

sufficiently while you are waiting, they become one and the same language; indeed, that any language in the world at all is quite intelligible.

After such experiences, I think I can be forgiven for having developed an enduring enthusiasm for the vigour of Celtic culture. The Celts adore merriment, and they adore sadness; what they cannot abide is the dullness of the in-between. They are happy enough with the bustle of cities – talk to the lads and lasses who work the little passenger ferries in Boston Harbour – but they have a deeply ingrained passion for the quietness of wild places, the lonely moor, the long and narrow road winding down to the sea, the heather-drenched glens, the little islands where the black cattle come down to the beach and stand in the shallow waves. They revel in change, flux, movement. They like the weather that is coming, not the weather that is here, the fresh dampness in the wind, or seeing the rain as it comes, what the Irish call ‘smoke on the mountain’, or the first nip of frost, or the early morning dew curling into little wisps of steam in the strong sunlight of spring. They like loneliness and sorrow; they like company, and the *craic* (lively conversation), and singing through the night until you fall asleep in your chair.

All this culture comes from somewhere. It has nothing to do with race because there is no such thing as a Celtic race. Anyone who starts talking about ‘the Celtic blood’ is talking dangerous nonsense. It does have a lot to do with history, with language, with religiosity if not actually with religion, and with a sense of place and the numinous. This book attempts to explore one aspect of Celtic culture, namely the Celtic pursuit, in many different forms, of governance by a king or queen. It is not intended as any kind of polemic in favour of royalty or the monarchy; if anything, my personal political views tend towards republicanism and disestablishmentarianism. There is a very broad spectrum of experience to be found within this apparently narrow topic. There is a great deal of difference between a brutish, petty king of the Arverni tribe in pre-conquest Gaul and an effete, kilted, feather-capped lord of the nineteenth-century Scottish Highlands, yet they do have some things in common. In this volume, I hope to discover at least in part what were the enduring qualities and characteristics which made the Celtic kingdoms, in their many different forms, such significant contributors to the world.



ONE



WHO WERE THE CELTS?

THE CELTIC IDENTITY

FOR more than two thousand years, the Celts have established a clear and recognizable identity on the world stage, yet, paradoxically, there is no convincing evidence of how, when or even where the Celts first appeared, nor has there ever been a single, unifying characteristic (apart, perhaps, from language) which unequivocally defines what it is actually to be a Celt. Whatever their origins, the Celts emerged in prehistory – Gerhard Herm calls them, poetically, ‘the people who came from the darkness’¹ – as a group of peoples which shared many common bonds of social customs, art, religious practices and, especially, of language, across a vast area of Europe, and which remains to this day, particularly on the Atlantic seaboard, a sufficiently distinctive group to merit recognition as separate Celtic nations. There are traces of the Celtic heritage not just in Britain and Ireland, Brittany and Galicia, where Celtic culture and political identity are still actively pursued, but also broadly across France, Spain, southern Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, northern Italy, the Balkans and even Turkey. Celtic art, which has flourished for two millennia, is still in production and sold across the world. Many Celtic social and legal ideas, including individual combat and fair play and the huge complexity of ideas which constitutes the chivalric code generated through the Arthurian legends and the Matter of Britain, have become deeply embedded in western culture. The Celts changed the world, and continue to do so.

Yet even the origin of the name ‘Celt’ is unclear. It is highly likely that almost all of the early tribes which we now group together under the title Celt never used the words Celts or Celtic to describe themselves. The Latin term *Celtae* was used by Caesar and others, and the name *Celtici*, used widely in south-western Spain, seems also to be a Romanization of an originally Celtic

word. Caesar tells us that the tribes he met used the word *Celtae* to describe themselves, even though they also had individual tribal names. The Greeks used *Keltoi*, which was simply their version of the same word. The Greek and classical Latin spellings do indicate, however, that the name 'Celt' should always be pronounced with a hard *lkl* sound, the Boston Celtics notwithstanding. The two other generic terms found in classical writing are *Galli*, 'the people of Gaul', and *Galatae*, a term more frequently used by Greek writers. The Galatians, to whom St. Paul's Epistle is addressed, are these same *Galatae*. The word *Gael*, now used to describe the northern Celts, is obviously related to *Galatae*. A large bronze tablet, found at Contrebia Belaisca (modern Botoritta) near Saragossa in Spain, which appears to be a legal document, contains about two hundred words of a language which has been called *Hispano-Celtic*, but which is known only through similar such tiny fragments. The name *Celt*, ancient though it obviously is, only came into widespread use following the work of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century linguists, in particular George Buchanan (1506–82) and Edward Lhwyd (1660–1709). No classical writer ever used the term to describe tribes or individuals in Britain or Ireland.

No matter how complex it may be to find perfectly accurate and historically attested definitions, it remains true that the single, most persuasive evidence of Celtic identity is evidence of use of a Celtic language. Celtic, or proto-Celtic, divided into two related, but separate, branches at some unknown point in its history. These branches are commonly called *Q Celtic* (sometimes *K Celtic*) or *Goidelic*, and *P Celtic* or *Brythonic*.

The modern Goidelic languages are Irish Gaelic (earlier called Erse), Scots Gaelic, and Manx. During the nineteenth century, Manx virtually died out as a widely spoken language, and the numbers of Scots and Irish Gaelic speakers declined markedly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but subsequently all three languages have been vigorously maintained (revived, in the case of Manx) and defended. Gaelic is still widely spoken in the west of Ireland, particularly in the area known as the Gaeltacht, the ancient kingdoms of Munster and Connaught, and it would not be unusual to hear Irish spoken anywhere in counties Galway, Cork, Kerry or Clare. Both Scotland and Ireland have realized the importance of the modern broadcast media to language survival, and so Scots and Irish Gaelic now thrive in radio, film and television as well as in the streets and in the schools. The Republic of Ireland requires its children to learn Gaelic and earnestly defends its official status, despite the predominance of spoken English.

The modern Brythonic languages are Welsh, Cornish and Breton. The most obvious characteristic which distinguishes them from the Goidelic group is a consonantal shift: where Goidelic has a *lkl* sound (developed from the original Indo-European *lqʷl*), Brythonic shifted to a *lpl* sound. Thus, Goidelic *cenn* ('head') becomes *penn* in Brythonic. Penzance, spelled Pennsans by modern Cornish speakers, means 'holy head'. The well-known Goidelic *mac*, meaning 'son of', becomes *map* or *mab* (and *ap* or *ab* in later

Welsh) in Brythonic. The Irish saint, Cieran, when he sailed on his millstone across the Irish Sea to become the patron saint of Cornwall, changed his name from Cieran to Piran (*cf.* the modern town name Perranporth, 'Piran's harbour'). The strongest of these languages is Welsh, both because it has the largest and longest literary heritage and also because it has a larger population of modern speakers, with even more healthy representation through modern broadcast media than Gaelic. Breton has been in decline for many years, but it is actively defended by a vigorous language movement which has achieved notable successes in recent years. Cornish died as a widely spoken language, but its revival, which began in 1904 with the publication of Dr. Henry Jenner's handbook of the language, has also been remarkably successful.

From the limited evidence available, it seems certain that the Celtic which Julius Caesar heard spoken – Gaulish, in other words – was P Celtic, or Brythonic, in character. It is sometimes called *Gallo-Brythonic* or *Gallo-Brythonic*. As Rome's influence spread throughout Gaul, and then into much of the rest of the Celtic world, so Latin increasingly influenced the Celtic languages. This influence was much stronger in Brythonic than in Goidelic. For example, the modern Cornish *eglos* (Welsh *egluys*), meaning 'church', is derived from Latin *ecclesia*, and the Cornish *pons* ('bridge'; the Welsh cognate is *pont*) and *fenester* ('window') are clearly directly borrowed from Latin *pons* and *fenestra*. One Celtic word has had a rare history: the English word 'car', now used to describe a motor vehicle, was originally a very ancient Celtic word which the Romans adopted (*currus*) to describe the wheeled chariots which they also adopted from the Celts.

Interpreting linguistic evidence is tricky, however. We know that Sanskrit *raj*, Latin *rex* and Celtic *rix* all mean 'king', and that they all derive from some earlier (proto-Indo-European) word with the same meaning. But how much does that tell us about the practice and significance of kingship in Indian, Roman and Celtic societies, other than the fact that it existed? We know that proto-Indo-European **peku* appears directly related to Latin *pecus* ('cattle'), Greek *pekos* ('pelt'), and the Latin and Greek verbs *pectere* ('to comb') and *pektein* ('to shear'), and we can, therefore, make educated guesses that **peku* must also have referred to sheep, and that combing, shearing, spinning and weaving were activities in those communities – if it doesn't exist, why have a word for it? But making convincing statements about social practice from linguistic evidence alone is very difficult, and has led to much heated argument.

So, we use linguistic evidence to identify the Celts, but this evidence is limited in quantity and frequently open to varying interpretation. Our other sources are documentary evidence, mostly from classical authors, and archaeological evidence.

The Celts are described or mentioned by name by Herodotus, Aristotle, Sotion, Poseidonius, Julius Caesar, Cicero, Polybius, Diodorus of Sicily (Diodorus Siculus) and Timagenus, and, in the Christian era, by Strabo,

Pomponius Mela, Lucian, Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius, Dion Chrysostom and Clement of Alexandria. All these authors were describing peoples whom they were, in varying degree, keen to characterize as barbaric, alien, uncivilized or threatening. All their accounts, therefore, are unreliable to some extent. For example, both Caesar and Strabo describe a Celtic method of execution or human sacrifice, supervised by druids, in which victims were burned alive in a huge wickerwork structure: Strabo uses the Greek word *kolosson* ('giant'), Caesar writes of *immani magnitudine simulacra* ('a huge dummy'). Two authors, writing in different places at different times, give the same description: that sounds convincing. Yet Strabo also describes Celtic executions involving bows and arrows, and we are virtually certain from archaeological evidence that the early tribal Celts never used bows and arrows – indeed, the very words for bows and arrows are late loan words in all the Celtic languages – so our conviction tends to evaporate. Strabo, an Asiatic Greek (his name is actually a nickname, meaning 'squint-eyed') who lived from c.64 BC to AD 21, spent all his time in the great library at Alexandria (perhaps poring over the books made him squint-eyed). He did meet Poseidonius personally, but apart from that meeting, all his descriptions of Britain, Gaul, Spain, Italy and Galatia came from other authors' manuscripts. It is perfectly possible, for example, that he borrowed Caesar's description of the wickerwork giant to add colour and local authenticity to his own writing. Classical historians were not at all scrupulous about acknowledging their sources, nor avoiding florid invention when it suited their purposes, so we have to read their accounts with cautious scepticism.

Of these authors, the most noted for descriptions of the Celts are Polybius, Poseidonius and Diodorus Siculus. Polybius, a Greek politician who lived from c.200 to sometime after 118 BC, published in about 150 BC a popular account of Rome's rise to power, from Hannibal and the Punic Wars to the Battle of Pydna in 168 BC which marked the Roman conquest of Greece (and which led to Polybius's own exile to Rome). He tells us a great deal about the early tribal Celts of Gaul. Poseidonius (his name derives from Poseidon, god of the sea) was a Syrian, the teacher of Cicero. He lived from about 135 to 50 BC, and he travelled extensively in the western Mediterranean, so it may be that he actually met and spoke with Gauls and Hispano-Gallic tribes. Unfortunately, only fragments of his writings survive and most of what he wrote comes to us through later authors who either quote him directly or borrow his descriptions, with or without acknowledgment. Diodorus Siculus ('the Sicilian') wrote a world history between 60 and 30 BC which included extensive descriptions of Britain and Gaul, but what knowledge, if any, was first hand is no longer ascertainable. Nevertheless, his vivid descriptions of the Celts' physical and social characteristics have been very widely quoted and used by later authors.

Some classical authors were more directly acquainted with the Celts, most notably Caesar and Tacitus. Julius Caesar (100–44 BC), a man of extraordinary ambition and achievements, was the last leader of the Roman

republic; indeed, it was the internecine wars following his assassination which led to the restoration of rule by the emperors. He conquered Gaul and invaded Britain, and wrote a detailed account of his exploits. This account, properly known as *The Commentaries*, but more widely known as *The Gallic War*, is a work of propaganda written to justify what was, in fact, an illegal series of campaigns, so it is heavily biased in political terms. Nevertheless, it contains much convincing detail, and it is still a rich source of information for historians of the early Celts.

Caius Cornelius Tacitus ('the silent one'), who lived from AD 55 to 100, never visited Britain, but his father-in-law, Agricola, was Roman governor of Britain for many years, so there is good reason to believe that much of his material came from first-hand accounts. His Latin prose style is unusual – dense, poetic, sometimes elliptical – but, in general, he is considered a fairly reliable witness. He gives us some very vivid pictures of the British Celtic tribes.

The archaeological evidence describing the Celts has greatly increased in quantity over the past century and, for good reason, is viewed as of vital importance. Real artefacts or real inscriptions, which can be subjected to all kinds of testing, are obviously convincing. The difficulty with archaeological evidence lies always in interpretation. We know that this urn was found in such-and-such a place, but how did it get there? Are we certain about what it was used for? Much of the evidence is 'text-free', to use archaeological jargon; in other words, it is not accompanied by writing which would unarguably define or describe its function or purpose. While a good deal of the archaeological evidence is not seriously disputed, there are also some classic enigmas (for example, the souterrains known as *fogous*) which still provide rallying points for vigorous argument.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTIONS

Herodotus, the Greek 'father of history' who lived from c.484 to 425 BC, tells us that the Celts came originally from the area of the Danube.³ He describes Iberians, Celts and Scythians together, and some of the material in the descriptions has led to conjecture that there was certainly cultural influence from one group to another, and possibly even some common genetic inheritance. Take, for example, Herodotus's account of head-hunting among the Scythians, which is strikingly similar to what we know about head-hunting among the Celts:

Each of them cuts off an enemy's head and takes it back home. He then skewers it on a long wooden stake and sets this up so that the head sticks far above the house, often above the chimney. They maintain that the head is put there as guardian of the whole house. . . .

With the heads of their worst enemies they proceed as follows: once they have sawn off everything below the eyebrows, they carefully clean out the head. If the owner is poor he will merely stretch calf-leather round it and use it thus. But if he is rich, he will also line the inside with gold and use it as a drinking vessel.

There is frequent confusion between Germans and Celts in the classical texts. For example, the three tribes which most plagued Rome during the first century BC, namely the Cimbri, Teutones and Ambrones, are described in most encyclopedias as Germanic tribes and their place of origin is usually given as Jutland. We still use 'Teutonic' as a euphemism for Germanic. Yet the name Cimbri is convincingly similar to the **cymbr* element which we find in Cymru (Welsh for Wales) and, a little transmogrified, in the Cumber- of Cumberland. Even more convincingly, the leader of the Cimbri was Boiorix, and that name is indisputably Celtic; we even know what it means – 'king of the Boii'. Similarly, Plutarch includes in his account of the Battle of Aquae Sextae descriptions of the Ambrones using their individual tribal names as rallying calls, a distinctly Celtic practice. Strabo differentiated between the Celts, who lived on the west bank of the Rhine, and the Germans, who lived on the east bank and were 'even taller, more savage and blond'. But remember that Strabo, who even promised, 'I shall . . . describe, in part what I myself have seen in my travels over land and sea . . .', was an Alexandrian bookworm, who may well have never once laid foot outside his library. The only certainty which emerges is that the distinctions between Celts, Germans and Scythians in classical texts are not always trustworthy.

There are some very early, fragmentary references to the Celts. Xenophon, a pupil of Socrates, mentions Celtic mercenaries in the wars of Athens and Sparta against Thebes. Plato includes the Celts in his list of tribes inclined to drunkenness. The world picture of these earliest Greek commentators included three great groups of barbarians: the Scythians, wild horsemen and archers from somewhere in the north-east; the Iberians and the Celts, possibly related, hirsute savages from the north-west; and the Hyperboreans, a mysterious people so little known that their only description was that they came from beyond ('hyper') the home of the personification of the north wind, the *Boreas*.

In much the same way that Geoffrey of Monmouth, many centuries later, felt the need to create historical individuals to personify events affecting whole peoples, so Diodorus Siculus felt the need to find an individual founder of the tribes of the Celts. His founder, the equivalent of Geoffrey's Brutus as father of all the Britons, is Herakles. He spins a yarn in which Herakles, travelling in what is now France, finds himself among the Mandubii, falls in love with their princess, and sires a 'little Heraklid', a child-hero called Galates, from whom the Galatai, or Galli, and the nation of Gallia itself, all took their names. This is fun, but it is also hokum. Diodorus saw in the Celts a replication of the ancient Achaean warrior society, after whose vigour and directness

the softer Greeks sometimes hankered. Diodorus relishes his descriptions of Celtic feasts:

They squat, not on couches, but on the ground, with wolf or dog-skins as cushions. . . . Nearby are the fires, stoked up with charcoal and well-furnished with kettles and spits full of large pieces of meat. Brave warriors are rewarded with the choicest pieces. . .

With that predisposition in mind, we note Diodorus's famous physical description of the early Celts:

The Gauls are tall of body, with rippling muscles, and white of skin, and their hair is blond, and not only naturally so, but they also make it their practice by artificial means to increase the distinguishing colour which nature has given it. For they are always washing their hair in lime-water, and they pull it back from the forehead to the top of the head and back to the nape of the neck, with the result that their appearance is like that of Satyrs and Pans, since the treatment of their hair makes it so heavy and coarse that it differs in no respect from the manes of horses. Some of them shave the beard, but others let it grow a little; and the nobles shave their cheeks, but they let the moustache grow until it covers the mouth. Consequently, when they are eating, their moustaches become entangled in the food, and when they are drinking, the beverage passes, as it were, through a kind of strainer . . .

Diodorus also informs us that the men wore brightly coloured and embroidered shirts, and a garment unknown to the Romans for which he uses the word *bracae*, which some have related to the word breeches, since the description is clearly of what would nowadays be called trousers in English, or pants in American English. Over the shirt the men wore a cloak, fastened at the shoulder with a brooch, and the material of the cloak was striped or checkered, suggesting a pattern like tartan or plaid.

These small, but easily visualized, details are helpful when we try to clarify the distinctions in classical descriptions between Celtic and non-Celtic barbarians. For example, Tacitus gives us the following description of the classical ancient German physique, but in so doing reveals that the extent to which these distinctions were agreed was open to dispute even in his own time:

For myself, I accept the view that the peoples of Germany have never contaminated themselves by intermarriage with foreigners but remain of pure blood, distinct and unlike any other nation. One result of this is that their physical characteristics, in so far as one can generalize about such a large population, are always the same: fierce-looking blue

eyes, reddish hair, and big frames – which, however, can exert their strength only by means of violent effort. They are less able to endure toil or fatiguing tasks and cannot bear thirst or heat, though their climate has inured them to cold spells and the poverty of their soil to hunger.⁷

Despite Tacitus's claim, his description of Germans is strikingly similar to many descriptions of the Celtic physical type, or at least one of them. Similarly, Herodotus describes the Scythians of Eastern Europe:

The Euxine Pontus, against which Darius made his campaign, contains – except for the Scythians – the stupidest nations in the world. For within this country of Pontus we cannot put forward any nation for its cleverness, nor do we know from there of any learned man; the exceptions are, among nations, the Scythians, and, of men, Anacharsis. For the Scythian nation has made the most clever discovery among all the people we know, and of the one thing that is greatest in human affairs – though for the rest I do not admire them much. This greatest thing that they have discovered is how no invader who comes against them can ever escape and how none can catch them if they do not wish to be caught. For this people has no cities or settled forts; they carry their houses with them and shoot with bows from horseback; they live off herds of cattle, not from tillage, and their dwellings are on their wagons. How then can they fail to be invincible and inaccessible for others?⁸

The firing of arrows from horseback is unequivocally Scythian and not Celtic, but some of the other attributes are not so distinctive. Later Celts were certainly farmers and tillers, but many of the early Celtic tribes led a wandering existence within more or less defined territories, taking their cattle with them.

Nobody can now confirm whether Tacitus knew the difference between a Celt and a German, or Herodotus the difference between a Celt and a Scythian, there runs throughout all the classical descriptions a thread of recurring doubt about accuracy. This is particularly true of the accounts of the Punic wars and the other engagements which shaped the emergence of Rome as a dominating power.

Tacitus, in many ways the most reliable and credible of all the classical historians, notes that among the Celts there were, indeed, many different physical types, just as there are to this day:

Who the first inhabitants of Britain were, whether natives or immigrants, is open to question: one must remember we are dealing with barbarians. But their physical characteristics vary, and the variation is suggestive. The reddish hair and large limbs of the

Caledonians proclaim a German origin; the swarthy faces of the Silures, the tendency of their hair to curl, and the fact that Spain lies opposite, all lead one to believe that Spaniards crossed in ancient times and occupied that part of the country. The peoples nearest to the Gauls likewise resemble them . . .⁹

The Silures came from what is now Wales, so the small, swarthy, curly-haired type is familiar, but it is worth pointing out that Tacitus's geography is suspect, since he places Spain 'opposite' Wales. Nevertheless, he correctly recognizes, at a very early date, an important truth about the Celtic identity, namely that physical appearance alone is by no means a reliable or adequate indicator.

Diodorus gives us mode and style of speech as a distinguishing characteristic:

The Gauls are terrifying in aspect and their voices are deep and altogether harsh; when they meet together they converse with few words and in riddles, hinting darkly at things for the most part and using one word when they mean another; and they like to talk in superlatives, to the end that they might extol themselves and depreciate all other men. They are also boasters and threateners and are fond of pompous language, and yet they have sharp wits and are not without cleverness at learning.¹⁰

Diodorus's preoccupation with Celtic similarities to the heroic Achaeans perhaps also influenced his description of their women, and of their sexual practices:

The Celtic women are not only as tall as their men, but as courageous. . . . But, despite their charm, 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 . . .¹¹

Strabo also describes homosexual practices among the young men of Gaul, who are 'shamelessly generous with their boyish charms', but both Strabo's and Diodorus's descriptions may be heavily influenced by the cult of the male body which permeated early Greek society, as evidenced by the famous devotions of Achilles to Petroclus, or Alexander to Hephaestion. Queen Cartimandua's elopement and alleged sexual promiscuity, described more fully in Chapter Seven, scandalized Roman society, and was long cited as an exemplar to Roman matrons of the misery awaiting them if they succumbed to barbarian patterns of lasciviousness.

Amianus Marcellinus, writing many years after Diodorus and Strabo, continues the description of the Achaean warrior type:

Almost all Gauls are tall and fair-skinned, with reddish hair. Their savage eyes make them fearful objects; they are eager to quarrel and excessively truculent. When, in the course of a dispute, any of them calls in his wife, a creature with gleaming eyes much stronger than her husband, they are more than a match for a whole group of foreigners; especially when the woman, with swollen neck and gnashing teeth, swings her great white arms and begins to deliver a rain of punches mixed with kicks, like missiles launched by the twisted strings of a catapult. The voices of most sound alarming and menacing, whether they are angry or the reverse, but all alike are clean and neat, and throughout the whole region, and especially in Aquitaine, you will hardly find a man or woman, however poor, who is dirty and in rags, as you would elsewhere. . . . They are fit for service in war at any age; old men embark upon a campaign with as much spirit as those in their prime; their limbs are hardened by the cold and by incessant toil, and there is no danger that they are not ready to defy. No one here ever cuts off his thumb to escape military service, as happens in Italy, where they have a special name for such malingerers. As a race they are given to drink, and are fond of a number of liquors that resemble wine; some of the baser sort wander about aimlessly in a fuddled state of perpetual intoxication . . .¹²

The liquors that resembled wine certainly included mead, a potent wine fermented from honey which is still widely available in Celtic countries, particularly Cornwall, and beer brewed from barley to a high strength and clarity, similar to the barley wines now commercially available in Britain, but less well known in other European countries or America.

Fine hair was the first and most significant attribute of Celtic beauty. Both men and women wore their hair long, frequently lime-washed, dyed and braided. In the Irish epic, the *Tain Bo Cuailnge* ('Cattle Raid of Cooley'), Queen Medb's supporters are identified by their 'flowing hair, fair-yellow golden streaming manes'. The warrior-hero of the *Tain*, Cu Chulainn, whose exploits are described much more fully in Chapter Eleven, has hair of three shades, black at the roots, red in the middle and blond at the tips:

His hair curled about his head like branches of red hawthorn used to refence the gap in a hedge. Though a noble apple tree weighed down with fruit had been shaken about his hair, scarcely one apple would have reached the ground through it, but an apple would have stayed impaled on each single hair, because of the fierce bristling of his hair above him.¹³

Dio Cassius describes Boudica, Queen of the Iceni, as having 'a great mass of bright red hair' which fell to her knees. In the *Tain*, the Druidess Fedelm has 'long, fair-yellow, golden hair; three tresses of her hair wound round her

head, another tress falling behind, which touched the calves of her legs'. The elaborate shape of the hair was as important as the colour, and it seems likely that the Celts used grease, animal fat probably, as well as lime-washing, to style their coiffures; a later passage in the *Tain* tells us that Cu Chulainn's hair looks 'as if a cow had licked it'. One of the reasons why so few Celtic battle helmets have been found may be that hair was so important that helmets were rarely worn.

Both men and women may have used cosmetics. The Irish texts describe a herb called 'ruam' which was used to redden cheeks; brows were blackened with berry juice. Deirdre, in the Irish tales, is so consumed by sorrow that, as she says, 'I do not redden my finger-nails.' The Roman poet Propertius reviles his mistress for wearing *belgicus color* and 'making up like the Celts'.

The Celts were unusually clean among ancient peoples. They did not use oil, like the Romans, but soap and water, the soap made from fat and ashes, probably scented with herbs. The Romans introduced more elaborate bathing rituals, including the use of body oils, into Gaul after the occupation. Men shaved regularly, typically shaving the chin and throat, but leaving side whiskers and long, droopy moustaches. Many mirrors and razors have been found among archaeological artefacts.

Strabo tells us that Celtic men were typically slim of figure: 'They try not to become stout and fat-bellied, and any young man who exceeds the standard length of the girdle is fined.' Other descriptions in the vernacular texts confirm the notion that physical beauty and moral and political superiority were very closely identified, and this idea is of special importance when we



Back of a Celtic mirror found at Birdlip, Gloucestershire, dating to the first century AD.

consider the significance of kingship. Any royal figure, king or queen, had to be impeccably, strikingly handsome or beautiful, without physical blemish of any kind; the smallest physical deficiency would invalidate the royal status.

Bracae, or breeches, have already been mentioned as distinctively Celtic. The other instantly recognizable item of dress is the Celtic woollen cloak, usually woven in a plaid or tartan pattern. These were so highly valued for their quality that they were significant items of import to Rome. They were of two types: a light, finely woven cloak for summer, and a heavier version for winter. The length and weight of the cloak, and the elaborateness of the brooch or clasp which fastened it, appear to have been important indicators of wealth and social status. Beneath the cloak was sometimes worn a short tunic of linen, shaped at the waist by a girdle or belt, often highly decorated. Strabo uses the Latin word *sagus* (plural *sagi*) to describe these garments, but tells us that the Celtic word for them was *laenae*. The modern Irish and Scottish Celtic word for a shirt is still *leine*.

The Greek word *peplos* is sometimes used to describe the longer tunic-dress worn by women, although this kind of dress, made from two rectangles of fabric fastened at the sides, is also found among non-Celtic tribes. A wrap-around skirt, which may or may not have been Celtic, despite its bold check patterns, was found in Denmark. The number of anklets found suggests that skirt length may have been no longer than to mid-calf.



A golden torc, one of several found at Snettisham, Norfolk, England.

Shoes and sandals were made from leather, or sometimes from linen uppers sewn to leather soles. There is some evidence that the Celts also made wooden shoes, or clogs: alder, a workable but highly water-resistant timber, may have been used.

Abundant finds of jewellery confirm the classical descriptions of Celtic love of adornment. Strabo tells us:

To the frankness and high-spiritedness of their temperament must be added the traits of childish boastfulness and love of decoration. They wear ornaments of gold, torques on their necks, and bracelets on their arms and wrists, while people of high rank wear dyed garments besprinkled with gold. It is this vanity which makes them unbearable in victory and so completely downcast in defeat.¹⁴

The torques, or torcs, mentioned by Strabo were distinctive Celtic neck-rings. They were fashioned from heavy silver or gold threads or chains, twisted and bent around the neck so that an opening remained in the front. They indicated high status, and appear so frequently in depictions of gods and heroes that they may also have had a religious significance, perhaps associated with the cult of the human head. A torc found at Tayac in the Gironde, deliberately snapped in three, was buried with a treasure of five hundred coins. At Mailly in Champagne, a torc was inscribed with Greek letters which indicate that it was part of an offering made to the gods by the tribe of Nitrobriges of southwestern Gaul.¹⁵ The Romans later adopted the torc as a form of military decoration, and cheaper versions, made from iron or copper alloy, have been found.

OUTLINE HISTORY

We shall be examining the history of the Celts much more extensively in later chapters, but a brief outline may be helpful at this stage, while we are still pursuing a description of the Celtic identity.

We have already seen that the origins of the Celts are shrouded in the mist of prehistory. The first identifiable Celtic period dates from around 700 BC, and is named after Hallstatt, a town near Salzburg in the Salzkammergut area of Austria, where an ancient salt mine and a vast prehistoric cemetery were discovered during the nineteenth century. The finds at Hallstatt provide evidence of a people in transition from the use of bronze to the use of iron. Remains of clothing, of jewellery, of cultivated foods like barley, beans, millet and apple, of fragments of domestic pottery, and traces of wooden huts, as well as traces of imported materials like amber, combine to give us a limited but fascinating picture of early Celtic tribal society. It appears to have been an aristocratic society, with richly adorned tombs reserved for the