

Introduction: Who were the Celts?

In the first century BC, the Iron Age peoples in western Europe, now known as Celts, were organized into tribes, many of which were gradually enveloped by the Roman world. The conquest of Gaul (now, roughly France) was followed after AD 43 by the creation of the province of Britannia which eventually included all of what is now England, Wales and Scotland south of the Forth–Clyde line.

Ireland, the Isle of Man and northern Scotland including the Hebridean and Northern Isles (the subject of this book) were affected by the Roman world to a far lesser degree.

Direct Roman dominance in Britannia lasted less than four centuries. By the late fourth century, a complex of factors including civil unrest as well as pressure from tribes such as the Huns, Goths and Vandals beyond the Rhine and Danube frontiers, led to control of Britannia being gradually run down. In 410, pleas of aid to the emperor Honorius were met with the famous statement that the Britons should ‘look to their own defences’ (Zosimus, 6.10.2). Society was forced to function with regional and local organization without direction from an overall power source. Historical sources virtually ended – for many reasons, including the fact that Britannia ceased to be of interest to Roman commentators. What happened in the following two centuries has therefore traditionally been termed the ‘Dark Ages’. Until the development of archaeology, what happened during this period was open to conjecture.

Historical and archaeological sources agree on the basics: from the early fifth century, the highly Romanized east, central and southern England received immigrations and subsequent overlordship by the Anglo-Saxons from the continent.¹ The first incomers were almost certainly deliberately recruited to help defend Britannia against other raiders and settlers, but there appears to have been a gradual take-over of power. This began in the east and south-east of England and had spread westwards by the late fifth century. It is significant that relations between those outside Anglo-Saxon territories continued to be as hostile to the new overlords as they had been to the Romans.

Significantly, the ‘Celtic’ world received no Continental migrants, though there were a few movements within the area: the Scots (from Ireland), established the kingdom of Dál Riata in Scotland in c. 500, for example. Anglo-Saxon supremacy over the former Britannia at its greatest extent took over two centuries to complete, so that there were noticeable gaps between Roman and

Anglo-Saxon control in southern Scotland and the extreme south-west of England. Pressure was exerted on Wales, but large-scale conquest was not achieved until the thirteenth century. The organization seems to have reverted to the former tribal areas, with distinctly Roman features. It is clear that the late Roman world was seen as a model for many aspects of life and culture (chs. 12 and 13).

Ireland, Northern Scotland and the Isle of Man continued to develop what was essentially the continuation of the Iron Age society of the first centuries BC/AD. However, the areas were also heavily indebted to the Roman world (chs. 00 and 00). Even the more remote Celtic lands were forced to take note of what was happening outside. Christianity was already spreading from Roman Britain to the Celtic areas by the later fourth century (possibly earlier), and was reinforced from the fifth with contacts from the Christian continent. St Palladius was allegedly sent to Ireland from Rome in 431. Written records gradually become available to historians once more.

The Angles of Northumbria (which included Bernicia) successfully pressed on the lands of the Britons of southern Scotland from the later sixth century. By the mid-seventh century the Saxon kingdom of Mercia presented a constant threat to the Welsh. The West Saxons (of Wessex) exerted pressure on Dumnonia (the extreme south-west of England) though did not achieve conquest until 838.

Northern Scotland, Ireland, the Isle of Man and to a lesser extent Wales, suffered attacks and settlements from the Vikings (also known as the Norse) from Scandinavia from the end of the eighth century. These events stretched through the ninth and tenth centuries with an impact that lasted until the twelfth. The looting and burning of monasteries was recorded by monks, who were inevitably biased against the newcomers. More peaceful aspects are also apparent in the settlement patterns and the art of the period.

In 1066 England was invaded by the Normans (themselves originally Vikings who had settled in northern France). The result was, that by the twelfth century, almost all areas of Celtic post-Roman Britain, were subject to Norman overlordship and the world of the late Iron Age/post-Roman Celtic Briton was over.

The quest for the Celts

The mystery of what happened to the British and Irish Celts during the fifth and sixth centuries has attracted much research and speculation over the past three centuries. The areas which did not come under direct Roman dominance were most successful in resisting Anglo-Saxon and Viking inroads and, significantly, retained cultural features that distinguish them from their neighbours. The temptation to trace lines of direct descent from prehistory

into modern times has proved irresistible and as a result there have been many heated debates. It has even been doubted (to the intense irritation of those who regard themselves as Celts today) whether it was ever, or indeed is, meaningful to speak of Celts or Celtic society at all.

The main approaches have been through linguistics, history, art history, politics, social history and archaeology and have been applied variously to the period roughly 600 BC to the present day.

The linguistic approach

The concept of the ‘Celts’ owes its existence to Classical writers (Rankin, 1987). The Celts figure in the writings of Herodotus (*Histories*, 2.33), in the fifth century BC as a group of people who ‘lived beyond the Pillars of Hercules’ (the Straits of Gibraltar) at the ‘extreme west of Europe’. The Greek ethnographer Poseidonius provided an account of their culture. Caesar was explicit that the Gauls were Celts, but there was a certain vagueness as to which other groups of people the Greeks and Romans encountered were actually Celts, and where the limits of their territories were.

The term ‘Celtic’ was first used in the context of Britain by the leading humanist and Classical scholar George Buchanan (1506–82), who argued that the clearest evidence for the origins of the population of Britain was to be found in languages (Collis, 2003: 34–40). In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the concept of the Celts as a unified and widespread group was taken up by a Breton monk, Paul-Yves Pezron (1639–1706), who defined Welsh as a Celtic language. An Oxford scientist, Edward Lhuyd (1660–1709), built on the work of Pezron and defined (in his *Glossography*, 1707) two language groups – the P (Brythonic) and Q (Goidelic) Celtic (Collis, 2003: 48–52). This viewpoint remains persuasive – partly because from the fragmentary evidence it is likely that the people Classical writers knew as Celts spoke a language belonging to the same family.

The Celts in the period under review had (as far as is known) no collective noun for themselves. Although Classical writers use the term ‘Celts’ with reference to some of the inhabitants of Continental Europe, they did not use it in relation to any of the people in Britain during either the pre-Roman Iron Age or the Roman occupation of Britannia. The term was similarly not used by any writer in early medieval Britain, Ireland or Continental Europe.

The eighth-century Northumbrian churchman/historian the Venerable Bede, stated that ‘This island . . . contains five nations, the English, Britons, Scots, Picts and Latins, each in its own peculiar dialect’ (Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* I. 1). However, there is still no firm evidence that the people to whom Bede referred regarded themselves as having a collective identity: he notably did not use the term ‘Celt’. The Irish in the early medieval period

sometimes called themselves *Féni*, or more often *Goídil* ('Gael'), a word borrowed from the Welsh *Gwyddyl*, which implies that they distinguished between themselves and other people with whom they came into contact (Byrne, 1973: 8). They regarded their language as unique, but recognized some similarities with British, which they thought were due to British borrowings from the Irish (Russell, 2005: 406).

Until the late tenth–eleventh-century poem, the *Armes Prydein Vawr*, there is no evidence that the inhabitants of Wales described themselves as *Cymry* ('Welsh') (Snyder, 2003: 262), though they most certainly recognized cultural identity with the *Gwyr y Gogledd* ('men of the north'), who spoke Welsh and with whom they shared genealogies. The Dalriadic Scots saw themselves as Irish and the Picts referred to themselves as *Prydyn* (earlier *Priteni*, i.e. Britons). They were named by their Gaelic neighbours as *Cruithin* or *Cruithni* ('the native people').

Some commentators have argued, by extension from prehistory, that there were no 'Celts' in the period covered by this book, simply because the term 'Celt' was not used by any of the people living at the time. However, even if this were accepted, speaking related languages does give a head start in trade and other communications, and the possibility that the 'Celts' had a sense of group identity cannot be dismissed outright. Large areas of the modern world acknowledge elements of common ancestry through strong interaction and cultural assumptions, whilst having no overall group name beyond being, for example, English- or Hispanic-speaking. Certainly the people of the 'Celtic fringe' areas were seen as having distinctive characteristics that set them apart from the English from the fourteenth century onwards (Pittock, 1999: 45). It is notable that the late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century antiquary John Pinkerton was using the term 'Celtic' when asserting that 'Scotland was held back by its degenerate Celtic population' (Pittock, 1999: 56).

The historical approach

The main difficulty in studying the Celts before the development of modern archaeology has been the sparsity of reliable historical sources. The areas were rarely of interest to the chroniclers of literate societies such as the Roman world, and the Celtic language itself was oral (except for a few Iron Age inscriptions, mainly on coins, in somewhat different languages) and largely without texts until the influence of Christianity in the fifth and sixth centuries. In addition, historical material relating to before the late sixth century in both Ireland and Britain is extremely difficult to evaluate since most was set down long after the events concerned. Conversely, once writing was widely introduced, it was so enthusiastically and copiously embraced in Ireland, that it is overwhelmingly difficult to collate with other evidence,

particularly for the period from 650 to 850 (Ó Cróinín, 1995: 8). The surviving written evidence for Britain (both Celtic and Germanic) remains extremely fragmentary.

Contemporary documentation required a knowledge of the Latin alphabet and language, and many documents were written for specific purposes not always helpful to modern historians. For example, many sources simply glorify individual saints, list battles, or were designed to entertain the contemporaneous audiences. As with modern biographies or political tracts, the agenda may well have been covert and at this distance in time, unidentifiable. Several historians of the period have concluded that there is almost nothing prior to the end of the sixth century that can be accepted as fact, and that a great deal afterwards is very suspect (Hughes, 1972: 146; Dumville, 1977: 173–4; Laing and Laing, 1990a: 42–4). Nonetheless, readers should be aware of the sources as well as their deficiencies, for each generation and each individual views material anew and rejects or accepts with new insight.

The archaeological approach

Many heated debates have taken place over the archaeological evidence for Celts in Europe and by extension, over the origins of the Celts in Britain and Ireland. The arguments have revolved around whether there were ‘Celts’ in later prehistoric Britain and Ireland.² Through much of the twentieth century, the Celts were identified with the Continental Iron Age cultures known as Hallstatt and La Tène.³ Dating from the seventh century BC onwards, these were primarily focused successively on Austria and Germany, and Switzerland and France. It was argued that both Britain and Ireland adopted a ‘Celtic’ culture (and language) after invasion or settlement by people belonging to these cultures. The ‘Celtic’ culture was then seen to have been retained from the Iron Age to the medieval period in the non-Roman regions of Britain, and (particularly) Ireland.

However, from the 1960s onwards, the idea of Hallstatt and La Tène invasions of Britain and Ireland was increasingly rejected (Cunliffe, 1991: 18–20; S. James, 1999). Although it is reasonable to say that some Celts (known to Caesar as Gauls) possessed La Tène material culture, it does not follow that all Celts necessarily possessed La Tène culture, nor that all people using La Tène objects were Celts.

But if there were no invasions, it was argued, could it be said there were Iron Age Celts in Britain and Ireland at all? It is not invariably true however, that material culture, ideas and language are spread only by invasion or large-scale settlement. Celtic culture, as well as language, could have evolved over a longer time and in a wider area than is suggested if it is rigidly identified with the archaeological cultures of Hallstatt and La Tène. In addition, during

the past twenty years there has been growing awareness that Ireland in particular was influenced by the Roman world. The study of early Celtic culture is therefore under considerable process of change in techniques of data retrieval as well as methodology.

The political and social historical approach

In Ireland, especially, through much of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth, research was coloured by political factors, tied up with modern nationalism. Interest in the early medieval Celts spread from a scholarly base, to the mass of the Irish population who saw that they were not the barbarians the English made out, but the inheritors of a great culture (Sheehy, 1980: 7). A number of personalities were important: William Wilde, George Petrie, William Wakeman, William Wood-Martin and others, including Margaret Stokes, worked in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century (Sheehy, 1980: ch. 2; Edwards, 2005: 236–7). The Celtic Society was founded in 1845, the year that Petrie's magisterial survey of Irish round towers was published (Fig. 1), and a few years before O'Neill's *The Most Interesting of the Sculptured High Crosses of Ancient Ireland* (1857). Among other pioneering studies were W. G. Wood-Martin's *The Lake Dwellings of Ireland* (1886) and *Pagan Ireland* (1895). Their research was often sound for its time, but was driven by growing national feeling and the more widespread interest in medieval antiquities.

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social historians were more concerned with establishing the antiquity of Irish institutions using Irish law codes as the basis for their discussions. These centred on the assumption or hope that Celtic society of the early medieval period (and by extension, later) represented a direct survival from prehistory (N. T. Patterson, 1991: ch. 1). Such commentators were concerned with what they perceived as the reality of the Irish past, but by the 1880s the Celtic Revival was under way, coloured by such literary figures as W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge, and by the Irish version of the Arts and Crafts movement (Sheehy, 1980: ch. 6). There was also a growing concern for the role of language, and of its roots in an Indo-European past.

The Harvard Archaeological Expedition (1932–36) was the real impetus behind modern archaeological research. Hugh O'Neill Hencken and Hallam Movius' objective was to explore the origins of the Irish, so the idea of 'Celtic origins' coloured their work. Hencken's excavations at Cahercommaun, the two Ballinderry crannogs and most importantly Lagore crannog were landmarks in the study (Cooney, 1995). S. P. Ó. Ríordáin and Joseph Raftery (who had worked with Hencken at Ballinderry) continued fieldwork in this tradition by providing a further series of major excavation reports on such sites as Garranes and a group round Lough Gur in the 1940s. However, work was still coloured by a desire to demonstrate the individuality of Ireland, while at the



Fig. 1 Round tower at Swords, Co. Dublin after Petrie, 1832.

same time trying to see how Ireland fitted into the wider European past. Françoise Henry became established as the leading figure in the study of Irish art of the period. Her work was characterized by a fervent pro-Irish nationalism (clearly exemplified in her work on hanging-bowls: F. Henry, 1936).

There was a similar if less intense nationalist movement in Scotland (Bell, 1981). Celtic historical studies were pioneered by William Skene, whose three-volume *Celtic Scotland: A History of Ancient Alban* (1876–80), despite its flaws, remains a classic, and was coloured by a strong patriotic fervour (Sellar, 2001). Joseph Anderson, a dedicated Scottish patriot, felt that a nation's achievements had to be viewed in as wide a perspective as possible (Graham, 1978; Clarke, 2002). His two volumes of *Scotland in Early Christian Times* (1881) were impressive, and his work with the Welsh art historian Romilly Allen resulted in the magisterial *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (1903), frequently cited in this book.

Other writers such as Daniel Wilson and Robert Munro were similarly pioneering an understanding of Scottish early medieval antiquities. Despite their work, however (and the long tradition of antiquarianism in Scotland, stretching back to the eighteenth century), Scottish archaeology tended to lapse into provincialism in the first half of the twentieth century, and interest was not widespread among the population in general. In the 1970s (when the first edition of this book was published), there was comparatively little interest in the Picts, either in the popular imagination or in academic circles, but a huge upsurge of national feeling and interest in what has been perceived as 'Celtic mystery' has led to the Picts becoming a focus of attention, as the 'original' inhabitants of the north of Scotland. While some 'Pictophilia' has probably been detrimental, it has also fostered major advances in learning.

In Wales some pioneering work was done on the inscribed stones by J. O. Westwood, an Oxford zoologist, culminating in *Lapidarium Walliae* (1876–9), but widespread interest in the antiquities of early medieval Wales was not effectively kindled until after the Second World War, and then only in scholarly circles (Laing and Laing, 1990a: 21–4).

The art historical approach

The study of Celtic Christian art commenced in earnest in the nineteenth century, when scholars began collecting data bases of sculpture and decorated manuscripts, and publishing the major pieces of ornamental metalwork. Study of art has been hampered by the lack of context – manuscripts and major pieces of ecclesiastical metalwork, for example, were very mobile, and travelled between monasteries (Laing and Laing, 1990: 44–6). Very few pieces of fine metalwork have been found in association with other material in archaeological contexts, and most of these have been of limited value in studying artistic developments.

Although sculpture rarely travelled far from where it was carved, it is almost always without an archaeological context. The finds of metalwork from Viking graves are provided with a *terminus ante quem* (earliest period

before which the objects could not have been made), but the objects were often very old before they reached their final resting places. Studies of the palaeography and comparative study of texts have been of limited value in the study of illuminated manuscripts, but most study has been concerned with the traditional method of comparing individual motifs and trying to arrange a sequence based on guesswork. The result has been a tendency to date to the eighth century anything that was seen as good quality that did not show obvious Scandinavian influence (J. Raftery, 1981: 89).

When art historians joined forces with prehistorians in attempts to find 'pure' Celtic art by tracing certain motifs back to the Iron Age on the Continent, even further problems arose as assumptions and implications were all too frequently piled upon dubious deductions and inferences.

Modern, scientific advances

Since the first edition of this book the greatest advances have been made with the development of scientific methods of investigation – especially in the laboratory and non-invasively in the field. A major series of radiocarbon dates and dates derived from dendrochronology (tree-ring dating) are beginning to remove the chronological problems. The application of dendrochronology has been particularly useful, since Irish sites often contain well-preserved wood from water-logged contexts (Baillie, 1981; 1993). There have also been some advances in field survey, though detailed regional surveys still remain relatively few (but see now Lacy, 1983; Cuppage, 1986; Buckley and Sweetman, 1991; Toal, 1995; O'Sullivan and Sheehan, 1996 for Ireland, and the RCAHM county surveys for Scotland and Wales).

In Ireland, excavations have included work at the two major sites, Deer Park Farms and Moynagh Lough (both in the process of publication), as well as a wide range of more minor ones. Work at Clonmacnoise is currently producing valuable information on monastic archaeology, as did the work on Reask and High Island.

In Britain, the major landmarks have been the excavation reports on Dunadd and Whithorn, and the reports on the series of 'high status' sites investigated by Leslie Alcock, most notably Dundurn, Dunollie and Dumbarton Rock. The final reports on Cadbury Castle and on Cadbury Congresbury have extended understanding of the archaeology of the south-west of England and a series of more minor sites have added considerable knowledge.

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The Celtic world

An insight into everyday life in the Celtic world of the early Christian period can be gained through studying many sources – from Law Codes, biographies of early saints and churchmen, poetry, to archaeological objects, sites and art treasures. The snippets of available information do not necessarily reflect the overall situation, yet encouragingly they do exist. Information is available on the structure of society (including the role of women and children), health, religion and many pastimes and pursuits. The limitations and constrictions of the written sources and material remains must be considered for each new piece of evidence.

Written sources

Much insight is gained into Celtic culture through study of written material – which simply did not exist until the Latin alphabet was adopted.

Celtic languages

Linguists use scientific rules to study how languages have developed, and can project back to presumed origins. Celtic languages developed from a parent Indo-European root. Indo-European was probably introduced to Europe at the end of the Neolithic/beginning of the Bronze Age (some have suggested even earlier), and it is generally held that Common Celtic developed after 1000 BC and that Celtic was being spoken in Britain and Ireland (as well as on the Continent) in the Iron Age, if not the late Bronze Age.¹

Two main Celtic language families were spoken in the period and region covered by this book, Brittonic/Brythonic (notably Welsh) and Goidelic/Gaelic (notably Irish) (Ball and Fife, 1993). Many scholars in the past saw them developing rapidly around the sixth century AD, but it is now thought that Brittonic Celtic evolved gradually in the early centuries AD and Goidelic Celtic may have developed around the same time-span from a common Insular Celtic source (Ellis Evans, 1990: esp. 174–5). Some conservative speech varieties probably lingered longer, but the fifth–sixth centuries were a crucial period for the development of the language.

This period probably also saw the development in north-west Britain of Cumbric – a language related to Welsh. The introduction of Scots Gaelic to Scotland was the result of Irish settlement in Argyll and the adjacent islands