

CELTIC CULTURE

LOCATION

People who still call themselves Celts today mainly live in Brittany France, Cornwall England, Galicia Spain, Galatia Turkey, Ireland, the Isle of Man, Scotland and Wales. All of these areas still have strong Celtic elements to their culture; some 2.5 million of them still speak Celtic languages.

Archeologists found the first evidence of Celtic culture in France and Germany from 1200 BC. An important archeological site which taught us a lot about the Celts was found in Hallstatt, Austria and dates back to the 8th to 6th centuries BC. This is also the time when Celtic peoples were settling in the British Isles. From around the 4th century BC the Celts lived on the British Isles. On the European continent the Celtic people were called the Gauls, a name that was invented by the Romans. Julius Caesar, the famous Roman general and emperor, occupied large areas of Gaul territory, as did other Roman leaders.

HISTORY

The Celts had an oral culture and largely distrusted the written word. Most of what we know about them was written down by Romans and by early Christian monks. That is why a lot of the written sources about the Celts tend to be romanized or christianized meaning that it was interpreted through Roman or Christian eyes. The most trustworthy written information about the Celts is found in notes made by traveling Irish monks in the 6th century AD. Because Ireland, Wales and Scotland were geographically isolated and never occupied by the Romans, we tend to believe that the most 'pure' form of Celtic culture and religion managed to survive here.

Society, politics and economy

The various Celtic tribes were bound together by a common language, culture and religion, rather than a central government. Celtic society was organized into different feudal systems headed by a king or queen. Generally speaking the Celts knew three classes in their society: a warrior upper class (headed by a king), druids (priests, judges and educators) and the commoners (freemen and slaves).

Women were well respected in Celtic society. In early Celtic culture there were many great women warriors and queens, and in tribal gatherings they had an equal vote. In contrary to Greek and Roman women, Celtic women had property rights. Women and men had equal rights to divorce: there is even an example of an Irish law that permitted a woman to divorce her husband if he snored.

The Celts had a vast trade network all across Europe. They traded metalwork, salt, grains and horses with the Romans in return for wine, and luxury goods. Their inventions in metal tools and weapons as well as agricultural techniques made them flourish.

CULTURE

Along with drinking and feasting, the Celts were very fond of fighting and making war. The height of their cultural, political and economical power lasted from the 5th to the 3rd centuries BC. In 390 BC Celtic tribes conquered Rome and occupied it for seven months, while in 335 BC they fought the Macedonian army of Alexander the Great.

In battle Celtic warriors would line up in front of the enemy army, and scream and bash their swords on their shields as they came charging into the enemy lines. With this strategy they hoped to scare their enemy since it is much easier to attack a fleeing soldier. When the enemy remained firm, the Celts would realign and start the intimidation ritual all over again. They painted and tattooed their bodies with fantastic designs, put glue in their hair so that it would stick up in long peaks, and wore long drooping mustaches. In battle they would wear brightly colored tartan pants or go completely naked apart from body paint. Even though the puritan Romans thought of them as revolting primitives, they still admired their extreme courage and strength as warriors. When they weren't fighting the Greeks or Romans, the Celts were often feuding amongst each other.

The Celts were also master craftsmen. They were the first people in Europe to work with iron, making tools, weapons and jewelry. The artifacts that were found by archeologists show a unique style. Celtic craftsmen and artists liked to use plant and animal motifs, as well as more abstract curves and spirals. These patterns were found on shields, swords, vessels, drinking cups and jewelry.

RELIGION

Celtic religion was polytheistic, meaning that they worshipped multiple gods and goddesses. Druids were the Celtic version of priests. They were spiritual leaders who led rituals and told prophesy, but they were also known as educators and judges. Julius Caesar once said that they were a very religious people who had a moral code that distinguished right from wrong. In the Celtic religion moral salvation was considered the responsibility of the individual.

The Celts were an Indo-European people and in their religion one can find many similarities with Latin, Greek and even Hindu gods. Celtic deities resembled humans who displayed human weaknesses and sins. The Celts believed their gods to be their ancestors, not their creators. The Celts believed their origins lay with the mother goddess, Danu, who fell from heaven and created the river Danube. They believed humans consisted of a body, soul and spirit, and the world was divided into earth, sea and air. Many Celtic religious and philosophical concepts of the world were divided up in trinities. It is thought that this strongly influenced the later Christian belief of the Holy Trinity.

The human head was seen as the source and power of the spirit. It was a mark of great might if they took the head of an enemy they admired, embalmed it in cedar oil and kept it as a prized possession. Celts believed that after death the soul would be reborn into the Otherworld: when a soul in the Otherworld died it would be reborn into this world. To give the dead a good start in the Otherworld the Celts buried them with rich goods such as jewelry, clothes, weapons, food, and drink. One day of each year, on October 31, members of the Otherworld would be visible in this world. This was the day when the dead could come back to haunt the living who had wronged them. It is still known to us as the feast of Samhain, Halloween, or All Souls' Day.

Celtic culture has had a deep influence on European society and religion. Versions of their language are still spoken in parts of France, England and Ireland. Back around 100 BC Celtic craftsmen anticipated many of the tools we use today, such as the plough, and many names of European towns and rivers are derived from Celtic names.

