

# Who We Are #14 — Ancient Celts



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Statue of Vercingetorix, the Gallic/Celtic warrior-king

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*Celts Were One of the Principal Indo-European Peoples Who Founded Europe  
Celts Were Fierce Warriors, Master Craftsmen  
Roman Conquest Drowned Celtic Europe in Blood*

IN THE LAST FEW installments we have dealt with those Indo-European peoples which, after leaving their homeland north of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, between the Urals and the Dnieper, invaded regions of the world heavily populated by alien races. Some — the Aryans, Kassites, Mitanni, Hittites, Phrygians, and Philistines — went into the Middle East, conquered the natives, and then gradually sank down into them through racial mixing over the course of millennia.

Others — the Achaeans, Dorians and Latins — went southwest, into the Greek and Italian peninsulas, conquered the aboriginal Mediterraneans already there, and founded the great civilizations of Classical antiquity. Although the racial differences between them and the natives were not as great as for those who went into the Middle East, mixing took its toll of these Indo-Europeans as well, and they gradually lost their original racial character.

## Old Europe

A similar fate eventually befell many of those — the Macedonians, Dacians, Illyrians, Thracians, and others — who settled in the Balkan area north of the Greeks, in that portion of southeastern Europe which, like the Mediterranean coastal areas, had earlier been settled by Neolithic Mediterraneans and where the pre-Indo-European civilization we have called Old Europe developed. In those portions of Old Europe in which the Mediterranean population density was high, the Indo-European invaders lost much of their original racial quality through intermixture. In other parts of Old Europe the racial balance was more favorable to the Indo-Europeans, and mixture with the Mediterraneans did not have such profound effects.

But there were large areas of Europe which were never penetrated to any significant degree by Mediterraneans from the south during Neolithic times. The Cro-Magnon race, whose population was everywhere quite sparse, remained undisturbed in much of northern and western Europe until the arrival of Indo-European Nordics.

### **Four Indo-European Peoples**

The Indo-Europeans who invaded these latter parts of Europe were able to remain racially pure, to a much greater extent than their cousins who invaded the more southerly and easterly regions, even to the present day. They established, in effect, a new Indo-European heartland in northern Europe. We shall look at four great divisions of these Indo-European peoples: the Celts, Germans, Balts, and Slavs.

These divisions are distinguished one from another by language, geography, and time of appearance on the stage of world history, as well as by their subsequent fates. But one salient fact should be kept in mind throughout the individual treatments of the Celts, Germans, Balts, and Slavs which follow: they are all branches from the same trunk.

Their languages all stem ultimately from a single Proto-Indo-European tongue, which formed at a time when all their ancestors lived together in the original Indo-European homeland in the steppes and forests of southern Russia. Since the departures of the various groups from this homeland at various times, the original tongue evolved in different directions, both through the normal processes of linguistic change with time and through admixture with the languages of the various non-Indo-European peoples with whom they subsequently came into contact.

### **Indo-Europeans Were Nordic**

And both the fossil remains and the eyewitness accounts of Classical authors confirm that all these Indo-European peoples were racially Nordic. Because they settled in different areas after leaving the original homeland, and because they subsequently mixed with different races and to different extents, there are noticeable differences in various racial characteristics among their descendants today. But originally, Celt, German, Balt, and Slav were indistinguishably Nordic.

The Celts were the first group to make an impact on the Classical world, and so we will deal with them first. The “C” may be pronounced either with an “s” sound, the result of French influence, or with a “k” sound. The latter was the original pronunciation.)

### **From Hungary to Ireland**

The reason the Celts interacted with the Greeks and Romans before the other groups did is that their wanderings took them farthest south. They invaded and settled in a great crescent stretching across central Europe from eastern Hungary

and Czechoslovakia through Austria, southern Germany, Switzerland, and France into the British Isles. At the eastern and western ends of their range, respectively, isolated bands of Celts penetrated into central Asia Minor and the Iberian peninsula, while in the center quite substantial numbers crossed the Alps into northern Italy.

The Celtic languages have survived only at the extreme western end of the Celtic lands: Brittany, Wales, Scotland's western Highlands, the Hebrides, and a few areas on the west coast of Ireland. Elsewhere the tongues of later Indo-European invaders Romans, Germans, and Slavs have replaced the original Celtic.

## **Celtic Heritage**

Nevertheless, all the European peoples living today in those regions once settled by the Celts share, in greater or lesser degree, the Celtic racial heritage. The Roman conquest of southeastern Europe, Gaul, and Britain destroyed the greater part of Celtic culture, as well as doing an enormous amount of racial damage; the effects of the later German and Slavic incursions were largely limited to linguistic and other cultural changes.

But the Celts themselves, as much as anyone else, were responsible for the decline of their racial fortunes. They settled in regions of Europe which, although not so heavily Mediterraneanized as Greece and Italy, were much more so than the German, Baltic, and Slavic areas. And, as has so often been the case with the Indo-Europeans, for the most part they did not force the indigenous populations out of the areas they conquered, but made subjects of them instead.

Thus, many people who think of themselves as "Celts" today are actually more Mediterranean than Celtic. And others, with Latin, Germanic, or Slavic names, are actually of nearly unmixed Celtic descent.

## **Celtic Origins**

In this installment we will look at the origins of the Celts and at their interaction with the Romans. In later installments we will deal with them again, when we look at the Germanic and Slavic peoples. There is an unavoidable arbitrariness involved in tracing the Celts back to their origins. In the beginning there was nothing to distinguish them from the other waves of mounted Nordic warriors who swept into Europe from the east over a period of thousands of years. Later they were a distinct people, with linguistic and other cultural traits which distinguished them from Germans and other Indo-Europeans. But the transition was gradual, making it difficult to assign a definite date to the origin of the Celts.

## **Unetice Culture**

For some time prior to 2,000 B.C. groups of Indo-Europeans collectively known to archeologists as the "Battle-axe People" had been settling in east-central Europe, in

the eastern part of the Celtic range described above. By 1,800 B.C. a well-developed Bronze Age culture, named after the Bohemian village of Unetice, near Prague, where archeologists have dug up many typical artifacts, had been established.

By 1,500 B.C. the Unetice culture, under the impact of a further influx of Battle-axe People from the east, had been transformed into the Tumulus culture, so called from the typical burial mounds associated with it. These burial mounds were similar to the kurgans which covered graves in the old Indo-European heartland. The builders of the Tumulus culture expanded it beyond the range of the older Unetice culture, shifting its center westward into Bavaria. Elements extended as far east as Hungary, however.

## **Proto-Celts**

By 1,200 B.C. the Tumulus culture had given way to the Urnfield culture, in which mound burials were replaced by cremations and the subsequent burial of the ashes in ceramic urns. The Urnfield culture had spread, by 1,000 B.C., over much of eastern and central Europe and had crossed the Rhine to the west and the Alps to the south. Most archeologists agree that the people who spread this culture were at least proto-Celts.

Throughout this period of cultural change and expansion, new immigrants continued to arrive from the east, playing a major role in the progression from Unetice to Tumulus to Urnfield. Finally, around 800 B.C., the Bronze Age Urnfield culture gave way to a new, Iron Age culture, named after the Austrian village of Hallstatt, where archeologists have uncovered many typical tools, weapons, and skeletal remains. The Hallstatt burial practice was a partial reversion to the more Typically Indo-European form of the earlier Tumulus culture.

## **Celtic Iron Age**

The Iron Age Hallstatt people were fully Celtic, and many archeologists regard 800 B.C. as an approximate date for the birth of the Celtic people and culture. Immigration from the east continued after 800 B.C., however, and so did Celtic cultural change and expansion.

By about 500 B.C. the Hallstatt culture had evolved into the La Tène culture, named after an archeological site on Lake Neuchatel, in Switzerland. The La Tène culture spread throughout the entire Celtic range, as far west as Ireland. On the continent it lasted only until the Roman conquest of most of the Celtic lands, but it survived in Ireland into the early Middle Ages.

## **Fastidious, Fair, and Fierce**

The early Celts were not literate, and we are, therefore, dependent on Classical authors for much of what we know about Celtic mores, lifestyles, and behavior, as well as the physical appearance of the Celts themselves. The fourth-century

Byzantine writer, Ammianus Marcellinus, drawing on reports from the first century B.C., tells us that the Celts (or Gauls, as the Romans called them) were fastidious, fair, and fierce:

The Gauls are all exceedingly careful of cleanliness and neatness, nor in all the country ... could any man or woman, however poor, be seen either dirty or ragged.

Nearly all ... are of a lofty stature, fair and of ruddy complexion: terrible from the sternness of their eyes, very quarrelsome, and of great pride and insolence. A whole troop of foreigners would not be able to withstand a single Gaul if he called his wife to his assistance, who is usually very strong and with blue eyes....

## **Equestrian Warriors**

All the Classical writers agree in their descriptions of the Celts as being tall, light-eyed, and with blond or red hair, which they wore long. Flowing, abundant mustaches seem to have been a Celtic national trait.

And the favorite national pastime seems to have been fighting. Born to the saddle and bred to arms, the Celts were a warlike race, always ready for a brawl. Excellent horsemen and swordsmen, they were heartily feared by all their enemies.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that these equestrian warriors invented chain-link armor and iron horseshoes and were the first to learn how to make seamless iron tires for wagons and war chariots. But the Celts were also the inventors of soap, which they introduced to the relatively unwashed Greeks and Romans. Their inventive genius also manifested itself in the numerous iron woodworking tools and agricultural implements which they developed.

## **Scythian Relatives**

Master craftsmen, their artistry in metalwork was applied to bronze, silver, and gold, as well as to iron. Their art shows a close affinity to that of the Scythians, as their cousins still back in the old homeland were called by the Classical writers.

The early Celts were not an urban people. Their dwellings, typically of timber construction, tended to be isolated farmsteads or, at most, clusters of a few buildings surrounded by a palisade. They did not build castles, as such, but depended instead on strategically located hilltops, fortified with earthworks and palisades, as places of retreat in wartime.

Gradually these hill forts, or *oppida* (as the Romans called them), gained permanent inhabitants and enough amenities so that they could be considered towns. They became the sites of regular fairs and festivals, and centers of trade as well as defense.

## **Aristocrats and Intellectuals**

Celtic society, following the customary Indo-European pattern, was hierarchical. At the top was a fighting and hunting aristocracy, always purely Celtic. At the bottom were the small farmers, the servants, and the petty craftsmen. The racial composition of this class varied from purely Celtic to mostly Mediterranean, depending on the region.

In pre-Christian Ireland there was an intellectual class which had a social status approximately equal to that of the warrior-landowners. This class consisted of druids (priests), bards, physicians, artists, and skilled craftsmen, who moved freely from petty kingdom to petty kingdom in a way that was not possible for any other class, thereby helping to maintain cultural unity throughout a wide area. A similar class served the same functions on the continent.

## **Importance of the Clan**

Blood relationships counted for everything in the Celtic world. Not only was there a distinction between those of Celtic blood and those descended from the aborigines, but among the Celts themselves all obligations fell not just on the individual but on his extended family, or kindred group. Loyalty was owed by every member of the kindred group to every other member, and debts and injuries involving two men from different kindreds automatically involved every other member of their kindreds as well.

The Celts, like the other Indo-European peoples of northern Europe in pre-Christian times, revered natural beauty, including that of the human body. Relations between the sexes were open and natural, and — in contrast to the norm for Mediterranean societies — Celtic women were allowed a great deal of freedom.

## **Vilest Men**

When the wife of Sulpicius Severus, a Romanized fourth-century historian, reproached the wife of a Celtic chieftain for the wanton ways of Celtic women, the Celtic woman replied: “We fulfill the demands of nature in a much better way than do you Roman women: for we consort openly with the best men, whereas you let yourselves be debauched in secret by the vilest.” In fourth-century Rome, of course, virtually all the wealth was in the hands of “the vilest” men: Jews, Syrians, and other Oriental immigrants who dominated commerce and constituted the nouveaux riches.

The ancestors of the Celts brought the solar religion of their Indo-European homeland with them to the areas they invaded; three-armed and four-armed swastikas, as solar symbols, are an omnipresent element in Celtic art, as is the four-spoked sun wheel. One of the most widely revered Celtic gods, Lug (or Lugh), had many of the attributes of the Germanic Wotan, and one of his designations,

Longhanded Lug, referred to his role as a solar deity, whose life-giving force reached everywhere.

### **Dark Side of Druidism**

By the time of the Roman conquest, however, many extraneous elements had become inseparably blended into Celtic religion. The druids practiced not only solar rites, but some rather dark and nasty ones of Mediterranean origin as well.

In some Celtic areas Mediterranean influences were much stronger than in others and influenced social structure as well as religion; the Celtic Picts, for example, adopted the matrilineal custom of the aborigines they conquered.

As mentioned above, the Urnfield culture had crossed the Rhine to the west and the Alps to the south by 1,000 B.C. Indo-Europeans, closely related to the Urnfield people and to the later Hallstatt and La Tène Celts, had crossed both these boundaries much earlier, in fact, and were in Britain well before 2,000 B.C. Throughout the Bronze Age and the Iron Age new groups of Indo-Europeans pushed westward.

### **6th- and 5th-Century Growth**

Nevertheless, it was not until around 600 B.C. that fully developed Celts had established themselves in France. During the next 200 years, while expanding the area of France under Celtic settlement, they pushed across the English Channel into the British Isles (which owe their name to the Britanni, one of the Celtic tribes which invaded the islands during this period) and across the Pyrenees into the Iberian peninsula.

In southern France (Aquitania) and in Iberia they encountered and mixed with a well-established Mediterranean population. In central and northern France the population became much more Celtic. By the time of Caesar's arrival in Gaul in the middle of the first century B.C., there was a fairly clear racial and cultural distinction between the mixed Celtiberian population in the Garonne valley and southward and the Celtic population to the north.

Caesar also distinguished between the Celts who occupied the region between the valley of the Garonne to the south and the Seine and Marne to the north, and the Belgae, who lived north of the Seine and Marne. The Belgae were apparently heavily Celticized Germans.

### **Celts, Germans Closely Related**

Many later writers have not been as careful as Caesar was and tend to lump all Celtic-speaking populations together as "Gauls," while sharply distinguishing them from the Germans. As a matter of fact, there was a much greater affinity between the Celts and the Germans, despite the language difference, than there was between

the truly Celtic elements among the Gauls and the racially different but Celtic-speaking Mediterranean and Celtiberian elements.

In the British Isles the racial effects of the fifth-century B.C. Celtic invasions varied. In some areas indigenous Nordic populations were reinforced, and in others indigenous Mediterranean or mixed populations diluted the fresh Nordic wave.

### **Brennus Sacks Rome**

Around 400 B.C. Celts invaded northern Italy in strength, establishing a permanent presence in the Po Valley, between the Alps and the Apennines. They pushed out the resident Etruscans and Ligurians, founded the city of Milan, and began exploring possibilities for further expansion south of the Apennines.

In 390 B.C. a Celtic army under their chieftain Brennus defeated the Roman army and occupied Rome. The Celts were not prepared to stay, however, and upon payment of an enormous ransom in gold by the Romans they withdrew again to northern Italy.

In the following centuries there were repeated clashes between adventurous Celts and the people of the Classical civilizations to the south. In the third century B.C. a Celtic army ravaged Macedonia and struck deep into Greece, while another group of Celts, the Galatae, invaded central Asia Minor. Three centuries later the latter were still in place; they were the Galatians of the New Testament.

### **Founders of Belgrade**

Also in the third century bands of Celts established enclaves in new areas all along the lower Danube; one such band settled in what is now Yugoslavia and founded the town of Singidunum, which is today called Belgrade.

But the Celts, unfortunately, despite their mobility and their intelligence, never formed a unified whole; they remained a collection of distinct tribes, as often hostile to one another as they were to non-Celts. This lack of unity brought their downfall.

Man against man, a Celt could usually beat a Roman; the Celts were at least as brave and as skilled in arms as the Romans, and the former were bigger and stronger, on the average, for the latter had by this time mixed for too many generations with southern races and lost most of the Nordic qualities of their forefathers. But the Romans had the supreme advantage of organization, without which little of lasting impact has ever been wrought in this world.

### **Celtic Sunset**

Celtic bands continued to whip Roman armies, even to the end of the second century B.C., but then Roman military organization and discipline turned the tide. The first century B.C. was a time of unmitigated disaster for the Celts. Caesar's



conquest of Gaul was savage and bloody, with whole tribes, including women and children, being slaughtered by the Romans.

By the autumn of 54 B.C, Caesar had subdued Gaul, having destroyed 800 towns and villages and killed or enslaved more than three million Celts. And behind his armies came a horde of Roman-Jewish merchants and speculators, to batten on what was left of Gallic trade, industry, and agriculture like a swarm of locusts. Hundreds of thousands of blond, blue-eyed Celtic girls were marched south in chains, to be pawed over by greasy, Semitic flesh-merchants in Rome's slave markets before being shipped out to fill the bordellos of the Levant.

### **Last Effort**

Then began one, last, heroic effort by the Celts of Gaul to throw off the yoke of Rome, thereby regaining their honor and their freedom, and — whether consciously or not — reestablishing the superiority of Nordic mankind over the mongrel races of the south. The ancestors of the Romans had themselves established this superiority in centuries past, but by Caesar's time Rome had sunk irretrievably into the quagmire of miscegenation and had become the enemy of the race which founded it.

The rebellion began with an attack by Ambiorix, king of the Celtic tribe of the Eburones, on a Roman fortress on the middle Moselle. It spread rapidly throughout most of northern and central Gaul. The Celts used guerrilla tactics against the Romans, ruthlessly burning their own villages and fields to deny the enemy food and then ambushing his vulnerable supply columns.

### **Vercingetorix**

For two bloody years the uprising went on. Caesar surpassed his former cruelty and savagery in trying to put it down. When Celtic prisoners were taken, the Romans tortured them hideously before killing them. When the rebel town of Avaricum fell to Caesar's legions, he ordered the massacre of its 40,000 inhabitants.

Meanwhile, a new leader of the Gallic Celts had come to the fore. He was Vercingetorix, king of the Arverni, the tribe which gave its name to France's Auvergne region. His own name meant, in the Celtic tongue, "warrior king," and he was well named.

Vercingetorix came closer than anyone else had to uniting the Celts. He was a charismatic leader, and his successes against the Romans, particularly at Gergovia, the principal town of the Arverni, roused the hopes of other Celtic peoples. Tribe after tribe joined his rebel confederation, and for a while it seemed as if Caesar might be driven from Gaul.

### **Tragedy of Alesia**

But unity was still too new an experience for the Celts, nor could all their valor make up for their lack of the long experience of iron discipline which the Roman legionaries enjoyed. Too impetuous, too individualistic, too prone to rush headlong in pursuit of a temporary advantage instead of subjecting themselves always to the cooler-headed direction of their leaders, the Celts soon dissipated their chances of liberating Gaul.

Finally, in the summer of 52 B.C., Caesar's legions penned up Vercingetorix and 80,000 of his followers in the walled town of, Alesia, on the upper Teaches of the Seine. Although an army of a quarter-million Celts, from 41 tribes, eventually came to relieve besieged Alesia, Caesar had had time to construct massive defenses for his army. While the encircled Alesians starved, the Celts outside the Roman lines wasted their strength in futile assaults on Caesar's fortifications.

### **Savage End**

In a valiant, self-sacrificing effort to save his people from being annihilated, Vercingetorix rode out of Alesia, on a late September day, and surrendered himself to Caesar. Caesar sent the Celtic king to Rome in chains, kept him in a dungeon for six years, and then, during the former's triumphal procession of 46 B.C., had him publicly strangled and beheaded in the Forum, to the wild cheers of the city's degraded, mongrel populace.

After the disaster at Alesia, the confederation Vercingetorix had put together crumbled, and Caesar had little trouble in extinguishing the last Celtic resistance in Gaul. He used his tried-and-true methods, which included chopping the hands off all the Celtic prisoners he took after one town, Uxellodunum, commanded by a loyal adjutant of Vercingetorix, surrendered to him.

### **Next: Germanic Expansion**

Caesar did not live long enough to wreak the same havoc in Britain which he had in Gaul, but other Roman generals finished what he had started. During the first century A.D. Roman Britain was bloodily expanded to include everything in the British Isles except Caledonia (northern Scotland) and Hibernia (Ireland).

Decadent Rome did not long enjoy dominion of the Celtic lands, however, because another Indo-European people, the Germans, soon replaced the Latins as the masters of Europe.