



Iron Age. Celts

Two thousand years ago there was an Iron Age Celtic culture throughout the British Isles. The concept of a "Celtic" people is a modern and somewhat romantic reinterpretation of history. The "Celts" were warring tribes who certainly wouldn't have seen themselves as one people at the time.

The word *Celt* comes from the Greek word, *Keltoi*, which means *barbarians* and is properly pronounced as "kelt".

The name 'Iron Age' comes from the discovery of a new metal called iron. The Celts found out how to make iron tools and weapons. Before the Iron Age the only metal used in Britain to make tools was bronze, which is an alloy of copper and tin (hence the Bronze 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

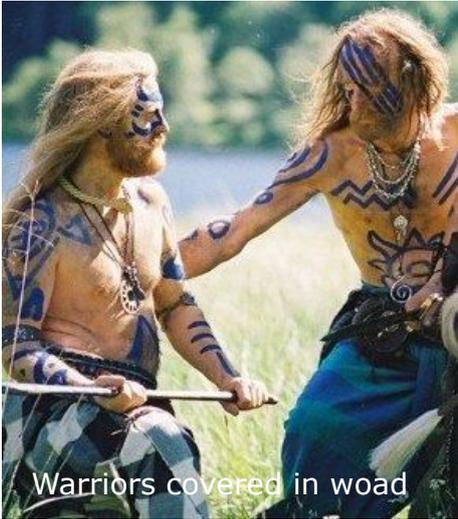
No one called the people living in Britain during the Iron Age, Celts until the eighteenth century. In fact the Romans called these people Britons, not Celts. The name Celts is a 'modern' name and is used to collectively describe all the many tribes of people living during the

No reliable written records exist for the prehistoric period in Britain. People visiting Britain at that time wrote of their impressions of the people and things they saw, but many of these reports are biased.

"Most of the inland inhabitants [of Britain] do not sow corn, but live on milk and flesh, and are clad with skins. All the Britons indeed, dye themselves with woad, which occasions a bluish colour, and thereby have a more terrible appearance in fight. They wear their hair long, and have every part of their body shaved except their head and upper lip."

Julius Caesar (A Roman Emperor)

Much of what Caesar wrote about has since been proved wrong. First, we know that, early Britons did sow corn. Their ancestors had been farming for hundreds of years. Second, they weren't clad in skins. The Bronze Age introduced sewing implements that made it possible to tailor clothing. Third, not every Briton covered themselves in woad: only those in battle did it to create a terrifying effect.

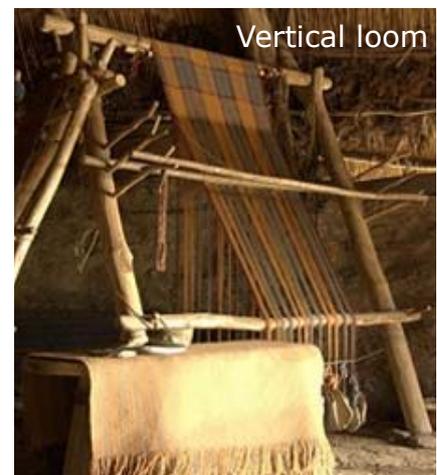


Warriors covered in woad

"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)

Celtic Clothes were made from wool and dyed bright colours with natural vegetable dyes (plants and berries) and woven by hand on a vertical loom. The wool cloth material made on the loom would then have been sewn together using a bone or metal needle and wool thread. Before being woven the wool was spun using drop spindles — a notched stick with a weight at the bottom to help the spindle to turn when spun round. The weight is known as a spindle whorl.



Vertical loom



Spindle

The common dress for a Celtic man was a tunic (l'eine) made of linen, and a woolen cloak (bratt). Bracae (trousers) were worn underneath tunics. Women wore floor-length skirts or dresses made of wool or linen and wore shawls or cloaks.

The Celts used to wear jewellery made from bronze, gold, tin, silver, coral and enamel. Important people like chieftains, nobles and warriors wore a Torc, a circular twisted metal neckband. It was made from gold, silver, electrum (gold-silver alloy), bronze and/or copper.



Torc

The Celtic tribes lived in scattered villages. They lived in round houses 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. The houses had no windows. The roof was made from straw with mud placed on top to keep the warmth in.

The houses in the north were made with large stones held together with clay.

The Celts would light a fire in the middle of the roundhouse for cooking and heating. It must have been very smoky inside. The smoke from the fire escaped through a hole in the roof. Animals were often kept inside the house at night, a wattle wall confining them to one area.

Sometimes groups of houses were built on the top of hills. These are called hill-forts. The largest and most complex Iron Age hill fort in Britain today is Maiden Castle in Dorset.



As well as small communities, there were also large settlements and heavily defended forts. Colchester was one such large Celtic settlement.

For people in Britain today, the chief significance of the prehistoric period is its sense of mystery. This sense finds its focus most easily in the astonishing monumental architecture of this period, the remains of which exist throughout the country. Wiltshire, in south-western England, has two spectacular examples: Silbury Hill, the largest burial mound in

Europe, and Stonehenge. Such places have a special importance for anyone interested in the cultural and religious practices of prehistoric Britain. We know very little about these



Silbury Hill

practices, but there are some organizations today (for example, the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids – a small group of eccentric intellectuals and mystics) who base their beliefs on them.

Stonehenge was built on Salisbury Plain some time between 3030 and 2300 BC. It is one of the most famous and mysterious archaeological sites in the world. One

of its mysteries is how it was ever built at all with the technology of the time (the stones come from over 200 miles away in Wales). Another is its purpose. It appears to function as a kind of astronomical clock and we know it was used by the Druids for ceremonies marking the passing of the seasons. It has always exerted a fascination on the British imagination, and appears in a number of novels, such as Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

These days Stonehenge is not only of interest to tourists, but is also a gathering point for certain minority groups such as hippies and 'New Age Travellers'. It is now fenced off to protect it from damage.



Stonehenge

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

Sources: Britain (James O'Driscoll), primaryhomeworkhelp.co.uk