

# The Historical Celts: Characteristics



- ▶ Plato: lists the Celts amongst a number of 'very warlike peoples' who indulge in 'outright drunkenness'
- ▶ Aristotle: the Celts 'openly approve of sexual relations between men'
- ▶ Aristotle: 'one...who fears nothing at all, not even earthquakes or waves (as they say of the Celts), has no name, unless we call him mad....'

Some classical sources (including some 'big hitters') refer in passing to 'characteristics' of the Celts.

Plato, for example, in his *Laws*, lists the Celts amongst a number of '*very warlike peoples*' who indulge in '*outright drunkenness*'.

Plato's most famous student, Aristotle, comments in his *Politics* that the *Celts* '*openly approve of sexual relations between men*' and fear nothing at all. This lack of fear, though, is put down to reckless passion, rather than a virtue.

Ptolemy I (via Strabo) states that the Celts '*fear no one and nothing – except that the sky might fall down on them!*'

There is nothing particularly unusual about descriptions of this sort. This is a case of seeing the Celts as 'other' and drawing attention to their characteristics, especially those considered barbaric or uncivilised. Indeed, the term 'barbarians' has its origins in Ancient Greece as a term used for Anatolians who made 'bar bar' sounds when speaking their language. This usage was then extended to anyone who didn't speak Greek. The Romans likewise used the term for anyone who was not Roman.

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The image above is a painting of Plato (left) and Aristotle by Raphael, dated to 1509. In it, Plato can be seen pointing upwards (towards ideals) with Aristotle reaching straight ahead (towards the physical world)

# Very warlike people



- ▶ According to Polybius, the Gaesatae led a Celtic army into battle at the Battle of Telamon (225 BCE) by throwing off their clothes and fighting naked

*‘The Gaesatae (Celtic spearmen) from conceit and daring threw their clothing off and went out to the front of their army naked, having nothing but their weapons’*

*‘The Romans....were greatly disturbed by the ornaments and battle noise of the Celts’*

*‘Aneroestus fled with a few followers and joined his people in a place of security. There he committed suicide along with his companions’*

The above quotes all come from Polybius *History*, written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.

They contain several ‘stereotypical’ Celtic characteristics of the ‘warlike’ Celts such as:

- Going into battle naked
- Making a lot of noise when doing so
- Committing suicide in defeat

It should be noted that not all of the Celts went into battle naked in the account of the Gaesatae above. The Insubres and the Boii wore ‘pants (i.e. trousers) and light cloaks’.

In the following century, Caesar (*De Bello Gallico* 5.14) adds that all Britons, i.e. both those of the coast and of the interior ‘*dye their skin with woad, which gives them a blue colour and fearsome appearance in battle*’. \*\*\*\*

Image from: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/223209725258427588/>

## According to Posidonius

- ▶ 'The Celts place dried grass on the ground when they eat their meals, using tables which are raised slightly off the ground'
- ▶ 'They eat only small amounts of bread, but large quantities of meat'
- ▶ 'The Celts sometimes engage in single combat during their feasts'
- ▶ 'Their tales are recounted by those called Bards, poets who recite praises in song'

Posidonius was a stoic philosopher who lived between c. 135 – c. 50 BCE.

In Gaul, he studied the Celts at first hand, and wrote about them in his *Histories*, especially Book 23. Unfortunately, his work has been lost, but several later commentators, including Diodorus (5.25 – 32) Strabo (IV. 4.2 – 6) and Caesar (BG VI. 11 – 28), all make use of it.

The quotes above are all translations from Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* written some 250 years after Posidonius' death. Diodorus, Caesar and Strabo, however, were all much closer to his time than this, writing in the middle or later part of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. \*\*\*\*\*

## According to Diodorus

The Celts are said to be:

- ▶ Vain - like their 'bling', dye their hair and wear stunning clothing
- ▶ Fearless, quick-tempered and easily provoked
- ▶ Violent – decapitating their enemies and preserving their heads in oil

Here are some of Diodorus' comments (in translation):

*'They accumulate a large amount of gold, men and women alike use it for decoration'*

*'The Gauls are very tall with white skin and blond hair, not only blond by nature but more so by the artificial means they use to lighten their hair'*

*'Some shave their beards while others allow a short growth, but nobles shave their cheeks and allow the moustache to grow until it covers the mouth'.*

*'During feasts it is their custom to be provoked by idle comments into heated disputes'*

*'They do not fear death'*

*'In both journey and battles the Gauls use two-horse chariots which carry both the warrior and the charioteer'*

*'They decapitate their slain enemies and attach the heads to their horses' necks'.*

*'They preserve the heads of their most distinguished enemies in cedar oil and store them carefully in chests'*

*'The Gauls wear stunning clothing – shirts which have been dyed in various colours, and trousers which they call bracae'*

*'The women of the Gauls are not only as large as their husbands, but are equal to them in strength'*

We can be fairly sure that the reference to decapitation and preserving their enemies' heads in oil was first noted by Posidonius. Strabo refers to a similar practice and notes that Posidonius saw it himself.

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## According to Caesar

- ▶ 'The Druids retire from war nor are they accustomed to any taxes. They have immunity from military service and are exempt from all lawsuits'
- ▶ 'All of the people of Gaul are completely devoted to religion'
- ▶ 'Men have power of life and death over their wives, as with their children'

These points pay more attention to the social structure of Celtic society. According to Caesar, the Druids played a particularly important role and subsequently held great status.

Despite the equal strength of the Gaulish women referred to by Diodorus (see previous slide), this apparently did not extend as far as holding equal status in society.

Of the three writers from this period, Caesar would have had the benefit of spending more time actually in Gaul in the presence of the people he was writing about. \*\*\*\*

## According to Strabo

- ▶ 'The whole race, which they now call both Gallic and Galatic, is warlike'
- ▶ 'As a rule, among all the Gallic peoples, three sets of men are honoured above all others, the Bards, the Vātes and the Druids'
- ▶ '...the barbaric and highly unusual custom (practised most of all by the northern tribes) of hanging the heads of their enemies from the necks of their horses when departing from battle, and nailing the spectacle to the doorways of their homes upon returning'

It is worth mentioning the reference to the 'northern tribes' here, as it was a common theme of both Greeks and Romans to believe that civilisation decreased the further one travelled from Greek or Roman ways. Caesar, on his invasion of Britain, makes similar references to the inland tribes furthest from the coast. The Irish, further away still, were long held to be cannibals. In his *Geography* (4.5.4) Strabo notes that the Irish were '*more savage than the Britons, being cannibals as well as gluttons. Further, they consider it honourable to eat their dead fathers....*'

He does at least add (ibid) '*I say these things not having trustworthy witnesses*'

This, though, raises some interesting points as far as the use of classical sources is concerned. It has already been noted that 'Celtosceptics' object to the use of the Celtic label in modern times as no classical source ever called the inhabitants of Britain or Ireland Celts. However, we have here an example of a classical source calling the inhabitants of Ireland cannibals. Presumably, then, using the same logic, we should accept that this was true.

Classical sources, like many others, may contain bias, inaccuracies, inconsistencies, gaps and flaws of all sorts. This suggests that they should be used with caution, bearing in mind as much as we can of the context of the source. They nevertheless must be used, as they are often all we have. \*\*\*\*

# Strong Women



- ▶ Onomaris
- ▶ Chiomara
- ▶ Camma
- ▶ Cartimandua
- ▶ Boudicca

There is a seeming contradiction between Diodorus' comment that *'The women of the Gauls are not only as large as their husbands, but are equal to them in strength'* and Caesar's *'Men have power of life and death over their wives, as with their children'*.

Nevertheless, Onomaris is referred to in the *Tractatus de Mulieribus Claris in Bello*, an anonymous work in Greek, but with a Latin title, where she is listed as one of 14 women to lead their people in battle and elsewhere. She is said to have led the Galatians across the Danube in about the fourth century BCE to find new lands. It is not known whether she was a factual figure or not, as some of the 14 women are historical figures while others are mythological.

Boudicca and Cartimandua were contemporaries in first century Britain. Boudicca, queen of the Iceni, famously led an uprising against the Romans in 60/61 CE, destroying the three cities of *Camolodunum* (Colchester) *Verulamium* (St Albans) and *Londinium* (London) in the process.

*'This is not the first time that Britons have been led to battle by a woman,'* records Tacitus. (PBE L1638-1639)

Cartimandua, on the other hand, was the pro-Roman queen of the Brigantes, who handed over the resistance leader Caratacus in chains to the Romans in the year 51.

In addition to the powerful women recorded by historical sources, archaeology provides us with the 'princesses' of Vix, Waldalgesheim and Reinheim. The Vix Princess will be discussed later in the Archaeological Celts.

Also, the right of Gaulish women, unlike their Greek and Roman counterparts, to inherit property, is noted by Julius Caesar thus: *"When a Gaul marries, he adds to the dowry that his wife brings with her a portion of his own property estimated to be of equal value. A joint account is kept of the whole amount, and the profits which it earns are put aside; and when either dies, the survivor receives both shares together with accumulated profits"* (PBE L1707-1713). \*\*\*\*

The image is of John Opie's 1793 painting 'Boadicea Haranguing the Britons'.

# Strong Women



"A whole troop of foreigners would not be able to withstand a single Celt if he called his wife to his assistance. The wife is even more formidable."

Ammianus Marcellinus

In keeping with their view of the Celts as 'other', Celtic women receive critical comments from Greek and Roman authors for being less feminine than their own women. Here is a quote from Ammianus Marcellinus: *"A whole troop of foreigners would not be able to withstand a single Celt if he called his wife to his assistance. The wife is even more formidable. She is usually very strong, and has blue eyes; in rage her neck veins swell, she gnashes her teeth, and brandishes her snow-white robust arms. She begins to strike blows mingled with kicks, as if they were so many missiles sent from the string of a catapult."* (PBE L1558-1564). One woman who was both formidable and feminine, being described by Livy as exceptionally beautiful, was Chiomara, the Galatian wife of Ortiagon, leader of the Tectosages. During the Galatian War of 189 BCE, Chiomara was taken captive where she was raped by a Roman centurion who then demanded a ransom for her return to her people. When the ransom was being paid and the centurion counting his gold, Chiomara ordered her people to cut off his head, which she then carried back to her husband wrapped in her dress. Plutarch records the following conversation between man and wife: *"A noble thing, dear wife, is fidelity."* *"Yes," said she, "but it is a nobler thing that only one man be alive who has been intimate with me."*

Plutarch also tells the story of Camma, another Galatian heroine, whose husband Sinatus, was murdered by a rival for her affections called Sinorix (King of Storms). Camma came under pressure from her family to marry him and eventually agreed. Drinking from the same cup was a tradition at weddings, and so Camma poisoned their wine, knowing that she would die, but so would Sinorix. The following, according to Plutarch, are her last words: *"I call you to witness, goddess most revered, that for the sake of this day I have lived on after the murder of Sinatus, and during all that time I have derived no comfort from life save only the hope of justice; and now that justice is mine, I go down to my husband. But as for you, wickedest of all men, let your relatives make ready a tomb instead of a bridal chamber and a wedding."* \*\*\*\* (Plutarch, On the Bravery of Women xx (Camma) and xxii (Chiomara) in *Moralia* vol III) Image of Woodcut illustration of Chiomara, wife of Orgiagon of Galatia, from an incunabular German translation by Heinrich Steinhöwel of Giovanni Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, printed by Johannes Zainer at Ulm ca. 1474, reproduced courtesy of kladcat under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic

# Druids



*"...a circle of Druids, lifting their hands to heaven and showering imprecations, struck the troops with such an awe at the extraordinary spectacle that, as though their limbs were paralysed, they exposed their bodies to wounds without an attempt at movement."*

Tacitus, Annals, Vol XIV chapter xxx

The Druids are said to be part of the 'intellectual' class of Celtic life, along with the Bards and Vates. As far as classical sources are concerned, Druids are only ever referred to in Gaul and Britain. They are not mentioned in Iberia, northern Italy, Galatia or Ireland, although we know from Irish literature that they, as well as the Bards and Vates were also found there, via the use of the names Drui, Bard and Fili. (PBE L1088-1091). The Bards are singers and poets, and the Vates 'soothsayers' and natural philosophers. The Druids themselves have been variously described as priests, philosophers, teachers, judges and so on (BC 3) who exercised great authority in ancient Gaulish and British society, often with a 'mystic' or 'magical' twist. According to Caesar *'The Druids are in charge of religion. They have control over public and private sacrifices and give rulings on all religious questions'* (BG VI.13).

Their influence was felt to be so great that the Romans, during the long process of conquering Britain in the first century CE, made a point of attacking their 'HQ' on Mona (Ynys Môn) the island of Anglesey in the year 60 under the control of Suetonius Paulinus. Tacitus provides us with our only classical account of the Druids in Britain in his *Annals* XIV. This is chapter xxx: *On the beach stood the adverse array, a serried mass of arms and men, with women flitting between the ranks. In the style of Furies, in robes of deathly black and with dishevelled hair, they brandished their torches; while a circle of Druids, lifting their hands to heaven and showering imprecations, struck the troops with such an awe at the extraordinary spectacle that, as though their limbs were paralysed, they exposed their bodies to wounds without an attempt at movement. Then, reassured by their general, and inciting each other never to flinch before a band of females and fanatics, they charged behind the standards, cut down all who met them, and enveloped the enemy in his own flames. The next step was to install a garrison among the conquered population, and to demolish the groves consecrated to their savage cults: for they considered it a pious duty to slake the altars with captive blood and to consult their deities by means of human entrails. While he was thus occupied, the sudden revolt of the province was announced to Suetonius. The revolt in question is that of Boudicca, who took advantage of Suetonius' absence.* \*\*\*\*

Image from J.R. Planché, *"History of British costume"* (1836), originally from Bernard de Montfaucon, *Antiquitas explanatione et schematibus illustrata* vol. ii, p. 436. 1719 (engraver: Thiroux)

## Similarities between Gaul and Britain

- ▶ Druids: Of great social rank and importance in both Gaul and Britain, with valued training taking place in Britain
- ▶ Chariots: Very similar usage and style of warfare
- ▶ Homes: Similarities noted in settlement patterns
- ▶ Rituals and Religion: Between south-eastern Britain and Gallia Belgica

According to Caesar (*De Bello Gallico* 6.13) – *'It is believed the training for Druids was discovered in Britain and from there it was transferred into Gaul. And now those who wish to learn the matter carefully depart for Britain for the sake of learning'*.

Not only does this imply similar attitudes towards Druids on the part of both Britons and Gauls, but also a shared language. Caesar goes on to note (6.14) that: *'They are said to commit to memory a great number of verses. And they remain some 20 years in training'*.

This could hardly have been achieved unless those involved were able to speak to each other.

Accounts of similarities in chariot warfare are recorded by Diodorus Siculus in the case of the Gauls and Caesar in the case of the Britons.

Diodorus (5.29) notes: *'In both journeys and battles the Gauls use two-horse chariots which carry both the warrior and charioteer. When they encounter cavalry in battle they first hurl their spears then step down from the chariot to fight with swords'*.

Whereas Caesar (4.33) has this to say: *'This is the way the British fight with their chariots. First, they drive about in all directions throwing spears and spreading chaos....when they have worked their way into the middle of the enemy cavalry they leap down from the chariots and fight on foot'*.

Caesar (5.12) is a valuable source of information for other aspects of life in Britain at this time, being the first to make observations based on personal experience. He has this to say on settlements: *'They live in homes packed close together, like the Gauls'* and this on the inhabitants of Kent (5.14): *'Of all the tribes of Britain, those inhabiting the wholly maritime land of Cantium are the most civilised, differing little from the Gauls'*.

Tacitus, (*Agricola* 11), takes a similar view towards the end of the first century CE when noting that *'In both countries, you find the same ritual and religious beliefs'*

*'There is the same hardihood in challenging danger, the same cowardice in shirking it. But the Britons show more spirit: they have not yet been softened by protracted peace.'* (BC L1305-1306). \*\*\*\*