

THE EUROPE OF GREECE

COLONIES AND COINS FROM THE ALPHA BANK COLLECTION



CONTRIBUTORS TO THE CATALOGUE

Editor of the catalogue

Dimitra Tsangari, Curator, Alpha Bank Numismatic Collection

Authors of texts

Polyxeni Adam-Veleni, Director, Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki (AMTh)

Eleftheria Akrivopoulou, Archaeologist-Museologist, AMTh

Vangelis Arvanitis, Architect Engineer, loopoSTUDIO

Giorgos Bourgiannakis, Archaeologist, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Museum of Mediterranean Antiquities, Medelhavsmuseet, Stockholm

Livia Buzolani, Senior Researcher Archaeologist, Museum for National History and Archaeology of Constanta, Romania

Pierre Cabanes, Honorary Professor, University Paris X Nanterre, France

Angelos Chariotis, Professor of Ancient History and Classics, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton

Thomas-Panagiotis Chatzigeorgidis, Architect Engineer, loopoSTUDIO

Strykara Galinski, Archaeologist, AMTh

Christos Gatzolis, Head of the Public Relations, Documentation and Publications Department, AMTh

Vasilis Giannakis, Architect Engineer, loopoSTUDIO

Eurydice Kafakidou, Assistant Professor of Classical Archaeology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

Petya Kiyashkina, Director, Ancient Nesebar Museum, Bulgaria

Elena Klerina, Head of Research, National Preserve "Chersonesos of Taurica", Ukraine

Angeliki Koukouvousi, Archaeologist, AMTh

Maria Costanza Lantini, Director, Parco Archeologico di Naxos, Italy

Giorgos Mavridis, Architect Engineer, loopoSTUDIO

Ourania Pali, Archaeologist, AMTh

Elas Petropoulos, Assistant Professor, Department of Language, Literature and Culture of the Black Sea Countries, Democritus University of Thrace, Visiting Professor, International Hellenic University, Thessaloniki

Michalis Petropoulos, Archaeologist, Honorary Ephor of Antiquities

Athanasia Psalti, Director, 10th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities - Delphi Museum

Anna Maria Puig Griessenberger, Archaeologist

Dimitris Roubis, Researcher Archaeologist, Institute for Archaeological and Monumental Heritage, Basilicata, Adjunct Professor, University of Basilicata, Italy

Maria Santos Rietolaza, Director, Museu d'Arqueologia de Catalunya-Empúries, Spain

Umberto Spigo, Director, Parco Archeologico della Isola Eolie, Italy

Evangelia Stefani, Head of the Department of Museographic Studies and Artistic Planning of Exhibitions, AMTh

Gabriel Takracchi, Researcher Archaeologist, Museum for National History and Archaeology of Constanta, Romania

Dimitra Tsangari, Curator, Alpha Bank Numismatic Collection

Michael Velenis, Architect Engineer, loopoSTUDIO

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The Celts

The Multifaceted Encounter of Greeks and Celts

The Celts, also known as Gauls or Galatians, lived originally in the regions north of the Alps and spread gradually throughout Central and Eastern Europe, from the British Isles and the Iberian Peninsula to the Balkans. They were a tribal people with no political cohesion but with common cultural traits and local particularities, who dwelt mainly in farming settlements and whose societies were based on tribal allegiance and kinship. At the top of the hierarchy was the king and the dominant class was the warrior aristocracy, whose desire to reinforce their social prestige was satisfied by the class of craftsmen who excelled at producing luxury goods, as well as by the acquisition of precious objects through barter trade and marauding raids. The bards were held in high esteem, as festivals were as important as warfare in confirming the Celtic aristocracy's ascendancy.¹ The druids were privileged persons as well, in the capacities of priest, seer and sage, who performed their sacerdotal duties in the natural environment, from which the Celtic pantheon drew its deities. As inhabitants of the regions beyond the Pillars of Heracles, the Celts are first mentioned by Herodotus, while Strabo gives an extensive presentation of the various Celtic tribes in his *Geography*.² Their cultural habits, physiognomic features and, above all, their military tactics composed the image of a "barbarous" people for the ancient Greek and Roman authors, who are the main source of information, as the Celts themselves had no script.³ In the ancient sources, the Celts are portrayed as bellicose and almost berserk, formidable horsemen, fond of adventure and carousing. Their strength is considered to be due to their massive stature⁴, as well as to their appearance; with their long blond hair like a horse's mane they resembled Satyrs or the god Pan.⁵ In the heat of battle the Celts, with their wild cries and trumpet

blasts, tried to create confusion among their opponents. They beheaded the defeated foes and hung their macabre trophy from their house doors.⁶ Indeed, so ferocious and fearless were the Celts that their only dread was that the sky might fall down upon their heads, according to a proverbial phrase they addressed to the king of Macedonia Alexander III.⁷

The Greeks are thought to have come into contact with the Celts as early as the 7th century BC, when crossing Central and Western Europe on their journeys in search of tin in the British Isles. This early cultural contact is hinted at in the ancient Greek myth on Keltoi' (Celtos) origin from Heracles, according to which the beautiful Keltine, daughter of Bretanos, trapped the mythical hero by hiding the herd of Geryones' cattle, in order to make love to him.⁸

The first contacts between Greeks and Celts are detected through finds from excavations mainly in Central Europe. Precious symposium vessels from the Hellenic world of the 5th century BC have been found as grave goods in the tombs of the Celtic aristocracy, such as the objects accompanying the female burial at Vix in France and are thought to express the Celtic aristocracy's disposition to adopt ways of the Greek elite. Although it has been argued that imported luxury objects of this kind influenced the aesthetics and the manners of the wider local society,⁹ other views emphasise a more instrumental use of Greek artifacts by Celt artists,¹⁰ who were particularly accomplished in metalworking.¹¹ Finds of Celtic provenance in Greece, such as the jewellery from the sanctuary of Hera at Perachora in Corinthia¹² are rare; nonetheless these too document the early contact between

1. Haywood, J., 2004, 34-39, Arnold, B., 1999.

2. Herodotus II.33, Strabo IV.3.4, 3.5, 4.1.

3. Hyejin, K., 2012, II2-II5, Powell, T.G.E., 2000 [1958], 61-66, Witt, C.M., 2006, 286.

4. Strabo IV.4.2.

5. Diodorus V.28.

6. Diodorus V.29, Strabo IV.4.5.

7. Strabo VII.3.8.

8. The myth is referred to by Parthenius in the 1st century BC and is not the only origin myth of the Celts that is recorded in the ancient Greek and Roman literary corpus. For other myths see Haywood, J., 2004, 7.

9. Wells, P., 2012, 201-207.

10. Witt, C.M., 1997.

11. Harding, D., 2007, 526-530.

12. Verger, S., 2003, 526-530.

Greeks and Celts in the framework of a wider field of exchanges. It is, however, certain that after the foundation of Greek colonies in the land of the Celts, such as Massalia, which was founded by Phokaia from Asia Minor in the 6th century BC on the coast of Southern Europe, the influence of Hellenic civilisation on the Celts/Gauls was intensified to such a degree that the Roman historian Justin wrote that "So splendid was their progress in good manners and wealth that it seemed as if Gaul had become part of Greece and not that Greece had colonised Gaul". In his Hellenocentric approach, Justin goes on to say that the Greeks taught the Gauls how to plough the soil, to cultivate the vine and the olive, as well as the techniques of fortifying cities. Therefore, the latter adopted "a more usual way of life" and abandoned "their barbarian habits".¹³

The Celts made a more dynamic appearance in the Mediterranean region when, in the early 4th century BC, they crossed the Alps, invaded the Italian Peninsula and destroyed Etruria and part of Rome. Some Celtic tribes settled in the Balkans, such as the Scordisci in the regions of Lower Panonia and Upper Moesia, as well as in Central Anatolia, which was named Galatia.¹⁴ Henceforth the Celts, now known by the name of Gauls, were to play for the Greeks the role of the enemy, just like the Persians in the Classical Period.¹⁵

However, on account of their prowess as warriors, the Gauls were employed as mercenaries throughout the Mediterranean region, sometimes in battle array in the Greek armies and sometimes against them. They fought against the Thebans on the side of the Spartans, as part of the guard of Dionysius I at Syracuse (2nd half of the 4th century BC), while in Hellenistic Times, Pyrrhus with Gaul mercenaries defeated Antigonus II Gonatas of Macedonia, who had Gaul mercenaries in his army as well. The influences the Gauls received from Greek culture in this period are detected, in particular, in the Gallic coinage from the end of the 4th century BC, when they imitated the coinage of the Macedonian kingdom.

In Greece too, and specifically in Aitolia, relations with the Gauls, as these were shaped after 279 BC when the latter launched an all-out attack against the Greek world, were to be perpetuated through coinage. After plundering Macedo-

nia, in a battle in which Ptolemy Ceraunus lost his life, they were held at bay by Sosthenes but soon recovered with the aim of attacking and sacking the sanctuary of Delphi. However, they met with the strong resistance of the Aitolians at Thermopylai in 278 BC, in a terrible battle described by Pausanias in *Phokis*.¹⁶ This victory of the Aitolians, which was won despite their dramatic losses on the battlefield, was commemorated by a statue they dedicated at Delphi, as well as on silver and gold issues of the Aitolian League, which feature on the reverse the personification of Aitolia as a female figure sitting upon Gallic weaponry.¹⁷ Attalus I of Pergamon also perpetuated the victories over the Gauls in Asia Minor by setting up sculptural *ex-votos* at Pergamon and in other Pan-Hellenic sanctuaries,¹⁸ indeed projecting them as divine punishment for the Gallic ransack of Delphi.¹⁹ The Greeks' victorious wars against the Gauls, until their final expulsion from Greek lands in 277 BC, thanks to Antigonus Gonatas, contributed not only to the rallying of the Hellenic world and the treatment of the Hellenistic kings as "saviours" of Hellenic civilisation, but also to the crystallisation of the view of the Gauls as "barbarians".²⁰

Greece experienced new invasions by Gauls during the Roman Period. In 120-119 BC, there were clashes in the area of Eastern Paionia between the Romans and the Scordisci, but this Gallic tribe was driven out of Macedonian lands thanks to the efforts of the quaestor of the Province of Macedonia, Marcus Annius, who "contained barbarian advances", an achievement recorded in the honorific decree of Lete.²¹ However, the Scordisci managed to penetrate twice more, in 114 BC and 85 BC, plundering the sanctuary of Delphi, until they were finally expelled in 84 BC to the Danube region.²² The clashes between Romans and Gauls continued. In the mid-1st century BC Julius Caesar in his campaign against Gaul (area of modern France) came up against the Helvetii, a Gallic tribe dwelling in the Swiss plateaux or, according to others, in areas of Southern Germany, who, as Caesar recounts in his famous work *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (VI.11-23), kept archives written in Greek script.²³ Caesar's victory

quest of the land of the Celts. The Gauls gradually adopted Roman habits, but elements of their culture were also assimilated by the Romans.²⁴ Thus, worship of the Celtic goddess Epona, protector of horses, is attested in Thessaloniki²⁵ as well as in other parts of the Roman world.

The Celts/Gauls represented in antiquity the "Other", the alterity with which Greek civilisation was confronted. In recent years, and specifically in the closing decades of the 20th century, they have become in various cases the imaginary "Other" of the postmodern world, mainly in Northern and Central Europe. Today, interest in Celtic culture²⁶ has taken on the proportions of "Celtomania", according to which the Celts, those fearless ancient warriors, are presented as "victims", as agents of a culture that was supplanted by the dominance of ancient Greek and Roman civilisation.²⁷

13. Boardman, J., 1996, 276.

14. Paul the Apostle addresses the Galatians of Anatolia who had been converted to Christianity in the mid-1st century AD (*Epistle to the Galatians*, New Testament).

15. Hyejin, K., 2012, 146; Strootman, R., 2005, 118.

16. Pausanias X.3-X.23.

17. Stavropoulou-Gatsi, M., 2008, 405; Tsangari, D.I., 2007.

18. Thanks to his victories over the Gauls, Attalus I was given the epithet "Soter", i.e. saviour in Greek (See Strootman, R., 2005, 124-127).

19. Hyejin, K., 2012, 122-128.

20. Strootman, R., 2005.

21. Syll³, 700.

22. Nigdelis, P.M., (no date).

23. Lambert, P.Y., 2001, 620.

24. Haywood, J., 2004, 84-85.

25. The relief inv. no. MG 3056, which is exhibited in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, constitutes evidence of her cult in Thessaloniki in Roman Times (See Despinis, G. - Stefanidou-Tiveriou, Th. - Voutiras, Emm., 1997, no. 148).

26. Dietler, M., 1994, Lewis, J.R., 2009.

27. Haywood, J., 2004, 211-212.