

Who Are the Celts And Why Should I Care?



Who are the Celts? Aren't they a basketball team? Don't they all look like Merlin and go around casting spells and muttering mystical prophecies? The Celts (pronounced with a hard "C", unlike the basketball team) are a people who dominated much of Europe from approximately 900 to 50 BCE (Before Common Era) and survive today in the far west of Europe. At their broadest expanse, they had settled lands ranging from modern-day Ireland to Turkey and Scotland to Spain. A defining characteristic of the Iron Age Celts was their use of the Hallstatt and, later, La Tène artistic styles, which are named after two sites of major Celtic archaeological finds. Discussing the ancient Celts is complicated by the fact that they left few written records. Some scholars argue that the ancient Celts most correctly formed a linguistic group, meaning they all spoke related languages. However, they shared many similarities in social structure, religion, and general customs, and as such they are often treated as a cultural group as well. Because they lived over such broad ranges of space and time, the various Iron Age Celtic tribes differed in many ways, but we can be certain about some of their common traits.

We know that they were a warlike people who lived mainly by pastoralism, or the raising of livestock, and farming. Cattle were so important to the Iron Age Celts that their wealth was measured by how many cattle they owned. Cattle-raiding was a very common practice among the ancient Celts, and there was frequent fighting between tribes. Iron Age Celts fought primarily with swords, shields, and spears. In certain locations and periods they also used chariots in battle. Chariots could be moved around the battlefield with ease. One warrior would drive each chariot, carrying a second to and from the enemy. Iron Age Celts had a class system by which the population may have been divided into four groups: druids/vates/bards, warriors/nobles, freemen, and slaves. Women could belong to any of these classes. There are numerous accounts of female warriors and druids. Celtic women enjoyed much more freedom and status in ancient times than did those in contemporary classical societies.



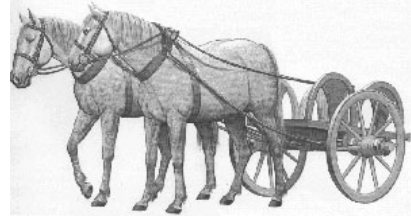
As warlike as they were, the Iron Age Celts valued aesthetics highly. They were known throughout the classical world for their love of personal ornamentation including earrings, bracelets, and torques, which were solid, metal neckbands. Many ancient Celtic artistic motifs, such as spirals, triskeles, and intertwining plant and animal designs, are still apparent in modern Western arts and design. Although the Iron Age Celts left very few written records, they were by no means an uneducated people. Their druids and bards kept and passed down massive oral histories and memorized and composed epic poems, stories, and songs to entertain people and keep their traditions alive. Bards were highly respected for their work. They provided the entertainment at the lavish feasts held by Iron Age Celtic rulers. The hosts of these events made their wealth apparent by their profuse hospitality.

The ancient Celts believed in a pantheon of gods and goddesses. Different tribes preferentially worshipped different deities, many of which were associated with the

features of the local environment, such as springs, wells, and rivers. Prayers and offerings were often made at these sites. The ancient Celts believed in an afterlife and that heroes would pass on after death to an otherworldly place of eternal light and warmth that varied in description but was often considered to be an island in the west. They also believed in reincarnation and the movement of souls between this world and other, mythical realms. The druids, about whom there are many common misperceptions, were the clerics and professionals of Celtic society. They were the historians, judges, healers, poets, and priests of their tribes and were revered by the people.

Becoming a druid often took twenty years of study.

The progressive marginalization of the Iron Age Celts resulted largely from Roman expansion. The ancient Celtic approach to warfare emphasized personal bravery and glory. In contrast, Roman notions of combat stressed organization and discipline. Individualism and intertribal conflict resulted in the failure of the ancient Celts to present a united defense against the Roman invaders. The Romans gradually overcame the Celtic tribes or drove them northward and westward. Nevertheless, the modern inhabitants of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Brittany, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, and Galicia (north of Portugal) survive as the descendants of the ancient Celts. Celtic languages are still spoken in all but one of these countries today.



Though the Iron Age Celts lived long ago, they have left imprints on the modern world in many ways. Most Americans of European heritage have at least some Celtic ancestry and many of our common customs are based on Celtic beliefs. The custom of throwing a coin into a well for good luck is based on the Celtic practice of tossing valuables into lakes and pools to petition the gods for help. The idea that three is a magic number reflects the tripartite deities and images ubiquitous in Celtic mythology and art. Some of our modern holidays have Celtic elements as well. Halloween originated as the festival of *Samhain*, the Celtic New Year and a time when the dead were believed to be able to return to this world. Mistletoe is hung during the Christmas season because of its former significance as one of the plants most sacred to the druids. Ancient Celtic myths and artistic forms continue to be enjoyed and reformulated today and are significant elements of the cultural heritage of the West and the world.

Sources

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