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Opening Extract from...

The Celts

Written by Dr Alice Roberts

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INTRODUCTION

SETTING OUT

I'm about to set sail on an adventure that will take me right across Europe, from its wild, western Atlantic coasts to its eastern edge and beyond. It's a journey that will take me back, deep into the past, into mysterious prehistory, in search of ancestors who still help us to construct our identities today – especially those of us who live near that storm-beaten Atlantic fringe. I'm going to explore a world where battles were fought with the mighty Mediterranean empires of Greece and Rome, where warriors were worshipped as gods, and where princes and princesses were buried with dazzling gold treasure. It's a world shrouded in mystery, where watery places held sacred significance – where swords and shields were thrown into rivers, huge cauldrons sunk in lakes, and the bodies of kings, slain as sacrifices, were consigned to bogs. I'm going in search of the Iron Age ancestors we call the Celts; I want to find out more about their lives, their art, their technology, their knowledge and beliefs. But I'm also setting out to discover how, in just the last ten years, our understanding of the Celts has been shaken to its foundations. The way we see the Celts is being completely transformed by a radical new theory.

The Celts are fascinating and enigmatic. They have been described as the first civilization of Europe, living to the north and west of the Alps. But one of the reasons I find them so intriguing is that they exist right on the edge of history, and we're still struggling to understand them and to find out who they really were.

They are the first northern European ancestors we know by name – but even the name is a problem. 'Celts' was a word used by the Greeks and Romans to refer to the barbarians (as they saw them) of central and western Europe. Some archaeologists have suggested that we shouldn't even use this name – that it's an unhelpful way of lumping together lots of disparate, ancient populations that were never really linked in any meaningful way. But other experts continue to use 'Celts' as a term to describe the people of central and western Europe, who do seem to have been united by some aspects of culture – most importantly, perhaps, by language. I think that's a reasonable definition, so let's start by using the term 'Celts' in this way, even if we decide later that the name shouldn't be applied quite so widely – if at all. This debate is part of the enigma; right from the outset, the Celts are proving difficult to define.

Even once we've cautiously accepted this working definition of the Celts, they're still tricky to pin down. We must piece together their story from fragments, glimpses and half-remembered images and tales. They are Iron Age people – their story spans most of the first millennium BC, from the end of the Bronze Age to the arrival of Romans in Celtic lands. They left virtually no written records, but they made stunning art, knew the secrets of metallurgy and had their own myths and religion.

The further you go back in time, the more history starts to fade. It gets sparser; you find occasional reports of mysterious people from far-flung and almost mythical places, and then . . . history runs out completely. We come up against the very definition of prehistory – people living in that distant past didn't write down anything about their understanding of the world, their rituals or their feelings. They didn't even write down anything about their everyday lives – their day-to-day existence, their families, their societies, their daily transactions. They didn't write down anything. And so you're left looking around for clues – objects, bones, the traces of walls and ditches – in fact, any physical traces that might give you a chance of finding out what people were like, and what they were doing with their lives. Archaeology drags up this evidence for us from deep underground or underwater – from ploughed fields, bogs, graves and riverbeds.

Some of that archaeological evidence reveals mundane but important details of day-to-day life in Iron Age Europe. But among those fragments of material culture are items that provide us with a wonderful, visceral, tangible link to those ancestors – including jewellery, decorated cauldrons and furniture, and sculpture. This ancient art is quite different from its modern counterpart. Celtic art has evolved considerably over time. Modern Celtic art, with flowing, organic lines, stylized animals and complicated knotwork, draws its inspiration largely from the illuminated pages of mediaeval manuscripts and from carved stone crosses. In fact, it's that Christian art of Britain and Ireland in the seventh and eighth centuries AD which was first described – in the mid-eighteenth century – as 'Celtic art'. But it does seem that this mediaeval

expression of Celtic art was itself a reimagining of an ancient style. The Iron Age 'original' is – to me – much more interesting, strange and visually arresting.

Together with these physical traces of the Celts themselves, we have indirect clues, including the persistence of stories, which, though changed by the passage of time, have recognizably ancient roots. The wonderful, strange and vibrant myths of the Celts have come down to us through the Irish and Welsh tales that were part of an ancient oral tradition, and which were finally committed to paper in the Middle Ages. Those stories give us a glimpse of Iron Age society, and still have the power to excite and thrill us today.

And there are contemporary historical accounts to turn to – not penned by the Celts themselves, of course, but by their literate neighbours. The Greeks and Romans met the Celts – initially, on voyages of discovery and, later, in the context of military campaigns – and wrote about them. Greek and Roman writers offer us precious glimpses of the Celtic world, providing us with compelling portraits of the inhabitants of that barbarian hinterland beyond their civilized frontiers.

Through the eyes of the classical historians, geographers and generals, the Celts appear from that prehistoric mist. We learn about their predilection for human sacrifice and head-hunting, their penchant for wearing trousers and their barbaric habit of drinking undiluted wine. Plato described the Celts as warlike and hard drinking, while Aristotle wrote that they would send their children outside with few clothes on, to harden them up, and that they would punish men who grew too fat. But we also glimpse individual characters. There's the fearless Celtic warrior, striding naked into battle, wearing only

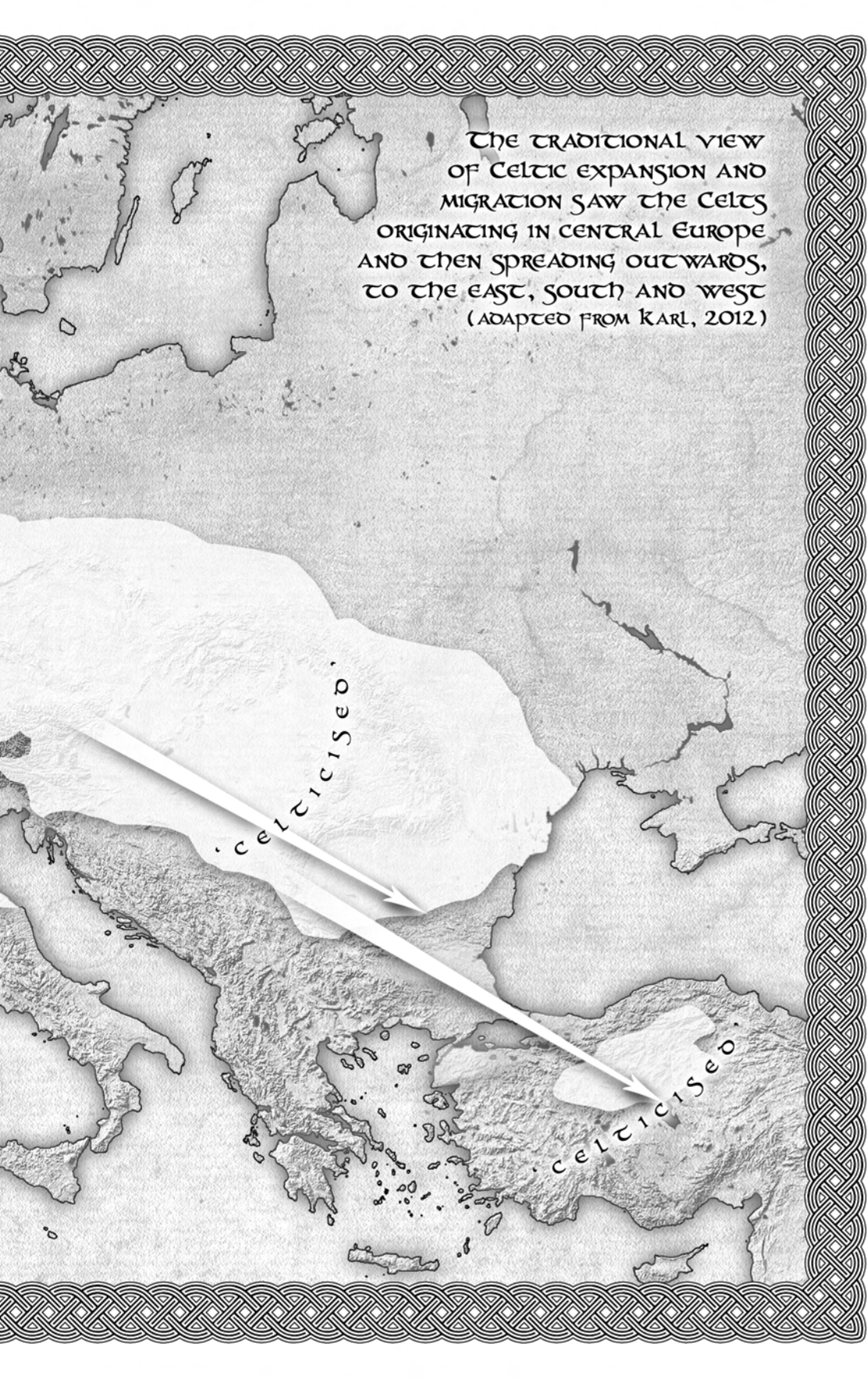
paint on his body and a gold torc around his neck. We see the warrior returning from the latest bloody battle, the heads of his enemies dangling from his horse's neck. We see the white-robed Druid harvesting mistletoe in the moonlight; fierce women, painted from head to toe in blue woad; and the warrior queen, riding in her chariot, her cloak billowing.

These images are indeed compelling – but how much can we trust such visions of the Celts? We must remember that each and every one of these accounts was written from the perspective of an outsider. I wonder how much they are coloured by a need and a desire to portray the Celts as barbaric, strange and almost the stuff of myths – or whether there might be a grain of truth in them.

I want to get closer to the real Celts, to know who they were and how they lived. I want to test those classical reports against the physical evidence uncovered by archaeologists. I also want to know more about the threads that connect us, today, with the Celtic past – the wonderful stories, beautiful art and, of course, modern Celtic languages. These three different aspects of culture appear to represent ideas that have survived through the centuries and millennia: echoes of an ancient – but not forgotten – past.

Language provides a crucial link with the past and, on the Atlantic fringe of Europe, there are living languages that form the basis of the modern Celtic identity – in Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Brittany. Cornish, spoken until very recently, was also a Celtic language. The similarities between these languages suggest that they came from a 'common ancestor'. There's something really intriguing about these languages and their ancient heritage, something that connects us with


N
'celticised'
'celtic origin'
'celticised'
'celticised'
Areas of Celtic influence



The traditional view of Celtic expansion and migration saw the Celts originating in central Europe and then spreading outwards, to the east, south and west (adapted from Karl, 2012)

the very distant past and seems important in our understanding of our regional and national identities today.

Although the Celtic languages are now restricted to the western fringe of Europe, place names right across Europe preserve a memory of a much more diffuse Celtic past. The Welsh word for water, *dwr*, is echoed in the names of rivers right across Europe – the Adur in Sussex, the Dwrdy in France, the Oder in Germany, the Turie in the Czech Republic and the Tur in Hungary. The Celtic languages spring as a branch from the large Indo-European language family – which includes Sanskrit, Greek and English.

The traditional story of the Celts sees them starting out in central Europe, then spreading east, south and west, carrying their distinctive material culture – and their language – with them. This model was based on nineteenth-century archaeology, interpreted in the light of the classical accounts. By the end of the twentieth century, archaeological evidence that didn't fit with the standard model was already stacking up and, in the past ten years, another significant challenge has appeared from the study of ancient Celtic languages. Under the old paradigm, Celtic languages reach the Atlantic fringe of Europe late in the story, eventually evolving into modern Welsh, Scots Gaelic, Irish and Breton. But the new challenges to this old view lead us to question that idea of a relatively recent arrival of Celtic in the west. Could it be possible that the Celtic language was here, on the Atlantic fringe of Europe, much earlier – perhaps even before the Iron Age? Linguistics provides us with clues, delving into the links between modern and ancient languages. And it's becoming clear that the traditional story of Celtic origins and spread is not just too simple – it's wrong.

Culture (including language) and genes do not travel around the world in a tightly bound package. If people are moving around plenty and sharing ideas, culture can spread without any significant permanent migrations or invasions taking place. On the other hand, genetics should be able to tell us about large shifts in population, and perhaps even about more subtle movements – migrations of just a few people, perhaps – which could have led to large cultural changes. Celtic languages help to underpin a strong sense of Celtic identity today, but is there a genetic link as well – right back to prehistoric populations in this north-western corner of Europe? In England, did the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons wipe out Celtic genes as well as Celtic language? Genetics may still have some way to go before it can provide full answers to these questions – if, indeed, it ever can – but it can certainly begin to provide us with another perspective on who the Celts were – and are.

Research from fields as diverse as history, archaeology, linguistics and genetics is providing us with new and surprising insights. We can turn to evidence that takes us right inside the Celtic world, bringing us closer to the ancient Celts and their experience of life in Iron Age Europe. But, as our picture of the Celts is becoming more rich and detailed, the standard model of Celtic origins is starting to fray around the edges. In fact, it's worse than that – the emerging new picture turns our old understanding of the Celts on its head.

Celtic studies is undergoing a paradigm shift, providing us with a whole new perspective on the European Iron Age. In the process of re-examining the evidence, while old theories are being torn down and new ones are being constructed,

we'll get a chance to see the Celts as never before. We'll get a clearer, brighter and more truthful picture of our prehistoric ancestors.

To understand why the picture is changing so radically, we need to go right back to the evidence – to look at the archaeological discoveries, the histories and the new insights from linguistics. It will be useful to explore sites and discoveries that were important to the traditional view of Celtic origins and spread, but then we'll need to dig deeper and go further afield, to see just how new evidence and new perspectives have shaken up that old story. Starting in what used to be thought of as the centre of the Celtic world – in central Europe – I'll then track the story of the Celts as far east as Turkey, and along the western Atlantic fringe of Europe, in Britain, Ireland, France and Iberia.

I know that this journey in search of the Celts is going to be far from straightforward. I know that the trail will twist and turn, and also that I'll be wading into an extremely controversial area. Indeed, my friend, the historian, Neil Oliver, has called it a '*C*-word'. The Celts are dangerous – too slippery to hold; too hot to handle. I don't care. I want to grasp the Celts, their culture and their origins, and I'm prepared to get my fingers burned. If I manage to unravel some of this mystery, it will be worth it. These are our ancestors, and it's time to find them.

Celtic Timeline

BC	
4500	Approximate beginning of the Neolithic in Britain, with farming adopted alongside hunting and gathering, and the first pottery
3200	Approximate beginning of the Bronze Age in Europe, with metalworking in the Aegean; earliest writing appears in the form of pictograms
2500	Approximate beginning of Bronze Age in Britain and Ireland
2300	Amesbury archer buried near Stonehenge
2200	Completion of Stonehenge (approx.)
2000	Domestication of the horse (approx.)
1800	First large-scale copper mines dug in Britain
1800–1500	Early precursors of alphabetic script appear in Bronze Age inscriptions in Egypt and Palestine
1500	Metal hoards appear in Britain and Ireland
1400	Gold bar torcs originate in Ireland
1300	Approximate beginning of Urnfield culture in central Europe
1200	Phoenician alphabet develops
1200	Iron production starts in Anatolia

1200–1150	Late Bronze Age collapse in the Eastern Mediterranean region. This is also the period which forms the setting of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* epic poems, written down some four centuries later
1200–1000	Bronze Ballintober swords manufactured in the British Isles
1100	Increasing use of iron across Europe
800	Approximate date for the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*
800	Approximate date of the transition from Bronze to Iron Age in central and western Europe; gradual phasing in of the use of iron between 800 and 500 BC in the British Isles
753	Traditional date for the founding of Rome
750	Urnfield culture replaced by Hallstatt culture (approx.)
740	Greek script develops from Phoenician script
700–600	Earliest Tartessian inscriptions in southwest Portugal
700–600	Etruscans and Greeks establish trading posts in Mediterranean – including Greek colony of Massalia
653	Rise of Persian Empire
650	Land along the Danube becomes increasingly heavily farmed with irrigation channels dug in the area of Heuneburg
600	Mud-brick walls built at Heuneburg
583	Bettelbühl Princess buried
540	Destruction of the mud-brick walls at Heuneburg
530–500	Hecataeus of Miletus pens his Periegesis highlighting the Celtic cities of the Mediterranean
500	Transition from Halstatt to La Tène culture in central Europe

500–400	Glauberg Prince burial
499–449	Persian wars with the Greeks
470/469	Birth of Socrates
450–400	Heuneburg fort abandoned, also Mont Lassois and Burgundy
430–400	Herodotus writes his *Histories*
387	Celts, led by Brennus, sack Rome
338	Greece under Macedonian rule
336	Alexander becomes king of Macedonia
335	Alexander the Great receives Celtic ambassadors in the Balkans
334	Celts and Romans sign treaty of Senones in northern Italy
331	Alexander the Great defeats Darius III of Persia in the Battle of Gaugamela, completing his conquest of Persia
325	Pytheas of Massalia voyages to Britain
323	Death of Alexander the Great at Babylon
300–200	Traditional date for the manufacture of the Gundestrup cauldron (though recent analysis suggests it may date to as late as 300 AD)
280	Celts ally with Thracians and attack Macedonians
278	King Nichomedes I of Bithynia encourages Celts to settle in Galatia in Turkey
277	Four thousand Celtic mercenaries employed by Ptolemy II of Egypt
263	First Punic War between Rome and Carthaginian army including 3,000 Celts
233	King Attalus I of Pergamum commissions the statue of The Dying Gaul (later copied by the Romans) to commemorate his victory over the Galatians

217	Hannibal's invasion of Italy, with an active alliance from the Celts
202	Scipio Africanus defeats Hannibal at Battle of Zama
189	Manlius' campaign against the Galatians and the destruction of Gordion
149–146	Third Punic War between Rome and Carthage, ending with the Sack of Carthage
146	The Greek historian Polybius writes his *Histories* (approx.)
146	The Battle of Corinth and the Roman conquest of Greece
129	Roman conquest of Turkey
121	Roman armies enter Gaul for the first time
75	Approximate date for the burial of the Snettisham Hoard
55–54	Julius Caesar's expeditions to Britain
52	Battle of Alesia, Romans defeat Gaulish army of Vercingetorix and end of Celtic dominance of western Europe
30	Approximate date when Livy starts his *History of Rome*

AD

23–24	The Greek geographer Strabo finishes writing his *Geography*
43	Roman invasion of Britain, led by Claudius
60–61	Boudican revolt
128	Hadrian's Wall completed
300–400	Earliest Irish writings in the form of Ogham inscriptions

383	Roman troops withdrawn from the north and west of Britain
410	Traditional date for the end of Roman rule in Britain as Emperor Honorius rejects British request for military assistance to resist Germanic attacks, and Rome is sacked by the Germanic Visigoths
519	Cerdic crowned the first Anglo-Saxon king of Wessex, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*
1100	The first known copy of the Irish *Book of the Dun Cow*
1350–1410	The *White Book of Rhydderch* and the *Red Book of Hergest* – earliest Welsh manuscripts containing the stories of the Mabinogion