

Celts

Celts, a grouping of *Indo-European peoples of diverse ethnic origin recognised as sharing a common culture, reflected in their social and political institutions, their religious observances, and their languages. From around 1000 BC to 100 BC they spread out from their original territory, probably that area of present-day central Europe in which the border of southern Germany meets that of the Czech Republic and Austria, ranging eventually from Britain and Ireland to Spain, Transylvania, Galatia, and Italy. At c.500 BC, the beginning of the second period of the Iron Age, the La Tène period—so-named after a site discovered in the nineteenth century at Lake Neuchatel in Switzerland—the Celts begin to enter the written record in the works of Greek philosophers and historians. The oldest archaeological evidence relating to them comes from Hallstatt, Austria, and dates to c.700 BC. From c.500 BC, possibly because of technological advantages resulting from the use of iron, their expansion intensified. In c.400 BC Celtic tribes such as the Boii (whence Bohemia) began to make invasions into Italy where they captured and sacked Rome in 390 BC. Another group attacked Delphi in 279 BC, but by 192 BC Rome had established its supremacy over the Celtic territories of Cisalpine Gaul (northern Italy), and, in another seventy years, Transalpine Gaul, an area extending from the Rhine to the Atlantic. Celtic peoples had settled in Britain from the fifth century BC, and Caesar records the emigration of Belgic Celtic tribes to Britain as having occurred in the early first century BC. It is not possible to say when the Celts first began to immigrate to Ireland; widely differing dates have been suggested but it is only from about the third century BC that it is reasonable to refer to a Celtic presence in Ireland. The Celts who settled in Ireland found before them a culture which had existed for some two thousand years; its social organization had permitted a wide range of trading contacts with Europe and North Africa, and a high degree of ceremonial in the burial of their dead, as well as ornamentation and pottery. Of the pre-Celtic language or languages of Ireland nothing is known.

Although in c.300 BC the territory occupied by Celtic tribes was very extensive, from Ireland to Asia Minor, they cannot be said to comprise an empire, in that their tribes, while sharing to a considerable extent in a cultural unity, lacked, nor did they ever seek to impose, political or military centralization. By the first century AD the Romans had conquered Britain, and, according to the Roman historian Tacitus, intended to annex Ireland as well, but this did not occur, with the consequence that, until the invasion of the *Vikings in the ninth and the *Normans in the twelfth century, Celtic civilization and culture survived intact in Ireland,

whereas the Gaulish language was virtually extinct by 500 AD. For this reason the most significant sources for Celtic civilization and culture are the testimonies of classical authors, writing mostly about the Continental Celts; Romano-Celtic sculpture and archaeology; and, most extensive of all, early Irish literature.

In Festus Rufus Avienus's *Ora Maritima* (written c.300 AD but quoting much earlier sources) there are references to Celtic tribes trading in the North Sea in the sixth century BC and the name of Ireland is given as 'Hiera' [see *Eriu] to which he assigns the Greek meaning 'sacred'. Plato (c.350 BC) contrasts the temperateness of the Spartans in drinking wine with the Celts, who are known for their drunkenness. Aristotle (c.330 BC) records their reckless ferocity of in battle, illustrating their lunatic rages by referring to them fighting the waves; he also says that they openly accept homosexuality. *Druids are first mentioned in c.200 BC. Polybius, the Greek historian, writing in the second century BC, describes the Celtic custom of going into battle naked, their head-hunting, and their recklessness in battle. The first century BC Greek philosopher Posidonius, in a commentary preserved by later writers, provides the fullest account of the continental Celts. He records their practice of fighting from chariots, with the warrior driven by the charioteer, as corroborated throughout the *Ulster cycle. He describes their valour in battle, their custom of fighting naked, and their enthusiasm for single combat, as in **Táin Bó Cuailnge*. Their propensity to swear by the deeds of their ancestors, and to proclaim their own martial abilities is attested, as is their practice of severing the heads of enemies and retaining them as trophies—all activities described in the *Ulster cycle. Posidonius also recounts their fondness for speaking in riddles [see **Tochmarc Emire*] and their love of learning. He distinguishes three divisions in their professional classes, closely related to a similar set of distinctions in Irish tradition: the druid, the seer [Irish fili—see *bardic poetry], and the bard. It is difficult to distinguish between his accounts of the functions of seers and druids; the former class may have been a subordinate or specialized section of the latter. In Irish tradition the seers/filid, after the coming of Christianity, took over most of the surviving status of the druid, and accommodated themselves to the new religion; while the bards seem to have become a less influential and more specialized section of the fili class. Nevertheless the continuity between early Irish literary and learned tradition and the culture of the Iron Age Continental Celts as attested by classical writers is striking. Celtic society, as with most Indo-European societies, was patriarchal. Its religion [see *mythology] associated deities with rivers, wells, and trees; and some of the rivers seem to have been accorded divine status, such as the Boyne and the Seine, which had a shrine to 'dea Sequana' at its source. The oak was sacred, and there were animal-gods, such as Tarvos in Gall (Irish: tarbh), and the mare Epona [Irish: ech, reflecting the p/q

differentiation—see *Celtic languages]. They believed in an afterlife, which was why, according to the classical writers, they showed such disregard for death in battle. They were said to practise human sacrifice, and predictions may have been made from the victim's entrails. This practice, said to have been conducted at *Samhain, was associated with the idol Crom Cruach whose cult St. Patrick suppressed. Fasting against an enemy, a widespread Indo-European custom, was sometimes used to obtain redress of a wrong. See T.G.E. Powell, *The Celts* (1958); Jan Filip, *Celtic Civilization and its Heritage* (1960); Alwyn and Brinsley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (1961); Joseph Raftery, ed., *The Celts* (1964); Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (1967); Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms* (1967); Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (1970); and Barry Cunliffe, *The Celtic World* (1979).