

## Summary 14: The Nation which Never Was

Early humans first came to Scotland probably around 8,500 BC. There is evidence they used boats for fishing and had tools of bone, stone and antler while their diet included shell-fish, fish and deer; they also made beads from sea-shells, used ochre pigment and produced a purple dye from a certain shellfish. Of course, farming and the Neolithic came to Scotland later than in the warmer south, but it is important to realise that this involved a flourishing and relatively sophisticated culture. By far the best-known of all the Neolithic settlements is on Orkney at Skara Brae which was occupied from 3,000 – 2,500 BC. And, as in Portugal, Galicia and elsewhere in this Atlantic region, there was also an extensive megalithic culture — eg, the standing stones at Callanish on Lewis. The megalithic culture overlapped with the Bronze Age which, in Scotland, meant the building of defensive structures such as brochs, duns, hill forts and crannogs. The Iron Age emerged around 700 BC and extended into Roman times. Those last centuries before the Roman occupation were characterised by the rise of petty kingdoms and consequent internecine quarrelling and skirmishing if not always outright warfare. It was at this time, probably around 1,000 – 700 BC, that the Brythonic Celtic culture and language appeared in Scotland at this, the northern-most extremity of what Peter Berresford Ellis, tongue-in-cheek, chose to call *The Celtic Empire*. This however bore no resemblance to the Roman or other empires as we know them. Nonetheless, the Celtic culture expanded throughout a large part of Europe, either by diffusion or — because the Celts were always at war with one another — by conquest.

In 1846 a prehistoric cemetery was found and later excavated at Halstatt in Austria which contained grave goods of a previously unknown kind, including daggers, brooches, iron and bronze swords and pottery. Near the end of the period, high status chariot burials in *tumuli* became fashionable. The site had been occupied from ~1200 to ~500 BC. In 1857 a related Celtic culture was discovered at La Tène in Switzerland. It is the La Tène culture which we recognise as "Celtic", those wonderfully intricate spirals and interlaced figures applied to shields, brooches, horse trappings and the huge cauldrons used in the frequent drinking festivities. Among the most familiar La Tène artifacts was the heavy gold or bronze *torc* worn around the neck. By the mid-La Tène period, towns — or *oppida* — had developed, built of wooden, not masonry houses. These people also dug pits, ritual shafts, into which votive offerings, including human sacrifices were thrown. To an extent they were also head-hunters. As in Halstatt, weapons and carts, drinking cauldrons and even domestic wares were buried along with the dead, indicating that they had a strong belief in some kind of after-life.

Until late last century Halstatt and La Tène were considered to be the homelands of the Celts. But were they? The answer seems to be that they were undoubtedly important centres of Celtic culture, but apparently they were not the homeland of the original Celts. This long-held belief among historians seems to rest on a mistake made by Herodotus who described the Celts and their homeland "on the Danube" fairly accurately but mistakenly believed the Danube rose in the Pyrenees! Later historians perpetuated the error of the Master even despite Julius Caesar's statement that the River Garonne separated the Celts from the Aquitani and the Marne and Seine separated them from the Belgae, thus placing them in southern France.

After the sack of Rome in 387 BC by the great Celtic army led by Ambicatus, the Romans hated and feared the Celts and many generals — including the Divine Julius — and future Emperors made their reputation fighting campaigns to eradicate them. The Celts however suffered from a serious fault in that the tribes were unable to forge lasting alliances among themselves and combine forces to defend their territories against the Romans. Effectively, Rome destroyed

Celtic power in Europe and weakened the culture because the people were gradually adopting Roman ways, including the use of Latin and after 380, the new official Roman religion, Christianity.

**Who then were the Celts in Britain?** Despite the long-held belief that the "Celticisation" of Britain was the result of invasion and conquest, it is now known to have been a gradual process of cultural diffusion from the Continent, probably by a mixture of what Professor Zvelebil classified as elite dominance, infiltration, frontier mobility and regional contact, and most of that was almost certainly one way or another as a result of trade. The "Celts" of Britain had always been there, they were the indigenous Britons who had adopted a Celtic language and Celtic culture perhaps only 1000 years before the Roman occupation. Whether they were Mesolithic hunter-gatherers come to Britain during the brief spring between the LGM and the Younger Dryas, Neolithic farmers, megalith builders or crannog dwellers living over the cold waters of a Loch, they were the same people, give or take a few visitors who came and left their genes behind. Despite actual invasions by Angles, Saxons, Jutes and of course the Norse Vikings and Normans, the people of Britain remain more than 80% genetically the descendants of their aboriginal ancestors.

There is a sharp dividing line between the Y-chromosome DNA of the Celtic-speakers of Ireland, Wales, Scotland and western Iberia (Portugal and Galicia) and the English and other Germanic speakers to their east. This has remained constant ever since northern Europe was resettled at the end of the LGM. Modern historians set aside these Atlantic seaboard Celts whom they call "*Insula Celts*" from other Celtic peoples of continental Europe. Indeed, there seems to be a sense emerging in the history books that these people were of far greater significance than previously thought. A latter-day revisionist view proposed by Professor Barry Cunliffe of Oxford University, and one of the reigning experts on the Celts, is that the Celtic languages spread not from east to west but in the reverse direction, from west to east, this expansion *originally propelled by the enormous prestige of the navigators and astronomer-priests who carried the megalithic culture of Ireland to England, France and southern Germany a couple of thousand years before the Celts' final brief period of military dominance. If this theory is correct, then the Celtic homeland must have been in precisely the areas around the Irish Sea where Celtic languages are still spoken today.*

One interesting source of support for this rather radical theory comes from what is called *Old European hydronymy*, that is the study of river names. This indicates (according to Panshin) that the .....*original Celtic homeland has to have been located in the west of the Iberian peninsula, the source of those seafarers who settled Ireland at the tail end of the Ice Age. Irish DNA gives powerful testimony to this — it is almost identical to that of the Basques, who would have been their immediate neighbours before the northward migration.* She adds that there is further evidence in support of this theory in an obscure Indo-European language called *Lusitanian* which could well be a survivor of proto-Celtic which otherwise disappeared at the end of the LGM. And so, maintains Panhsin in what for us, is her final word:

*With the relocation of the Celtic homeland to the Atlantic fringe, the linguistic map of western Europe falls neatly into place. Proto-Germanic was the language of those late Magdalenian reindeer Hunters who migrated from southern France to England, Germany, and Denmark around 16,000-13,000 BP. Proto-Celtic was the language of the Iberian seafarers who set out for the north about 10,000 BP. And proto-Italic was the language of the people who lived in central Italy both during and after the late Ice Age and didn't go anywhere at all.*