

The Historical Celts



- Geographical Location – from Iberia to Anatolia
- Characteristics, including similarities and differences between 'Continental' and 'Insular' Celts

The following sections will look at historical references to the Celts, from both Greek and Roman sources. Students should be prepared for a few surprises, such as discovering that some of the original 'quoted' sources are in fact lost. Many survive solely in fragments, and are only known to us as a result of the original work being copied or cited by a second party, often centuries later.

So, for example, the words of Hecataeus, often noted as being the earliest ever reference to the Celts, have not survived in his own work, but as entries in a work entitled *Ethnika*, by Stephan of Byzantium, who lived a thousand years after him. This of course still suggests that Hecataeus' work was known to Stephan, but we do not have the primary source that we would ideally like, nor can we be sure if the information from the original has been 'modified' or 'interpreted' by the new scribe.

The map in the slide above is of Europe according to the Greek geographer Strabo.

The Celts according to Hecataeus



Hecataeus of Miletus (c.515 BCE) made the first known references to Celts and where they lived:

- ▶ Massalia: (modern day Marseilles) in the land of the Ligurians close to lands occupied by Celts
- ▶ Narbon: (modern day Narbonne) a market town of the Celts in southern Gaul
- ▶ Nyrax: Noreia in what is now Austria, or Nyons in southern Gaul?

Hecataeus of Miletus (c. 550 – 475 BCE) is generally credited with the earliest ever reference to the Celts. Three towns are mentioned in connection with them. His work *Periodos ges*, which roughly translates as 'A Survey of the World', contained one section on Europe and another on Asia (which in this case also included North Africa or 'Libya'). *Periodos ges* was written around 520 – 515 BCE and, although we do not have the original, over 300 fragments from it can be found in Stephan of Byzantium's *Ethnika*, which is similar in style to an encyclopaedia with lists of entries. It should be stressed that *Periodos ges* dates from c. 520 BCE, and *Ethnika* from about 530 CE, i.e. a difference of some 1050 years, which is roughly equivalent to using a historian of today as a secondary source for direct information on the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Nevertheless, the fragments relevant to the Celts are:

Fragment 54, where Stephan notes that, according to Hecataeus, **Narbon** (modern day Narbonne) is a 'trading centre and city of the Celts';

Fragment 55, which notes that, according to Hecataeus, **Massalia** (modern day Marseille) is a city of the Ligurians, near Celtica, and;

Fragment 56, which states that Hecataeus describes **Nyrax** as being a Celtic city.

There is no doubt as to the location of Narbon and Massalia. Nyrax has been more problematic, with some arguing that it is modern day Nyons, and others opting for Noreia, the lost city which was capital of the 'Celtic' kingdom of Noricum. Nyons is about 90 miles north of Marseille in southern France, whereas Noricum would be in modern day Austria, and more like 600 miles from Marseille. Nyons would place all three of Hecataeus' cities within a 150 mile radius of Marseille, whereas Noreia would mean two cities on the southern coast of France, and the third in a mountainous region of Austria on the other side of the Alps. What Noreia has going for it, however, is its closeness to the Danube, and we can see the relevance of that from the work of our next source, namely Herodotus, the 'Father of History'.

The black and white image above is an attempt at recreating Hecataeus' map of the world and comes from *Popular Science*

Monthly, Volume 16 1879/80. The Celts can just be made out in Gaul. The colour image is an attempt at bringing the older image to life and is credited to Bibi Saint-Pol

<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hecataeus-of-miletus>

<http://www.vanhamel.nl/codecs/Periegesis>

The Celts according to Herodotus

A quote from Herodotus, c. 450 BCE:

'The Nile flows out of Libya, cutting through the middle of that country. And as I reason, calculating unknown things from known, it begins at the same distance as the Ister (the Danube). For the Ister, beginning in the land of the Celts and the city of Pyrene, flows through the middle of Europe. **The Celts live beyond the Pillars of Hercules (straits of Gibraltar) and border on the Cynetes, who are the westernmost inhabitants of Europe.** The Ister then flows through all of Europe and empties into the Euxine Sea (Black Sea) at Istria, which Milesian colonists inhabit'.

Herodotus (c. 485 – 425 BCE) refers to the Celts in his *History*. The main focus of this work is concerned with the Greco-Persian wars which lasted for almost the entire first half of the fifth century BCE, but part of this involves 'setting the scene' by referring to wider locations and the peoples found in them. Against the backdrop of comparing the length of the Nile with that of the Danube (named above as the Ister), Herodotus mentions the Celts in passage 2.33, shown in translation in the slide above

It can be seen from this extract that Herodotus is not particularly interested in the Celts as such, but in claiming that the Danube is as long as the Nile. This would only be feasible (and we now know of course that it isn't) if the Danube had its source in the extreme west of Europe and then flowed eastwards across the entire continent. He notes that the Celts '*live beyond the Pillars of Hercules and border on the Cynetes, who are the westernmost inhabitants of Europe*' and it is tempting to see the Pyrenees in the name Pyrene, although this cannot be verified. Indeed, everything about the passage suggests that Herodotus believes, quite wrongly, that the source of the Danube is in Iberia, so perhaps the Father of History was not so hot on his geography!

This, though, has implications for later claims that the Celts lived at the true source of the Danube, which lies to the north of the Alps in southern Germany and Austria, an area often labelled as the 'Celtic Homeland' for precisely this reason. It is of particular importance to the identification of Hallstatt as a Celtic site.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herodotus-Greek-historian>

(Translation taken from Koch, John. T. & Carey, John (eds) *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales*, 4th ed, Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003, p.5)

The Early Celts: Geographical Spread

- ▶ *"Ephorus, in his account, states that Celtica is so large that it includes most of Iberia as far as Cadiz"* (Strabo)
- ▶ *"Ptolemy, the son of Lagus, says that during this campaign some Celts living near the Adriatic arrived seeking good will and friendship"* (Strabo)
- ▶ *"the bold Celts test their children in the jealous Rhine"* (Anonymous)

Ephorus (c. 400 – 330 BCE) was a Greek historian who wrote 29 books on the history of humanity in his work *Historiai*. His son, Demophilus, added a 30th book. Various historians later used Ephorus as a source, but Strabo, a Greek scholar of the first century BCE had a particular interest in his work as a geographical source. As is the case with Hecataeus (above), the 'quote' from Ephorus comes not from the horse's mouth as it were, but indirectly via Strabo's *Geographica* (4.4.6) written some 300 years later. Here is a translation:

"Ephorus, in his account, says that Celtica is so large that it includes most of Iberia as far as Gades" (i.e. Cadiz).

It is worth noting here that Cadiz is very close to the 'Pillars of Hercules' mentioned in the Herodotus quote. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ephorus>

So far we have seen references to Celts living in what would now be the south of France, the Iberian peninsula, and possibly north of the Alps, depending on the reliability of Herodotus' source of the Danube and interpretations of the location of Nyrax. However, they crop up in other locations as well. According to Strabo for instance:

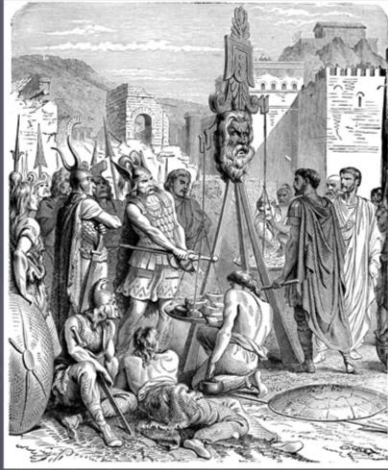
"Ptolemy, the son of Lagus, says that during this campaign some Celts living near the Adriatic arrived seeking good will and friendship".

Unlike Strabo, the Ptolemy in question lived in the 4th century BCE and at the time was one of Alexander the Great's generals.

As well as the Adriatic, an anonymous Greek poem written in about the year 200 BCE states that *'the bold Celts test their children in the jealous Rhine'*. Polybius, writing about the Battle of Telamon in 225 BCE (about 25 years before he was born) in his *History* notes that the Gaesatae came from the Alps, the Boii and the Insubres from Cisalpine Gaul (northern Italy) and the Taurisci from Slovenia.

He later references the Asian Galatae, including the Tolistoboi, the Trocmi and the Tectosages who made Ancyra (Ankara) their capital. (PBE L3408-3409).

Expansion of the Gauls



- ▶ The Gauls were expansive in the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE and clashed with both Romans and Greeks
- ▶ The Gaulish Senones tribe, led by Brennus, defeated the Romans at the Battle of Allia in c. 390 BCE, before sacking Rome itself
- ▶ Another Gaulish leader called Brennus invaded Greece and attacked Delphi in 279 BCE. He was defeated and took his own life

Both the Greeks and the Romans had personal experience of the Gauls. The Insubres tribe is held by Livy to be the first of the Gauls to establish themselves around Milan as early as the 7th century BCE. This earlier settlement in the foothills of the Alps and around Lake Como and Lake Maggiore was the territory of the culture group known as Golasecca. (BC L695-698). According to Livy, the migrations were the result of overpopulation in Gaul. Ambigatus, king of the Bituriges, planned the exodus of the excess population of his own tribe, and that of the Arverni, Senones, Aedui, Ambarri, Carnutes and Aulerci. He appointed two nephews to lead the exodus, Bellovesus would move south into northern Italy while Segovesus would move east towards the Hercynian Forest and modern day Hungary. (BC L689-695)

The Boii and the Senones followed by crossing the Alps at around the turn of the 4th century BCE and establishing themselves in various parts of what is now northern Italy. From here they came into conflict with Rome. The Senones, led by Brennus, defeated the Romans at the Battle of Allia in 390 BCE and went on to sack Rome itself, reportedly demanding 1000 pounds (in weight) of gold as booty. In the following century, the Romans defeated the Boii and the Insubres at the Battle of Telamon in 225 BCE.

More Gauls (including the Boii once again) also expanded into the Balkans. They met Alexander the Great, and, some fifty years after his death, invaded Greece. Led by (another) Brennus, they attacked Delphi. This invasion was ultimately unsuccessful and led to Brennus' taking his own life in defeat. However, a group of Gauls would go on from here to establish the kingdom of Galatia in Anatolia (modern day Turkey). These are the 'Asian Galatae'.

The image above is from "*Histoire de France en cent tableaux*" by Paul Lehuteur, Paris, 1886 and depicts Brennus' famous 'Vae Victis' — 'Woe to the vanquished!' quote following the sacking of Rome in c. 390 BCE.

Celtae and Galatae

A quote from Diodorus Siculus:

'It is useful now to point out a distinction unknown by most. Those tribes that live inland from Massalia (Marseilles) as well as those around the Alps and on the eastern side of the Pyrenees are called Celts. But those tribes in the northern area near the ocean, those near the Hercynian mountain (probably in today's Czech republic) and those beyond as far as Scythia are called Galatae. The Romans, however, group all these tribes together as Galatae.'

Diodorus Siculus was a Greek historian born in Sicily (Siculus meaning 'of Sicily' – it is worth remembering here that many Greeks would have been born or lived outside of Greece due to the establishment of Greek colonies around the Mediterranean). He lived in the first century BCE and spent about 30 years, roughly between about 60 – 30 BCE, writing an enormous 40 book history of the known world called *Bibliotheca historica*. Book 5 contains numerous reference to the Gauls, some of which will be referred to below under 'Celtic Characteristics'. As far as geographical locations are concerned, however, we have Diodorus to thank for this one:

'It is useful now to point out a distinction unknown by most. Those tribes that live inland from Massalia (Marseilles) as well as those around the Alps and on the eastern side of the Pyrenees are called Celts. But those tribes in the northern area near the ocean, those near the Hercynian mountain (probably in today's Czech republic) and those beyond as far as Scythia are called Galatae. The Romans, however, group all these tribes together as Galatae.'

As is the case, however, with, for example Deutsch and Dutch or Welsh and Walsh or Irish and Erse, it is no great leap, despite Diodorus' 'distinction', to link Celtae and Galatae as variants of the same word.

(Translation by Philip Freeman taken from: Koch, John. T. & Carey, John (eds) *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales*, 4th ed, Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003, p.14)

Gaul according to Caesar



A quote from Julius Caesar, c. 55 BCE:

- ▶ 'Gaul is a whole divided into three parts, one of which is inhabited by the Belgae, another by the Aquitani, and a third by a people called in their own tongue Celtae, in the Latin Galli'.
- ▶ 'All of these are different one from another in language, institutions, and laws. The Galli are separated from the Aquitani by the river Garonne, from the Belgae by the Marne and the Seine'.

Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres, quarum unam incolunt Belgae, aliam Aquitani, tertiam qui ipsorum lingua Celtae, nostra Galli appellantur'.

'Hi omnes lingua, institutis, legibus inter se differunt. Gallos ab Aquitanis Garumna flumen, a Belgis Matrona et Sequana dividit'.

The above words written by **Julius Caesar** (100 – 44 BCE) are the first in Chapter 1 of Book 1 of his *De Bello Gallico* (The Gallic Wars).

Given that Caesar specifically notes that those called *Galli* in Latin are called *Celtae* 'in their own tongue' it is not unreasonable to assume that the three forms *Celtae*, *Galatae* and *Galli* are different ethnonyms for the same people. The modern English equivalent would be 'Gauls'.

Strabo (c. 64BCE – 24 CE) - another Greek historian born outside of Greece - as good as confirms this when he notes in his *Geographica* that 'the whole race, which they now call both Gallic and Galatic, is warlike'.

The Aquitani, given their location, are likely to be Basques. However, the rest of Gaul is occupied by two large groups, one in the south and the other in the north, both containing numerous tribes. The Celts occupy only the south and speak a different language to their northern neighbours.

It is unlikely that the Rhine was as absolute a border as Caesar would have us believe between Gallia and Germania, as we know that in some places there were likely to be both Celtic speakers to the east of it and Germanic speakers to the west of it.

Translation from: Edwards, H.J. 1986, *Caesar: The Gallic War, An English Translation*, London, Heinemann.

Some Geographical Contradictions

- ▶ Caesar: *the Belgae live between the Rhine and the Seine*
- ▶ Strabo: *the Belgae live between the Rhine and the Loire*
- ▶ Diodorus: *those tribes in the northern area near the ocean are called Galatae*



Care should be taken not to accept classical sources at face value. Sometimes they would cross-refer each other's works and sometimes contradict each other. As far as the Belgae are concerned, for example, three sources, all writing within about half a century of each other note the following:

Caesar: *the Belgae live between the Rhine and the Seine*

Strabo: *the Belgae live between the Rhine and the Loire*

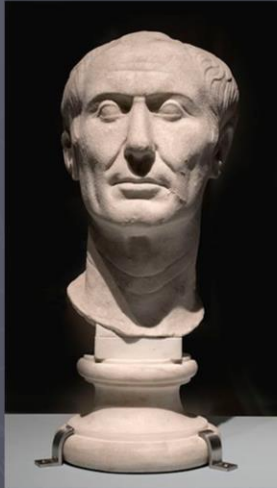
Diodorus: *those tribes in the northern area near the ocean are called Galatae* - this being significant because the northern area near the ocean is where Caesar and Strabo have placed the Belgae.

Whether or not the Galatae are the same people as the Belgae, and whether the Belgae should or should not be included amongst the 'Galli' seems to vary to some extent from author to author and from context to context. Caesar quite clearly lists the Belgae as separate to the Galli, and Strabo claims that the Belgae are *divided into fifteen tribes and inhabit the territory between the Rhine and the Loire*. Strabo's account though is ambiguous regarding whether or not the Belgae belong to the '*whole race, which they now call both Gallic and Galatic*' because it is within this context that he notes the Belgae as their best warriors (4.4.2 – 4.4.3).

Should the Belgae be considered 'Celts'? We have seen that no classical source ever used Celts as a label for the inhabitants of Britain, but Caesar notes that the Belgae had settlements on the coast of Britain:

'The interior parts of Britain are inhabited by tribes which by their own traditions are indigenous to the island, while on the coastal sections are tribes which had crossed from the land of the Belgae....'

Veni, vidi, vici



- ▶ In 55 BCE and again in 54 BCE, Caesar came to Britain and saw, but did not conquer
- ▶ The actual Roman conquest of Britain took place a century later under Claudius

A consequence of Caesar's Gallic Wars was that he led two small invasions of Britain, albeit only a tiny portion of the south eastern corner. Caesar writes an account of these two invasions in *De Bello Gallico*. The first invasion of 55 BCE is referenced in Book 4 and his second invasion a year later is written about in Book 5. These references are the first to name individuals from Britain such as Cassivellaunus, who led the opposition to Caesar in his second expedition of 54 BCE.

It is often mentioned, especially by those sceptical of what is perceived as the inaccurate or misleading use of the label 'Celt', that no historical source ever referred to the inhabitants of either Britain or Ireland as Celts. This is quite true. What is less clear, however, is whether the labels used for various peoples around Europe were meant to be 'ethnic' or purely 'geographical' in nature. We have already seen, for example, Caesar's statement that only one of the three peoples listed as inhabitants of Gaul were actually named by him as 'Gauls'. It would appear then that the Belgae and the Aquitani were 'geographical Gauls', on the basis that they were located within the territory called 'Gaul', but not 'ethnic Gauls', on the basis that they possessed – according to the exact same source – different languages and customs to the 'Galli'.

In today's world the island of Britain is often referred to informally by people from overseas as 'England'. It would not be too difficult to imagine someone paraphrasing Caesar's introduction to the Gallic Wars like so:

'England is a whole divided into three parts, one of which is inhabited by the Scots, another by the Welsh, and a third by a people called in their own tongue English'.

Indeed, the Italian historian Polydore Vergil, in his 16th century *Anglica Historia*, starts Book 1 in a manner clearly influenced by Caesar, thus:

The whole of England, (which is now called by the double name of England and Scotland) is an island set in the ocean opposite the shore of France, and is divided into four parts. The first is inhabited by the English, the second by the Scots, the third by the Welsh, and the fourth by the Cornish. These all differ

from each other in language, manners, or customs.

Image of bust of Caesar at Museo di antichità di Torino courtesy of Ángel M. Felicísimo, Mérida, Spain,

Tribes on both sides of the channel



- Suessiones: ruled by Diviciacus who had 'within living memory' of Caesar been the most powerful king in Gaul
- Atrebates: ruled by Commius with lands in both north eastern Gaul and southern Britain

Caesar notes in Book V: 12 of *De Bello Gallico* that: “the inland part of Britain is inhabited by tribes declared in their own tradition to be indigenous to the island, the maritime part by tribes that migrated at an earlier time from Belgium to seek booty by invasion”.

Belgic tribes had probably been trading and settling in Britain since at least the second century BCE. Diviciacus was ruler of the Suessiones in the early first century BCE. Coins associated with him, dated to between about 90 and 60 BCE, have been found in south eastern Britain from what is now Sussex and Kent through to the Wash. In Gaul, the Suessiones occupied land in the western part of Belgic Gaul, between the rivers Oise and Marne, which are both tributaries of the Seine. Their capital Noviodunum, is the modern town of Soissons.

The *Atrebates* also had land on either side of the channel. In Gaul, the much changed remains of the tribal name can still be seen in the place names Arras, their capital in Gaul, and the name of the Artois region. Their lands in Britain were around what is now Hampshire, Berkshire and Sussex. Modern day Silchester, was known to the Romans as Calleva Atrebatum. In the first century BCE, their king Commius is known to have ruled in both Gaul and later Britain, and Caesar in fact initially used Commius as an envoy to Britain to try to persuade the Britons not to resist the Romans. This attempt did not succeed. Commius was both an ally and an enemy of Caesar at different points.

Ptolemy's *Geography*, produced about 150 CE during the Roman occupation of Britain, has three neighbouring *civitas* noted as *Atrebates*, *Belgae* and *Regni*. These may well be administrative divisions drawn up to suit the Romans rather than a reflection of 'tribal' boundaries. The *Atrebates* had been present in Britain since at least the time of Caesar some 200 years earlier, and their land would most likely have included all three. Bordering on the *Atrebates civitas* in Roman Britain was that of the *Belgae*. In Roman times, what is now the city of Winchester was known as *Venta Belgarum* (town of the *Belgae*). This usage of the label 'Belgae' is a little confusing, as the *Atrebates* were themselves held to be a Belgic tribe. This adds to the likelihood that the three *civitas* of *Atrebates*, *Belgae* and *Regni* had all previously been lands of the *Atrebates*.

Ptolemy also has the Brigantes in both Britain and Ireland. This may well be the case as some of them may have tried to 'escape' from the Romans by moving to Ireland. Excavations of weapons carried out at Lambay Island, off the coast of Dublin, seem to support this. (PBE L1619-1623)