

Book review written for Studia Celtica

B. Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, second edition 2018). Pp. 486; £20 (pbk). ISBN 978-0-19-875293-6

The second edition of *The Ancient Celts*, this version aims to update the work undertaken by Cunliffe during his “sabbatical ... on the north coast of Brittany” (p.viii), first written in the mid 1990s when the subject of the Celts was being re-debated.

At the end of the twentieth century, archaeologists were beginning to develop new models of thinking about the Celtic languages and how they may have spread, which in turn led to the rise of the “Celtic from the West” approach. This approach was first proposed in 2001 in Cunliffe’s *Facing the Ocean* and has provoked controversy amongst linguists and historians ever since, arguing that the Celtic language originated in the Atlantic zone, developed as a *lingua franca* and spread into middle Europe around 2000BCE.

This book starts with an introduction to how we know the Celts, looking at changing historical perspectives through time from the Celtomania of the 17th and 18th centuries, through to the Celtosceptic views of the late 20th century. Classical sources give us our first glimpse of the Celts as they came into contact and conflict with the Greco Roman world, portrayed as a warlike and savage foe to be respected. Archaeology from this time such as the Dying Gaul statue reinforces such a view. During the medieval and early modern period, the world seemed to forget about the Celts, until printed sources became available, coinciding with a surge of nationalism which in many places was linked with a reawakened interest in native languages. This in turn led to archaeological excavations which helped to form the vision of the Celt as warlike and widespread. Cunliffe warns that we cannot study the past without being aware that transient values and aspirations of the moment will always be at play.

The next chapters consider the accepted ways of identifying a Celt (language, literature and archaeology/celtic art) in more detail. For the purposes of this work Cunliffe states that he considers a Celt to be someone who spoke the Celtic language (p53), which although broad is considered to be a workable generalisation. The chapters take a broadly historical chronological approach, occasionally branching off to consider the contemporary accounts or archaeological findings in more detail.

In considering the spread of the Celtic language across the time period in question (5500 BCE to Roman times), Cunliffe uses the work of Patrick Sims-Williams and John Koch to argue that there was a vibrant language in the Atlantic zone in the Late Bronze Age. Cunliffe goes on to explain his theory in compelling detail over the following chapters, backed up with archaeological evidence from grave types and goods. He also introduces the concept of analysis of stable isotopes preserved in teeth as a way of estimating how far an individual may have moved between early childhood and death, a scientific advance which was not available when the first edition was published.

An addition to this edition is the focused work on Celtic Iberia, describing how the people there interacted with the Mediterranean populations and the Phoenicians, and how Cunliffe believes the Celtic language in Iberia developed. Place name evidence shows that Celtic in various forms was spoken across parts of Iberia, and inscriptions in Celtic utilising Phoenician script date back to the eighth century BCE. He further puts forward a theory for the development of the Celtic

language from Proto-Celtic into Hispano-Celtic in 900 BCE, and a further split some three hundred years later into the Gallo-Brythonic (eventually P Celtic) and Goidelic (Q Celtic).

Chapters 4 and 5 provide a background to Europe based on archaeological finds, showing a pattern of expansion and contraction amongst various populations: the Minoans, Phoenicians, Etruscans, and the Celts themselves. Cunliffe takes time to introduce trade and conflict as ways of people and items finding their way around Europe, highlighting important settlements and finds as well as touching on Hallstatt and La Tène. These important archaeological sites are discussed in greater detail later in the book. At this point it is important to consider that people (both individuals and en masse) move for reasons other than war and were much more mobile than might initially be presumed. Skilled artists for example were much in demand. Also, material goods can end up far from where they were made through trade as high prestige items or as household goods for societal elites. In turn, these items can go on to influence local artists, with styles being adopted and absorbed in unexpected ways.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 provide coverage of the Celts and their movements and interactions with others as seen by the classical writers. Expansion brought the Celts into conflict with other cultures, most notably Rome. Julius Caesar provides great detail in his writings about his contact with the Celts, however it is important to remember that he was writing as a war leader and not specifically a social historian. These chapters really highlight the fact that it is not possible to look at the Celts in isolation as they interact with so many other people and societies.

Cunliffe then takes time to focus the next few chapters specifically on warfare, arts and what is known or strongly presumed about Celtic religious systems. He compares the archaeological findings with the historical writings. The texts offer particularly anecdotal evidence for religious practice, usually for the purpose of conveying another message. It is through these texts that we learn of the Druids, how much of a threat the leaders of the classical world thought they were, and what they did about it.

The final few chapters consider the Celtic world under Roman rule, how order was (or in some cases was not) maintained through client kings and magistrates, and the gradual absorption into the Roman Empire of the continental Celts. The insular Celts remained relatively isolated on the very Western fringes, which Cunliffe maintains is why the languages have survived for so much longer in these areas. It is true that languages evolve over time and do not stay static for various reasons, and Cunliffe provides reasonable arguments to back up his assertions in this book.

This book would be well suited to a student of Celtic history who is interested in the origins of language and the concept of the Celt, and also to a well-educated casual reader. It is beautifully illustrated, with 30 detailed maps showing the spread of Celtic language, peoples and archaeological finds, and over 260 colour photographs and illustrations of grave goods, archaeological sites, statues, weapons and inscribed tablets. At the end of the book is a detailed guide to further reading, providing recommended books for the general reader and the more academic reader for each chapter and also the subject of the Celts as a whole. After this there are four pages of chronological tables, detailing the history of the Celts and other related events from the foundation of Massalia in 600BCE to the Battle of Mons Grapius in 84CE. I can strongly recommend this book as both an entry point and for further study.

Encyclopedia entry written for Dictionary of Welsh Biography

S. Illtud (ca.450-537), Abbot of Llantwit Major (Llanilltud Fawr) in Wales, and the teacher of the Welsh.

Name: Illtud

Date of birth: ca. 450

Date of death: cd. 537

Spouse: Trynihild

Gender: Male

Occupation: Knight, Abbot, Christian teacher

Area of activity: Religion

Author: C. Passingham

S. Illtud is one of the most venerated saints in Wales but few genuine facts are known about his life. The earliest written evidence for S. Illtud can be found in the Life of [S. Samson of Dol](#), one of his students which was composed in the 7th century AD. The first Life of S. Illtud was composed in the twelfth century and is extant in the *Cotton. Vespasian* A.xiv manuscript. It is a late composition, doubtless based on an earlier version.

Illtud (Eltutus; Celtic, meaning the man of many tribes) was probably born in the middle of the 5th century AD. His father was Bicarnus, a minor Breton Prince. His mother was Rieingulid/Rieingulida, daughter of Anblaud, a King of Britain or possibly lesser Britain (Brittany). It is unclear as to whether he was born in Glamorgan in South Wales, or in Armorica (Brittany).

The Life of Illtud portrays him as the son of a prominent Briton and a cousin of [King Arthur](#). In his youth, Illtud chose a military career, becoming a soldier. According to one account he crossed to Britain from Armorica and joined [King Arthur's](#) court. He married a very religious woman called Trynihild and became a soldier, leading to him sometimes being called Illtud the Knight. He was a soldier in the army of one of the chiefs of Glamorgan. He would later travel to Glamorgan where he was converted by [S. Cadoc](#), and became his disciple in around 476 AD. The Life states that one day Illtud was out hunting with the retainers of Paul of Penychen. They made rude demands for food of [S. Cadoc](#). Illtud had strayed from the party and avoided their fate of falling into the earth which opened up like a mouth to swallow them. At this point, according to the Life, [S. Cadoc](#) urged Illtud to give up the military profession and take the tonsure because he had been spared. Trynihild and Illtud separated on Illtud's insistence. It is likely Trynihild became an anchoress, and Illtud became a hermit near the river Nadarfan, going on to become one of the founding fathers of Welsh monasticism. Baring-Gould and Fisher suggest a less miraculous reason for his conversion, suggesting that the party may have fallen into a morass whilst out hunting, and that Illtud survived this tragedy and converted as a result.

S. Germanus of Auxerre, possibly his grandfather, instructed and trained Illtud in his youth. Baring-Gould and Fisher argue that it is more likely Illtud was the nephew of S. Germanus of Armorica, and that the writer of the Life mixed up the two men. Later Illtud became a monk, and was ordained into the priesthood by Germanus, together with a number of men who would go on to become saints. The Life of [S. Brioc](#) confirms Illtud as being a fellow disciple of Germanus along with [Brioc](#). He studied extensively with S. [Dubricius](#), Bishop of Llandaff.

Illtud founded a number of churches, monasteries and schools in Wales. In the saints' lives Illtud is closely associated with the regions of Dyfed and Glamorgan in South Wales, as well as Brittany, and a hermitage on Caldy Island in the Bristol Channel. The most famous of his endeavours was the monastery in Llantwit

named Llanilltud Fawr *lit. "the great church of Illtud"* and known as Cor Tewdws, the Chief University. The monastery was situated in Glamorgan, South East Wales, and was founded in 476 AD. Illtud was the first Abbot of the monastery and ruled it for many years. Many of the Welsh saints of this period came from that monastery. It is likely that hundreds of monks lived in Llantwit Major simultaneously, and at its height the monastery had over 1,000 pupils. Monastic life flourished until the Norman Conquest, when native Britons were removed from ecclesiastical office. The monastery was famous for being one of the finest educational centres in Western Europe at that time, and the earliest centre of learning in Britain. It is believed that Sts [David](#), Patrick and Gildas were all educated there. Illtud's influence contributed to the formation of monastic life, culture, education and learning in Wales at that time. Llanilltud Fawr was one of the most important churches in all of Wales. Many other churches in Wales are dedicated to S. Illtud, and most of these churches are concentrated in South or South East Wales. In ca. 521 AD Illtud retired to live by the banks of the River Ewenny, and made his disciple [Samson](#) Abbot in his place.

Illtud had a number of disciples in Wales and Brittany, among them S. David of Mynyw, [S. Samson](#) of Dol and [S. Gildas the Wise](#). The Life of [S. Samson](#) describes S. Illtud as *"the most prominent teacher of the Britons and the whole of Britain"*.

Illtud was said to lead a severe ascetic life in imitation of the desert fathers from Egypt, Syria and Palestine. He would fast, and each night would stand in the river for an hour whilst naked. He devoted his time to manual work, fasting and abstinence. At one point he spent almost three years alone in a secluded cave in prayer. He was also known for being a charitable monastic leader, deeply revered and remembered for his holiness. It is said that when there was a famine in French Brittany, Abbot Illtud organised a fleet of boats to take grain to the Bretons. There are numerous places named for him in Brittany.

S. Illtud was known as a worker of wonders during his lifetime. It was said he had the power to foresee events, specifically his own death and that of his friends and disciples who would die around the same time as him. He has a miraculous altar in Gower attributed to him. He was also known to communicate with wild animals. He once rescued a stag (or fawn, depending on sources) from King Meirchion who was hunting it. The stag became tame and could even be used to deliver timber for the saint on a cart in order for him to build his church. Illtud is credited with introducing the Welsh to updated methods of ploughing their fields, and also with helping them reclaim land from the sea along the banks of the Severn.

According to Welsh legend Illtud was one of the three knights of the Holy Grail, along with Cadoc and Peredur. Some scholars have tried to equate Illtud the Knight with Sir Galahad.

Researchers suggest that Illtud died in the early 6th century, between 527 - 537, possibly in Brittany but more likely in Llantwit where a 9th century cross bears the names of "Illtet, Samson and Eleisar". He was buried in Brecknockshire near the chapel of Bedd Gwyl Illtyd on an area of land known as Mynydd Illtud. His saint day is celebrated on 6 November, and until recently Illtud was honoured by the practice of keeping a vigil at his stone before this day. There is also a celebration in Brittany on the last Sunday of July in honour of Illtud. He was one of the leading figures of the early church in Wales.

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Sources

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Further Reading

Wikipedia article: [Saint Illtud](#)

Dictionary of Welsh Biography article: [Illtud](#)