



Iron Age Teachers' Pack Text

BACKGROUND NOTES

THE IRON AGE CELTS

From the building of hillforts and the first use of iron, to tribal resistance and Roman conquest, the Celtic Iron Age in Wales (750BC-AD50) is a fascinating time of human change and development.

We can learn about the customs, beliefs and organisation of early Celtic societies by looking for the remains they left behind. Archaeologists try to fit together the fragments of ancient human evidence, discovered during survey and excavation, or as chance finds. Whether looking at the 'left-overs' from a feast, or the ruins of a settlement, each clue adds to a bigger picture of what it was like to live during the Iron Age.

WHO WERE THE EARLIEST CELTS?

The earliest written references to the Celts were made by the Greek writers Hecataeus and Herodotus, during the sixth and fifth centuries BC (600-400BC). The Greeks named them *Keltoi* or *Galatae*, and to the Romans they were known as the *Celtae* and *Galli* (or Gauls). To those living in the Classical Mediterranean world they were considered as alien and barbarian people who lived north of the Alps.

We do not know what the Celts called themselves. This pre-Christian Celtic world might best be viewed as a loose mosaic of chiefdoms and societies, and not as an empire or nation. Within them a range of related Celtic languages and dialects were spoken.

Soon after 400BC, classical writers record a large-scale migration of Celts from central Europe across the Alps into northern Italy and into eastern Europe. Rome was attacked during the 380sBC. The geographer Strabo recorded a friendly meeting between Celts and Alexander the Great in the Balkans in 335BC, whilst in 279BC the Celts are known to have looted the sacred Greek site at Delphi.

DID THE CELTS WRITE?

A few stone inscriptions survive from Italy and Spain of Iron Age Celts but there are no examples from Britain. Here word of mouth and memory were societies' means of recording events.

There has been a tendency to use Early Medieval texts from Wales and Ireland, for example the Mabinogi, as reflecting life at this time. However these literary sources were written over a thousand years later than the Iron Age. Story-telling remained a means of maintaining folk memory, but society and religions had changed dramatically during this time.

WHAT DID THE ROMANS TELL US ABOUT WALES AND BRITAIN?

With the expansion of the Roman world into western Europe, written histories and geographies record the customs and organisation of the native peoples'. Many of our ideas about the Celts derive from Julius Caesar's accounts of his conquest of Gaul.

The classical writers never referred to the peoples of Britain as either Celts or Gauls, instead they were named in relation to tribes, leaders and the geography of the islands. What we know as Wales today was, according to Roman sources, inhabited by at least four tribal peoples by the time of the invasion (AD43-70): the *Ordovices* (north-west), the *Deceangli* (north-east), the *Demetae* (south-west) and the *Silures* (south-east).

SHOULD WE USE THE TERM 'CELTS'?

Recently some academics, notably Simon James and John Collis, have challenged the use of the term 'Celtic'. They draw attention to the limited reference by classical writers to the Celts.

During the first Celtic revival in the seventeenth century, the word was used to define the Celtic family of languages. Linguists identify two families of Celtic languages: Q-Celtic or Goidelic (Irish, Scots Gaelic and Manx) and P-Celtic or Brythonic (Welsh, Breton and Cornish). In the past, it was believed that each language family represented a wave of Celtic migrants moving from central Europe into Britain and Ireland. This theory has now been superseded. One idea is that the Celtic languages evolved gradually across a large area, rather than rapidly originating from a single source. The Celtic language family is only one of the Indo-European language group, which has evolved since early prehistory.

The idea of a pan-European 'Celtic Society' and belief system prior to Roman conquest, is now seen as over simplistic and inaccurate. Instead the archaeological evidence shows strong regional contrasts, which suggests a mosaic of diverse societies across Europe. Each had its own beliefs and customs. Reading the past in this way celebrates the interpretation of societies as being diverse and dynamic.

CAN WE IDENTIFY THE CELTS THROUGH THEIR ART?

Celtic art, also known as La Tène art, appears as an art-style in Switzerland, Austria, southern Germany and eastern France during the fifth century BC. This style was different from that of the Mediterranean world. Greek and Roman patterns were often borrowed. Most of the decorative pieces that are preserved are high status display objects and warrior equipment. The art appears in stone, metal, pottery, wood and glass. By 200BC the British Isles were developing their own distinctive styles.

Archaeologists studying Celtic art question its meaning. The art has often been used to suggest a pan-European 'Celtic Society' with common religious belief and language. A shared art form need not reflect a single ethnic identity. Celtic art may have been a fashion statement that swept across the continent.

HOW DO ARCHAEOLOGISTS DATE THE CELTIC IRON AGE?

The name 'Iron Age' derives from the discovery and use of a new metal technology: iron. In Wales, the earliest iron objects (750BC) come from the Llyn Fawr, Rhondda Cynon Taf, hoard. They include a sickle, a sword and a spear. The end of the Iron Age in Wales is marked by the arrival of the Romans (AD 43 onwards).

Archaeologists employ a range of dating techniques. By carefully removing soil on ancient sites, layer by layer, keeping records of what they see, it is possible to build up a history of events. By comparing objects such as pottery and metal work, found in the different layers, a sequence of changing styles emerges. Where organic materials survive, samples can be taken to be radiocarbon dated. This gives a third dimension to the dating process. Historical sources, most of which were written by the Romans with their own interpretations and biases, are rare at this time in Wales.