

# A Discussion of Celtic Society and Religion

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After watching a group of people who called themselves Druids doing a ritual at Stonehenge on the Discovery channel, I began to wonder out of idle curiosity just how much of what they were doing was based on any kind of factual evidence. Being a graduate student at the time, and prone to do research at the drop of a hat, I began to look things up in the library. And because I have a bad memory, I wrote things down. This is the result.

Any differences between this text and current academic beliefs is due either to the age of my sources or my interpretation of them as I condensed the material and resolved conflicts. The inconsistencies in this document are the result of differing opinions of my sources which I decided to leave in. Outright errors are probably mine.

Note : to avoid having to use words like "probably", "approximately", and "apparently" over and over, please keep in mind that the information presented here is the best guess of current knowledge, *and* an average of many (occasionally conflicting) pieces of evidence and interpretations. All dates given are approximate.

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## Terminology

"Britain" refers to the island of modern-day England, Scotland, and Wales

"Ireland" refers to the island of modern-day Ireland

"Gaul" refers to what is now modern-day France, Belgium, and western Germany

"Iberia" refers to what is now modern-day Spain and Portugal

"Brittany" refers to the small peninsula of France closest to Britain

"Insular" refers to Britain and Ireland (it means "island")

"Dalriada" refers to the southwest portion of modern-day Scotland

"British" refers to the Celtic culture in Britain

"Irish" refers to the Celtic culture in Ireland

"Gallic" refers to the continental Celtic culture centered around Gaul

"Gaelic" is the language currently spoken in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales

"First century BC" (for example) refers to the period between 100 BC and 0 BC

"early" means closer to 100 BC, and "late" means closer to 0 BC

"First century AD" (for example) refers to the time between 0 AD and 100 AD

"early" means closer to 0 AD, while "late" means closer to 100 AD

When referring to Irish and Welsh myths or laws, they will be called "Irish" for simplicity.

The words "king" and "chieftain" are used interchangeably in the sense of "the leader of the tribe".

In modern-day academia, "Celtic" refers to a group of people who all spoke basically the same language. The Celtic culture spanned all of Europe for almost a thousand years, and each region had its own sub-culture, which changed over time. Even then, archaeological evidence indicates that at any given time there were many very diverse and very local customs and gods within each region, so it is nearly impossible to speak of a single "Celtic culture".

It is important to note that in this paper, the term "Celtic" refers *only* to pre-Roman Britain and Gaul, and pre-Christian Ireland, not to the entire Celtic culture. Given the extreme diversity just mentioned, the best that can be done is to find the cultural elements common to these three, which are closest to what is thought of today as "Celtic" by the general public. Other Celtic cultures outside these times and areas will be specifically identified.

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### **Problems with Sources of Information about the Celts**

Unfortunately, the Celts chose not to write down any of their history or beliefs, so no written records exist from them about their culture. There are three main original sources of information about the Celts : the classical writings of the Greeks and Romans, Irish and Welsh myths and laws, and archaeology. Virtually all the information in this document comes from these sources. Secondary sources such as modern-day folk celebrations and the writings of modern authors are discussed below.

#### **Classical Writings**

Roman and Greek writings about the Celts used each other as sources without credit, are highly biased, and sometimes completely fictional. They also sometimes confused Celtic tribes with Germanic ones. Altho they range from the 6th century BC to the 4th century AD, most were written between 150 BC and 100 AD, quite late in Celtic history. They refer mostly to Gaul, occasionally to Britain, and only a few times to Ireland. All the writers interpreted Celtic culture in the light of their own ethics, sensibilities, religious beliefs, and personal agendas.

Some writers portrayed the Celts as noble savages in order to point out problems with the Greco-Roman civilization, while others portrayed them as savage barbarians in need of civilization (hence justifying the Roman conquest of Celtic lands). Greek writers tended to ignore the sometimes large cultural diversity between tribes, while Roman literature of the day was written by nobles for nobles, and its primary purpose was entertainment and titillation, not accurate reporting—it is well known that writers would literally make up "facts" about faraway places! In addition, the Classical writers believed things which we would find strange today—two writers, including Caesar, record in some detail the mythological creatures seen by Romans in Britain as real (unicorns, in Caesar's case).

The Romans in particular were highly biased against the Celts, due to the many defeats they had suffered at the hands of Celtic armies during the several hundred years prior to Caesar. The worst insult came when Celts successfully invaded Rome itself in 390 BC, destroyed the city, and demanded 1000 pounds of gold to leave. Greece had also been invaded by Celts in 290 BC, and so they were somewhat biased as well (but they did not hold as much of a grudge as the Romans).

Many of the earliest Roman eye-witnesses to Gallic and British culture were military men on active campaigns, and thus were focused on the military and political aspects of Celtic culture, and were probably hostile to the Druids because of their strong political and military influence. Most other early writers wrote second-hand accounts of Gaul and Britain, either depending on the tales of travelers from those regions, or simply expounding on earlier authors' works. None of the Classical writers ever discussed the pantheon of Celtic gods clearly, nor presented a coherent picture of the Celtic belief system.

Finally, Caesar's eye-witness reports were meant to win over Roman public opinion (because his expeditions into Britain were an unauthorized personal enterprise), and to convince the Senate that the Gauls were a good prize if conquered and a threat if not. Thus he had many reasons to fabricate, distort, or exclude information about British and Gallic culture. Many of the statements he made about the Celts are contradicted by other sources.

### Irish Myths and Laws

The Irish and Welsh myths we have available today could be anything from actual history to total fantasy, or anywhere in between. No Irish myth was written down before 500 AD, and the majority of the surviving manuscripts are dated 1100 AD or later. The language used suggests many of the stories actually originated around 700 AD, altho they probably incorporated aspects of local traditional myths from earlier times. However, that still leaves a gap of more than 500 years between the Gallic Celts described by the Greeks and Romans, and the Irish Celtic culture presented in the original stories. In addition, most of the writing was done by Christian monks, who were prone to be biased against the "pagan" religion and sexual content presented in their sources—it is very likely that the most "offensive" material was deleted, and some Christian myths and ethics incorporated in its place. No details of Celtic rituals or belief systems are given.

Irish and Welsh laws were also not written down until the 7th and 8th centuries AD respectively, and contain many medieval laws as well as Christian moral (particularly sexual) laws, so it is somewhat difficult to separate out the original Celtic laws. In addition, the Celtic laws changed over time, and so sometimes contradict each other. These laws can give us a good idea of what early Irish and Welsh culture might have been like, but say nothing directly about the religion.

Finally, these myths and laws pertain to one specific portion of Celtic culture, and one which was far removed for a long time from most of the rest of Celtic culture. The culture they describe may or may not be similar to the culture of Britain or Gaul. See "How Celtic Were (and Are) the British and Irish?" below for further discussion.

### Archaeological Evidence

This consists of site excavations (and the material found there), as well as coins, statues, drawings, and inscriptions, and linguistic analysis of words and place names. Obviously, we can only base our conclusions about Celtic culture on what has been found, which may or may not be typical examples. Virtually all archaeological evidence requires some interpretation, which we might not interpret correctly due to our different mind-sets and world-views. The Celts worked mostly in wood, which has completely vanished from the archaeological record except in very rare cases. In addition, there is even less evidence that has no Roman influence. Finally, it should be kept in mind that any conclusions based on archaeological beliefs more than 10 years old are probably out of date, as scholarly opinion is always changing in the light of new discoveries.

### British and Irish Folk Celebrations

While it might be tempting to assume that local celebrations still contain elements of their Celtic origins, many of them were started in medieval times or later. It requires a great deal of careful research before a celebration can be considered Celtic, and even more to extract the true Celtic elements.

### Modern Writers

Writers of the late 1700's and early 1800's such as Edward Williams, Rowland Jones, John Cleland, William Cooke, D. James, Edward Davies and William Blake simply *fabricated* information and rituals. Groups such as Edward Williams' "Order of the Bards" and Henry Hurle's "Ancient Order of Druids" had nothing to do with historical accuracy. The fictional accounts continued into the 20th century, with Lewis Spence basing the validity of his claims on his belief that his "Celtic heritage" (he was a Scot) conferred to him powers of intuition beyond scholarly knowledge ("far beyond those of mortal men").

By his own admission, Robert Graves' "The White Goddess" presented a personal vision of Celtic life and religion—how he *wished* it had been. Unfortunately, he never warned his readers that the work was to be taken

as metaphor or myth, and it has been taken as factual history by the general public. He presented Celtic societies run entirely by women, and invented the three aspects of the Great Goddess (maiden, mother, crone) and the "Celtic Tree Calendar". He also created a symbolic link between goddesses and the moon which would not seem natural to many ancient peoples, including the Celts.

Even the modern works of Caitlin Matthews (who does use academic sources for her Celtic material) mixes pre-Celtic British rituals and Native American ideas together with known Celtic traditions.

Please note that these observations regarding Graves and Matthews are not meant as a put-down. They present a theology which works for many people, and is continuing to evolve today, independent of its sources. It should just be understood that their works do not portray an accurate representation of the original Celtic culture or religion.

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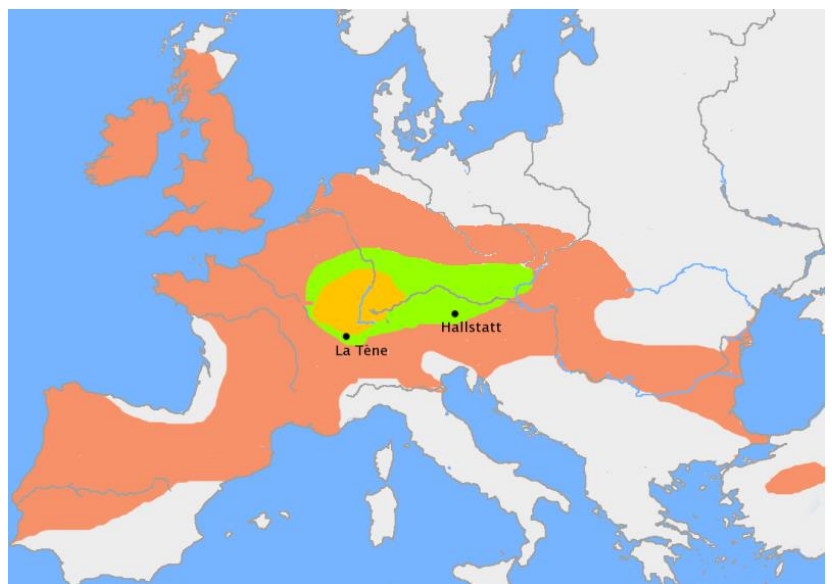
### A Very Brief History of the Celts

It is very difficult to briefly describe the spread of Celtic culture, especially into Britain and Ireland, with any accuracy—there are just too many ways to interpret what little information we do have. What follows is just one likely scenario.

A proto-Celtic culture ("Urnfield") evolved around the Rhine and Danube rivers, in the southern part of modern day Germany, some time around 1200 BC. This culture spread, whether by migrations or by ideas, apparently as far as Britain and Ireland. A fairly homogeneous iron-using culture that is definitely recognizable as Celtic ("Hallstatt") was in place around eastern France and south-western Germany by 700 BC, and its people started to migrate across Europe around 600 BC. Hallstatt nobles prospered from salt mining, and by controlling the flow of trade thru their territories. This society either evolved into or was replaced by a more artistically and culturally refined, but also more warlike, society ("La Tene") in the early fifth century BC, and whose people started to migrate south and east throughout Europe during the fourth century BC. However, the La Tene culture spread even faster than its people due to the already existing trade routes and common language. It is the La Tene culture which the Greeks and Romans wrote about, and which is generally thought of when talking about the Celts by the public today.



Urnfield culture



Green=Hallstatt culture; Orange=La Tene culture  
Brown=widest spread of Celtic culture

Linguistically, the Celtic language had already spread across a wide part of central and western Europe by 600 BC. At its peak in the third century BC, Celtic culture had spread in one form or another to modern-day Ireland, Britain, Portugal, northwestern Spain, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, northern Italy, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and a portion of Turkey.

The Greeks started writing about them in the 6th century BC, and referred to them as both Celtic and Gallic, which the Romans did also. When the Romans started to expand their empire around 150 BC, virtually all of their conflicts were with the Celtic culture. The Celts lost.

### How Celtic Were (and Are) the British and Irish?

The British Celtic culture did come over from continental Europe. Whether this was an infusion of people, or merely their ideas, is unknown, but British culture is definitely Celtic in nature, possibly as early as 1100 BC, probably by 800 BC, and definitely by 500 BC. But once on the semi-isolated island, their culture began to evolve and diverge from that of the continent. There may have been small Celtic migrations from the continent into Britain and Ireland around 600 BC, 350 BC, and 100 BC, but from many different aspects (styles of crafts and architecture, burial practices, etc.), there does not appear to have been a "Celtic invasion" of Britain from the continent during the Iron Age as was once thought. The British culture appears to have evolved directly from the indigenous Bronze Age culture, with occasional influences of ideas from the continent. Besides trade (which can be a rich source of new ideas), the most influential contacts may have come from the Gallic nobility, since they had the mobility to travel, many political and kinship connections with Britain, and the power to change things. These intermittent but continual contacts provided new ideas, but even the ones that were kept were modified to fit the existing culture. Thus British culture had been evolving along a mostly independent path from that of Gaul for a very long time.

The Romans usually used the word "Celtic" to describe the culture of Gaul, and occasionally to refer to other cultures of continental Europe. Caesar comments that the Gauls of his day (55 BC) referred to themselves as Celtic. Romans differentiated between the cultures of Gaul, Germany, and Britain, and even made a distinction between northern and southern Britain, but they never used the word "Celtic" to describe the peoples of Britain or Ireland. Caesar says that the British language was only "similar" to that of the Gauls, and Strabo (64 BC-24 AD) spent some time describing the racial differences between the Britains and the Gauls. In the Romans' minds, British culture was distinctly different from that of the Gallic Celts.

The idea that the early British were "Celtic" did not appear until 1700, and gained popularity without much evidence until modern archaeology started to investigate the early history of the British Isles in the late 19th century. Many of these first beliefs about early British culture were based on Classical sources (which referred mostly to Gallic Celts), or simply made up, as discussed above.

It is even harder to trace the spread of Celtic culture into Ireland, which is still considered "Celtic" today only because it has had the least amount of external cultural influences (in other words, invasions). But due to its extreme isolation, its culture has been diverging even further from the continental Celtic culture since the original Celtic immigration to Ireland, possibly as early as 1100 BC. Altho Ireland had trade contacts with Britain and continental Europe as early as the first century BC, it also shows the least amount of Hallstatt and La Tene influence. And while Ireland is physically isolated, it has since been influenced by other cultures such as the Vikings, the Normans, the English, and especially by Christianity, and so today at least is not very representative of ancient Celtic culture.

However, from a linguistics point of view, Ireland and Britain are very definitely Celtic in that their Gaelic languages (Irish, Welsh, etc.) are derivatives of an original Celtic tongue. In fact, the Celtic language was probably most similar to modern-day Welsh, Breton, and Cornish.

The point of all of this is that while all three cultures—Irish, British, and Gallic—had many similarities, they also had many differences. Anything we can say about the customs, laws, gods, and religious practices in Britain (for example) may or may not have had anything to do with Gaul or Ireland, and vice-versa.

### The Connection Between Ireland and India

There are an amazing number of similarities between ancient Ireland and India, whose languages, laws, and myths all share many common elements. Other similarities are discussed in "Druidic Beliefs and Functions" and "Ritual Festivals/The Coligny Calendar", below. This suggests that all the early Indo-European cultures were descended from a common source, which probably started in the region north of the Baltic and Caspian seas around 3000 BC (give-or-take 500 years), and then spread east, west and south. Because of its isolation, Celtic Ireland retained more of these original elements than the rest of Europe.

### The Scots and the Picts

The Scots and the Picts occupied the northern part of Britain. While they did not appear as identifiable cultures until well after Rome occupied Gaul and Britain, they are described briefly in order to put them in context.

The Picts are mentioned by various authors from 300 to 600 AD, including St. Patrick. They were the indigenous inhabitants of northern Britain, and they probably spoke a form of Celtic similar to British Celtic as well as a second unidentified and undeciphered language. Two authors, in 300 and 600 AD, mention that the Picts had intricate drawings of animals and other designs tattooed all over their body as a sign of status, and wore little clothing in order to show them off.

The Scots were descended from the many Irish who settled peacefully in the southwest portion of modern-day Scotland ("Dalriada") around 500 AD, but this area already had strong contacts with Ireland by the 1st century AD, which had been slowly building from as early as the Bronze age.

The little available evidence suggests that the culture and religion of the early Picts and Scots was very similar to that of the Irish and pre-Roman British Celts. Indications of war chariots, human sacrifice, head hunting, and ritual use of cauldrons have been found. But they were in constant contact with the Romans, Christianity, and the Anglo-Saxons, and so were constantly changing over time.

The Scots and Picts were continually at war with each other, the Romans, and the Anglo-Saxons. The Scots conquered the Picts around 840 AD, and the two cultures merged to eventually become Scotland.

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### Timeline

5000 BC - 2000 BC	: Neolithic = "New Stone Age" (start of farming)	
3000 BC - 2000 BC	: Stonehenge built	Bronze
1100 BC - 900 BC	: Proto-Celtic culture reaches Britain and Ireland	Age
800 BC - 700 BC	: Start of the Iron Age in western Europe	
800 BC	: Hallstatt culture starts to develop in Europe	
500 BC	: Hallstatt culture reaches Britain	
500 BC	: La Tene culture begins to spread across Europe	
250 BC	: La Tene culture reaches Britain	
150 BC	: La Tene culture reaches Ireland	
50 BC	: Rome firmly established in Gaul	
50 AD	: Rome firmly established in Britain	

Here is a very condensed and approximate timeline showing the extent of other cultural influences on western Celtic cultures :

	Gaul	Britain	Scotland	Ireland
100 BC				
0	Conquered by Rome	Caesar raids		
100 AD		Conquered by Rome	Rome occupies southern Rome withdraws	
200 AD				
300 AD	Anglo-Saxon (A-S) raids	Anglo-Saxon raids	Picts first named	
400 AD	Rome becomes Christian	Christianity arrives	Irish raids; Christians	Christianity arrives
400 AD	Rome falls; A-S conquer	Rome withdraws		
500 AD	Britain settles Brittany	"King Arthur" repels A-S		St. Patrick
500 AD		Anglo-Saxons conquer	Irish colonize Dalriada	
600 AD		Christians convert A-S		
700 AD			A-S rule south Pictland	
700 AD			Picts rule Dalriada	British A-S raids
800 AD	Viking raids	Viking raids	Viking invasions	Viking invasions
800 AD	Brittany becomes kingdom		Picts & Scots merge	
900 AD			Scandinavians conquer	
1000 AD				Irish repel Vikings
1000 AD		Normans conquer		

## A Brief Description of Celtic Culture

### Meaning of the name "Celt"

The first Greek word for this culture, "Keltoi", was itself of Celtic origin. It may be related to the Celtic word for "hidden", possibly referring to the prohibition against writing down their knowledge.

### Appearance

In general, Celts were tall (compared to Greeks and Romans), fair-skinned and fair-haired (or red-headed), and were very concerned about their appearance. Obesity was subject to fines and grounds for divorce, and kings could not be physically deformed in any way. Men and women bathed daily (with soap, which the Celts invented), used makeup and perfume (as did Greek and Roman men and women), kept their clothes clean, and decorated themselves with lots of jewelry. Women painted their nails crimson, darkened their eyebrows, and reddened their lips, which was apparently more than Roman women did. Men wore their hair long and swept back into spikes, bleached and stiffened with mineral lime water. Women wore their hair long, and braiding and dying the hair was done by both men and women. Men were clean-shaven, mustached, or fully bearded (in Gaul, mustaches were a sign of nobility). Both men and women may have shaved their body hair.

Men tended to wear long-sleeved woolen or linen (flax) tunics and long trousers (except in Ireland, where they wore long tunics), women wore long tunics (probably calf- or ankle-length), and both wore woolen hooded cloaks when needed. Clothing was fastened with pins or brooches, and gloves of cloth, skin, and fur were available. Footwear included sandals, and shoes made from fine leather, cloth, or wood—the very wealthy may have worn shoes or sandals made of silver. Many fabrics were colored with vegetable dyes in simple tartan- or tweed-like designs. Those of high rank may have worn some silk, or had gold woven into their clothing. Interestingly, at the same time that British Celtic woven woolen cloaks were all the rage in Rome, Caesar declared that the British Celts did not even know how to weave! The Celts did not wear kilts, which were invented in the early 1700's AD.

Both men and women wore jewelry such as bracelets, brooches, and rings, and gold or silver bracelets may have been used as an early form of currency. Anyone who could afford it wore a torc—a stiff, circular metal necklace, usually made of one or more twisted wires. The material and style of the torc indicated their social status, and possibly their particular tribe or region. The torc in general seems to be a symbol of being a Celt, and has been found in graves as early as 550 BC.

### Social Classes and Government

- "Britain consists of many warlike tribal states of various forms of government, with continually shifting alliances, and no large cities" - Caesar (55 BC). *Note : most quotes presented like this are paraphrases.*

As was true of the Greeks, Romans, and other early Indo-European societies, Celtic society consisted of several different classes—the warrior nobles, the artisans/intellectuals, the freemen, and the non-free. For the Celts, some social mobility between groups was theoretically possible, since the groups were defined by wealth, not by birth. However, this was not often possible in practice, and Irish law even penalized couples who married from different classes.

The Celts had no one form of government. Tribes could be run by a hereditary king, a pair of rulers, or have an elected chieftain and/or council of elders. Sometimes there was a hierarchy of leadership, so that the ruler of each tribe answered to a ruler of several tribes, who answered to a ruler above him, and so forth. When this was the case, the higher ruler did not have any authority over the people of the lower ruler. In the case of hereditary kingships, the new king may have been chosen by the dead king's *derbfine* (see "The Family" below), and did not automatically go to the son. In all cases, the main criteria for rulership was the fitness or appropriateness of the candidate. By the time of Caesar (55 BC), a large group of Gallic tribes were run by a magistrate and a "senate" of 300 nobles, all of whom were elected. In addition, important decisions had to be approved by a popular assembly of wealthy freemen. While Britain also had a mixture of governments at this time, Ireland had only hereditary kingships.

Two later sources suggest that the succession of Pictish kings may have been matrilineal. They mention a tradition which says that the Picts were allowed to take wives from the Irish on the condition that, when the succession was in doubt, the Picts should choose their kings from the female line. However, it appears that this was only done in exceptional circumstances (which was also practiced in some non-Celtic societies). In addition to succession by the son, the Scots had a form of succession whereby kings were often succeeded by their brothers and then their nephews. Keep in mind that what the Picts and Scots did may or may not have been practiced by the earlier Gallic, British, and Irish Celts.

The chieftain had to act honorably, and obey many rules and restrictions ("geases"), to keep the gods happy, because he was directly responsible for the prosperity of the tribe. He may have been considered divine, and probably had to ritually mate with a goddess, a recurring theme in Irish myths. A chieftain could be deposed for being unjust, ungenerous, or even because of natural disasters such as famine (because if the tribe did not do well for any reason, it was his fault). He was expected to lead his tribe in battle (so he had to be a good warrior), and in Ireland both his father and grandfather had to have been nobles. The chieftain did not receive any payment or services from the rest of the community, nor did he create the laws. He simply had a few more privileges than the other nobles—for example, when new land was seized from another tribe, he decided which families would cultivate what areas. The only thing a new king "inherited" from the previous one was the land and buildings used for tribal assemblies.

The rulers, council, and/or senate came from the noble class, who were warriors and owned land (whom Caesar called "knights and barons"). It is likely that the nobility did not actually "own" the land, but rather controlled it, allotting various parts for grazing or farming. The users of the land could be relatives or clients (see "Society", below).

The property-owning freemen were people who did not own land, and included warriors, smiths, farmers, priests, craftsmen, lawyers, scholars, and entertainers. These freemen comprised the popular assembly mentioned above.

All of the above groups had some say about how their society was run, but the unskilled farmer was definitely lower in status than the rest (see "Social Status", below).

In Irish law, the non-free had no political, social, legal, or religious rights, and consisted of three groups. The lowest consisted of cowards who deserted their clan, prisoners of war, and hostages. They could not bear arms, but if deemed trustworthy, they were allowed to be farmers. They could not regain their rights until their fine or ransom was paid off by themselves or someone else, but their grandchildren automatically had full citizenship in the clan. The other two groups (who were typically being punished for breaking the law—see "Laws" below) were given menial jobs such as heavy manual labor for men or household farm chores for women. They could not leave the territory without permission, but if they paid their fines, they regained their status as full citizens. These non-free people are sometimes referred to as "slaves" because they had no rights, but it can be seen that this is a simplification. In this paper, the terms "non-free", "slave", and "outcast" (see "Laws" below) are used interchangeably. What percentage of the population were slaves, and how much the society depended on their labor, is unknown.

While it is the nobility, artisans, and intellectual classes which define a culture, keep in mind that the vast majority of Celtic people were farmers. The common peasant farmer in Gaul or Britain noticed very little change in their daily life when Rome took over.

### Social Status

A person's social status depended on their wealth, their personal abilities (eloquence, courage, fighting skills, knowledge, etc.), who they were related to, their gender, their family's social class, and their tribe's ranking among other tribes. A woman's social status also depended on what kind of marriage(s) she was in (see "The Family", below). A person's social status defined what rights they had, how they were treated under the law, and their qualifications for leadership of tribes or armies.

The Celts, both men and women, were well known by the Classical writers for their love of food, music, and especially alcoholic drink, and of the inevitable drunken boasting and brawling. However, this actually served an important social function. There was a great deal of rivalry between nobles of each tribe, and between tribes, as far back as the Hallstatt era. By hoarding the best goods for themselves (especially exotic imports like Greek and Roman goods and wine), they were able to show favor by giving gifts. Hosting a feast allowed a noble to display his wealth, and enhance his status, by selectively bestowing favors (fine goods, gold, wine, etc.) to gain and reward his supporters. This resulted in competition between his supporters as well—warriors at these feasts would compete in mock combat for prestige (which given their pride and inebriation, often turned into real combat, sometimes to the death). To put this in perspective, Roman politicians also hosted social events like gladiatorial games and feasts to enhance their prestige and gain supporters.

Another practice which evolved from this competition for status was the raid. Raiding neighboring tribes provided goods for feasts, and a chance to demonstrate leadership, bravery, and fighting prowess. While it started with raiding neighbors, escalation over time led to larger groups ranging farther from home, which eventually led to the creation of the mercenary groups discussed in "Society", below. Raiding was common between Bronze-age Greek tribes as well.

As in Greek and Roman cultures (and even today), display of wealth was one way to demonstrate one's status. While public displays (hosting feasts or festivals, gift-giving, etc.) were one way to do this, visual display was

another. The Romans decorated their temples and homes, but the Celts preferred to decorate themselves (makeup, jewelry, fine weapons, and armor).

### Society

- "The Celts have made it a crime to write down any of their knowledge, probably to prevent their knowledge from spreading to their enemies, and to improve the memory and mental skills of their own people" – Caesar (55 BC).

The Celts had a reputation with the Classical writers for being a very mobile culture. While their Indo-European ancestors were nomadic, the Celts were basically an agricultural people, which means they could not constantly wander the land. However, because they did not often build stone buildings, they were highly mobile, and entire groups of tribes would pack up and move to new territory if pressured by other tribes, overpopulation, or poor farming conditions. Overpopulation was the reason for many of the early Celtic migrations across Europe, and tribes in Gaul were moving westward due to the expansion of their eastern Germanic neighbors as late as Caesar's time.

The priests, entertainers, smiths, craftsmen, and scholars—genealogists, historians, lawyers (yes, even back then!) and physicians—could travel between tribes at will, which is amazing considering the constantly changing alliances and frequent hostilities between tribes. Fees for their services could be quite high, and their power and fees were often resented by kings and nobles.

There was also a large organization of warriors which existed outside of the tribal structure. These groups are often called mercenaries, which is partly true because they could be hired by anybody, even other cultures. Celtic warriors fought for Greece, Egypt, Hannibal (whose army was mostly Celtic by the time he reached Rome), and others. However, they also mounted expeditions all over Europe of their own volition. These groups provided young men a chance to seek fame and fortune before settling down and starting a family.

Late iron-age Gaul was organized into clients and patrons. A client was someone under obligation to provide goods or services to a noble patron, in return for protection from invasion and famine. This was mainly used by nobles to parcel out their land to non-landowning freemen farmers to grow crops and pasture livestock, who then paid the noble some of the harvest and meat. Artisans (craftsmen and entertainers) would be guaranteed an income in exchange for their services. Nobles could even acquire clients in other tribes, and in late Iron Age Gaul entire tribes were coming under the clientage of other tribes. An interesting possibility is that at some point, the losers of a war became the clients of the victors. As clientage evolved, a person's status also became a function of their clients (both quantity and quality).

While most other cultures either did not care for their sick and feeble, or simply put them to death, the Irish had many hospitals, possibly as early as 370 BC. Their laws required that any ill or injured person have access to medical treatment no matter their status (unless they were outcast), and unqualified doctors were severely punished. Interestingly, the doctor had to compensate the patient if the patient worsened due to the doctor's negligence or ignorance. In addition, someone who wounded another was required by law to take them into their own home and care for them until they recovered, but only after waiting a few days to see if they would survive their injuries. Virtually nothing is known about how the British and Gallic Celts treated their sick.

The Celts highly valued learning, intelligence, and eloquence. Greek and Roman writers often commented on the elegance of their use of language and their appreciation of linguistic subtlety (like puns).

Greek sources also comment on the popularity of music among the Celts, and mention a variety of musical instruments. Musical instruments and dancing people can be seen on Celtic pottery as early as the 7th century BC. Their instruments included a lyre-like stringed instrument, drums, pipes, and trumpets.

The Celts seem to have been very friendly and generous to visitors. Chieftains could become outcast if they did not offer guests food and drink before discussing business. Hosts were also known to offer a bath to arriving guests who had been traveling a long time.

### The Family

The family unit ("derbfine") consisted of all those who were related to a common great-grandfather, and so could be quite large. The entire derbfine could own land and was often responsible for the actions of its members.

According to Irish laws, marriage was not a religious matter—it was simply a contract with certain well-defined requirements, and for most marriages, the head of the household was whoever was wealthier. The legal age for marriage was 17 for boys and 14 for girls. Marriages were as much between families as between individuals, so family approval was very important. Couples marrying without family approval risked becoming outcast (see "Laws" below).

Celtic society was very definitely "patrilineal", which means that the family line passed thru the father, preferably to his sons. The extreme importance of having a male heir is the source of Celtic attitudes towards divorce, promiscuity, and polygamy. The Celts had hardly any sexual taboos or prudery—in Ireland, married or unmarried men and women were free to choose lovers at any time (so long as all the families involved approved, and the contracts were signed!). Men could have a primary wife and one or more second wives (who could have almost equal status with the primary wife if she bore him a son when the primary wife could not), and hire one or more concubines for a year at a time. Interestingly, the Celts thought that sex for profit was more honorable than sex without profit—while clandestine affairs and adultery were harshly punished if found out, a concubine was respected, and some held nearly the same status as a second wife without a male heir.

Women were not limited to having a relationship with only one man at a time, but did have fewer options. This was possibly due to the realities of life rather than any bias against women—easy divorce and high male mortality rates from warfare encouraged female monogamy. Caesar mentions a tribe in Gaul where the women could have many husbands, but this could have been a misunderstanding or oversimplification on his part (or an outright lie), or an isolated tribal custom.

There was no stigma about divorce, which could be initiated by either the husband or the wife (as was true in Roman civilization), but only under certain well-defined circumstances. According to ancient Irish law, a woman could be divorced for being a bad housekeeper, constantly stealing, having an abortion, betraying or dishonoring her husband, unfaithfulness, or killing her husband's children. A man could be divorced for being unable to provide financial support, being sterile, becoming a practicing homosexual, physical or emotional abuse of his wife (including rape), being overweight, not keeping her satisfied in bed, leaving his wife for another woman, telling lies about her or publicly ridiculing her, or deceiving her into marriage.

When a couple divorced, each person took from their current belongings in proportion to what they had brought into the marriage, but the wife may have also received one ninth of the increase in her husband's wealth while they were together. However, if one person wronged the other, the person at fault kept only what they originally brought into the marriage. Temporary separations were possible as well, but if either partner permanently left without getting a divorce, they became outcast. Interestingly, Welsh law does not hold a wife responsible for attacking her husband or his mistress for up to three days after she finds out about his affair (after that, it was considered premeditated).

The Irish Celts were very concerned about the welfare of their children. Regardless of the parent's marital status, the mother's derbfine had the legal right to intervene when parents neglected their children, or when children were orphaned. After the age of seven, children were usually raised and educated by foster parents, who would teach the child their skills and knowledge. Fosterage was a legal contract between the parents and the foster parents, and could be done out of friendship, or for a fee. Irish laws defined exactly how the children

should be treated, trained, and fed, based on their status. The foster parents were legally responsible for the child during this time, and fosterage could only be ended by death, marriage, or committing a crime.

The legal age of adulthood was about 14, and the parents or foster parents were legally responsible for their child's actions before then. In Ireland, a father could always cancel his son's contracts no matter the son's age.

### Homosexuality

- "The Celts respect manly love quite openly" - Aristotle (384-322 BC)
- "Despite their women's charms, the men will have nothing to do with them. They long instead for the embrace of one of their own sex, lying on animal skins and tumbling around with a lover on either side" - Diodorus (70-20 BC).
- "The young men of Gaul are shamelessly generous with their boyish charms" - Strabo (64 BC-24 AD)
- "And among the Celts, tho they have quite beautiful women, they enjoy boys more; so that some of them often have two lovers to sleep with on their beds of animal skins" - Athenaeus (200 AD)

Homosexuality was quite common and accepted in both Greek and Roman cultures. The classical authors are quick to describe the practice of homosexuality among the Celts, but all of the above quotes might be heavily influenced by the cult of the male body which permeated early Greek society (which was then copied by the Romans). However, there are also discrete references to male and female homosexuality in Irish myths. On the other hand, homosexuality was also grounds for divorce in Irish law, so it may not have been entirely socially acceptable.

It may have been most practiced by the groups of young mercenary warriors discussed in "Society" above. This makes sense because they were all male, and it is these groups that most Greeks and Romans would have met first-hand as the groups traveled across Europe. Men were probably then expected to be heterosexual once they returned to their tribe and started a family, in order to ensure male heirs.

### Laws

Celtic society was deeply attuned to the idea of law. Two principles are consistently repeated in a variety of ways. The first is "the fitness of things", the notion that there is a universal natural order, and that good laws come from observing what is natural, fitting, appropriate, and connected. The second is "fair play" : big should fight big, little should fight little; a hero offering individual combat should be met by individual combat; the kind and severity of the punishment should fit the kind and severity of the loss incurred. Irish law also made special allowances for those with mental or physical handicaps (as did Roman law to some extent).

Irish law was based on the good of the community, and no one was exempt, not even kings or Druids. Irish law was amazingly complex and obsessively detailed, in part to deal with all the possible complications of their relationships (there were nine or ten different kinds of marriages!), including divorce, inheritance, and violence between wives.

The laws also helped minimize intra-tribal violence by defining "fair revenge", or how much retribution a family could extract when wronged. To that end, everyone had an "honor price" and a "body price" based on their social status (in addition, women also had a "marriage price", which depended on the kind of marriage they were in). If someone was dishonored, injured, or killed, the culprit must pay the victim (or the victim's family) a fine proportional to the appropriate price. This system helped to reduce, but did not eliminate, the amount of warfare between tribes due to family feuds.

The most common form of punishment for breaking most laws was a fine, usually in some combination of livestock, slaves, and/or land. Death, mutilation, and flogging as common criminal punishments was introduced

by Christianity, which replaced the idea of compensation with revenge. For the worst crimes (or failure to pay a fine), the offender became an outcast, with no political or legal rights, nor the ability to attend public or religious ceremonies (see "Social Classes", above). In addition, anyone could become outcast if they failed to execute the legal obligations of their position.

Lawyers also arbitrated all legal contracts, such as between patrons and clients, or between families for fosterage.

### Women in Celtic Society

- "Celtic women follow their menfolk into battle" - Polybius (200-118 BC)
- "The women of the Celts are nearly as tall as the men, and they rival them also in courage" - Diordorus (70-20 BC)
- "In Britain, there is no rule of distinction to exclude the female line from the throne, or the command of armies" - Tacitus (55-118 AD)

Several graves dated from 600 BC to 100 BC have held women who were either queens, or warriors, or both. Classical sources describe individual female Celtic leaders from 300 BC to 400 AD, and Roman records indicate that British noblewomen had both property and inheritance rights. Irish myths are full of heroic, tragic, or evil queens and female warriors, and mention a woman who reigned for 7 years as queen of all Ireland around 377 BC. The women in these myths are neither simple stereotypes nor supporting characters.

According to Roman writers and Irish law, a Celtic woman could not be married without her consent, and could choose her own husband (both of these rights were denied to Roman women). However, just as in Rome, specific marriages were often sought to create political alliances between families.

The Romans claimed that Celtic women were just as fierce, brave, proud, and eloquent as the men, often fought beside their husbands, and could be rulers and warriors. However, Caesar makes no mention of Celtic female warriors, even tho he fought many battles against Gallic and British Celts.

Plutarch (46-124 AD) mentions that Celtic ambassadors were often women, and that women took part in Celtic assemblies, often calming quarrels or preventing wars with their diplomacy. Hannibal negotiated alliances with female Celtic ambassadors around 218 BC.

The Romans also encountered tribes or groups of tribes ruled by women. Boudicca, a warrior queen (hmm, sounds like a good name for a TV series...), led a multi-tribal revolt in Britain against the Romans around 61 AD after they massacred a group of Druids, publicly flogged her, raped her daughters in front of her, and tried to take over her late husband's tribes. Legally, she did not inherit the right to rule, but these were extenuating circumstances—she was royalty, she had been publicly humiliated, and the people were ready to revolt anyway.

According to Irish law, women could own and inherit property (unlike Greek and Roman cultures, where women *were* property and hence had no rights). Within broad limits, primary wives and secondary wives with sons could buy, sell, loan, borrow, or make contracts without their husband's permission. Women could be plaintiffs, witnesses, lawyers and judges in court cases. Rape and sexual harassment (both physical and verbal) were illegal and stiffly fined. A child born of a free man and his female slave had to be raised by the man, and women who committed crimes usually received the same treatment as men. Of the spoils of war offered to the tribal king, his wife received one third for her own. The laws also indicate that women could be war leaders, artisans, poets, and physicians. See "Druids" below for the role of women in the priesthood.

On the other hand, while girls had to receive a basic education, it was not quite as much as boys (altho a girl's education could be extended under certain circumstances). A woman could inherit land from her parents, but

only if she had no brothers, and the land returned to her father's derbfine when she died. Most women's honor price was a function of their brother's, father's, or husband's social status, and raping women from other tribes was not illegal. While a son was legally required to care for his parents in their old age, he had to support his father and abandon his mother if he could not afford both. A queen had no special rights beyond that of any other woman, and could not inherit her husband's kingdom. Interestingly, the mother of a king had more status than his wife. There is also some evidence that women were not allowed in the late Iron-age multi-tribal Gallic popular assembly mentioned earlier.

Women warriors appear on early Celtic coins, appear often in Irish myths, and laws were passed in Christian Ireland around 600 and 700 AD explicitly prohibiting women from being warriors. It may have been the legal system which encouraged a woman who inherited her family estate (which wasn't impossible, since all her brothers could die in battles) to become a warrior, in order to protect her property. But while a few noblewomen may have been warriors, most of the women present at inter-tribal battles were spectators.

The general indications are that by the Late Iron Age, women (especially nobles) were treated as near equals under Celtic law, and had the right to pursue almost any kind of profession (within their status and means). But what is not made clear by any source is how often a woman would take any other profession besides or in addition to motherhood (which was itself a venerable task, since she was risking her life to ensure the continuation of the tribe—childbirth was the cause of death for about 20% of childbearing women). From the archaeological evidence, female rulers and warriors were the rare exception rather than the rule. This is also indirectly supported by the Classical writers, who seemed to have been quick to point out any woman of power (perhaps because of the novelty of the concept in their eyes), and only mention a few. The vast majority of Celtic women (especially in the lower classes, which made up the bulk of the population) probably raised the children, made clothing, and cooked the meals, as did their Greek and Roman counterparts.

### Resources and Technology

Iron was used for knives, shears, axe-heads, plow-heads, spearheads, swords, and shield reinforcements. Bronze was used for cauldrons, bowls, flagons, mirrors, ornaments and sculptures, as well as for sword hilts and scabbards, shield mounts, and horse gear. Gold and silver were used for jewelry and objects that signified high social or political rank. Bone and antler provided tools for crafts such as weaving and leather-working, as well as ornaments, handles, and sword hilts. Glass was used for jewelry (beads) and small figurines, and clay for pottery of all kinds. Wood provided timber for buildings, boats, wheels, carts, etc. Straw, reeds, and rushes made bedding, baskets, and roofs, while other plants provided medicines, dyes, cosmetics, perfumes, and fibers for fabrics.

Foodstuffs included wheat, barley, millet, corn, oats, rye, peas, beans, and fruit. Beer, ale, and mead were common, but wine was an imported luxury. Domesticated animals included primarily cattle, pigs, and horses, but also sheep and goats, which provided leather, pelts, meat, milk, butter, cheese, and wool. Dogs were used for hunting, and cats were kept to reduce the rodent population around their stores of grains (there were stiff fines in Irish laws for killing a cat). Bees were kept, providing honey for sweetening and for making mead, as well as wax. Deer, bears, boars, rabbits, wolves, foxes, badgers, birds and fish were available for hunting, altho by this time hunting was more often for sport and prestige than necessity. Cheese, meat, stews, and porridge probably formed the bulk of their diet. Cooking was done over an open fire, or by boiling in a cauldron, or in wooden troughs by adding hot stones—no sign of ovens have been found.

Homes were circular in Britain and Ireland and rectangular in Gaul, with walls of wood or sometimes stone, and roofs supported by wooden poles and thatched with straw, reeds, or rushes. The floor was earthen or clay, covered with straw or rushes. A single large fire in the middle provided warmth and cooking. Bedding was spread around the walls, and consisted of piles of straw or rushes covered with fur skins. Interestingly, Caesar (55 BC) mentions wooden buildings in Britain up to three stories high.

The Celts invented several farming tools which were superior to those used by the rest of Europe and the Mediterranean. Two and four wheeled chariots were available, commonly used in warfare, and were also copied by the Romans. They had dice and board games, and apparently invented barrels, but buttons and chairs were unknown to them. By the time they met the advancing Romans, the two cultures were more or less equally matched technologically.

Gaul, Britain, and Ireland all had sturdy sea-going vessels, and there was steady trade going on between them, as well as with the rest of the continent. Irish laws even differentiate between sea-going vessels, coast-hugging vessels, and river vessels.

Trading was very brisk in iron, salt, copper and tin (the last two are needed to make bronze), and was probably the major factor in the rise of the Hallstatt noble classes. Other marketable imports and exports included wool, pottery, weapons, cloaks, wine, jewelry, and horse gear.

Common measures of value included the milk cow, the female slave, a unit of land (the actual size of which varied based on its agricultural potential), and a standard-weight iron bar. Coin money was not minted in Gaul until the 3rd century BC, nor in Britain until the 2nd century BC. Oddly, coins do not appear in Ireland until after Christianity arrived there.

The Celts were not actually illiterate—Gallic Celts were using Greek writing for their business matters by the time the Romans met them, and Roman writing was adopted later on. But none of their tribal history, genealogy, myths, or religious beliefs could be committed to paper. It should be noted that Ogham, a form of writing found in Ireland, didn't appear until about 400 AD, and so does not appear to be part of the early Celtic culture.

Celts seemed to prefer investing their time and efforts towards creating objects (jewelry, figurines, weapons, etc.) rather than architecture (temples, large buildings, cities, etc.) like the Romans. But the Celts were the first great road and bridge builders, long before the Romans. The Celts were the first in Europe to build chariots capable of moving heavy goods and weapons, and Irish laws state that each chieftain was responsible for maintaining the roads in his territory. Unfortunately, the Celts usually used wood as a building material (alho a few stone structures survive to this day), and many Roman roads and temples were built on top of existing Celtic structures, which means that many of the original works are no longer in evidence.

### Hillforts

One of the most prominent Celtic structures still visible today are the "hillforts" ("oppida" in Latin), which had been built across Europe since 1200 BC, but which experienced a surge of building in Celtic lands around 700 BC, right around the introduction of iron.

There are over 3000 hillforts in Britain, which typically enclose a hilltop or restrict access to promontories. These were well designed by knowledgeable (and well-paid) professionals, and usually consisted of one or more ditches and steep banks with stone or wooden ramparts (thick walls). Some of them are huge works, with walls over 30 feet high running for over a mile, but most of them enclosed far less than 100 acres. A moderately large hillfort enclosing 25 acres would take a community of several hundred people a couple of years to complete (working 1 of every 3 days on the hillfort), and so represented a huge investment of resources. Some of the smallest appear to be the homes of kings, and are only 1 to 5 acres in size.

Hillforts seem to be much more common in Ireland, where over 30,000 have been identified, and are also known as ringforts, raths, duns, cathairs, or caiseals. However, most of these are very small, only 120-150 feet across, and probably protected the home of a single derbfine.

Celts in northern Britain also lived on crannogs, artificial islands built up in lakes or bogs. The practice was exported to Ireland around the sixth century AD.

The exact purpose of some of the larger hillforts is still unclear—they may have been shows of power, trading markets, food storage sites, a place to assemble for rituals and festivals, or places where coins and high-quality goods were manufactured. Some were occupied continually, others only seasonally. While they were undoubtedly used as a gathering place while under attack (which would explain the grain-pit storage facilities), they might have been occupied in peaceful times by the principal members of the community—the priests and chiefs, smiths and craftsmen, traders, etc.—sort of a local "town square" within a reasonable walking or riding distance of many derbfines.

Just before Roman occupation, hillforts were becoming towns—a Gallic hillfort had a 3 mile wall enclosing 335 acres, and in Britain, a 17 acre hillfort defended 850 acres around it. Some of these had well laid out streets and buildings.

While hillforts were adequate defense against other Celtic tribes, they were no match for Roman legions, who easily overran the hillforts when they invaded.

### Warfare

- "The whole race of Celts is war-mad, and both high-spirited and quick for battle, although otherwise simple and not ill-mannered" - Strabo (64 BC-24 AD)

The Celts were proud, brave, and warlike in spirit. Warriors were quick to defend their honor or avenge an insult. Raids, or disputes over land or other possessions often resulted in families or tribes fighting each other. Feuding was common, with two families continually taking revenge on each other for past grievances (see "Laws" above). However, Druids probably helped negotiate many peaceful settlements, either thru compromise or legal arbitration, which kept wars from constantly disrupting daily life. It would be wrong to think that the love of war was confined to the nobility at the expense of the suffering peasants—admiration for the warrior class appears to have permeated the entire culture.

Celts often preferred to settle inter-tribal wars by means of single combat between the chieftains or champions of the two armies. In Irish myths, a warrior's honor was much more important than his life, and while retreat was permissible, surrender was not an option. Caesar noted that many defeated Gallic generals sought death in battle or committed suicide, and speculated that this was perhaps for religious reasons. This was not uncommon among many early Indo-European cultures, and some Roman generals did the same thing.

Some Gallic warriors did fight naked, using only a sword and shield, painted with blue dye until the 3rd century BC, and the practice apparently continued in Britain until Caesar's time. This may have been for religious reasons (the designs of the paint may have been believed to afford magical protection), or to instill fear in their enemies (to show how little they feared death), or to prevent wounds from being infected by cloth fibers. A more practical reason may be that many fighters were not wealthy enough to afford armor, or it may be that warriors who fought naked received more glory and prestige, and hence more status. If the blue dye was indeed wode (some evidence indicates it may have been a copper-based compound), it may have been used to prevent infection. It should be noted that Greek warriors fought naked at one point in their early history, too.

Armor was not unknown to the Celts—they had helmets and large shields, and an occasional chain mail shirt (chain mail was invented by the Celts around 300 BC). Weapons included swords, daggers, spears, and slings. Many Celtic innovations in battle technology and tactics were quickly adopted by the early Romans! Caesar (55 BC) mentions that Gaul had many archers, which were largely ineffective in battle, but archaeological evidence shows no trace of bows or arrows being used by the early Celts.

Celtic battles were very noisy, with both sides shouting their own praises, and belittling their opponents, before beginning. War trumpets, drums, battle cries, and yelling from the female spectators added to the din. Keep in mind that until the Romans invaded, most inter-tribal "wars" involved less than 100 men and lasted less than a full day. Celts often ransomed prisoners of war back to their own people rather than kill or enslave them as the Romans did.

Celtic warriors made excellent cavalry and charioteers, and were well known all across Europe for their bravery. Celtic armies were also well feared for their fanatical charges, and ferocious but reckless attacks, with some Celts choosing to fight to the death. In many cases however, if they were not immediately victorious, they would often panic and flee. When Rome invaded Gaul and Britain, large multi-tribal Celtic armies were created that were organized by tribe. Unfortunately, the touchy pride of the tribal leaders made these armies very difficult to control.

Most Celtic warriors had only a shield and spear, with items such as swords, helmets, and chain mail reserved for wealthy nobles. On the other hand, every Roman legionnaire was well armored and well equipped, and trained to work together and not panic under pressure. The Greeks and Romans found that the largely unarmored Celts were particularly vulnerable to long distance attacks from javelins and arrows. Unarmored Celts wielding long swords and spears were also no match for Roman short swords stabbing at them from behind their huge shields. The Romans also had a major advantage with their better military organization and resources—Caesar won one battle by waiting for the large opposing Celtic army to get hungry and go home!

While the Celts and the Romans were about equally matched technologically, it was the Celt's attitude that the individual's glory in battle was more important than working together to win the battle that was their ultimate downfall.

### Life After Roman Conquest

The Roman conquest of Gaul and Britain did not end the Celtic culture there immediately, nor was there a sudden, large change in their way of life. The Gallic Celts had been importing Roman goods for at least 150 years before the Romans conquered them, and had already been moving towards a more urban (that is, Roman) way of life.

Under Roman rule, many Celtic-speaking areas maintained much of their identity for a surprisingly long time, and achieved a degree of political stability and material prosperity far greater than what they had before. But their culture did become increasingly "Romanized" as time passed. Tacitus (55-100 AD) noted that by 80 AD (less than 20 years after Boudicca's rebellion), British Celts were mimicking Roman speech, dress, and lifestyle.

Many chieftains gladly allied themselves with the Romans, either because the added military might would give them an edge over neighboring tribes or bordering invaders, or because of the glamour and prestige of modern, trendy Roman culture, or because they wanted to be on good terms with their new rulers. Roman citizens had more rights than Latin citizens, who had more right than non-citizens. In exchange for accepting Roman law and customs, Celtic noblemen were granted Roman citizenship, their freemen were granted Latin citizenship, and in theory, their tribes were granted autonomous rule.

But in reality, Roman persecution of the Druids (see "Druids", below) put their religion under government control, and by recruiting Celtic warriors into Roman legions and shipping them off to other lands, Celtic tribes were stripped of their warrior class. In addition, Roman emperors and local Roman governors were often harsh and cruel in their treatment of their conquered subjects.

Gallic was still recognized in the 3rd century AD as an official language, but had probably disappeared by 500 AD. The Druids did not die out quickly either—they are still mentioned in the 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th centuries AD, including references in Irish laws (where Roman rule never reached).

## Miscellaneous

Three was the most important number to the Celts. Images of gods often have three heads or three faces, and triple goddesses are common. A group of three facts or three ideas is a common writing style in Irish writing, and trios of heroes are common in Irish myths. Three is also an important number for the Greeks, Romans, and Hindus, and so may have originated with the earliest proto Indo-European tribes. Unfortunately, exactly why three was originally such an important number may never be known.

A Classical reference to a Celtic saying : "worship the gods, do no evil, and exercise courage". Interestingly, the medieval Christian chivalric code of honor is essentially identical to this.

An Irish reference to a Celtic saying : the "truth that is in our hearts, and strength in our arms, and fulfillment in our tongues" will maintain us in our lives.

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## **Druids and Seers and Bards (oh my!)**

- "The Druids are great natural scientists, using their knowledge of physics and astronomy to construct calendars" - Cicero (106-43 BC)
- "The Gauls say that Druidism originated in Britain and came to Gaul" - Caesar (55 BC).
- "The Gallic Druids have an assembly and a chief, and convene once a year in Carnutes (in Gaul). The Gauls send their Druids to Britain to be trained" - Caesar (55 BC).
- "The Druids have the power to excommunicate any individual or tribe that does not follow their decisions, rendering them outcasts without religious or legal status" - Caesar (55 BC).
- "The Druids are not required to fight in war, nor do they pay taxes. They are dispensed from military service and all other obligations" - Caesar (55 BC). *Note - the Gauls did not collect taxes in the Roman fashion at this time.*
- "The Druids handle disputes and often decide whether to start or end wars" - Caesar (55 BC).
- "The Druids are engaged in sacred matters, conduct the public and private sacrifices, and give rulings on all religious issues. They are teachers, healers, judges, and keep the calendar. Large numbers of young men seek them out for instruction, and the Druids are held in great honor and high rank, almost equal with the knights" - Caesar (55 BC).
- "Druids have the power to prevent battles between Celtic tribes" - Diodorus (70-20 BC).
- "Among all the tribes generally speaking, there are three classes of men held in special honor : the Bards, the Seers, and the Druids. The Bards are singers and poets; the Seers are interpreters of sacrifice and natural philosophers, while the Druids in addition to the science of nature, also study moral philosophy" - Strabo (64 BC-24 AD).
- "The Druids are teachers of wisdom, who profess to know the greatness and shape of the earth and the universe, and the motion of the heavens and of the stars, and what is the will of the gods" - Mela (50 AD).
- "The Druids teach many things to the nobles of Gaul in a course of instruction, lasting as long as 20 years, meeting in a secret cave or remote woods" - Mela (50 AD). *Note : the secrecy may have been because Gallic Druids were outlawed by the Romans by this time.*
- "On the sixth day after the full moon, after making preparations for a sacrifice and a banquet beneath the trees, a Druid in a white robe climbs a sacred oak and cuts off a mistletoe branch using a golden sickle, while others catch the branch in a white cloak. Two white bulls are then sacrificed" - Pliny (23-79 AD). *Note—given the Druid's extremely secretive nature, the rarity of white bulls, and the softness of gold, this has a high probability of being partially or completely fabricated.*

Pliny claimed the word "Druid" came from the Greek word for oak tree, "drus", and a root syllable "wid" meaning "to know" ("knowledge of the oaks"). Early scholars agreed with this, saying the probable proto-Celtic word "deru" means "oak" and "weid" means "to know". Modern scholars interpret "deru" as "strongly", indicating "the very wise one".

There are many different opinions about the Druids because there is so little concrete evidence about them. Over the last hundred years, scholars have suggested that :

- They were a pre-Celtic tradition in Britain and Ireland
- They were an ancient Celtic tradition

- They started in Celtic Britain
- They started in Celtic Gaul

- They were local only to Ireland, Britain, and Gaul
- They were a part of every Celtic culture

The current evidence tends to indicate that they were not pre-Celtic, and that they existed primarily in Gaul, Britain, and Ireland, but some of their ideas were more widespread. Unfortunately, their exact origins are still unknown.

There is some evidence that Gallic Druids first appeared around 400 BC, but the Druids are not mentioned by Classical sources until the 2nd century BC, and not conclusively by that name until about 70 BC. Out of all the Celtic cultures they knew across Europe, the Classical writers only wrote of "Druids" in Gaul, and only one reference is made to Druids in Britain—but Druid-like concepts are mentioned as part of several other Celtic cultures all over Europe. Oddly, Caesar mentions them in Gaul, but not once in Britain, altho he says that Gallic Druids were trained in Britain, where the major centers of Druid learning are located. Irish mythology has many references to Druids, and also indicates that some of their Druids were trained in Britain. Some headdresses and scepters, probably used by Druids, have been found at archaeological sites.

The Classical writers depicted Druids as anything from bloodthirsty shamans to noble philosophers, but never as priests. Nor do Classical sources depict Druidism as a formal religion, and one author even makes a clear distinction between a "Druid" and a "priest".

Druids were apparently an intertribal group, and could travel between tribes at will, altho important people such as kings possibly had their own "court Druid". Their status was very high—according to Caesar, Druids had about the same status as nobles, but according to Irish myths, some Druids ranked over some kings at assemblies. Irish law states that the High Druid was allowed to speak before the High King did at assemblies.

Being a Druid was not an exclusive job—at least some Druids were also tribal chieftains. Druids were probably selected from the nobility, and it took up to 20 years to finish Druid training, for they had to commit to memory all the oral traditions passed on from previous generations. They functioned as ministers, philosophers, teachers, natural scientists, keepers of the shrines, and dispensers of law (see the next section for details). They were advisors to kings and warriors, often made legal, political, and military decisions, and usually accompanied the troops to battle to perform on-the-spot divinations. In Irish myths, they could marry and have concubines, and they were not quiet, ascetic monks—Caesar reports that some disputes over their elections ended in one-on-one combat!

The Seers ("Vates" in Latin) were either a subgroup of the Druids, or a separate but closely related group. The Druids were more prestigious and more concerned with philosophy and theology, while the Seers dealt with the interpretation of divination and sacrifice. Note that we have no proof that the Druids were philosophers (in the

ancient Greek sense) other than Classical sources, who may have presented them as philosophers as part of their "Noble Savage" image. In Ireland, the Seers were poets, prophets, and diviners, and they were responsible for the upkeep and transmission of sacred oral traditions such as the myths and the laws.

The Druids seemed to search for knowledge, while the Seers dispensed that knowledge to the public. What we think of today as "the Druids" were really the Druids and Seers.

Bards (poets, musicians, singers) also held a high position in Celtic society—they were closely associated with the Druids, and some were under the patronage of chieftains. Classical sources usually differentiate Bards from Druids, but the distinction is more blurred in Irish myths. Bards were a highly trained, professional group, and held the entire Celtic history, legends, myths, folklore and poetry in their minds. It took up to 12 years to reach the highest level of Bardic training, and a Master Bard had as much status as a chieftain of a small tribe. In Irish myths, Bards had magical powers, with the ability to put their audience to sleep, cause uncontrollable laughing or weeping, or even kill. In some stories, a Bard's "satire" (or curse) could destroy someone's reputation, and cause illness, deformity, or death. In reality, the satire would make the victim an object of ridicule or even an outcast, so that some Bards would use the threat of it to get what they wanted.

The Celts valued knowledge and skill very highly, and so did not specialize as much as we do today—there was often a great deal of overlap of skills. In Irish myths, Bards often had many of the same abilities as Druids, and Druids were often skilled at poetry and music. In addition, there was overlap in the division of some of their duties, such as maintaining tribal knowledge, and providing legal defense and judgment, and evidently these functions were not even exclusive to Druids and Bards. Irish laws were revised around 100 BC, 0 AD and 200 AD to define just who could do what.

The image of Druids as white-haired bearded old men is a modern-day misconception—most fully trained Druids would have been 25 to 40 (it was very unusual to live past 40 in those days). They would not have worn their robes of office (which *might* have been white and/or inlaid with gold thread) unless performing at some official function. Irish myths often depict Druids as carrying a "wand", a branch with small bells hanging at the end of it (in one story, the branch is from an apple tree). There is also some evidence from Irish myths and early Catholic records that Druids may have had a special haircut, perhaps some sort of tonsure (top of the head shaved, or top and front of the head shaved, like Christian monks). It is even possible that the Christian monks adopted the haircut from the Druids!

Druids are sometimes thought of as magicians due to some of the Classical writers who referred to them as "magi", using the term for the priest caste of Persia. The ancient Mediterranean cultures all believed in the power of magic to cause illness, death, and bad luck—Hebrew, Greek, and Roman authorities all tried to suppress magicians. It was a very typical practice for each culture to label the other culture's priests as magicians. The Romans in particular passed anti-magician legislation as early as 81 BC, and unfortunately for the Druids, the Roman conquests of Gaul and Britain coincided with the height of anti-magician hysteria—there were at least 10 government-sponsored purges of magicians in Italy between 33 BC and 93 AD. Druids appear as magic-users in Irish myths as well, and are able to create fogs, storms, sleep, amnesia, invisibility, and shape-shift to look like an animal or to mimic a specific person. The image of Druids as magicians was continued by Christianity, whose early saints wielded the same magical powers (but provided by their faith, of course) in order to defeat the Druids.

The Classical writers tell of many Celtic holy women and groups of holy women, describing women prophets (Seers) and priestesses. Strabo (64 BC-24 AD) mentions that the men and women of the Gallic priesthood could marry (whether only within the priesthood or to anyone is not clear), and that the priestesses were very independent of their husbands. Dio Cassius (190-210 AD) claimed that Boudicca (60 AD) was a priestess of a goddess of battle and victory. In Irish myths, women could be Bards and Seers; in addition, priestesses had the same magical powers as Druids, and were often married to Druids. Both sources indicate that female Bards and Seers were not very common. Irish laws indicate that women could be Bards, and mention one woman who

became chief Bard of all Ireland in the tenth century AD (which may not reflect Celtic society 1000 years earlier). All this *suggests* that women could definitely be Seers and Bards, but that Druids were an all-male group with priestesses forming a separate group. The exact social status and religious function of the priestesses are unknown.

In Irish myths, many women and non-Druid men with the gifts of prophecy, magic, healing, and spirit communication are treated with great respect by the community and well tolerated by Druids. So it appears that at least Irish Druids did not claim the exclusive right to act as intermediaries between the human and the divine. Whether this was true in Britain and Gaul is unknown.

Gallic Druids were outlawed by the Romans as early as 35 AD, with Britain following by 60 AD. This was due to many possible reasons, including the Romans' abhorrence of human sacrifice (but not likely, for reasons discussed in "Human Sacrifice", below) and fear of magicians discussed above, or the realization that by destroying the Druids, who were keepers of Celtic culture, the Celts would be more easily absorbed into Roman rule. The Romans were also afraid that the Druids had enough power to incite the people to rebellion, and realized that there was a great deal of treasure to be had by sacking Druid shrines—Roman records indicate the recovery of over 100,000 pounds of silver and almost 100,000 pounds of gold from a single sacred lake! While that may sound fantastic, it is a fact that Caesar was able to settle his vast debts and finance his career with the loot he brought back from Gaul. So Druids had already been suppressed for almost 400 years by the time Christianity became the state religion. Ironically, many Druids may have joined the Church gladly at this point, where they could still perform many of their functions, and not be persecuted by the Romans!

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### **Druidic Beliefs and Functions**

Much of this section relies on extrapolations from a very few sources which are possibly very biased, and so has the highest chances of being completely wrong. In what follows, "Druid" refers to the Druids and Seers.

Celtic religion, as do all religions, dealt with the nature of the universe and mankind's relationship to it. From various sources, we can conjecture that the Celts believed one should live in harmony with nature, accept that pain and death are not evil but part of some divine plan, and that the only evil is moral weakness. In Irish mythology, Druids were concerned with the notion of Truth as the highest principle—voicing the Truth often caused magical events to happen. Interestingly, while there were old Irish words for responsibility and guilt, there was no word for sin until after Christianity arrived.

A Gallic Celt living soon after the Roman conquest (60 BC) wrote that Druids would walk on beds of burning coals at some of their festivals.

According to Irish myths, Druids practiced some form of baptism. While this may be a practice added by Christian monks transcribing the texts, using water for ritual purification was practiced all over the ancient world, and so baptism may or may not have been a Druid tradition.

The Druids maintained their authority thru the use of the "geas" (pronounced "GEE-as", with a hard "g" and a soft "s"), or taboo. This prohibition was used to restrict what someone could do, because the penalty for not abiding by the geas was to become outcast.

The Druids probably were priests, in the sense that they were keepers of the shrines, and knew the correct way to perform sacrifices and divinations, and interpret omens. As in Rome and other cultures, this was the function of the priesthood—but Druids had many other roles in Celtic society.

Druids were teachers to the children of the nobles. Whether there were actual schools, or groups of students who hung out with a teacher, or the teacher visited each student individually, is unknown.

Druids were also judges and lawyers as well. Both Strabo (64 BC-24 AD) and Caesar (55 BC) say that the Druids were entrusted with all legal decisions, public and private. They were the highest authority—there was no appeal against their decisions. Caesar adds that people came from many regions to the annual Druidic assembly in the center of Gaul, in order to present disputes for the Druids to arbitrate. If true (there is no other evidence of such a gathering, and Caesar may have been exaggerating the Druid's power to make the Gallic tribes appear more of a threat), this would imply a high degree of judicial and political unity among the Celtic tribes of Gaul, maintained by the Druids.

According to the Classical sources, the Druids were ambassadors, peace-keepers, and advisors to kings. Druids were able to halt impending battles, even when both sides were lined up and ready to fight. One Classical author writes that "kings were not permitted to adopt or plan any course, so that in fact it was the Druids who ruled", altho this is possibly an exaggeration. Unfortunately, we have no idea how the authority of the Druids interacted with the authority of the kings.

The Druids also kept the history of their people. Several Classical sources relate how the Druids had accurate knowledge of events that had happened up to 300 years prior, and Druids in Irish myths are clearly the authority for information and advice with respect to history and genealogy.

Pliny (23-79 AD) tells of eminent Druid physicians in Gaul just before the Roman conquest (100 years earlier), with such excellent reputations that many people went to study with them. Archaeological evidence supports this, with surgical tools found in graves as early as 200 BC. Skulls have also been found with holes cut in the bone, and the forensic evidence shows that the person sometimes lived for quite some time afterwards. Irish myths tell of a chieftain who was taken to a hospital after his skull was fractured, and lived to become a great scholar. Druids often appear as healers in these stories, where they used herbs, and performed Caesarean sections, amputations, and brain surgery. They also used stitches to close wounds, and groups of doctors sometimes accompanied armies to battle.

Druids were hailed by the Classical sources as being highly advanced in the science of astronomy/astrology (which were the same thing until the 17<sup>th</sup> century AD). They used this knowledge for divination and to create calendars, as did Roman priests. See "The Coligny Calendar" in "Ritual Festivals" below for one example.

As can be seen, the Druids, Seers, and Bards were responsible for sustaining the sense of identity and continuity of Celtic communities. As law-keepers, historians, teachers, and priests, they were the guardians of tradition.

One interesting theory is that "Druid" was simply the name of the entire Celtic intellectual class. In this sense, the Druids would have been identical to the Brahmin caste in India. The wide range of skills and duties described above probably could not be performed by each and every individual. This would be similar to saying that modern society has a group known as the "Scientists", whose functions include physics, chemistry, geology, astronomy, and biology—and then expecting every scientist to be competent in all areas. This would explain why what is usually thought of as a small group of priests actually held many key positions in their society, and why there was so much apparent overlap between the Druids, Seers, and Bards—given the Celtic appreciation of skills and knowledge, having more skills probably brought more status—and an incentive to be multi-talented.

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## Nature Worship

As is the case with many polytheistic religions, Celtic gods were everywhere. Each tree, lake, river, mountain and spring possessed a spirit, and was worthy of worship (but the more impressive the location, the more it was worshipped). The entire Celtic landscape was numinous (possessed by spirits), and so outdoor worship was common. A holy location (spring, mountain, etc.) often had the same name as its patron deity.

### Trees

- "The Gauls worship in groves of trees" - Mela (50 AD).
- "They choose groves of oak for the sake of the tree alone, and they never perform any sacred rite unless they have a branch of it" - Pliny (23-79 AD).
- "The Britains worship in groves of trees" - Tacitus (55-118 AD) and Cassius (190-210 AD).

Trees were sacred, symbolizing a link between the sky and the underworld (branches and roots), longevity, and cycles of "death" in the fall and "rebirth" in the spring. Trees are often associated with mother-goddess images because of their regenerative abilities. In Ireland, the inauguration of a ruler always took place near a sacred tree, and in Ireland and Gaul there is evidence that each tribe had a sacred tree near the center of its territory, symbolizing the tribe's unity and strength. In Irish myths, all trees are sacred but the oak, yew, ash, and hazel were particularly holy.

Oak was considered sacred by many European and Mediterranean cultures (including Greek and Roman), long before the Celts appeared. It was highly regarded for its size, majesty, and longevity, as well as for its usefulness as a food source (acorns), fuel, and building material. Most wooden river offerings in Gaul are made of oak (see "Sacrifices, Water Offerings" below).

Ash was regarded as very magical all over northern Europe, and it appears in British legends more than any other tree. Interestingly, the folk-tales of several areas in Britain say that witches are repelled by ash, which is holy to Druids, suggesting that witchcraft evolved from different origins than the Druids.

Mistletoe was possibly revered by the Druids, and even more so when it was found growing on oak. According to Pliny (23-79 AD), it was called "all healing" in Celtic, and was believed to have general powers of healing, was an antidote for all poisons, and removed infertility in particular. But the existing Gaelic words for mistletoe all mean "high branch", and any ancient herbalist would know that it is a nervine and antispasmodic, so Pliny's information is suspect. In addition, there are no other Classical references which indicate that mistletoe was important to the Druids. Even if true, this must have been a Gallic and/or British tradition, for mistletoe was not native to Ireland, and was not known there until the 18th century AD.

A grove, or group of trees, was also sacred, not only due to the sanctity of the individual trees, but because they were dark, mysterious, and secret places (see "Shrines", below). There are many Classical references to such sacred groves, such as the following, written by Lucan around 50 AD about a grove in Gaul destroyed by Caesar a hundred years earlier :

They came upon an ancient and sacred grove, its interlacing branches enclosed a cool central space into which the sun never shone, but where an abundance of water spouted from dark springs. The barbaric gods worshiped here had their altars heaped with hideous offerings, and every tree was sprinkled with human blood. Nobody dared enter this grove except the priest; and even he kept out at midday, and between dawn and dusk—for fear that the gods might be about at such hours.

However, many of the woodland sanctuaries which have been found were actually healing shrines to beneficial deities.

### Water

Water was perceived as a life-force, both creating and destroying life, not only by the Celts but by many pre-Christian Mediterranean and other Indo-European cultures. The sources of rivers, and places where two rivers met, were especially holy. Offerings were often made to rivers, lakes, and marshes (see "Sacrifices, Water Offerings" below). Bogs were special too, not only because of the water, but because of the element of danger and treachery.

Springs and wells were associated with divinities, especially healing ones. Wells, which penetrated deep into the ground, were a link between the earth and the underworld (discussed below), and springs were revered for their medicinal and purifying properties. Archaeological evidence indicates that healing magic was based on the principle of reciprocity : after bathing in the sacred water of the spring, the believer offered a wooden model of their diseased limb or organ, in the hope that the spirit of the spring would give back a whole and healthy one.

Each such place had its own patron deity, usually a goddess—Sequana was goddess at the shrine at the source of the river Seine in Gaul, and Sul (or Sulis) was goddess of the shrine at Bath. Oddly, there is little conclusive archaeological evidence for any Celtic use of such places in Britain except at Bath.

### Animals

Being so close to nature, animals were numinous as well. There are common themes in Celtic images and Irish myths (as is true elsewhere in the ancient world) of gods with animal qualities, and the ability to change into animal form. The myths are also full of many animals with magical abilities.

Another common theme is the concept of enchanted magical animals, usually gods or humans who have been metamorphosed into animal form as revenge or punishment. But only their physical form is altered—they can still think and can often speak.

Animals themselves were revered by the Celts (as by many pre-Christian cultures) for their specific qualities : speed, ferocity, sexual prowess, or beauty. There existed a special and complicated relationship between the Celts and the creatures they hunted, one that involved not only reverence, but an acknowledgment of theft from the natural world, which required appropriate rituals of appeasement (which had been practiced by many peoples long before the Neolithic age). The gods of the hunt both promoted the hunt and protected the animals being hunted.

Certain animals had their own deity, usually a goddess : Epona (horse), Artio (bear), and Damona (cow) are a few known today. Tribes did not seem to worship a single tribal or totem animal.

### Heavenly Bodies

St. Patrick (450 AD) is recorded by a contemporary as saying that all those in Ireland who adored the sun would perish eternally. The "Celtic Cross", (which originated in modern-day western Czechoslovakia long before the Celts around 3000 BC and spread westward), was probably a sun symbol early on, but whether it retained that meaning into the Celtic era is unknown. However, in Irish mythology it is very lucky to make a circle in the same direction as that of the sun (clockwise, "deisiol" or "deiseal" in Irish), and very malicious or foolish to go in the other direction ("widdershins" in old English)—this is because following the direction of the sun is following the order of the universe. And most Celtic shrines found in England have their doorways pointing in the general direction of the rising sun. Finally, Pliny (23-79 AD) says that Druids hailed the moon as healer of all things.

On the other hand, there are no clear references to worshipping heavenly bodies in the Irish myths, nor of any gods clearly associated with them, and the absence of Celtic celebrations at the equinoxes and solstices (see "Ritual Festivals" below) would seem to indicate a lack of veneration towards the sun. While Belenos is

definitely a sun god, he originated in Austria and migrated westward with Roman conquerors. In addition, much of Pliny's other information is suspect. Most of the solar and lunar worship in Gaul and Britain appears only after Roman occupation. It seems that while the Celts were aware of the sun and moon as powerful forces of nature and markers of time, they did not actually worship them.

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## Gods and Goddesses

- "The Gauls all assert their descent from an ancestor-god (which is not unlike Dispatēr, our god of the dead), and say that it is a Druidic belief" - Caesar (55 BC).

The main sources of information about Celtic gods and goddesses are Irish myths, and Gallic statues and engravings. The Classical writers labeled the Celtic gods in terms of their own, and ignored the differences, which makes their information very hard to use. Unfortunately, the gods and goddesses of Irish mythology may or may not have much to do with Celtic divinities of other regions (with few exceptions, it is difficult to correlate the Irish names to the gods known from Roman descriptions and archaeological inscriptions), and many of the Gallic objects were made after Roman occupation. It is hard to tell if gods with similar names from different regions sprang up independently, or spread over the centuries, or were combined by later Roman or Christian writers who could not see the differences.

Diodorus (70-20 BC) reports that when a Celtic leader saw statues of gods at Delphi, he laughed at them for thinking that gods had human form, and archaeological evidence indicates that Iron Age British Celts did not create images of their gods. Archaeologically, there are relatively few stone or metal images of Celtic gods (some of which date back to the 6th century BC), altho of course there could have been many wooden images, which did not survive. Most god images were created after Roman occupation, but the Gundestrup cauldron (see "Cauldrons" below) is one of the most striking pre-Roman artifacts depicting deities.

In Irish mythology, the main thing that separated the gods from mortals was their ability to use magic. They were crafty and unpredictable—if properly approached and honored by ritual according to their own individual requirements, they could be mild and helpful. If neglected or offended, they would be cruel and relentless. They frequently entered the world of men and played tricks upon those they chanced upon. They were not invincible, nor were they immortal. They lived in the Otherworld (see "Death and the Otherworld" below) when not bothering mankind on Earth. In these terms, Celtic gods were little different from Greek and Roman gods.

In Irish myths, many Celtic gods and goddesses had triple forms—three *different individuals* with different names that were conceptually linked to each other. This triplicity of deities can be found in early Greek, Roman, and Hindu religions as well.

When depicted visually, repeating the image of a deity may enhance its qualities (luck, protection, fertility, etc.). Because many of the triple-headed statues look in different directions, it has been suggested that they may signify the continuity of time (past, present, future) or the universe (earth, heavens, otherworld), but it is impossible to know what these images actually meant to the Celts.

### The Earth Mother

Being an agricultural people, the Celts were very focused on the well-being of their crops and livestock, and so many of the Celtic gods and goddesses of nature had some connection with fertility. As was the case most everywhere else in the ancient world, the primary source of divine fertility was the earth-mother, who appeared in Europe around 2000 BC, well before the Celts.

All over the ancient world, mother-goddesses were most often depicted as a triad. Most of the triple images are merely holding different objects symbolizing fertility and plenty such as baskets, eggs, grapes, babies, fruit, and bread. One Germanic statue shows two older women on either side of a young girl. In general, these mother-images were not associated with a named goddess, but are simply referred to as the "Matres" (a modern-day label). None of the Matres statues found in Gaul or Britain appeared until Roman soldiers brought the images with them from Germany, and so this triple-mother image may not have even been a religious icon of the early western Celts.

Irish mythology presents most of its goddesses as sexually aggressive, warlike, and destructive. Altho many of their goddesses can change form between a hag and a young girl (as well as shapeshift into animal forms), and a few have the triple forms described above, there is no sign of a Great Mother, Earth Mother, nor supreme Triple Goddess (maiden, mother, crone) in Irish myths.

### The Antlered God

The earliest known image of an antlered god is from the 4th century BC. The only known inscription (from late 1st century BC Gaul) of his name is broken off at the beginning, reading only "ernunnos"—linguistics suggests the probable "K" sound at the beginning (and note the already Romanized "-os" ending). The typical image is of a man with antlers and two torcs, standing or sitting cross-legged, who is accompanied by a ram-horned serpent. In some carvings, he has a female consort, who is sometimes antlered as well. He is often depicted as a giant, about as tall as two ordinary men.

The general symbolism of Kernunnos is that of a wild god of nature, of fertility and plenty. He is so close to the natural world that he takes on some animal characteristics (see "Nature Worship, Animals" above), thus enhancing his potency as a lord of nature.

The antlered god and ram-horned serpent are images going back to the Bronze Age all over Europe, which became a strong Gallic tradition. There are many images of many different kinds of horned gods (ram, bull, stag, etc.), especially in Britain, but he is virtually absent in Ireland. It is not known if the Celts considered him "the" lord of nature or just one of many, nor whether the name "Kernunnos" was widespread or very local.

### Other Gods

The general modern-day consensus is that each small area (perhaps groups as small as just several tribes) in the Celtic world had its own set of gods. There are some 375 gods named in religious inscriptions in Gaul, with 305 of them named only once, and only four are named more than 18 times—Grannos (a god of healing, often associated with hot springs), Belenos (a sun god), Rosmerta (a goddess of abundance), and Epona (a goddess of horses). Only a handful were honored across a region, and only a few were known across all of Gaul. Note that all of these inscriptions were made after Roman occupation, and so may not accurately represent the original Gallic pantheon of gods. At the very least, their names have been "Romanized" (the "-os" and "-a" endings, for example, in Grannos, Belenos, Rosmerta and Epona).

While the specific names and stories may vary from region to region, there are some common types of Celtic gods. It may be that the vast variety of names are just the local names of a common pantheon of deities which spanned the Celtic culture.

One such type is the "god of the tribe" who watches over and protects the tribe, and is the tribe's ancestor-god (the god from which the people are physically descended). In Ireland he was named "Daghda", and he was also the chieftain of the gods. He was the best magician, best fighter, and best artisan among the gods. His symbols were his club, which protected his people, and his cauldron of plenty, which fed them. He originated in Gaul, where he was called "Sucellus".

The tribal god was usually paired with a local nature goddess, sometimes the goddess of a nearby body of water. In general, gods tended to be tribal, and goddesses tended to be regional. Divine couples were often associated with health, wealth, harmony, protection, or abundance. In Irish myths, gods were never associated with bodies of fresh water, only goddesses.

Other basic types include gods and goddesses of war, of nature and animals, of fertility, and of occupations—smiths, bards, etc. But most Celtic gods were multi-talented, and cannot be easily pigeon-holed into a single role. In Gaul, some of the more widespread god images include a three headed god, a wheel bearing god, a god with a hammer, a horned god, and a two-faced god.

The most widespread deity, known across much of the entire Celtic lands, was named "Lugh" in Ireland (pronounced "Loo"). He was a multi-skilled, sophisticated, inventive, brilliantly clever and handsome god, and was the patron of heroes and craftsmen.

A medieval commentary on Lucan (4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century AD, by a Christian monk) claims that there are three primary gods worshiped by the Gauls—Teutates, whose victims should be drowned in a cauldron; Esus, who required hanging or stabbing; and Taranis, whose sacrifices must be burned. But only one inscription to Teutates has been found, and his name is best translated as "the god of the tribe"—more of a title than a name. Further, only one inscription to Esus and seven to Taranis have been found, so this information is highly suspect.

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### **Ritual Festivals**

Being primarily farmers, the seasons were very important to the Celts. Thus it is not surprising that the major Celtic festivals were all linked to agricultural and pastoral events. Imbolc, celebrated on February 1 or 2, was related to the birth of lambs. Beltane took place on May 1, and signified the beginning of summer and the time to start pasturing the livestock. Lughnasa was centered around August 1, and was linked to harvesting the crops. Samhain, celebrated from sunset October 31 to sunset November 1, marked the end of pasturing, the beginning of winter, and the Celtic new year.

All these names are taken from the Irish festivals, which were not necessarily celebrated throughout the Celtic world. While Samhain and Beltane seem to have been widely celebrated, and Lughnasa was also celebrated in Gaul, Imbolc was unique only to Ireland. The Welsh gave no particular importance to any of these days except May 1, whose festival had many things in common with Samhain. Classical sources make no mention of seasonal festivals being celebrated by any of the Celts they knew of. The Coligny calendar (see below), which is a Celtic but not Irish calendar, only mentions Samonios (Samhain). Beltane was celebrated in different forms by many cultures from Ireland to Russia as May Day.

Feasts in general were usually grand affairs, and whole communities of tribes would partake in the festivities. The animals eaten were sacrificed to the gods (see "Sacrifices, Animal Sacrifice", below), and toasts were given in the god's honor. Poseidonius (100 BC) wrote of one Celtic chief, Louernius (which means "fox"), as building a square enclosure 1.5 miles on a side, and providing vats of expensive liquor, enough food so that everyone could eat for days, and gifts of gold and silver to his people.

### **The Coligny Calendar**

The earliest known Gallic calendar was found in 1897 in France. It was engraved on a 3 foot by 5 foot brass plate, comes from the 1st century BC, and spans 62 months. The language is Gallic, but the letters are Roman. It was made around the time of the Roman conquest, and was apparently kept in a temple of Apollo. But is far more elaborate than the Roman calendar, having a highly sophisticated five-year synchronization between the

lunar cycle and solar cycle. There are many similarities between its system and those of the Vedic calendar system used in ancient India.

According to this calendar and comments by Caesar (55 BC) and Pliny (23-79 AD), the Celts counted time in cycles of half a lunar month, half a solar year, and 30 years (a generation). Their "day" started at sunset, which is why the modern-day remnants of their celebrations (such as Samhain, which turned into "All Hollow's Eve" or Halloween) start in the evening. Thus they may have counted "days" by the number of nights since the last new or full moon.

### Imbolc (Imbolg)

Pronounced "IM-molk" in Celtic, this feast of renewal, purification and healing was linked with the goddess Brigit.

### Beltane (Beltine, Beltain, Beltan, Baltein)

Pronounced "bey-AL-tin-ah" in Celtic, its name may come from the bright ("bel" in Celtic) fires which were a part of its celebration, or it may be connected to the Austrian Celtic deity Belenos (but not likely, for reasons discussed in "Nature Worship/Heavenly Bodies" above).

This festival welcomed the heat of the sun which would ripen the crops. This was a dangerous time due to the uncertainty of how well the crops would grow. Animal and human sacrifices were made, and bonfires were kindled in sympathetic magic to encourage the sun's warmth on earth. Perhaps sexual promiscuity was practiced to encourage the fertility of the crops, but there is no definite evidence of this.

The Irish writer Cormac (850 AD) describes a Beltane ritual in which all fires in the town were extinguished, two large fires were ignited and blessed by the Druids (!), and livestock driven between them, possibly to ensure fertility, purification, and/or protection from disease.

### Lughnasa (Lughnasadh, Lughnasad, Lunasa)

Pronounced "LOO-nas-sah" in Celtic, meaning "feast of the god Lugh", its festivities started two weeks before August 1, and lasted a month. This is the only festival that has no pastoral components to it, and may have been the last festival (in terms of when in history people started celebrating it), or it may have been imported from somewhere else. Lammas was a later Anglo-Saxon festival celebrated on the same day.

### Samhain (Samain)

Pronounced "SAR-wen" or "SHAH-vin" in Celtic, at this time great bonfires were lit, the death of summer was mourned, and a portion of the season's harvest was sacrificed to all the gods in tribute. This may have been the first festival historically, since with the harvests gathered and most of the livestock slaughtered in preparation for winter, food was plentiful.

In Irish myths this festival marked the day on which men triumphed over the gods, banished them to the territories under the earth (the Otherworld), and inherited the natural world. Irish myths and Classical writers both say that this was a time of generation and fertility that included human sacrifice and ritual sexual intercourse. On a more mundane level, it was also a time when Irish tribes assembled to install rulers and honor warriors, and to make laws.

Samhain belonged to neither the old year nor the new year, and was a time of great danger, when time and space were temporarily frozen and normal laws suspended. The barriers between the earth and the Otherworld were dissolved—Otherworld gods and spirits could walk on earth and humans could visit the Otherworld. The

dead were not "brought back from the dead" nor "reincarnated"—they stayed in their Otherworld form, but could see and be seen by mortals. They used this time to wreak vengeance on those in this world who had wronged them. Tricks and attacks by spirits or monsters lasted the whole 24 hours, not just the first evening.

### Solar Festivals

Archaeological evidence of the importance of winter solstice to the pre-Celtic cultures of Britain dates as far back as 3200 BC, and Stonehenge and other stone circles were definitely aligned with winter solstice (see the next section). But all available evidence indicates that Celts did not celebrate the solstices, the equinoxes, or Midsummer (which was imported by Anglo-Saxons and Vikings much later).

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## Shrines

Some sacred places were separated from the mundane world simply by means of some kind of barrier which enclosed the numinous area. Thus a piece of ground was designated as holy, and became a focus of communication with the supernatural world. The Celtic word for shrine or sanctuary was "nemeton".

While groves (see "Nature Worship, Trees" above) formed a natural boundary, many times this symbolic barrier was a square or circular wall or fence of tree trunks, forming an unroofed structure. Such structures were built as early as the 6th century BC. More shrines were built in the Iron Age, and while they tended to be buildings rather than fenced areas, they had no specific structure, so it is often hard to tell a shrine from a house. The number of temple-like shrines increased dramatically after Roman occupation.

Some 24 Celtic shrines have been identified in England :

- 17 were rectangular, and the doorway faces in the general direction of the rising sun in virtually all of them.
- Most could only hold about a dozen people, and 6 could only hold a single person; a few could hold up to 50 people.
- 13 were set in open countryside, requiring a special journey; of the rest, 9 were isolated from other buildings, and 6 were set apart by an enclosure.
- 13 had brooches, weapons, coins, animal bones, horse harnesses, and real or miniature weapons left as offerings. Food, drink, or clothing may have been left, but these would not show up in the archaeological record.
- Some sites had more than one shrine.

Some larger shrines show evidence that people were walking or dancing in a circle around a central point, sometimes marked with a large pole set in the ground. Several shrines in Gaul, dated from the 3rd to 1st centuries BC, were surrounded by a ditch and bank which was topped by a fence, measuring 100 to 150 feet per side, with a wooden building in the center. Several sites in Ireland also consist of a small building within an area delineated by ramparts, but with ditches on the inside (which provides little defensive advantage), and so may have been centers of ceremonial assemblies.

A 3rd century BC shrine in Gaul held a great central pit into which the sacrificed bodies of elderly oxen were placed for decomposition before the bones were carefully positioned in the surrounding ditch. Young pigs and lambs were killed and eaten in religious feasting, many human bones have been found, and 2000 ritually broken weapons were offered to the gods (see "Sacrifices, Pit Offerings" below). A 1st century BC shrine in Britain was used in a similar manner.

Another 3rd century BC Gallic shrine has arm and leg bones from over 1000 apparently healthy young individuals (aged 15 to 20) stacked in a crisscross manner to create four cubic monuments over 5 feet on each side.

A shrine built in Ireland in 95 BC was deliberately burned down shortly after it was built, and sealed beneath a great stone cairn (pile of rocks).

A late Iron Age British shrine is actually at the bottom of an 8 foot deep shaft dug into chalk, with a small chalk figurine placed into a niche in the wall.

"Viereckschanzen" (quadrangular earthwork) have been found from Britain to Bohemia, but their purpose is still uncertain. They may have been meeting places for rituals, ceremonies or festivals, because many of them have ritual pits (discussed below in "Sacrifices/Pit Offerings" below).

### The Celts and Stonehenge

The henges (stone circles) and barrows (hill tombs) in Britain and Ireland were built by the people who lived there long before the Celtic culture arrived from the continent. These people had stopped building henges and barrows by 1500 BC, and were no longer using them by 1200 BC, and the reasons for this are not entirely known. But Irish mythology believed them to be built by another race (that is, not by humans), and Celts usually avoided them, especially the great tombs. Later, as Celtic populations increased in Ireland and Britain, many of the barrows and henges were destroyed to reuse their building materials and to reclaim the land for farming, so the Celts evidently did not consider them sacred.

The myth that Stonehenge was built by Druids started in the 1600's, when the true age of Stonehenge was unknown. This idea then had some three centuries to flourish in the minds of the public before the true time-frames of Stonehenge and the Druids were determined. Another common belief is that the Celts must have at least held their rituals at these monuments, even if they did not build them. But if there had been any significant amount of ritual activity at these areas by the Celts, they would have left some archaeological evidence, and there is none.

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## Sacrifices

- "In Celtic temples and sacred grounds, a great amount of gold has been deposited as a dedication to the gods, and not a native of the country ever touches it because of their religious scruples, even tho the Celts are an exceedingly covetous people" - Diodorus (70-20 BC).

A sacrifice involves giving up something which is of value, in hopes that the recipient will look favorably upon the giver. The more valuable the offering, the more powerful the appeasement.

The Celts made offerings of tools, weapons, jewelry, coins, animals, and occasionally (in times of great need or great gratitude) humans. They were practical in their offerings, giving less valuable items when times were good, but increasing the value when things got worse.

The reasons for a sacrifice could be many. Besides general appeasement (to keep the universe running as it should), later evidence from Roman times indicates the normal range of human concerns, including appeals for good harvests, wealth, health, revenge, and justice.

Some of the items that were sacrificed were probably spoils of war, and offered in thanks of a successful campaign. When sacrificing an item, it was often ritually destroyed either so that the giver could no longer use

it, or to symbolically "kill" the item. This can include burning it, burying it in earth or water, breaking it, taking it apart, or combinations of these. All of these forms were practiced all across Europe long before the Celts appeared.

### Pit Offerings

Practiced across Europe and Britain since the Late Stone Age, these pits were usually grain storage pits that were no longer being used, but some were dug specifically for ritual purposes. Some of these pits are extraordinarily large, the largest being 8 feet in diameter and 120 feet deep.

In Britain, they usually contain pot shards, twigs of ash, wooden figures, and bones of humans, cows, dogs, birds, and horses. Sometimes food, currency and jewelry were left. Evidence at some pits indicates that some of the animal bones were the remains of a feast, usually cooked near the pit, which may have been part of a ritual. These pits were usually done carefully, infrequently, and contained high-quality items.

While the true reasons for such sacrifices may never be known, they suggest a ceremony giving general offerings to, or thanks to, or asking for the protection of, some underworld spirit. Some of them appear to be in consecrated areas, perhaps to enhance the sacredness of the area. In the case of disused grain storage pits, it may have been to placate the gods of the earth for intruding upon their domain (that is, for digging the pits) or to thank them for having watched over their food. Or it is possible that the offerings were meant to ensure the earth's fertility. Or perhaps something completely different.

### Water Offerings

- "The Gauls make offerings of treasures and spoils of war to sacred lakes" - Strabo (64 BC-24 AD).

Sacrifices to many forms of water (lake, river, marsh) were practiced in all parts of Europe as early as 1200 BC, long before the La Tene Celts. In Britain, the items offered included cauldrons, axes, swords, coins, sickles, harnesses, vehicles and vehicle fittings, pottery, gold bars, dress fasteners, earrings, brooches, bracelets, and humans. Sometimes miniature weapons were used, or weapons made of inferior materials, but some of the jewelry and weaponry is very finely worked. Many of the items are bent or broken (some of the coins were clipped to render them worthless). There are many water offerings found in Ireland as well.

There are interesting patterns to water sacrifices. For example, most of the wooden offerings in Gallic rivers were made of oak, while in England, sacrifices to rivers were only made in rivers that flowed east. Shields and vessels were generally left in bogs and pools, while weapons were left in rivers. Necklaces and torcs are almost never found in water, and mirrors are never found in water in Britain. These patterns obviously reflect the belief systems of the Celts, but it is hard to determine what they meant to them.

The reasons for water sacrifices could be many, including : the items belonged to someone who died or was buried in the water; to keep the value of remaining items high by their scarcity; to impress observers with the giver's wealth by throwing away valuables (something a chieftain would do); or as offerings to spirits. The spirit so honored could have been any of the gods, or a specific clan patron, or the spirit of the river, lake, or marsh receiving the gift (which might often be the tribe's goddess).

Did you ever make a wish and throw a coin into a fountain as a kid? That is probably a very distant echo of this ritual.

### Animal Sacrifice

Animal sacrifice, practiced all over the ancient world, can take two forms. Some parts of the animal (usually not the best parts) can be buried, burned, or left out as offerings while the rest is consumed by the community.

Or, the entire animal can be given to the gods, representing a much greater sacrifice on the part of the community.

Celtic animal sacrifices varied by the animal—oxen, bulls, and horses were left in an open pit to decay, and then their skulls or bones carefully placed somewhere else. Sheep and pigs were eaten as part of ritual feasts.

Virtually all Celtic animal sacrifices used domesticated species, possibly because sacrificing an animal that was hunted down was not the same as giving up something already owned. But the Celts were practical here, as well—most of the oxen sacrificed were very old, and probably of little use to the owner anymore.

### Human Sacrifice

The Classical sources make a big deal about the Celt's use of human sacrifice, but there is little archaeological evidence for massive amounts of Celtic ritual murder, nor is it mentioned in Irish myths (alho it could have been censored by the transcribing monks). It should be noted the Romans also practiced human sacrifice for religious purposes until it was outlawed in 97 BC, and even after that, they were still putting huge numbers of slaves and warriors to death in the Coliseum as "sport". They also continued to publicly execute the leaders of their conquered foes (which is essentially the same as a sacrifice), and they sacrificed children in rituals to summon the spirits of the dead. The Greeks had also used human sacrifice (especially young virgins) to appease the gods in their past, as well.

The Classical writers generally agree that the Celts sacrificed criminals and war prisoners when possible, but would use anyone when needed. They also all agree that human sacrifice was used only for divination, not to appease the gods. However, the Classical authors were probably all practicing propaganda against the Celts to some extent. One of these writers was the source of the story whereby many humans were stuffed into a gigantic wicker humanoid figure, and then burned to death, for which there is no other evidence.

To what extent (if any) the Celts practiced human sacrifice is still a subject of debate among scholars. Archaeological evidence is inconclusive, since there are many ways to kill someone without leaving any marks on the skeleton. And in examining archaeological evidence, care must be taken to distinguish death caused by ritual from rituals performed on the body after a natural death. Ancient Irish laws were generally opposed to capital punishment, which suggest that Ireland may not have been practicing human sacrifice by the Late Iron Age. Finally, Mela (50 AD) said that any tradition of human sacrifice among the Gallic Celts had ended long before his time (but that could have been due to Roman rule). Perhaps the other Classical writers wrote of gruesome Celtic sacrifices in dark forest groves because such worship in fearsome places was so alien and titillating to the ordered and urban life of their Mediterranean readers.

Even if a skeleton is found in a situation which strongly suggests sacrifice, there is usually no way to tell if it was a criminal, prisoner, victim of war, noble, or an average person. But excavations indicate that children may have been preferred for ceremonial dismemberment in Iron Age Britain.

The reasons for the sacrifice are sometimes hard to determine as well : it could be a dedication to a deity, part of a divination (see "Divination" below), thanks for good times, enhancement of the holiness of a shrine, or a plea to the gods for help in hard times. One interesting idea is that some victims may have been willing messengers to the gods ("when you get to the Otherworld, tell Lugh our tribe needs his help!").

### Lindow Man

In 1985, a body was found in a peat bog in England, extremely well preserved by the acidic water. Carbon dating indicates he died around 75 AD, plus or minus 100 years. The forensic evidence indicates that he was in very good shape physically, well fed, led an easy life (his beard and fingernails were manicured!) and had been neither laborer nor warrior nor bard, so he was probably a Druid.

His skull was smashed in three places, he was strangled, his jugular vein was severed, and he was left in a pool of water. This suggests that he was ritually sacrificed, possibly to three gods at once : first struck three times by an axe, then "hung" with a thrice-knotted sinew cord (which killed him), and finally symbolically drowned. The blood from his jugular was probably collected in a cauldron for another part of the ritual.

His last meal consisted of a piece of unleavened bread (like a pancake) made of wheat, barley, and rye, with one corner intentionally scorched. There were bits of charred heather, uncharred sphagnum moss, and a few grains of mistletoe pollen mixed in with the food as well. The presence of mistletoe may be an indication of a Druid ritual.

Interestingly, there were traditions practiced at Beltane up until the end of the 1800's in Britain where a pancake was roasted on a fire, then broken into many pieces, and one piece blackened with charcoal. Everybody would take a piece at random, and whoever got the blackened piece was symbolically sacrificed. There is also an Irish tradition involving the symbolic triple killing of the king at Samhain by burning, wounding, and drowning.

Such a sacrifice would not be done often, nor lightly. Around 61 AD, Roman legions had destroyed many Druid sanctuaries and killed over 80,000 Celtic warriors in battle while squashing Boudicca's rebellion. Many of the British Celts were so disrupted by this chaos that they were unable to plant spring crops, and thus many more were facing starvation by the end of the year. It is possible that Lindow man was sacrificed at this dire time, as a plea to the gods to halt or repel the Romans, but this is pure speculation.

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### Divination

- "Gallic Druids took victims to their temples and either stabbed them, shot them with arrows, or impaled them, using their death throes to foretell the future" - Diodorus (70-20 BC), Strabo (64 BC-24 AD).  
*Note : archery was not used at all by the early Gauls, so this is highly suspect.*
- "British Druids butcher their captives to use their entrails for divination" - Tacitus (55-118 AD).

One of the functions of the Druids was the control of supernatural forces by means of divination. This magical prediction made it possible to plan the best time for important events—going to war, sowing or reaping crops, electing a new king, etc. Druids were hailed by the Classical writers as being well versed in the arts of prophecy, augury, and divination.

A 2nd century BC Greek writer noted that the Celts would spend the night at the tomb of a great warrior to receive divinatory inspiration.

The Coligny calendar has days marked as "good" and "not good", an indication of the importance of divination to its makers, who were probably Druids.

Boudicca is said to have released a hare before her revolt to watch which way it ran—its movements were taken by the people as a good omen. Caesar (55 BC) said that the British had made the hare, the rooster and the goose illegal to eat, yet bred them. It seems likely that their purpose was for divination.

Irish myths tell of Druids interpreting clouds and large fires of ash wood for omens, especially before battle. Sounds and movements of ocean waves, as well as the flights of birds (augury), were also sources of revelations in some stories. Other methods included interpreting dreams, reading the patterns of sticks thrown on the ground, or the shapes of tree roots. One myth tells of a divination ritual in which a Druid gorges himself on the meat of a slaughtered bull, and then retires into a sacred sleep (possibly wrapped in the skin of the bull he just ate) to await dreams in which the future king would be identified. The bull was a favorite sacrifice in many of these stories.

To keep this practice in perspective, the Romans also practiced divination (especially before a battle), using the entrails of animals, and the flight of birds, among other methods. So the Druids were not doing anything new, but they did seem to have a reputation for being very good at it.

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### Death and the Otherworld

- "The Druids attach particular importance to the belief that the soul does not perish, but passes after death from one body to another" - Caesar (55 BC).
- "The Druids promote this belief so that their warriors will not be afraid to die, which probably explains their fierceness in battle" - Caesar (55 BC).
- "Funerals, considering the Gallic standard of living, are splendid and costly. Everything, even including animals, which the departed is supposed to have cared for when alive, is consigned to the flames. Slaves and retainers were also sacrificed until shortly before my arrival" - Caesar (55 BC).
- "The Celts believe that men's souls and the universe are indestructible, altho at times fire and water may prevail" - Strabo (64 BC-24 AD).
- "The Celts perceive men's souls to be immortal and that after a number of years, people live again, their souls inhabiting a new body" - Diodorus (70-20 BC).
- "The Celts regard death merely as an interruption in a long life, as a stage between one life and another" - Lucan (39-65 AD).
- "The Gauls burn or bury with the dead the things they were accustomed to in life" - Mela (50 AD).
- "The Celts celebrated birth with mourning and death with joy" - Philostratus (170-249 AD). *Note : if true, it was probably because the Otherworld was so much nicer than this one.*

Celtic religion taught that the soul was immortal, and that death was a change of place. Life went on in much the same manner in the magnificent Otherworld, which was a physically real place. All souls went there, no matter one's actions in this world. It is possible, altho not known for sure, that the Celts believed that when people died there, they were reborn in this world. The belief in the existence of the Otherworld was so strong that Classical writers noted that Celts would accept IOU's from each other which were to be repaid in the Otherworld should they fall in battle first. The presence of grave goods seems to imply that death was viewed as a journey into some new form of existence for which the dead needed to be prepared.

Early Classical writers noted a similarity between this belief in a literal personal immortality with the teachings of Pythagoras. This evolved in later writings to the Druids having been taught by a pupil of Pythagoras, or (even later) to Pythagoras having been taught by the Druids! But the only thing in common between the Celtic belief and Pythagoras' is that the soul survives after death.

#### The Otherworld

Irish myths provide one description of the Celtic Otherworld, the place where the gods reside, and where all humans go after they die. Whether this exact same view was held by other Celtic cultures is unknown.

It has two aspects—on the one hand, it is much like earth but vastly better. There is no pain, disease, or aging; it is full of music, magic, feasting, riches, enchantment and beauty, altho there is still combat between heroes (of course!). It is a timeless and happy place, a source of all wisdom, peace, beauty, harmony and immortality. A central concept is the feast, with inexhaustible cauldrons of mead and meat. Magical cauldrons abound in the Otherworld—cauldrons of never ending food, or of regeneration.

But the Otherworld is also full of somber and dangerous gods. It can be a very dangerous place, especially if visited by humans before they die. They do not age while in the Otherworld, but age instantly when they return to earth.

The location of the Otherworld varies—it may be an island in the western ocean (Atlantic), beneath the sea, or underground. It could be reached by a variety of means—by boat across the sea, or thru a lake or cave. Living humans were also lured to the Otherworld by enchanted animals.

A curious feature of the Otherworld is that the supernatural beings that live there require humans to do some things for them, usually battle (which is very convenient, as Celtic warriors loved to fight).

### Burial Practices

The few bodies that were buried between 700 BC and 400 BC in Britain may have been sacrifices, or people strongly feared or disliked by the community. The evidence indicates that most bodies were left out in the open to decay, altho bones of special people may have been kept, out of affection or for use in ritual.

Many bodies in Britain were buried after 400 BC, and these were buried with ceremony and dignity. Many grave goods were also included, indicating that the deceased would have need of them. These might include clay pots, brooches, mirrors (only with women), glass beads, and knives. Some men and women are buried with chariots, probably an indication that they were chieftains. Warriors were buried with their swords; some men had spears thrust into their graves, perhaps symbolizing death in battle or many battles fought well. Later, ceremonial pots with a leg of lamb were included in the grave, possibly the deceased's portion of a ceremonial dinner, or meant to accompany them to the Otherworld, indications of an expectation of an afterlife. Oddly enough, despite the undoubtedly large number of childhood deaths, no bones of children have been found.

Cremation was the standard practice of the Romans, and was soon adopted by the Gauls after Roman occupation. Cremation appeared in Britain during the early 1st century BC, probably imported from the continent. There are indications of feasting, drinking and gaming as part of the ceremonies, probably to celebrate the departed's arrival in the Otherworld, a much better place than this one.

### Rituals of the Head

The Celts believed the essence of a person was contained in the head and not the heart, which lead to some rituals involving human heads, with archaeological evidence to support this at a few sites. Human heads were sometimes displayed on posts, hillfort walls, or in niches in temple walls.

Celts took the heads of their slain enemies, and would offer them as sacrifices, or carefully preserve the heads of their most important enemies in cedar oil, and display them with pride to guests as concrete proof of their courage and skill in battle.

Classical writers and various inscriptions describe warriors with heads hanging from their horse's necks or saddles. Irish myths have many magical heads, particularly of superhuman heroes and kings, which provided protection and prophecy.

Heads may have been collected as a rite of initiation for young warriors, or as an attempt to increase one's own power (social and/or spiritual) by possessing the head of a courageous enemy.

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## Cauldrons

While the Celts used cauldrons as domestic cooking pots, they were also a significant item in Celtic ritual (as was true in Greece also). Cauldrons may have been used to either drown or collect the blood of sacrificial victims.

Ceremonial cauldrons were used as early as the Bronze Age, and many large cauldrons were associated with lakes or springs in the Iron Age. Their function as containers of liquid may explain why they were so often deposited as sacred offerings in water (see "Sacrifices, Water Offerings" above).

In Irish myths, cauldrons were traditionally associated with feasting, plenty, regeneration, and rebirth.

### The Gundestrup Cauldron

In 1891 a cauldron was found in Gundestrup Denmark, dated from around 100 BC. Approximately 16 inches tall and 28 inches in diameter, it is made from about 20 pounds of silver, and has 13 panels depicting deities and rituals, including an antlered god and horned serpent. It was built in sections (by at least five different artisans), which were then dismantled and "sacrificed" to a peat bog, possibly as thanks for a successful raid (see "Sacrifices, Water Offerings" above).

There is some question about how it ended up in Denmark, since its artistic style indicates that it was probably created somewhere in the area of modern-day Romania. And altho some animals shown on it are Mediterranean, it definitely depicts British weaponry and armor. It was most likely commissioned from eastern artisans by western Celts, then stolen by invading Danes much later.



Panel showing an antlered god (Kernunnos?) wearing a torc, holding a torc and a snake



Panel showing the wheel-bearing god



Panel showing (perhaps) a god dunking warriors in a cauldron of rebirth



## Conclusion

Hopefully, this summary has served to demonstrate both how rich and complex Celtic society was, and how little is definitely known about it. The best we can do is paint a picture with many different bits of information, each with only some truth to it, and hope that the resulting mosaic at least partially resembles the real thing.

Celts as a whole cannot be easily judged by today's standards. They had very complex social and legal systems, and were the artistic and technological equals to (and in some ways, betters of) those around them. They valued personal honor and the truth above all else. Their treatment of women, the sick, and the elderly was the best Europe had seen up to that time (and would not see again for almost two thousand years), and they obviously had a deep appreciation of and reverence for nature, music, poetry, religion, art, and craftsmanship.

On the other hand, they were proud and loud and temperamental, vain and greedy, fiercely competitive, extremely status-conscious, and often at war with their neighbors over petty disputes. They kept slaves, practiced human sacrifice (including children), saved the heads of their enemies as trophies, and raped women from other Celtic tribes. Their gods, as was true of most gods of that time (and often today, unfortunately), were not universal gods, but gods of their people, whose function was to protect their tribe and destroy their enemies.

Socially and technologically, they were basically the equals of other Mediterranean civilizations, altho running perhaps one or two hundred years behind Greece and Rome in terms of cultural sophistication and governmental organization.

Ultimately, Celtic religion was a combination of many elements that had been practiced for hundreds or even thousands of years all over Europe and the Mediterranean. Its one truly unique feature was the belief that the soul survived after death (altho even that concept had already been thought of by Pythagoras).

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"Women in Celtic Law and Culture", J. Thompson, 1996

All of the above sources are highly recommended for further reading! They present the evidence upon which this summary is based, and thoroughly and objectively discuss the pros and cons of the issues. Books in **bold** are good summaries with lots of pictures.

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Original ideas of the author include the concepts that homosexuality was commonly practiced only by the wandering mercenary groups, and that warriors who fought naked received more glory and prestige, and hence more status.

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