souls of the departed returned to the world of the living and warmed themselves in their former homes, and less benevolent spirits were also released from the Otherworld. Samhain was later to be Christianised as the feast of All Saints Day, but traces of the older pagan traditions have survived in our Hallowe'en celebrations. Imbolc was the second of the Celtic seasonal festivals and was a pastoral festival with strong associations with fertility, lambing and the lactation of the ewes. It was also devoted to the powerful triple-goddess, Brigit, who in her different aspects was influential in the fields of healing, poetry and smithcraft. Now that is multi-skilling! Beltane marked the beginning of summer when stock was driven to graze in the high pastures and when ceremonies related to fire were held. There is a tradition that on that day the Druids drove cattle between two fires as a protection against disease. Lughnasadh was also a summer festival marking the start of the final quarter of the Celtic year and was linked to the bringing in of the harvest. This

was the festival of the powerful god Lugh who was revered as a formidable warrior and a master magician and is said to have helped the craft-gods to forge their magic weapons.

The Celts gained a reputation for being fierce warriors who were skilled horsemen and who also fielded chariots in battle. They fought as mercenaries in the Spartan Wars of the 4th century BC and the Punic Wars during the 2nd and 1st centuries BC, and 20,000 Galatians (Celts) were hired as mercenaries by Nikomedes 1 of Bithynia in 277 BC. They sacked Rome in 390 BC and in 279 BC when they also plundered the fabulously wealthy treasury at Delphi as they passed through Greece on their way to Asia, and they attacked the Romans again in 225 BC. With the invasion of Gaul by the Roman army under Julius Caesar the Celts fought their last major battles in Europe under the leadership of the great Celtic king and chieftain of the Arverni, Vercingetorix. They were defeated at the Battle of Alesia in 52 BC where, in order to save as many of his men as possible, Vercingetorix gave himself up to the Romans. In 46 BC he was paraded through the streets of Rome as part of Caesar's triumph and then executed by strangulation. The Romans introduced their law, language and education across all the countries they conquered and gradually the Celtic culture was subsumed. This, however, did not apply to the Insular Celts, as we shall see...

Encyclopædia Britannica sums up the Celts in one somewhat uncharitable sentence, 'The Celts were hospitable, fond of feasting, drinking and quarrelling, and incapable of prolonged concerted action'.

A more empathetic Tolkien said, 'Celtic is a magic bag, into which anything may be put, and out of which almost anything may come...Anything is possible in the fabulous Celtic twilight, which is not so much a twilight of the gods as of the reason'.

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