

Assignment One – Essay 2500 words – The Celts Through The Eyes Of The Greek And Romans (HPCS5016) - Heidi Wyldewood (2100492)

What factors can impact the representation of the Celts in Greek and/or Roman literary texts? Support your answer with evidence from selected texts. (Lecturer: Ruth Parkes)

The Celts arrive in the literary sense around the year 500 BC via a Greek historian and geographer. Throughout subsequent centuries various Greek and Roman writers document interactions with the Celts, form opinions about them, and put words in their mouths, right up until the end of the Roman occupation of Gaul and Britain. The Celts themselves did not pen their own story, customs, or beliefs, so assuming the representations of them by others to be wholly accurate and without bias can prove problematic. This paper first examines the problem of fragmentary texts or second-hand news and the use of dramatic license found in early sources. This leads to an examination of the stereotypes often found when encountering the Celts in Greek or Roman literature and how those linguistic tropes continued. Next discussed is why early writers themselves might have been influenced either consciously or subconsciously to portray the Celts less than truthfully. Proposed as one of the primary shapers, of how the 'other' was first encountered and thought of, is the early classical world view, including mythology, climate and environment. Finally, two events are put forward as significantly embedding negative stereotypes in the Greco-Roman psyche. Whilst other factors, such as personal agenda, influenced accounts of individual Celts, the focus of this paper is the impact of aversion and distrust on the generalised descriptions and repeated characterisations of the Celts.

It was Hecataeus of Miletus who first mentioned the Celts, but his words, among some three hundred fragments of *Periodos ges*, can only be glimpsed in Stephanus of Byzantium's *Ethnika*, written c. 530 CE, a thousand years later.¹ Again, when the Greek historian Ephorus, c. 400 – 330 BCE, described the location of 'Celtica' it is via Strabo's *Geographica*, three hundred years on that his words survive.² Whether these observations, regarding Celtica and Britain, were originally made by Greek geographer and explorer, Pytheas of Massalia in the 4th century BCE, is not certain, for his words are preserved too in the same book by Strabo, but with a proviso that Pytheas is 'a man upon who no reliance can be placed'.³ It appears that Pytheas had originally been 'taken seriously by Eratosthenes, Timaeus, and possibly Ephorus, who made extracts from it', some of which were subsequently repeated centuries later by 'Diodorus, Caesar, Pliny, and Tacitus'.⁴ He was 'imitated and parodied' by Euhemerus, Hecataeus (of Abdera), and Diogenes, and, although quoted, was not believed by Polybius, Strabo and Pliny.⁵ However, Pytheas had reportedly sailed into the North Atlantic and around the European coastline to the seas around Britain, identifying land masses and recording

¹ John T. Koch, 'Hecataeus', *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 898.

² Strabo, *Geography* 1.2.28.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.4.3.

⁴ C. F. Angus, 'Pytheas of Marseilles', *Greece & Rome*, 3.9 (1934) 165-172 (p. 165-166).
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/641027>> [accessed 1st April 2023].

⁵ *Ibid.*

Celtic place names, experiencing first-hand what those others had not.⁶ This example points to the fragility of the earliest sources, exposing the risk of distortion, partial quotation or mockery. Centuries later, when Tacitus provided an account of the Romans' dealings with the Celtic people in Britain, it was via his father-in-law Agricola that he gained some of his knowledge, therefore his words have to be scrutinised with the potential for personal bias in mind.⁷ When Livy described scenes that unfolded during the Sack of Rome nearly three hundred years prior, one has to wonder if the account was not helped along by a little embroidery. Who reported that the Gaul touched the beard of the elderly patrician if 'he was the first to be killed', the remaining magnates 'were butchered in their chairs', and 'no living being was thenceforth spared'?⁸ Not the victorious Celts surely.

Livy's account also presents the Celts as surprised, 'almost dumb with astonishment', and 'puzzled' by their own success, and standing in awe and wonder, 'gazing' at the magnificence of Rome.⁹ The Celts are portrayed as relatively unevolved, simpleminded, with 'Fortune' adding weight to any military tactics they employed.¹⁰ Some scholars have expressed their doubts about the veracity of parts of the account, suspecting that the Celtic success has been downplayed.¹¹ Whilst the panicked Romans do not initially come out well in the account, their discipline and civility is redeemed in contrast to the marauders:

Those who are coming here in loose and disorderly fashion are a race to whom nature has given bodies and minds distinguished by bulk rather than by resolution and endurance. It is for this reason that they bring into every battle a terrifying appearance rather than real force. Take the disaster of Rome as a proof. They captured the City because it lay open to them; a small force repelled them from the Citadel and Capitol. Already the irksomeness of an investment has proved too much for them, they are giving it up and wandering through the fields in straggling parties. When they are gorged with food and the wine they drink so greedily, they throw themselves down like wild beasts, on the approach of night, in all directions by the streams, without entrenching themselves, or setting any outposts or pickets on guard. And now after their success they are more careless than ever.¹²

Plutarch's account of the same event, penned some decades after Livy's, provides yet more elaboration about certain scenes, such as the plight of the Vestal Virgins and that of Papirius Marcus' beard: the 'barbarian' has to pluck up his courage to draw near and touch it, 'hesitating' before the 'superior beings', the Roman elders.¹³

⁶ John T. Koch, 'Pytheas', *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 1472.

⁷ Tacitus. *Agricola. Germania. Dialogue on Oratory*, trans. by M. Hutton and W. Peterson, rev. by R. M. Ogilvie, E. H. Warmington and Michael Winterbottom (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), pp. 16-20.

⁸ Livy, *The History Of Rome*, 5.41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.39-41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 5.38.

¹¹ Ulrike Roth, 'The Gallic Ransom And The Sack Of Rome, Livy 5.48.7-8', *Mnemosyne* 71.3 (2018) 460-484 (p. 462) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26572929>> [accessed 1st April 2023].

¹² Livy, *The History Of Rome*, 5.44.

¹³ Plutarch, *Lives. Camillus XXII*.

The stereotype of the 'barbarous and ferocious' Celt is one that is repeated throughout the works of different writers, providing a foil for the sophisticated Greeks and Romans.¹⁴ Strabo talks of them being 'war-mad', 'simple', 'high-spirited', witless, and boastful, and that 'by reason of this levity of character they not only look insufferable when victorious, but also scared out of their wits when worsted'.¹⁵ Diodorus portrays the Gauls as 'most savage' and of 'great stature', including the women.¹⁶ He calls their voices 'harsh and deep', and that they talk in 'few words and riddles', and suggests that their words may not be true, full of exaggerations and boasts, and deliberately misleading.¹⁷ Ammianus says they are 'terrible' and threatening, have 'overbearing insolence', fierce eyes and are fond of quarrelling. He described the women as even stronger, 'with flashing eyes' and gnashing teeth.¹⁸ He also makes a note of their voices being different to the women he was used to, as did Dio Cassius when he said that the famous Boudica was very tall, terrifying in appearance, and 'her voice was harsh'.¹⁹

Whilst the Greeks and Romans enjoyed wine, they viewed the 'outright drunkenness' exhibited by the Celts as morally lacking in discipline.²⁰ This behaviour appeared a particular sticking point for the classical writers:

It is a race greedy for wine, devising numerous drinks similar to wine, and some among them of the baser sort, with wits dulled by continual drunkenness (which Cato's saying pronounced a voluntary kind of madness) rush about in aimless revels, so that those words seem true which Cicero spoke when defending Fonteius: "The Gauls henceforth will drink wine mixed with water, which they once thought poison".²¹

Although there is plenty of material evidence to attest to the Celts love of beer and wine, scholars agree that much of the characterisation of the Celts as drunks by classical writers was 'due to cultural chauvinism' and partly based on limited early encounters with Celts by the likes of Plato, whose generalisations became overly recycled by later Greek and Roman authors.²²

The intolerance exhibited towards cultural differences is highlighted when Aelian talks of his admiration of 'the wisdom of the barbarians', c. 200 AD, referring to the practice of looking for signs and omens in the intestines of slaughtered animals carried out by 'the Indian..., the Celt' and 'the Egyptian'.²³ He elevates the activity, draws the barbarians closer in kind, and credits them with intelligence, because both the Greeks and the Romans themselves

¹⁴ Livy, *The History Of Rome*, 33.12.

¹⁵ Strabo, *Geography*, 4.4.5.

¹⁶ Diodorus Siculus, *The Library Of History*, 5.32.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5.31.

¹⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, 15.12.1.

¹⁹ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 62.

²⁰ Plato, *Laws*, 1.637.

²¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, 15.12.4

²² Philip M. Freeman, 'The Earliest Greek Sources On The Celts', *Études Celtiques*, 32 (1996), 11-48 (p. 25) <https://www.persee.fr/doc/ecelt_0373-1928_1996_num_32_1_2082> [accessed 1st April 2023].

²³ Aelian, *Historical Miscellany*, 2.31.

undertook exactly the same type of divination.²⁴ Conversely, a hypocritical distancing of themselves from the Celts occurs when Romans talk about human sacrifice. Horror at the thought of the Celts sacrificing humans persisted throughout the Roman occupation of Gaul and Britain, and ‘sensationalized ethnic slurs’ were not unknown in which the Celts were falsely reported to practice cannibalism too.²⁵ However, Pliny acknowledged that ‘abominable rites’ involving human sacrifices were only forbidden amongst the Romans in 97 BC, ‘so that down to that date’ it still occurred, albeit rarely.²⁶ Elsewhere documented is Rome’s ongoing execution of political prisoners and the ritual killing of unchaste Vestal Virgins, whilst the glorification of the gladiatorial stadium ‘continued into the Common Era’.²⁷ Could ceremonial or celebratory killings only be tolerated if done the Roman way?

Homosexuality was not uncommon amongst Greeks and Romans, but only societally accepted if practiced from a position of penetrative power with a lesser male, ‘often in the form of pederasty’.²⁸ When this preference for other men over their wives and passionate trysts amongst equals were observed amongst the Gauls, this cultural difference was enough to cause remarks. Diodorus and Strabo say that they ‘rage with lust, in outlandish fashion, for the embraces of males’ and that ‘it is considered no disgrace for the young men to be prodigal of their youthful charms’.²⁹

Similarly when Polybius describes a people whose lives were ‘very simple’ and who had ‘no knowledge whatever of any art or science’ it is in contrast to the skilled metallurgy and craftsmanship evidenced by material culture and even their own literary accounts, could it be that the only good art was the ‘classical realism’ of Roman or Greek art, and that ‘Celtic art was more ambiguous and harder to read’?³⁰ When Diodorus adds ‘yet they have sharp wits and are not without cleverness at learning’ to his less than positive characterisation, what learning was he referring to?³¹ It is tempting to see remarks like this as patronising concessions from those who saw themselves as a superior, civilising influence.³²

Reiterated descriptions of the Celts, being difficult to understand, hard to listen to, rowdy, pompous, loud, drunk, or worse, sound xenophobic, but when combined with adjectives such

²⁴ Sarah Iles Johnston, ‘Divination: Greek and Roman Divination’, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 4, 2nd edn., ed by Lindsay Jones, (USA: Gale, 2005), pp. 2375-2378.

²⁵ Wendy Davies and Antone Minard, ‘Foodways’, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), pp. 762-766. (p. 763).

²⁶ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, XXX. III.

²⁷ For a discussion on the ‘live interment of Vestal Virgins’ and of ‘pairs of Gauls and Greeks’ see Celia E. Schultz, ‘The Romans And Ritual Murder’, *Journal Of The American Academy Of Religion*, 78.2 (2010) 516–541 <doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfq002>. For the official ban on gladiatorial events in 325 CE as recorded in Cod. Theod. 15.12.1. see David Potter, ‘Constantine And The Gladiators’, *The Classical Quarterly*, 60. 2 (2010), 596-606, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40984834>> [accessed 1st April 2023].

²⁸ Freeman, ‘The Earliest Greek Sources On The Celts’, p. 31. For a discussion of Roman homosexual practice see Amy Richlin, *The Garden Of Priapus: Sexuality And Aggression In Roman Humor*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 225.

²⁹ Diodorus Siculus, *The Library Of History* 5.32. For Strabo see *Geography*, 4.4.6.

³⁰ Polybius, *The Histories*, 2.17. For Celtic art see Julia Farley and Fraser Hunter, *Celts: Art And Identity*, (London: The British Museum Press, 2015), p. 39.

³¹ Diodorus Siculus, *The Library Of History*, 5.31.

³² Strabo, *Geography*, 3.2.15.

as terrible, formidable, and ferocious it appears to indicate something else. If disquiet or fear did influence Greek and Roman writings about the Celts, where did it come from? Perhaps the early classical world view holds part of the answer.

When the Greeks began to theorise about what lay beyond the edges of their civilised world they saw it surrounded by the River Ocean under the domain of the Titan god, Oceanus.³³ The land in the middle was not just defined by geographical features but by people. The 'oikoumenē', the inhabited land, was a sweeping radius of land, around them, filled with tribes and races, and beyond it empty lands, then the great river.³⁴ This gave rise to speculation about who or what lived at those edges. Gradually this basic idea of the circular river was challenged by the likes of Herodotus, and as peoples explored further over the centuries, creating maps or accounts of their travels the world view changed, but not before strange and mythological ideas had formed about monstrous creatures, godly inhabitants, and people with goat feet, dog heads, full body hair, eight fingers and toes, or ears down to their elbows.³⁵ The expansion of geographical knowledge came with a greater understanding of climate. Aristotle put forward 'that the habitable world was confined to the temperate zone', not the central torrid zone or two frigid zones.³⁶ Although it was not quite as simple as 'assigning the four points of the compass to Indians, Ethiopians, Celts, and Scythians' the Greeks did perceive direction and climate to have an effect on the characteristics of the people.³⁷ The centre was thought to have 'the best seasons', therefore the preferred type of people, elsewhere the people differed in various ways from the perceived optimal norm.³⁸

This origin of perceiving people to be fundamentally peculiar or intellectually inferior to those living in the Mediterranean, meant that various peoples were deemed as having 'undesirable characteristics', not just the Celts.³⁹ The idea of foreigners resembling 'wild animals' persisted

³³ Strabo, *Geography*, 1.1.3.

³⁴ Jessica Priestley, *Herodotus And Hellenistic Culture*, (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 109-110.

³⁵ James Room, 'Herodotus And Mythic Geography: The Case Of The Hyperboreans', *Transactions Of The American Philological Association (1974-2014)*, 119 (1989), 97-113 (pp. 100-101) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/284263>> [accessed 3rd April 2023]. For the 'Land of the Hyperboreans', goat-footed people, and Greek gods see John Dillery, 'Hecataeus Of Abdera: Hyperboreans, Egypt, And The "Interpretatio Graeca"', *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte*, 47.3 (1998), 255-275 (pp. 262-265) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4436508>> [accessed 2nd April 2023]. For the strange descriptions of people and animal in Asia reported by Ctesias c. 5th century BC see Andrew Nichols, *The Complete Fragments Of Ctesias Of Cindus: Translation And Commentary With An Introduction* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Florida, 2008) <https://www.academia.edu/20652164/THE_COMPLETE_FRAGMENTS_OF_CTESIUS_OF_CNIDUS_TRANSLATION_AND_COMMENTARY_WITH_AN_INTRODUCTION> [accessed 4th April 2023].

³⁶ Marie Sanderson, 'The Classification Of Climates From Pythagoras To Koeppen', *Bulletin Of The American Meteorological Society*, 80. 4 (1999), 669-673 (p.669) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26214921>> [accessed 3rd April 2023].

³⁷ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Location Of The Celts According To Hecataeus, Herodotus, And Other Greek Writers', *Études Celtiques*, 42 (2016), 7-32 (p. 7) <https://www.persee.fr/doc/ecelt_0373-1928_2016_num_42_1_2467> [accessed 2nd April 2023].

³⁸ Herodotus, *Histories*, 3.106. For climate and personality see Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters, Places*, 12-24.

³⁹ Freeman, 'The Earliest Greek Sources On The Celts', p. 24.

no matter who they encountered or traded with.⁴⁰ It follows then that the Celts were already at risk from being seen as more primitive prior to any face-to-face contact.

Adding to this wariness towards the Celts, the Sack of Rome and the 'attack of the Gauls on Delphi' appear to have reinforced and intensified a prejudice within the cultural psyche of the Greeks and the Romans.⁴¹ Both assaults struck at the Greco-Roman heart, demonstrating a disregard for their centres of civilisation and religious practice. These two histories were seen as important to hand down, warning future generations about possible 'sudden and unexpected invasions of barbarians' and urging them to have courage, to take up arms against them, and to 'fight to the end for his native land'.⁴²

It is not only in old times but more than once in my own days that the Greeks have been alarmed by the prospect of a Gaulish invasion; and this especially was my motive for giving here an account of the Gauls, summary indeed, but going back to the beginnings.⁴³

In other sources a hint of admiration can be read in the words, such as when Cato the Elder talks of the Gaul making an 'art of war' or Ammianus Marcellinus stating that 'all ages are most fit for military service, and the old man marches out on a campaign with a courage equal to that of the man in the prime of life'.⁴⁴ Recognition of the Gaul's love of fighting and their many skilled warriors fed into the Greco-Roman unease about their noisy neighbours though. In the 3rd century BC, Callimachus drew a direct connection between the Gaulish threat and the mythic terrors from the unknown beyond the *oikoumenē*, saying that 'a general conflict will come upon us, when the later-born Titans, raising up against the Greeks a barbarian sword and Celtic war'.⁴⁵ Even as late as 69 BC, Cicero was still reminding the Romans about the past, with a caution to mind the ongoing 'blood feud' waged by the Gauls, who once 'came to the Oracle of the Pythian Apollo at Delphi, the resort of the whole world, to harry and to despoil' and that they did the same to the 'Capitol and the temple of that Jove'.⁴⁶

In conclusion then, it should be acknowledged that the earliest information about the Celts exhibits a fragility with regard to fact and subject to dubious theories. Second-hand or duplicate sources may have been based on partial access to earlier works; biased in the choice of quotations or filtered to uphold stereotypes; or doubtful about the veracity of that which they copied or the stories they recorded. Additionally, some later accounts appear to have undergone further dramatisation.

However, the main impact on the representation of the Celts occurred via the 'othering' of foreigners, with them being regarded as less developed or savage, from the outset. Once the Celts had emerged into view for the Greeks and Romans, somewhere between the primitive

⁴⁰ This description was applied to the Chinese, see Pliny The Elder, *Natural History* 6.54.

⁴¹ Polybius, *The Histories* 2.35.6-10.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History* 15.12.3.

⁴⁵ Callimachus, *Hymn IV To Delos*, 171-175.

⁴⁶ Cicero, *Pro Fonteio*, 30-33.

curiosities at the edge of the world and their own enlightened centre, the Sack of Rome and the desecration of Delphi concretised the barbarian into the group consciousness as a something to be feared and managed. Despite concessions to bravery and skill, this trope was oft repeated by classical writers and used in many cases to highlight the perceived superiority of expanding Roman imperialism, all the while believing there to be a huge gap between the cultural and societal standards of the Celts and themselves. Whilst Greek and Roman sources provide the only descriptions of the early Celts, many have been influenced by a certain prejudice, hostile at worst and intrigued at best.

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