

# The Celts and Their History

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## Abstract

This essay was written for learners of the history of English. It can be used as a university text, and includes ten questions about the Celts. After reading, you should understand their history and lifestyle, as well as be able to answer the ten questions. The introductory books on English history mainly focus on the Anglo-Saxon race and make little of the Celts, because the English language has its roots in Anglo-Saxon languages. The Celts, the first settlers of Britain, have had a long, ancient history since they moved to Britain. We describe the history of the Celts to develop a broad range of knowledge about English history. This ethnohistory is useful for understanding the whole picture of English history in chronological order.

**Key words:** the Celts, the history of Great Britain, English history

## 1. Introduction

When we discuss the history of the English language, the first settlers of the British Isles, the Celts, are usually emphasized as the first ethnic group in Great Britain. Although quite few, some words in present day English originated in Celtic languages. Some are names of cities, such as London, Kent, Devon, and Lindsay. The Celts did not have their own writing system, and so did not leave any literary materials that could provide clues about themselves. They are an inscrutable people, shrouded in mystery. Thus, in introductory texts of history of English, they have not been described so often.

In this essay, we focus on the Celtic people as the first settlers of Britain. We describe English history centering on the Celts hidden in a veil of mystery. As an external factor, we will study the flow of ethnic groups and the transition of their social life in the Britain Isles. Historical remarks on the Celts are rarely mentioned in introductory textbooks on the history of English in Japan. Filling in the gaps is useful for understanding the historical changes of the English language. The remarks in this essay will provide answers to the following questions:

- a. Who can be defined as Celtic?
- b. What did the Celts bring to Britain?
- c. What kind of class-structured society had been built by the Britons, Celtic inhabitants of southern Great Britain, at the time of the Roman conquest?
- d. What did the Britons export to the Roman Empire?
- e. What was the average height of the Celts?
- f. What was the fundamental spirit of holy men in Celtic religion?
- g. What did the place-name *Atholl* originally mean?
- h. What do the word endings in *Manchester* and *Lancaster* mean?
- i. Who mainly used Celtic languages at the time of the Roman conquest?
- j. How was the kingdom of Scotland born?

The above questions can be used as exercises in outside teaching hours. After students review the questions beforehand, this essay can be used to provide feedback on their answers. Sometimes, the Celts were called barbarians or reasonless brutes. But when we understand their history, we can discover aspect of the Celts which we had not previously known.

## 2. Pre-Christian Great Britain and the Celts

The Celts were indigenous European people. They were Caucasian and one West Indo-European ethnic group composed of Greeks, Latins, and Slavs. Around 4000 B.C., lifestyle shifted from hunting and foraging to agriculture and keeping animals. Before the rise of the Roman Empire, the Celts had been divided into small groups and formed small tribal communities in their agricultural society. They grew grain, such as wheat and barley, and kept sheep, cows, and swine. They also managed and protected areas of forest to obtain building materials. It was customary to burn dead bodies into ashes and lay them to rest in a tomb buried underground. The Celts were a martial and warlike people, and resolutely courageous.

The Celts were recognized as a people who lived in Great Britain and Ireland, for the first time, in the prehistoric period called Iron Age, when the seventeenth century arrived. In the fourth century B.C., the navigator Pytheas from Marseille, called the British Isles and Ireland “Pretani” or “Pritani.” These expressions were quoted later by many other writers, and were changed again and again, eventually becoming fixed as “Britannia” for the islands’ name and “Britoness” for the inhabitants. At that time, the Celts in Europe were called “Keltoi” by the Greeks and “Galli” or “Celtae” by the Romans. They started to move to the British Isles from the European continent, bringing iron, in the seventh century B.C. Before that, Beaker folk had been there since the twenty-second century B.C., when the Bronze Age started in England. These people made a pottery called Beaker, so they were called Beaker folk. They dominated the British Isles until the sixth century B.C.

Celtic people did not move from the European Continent in mass, but as a troop equipped with iron weapons. They brought iron and colonized the British Isles in the 7th century B.C. At that time, agricultural instruments made

of iron drastically enhanced agricultural production.

The Celtic people moved to British Isles from the continent following Beaker folk. They were called Goidel. Then, tribes called the Britons and Belgae colonized the British Isles. Each tribe spoke Celtic languages, and were collectively called the Celts or Celtic people. It seems that they totally dominated Great Britain and Ireland in the first century B.C., but it is difficult to prove the matter because they did not have a writing system. According to one estimate, Celtic people already started to live in the British Isles in the twenty-first century B.C., and occupied the complete islands by the sixth century B.C.

Celtic people had occupied a large area from Scotland to Asia Minor for about 500 years, until the Gallic Wars began, and their territories were absorbed into the Roman Empire. Excavation of old ruins has made it clear that there were large farmlands, villages, gathering places, forts, and shrines in their territories. Around the fifth century B.C., the Celts developed a form of hierarchical warrior organization based on kinship, called “chiefdom.” As social stability was secured, the population grew rapidly on the European continent. The rapidness of the growth was the main reason the Celtic people spread over such a wide area. According to one view, the population of Great Britain grew rapidly after 200 B.C., and 2 – 3 million people lived there in the late Iron Age. They mastered the skill of making ironware and lived in shelters surrounded by defensive walls. In the sixth century B.C., their territories spread from the Iberian Peninsula to the headstream of the Danube. After the Roman Empire gained power and rose to the fore, Celtic territories were confined to the British Isles.

Some articles have been unearthed from ancient tombs in the British Isles. They tell us how violent the conflicts among tribes were. Some tombs included a stripped two-wheeled horse-drawn chariot and many arranged skulls. Celtic

people had the practice of removing and preserving a person's head after killing the person, and a custom of eating human meat.

They had a coinage system and used coins bearing a barley mark on them. Their rich agricultural society was formed based on iron farming implements. Their settlements were surrounded by trenches and clay walls. They built markets and mints within these premises.

It is difficult to imagine that the Celtic people identified themselves as one ethnic group at that time. They were composed of at least two different groups; one controlled by a chief and another controlled by a king. It is reasonable to think that there were some different Celtic peoples, and that each spoke their own Celtic language: Gaulish, Gaelic, and Welsh. In general, people who spoke Celtic languages are defined as the Celts.

### **3. The Celts in the Roman Britain period**

Julius Caesar invaded Britain in 55 and 54 B.C. as part of his Gallic Wars. He tried to beat off the people in the British Isles, called Britons. The Romans were often beset by Britons who descended on the territories of the Roman Empire. Claudius, a Roman emperor from 41 to 54, started to completely conquer the British Isles to beat off the Britons and maintain the Empire's integrity. Claudius battled with the Celts and dominated the whole area of Cornwall in 51. In the early 70s, the Romans kept Wales and Yorkshire under their control. In 84, there was a final battle in the north part of Scotland, called Battle of Mons Graupius. After this battle, the Roman Empire seized control of most of the British Isles. They incorporated the land up to the south of the Scottish Highlands, but gave up on conquering the north of Scotland, owing to the stiff resistance of the Picts, a Celtic tribe.

Hadrian, a Roman emperor from 117 to 138, built Hadrian's Wall in 122,

which marked the northern limit of the Roman Empire. It was 117.5 km long and made of a stone base and a stone wall. In the northern part of Hadrian's Wall, Celtic people maintained an independent society of their own until the fifth century. For a while, the Roman Empire sometimes attacked the Highlands and Western Isles, but never brought them under Roman rule. The same went for Ireland. The era from this conquest to the early fifth century is called the Roman Britain Period.

The British Isles became a Roman province and worked for the Roman Empire. They had local administrative sections based on tribes, and they worked as a unit to levy taxes. The king or head of each tribe took charge of collecting taxes for Rome.

Roman forces resided in various places within Britain. The name *Britain* is derived from *Brittania*, which was the name used by ancient Romans. A location for their forces was called *castrum* in Latin, which survives in the Modern English word endings *chester*, *caster*, and *cester*, forming the city names of *Winchester*, *Manchester*, *Lancaster*, and *Gloucester*. These word endings indicate that there were military garrisons in those places. The Empire built more than 80 Roman cities in Britain. They included stone-built public facilities, auditoriums, amphitheaters, community bathhouses, and waterworks. They were modern cities protected by surrounding stonewalls. Each city was systematically connected by roads. Rural areas spread out between cities. Agriculture was the only industry. High-ranking Roman officials and Briton nobles dominated the common people in this agricultural society. Accordingly, the commoners had little chance to experience Roman culture. They lived an old farming and country life. The Roman rulers treated the commoners as slaves, but the Romans also brought a serene life to Briton, providing a stable society and economy. Lower-class Celts were called up as reserves for the Roman army. Some of them could return home after serving in

the Roman Empire. After they went home, some started to conduct agricultural or commercial business. At that time, wool goods, pottery, bricks, bronzeware, and glass were exports of Britain to the European continent.

Some Celts ranked highly and could have the job of controlling their own territory. The Celts were divided into rich and poor common people. In order to get good jobs, people had to learn Latin. The Celtic language was used in the rural areas.

At that time, Britons, one of the Celtic tribes, had a clan- or tribe-based society. High-class soldiers ruled this society. Britons were composed of three social classes: *plebs* known as commoners of lower social status, *equites* known as soldiers, and *druids* known as religious leaders. They didn't have their own writing system, but used storytellers to tell their history and ancient folklore. Soldiers and religious leaders lived well. Commoners were their subordinates and not permitted to join social meetings. Under the established social order, they organized their society into rural areas, hill forts, and shrines for sacred festivals.

Many tribes lived in the British Isles, and battles between them were not rare at that time. They always completed preparations for fighting. They built fortresses on hills, surrounded by clay walls. There are remains of more than a thousand hill fortresses in the British Isles. This proves that the ancient Celts were composed of various tribes. Caesar commented in a document that he was surprised at the high density of population in Britain and at the great quantities of livestock in the British Isles.

The Roman Empire did not assume to have Britain under their complete control or ownership. After the Roman conquest, the Romans and Celts in the southeast Britain Isles agreed to a trade partnership. During the 90 years after the Romans arrived in Britain, the Romans and Celts coexisted peacefully. During this period, Roman culture reached the British Isles. The society and

economy of the Britons underwent a complete change. The city system and the monetary economy developed drastically because of brisk trade with Rome. Costly pottery, silver products, and wines of the Mediterranean coast have been unearthed from tombs of the wealthy, which indicates their social prosperity at the time. Olive oil and wine were carried into Britain, and from Britain, grains, wool goods, slaves, and hunting dogs were carried out to the European continent. Slave trade had already been conducted before the Roman conquest, and chains have been excavated from the ruins of the period.

The highlands of Britain were a cattle-raising region, and forests, pastures, and fields stretched as far as the eye could see. Goats were raised for wool and milk, and trees were grown for building materials. The north and west part of Britain were lands for cultivation of cattle. Canals surrounded them to prevent the entrance of other animals. The scale of productivity was sometimes more than self-sufficient, with surplus crops (Reynolds 1987). Excavation has shown that people in Britain faced a prosperous time and a somber time each year.

The ruins of ancient storehouses were excavated at the Danebury hillfort, which prospered from around 650 B.C. to around 100 B.C. The hillfort became involved in some sort of fight and was abandoned around 100 B.C., which has been proved by the burned gate. Most houses had circular designs and the largest one was more than 15 meters wide. The walls were made of clay and wattle to prevent rain and wind from intruding. There was a circle of poles set up inside the houses, which had plenty of interior space. They also had many holes for indoor grain storage.

As evidence of the physical features of Britons, human bones have been unearthed from burial places in the east part of Yorkshire. They indicate that the average height of adult males was 1.71 meters and that the average height of adult females was 1.58 meters. A long life at that time was about 40 years.



From the beginning of the fourth century to the beginning of the fifth century, the Roman Empire stood at a major crossroads. During this period, many soldier emperors appeared in Rome and were attacked many times by Germanic peoples. Around that time, the emperor, Constantine, returned to Rome from Britain. He defeated the harmful soldier emperors one after another in civil war. The Roman army had to return home to strengthen defenses against the Germanic peoples. After they left Britain, the neighboring tribes such as the Picts in the Scottish Highland and the Celts in Ireland started to invade Britannia (England), which had been left lightly guarded. After its Roman rulers left Britain, it became a nation of small tribes. In order to brace themselves against attacks by Picts and Celts, they let the Saxons, a Germanic tribe, settle in the lowland shores of Britannia in 367. Relying on another tribe for defense against an enemy was a traditional tool of the Roman Empire. From the beginning of the fourth century, Saxons started to settle in Britannia from the European continent. Actually, the Saxons suffered from shortages of usable land on the continent. The invitation in 367 was thus a good opportunity for Saxons to move to Britannia on a large scale.

#### **4. The Celts in Ireland**

Ireland, to the west of Britain, was not occupied by the Roman Empire, nor were the Scottish Highlands. The oldest existing document of Ireland was written after the fifth century. At that time, the Celts in Ireland worked as pirates. Ireland is very close to Britain. People in Ireland and Britain constantly moved across the English Channel. The Celts in Ireland built their houses strongly and strengthened their defenses. Their buildings had circular designs like those in Britain. Hillforts, meeting places, and remains of kings have been unearthed in Ireland. Around the fifth century, Christianity

prospered and Ireland was considered an island for saints and scholars.

The oldest existing document of Ireland is called Prosper's Chronicle. It describes the propagation of Christianity in Ireland in 431, which is its oldest described event. Pope Celestine I sent Saint Patrick to Ireland so that people in Ireland would become priests. At that time Ireland was divided into four provinces: Ulaid (Ulster), Connacht, Laigin (Leinster), and Mumu (Munster). Ulaid was ruled by the king Conchobar mac Nessa, and Connacht was ruled by the queen Medb. Each province was composed of many tribes and later formed seven provinces.

In Ireland, formerly composed of tribal societies, Saint Patrick started a city system based on bishops, which had been developed in the Roman Empire. The city was built as a round fortress, including a church, chapel, priest's house, and kitchen system. Saint Patrick persistently developed urbanization, which eventually reached maturity in the sixth century. The churches finally became monasteries. According to the teachings of the founder, monasteries ruled each area. He established a bishop system to govern cities, which molded to the Celtic spirit. Originally, the Celts were a collection of small tribes that preserved families and blood relatives. In monastic institutions, an abbot ruled each monastery. This was like a family, and fit into Celtic disposition.

Roman culture mixed with traditional Celtic culture through the spread of Bible. Ireland prospered and became the center of writing culture and education. Monks specialized in Irish and Latin. They eagerly produced manuscripts on religious theory, hagiology, natural history, and astronomy. Some of them wrote original notes and even poems in the margins. They were willing to choose ascetic lives. Some left Ireland and moved to Great Britain. In the late fifth century, Saint Columba moved to the Isle of Iona off the western coast of Scotland. He founded an abbey, the Monastery of Iona, which later became the most dominant religious institution in Ireland, Scotland,

and England. He popularized Irish Christianity among the Picts. The place name *Atholl* then scattered across Scotland. The original meaning of *Atholl* is *Second Ireland*.

After the Vikings began attacking Scotland, some tribes living in Britain, including the Picts, Gaels, and Britons, formed a confederation. After that, the Kingdom of Alba was born and eventually created the Kingdom of Scotland.

The movement of monks from Ireland was a preparatory step for spreading Irish Christianity into the south of Britain. Celtic monasteries had spread all over Britain until the seventh century. A spirit of hermitage and missionary work defined the character of monks, wandering from place to place. Their self-sacrificing lives were accepted by people in Britain, where Irish Christianity spread rapidly.

In Ireland, unoccupied by the Roman Empire, the times were quiet and the people retained stories passed down orally in Latin. There remained many stories about militaristic aristocrats, such as “The Cattle Raid of Cooley.” At that time, people seeking education and knowledge gathered at monasteries in Ireland. After acquiring profound learning, they moved to Britain and various other parts of Europe. The prosperity of Ireland continued until the Viking attack, after which they faced an era of Viking dominance, and many manuscripts that had been transcribed by hand were abandoned and lost. The prosperity of Ireland ended in 795, when the Vikings invaded Ireland.

## **5. Concluding Remarks**

In this essay, we have explained the lives and history of the Celts, who have been described little in introductory books on English history. As a reader of English history, we have mentioned the Celtic people in Britain and Ireland. We have also illustrated that this ethnohistory is useful for understanding the

whole picture of English history in chronological order. By providing ten questions to deepen understanding of the Celts and English history and by answering those questions, we have accounted for the drastically changing social situation of the Celts from about 2000 B.C. to about 800 A.D.

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