

The Celts As Per The Classical Sources

The Celts, or rather Celtic speaking tribes, were multiple groups of people speaking languages originating from the same source - Proto-celtic language, which later on split into two groups, developing further whilst changing in accordance with the region it was used in. When it comes to defining Celts or their characteristics, our sources are quite limited, as the only verifiable way to define them is to use historical sources or archaeology, both of which pose further problems and discrepancies. When looking at the historical sources about 'the Celts' we come across people such as Julius Caesar, Strabo Tacitus or Aristotle, which whilst providing elaborate definitions and characteristics of them, did so based on flawed preconceptions and ideologies. Similar problems occur when attempting to define 'the Celts' by utilising the archaeological finds, such as items which came to be described as 'la Tene culture' or 'Hallstatt culture' - referring strictly to the area where these were found. This is often compared to the theory of Coca-Cola and Pepsi cans. In this theory, a few hundred years from now, future archaeologists would uncover two different kinds of cans in different areas and propose a theory that our culture, our people, were divided into two categories - the Cola and Pepsi people, then they would proceed to build further theories based on that thesis. Would it be an appropriate description or classification of us as a civilization? Would it provide a clear picture of our characteristics? Not necessarily. The same principle applies to 'the Celts'

The Celts, according to classical sources (Roman and Greek) were a notorious group of barbarians. The very name given to this group of people clearly shows the attitudes held by such people as Julius Caesar or Strabo, as Latin *Celta* or Greek *Keltoi* means 'barbarian'. This of course initially only referred to the continental Gauls, rather than the Celts living on the Isles,¹ Ephorus (c. 350 BC) divided the world into four different areas, with Greece in the middle - The Celts (North-West barbaroi), Sarmatians (North - East barbaroi), Ethiopians (South - West barbaroi) and Indians (South - East barbaroi), clearly defining the classical attitude of Us versus Them, which causes problems when discussing the Celtic continuity and assessing the verifiability of the classical sources.

Looking at the historical sources themselves, whilst taking into account the geopolitical attitudes of the time, we can clearly see why such a name was chosen for the Celtic-speaking tribes. During that historical era, civilisation was being defined by two key nations - Romans and Greeks, with the addition of Egyptians. It was them that defined what was 'cultural', 'appropriate' or 'normal', oftentimes missing the metaphorical mark themselves and acting or permitting actions that we, in this day and age, would call highly inappropriate or simply disgusting. This raises the first point in the debate - are the historical sources objective or verifiably credible. The answer of course would vary based on the approach, but what has to be taken into account is that Romans and especially Julius Caesar were of mind to conquer the Galateia and the only justifiable way they could achieve that was to paint a bleak picture of the Celtic-speaking tribes as barbarians and heathens, akin to

¹Delyth, Jen, *Keltoi*, N.A. <<https://www.celticartstudio.com/symbol/symbols/83/>> [accessed 29 April 2023].

how Christians throughout history justified their own inquisitions and forcible religious conversions.

Whilst going through the historical mentions of 'the Celts' we can see multiple records of homosexuality, incest, brutality, human sacrifices and vanity amongst many others. These references of course refer to the current, at the time, shifts in political and sociological attitudes of the "civilised people", especially Greeks and Romans. This of course is problematic in itself, as a lot of these occurred in both Greek and Roman societies and was deemed as perfectly acceptable, if only for the fact that it was only slightly different. Such an example would be homosexuality. Both Julius Caesar and Strabo mention, on multiple occasions, that Celtic men (Gauls) were known for their homosexuality. Strabo goes as far as to say that it was considered shameful for the Gauls if a young man would not seek an older man to enjoy some alone time. Both of them go as far as to paint a picture of homosexuality being the bedrock of the culture and such a natural thing for the Celts that it was appalling for the Romans and Greeks. This of course is directly contradicted by history, as homosexuality was widely known and accepted by both of these cultures. There, of course, was a difference, which both of these authors made sure to emphasise. In ancient Greece it was perfectly acceptable for a man to have intercourse with other men, as long as he would be the dominant partner in the relationship, performing the penetration rather than penetrating - it was then considered to be a sign of his masculinity and deemed perfectly normal. It was completely opposite if a man was on the receiving end of this. This of course referred to a long-standing perception that penetration causes men to lose their status, as they are being "used like women" therefore, just as women should not have a status or rights, essentially being put in a position much below a man. Neither Julius Caesar, nor Strabo, outright state this, or refer to such acts in their own countries, but they make a point of emphasising how young Celts would have completely different attitudes, in a way stating that these young men were not honourable.

The above is directly contradicted by multiple sources, once again by putting the Celts in a negative light. The classical sources accuse "the Celts" of incest, which they define as a brother marrying his "sister-in-law" after his brother passes away, to provide for her. There are multiple mentions of women remarrying within their husband's family and those classical sources describe this as "incestuous", something that we, this day would not have called as such. This almost-hypersexuality, as it comes to be described as, as well as a drive to claim women, as well as of women having multiple husbands, comes to contradict the picture painted by the classical sources of the Gaulish men being homosexual, at least in a way we would understand this nowadays.

Another aspect of the Gauls that classical sources mention, but differs slightly from one source to another, would be their approach to war, death and their appearance. The Celts are generally described as tall and muscular,² which the classical sources agree upon, just as they agree that the Celts used to dye their hair blonde with the use of lime water. Diodorus, especially, pays particular attention to the physical appearance and the garments,

² Diodorus and Exploring Celtic Civilizations, *Diodorus Siculus, Library of History*, N.A.
<<https://exploringcelticciv.web.unc.edu/diodorus-siculus-library-of-history/>>[accessed 29 April 2023].

mentioning that they enjoy dressing in an extravagant manner, oftentimes fashioning jewellery and accessories out of gold.³ This extravagance changes when it comes to the battle itself, as Diodorus says 'Certain of them despise death to such a degree that they enter the perils of battle without protective armour and with no more than a girdle about their loins.'⁴, emphasising that they throw away what they consider unnecessary, possibly to scare their opponents and lower their morale whilst increasing their own, this differs slightly from the description provided by Polybius, who says that 'the Gaesatae from vanity and bravado threw these garments away, and fell in in front of the army naked',⁵ therefore contradicting the above statement if it was to be taken as characteristic of all of the Celtic tribes, as these accounts clearly show that such an occurrence, if truly took place, differed between the tribes or possibly battles that the classical authors made a record of.

Druids, human sacrifices and the origins of the Celts. These two subjects were especially emphasised by Strabo in his records, where he describes three different categories of Celtic men - The Bards, [O]vates and Druids.⁶ He goes on to describe the Druids as the most just of all of the Gaulish men, responsible for imposing appropriate judgement, including in the case of murder. He describes them (as well as Ovates) as learnt in philosophy - natural and moral. A similar description is provided by Julius Caesar, who specifically defines two orders of men,⁷ once again mentioning druids and, this time, mounted knights.⁸ By stating the above, both of these sources directly contradict the statements that the Celts are simple minded-barbarians.

Druids themselves are an aspect that can be directly found in others (according to the definitions imposed by the classical authors, which excluded The Celts of the Isles from being defined as such), they are an integral part of the culture of Britain, Julius Caesar even goes as far as to say the following, 'It is believed that their rule of life was discovered in Britain and transferred thence to Gaul; and to-day those who would study the subject more accurately journey, as a rule, to Britain to learn it.'⁹, drawing a very clear connection between the culture of the Isles and the culture of the Gauls - the Celts according to the classical sources. Caesar mentions another aspect of the culture that connects the Gauls with not only Britain, but also Slav territories, which is 'The Gauls affirm that they are all descended from a common father, Dis, and say that this is the tradition of the Druids.', this is a direct reference to the Slavs and their Wolochs (or Wolchws [alternative spelling]), which are the equivalent of Druids in Slavic tradition. Wolochs come from the Slavic God Wales - the ruler of the Underworld, Wolochs were a Slavic tribe that mixed with other tribes and

³ Diodorus and Exploring Celtic Civilizations, N.A.

⁴ Diodorus and Exploring Celtic Civilizations, N.A.

⁵ Polybius and Exploring Celtic Civilizations, *Polybius, Histories*, N.A.

<<https://exploringcelticciv.web.unc.edu/polybius-histories/>>[accessed 29 April 2023].

⁶Harland, Phillip A., *Celts: Strabo On Peoples Northwest Of The Alps (Early First Century CE)*, N.A.,

<<https://www.philipharland.com/Blog/2022/08/celts-strabo-on-peoples-of-the-transalpine-region-early-first-century-ce/>> [accessed 29 April 2023].

⁷ Caesar, Julius, and Edwards, H.J, *The Gallic War*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1917), p. 335.

⁸ Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, p. 335.

⁹ Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, p. 337.

provided them with knowledge and service akin to that the Druids provided. For that very reason, the comparison is quite clear and straightforward, linking the Gauls with a culture further away than that strictly next to them.

Classical sources liked to emphasise the barbarian side of the Celts, making them seem almost inhumane, very often to justify their own violence and brutality (akin to the process of Christianisation seen after the fall of Rome throughout the entire world), for this purpose, they described women as tall and muscular, sometimes stronger than man, Diodorus say the following 'The women of the Gauls are not only like the men in their great stature but they are a match for them in courage as well',¹⁰ painting the picture of a woman much different to that known to the "civilised" cultures such as Roman or Greek, where women would mostly stay at home and be perceived as lithe housewives, rather than those equal to men, this is further confirmed by Ammianus Marcellinus who says that 'In fact, a whole band of foreigners will be unable to cope with one of them in a fight, if he call in his wife, stronger than he by far and with flashing eyes; least of all when she swells her neck and gnashes her teeth',¹¹ this further presents Gaulish women as brutal and uncivilised to their Greek or Roman equivalent, making them far more fearsome than the men. This served to further the divide between these two cultures and by making the Gauls seem completely different in this aspect to the Romans or Greeks, it further justified invasions and military intervention, as with sufficiently different descriptions, repeated by multiple sources, Gauls were perceived by the citizens and those in power as beasts. This description is of course contradicted by Julius Caesar, who says that 'husbands have power of life and death over their wives as well as over their children',¹² this of course does not contradict the description of Gaulish women, but limits their equal position within the society to that beneath her husband, making it seem that even if Gaulish women were of strength and bloodlust equal to their husbands, it was not strength which defined the position within society, it was not the fighting capabilities, but that, similar to other cultures, it was gender defined.

The classical sources disliked the Celtic tribes and made sure it was clear for anyone reading their descriptions. There is very little objectivity in their records and the majority of them seem very politically appropriate for their time. Nevertheless, the amount of sources which describe the Celts (with the exclusion of the oral tradition and manuscripts written down centuries later) is very limited, forcing us to rely on those of Greek or Roman origin, as it is only them that provide us with a literary description of their characteristics. The archaeological finds, which may be used as primary sources in regards to the Celts settling down in certain areas (La Tene and Hallstatt) do not provide us with the necessary insight we require to understand our ancestors, therefore, we have to rely on the records of people that view them in less than favourable light. By doing so we arrive at a conclusion that The Celts were very war-like people, who never shied away from a battle and went as far as to fight during their meals - 'And it is their custom, even during the course of the meal, to seize

¹⁰ Diodorus and Exploring Celtic Civilizations, N.A.

¹¹ Marcellinus, Ammianus and Exploring Celtic Civilizations, *Ammianus Marcellinus, Rerum Gestarum*, N.A. <<https://exploringcelticciv.web.unc.edu/ammianus-marcellinus-rerum-gestarum/>>[accessed 29 April 2023].

¹² Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, pp.343-345

upon any trivial matter as an occasion for intense arguments and then to challenge one another to single combat, without any regard for their lives;’,¹³ who were rich, yet became wealthy without the need of physical labour.¹⁴ They are further described as very spiritually inclined, to the extreme of being shunned if they would not follow the directions of Druids,¹⁵ who were in charge not only of spiritual, and religious matters, but they were responsible for imposing judgements and providing direction to their tribes.¹⁶ Classical sources are not without plenty of their faults, but apart from the few inscriptions in the Ogham alphabet, which only tell us that the Celts had the tradition of burying their departed in front of the entrance to their house, we have to use them if we wish to learn more about the past.

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¹³ Diodorus and Exploring Celtic Civilizations, N.A.

¹⁴ Diodorus and Exploring Celtic Civilizations, N.A.

¹⁵ Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, p. 337.

¹⁶ Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, p. 337-339.