

Who were the Celts?

The Celts were a group of peoples that occupied lands stretching from the British Isles to Galatia. The Celts had many dealings with other cultures that bordered the lands occupied by these peoples, and even though there is no written record of the Celts stemming from their own documents, we can piece together a fair picture of them from archeological evidence as well as historical accounts from other cultures.

The first historical recorded encounter of a people displaying the cultural traits associated with the Celts comes from northern Italy around 400 BC, when a previously unknown group of *barbarians* came down from the Alps and displaced the Etruscans from the fertile Po valley, a displacement that helped to push the Etruscans from history's limelight. The next encounter with the Celts came with the still young Roman Empire, directly to the south of the Po. The Romans in fact had sent three envoys to the besieged Etruscans to study this new force. We know from Livy's *The Early History of Rome* that this first encounter with Rome was quite civilized:

“[The Celts told the Roman envoys that] this was indeed the first time they had heard of them, but they assumed the Romans must be a courageous people because it was to them that the [Etruscans] had turned to in their hour of need. And since the Romans had tried to help with an embassy and not with arms, they themselves would not reject the offer of peace, provided the [Etruscans] ceded part of their superfluous agricultural land; that was what they, the Celts, wanted.... If it were not given, they would launch an attack before the Romans' eyes, so that the Romans could report back how superior the Gauls were in battle to all others....The Romans then asked whether it was right to demand land from its owners on pain of war, indeed what were the Celts doing in Etruria in the first place? The latter defiantly retorted that their right lay in their arms: To the brave belong all things.”

The Roman envoys then preceded to break their good faith and helped the Etruscans in their fight; in fact, one of the envoys, *Quintus Fabius* killed one of the Celtic tribal leaders. The Celts then sent their own envoys to Rome in protest and demanded the Romans hand over all members of the Fabian family, to which all three of the original Roman envoys belonged, to the Celts, a move completely in line with current Roman protocol. This of course presented problems for the Roman senate, since the Fabian family was quite powerful in Rome. Indeed, Livy says that:

“The party structure would allow no resolution to be made against such noblemen as justice would have required. The Senate...therefore passed examination of the Celts' request to the popular assembly, in which power and influence naturally counted for more. So it happened that those who ought to have been punished were instead appointed for the coming year military tribunes with consular powers (the highest that could be granted).”

The Celts saw this as a mortal insult and a host marched south to Rome. The Celts tore through the countryside and several battalions of Roman soldiers to lay siege to the Capitol of the Roman

Empire. Seven months of siege led to negotiations whereby the Celts promised to leave their siege for a tribute of one thousand pounds of gold, which the historian *Pliny* tells was very difficult for the entire city to muster. When the gold was being weighed, the Romans claimed the Celts were cheating with faulty weights. It was then that the Celts' leader, *Brennus*, threw his sword into the balance and uttered the words *vae victis* "woe to the Defeated". Rome never withstood another more humiliating defeat and the Celts made an initial step of magnificent proportions into history.

Other Roman historians tell us more of the Celts. *Diodorus* notes that:

"Their aspect is terrifying...They are very tall in stature, with rippling muscles under clear white skin. Their hair is blond, but not naturally so: they bleach it, to this day, artificially, washing it in lime and combing it back from their foreheads. They look like wood-demons, their hair thick and shaggy like a horse's mane. Some of them are clean-shaven, but others - especially those of high rank, shave their cheeks but leave a moustache that covers the whole mouth and, when they eat and drink, acts like a sieve, trapping particles of food...The way they dress is astonishing: they wear brightly coloured and embroidered shirts, with trousers called bracae and cloaks fastened at the shoulder with a brooch, heavy in winter, light in summer. These cloaks are striped or checkered in design, with the separate checks close together and in various colours."

"[The Celts] wear bronze helmets with figures picked out on them, even horns, which made them look even taller than they already are...while others cover themselves with breast-armor made out of chains. But most content themselves with the weapons nature gave them: they go naked into battle...Weird, discordant horns were sounded, [they shouted in chorus with their] deep and harsh voices, they beat their swords rhythmically against their shields."

Diodorus also describes how the Celts cut off their enemies' heads and nailed them over the doors of their huts, as Diodorus states:

"In exactly the same way as hunters do with their skulls of the animals they have slain...they preserved the heads of their most high-ranking victims in cedar oil, keeping them carefully in wooden boxes."

Diodorus Siculus, History.