

THE  
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CELTS

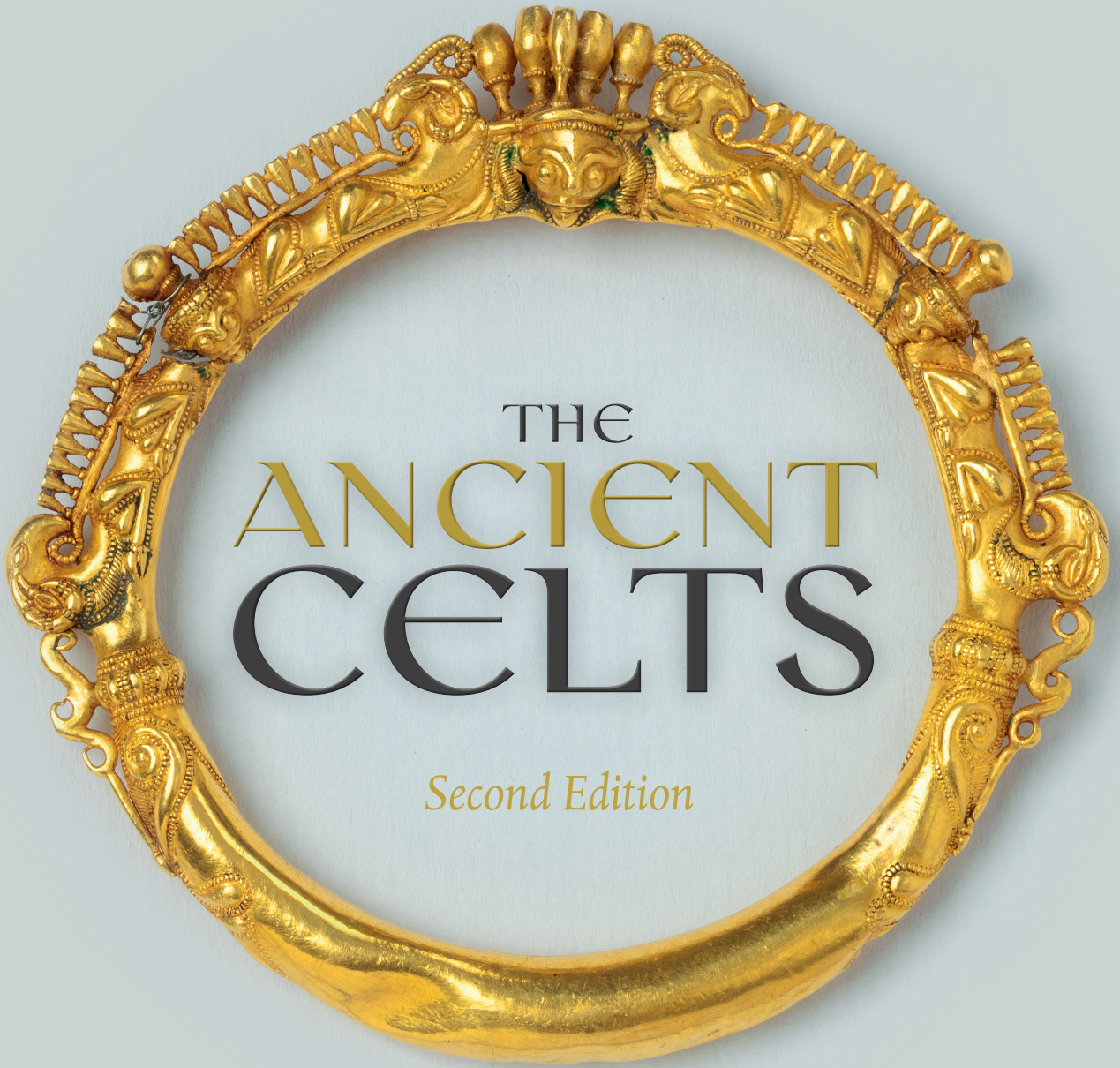
*second  
edition*

BARRY  
CUNLIFFE



# THE ANCIENT CELTS





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*Second Edition*

BARRY CUNLIFFE

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## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

**T**HE First Edition of this book was written twenty years ago when the subject, indeed the validity, of the Celts was being actively debated. Most archaeologists were agreed that our perceptions of the ancient Celts, which had changed little over the last century, were in urgent need of revision. A certain nostalgic cosiness had crept in and although new data was accumulating fast there had been little critical debate. Old mantras about ‘Celticness’ were repeated bringing comfort rather than stimulation. In the debate that followed in the 1990s and the early years of this millennium the way in which the concept of the Celt had been constructed was energetically reassessed, old preconceptions were cast off, and new ways were developed to try to improve our understanding of the European barbarians who were referred to as Celts or Gauls by their Mediterranean neighbours.

What became clear, early in the debate, was that the models we had been using were no longer fit for purpose. They were predicated on a theory, first coherently formulated in the early eighteenth century, to explain variations in a language group to which the name ‘Celtic’ had been given. It was not until the early nineteenth century that the nascent discipline of archaeology began slowly to yield relevant data. Since philology was the senior discipline, the findings of the archaeologists were, inevitably, interpreted in terms of the linguistic model. So it was until the last decades of the twentieth century, when it began to become apparent that the archaeological evidence could no longer be forced to fit the old linguistic theories. It was in this atmosphere of new-found confidence that some archaeologists began to consider fresh models suggesting that the Celtic language may have originated in the Atlantic zone of Europe and may have spread eastwards, perhaps as early as the third millennium BC.

The discussion has continued over the last fifteen years or so, some groups trying to find a rapprochement between archaeologists and linguists. Now, with the development of new techniques to extract ancient DNA from human bones, an entirely new source of data is becoming available, totally independently of archaeology and



PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

linguistics. Once sufficient ancient DNA evidence becomes available and is brought into meaningful juxtaposition with the archaeological data, reliable narratives of human mobility, exploring both connectivity and remoteness, will be able to be constructed for Europe. These will challenge linguists to look anew at their long-held theories. Out of all this the history of the people who spoke the Celtic language will emerge. These are exciting times. The exploration of the Celts, then, is a worthwhile pursuit since it draws us deep into the processes which help us to begin to understand the complexity of our past.

Barry Cunliffe  
*Oxford*  
*December 2017*



## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

FOR two and a half thousand years the Celts have continued to fascinate those who have come into contact with them. For the Greeks and Romans the fascination was tinged with fear tempered with a degree of respect for Celtic prowess in battle. Later generations, further removed from the reality of the barbarian Celts of the first millennium BC, generated their own myths and stereotypes about the past, re-creating Celtic ancestors for themselves in the image of the day designed to explain their own attitudes and aspirations and to provide a legitimacy for actions. The study of the Celts and of our changing visions of them offer an incomparable insight into the human need to establish an identity—and of the difficulties which this poses to archaeologists, who, by their best endeavours, attempt to remain objective.

It could be argued that biased historical anecdotes, ill-understood patterns of early language development, and hard archaeological ‘facts’—the artefacts, ecofacts, and structures of the past recovered through excavation—should not, and indeed cannot, be brought together to create a coherent picture of the past. The position is firmly taken by some and energetically argued; it is not one with which I have much sympathy. Given an array of disparate evidence, we would, I believe, be failing if we were to fight shy of the challenges posed by using every available scrap in our attempt to construct a European protohistory. In doing so we will, inevitably, be drawn into simplification and generalization, laying ourselves open to criticism from the purists, but better the attempt to create a whole, however imperfect, than to be satisfied with the minute examination of only a part.

In writing this book, within the entirely reasonable constraints suggested by the publishers, I have found it impossible to go into areas of detail which I would like to have covered, while at the same time being drawn into the wider themes of European pre- and protohistory. Rather than adhere to the preconceptions of my original plan, I have allowed myself to be led by the subject. What emerges is much less an ‘archaeology’ than it might have been.





PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

My other indulgence is to have written the text during a sabbatical term living in a house on the north coast of Brittany, overlooking a narrow bay to the headland of Le Yaudet beyond. In the Late Iron Age, the promontory was defended by a massive rampart, and it is quite conceivable, though yet unproven, that it was one of the communities attacked by Caesar in 56 BC. Living here in Brittany has provided a constant reminder of the Celtic world. In the nearby church at Loguivy-lès-Lannion we attended a musical celebration for the pardon of St Ivy. The long address of welcome was in Breton. Then followed music and singing dominated by bagpipes and bombardes identical to those played by the shepherds in the Adoration depicted on the seventeenth-century altarpiece above. Two months later, in July, the local *fête folklorique* was held within the promontory fort of Le Yaudet. The event is an entirely new creation only some ten years old, but it is fast becoming a focus for the community. The displays of old farm machinery and ancient crafts are as fascinating to the local population as they are to the tourists, and in the evening, as dinner in the open air proceeds, old and young alike join in the singing of Breton songs and the dancing, and listen to the telling of stories. It is, of course, a conscious re-creation of a past, but a past not long gone and one which offers a much-needed sense of identity and continuity in a fast-changing world.

The archaeology of Le Yaudet, the Breton language still spoken, and the underlying sense of a Celtic ethnicity are aspects of the phenomenon of the Celts: in their coherence and disparity they provide a leitmotiv for the book to follow.

Finally a few acknowledgements: to the editorial and design departments of Oxford University Press for their help and advice throughout; to the many individuals and institutions who provided photographs; to Alison Wilkins for producing a new series of line drawings; to Lynda Smithson for preparing the text; and to my family for their forbearance and understanding with my mild obsession.

Barry Cunliffe  
*Pont Roux*  
*January 1996*



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MONDINE...  
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# 1 Visions of the Celts

**I**N a famous lecture given more than half a century ago, the Oxford scholar J. R. R. Tolkien chided his audience, mostly comprised of Celtic specialists, by claiming “Celtic” of any sort is . . . a magic bag, into which anything may be put, and out of which almost anything may come. . . . Anything is possible in the fabulous Celtic twilight, which is not so much a twilight of the gods as of the reason.’ He was specifically referring to linguistic etymologies, but his words were true for Celtic studies in general, which, after nearly three hundred years of introspection, had created a tissue of self-sustaining myths far removed from the reality of the available data. By throwing into the ‘magic bag’ scraps gleaned from linguistics, classical sources, vernacular literature, archaeology, and art history, and seasoning the mix with a dash of nationalism and no small amount of wishful thinking, there emerged resplendent the image of the Celt, an image fashioned by the needs and aspirations of those who created it.

When Tolkien’s lecture was published in the early 1960s, archaeologists were already beginning to feel uncomfortable with the generalized concept of Celtic society then broadly accepted, and in particular with some of the invasionist theories inherent in the traditional narrative. Indeed, some believed that the terms ‘Celt’ and ‘Celtic’ should be avoided altogether because they had led to distortions in the way the archaeological record was interpreted and presented. One writer regarded ‘the Ancient Celts of Britain and Ireland’ as a ‘bogus and recent invention’.



Behind these early Celtosceptic debates lurked an entirely different question: when and where did the Celtic language originate? The traditional view of Celtic origins was that Celtic ‘culture’ emerged in the early first millennium BC, towards the end of the Late Bronze Age, in west central Europe, the implication being that the language developed at the same time, and that it was from this homeland Celtic language and culture spread south, east, and west to encompass much of the European peninsula. In the 1990s an alternative hypothesis began to be considered: that the language developed much earlier in the Atlantic zone perhaps as a lingua franca and spread eastwards into west and central Europe during a period of mobility characterized by the Beaker phenomenon in the middle of the third millennium. The debate is still continuing and these are questions to which we will return (pp. 58–63).

The subject of the ancient Celts, then, is one that generates much lively discussion. In this chapter we will consider how the concept of the Celt has come into being and how it has changed over the last two and a half thousand years.

## Classical Sources and Archaeology

The first reference to the Celts in Europe is found in the work of the Greek geographer Hecataeus of Miletus, writing at the end of the sixth century BC. Thereafter the Celts are mentioned with increasing frequency by Greek and Roman writers. Without their descriptions and speculations our understanding of the Celts—the Iron Age communities of central and western Europe—would be very different. Alone, the mute archaeological evidence would allow us to sketch a warrior society focused in west central Europe, its aristocracy demonstrating its prowess through elaborately equipped burials. Over the period from the eighth to the fifth century different ways of displaying status were introduced. We would be able to recognize growing links with classical cultures of the western Mediterranean, reaching a new intensity in the period from the mid-sixth to the mid-fifth century BC, after which local schools of fine metalwork, using concepts and techniques learned partly from the Mediterranean world, developed to serve the elite.

The archaeological evidence would amply demonstrate the emergence of a more warlike society by the fourth century whose values and technology, reflected in the material culture recovered from cemeteries, spread across much of Europe, from northern France to Romania and from Poland to the Po valley. Towards the end of the second century and throughout the first, in the decades preceding the Roman expansion we would observe an intensification in production and exchange over much of the central area, focusing on large nucleated settlements, many of them defended, which were beginning to appear at this time.



If we stood back and took a broader geographical perspective, it would become immediately clear that at any one time there was considerable cultural variation from one area to another: we would be able to identify core zones of innovation and intensification, and peripheries in which these developments were reflected with decreasing clarity as distance from the core increased.

What we would *not* be able to appreciate with any degree of certainty is the long period of conflict between the Celtic communities of the Po valley and the Roman world; and we would be largely ignorant of the violent raids of the Celts deep into Greece in the third century BC and of the large-scale migrations of communities from the Middle Danube into the heart of Asia Minor which followed. Nor would we have in our minds visions of white-robed Druids cutting mistletoe with golden sickles when the moon was just at the right stage of its cycle, or of harsh-voiced warrior queens with waist-length golden hair, or of feasting warriors slurping their wine through drooping moustaches while boasting outrageously of their prowess. Unlike the archaeological evidence, the classical sources provide a narrative and action. They offer us a range of characters, with a large supporting cast whose achievements and failures are fascinating to follow.

While the purist archaeologist might argue that one should study the Iron Age communities of Europe only through the archaeological data since the classical sources by their inevitable partiality and deliberate manipulation distort our understanding, to reject such a rich vein of anecdote would be defeatist: it would admit to an inability to treat the written sources critically.

The Greek and Roman authors have provided us with their own vision of the Celts, a vision born of contemporary or near-contemporary experience. That vision has pervaded Celtic studies for 2,000 years and cannot be ignored.

## The Graeco-Roman Vision

Classical observers refer to the Continental Celts by a variety of names. The Roman historians writing of the migrations from north of the Alps to the Po valley and beyond called them *Galli*, and this tradition was followed by Polybius, to whom they were *Galatae*, a name also commonly used in other Greek sources. Most of the first-century BC writers, however, realized that these names were interchangeable with the Greek *Keltoi* and Latin *Celtae*. Indeed Caesar, writing of the inhabitants of central Gaul, specifically says: 'We call [them] Gauls, though in their own language they are called Celts.' The second-century AD Greek writer Pausanias also stressed that *Keltoi* was a more long-established term than *Galli*. The simplest way to explain this apparent confusion would be to accept that *Celtae/Keltoi* was the general name by which



the broad sweep of peoples stretching from north of the Alps to Iberia were known to the classical world and knew themselves, and that *Galli/Galatae* was a specific term applied to those tribes among them that chose to migrate to the south and south-east. Caesar's statement 'We call them Gauls' may be interpreted as implying that the term had a Mediterranean origin. One possibility is that it comes from an Indo-European word meaning 'stranger' or 'enemy', in which case it can hardly be an ethnonym.

Knowledge of the Celts grew slowly up to the fourth century BC. The geographer Hecataeus had access to some information about the Celts. He was aware that the Greek colony of Massalia, founded about 600 BC, lay in the land of the Ligurians near the territory of the Celts, and that the settlement of Narbo (Narbonne) was Celtic. Hecataeus thus firmly establishes the presence of Celts in southern Gaul in the late sixth century. Elsewhere he mentions Nyrax as a Celtic city. No certain identification can be offered, but Noreia in Austria has been favoured by some commentators.

Herodotus of Halicarnassus, writing in the early fifth century BC, makes reference to Celts in his *Histories*, though he admits that his information about the west is imperfect. He provides three geographical observations: that the source of the Danube is in the land of the Celts; that the river rises near the Celtic city of Pyrene; and that the Celts lived west of the 'Pillars of Hercules' (the Strait of Gibraltar) next to the Cynetoï, who were the westernmost peoples of Europe. Thus Herodotus' informants seem to have believed that there were Celts living in both south-west Iberia and middle Europe. The mention of Pyrene as being near the source of the Danube does, however, present a difficulty since it is assumed to be related geographically to the Pyrenees, some suggesting it to be the port of Emporion (Asturias). Herodotus' confused geography is unlikely to be resolved.

By the fourth century the Greeks had come to accept that the Celts occupied a large swathe of western Europe from Iberia to the Upper Danube. Ephorus (c.405–330) regarded them as one of the four great barbarian peoples of the world, along with the Scythians, Persians, and Libyans. In this he was reflecting the broad general model which helped the Greeks to explain the nature of the periphery beyond the civilized Mediterranean core. Strabo, writing more than two hundred years later, said that Ephorus believed 'Celtica' to be so large that it included most of Iberia as far west as Gadir (Cadiz).

It was during the fourth century that more detailed information about the Celtic peoples began to accumulate, when Celtic bands—settlers, raiders, and mercenaries—became involved in the politics and military affairs of the Mediterranean. Knowledge of the large-scale migration of Celts from north of the Alps to the Po valley c.400, and of subsequent raids southwards against Rome and beyond beginning in c.390, soon reached the Greek world, where Celtic warriors, along with Iberians,



began to be employed as mercenary troops in the war between the Spartans and Thebes in 367 BC. Thus, when Plato (429–347) in his *Laws* describes the Celts as warlike and hard-drinking, he may have been relying on first-hand experience rather than simply repeating a stereotype of ‘barbarians’.

Aristotle (384–322) clearly had access to a number of sources on which to base his generalized comments about Celtic peoples and he was certainly aware of the attack on Rome. For him the Celts were a hardy northern people: they exposed their children to their harsh climate with little clothing in order to toughen them, and excessive obesity among men was punished. They were warlike, ferocious, and fearless to the point of irrationality; the men took little notice of their women and rather preferred male company; and they had strict rules of hospitality, especially to strangers. A lost text, *Magicus*, sometimes ascribed to Aristotle, is said to mention the existence of Druids and holy men among the Celts and Galatae. The Aristotelian stereotype is a compound of anecdotal scraps presented within a vision of how barbarians ought to be. The balance of fact and prejudice is difficult to assess, but as noted above the range of information available from first-hand observation had greatly increased during the fourth century and it would be surprising if Aristotle had not used it with judgement and discretion.

While the intrusion of Celtic peoples into the Mediterranean world increased the familiarity of the classical world with them, expeditions, such as that undertaken by Pytheas of Massalia in c.320, will have broadened the knowledge base still further. Pytheas sailed along the Atlantic seaways in a voyage of discovery, his curiosity, no doubt, inspired by economic considerations. He describes the Armorican peninsula, which he considered to be a part of *Kelticē*, before going on to explore the coasts of Britain, perhaps even venturing still further north. For him the British Isles lay north of the land of the Celts and were known as the *Pretanic* islands. There is no suggestion that he regarded the Pretani as Celtic.

In parallel with the scientific discoveries of men like Pytheas and the philosophical considerations of Aristotle, Greek mythology expanded to take account of the Celts. According to Timaeus, they were descended either from the union of Polyphemus and Galatea or from the giant Keltos. Another version sees the Galatians as the descendants of Galatos, the son of Cyclops and Galatea. A different tradition assigns the fatherhood of Galatos or Keltos to Heracles, who, during his wanderings in the west, was seduced by Keltine, the beautiful daughter of King Bretannos. Unable to resist her charms, and to overcome her reluctance to give him back the cattle of Geryon, he felt impelled to sleep with her.

The Celts were brought into much sharper focus for the Romans and Greeks during the fourth and third centuries BC as hordes of warriors, sometimes accompanied





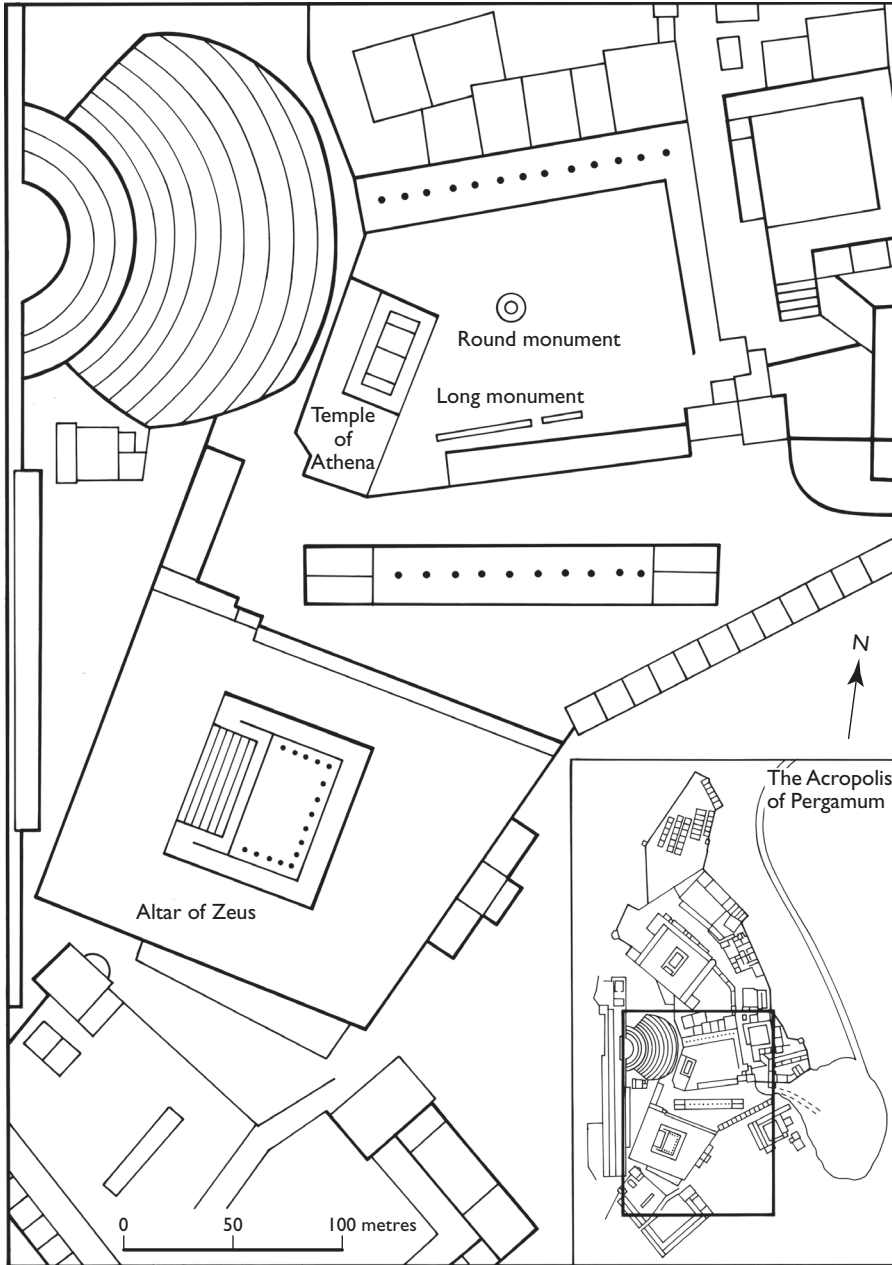
by migrating communities, thrust their way into Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor. For Rome the dangerous conflict lasted from the initial advance southwards towards Rome soon after 400 BC to the decisive battle of Telamon in 225. The Greek confrontation was shorter-lived, centring on the invasion of 280–278, which culminated in an attack on Delphi. In Asia Minor the Hellenistic and Roman armies were to confront Galatians throughout the century or so after the migration from Europe in the aftermath of their abortive Greek expedition.

It was during these two centuries that the Celtic stereotype was to acquire its familiar form. They were unrestrained, fearless warriors, irrationally brave in the first onslaught but prone to wild despair if the battle turned against them. Unpredictable and unreliable as allies, they could easily be aroused to battle fury but could quickly become too drunk or too paralysed by superstitious fear to fight. And above all they were barbarians: people of alien behaviour, cruel, and prone to such savagery as human sacrifice and even cannibalism. It is easy to see in this broad sketch—a sketch which any Greek or Roman schoolboy might have been expected to turn out—a stereotypical, almost timeless, description of ‘the enemy from without’, and yet beneath its simplistic exaggeration lie some elements of the truth learned from the bitter experience of two centuries of confrontation and conflict.

The historians of Greece and Rome, writers such as Polybius (c.204–c.122 BC), Livy (59 BC–AD 17), and Pausanias (late second century AD), were all attempting to project particular images of history. Their individual presentations of the Celt were necessarily conditioned by this, but the common thread which they wished to communicate was of their own systems triumphing over fearsome forces from without: the rational, civilized order of the state contrasted with the wild, savage chaos of the primitive barbarians. It was, therefore, the antitheses of the ideals of Graeco-Roman civilization that were emphasized in the classical accounts of the Celts. To point up the classical achievement, however, the enemy had also to be seen as a worthy opponent, fearless in battle and with a savage nobility that made his defeat the more remarkable.

These attitudes come together in the dramatic visual reality of contemporary sculpture. The violent savagery of Gauls looting a temple is brilliantly portrayed in a sculptured frieze of the second century BC from Civitalba (Ancona), but the power and nobility of the Celt is nowhere better captured than on the victory monuments erected by the Attalid kings at Pergamum and at Athens in the third and second centuries BC. The acropolis monument at Pergamum, commissioned by Attalus I in the 220s, is known to us only from later Roman marble copies: the famous Dying Gaul, a Gaulish warrior committing suicide beside his dead wife, and the head of a bearded Gaul. Together they convey the vision of an enemy one could be proud to have defeated.





1.1 The acropolis of Pergamum in western Turkey was the focus of Pergamene power in the third and second centuries BC. The two religious precincts, the temple of Athena and the altar of Zeus, were focal points for the display of sculptural compositions celebrating Pergamene victories over Celtic raiders. Through these monuments the kings of Pergamum were laying claim to be the saviours of Hellenism.





1.2 The Dying Gaul. The marble statue, now in the Capitoline Museum, Rome, is the image par excellence of Celtic nobility in battle. The naked warrior, with tousled hair and drooping moustache and wearing a neck torc, reclines bleeding on his shield, his discarded sword nearby. The statue is generally considered to be a copy of an original which adorned the monument erected in Pergamum by Attalus I after 228 BC and is thus a reliable representation of the Celts of Asia Minor in the late third century BC.

The Pergamene kingdom as the saviour of Hellenism is the theme displayed in an even more dramatic form in a victory monument erected on the acropolis of Athens after the final defeat of the Gauls between 168 and 166 BC. Here, according to Pausanias, the Pergamene defeat of the Gauls in Asia Minor was presented in parallel with the Greek victory over the Persians at Marathon and both were balanced with mythological battles, the Greeks against the Amazons and the ancestors of the Pergamenes against the Giants. The claim of the Attalids was, thus, blatant: they, like the Greeks, have throughout time been the saviours of civilization against the external forces of chaos and destruction. The allusion was already there in the *Hymn to Delos*, written by Callimachus, who lived at the time of the Celtic attack on Delphi, in which the Celts are likened to 'Latter-day Titans'. Of the many Gauls who would have been depicted among the hundred or so statues that formed the monument, five survive in Roman marble copies (one in the Louvre in Paris, one in Naples, and three in Venice); all are portrayed at their moment of defeat as cowed by the might of their conquerors. A similar mes-

sage was conveyed by the great frieze carved around the outside of the altar of Zeus at Pergamum showing Zeus and Athena defeating the Giants while the Attalids defeat the Gauls. Here again the Pergamene rulers are claiming to be the heroes who saved the civilized world.

In these remarkable survivals, the classical vision of the Celts as it was perceived by those with the power to purvey their own version of history and its messages stands out in sharp focus. Once created it has remained in the consciousness of all subsequent observers.

With the threat of the Celts as a force for destruction receding in the second century, a somewhat different metaphor began to develop. The most informative source is the work of Poseidonius (c.135–c.50 BC), a Syrian Greek from Apamea. Poseidonius wrote a series of *Histories* in fifty-two books, beginning his narrative in the mid-second century to follow on from the *Histories* of Polybius. Book 23 contained an ethnographical introduction about the Celts as a background to the Roman conquest of Transalpine Gaul completed in 121 BC. For this he had access to a variety of earlier sources augmented by his own travels in Gaul. The information at his disposal, then, comprised much anecdotal material reflecting earlier times which he was able to present alongside his own more systematic observations. The *Histories* are no longer extant but were extensively used, sometimes with direct acknowledgement, by three later writers, Strabo (c.64 BC–AD 21), Diodorus Siculus (who wrote c.60–30 BC), and Athenaeus (c. AD 200), and they may also have been used by Julius Caesar as a source for the ethnographic descriptions in his Book 6 of the *Gallic War*. Poseidonius was a Stoic philosopher, and, as Athenaeus tells us, in describing the customs of many peoples he composed his work ‘in accordance with his philosophical convictions’. In essence Poseidonius believed that contemporary barbarian peoples reflected a condition closer to the Golden Age than civilized societies, and that in that Golden Age people were ruled by the wise. To this extent his account of the Celts has something of a rosy glow about it. Thus he approves of their bravery and of their honouring of the brave, and comments favourably upon their hospitality to strangers.



1.3 A Celtic warrior committing suicide in defeat by the body of his dead wife. The group, now in the Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Altemps, is probably a marble copy of an original which once adorned the Temple of Athena Nikephoros at Pergamum commissioned by Attalus I at the end of the third century BC.

