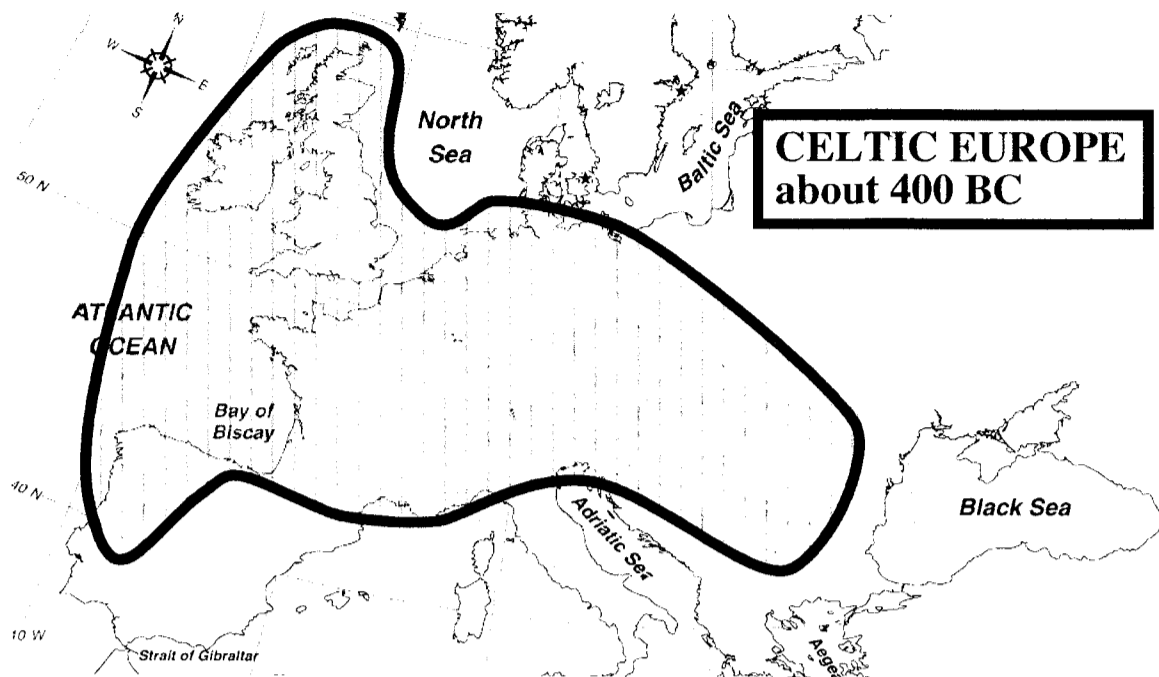


The Celts of Western Europe



Origins

The Celts were an important people of first millennium BC. Europe, known as the Keltioi by the Greeks and the Celtae by the Romans. They were the Gauls that Julius Caesar fought in 58 BC, and the people of Queen Boudicca in England when she burned Roman London in 69 BC. Between 800 BC and the beginning of the Christian Era, the Celts had occupied current-day Hungary and the Balkans to the edge of the Black Sea, Western Poland, Germany, Switzerland, Northern Italy, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Denmark, Northern Spain, and the British Isles. One group even settled in Turkey. From hill-forts, Celtic warriors in chariots—often naked since the naked body was thought to provide magical protection against death—

attacked neighboring peoples. In 400 BC they crossed the Alps into northern Italy, established agricultural communities along the Po River and even sacked Rome itself in 387 BC. Other Celtic groups plundered Macedonia, Thrace, and Greece in the third century BC.

Cultural Achievements

The Celts had a rich oral literature, a striking musical heritage, and a highly intricate art style made notable through the survival of works such as the *Book of Kells*. This book demonstrates the earlier merger of a detailed geometric art style with classical foliage motifs and stylized animals to create a very abstract art that remains distinctive today. They were highly skilled in metalwork and made beautiful



bronze and iron goods, including a wide variety of jewelry worn by men and women. Kings ruled with the aid of highly trained scholars and priests. The rights of women were essentially equal to those of men, and women could not only hold property and divorce their husbands, but also attain high status and even rule a country. The development of a complex legal system, an early form of democracy, and a type of writing known as Ogham (“oyam”) on wooden wands were also features of Celtic culture. Noted for their eloquence, the Celts maintained a large oral literature, which emphasized, in part, strict traditions of hospitality and generosity. They were skilled traders and developed extensive trading systems throughout Western and Central Europe and beyond, with important trading sites such as the Greek colony of Massalia (modern Marseilles).

Celts had little fear of death and believed in the immortality of the soul. Many of the oldest tales of Irish gods told of rebirth. The setting of such tales gives a glimpse of the afterlife: a land of perpetual youth with ever-blooming flowers, peace, and goodwill. One interpretation of Celtic attitudes is that they believed in an ongoing chain of existence, with an easy passage between this world and the Otherworld.

Festival of Samhain

Much of the Celtic belief system can be seen in the celebration of Samhain (“sowen”), the beginning of the Celtic New Year. This was one of two major annual festivals (the other was associated with Spring) and took place at the end of the harvest in late October. Livestock was rounded up, harvests taken in, and fighting ended—all in preparation for the cold and darkness of winter. This cold time of year was under the power of Cailleach, who was known as the dark woman of knowledge, or the giver and taker of life.

Samhain was a feast concerned with the dead and with divination. On Samhain night the spirits of the dead could return and commune

with the living. It was believed that at this time, the barriers between this world and the Otherworld were gone, and passage to and from each was possible. Prudent people were watchful when traveling on Samhain, as they might also be lured into the Sidhe (“shee”) (the homes of the fairies) or the divine Tuatha de Danaan (the children of the goddess Danu, a magical race who had lived in Ireland long before the Celts). Hearth fires were extinguished and relit from bonfires set to honor the gods. Food offerings were also prepared for the dead.

Lasting Influences

After the Christian era, the Irish had the most intact Celtic culture through the Middle Ages. Christianized in the fifth century AD, it was Irish monks who maintained much of the learning of Europe through the Middle Ages. Today, Gaelic, the Celtic language of Ireland and parts of Scotland, is still spoken and is the other national language of Ireland. Welsh, a closely related language, is common in Wales, as is its counterpart, Breton, in French Brittany. Celtic traditions are also a continuing part of the complex heritage of Britain and even the United States, where a great many Americans claim descent from Irish and Scottish ancestors.

Traditions such as Samhain were merged with Christian beliefs, but survived in many different forms as part of the feast of All Saints’ Day, celebrated on November 1. The vigil of that night in Ireland is called Oiche Shamhna, and is celebrated with feasting, merrymaking, and divination—similar to Samhain. Food offerings were left near doors for the spirits, as were tobacco and candles (one for each deceased relative). Special foods were prepared for people to eat, including champ (mashed boiled potatoes with cooked green cabbage and raw onion), stampy cakes (grated raw potato, flour, sugar, and cream), oatcakes, and pies. Other traditions from Samhain were continued, including the gathering-in of livestock and harvest, paying debts, and lighting bonfires. Some traditions, such as apple divination and trick-or-treating have continued into modern times.

