

Lecture Two: The Earliest Settlers of Britain

1. The Iberians

The first settlers, who came to settle England about 3000 or 2500 BC or during the Bronze Age, are called the Iberians. They are originally from the Iberian Peninsula (nowadays Spain and Portugal). Very little is known about them except some information extracted from archeological research about their physical appearance; they were dark-haired and dark-skinned people. They were primitive and lived on hunting and later they learned to farm and used bronze to produce weapons. They raised animals and used them as a source of food and clothing and energy. They settled in the western part of Britain and Ireland. It is said that they raised the Stonehenge which is known as a center of religious worship. Other smaller Henges are found in different parts of the country

2. The Celts

From around 750 BC to 12 BC, the Celts were the most powerful people in central and northern Europe. There were many groups (tribes) of Celts, speaking a vaguely common language. The word Celt comes from the Greek word, *Keltoi*, which means barbarians and is properly pronounced as "Kelt".

No-one called the people living in Britain during the Iron Age, Celts until the eighteenth century. The Romans called these people *Britons*, not Celts. The name Celt is a 'modern' name and is used to collectively describe all the many tribes of people living during the Iron Age. The Iron Age Celts lived in Europe 750 years before Jesus

was born. The Iron Age ended in AD43 (43 years after Jesus was born) when the Romans invaded Britain. The Celts are called Iron Age Celts.

2.1. The Celts Original Lands

The Celts lived across most of Europe during the Iron Age. Several hundred years before Julius Caesar, they occupied many parts of central and western Europe, especially what are now Austria, Switzerland, southern France, and Spain. Over several years, in wave after wave, they spread outwards, taking over France and Belgium, and crossing to Britain. Northwest Europe was dominated by three main Celtic groups:

- the Gauls
- the Britons
- the Gaels

Written accounts

People visiting Britain wrote of their impressions of the people and things they saw. Many of these reports are biased. Much of what Caesar wrote about has since been proved wrong. First, we know that early Britons *did* sow (plant) corn. Their ancestors had been farming for hundreds of years. Second, they weren't clad (dressed) in skins. The Bronze Age introduced sewing implements that made it possible to tailor clothing. Third, not every Britain covered themselves in woad.

"They are very tall in stature, with rippling muscles under clear white skin. Their hair is blond, but not naturally so: they bleach it, to this day, artificially, washing it in lime and combing it back from their foreheads. They look like wood-demons, their hair thick and shaggy like a horse's mane. Some of them are clean-shaven, but others - especially those of high rank - shave their cheeks but leave a moustache that covers the whole mouth"

Diodorus Siculus (A Roman historian)

2.2. The Brythonic (British) Celts

Before the Romans arrived, Britain consisted of a patchwork of tribal areas, each with its king. Life was hard for the Celtic tribes. They were mainly farmers who grew, gathered, or hunted for their food. They were also fierce warriors who were often at war with each other.

The small tribes of Brythonic Celts grew over the years into larger tribes with their own distinctive identities and living in their special regions throughout Britain. Each tribe had its name and ruled by a chieftain/king or queen.

- A famous Celtic Queen

Warrior Queen Boudicca was the wife of the ruler of the Iceni, a Celtic tribe who lived in eastern England. After her husband's death, the Romans claimed the Iceni lands. When Boudicca protested she was beaten and her daughters attacked. In revenge, Boudicca led an army to attack London in AD 60. Boudicca's army caused vast amounts of damage to the Roman legions before being defeated.

2.3. What clothes did the Celts wear?

The Celts loved bright dazzling colors. They dyed their woolen trousers and tops in bright colors. Their clothes were made from wool and dyed with natural vegetable dyes (plants and berries) and woven by hand on a vertical loom¹ (pictured below).

Jewellery: The Celts also loved to wear jewelry made from bronze, gold, tin, silver, coral, and enamel. Important people like chieftains, nobles, and warriors wore a Torc (neck ring), a circular twisted metal neckband. It was made from gold, silver, electrum (a gold-silver alloy), bronze, and copper.

Bracae (trousers): were worn underneath tunics

¹ an apparatus or a machine used for making fabric by weaving yarn or thread. Yarn is spun thread used for knitting, weaving, or sewing

Tunics: Tunics were mainly worn by men. They were a simple 'T' shape and worn at any length from the knee to the ankle. Men would wear a tunic with a belt, a cloak, and trousers.

Dresses: Women wore floor-length skirts or dresses made of wool or linen and wore shawls or cloaks. They are capes or mantles called Bratt which were made from wool.

2.4. What did the Celts eat?

There were no supermarkets or shops to buy food so the Celts ate what food they could grow or hunt. They ate Plants products like Vegetables, wild nuts, berries, grains to make bread and also porridge, herbs, and leaves They also lived on Animal and fish meat like :

Wild animals e.g. deer, wild boar, fox, beaver, and bear.

Fish e.g. trout, mackerel, and salmon.

Domesticated animals like chicken, goat, sheep, and pigs. They also consumed Eggs taken from hens and wild birds.

2.5. Celts Houses

The Celtic tribes lived in scattered villages. They lived in roundhouses with thatched roofs of straw or heather. The walls of their houses were made from local material. Houses in the south tended to be made from wattle (woven wood) and daub (straw and mud) as there was an ample supply of wood from the forests.

2.6. Celtic Religion

The Celts of Britain were very superstitious people. They believed in many gods and goddesses: over 400 in fact. Among them were:

Sucellos is the sky God, with a hammer that caused lightning.

Nodens is the God who made clouds and rain.

Many gods had no names but lived in springs, woods, and other places. Offerings to the gods were thrown into lakes, rivers and left by springs and wells.

- **Celtic Priests**

Celtic priests, called Druids, were the link between the supernatural world and the ordinary human one. They were able to predict what would happen in the future by interpreting nature. They likely knew how to read and write, and they certainly had a good grasp of mathematics. They knew something of medicine and law, and they could trace the stars and the planets. The main center of the druids in Britain was Anglesey, in Wales.

2.7. Weapons and Warriors

Many Celts went into battle unprotected by helmets or armor. They often fought naked and it is believed that women fought as well.

2.8. Celtic Invasion

Thanks to their use of iron and their developed techniques of farming, they imposed themselves on the Iberians. They came in successive waves and savagely killed and chased the Iberians and settled their lands by force. They brought with them their dialects and culture. In the end, they could mix and co-exist together and developed new dialects which some of them still exist like Erse, Gaelic, and welsh .the Celts did not trade with other people in Europe except their relative in the north of France who taught them to use coins instead of iron bars. They also helped them to push out the roman invasion of northern France. It is there where Julius Caesar saw for the first time the British Celts and decided to hold a military campaign to invade Britain later on.

3. The Romans

After Julius Caesar saw the Celts in the north of France where the Celts of Britain were fighting with the Celts of Gaul against the Romans, he decided to invade Britain.

He made two expeditions in 55 and 54 BC. These two military expeditions were pushed down by harsh Celtic resistance and the Romans were forced to retreat. Yet, the real successful Roman invasion was held by the emperor Claudius in 43 AD². They came to colonize and exploit Britain by right of superior civilization. To fulfill their objective, they induced and subdued the Celts and assimilated the Latin language, culture, and roam lifestyle. They encouraged the Celtic tribe chiefs to Romanize and Latinize them. These were the roman conditions to leave them live as chiefs. The name Britain comes from the Greco-Roman word “Pretani”, the Romans mispronounced the word and called the island “Britannia”.

3.2. Roman effects on Britain

- The Romans brought the skills of reading and writing to Britain
- The roman could not conquer “Caledonia” as they call her Scotland; they were pushed out by the Caledonian Picts who continued raiding over the Romanized cities and Celtic tribes. Finally, they built a protecting wall to prevent them from causing damage to their cities. It was erected by the emperor Hadrian between 122-127 which later marked the frontiers between Scotland and Britain.
- The Romans built about twenty large towns and cities. Like Winchester, Chester, Lancaster, York, bath, London which became the greatest center of trade and government. These cities were decorated with villas and gardens and surrounded by forts for protection. In the roman manors or farms, they recruited workers to sow the crops and sold them in the markets. The workers were called the serfs.
- Besides, many popular baths were built which introduce a culture of water to the British people.
- They connected towns with roads which continued to be used a long time after the roman departed from Britain.

² AD stands for Anno Domini, Latin for “in the year of the Lord”, while BC stands for “before Christ”.

- The Roman introduced Christianity to the different parts of the British Isles and succeeded in Christianizing the Celts through the Christian missionaries and Saint Augustine.

3.3. The Roman Departure from Britain

The fall of the Roman Empire started in the second half of the 4th century AD. In Britain, it was precipitated by the Celtic resistance revival and the different raids over the Romans from both Ireland and Scotland. In the first half of the 5th century AD, the Roman Empire could no more protect its subject in Britain and many other wars broke out in the different parts of the empire and they needed more legions to face them. Finally, they left Britain and the Romanized Celts unprotected; their withdrawal made another wave of conquerors come to invade Britain. These were the Anglo-Saxons.