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Revisiting the achievements of the Ancient Celts : evidence that the Celtic civilization surpassed contemporary European civilizations in its technical sophistication and social complexity, and continues to influence later cultures.

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A Lost Civilization as Great as Any

Scholars traditionally associate the advancement of Western culture from antiquity to the Renaissance with the innovations of the Romans and their Mediterranean cultural predecessors, the Greeks and Etruscans, to the extent that the word "civilization" often seems synonymous with Romanization. In doing so, historians unfairly discount the cultural achievements of other Indo-European peoples who achieved civilization in their own right and contributed much to ancient and modern life. One such people were the Celts, whose dominance in culture, politics, and trade once extended over a territory far larger than that of the later Roman empire, and whose legacy remains most intact in the Britannic archipelago – particularly on the island of Ireland, where the island's relative isolation from the cultural upheavals of continental Europe during and after the Roman period allowed the continued flourishing of Celtic culture. The modern world has inherited many Roman misconceptions of Celtic culture that cause its inhabitants to view the Celts as mystical barbarians valuable for little more than their art, but this is not the case. Ireland and other sites in Europe that preserve Celtic patrimony offer evidence of the Celts as an ancient civilization that possessed a unique and highly developed perspective on the natural and supernatural framework of existence, and which in many ways surpassed the scientific and artistic accomplishments of the Roman empire. This thesis will demonstrate that although their legacy is often misrepresented or even ignored by historians (who thus far have yet to compile an exhaustive or comprehensive investigation of Celtic achievement throughout history, and who often approach the subject with a Roman-inherited, anti-Celtic bias), the Celts created one of the greatest civilizations in Ancient Europe, a surprisingly modern society that at its height bested all of its European contemporaries (including the Romans) in technical achievement and sociological complexity, and pioneered innovations in social progress such as

social mobility, gender equality, and environmentalism to a degree unparalleled even in modern Western society.

The Ancient Legacy

Although the Irish eventually became the stewards of the remnants of Greco-Roman culture, their own cultural heritage is no less impressive than the one they inherited from southern Europe, and influenced the evolution of the modern world in ways that few moderns appreciate. In fact, the Celts were, by most modern measures, far more culturally sophisticated than the contemporary Romans or Greeks, as will be discussed.

In addition to a genetic inheritance that features in the ancestry of many modern people of European descent, the Celts provided a wealth of cultural traditions and technical innovations – many of which have been erroneously attributed to later cultures. It was the Celts who created the first chainmail¹, devised a calendar far surpassing the Julian or Gregorian in accuracy², and excelled all of their contemporaries in the prediction of solar and lunar eclipses. More impressively, they refined the art of blacksmithing to a degree unrivaled by any predecessor culture³, paved the first roads in Europe⁴, and devised social and cosmological systems that exceed those of the most celebrated world cultures in their intricacy.

Who Were the Celts?

In proving the cultural relevance of the Celts, it is important to specify to whom the term refers. The Celts are an Indo-European people who became culturally distinct from other Caucasian ethnic groups around 1200 BC.⁵ The first discernibly Celtic culture in the archeological record is that of the Hallstatt people – a group of tribes that lived in Germany from around 1000 to 600 BC (the Hallstatt period in Celtic history).⁶ The Hallstatt Celts were

characterized by their brightly colored clothing, skillfully crafted weapons, and iron-wrought vessels and utensils, all of which would be hallmarks of later Celtic cultures⁷. The Hallstatt people were also remarkable for burying their dead in ornate tombs, thereby distinguishing themselves from their Germanic neighbors who preferred cremation⁸. The Hallstatt period lasted for some four centuries, during which time the Celtic population increased rapidly.⁹ This population boom provided an impetus for the Celts to venture beyond their central German homeland to seek out new farmland, and engage in trade with neighboring peoples to fuel their growing economy. The first foreigners with whom the Celts engaged in regular trade were Greek merchants, who were highly impressed not only by the quality of Celtic textiles and metal working, but by the size and strength of its purveyors. At an average of between five-and-a-half and six feet in height, the Celts dwarfed their diminutive Mediterranean trading partners, who at that time rarely grew taller than five feet.¹⁰ Of particular interest to the Greeks was the pale complexion and fair hair of the Celts, which seemed strange to the bronze-skinned merchants who had never seen blondes or red-heads.¹¹ Some scholars claim that it was because of their relative pallor that the Greeks called the Celts *Galatai* or “milk-white”,¹² the name by which they would become known throughout the ancient world. One might also argue that *Galatai* is a corruption of a name by which the Celts called themselves, based on the Old Gaelic word *Goidel* (which gave rise to the word *Gael*).¹³ *Keltoi*, the Greek word from which “Celt” is derived,¹⁴ is thought to come from an ancient Celtic word meaning “hidden”,¹⁵ referring to the centuries the Celts spent in relative isolation from other peoples before participating in trade. The same word is thought to be the ancestor of the word “kilt”,¹⁶ the function of which, then as now, was to hide certain parts of the wearer from the weather and the viewing public. At the close of the Hallstatt period in around 600 BC, the Celts occupied much of the land that now belongs to Germany and

France,¹⁷ and were known throughout Europe for the skill of their craftsmen. Significantly, the Hallstatt Celts were the first culture in Europe to independently develop iron metallurgy,¹⁸ and used the new invention to deadly effect.

The next cultural epoch in Celtic history, from 500 BC to 100 AD, is called the La Tène period,¹⁹ wherein the Celts perfected the distinctive curvilinear design techniques that they would later apply to the arts of metal working, weaving, and painting; these were the basis for the classic Celtic vines, knots and mandalas with which Celtic art is associated to the present day. It was during this period that the Celts used their advanced iron weapons to effectively conquer and dominate almost the whole of Europe, forming a Celtic dominion that stretched East to West from Asia Minor to Portugal, and North to South from the British Isles to the Po Valley of Italy.²⁰ Celtic dominance in politics, religion, and trade throughout Europe lasted until the Roman conquest of Gaul by Julius Caesar in the 1st Century BC²¹, after which Celtic influence remained strong, albeit without the former accompaniment of sovereign power.

As they expanded across Europe, the early Celts of the La Tène period became divided into various kingdoms, each of which comprised a tribe or group of tribes.²² Initially, all of the Celtic communities shared a common language,²³ but the political de-unification that accompanied the expansion of Celtic territory in the LaTène period caused the gradual evolution of that language, dubbed proto-Celtic by linguists²⁴, into distinct descendent languages. Scholars cannot discern at what point in history these languages became mutually unintelligible, but it is suspected that there was a high degree of intercommunication between politically distinct Celtic nations as late as the Roman conquest of Gaul.²⁵

Road Builders

Evidence for relative linguistic unity among the Celts until the Roman conquest comes in the form of a technological achievement often mistakenly attributed to Rome: the paved road. Although it is widely believed that most of Europe had no roadways more advanced than hunting trails and cattle paths until the Pax Romana, archeological evidence suggests otherwise. In reality, systems of timbered roads connected the Celtic world by the 2nd Century BC, and perhaps earlier.²⁶ The remains of these Celtic highways are best preserved in the areas in which they forded beat bogs, as the anaerobic bacteria within the bogs cannot easily digest cellulose, and thus did not cause the logs composing the road surface to decay when they sank into the bogs over centuries of disuse in the Roman and Medieval eras.²⁷ The vast extent of the roads is attested by records that show the widespread use of heavy, wheeled vehicles such as wagons and war chariots throughout the Celtic world well prior to the construction of Roman roads anywhere in Europe. The Romans constructed their first paved roads during the reign of the dictator Appius Claudius in the year 312 BC, but an invasion of the Italian peninsula by Celts equipped with wagons and war chariots occurred almost a century earlier, proving that the Celts had the necessary infrastructure to enable the use of such vehicles well before the Romans.²⁸ Moreover, the invading Celts would have almost certainly required a network of paved roads to mount their Italian offensive, and in consideration of the conspicuous absence of other roads, one must conclude that the Celts built the roads for themselves. In constructing their own roads decades later, the Romans might well have been inspired to appropriate and improve on the Celtic model that had been employed so effectively against them. Here, it would seem, the Romans themselves tacitly conceded Celtic infrastructural superiority; there is, as the saying goes, no higher compliment than imitation.

The Celts paved roads not only in the vicinity of Rome, but throughout Europe. At least four Celtic timbered highway systems are known to have existed, as archeological examples have been uncovered in Ireland, Britain, Continental Europe (specifically in modern-day Germany), and in former Gallia Cisalpina (in the Po Valley of what is now Italy).²⁹ Remarkably, the archeological remnants of Celtic roads throughout Europe display not only the same materials and methods of construction, but an almost identical gauge,³⁰ indicating that the design and maintenance of the roads was uniform wherever the Celts held sway. This innovation was remarkably forward-thinking, especially in consideration of the fact that American railroads (an infrastructural system undeniably more recent and ostensibly more advanced than any ancient predecessor) had no standard gauge until after the American Civil War. The adoption of a standard road gauge throughout Celtic hegemony would have served two purposes, assuring both the potential interconnectivity of roads built in different Celtic kingdoms, and the accommodation in those kingdoms of every wheeled vehicle, whether merchant or martial, that did not exceed the roads' gauge. An infrastructure operating on such a vast scale and at so sophisticated a level of coordination indicates that its designers belonged to a people united by more than ethnicity and religion. The Celts of the La Tène period most definitely communicated routinely and effectively (either via undifferentiated Proto-Celtic or a Celtic lingua franca developed through trade), and their infrastructural capability far surpassed that of their non-road-building contemporaries.

The linguistic and infrastructural interconnectedness of polities across the Celtic world indicates a tremendous degree of pan-Celtic cultural solidarity. This not only disproves the traditional view of the Celts as a cabal of disparate barbarian tribes, but makes them the authors of an achievement unmatched until the modern era: the integration of a politically divided

Europe. Although the Romans constructed a uniform system of European roads, they were aided in their efforts by the stability and single-mindedness of government under the Pax Romana. The Celts, in building their highway system, faced the far more complicated task of connecting and standardizing roads over a similar geographical area, but without a the organizational oversight of a central government, requiring the collaboration of perhaps hundreds of independent Celtic kingdoms. This impressive achievement had no precedent, and was not duplicated again until the 20th century. It strongly attests a high degree of cultural homogeneity throughout Celtic hegemony.

As time progressed, the Celtic population did undergo significant cultural shift, but primarily (if not exclusively) as a result of the Roman invasions of Gaul and Britain. Celts within Roman territories could no longer freely associate with unconquered Celts in other regions, and felt compelled by Roman authorities to abandon Celtic customs in favor of Roman ones. The Celtic language (once more-or-less universal to all Celts, or at least not so greatly differentiated as to be unintelligible between Celtic groups, as earlier discussed) became divided into three parts (each of which eventually subdivided into other regional dialects), and was no longer mutually intelligible throughout the extent of the Celtic world.³¹ Continental Celtic, spoken in mainland Europe, became extinct shortly after the Roman invasions.³² Because it had no time to evolve in isolation from the other Celtic languages before being supplanted by Latin, linguists believe that it more closely resembled Proto-Celtic than the other Celtic successor languages.³³ The second branch, Brythonic – which was spoken in Britain – eventually sired the modern languages Welsh, Cornish, and Breton.³⁴ The third branch, Goidelic – spoken in Ireland – evolved into Manx, Irish and Scottish Gaelic,³⁵ only the latter two of which survive today. Although the Brythonic and Goidelic languages may have prominently displayed many loan-

words and pronunciation tendencies of the pre-Celtic inhabitants of Britain and Ireland even before the defeat of Gaul (since Celtic culture in the Britannic archipelago grew from trade and cultural exchange with the continent rather than a Celtic genetic lineage or large-scale Celtic invasion of the isles),³⁶ they bore many more similarities to Continental Celtic at the time of the Caesarian invasion than they do today. Nevertheless, they evolved rapidly when the Continental Celts were Romanized. Brythonic was further hastened in its mutation by the influx of Latin words that occurred with the conquest of Britain in the 1st century BC.³⁷ Ultimately, the Roman invasions drew the La Tène period swiftly to a close, and marked the beginning of a gradual descent from the zenith of Celtic political power. The disintegration of Celtic linguistic unity boded ill for the future of Celtic culture. An all-Celtic European cultural block has not existed since, and this fracture meant a marked reduction in the exchange of goods and ideas among Celtic nations, and a corresponding decline in Celtic cultural achievement. The Celts would continue their tradition of innovation even after the Roman onslaught (especially in Ireland, where Roman impact was minimal), but the golden age had undeniably come to an end.

A Complex Society

One eventual casualty of the Roman advance was the traditional Celtic social structure. While the Ancient Celts might not have been divided by language prior to Roman expansion, they were definitely divided by class. Contrary to the popular notion of the Celts as socially anarchical barbarians, they actually maintained a highly complex system of rank based on birth, occupation, and merit.³⁸ The Celts divided their society into castes that functioned very similarly to those in Hindu Society, demonstrating the shared Indo-European roots of the two cultures. At the bottom of the social pyramid (analogous to the Hindu *sudra* and *vaishya*) were the farmers, laborers, and craftsmen, or *Ceile*³⁹ (as they were called in Irish – the name of the caste in other

Celtic languages is not known, although its existence throughout the Celtic world in the Pre-Roman era is attested by Greek and Roman records).⁴⁰ Although they occupied the lowest rung of freemen on the social ladder, the *Ceile* were relatively well respected by the other castes. The Brehon laws (an Irish law code recorded in the 5th century AD but predating the widespread Christianization of Ireland)⁴¹ enumerates rights and privileges for the *Ceile* that closely resemble those of their social betters. The Celts were essentially an agrarian society, and recognized their dependence on the land and the farmers who tilled it. Similarly valuable were the smiths who crafted the weapons necessary for the conquest and defense of new lands. Once again, the Celts were ahead of their time. No contemporary culture neighboring the Celts had a similar respect for its lower classes, and no European culture would again until the Renaissance.

The next caste, the *flaith* or *aire* were warrior-nobles, and could be compared to the Hindu *kshatriya*.⁴² They were responsible for waging the frequent wars that occurred between Celtic principalities and their neighbors. The Celtic fondness for battle, and the skill with which they expressed that fondness, was legendary among their contemporaries, and engendered fear in even the bravest enemy soldiers. For all that the Romans may have been the best tacticians of the ancient world, they were not always considered its best fighters; even after the Roman conquest of Gaul, the Romans themselves often accorded that distinction to the Celts.⁴³ Roman reverence for Celtic battle prowess – like Roman irreverence for most other aspects of Celtic culture – owes much to the fact that the Celts once sacked Rome.

Iron Weapons, Female Military Service, and the Celtic Sack of Rome

In the summer of 390 BC, a Celtic tribe from southern Gaul (modern-day France) called the Senones entered the Po Valley and encamped outside the Roman-controlled Etruscan city of

Clusium, where they proposed to begin negotiations for the sale of land.⁴⁴ However, the citizens of Clusium mistrusted the warlike and numerous Celtic immigrants, and requested diplomatic assistance from Rome.⁴⁵ Instead of negotiating, however, the summoned Roman envoys joined Clusium's citizens in launching an attack on the Senones, killing one of their chiefs.⁴⁶ The murder outraged the Celts, who had sworn along with the Romans that no one would be harmed during negotiations.⁴⁷ This shows an instance in which the Celts, contradicting their Roman-ascribed stereotype of untrustworthiness, honored a legal contract that Romans themselves violated. Adding insult to injury, the Romans celebrated the assassination of the Celtic land negotiator as triumph, and appointed the three murderous ambassadors tribunes of Rome.⁴⁸ Brennus, the high king of the Senones, then ordered his people to leave Clusium, but only so that he could lay siege to Rome. On the seventy-mile march from Clusium to Rome, the Celts harmed no one, assuring the Italian natives that the Senones' quarrel was with only the Romans.⁴⁹ This further demonstrates the Celtic respect for international law. In modern terms, their expedition was a military action against a rogue state in retaliation for a flagrant violation of international law. This action might bear semblance to the international relations strategy of a modern Western nation, but predates even the Punic Wars. Even more striking is the Celts' supreme respect for civilians and non-combatants thousands of years before the signing of the Geneva Convention, in an era when the wanton rape and slaughter of enemy peoples (armed or unarmed) was the almost universal norm.

Just as their behavior before the battle unequivocally proved the Celts' formidable diplomatic acumen and honorable wartime conduct, the Senones' behavior during the battle illustrated their tremendous battle prowess. At the subsequent battle of Allia, the Roman army suffered a crushing defeat in the field, lost any semblance of discipline, and fled back to the city

in a total rout, hotly pursued by the Gauls.⁵⁰ The poor defense on part of the Romans had to do with several factors, the first being inferior training. The Celts, a martial people, prided themselves on their ferocity in battle.⁵¹ They also came equipped with sophisticated iron weapons and defensive implements, such as iron-studded shields, chainmail, double-bladed axes, iron-headed spears, and double-edged short swords.⁵² By contrast, Roman citizens in the early days of the Roman Republic had no standing army, and practiced war as a voluntary activity when their services were requested by the Senate.⁵³ Although the patricians received some military training as part of their education, the plebeians (who constituted the bulk of the volunteer army) were deliberately discouraged from learning warcraft – probably so that they would be less militarily capable in the event of an armed insurrection against the ruling classes.⁵⁴ The Celts had no such liability, as potential for mobility between the social classes in Celtic society reduced intra-societal tension beyond the need of disarming the populace.

Further dooming the Roman cause was the general belief in the incapacity of women to wage war. The Celts famously encouraged women of the *flaith* to engage in combat, according them the same rights and privileges as male warriors. The Celts were the only civilization of European antiquity that widely endorsed the practice of female militarism. Scholars have reached no consensus as to why, but theories abound. The massive population boom at the beginning of the La Tène period provides one plausible explanation: as the Celts expanded, encountering new and hostile peoples in their occupation of new territory, it was likely necessary for all members of the community to engage in the tribes' defense. Even as the Celts came to dominate their neighboring ethnic groups, the martial character of Celtic women could have vestigially endured. Then again, the Celts – like many forward-thinking military strategists today – might simply have calculated that women are roughly as capable of performing the duties requisite of military

service as are men, and demanded military service of all their people accordingly. More likely, the accommodation of female military participation was the natural evolution of the abiding respect for sexual equality that pervaded Celtic culture, as will be later discussed. Whatever the cause, the spectacular gender-inclusivity of the Celtic army exceeded even the military of the modern United States in the scope of its provision for sexual equality, much to the dismay of the Romans. Female warriors gave the Senones a decided advantage on the battlefield, since the strict enforcement of gender roles on part of the Romans meant that the fighting force available to Rome was necessarily reduced by half. The presence of women in the Celtic army not only hastened the Celtic victory, but worsened the shame of the Roman defeat. The Romans, steeped in their cultural machismo, must have felt acutely the indignity of having been, in the parlance of modern school boys, "beaten by girls."

The final mortal defect in the Roman defense was the poor quality of the Latin weaponry. Although the Romans had encountered iron by way of trade with other Mediterranean peoples, their knowledge of the metal could not rival that of the Celts, who had been perfecting their ironwork for centuries before the Romans knew the technology existed. The relatively primitive Roman smith-craft could only produce weapons that seemed rudimentary in comparison to those of the invaders. Small shields made exclusively of wood, spears and javelins far shorter than those of the Celts (and not uniformly iron-headed), and a lack of short swords for close combat made the legionaries easy prey for superior Celtic weapons, and resulted in a battle that might more aptly have been called a massacre.⁵⁵ The Celts quickly cut the untrained and ill-equipped plebeian flanks to ribbons, and the terrified and disorganized patricians ran for their lives.⁵⁶

The survivors retreated to the Capitoline Hill, where they endured a seven-month siege during which the Senones sacked and looted the rest of the city.⁵⁷ Having humiliated the Romans on the battlefield and thoroughly desecrated Rome, Brennus demanded a further 100 lbs of gold before he and his tribe would leave the now ruined city.⁵⁸ When the Romans protested, the Roman historian, Livy, has it that Brennus added the weight of his sword to the already unbalanced scale, and proclaimed “*Vae Victis!*” (Latin for “woe to the conquered”).⁵⁹

The battle of Allia was and remains the most decisive military defeat in all Roman history. More than any other incident, it compelled the Romans to modernize their military machine. The standard accoutrements of legionary warfare – the short-sword (or, in Latin, *gladius*), the full-body shield, the iron-tipped spear, and metal body armor – were either copies of Celtic devices, or designed specifically to defend Roman soldiers against them. This demonstrates that much of the military prowess attributed to Romans was only borrowed from (or necessitated by) the Celts.

The Erudite Class

Although brief, this unfortunate first military encounter with the Celts left an indelible mark on the cultural memory of the Mediterranean peoples, who thence forth viewed the Celts as a horde of barbarous warlords – a stereotype that would help provide Julius Caesar’s justification for the invasion of Gaul in 52 BC as a preemptive strike,⁶⁰ and one that widely persists in academic circles to this day. Quite contrary to this popular image, the Celtic people at large were mostly peaceable. Though the members of the *flaith* enjoyed battle and were highly distinguished warriors, they were not the most respected caste in Celtic society. Outranking them were the members of a third caste, the *gutuatiri*, which is continental Celtic for “speakers to the

gods".⁶¹ The *gutuatri* were intellectuals who acted as doctors, lawyers, judges and priests.⁶²

There were three classes within the *gutuatri* – the *bards*, the *fili* (called *vates* or *ovates* on the continent), and the *druids* (a word that in Irish can also refer to the entire *gutuatri* caste).⁶³

The bards were the lowest rank of the *gutuatri*.⁶⁴ As Celtic historians, they were expected to memorize vast quantities of data in the form of stories, songs, poems and prayers so that they could recite them to the people at festivals and religious ceremonies.⁶⁵ When they were not needed for religious or social rites, they often wandered between communities, where they were given food and lodging in exchange for performances of their songs and tales.⁶⁶ The second class, the *fili*, were scientists, mathematicians, doctors, and augurers.⁶⁷ Depending on their individual specialty, they were responsible for calculating the time for planting and harvest, healing the sick, caring for women during pregnancy and childbirth, or resolving legal disputes.⁶⁸ The final class, the *drui* (or *druid*, in singular form), acted as religious leaders, and were the most elite *gutuatri* caste.⁶⁹ Druidism was not a birth right; a druidic apprentice had to study for as many as twenty years before he or she could attain the honored title.⁷⁰ Schools of druidry existed in Gaul, Britain, and Ireland where apprentices studied under other druids to learn the many skills the position required. The term "school" as used here refers not to institutions precisely like academies or universities, but to sects of druidism associated with particular cult centers which would-be druids sought out to begin their druidic studies.⁷¹ Druids learned their craft primarily by undergoing a lengthy apprenticeship, after which time they would refine their knowledge through personal investigation, and participation in the intellectual community that druidry represented.⁷² Because druids had to be educated in all of the arts and sciences, they usually spent time in their apprenticeship working as *bards* or *vates*. In fact, many *bards* or *filli* were not perusing their vocations as careers, but merely training for the time when they would become

druids.⁷³ The *gutuatri* caste on whole is often compared to the Hindu *Brahmin* caste,⁷⁴ although to represent the Celtic system as completely analogous to its Indian counterpart can be misleading.

Even though the Celtic caste system in many ways resembled that of the Hindus, it differed in three significant ways.⁷⁵ In the first place, it combined all laborers, whether skilled or unskilled, into one caste, as earlier mentioned.⁷⁶ Secondly, and importantly, it provided that there was potential for mobility between classes based on personal merit.⁷⁷ Social interactions and even marriages between castes could be perfectly auspicious if the participating member of the lower caste had shown exceptional valor or skill.

Elected Leaders and Social Mobility

Finally, and most interestingly, the Celtic system may have created a separate caste, called the *Rix* or *Rige*, (meaning “king”) that existed exclusively for the provision of monarchs.⁷⁸ The *Rige* were expected to have the battle prowess of *flaith* and the wisdom of the *gutuatri*, but in exchange enjoyed the exalted status of being the most privileged class in Celtic society and the central figures in Celtic politics.⁷⁹ The existence of the *rige* class is controversial among some scholars, who claim that the *rige* were merely the elite of the *flaith* class.⁸⁰ Truly, the latter scenario seems more likely, as the existence of a fourth caste would violate the Celtic rule of threes (whereby most aspects of politics, religion and cosmology were divided into three parts out of reverence for the sanctity of the number three).

As to the political structure over which the *rige* reigned – whether as their own caste or not – the Celts lived in kingdoms which consisted of one or more related or politically allied tribes, each of which was further divided into clans.⁸¹ Kingdoms could be of various population

sizes and geographical areas, but typically tended to be relatively large (usually comprising no less than 20,000 people and sometimes numbering many hundreds of thousands), and grew larger as the *La Tène* period progressed.⁸² Each kingdom was governed by a king or tribal confederation led by multiple kings, and each tribe was governed by king or chieftain.⁸³ The nomenclature of Celtic kingship versus Celtic chieftainship can be confusing as there is no technical distinction between a chieftain and a king, so oftentimes the leader of any tribe is referred to as a king instead of a chieftain, and the leaders of kingdoms comprising multiple tribes are called high kings. Whatever the titles ascribed them by modern historians, tribal leaders could be male or female,⁸⁴ and were elected from the ruling family by vote of its members⁸⁵ Often times, members of the warrior caste – if they were related to the monarch by marriage or exceptionally well respected in the community – could be voted into the kingship without the normally prerequisite membership in the royal family.⁸⁶ This capacity for social mobility existed in no other contemporary Indo-European society. Persians, Romans, Teutons, Hindus, Greeks, and Slavs almost invariably occupied one social class from birth to death, with no hope of advancement or danger of demotion except in the case of political coup. In this regard, the Celts far more closely resembled a modern society than any other ancient culture in Europe, the Middle East, or the Indian subcontinent.

Class flexibility gave the Celts the distinct advantage of selective specialization. Members of Celtic society had more freedom than any contemporary Europeans to pursue the vocations to which they felt best-suited. While most moderns take that capacity for granted, it was truly revolutionary in its day, and had vast implications for Celtic culture. It is no coincidence that Celtic smiths and artisans excelled their Roman counterparts in the quality and

abundance of their products; whereas the Roman professionals had inherited their occupations, the Celts had earned them.

Ancient Eco-Feminists

Not only the policy of elected leadership ranked the Celts among the most socially enlightened peoples of the ancient world; they pioneered the "green" and feminist movements before the issues underpinning them were even thought to exist, as is evidenced by the way in which they practiced religion.

The most basic tenet of Celtic religion is reverence for nature. While the Romans, Greeks and Etruscans worshiped in gargantuan temples quarried at high cost from often remote and otherwise-pristine wilderness areas, the Celts worshipped at the natural sanctuaries of sacred groves and springs, with negligible expense and environmental impact.⁸⁷ Some historians have therefore supposed them incapable of building conventional temples, but the reason for their forbearance with respect to religious construction had nothing to do with their abilities.

Architects capable of building and maintaining a free-standing highway system over wetlands, or constructing the many multi-story Iron Age stone fortresses of Ireland and Scotland (or *brochs*, as they are known in Gaelic)⁸⁸ could, if they so chose, have raised any number of temples in wood, brick or stone; they simply refrained from doing so. Above all other considerations, the respect for nature intrinsic to Celtic spirituality – a genuine recognition of value in preserving the natural splendor of wild places and an understanding of the practical benefits of good ecology – provided the incentive. Even at the nascence of modern environmentalism during 19th century, land preservation for the sake of nature in and of itself was unheard of. Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian conservationists almost invariably rescued land from industrial exploitation in the

present only so that it could be industrially exploited in the future. Environmentalism spurred by reverence for the natural world would not take root until well into the 20th century, yet the Celts had begun the practice over 4,000 years before the Industrial Revolution.

Although in consideration of their wood-intensive, timber-surfaced roads, the "tree-hugger" stereotype might not accurately apply, the Celts did believe that of all plant life, trees had special spiritual significance. The groves the Celts most prized were those with high concentrations of oak trees, which they considered especially sacred.⁸⁹ Druids, the elite priestly class within the *gutuatri*, are thought to have derived the name of their caste from the proto-Celtic words *dar* or *dru*, which could mean either "far" or "oak" and *uid*, which means either knowledge or vision.⁹⁰ Thus, although druids were extensively trained in matters of theology, geography, astronomy, law, history, and medicine, their occupational title meant either "far seers", or "the ones who know about oak trees". Why oak trees in particular were so revered is a mystery, although it is possible that they were celebrated for the strong temper of their wood and the unique and easily recognizable shape of their leaves and acorns. They also frequently host the parasitic mistletoe vine, which the Celts admired for its ability to grow in all seasons without touching the ground, and, according to some, for its powers as an aphrodisiac and fertility aid. (The purported origin of the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe was a druidic ritual performed to ensure pregnancy for a newlywed couple.)⁹¹

The continental Celts believed that all wild plants and animals including the oak were sacred to the god Cernunnos, or "the horned one" (so called because of his antlers), who personified the natural world.⁹² Cernunnos was one of the most important gods in the continental Celtic pantheon, and was considered a god of life, death, wealth, hunting, and male sexuality.⁹³ In Ireland, his function was divided between several successor deities, including the

Dagda (to be later discussed), the "green man", and the divine hero, Fionn MacCumhail.⁹⁴ His few surviving monuments always depict him as either naked or covered in vines (possibly mistletoe), and surrounded by predators such as wolves and lions, and game animals like boar and elk, which were celebrated for their strength and sexual stamina.⁹⁵ Another animal with which Cernunnos was associated is the horned serpent – usually pictured as a snake with the curved horns of a goat – which functioned as a phallic symbol roughly equivalent to the *lingam* of Hindu god Shiva.⁹⁶ Like Shiva, Cernunnos favored the title “Lord of Animals”,⁹⁷ further illustrating his power and importance in the natural world.

While Cernunnos personified nature at large, individual species of animals – especially domestic varieties – often claimed representation by their own deities, usually goddesses. A prominent example of this phenomenon is Epona, goddess of horses. Worshipped in Ireland as Macha and in Britain as Rhiannon, the Celts revered Epona because of their agricultural and military dependence on the horse.⁹⁸ She also had the interesting epithets “Lady of Secrets” and “Keeper of Keys”,⁹⁹ acting as both a receptor for prayers of confession, and an advisor to the faithful in times of important decision making.¹⁰⁰ Among the most widely worshipped of the Celtic goddesses, Epona has the distinction of being the only Celtic deity to enter the Greco-Roman pantheon, where she earned the devotion of soldiers and gladiators who honored her as the patron goddess of cavalry and charioteers.¹⁰¹

The Celts generally portrayed their nature deities as being in close proximity to, or having the characteristics of, the animals they represented. Epona, for instance, could manifest either as a horse (usually a mare with a young foal, to showcase her powers of fertility) or as a woman mounted on horseback.¹⁰² Cernunnos, for his part, usually took the form of a bearded man with a horned or antlered head, but could bear the complete head or tail of deer, or appear

(less commonly) as a buck, auroch, bull-elk, wolf, or any other sacred, forest-dwelling animal with which his worshippers associated his cult.¹⁰³

Celtic adoration of nature did not confine itself to the fields and forests. The Druids also recognized the sanctity of bodies of water throughout the Celtic world. The Celts considered fresh water sacred to the mother goddess (the female aspect of nature), and imagined bodies of water as personified by various water goddesses who could bestow blessings of life and health on the Celtic faithful when treated with the proper respect.¹⁰⁴ In addition to having their own spirits, all rivers and streams fell within the purview of Sequona (also called Succona or Sequana) the goddess of rivers, springs and wells.¹⁰⁵ In addition to serving as the patron goddess of the boatmen, fishermen, and farmers who relied on her waters for survival, she also possessed powerful healing abilities. In recognition of her role as divine healer, the Celtic infirmed often carved votive offerings of their afflicted body parts (a wooden head for migraine head ache, a bronze leg for a broken femur, etc.) and cast them into a river in hopes that Sequana would be reminded of their suffering and heal them more quickly.¹⁰⁶ Such prayers and supplications did not replace medical treatment, but did serve as an important means by which it could be enhanced. Supplicants often accompanied the offerings with gold coins to express their piety and ensure complete healing, and it is from this ritual that modern Europeans and Americans derive the practice of throwing pennies in fountains for good luck.¹⁰⁷

As a healer and water goddess, Sequana did not work alone. Many rivers were presided over by the local fertility goddess of the region through which they flowed, or the tribe which relied on their waters. History provides an example in the form of the goddess Brigantia (also called Brie or Brigid)¹⁰⁸ – a powerful and extensively worshipped earth goddess associated with agriculture, child birth, and the coming of spring – whom the Celts honored at sacred springs and

rivers throughout Ireland, Britain, and Continental Europe.¹⁰⁹ In other cases, a river's individual spirit could achieve divine status, and earn worship as goddess in its own right. In their capacity as healing places, rivers and springs – especially hot springs – were also the province of Sulis, a popular goddess of healing who was worshipped in much the same way as Sequana.¹¹⁰ Many of her shrines – including the famous hot springs of Bath, England¹¹¹ – are still in recreational and medicinal use today, albeit without regard to their sacred pasts.

The Celts were not only remarkable for their love of nature, but also their high regard for women. In an age when almost all other Indo-European peoples restricted women's rights to the spheres of the home and to a limited extent the temple, Celtic women were encouraged to become spiritual and political leaders, artisans, merchants and even warriors, and were permitted to buy, sell and inherit property.¹¹² The Celtic devotion to gender equality was even reflected in their pantheon, where most gods and goddesses were seen as manifestations of the supreme father god and mother goddess, whose relationship was thought of as roughly equal.¹¹³ In the Greco-Roman pantheon, by contrast, philandering Zeus reigned supreme, and the goddess thought to embody the womanly ideal was neither the intellectual Athena nor the self-asserting Artemis, but Hestia (a goddess of hearth and home whose acolytes were sworn to virginity on pain of death). The equality between men and women enshrined in Celtic religion meant that what now might be classed as feminist rhetoric was official druidic doctrine. In this area, the modern West still lags behind the Celts. The gap will have demonstrably closed only when Catholic and Orthodox priests endorse women's liberation, and bless congregants in the name of the Father, the Son, the Mother, the Daughter and the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, and somewhat ironically, this means that the Western world might never be as gender-equitable or sexually progressive as a culture many thousands of years older that moderns often dismiss as barbaric.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Celtic gender equality is its cultivation of a viable masculine gender identity tangent on neither conformism to femininity nor, conversely, the subjugation of women. Modern Western feminism often faces resistance from conservative critics who accuse the movement of "feminizing" the Western male, while feminists themselves allege that traditional masculine roles rely on the exploitative male domination of females. The situation sometimes sparks vicious debate, polarizing and politically-charging the issue of gender relations. Yet millennia ago, the Celts had no such dilemma. Their religious framework provided for the development of gender roles along a via media in which men could respect women as full equals without assuming stereotypically feminine attributes. Indeed, Celtic society produced men whom moderns would class among the "manliest" of European antiquity – with bulging muscles, luxuriant facial hair, a perpetual readiness to fight if provoked (as any Roman at the battle of Allia would attest), a legendary fondness (and tolerance) for alcohol, and formidable gastronomic and sexual appetites – but who were still expected to accord their peers the same degree of respect regardless of gender. This is a skill notably absent in the modern West, and one which might markedly improve society if mastered.

The Celts and the Christian Trinity

The roles of the divine mother and father in Celtic mythology did far more than inform gender relations; wide swaths of the vast multitudes of Celtic gods existed only to isolate and amplify their attributes. At times, the result can confuse historians and mythologists; the mother and father went by various names and guises, and isolating them from other gods and goddesses whom the Celts regarded as their children or less powerful manifestations can prove a tedious endeavor.

Further complicating the identification of gods in the Celtic pantheon is the Celtic love of the number three. This tendency compelled the druids to worship of many of the gods and goddesses in triplicate form, dividing each deity into three different gods or goddesses and giving each a different name and set of attributes, even though all represented mere aspects of the same god or goddess. This system made perfect sense to the druids, but seems considerably less intuitive to modern scholars, who can almost never say with certainty if a group of deities with similar traits are unique individuals, or variants of the same triune god. It is important to note, however, that the concept is not entirely alien to moderns. When applied to early Christianity by the Irish monk, Saint Columba, the Celtic mode of triune thinking facilitated the early acceptance in Ireland of the Holy Trinity.¹¹⁴

The trinity has always been among the most difficult aspects of Christian doctrine to understand; if not for their extant appreciation of triune gods, the Celts might have resisted conversion, which in consideration of their importance to European evangelism in the Middle Ages would have significantly altered the religious history of the western world. In fact, if not for the Celtic eccentricity of triplication, the majority of practicing Christians might belong to the Coptic and Eastern Orthodox denominations; with Catholicism a small sect in southern Europe; Germany, Scandinavia and the Britannic Archipelago pagan; and the Protestant Reformation a nonentity. In consequence, no variety of ancient paganism has demonstrably contributed more to Christianity than that of the Celts. Even the Roman pagans, with whom Roman Catholicism is obviously and intimately associated, did little to influence Christian doctrine other than supply converts.

An Intricate Pantheon

Whereas the Christian pantheon (or, perhaps more accurately, "monotheon") comprises only one trinity, the number of Celtic trinities was truly staggering, as many a paleo-theologian has discovered to his frustration. The Celtic pantheon becomes especially difficult to sort out when different trinities share gods (as they sometimes do), or contain gods with different names and functions in different parts of the Celtic world (as they almost always do). An example is the Morrigan, or "Shadow Queens" in Irish, the triple goddess of war of the Irish pantheon.¹¹⁵ Her three component goddesses are Nemhain, who presided over battle fields in the form of a raven, or as the infamous "washer at the ford" who washed the blood from the clothes of men doomed to die in battle; Badb (pronounced Bav or Bava) another raven goddess who could foretell the death of a warrior and announce it in the form of a banshee; and Macha, a powerful goddess of warfare¹¹⁶ – possibly the same Macha who as Epona was worshipped as a fertility goddess in continental Europe without any reference to either Badb or Nemhain.

Despite the multiplicity of names and traditions, mythologists have made at least some reasonably confident pronouncements on the nature of the Celtic gods. For instance, the gods all claim descent from three primal deities: the mother goddess, who represented the earth; the father god, who represented the sky (both earlier mentioned); and the sea god, a consort of the mother goddess that represented the oceans.¹¹⁷ These primal gods, although the most powerful deities, did not usually intervene directly in human affairs. The mother – called Dana, Danu or Anu in Ireland, Scotland, and Continental Europe, and Donn in Britain¹¹⁸ – the Celts considered loving female progenitor of all living things, including majority of the gods. It was for this reason that the most widely worshipped family of Celtic gods was referred to in Ireland as the *Tuatha de Danann* or "The Children of the Goddess Danu."¹¹⁹ Danu seems comparable to the

Gaia of Greek myth; she was Mother Earth, the land the Celts depended on for survival. The fresh water in rivers, lakes and streams was thought of as part of Danu, coming from the Earth to sustain life just as milk flows from a mother to sustain her children. It is probably for this reason that the spirits of bodies of fresh water were thought of as female.

The waters of the ocean were not potable, and thus the Celts could not consider them the milk of Danu. They belonged to the sea god, who throughout the Celtic World was called Lir (spelled Lyr or Llyr in the Welsh and Cornish traditions).¹²⁰ The sea god was feared and respected throughout the Celtic world because of his propensity to use his fierce storm winds to claim the lives of Celtic sailors. Celts wishing for a safe voyage did not pray to Lir, but to his son, Mananan, who was also the child of Danu, and thought of as more affable and humane than his father.¹²¹

More benevolent than his oceanic counterpart, the father god represented the sky, and the masculine aspect of the universe.¹²² He had strong solar associations, and was known on the continent as Belenus, in Wales as Beli, and in Ireland as Bel.¹²³ The name is derived from a proto-Celtic root word which means "bright" or "shining", and his sobriquets include the title "god of the solar fire."¹²⁴ In Ireland, it seems that he was worshipped exclusively as a sun or fire god, while his attributes having to do with virility and manly virtue were largely delegated to his son, the Dagda.

Although his name means "the good father",¹²⁵ most scholars believe the Dagda is the son of Danu, and not her lover. Dagda was the patriarch of the *Tuatha de Danann* in Irish myth, and was renowned for his many manly attributes.¹²⁶ He had voracious gastronomical and sexual appetites, an incredible tolerance for alcohol, and astounding size and strength. Intriguingly, he

could also play the role of a buffoon; he often delighted in wearing a tunic or kilt so short that it did not conceal his gargantuan genitalia, and loved to demonstrate his supernatural strength in the company of the other gods and goddesses whether or not the situation called for such displays.¹²⁷ Among his most prized possessions were a club that could kill with one stroke and revive the dead with another, a sword as long as a rainbow, and a cauldron of plenty that could never go empty regardless of how much was eaten.¹²⁸

The existence of so complex a pantheon in any society could not be the work of mere barbarians. The intricacy of Celtic theology becomes all the more impressive when one considers that all of it – every myth, legend, song and story – was preserved faithfully over millennia by rote memorization. Systematization of orally transmitted histories on this scale is unprecedented in the ancient world, and has not been equaled since, ranking the druids among the most organized priesthoods in human history.

The Celtic Calendar and the Modern World

The realm inhabited by the Dagda and the other Celtic gods was not self contained, but penetrated the physical world.¹²⁹ Consequently, the Celts considered reality not mundane, but pervaded by sacred plane of existence that continually imbued it with magic and sanctity. Called the Otherworld,¹³⁰ it was the magical place where the gods and the spirits of the dead were believed to dwell. Although it was usually thought to exist in places inaccessible to living humans – far to the west, beyond the horizon, beneath the sea, or deep underground¹³¹ – the Celts thought it could be entered at certain holy sites like sacred groves, springs, or ancient burial mounds called *sidhe* (an Irish word pronounced like the English pronoun "she") or by special invitation from the gods.¹³² The otherworld opened its borders completely at *Samhain*¹³³ - the

harvest festival of Cernunnos on November 1st - when all the Otherworldly spirits (gods and ghosts alike) were thought to walk the earth. At this potentially perilous time, the Celts would build massive bonfires and make burnt offerings to appease the gods and righteous dead, and don frightening costumes to ward off the evil spirits.¹³⁴ This festival became the forerunner of the Catholic feast days of All Saints Day and All Souls Day, and eventually spawned the modern celebration, Halloween.¹³⁵

Samhain, which also acted as Celtic New Year's Day,¹³⁶ was one of the eight most important holidays of the Celtic year.¹³⁷ In addition to celebrating the two equinoxes and solstices that marked the four quarters of the solar year, the Celts also had three festivals in addition to *Samhain* on the inter-solar, or cross-quarter, days that honored the gods and helped regulate the agricultural calendar.¹³⁸ *Imbolc* (also called *Bigid*) was a spring festival that occurred on February 1st to honor the earlier-mentioned agricultural goddess, Brigantia, and signal the time of planting.¹³⁹ Next was *Beltane*, which came on the 1st of May and was dedicated to the god Belenus, honoring the sun god for his beneficence in growing the crops.¹⁴⁰ Finally, on the first of August, came *Lugnasa* (also called *Lughnassad* or *Lammas*) which inaugurated the beginning of the harvest and was set aside for the veneration of Lugh,¹⁴¹ the god of spiritual light who served as the patron of art, sport, and medicine.¹⁴²

The fact that the Celts had enough leisure time and spare resources to hold extravagant, state-sanctioned public feasts for days-on-end every six weeks testifies to the efficiency and abundance of their agriculture, and handily disproves the popular notion that the Celts were practically starving before the Romans taught them Mediterranean farming methods. If their prayers were for plenty, the Celts consistently had every reason to reward their gods for a job well done.

Roman Misconceptions of Ireland and the Irish

As complex as it was, the cultural relevance of the indigenous Celtic religion diminished drastically wherever Greco-Roman paganism – or in the case of Ireland, later Roman Catholicism – took root. Although historians rightly credit the ancient Romans with a great capacity for the tolerance of many non-Roman belief systems (such as that of Ancient Egyptians) before the adoption of Christianity as the state religion under Constantine, the Romans actively suppressed the religious beliefs of the Celts in both Gaul and Britain.¹⁴³ The evident lack of Roman cultural sensitivity with regard to Celtic religion stems in part from Roman mistrust of the druids, who of all strata in Celtic society most ardently and effectively organized resistance to Roman rule.¹⁴⁴ The systematizing nature of Roman anthropological inquiry might also have played a role, as in the attempt to better understand the Celtic pantheon, Romans erroneously equated many Celtic deities with their own gods, with the result that the mythologies associated with those gods often became almost unrecognizably distorted.¹⁴⁵

Even once assimilated by Roman culture, however – either as part of the Roman Empire or the Roman Catholic Church – the descendants of the pagan Celts persisted in their ancestral tradition of innovation, especially in Ireland, where Roman influence least deleteriously imposed on the existing cultural landscape. Historians and archeologists debate whether the Irish had a written language prior to the advent of Irish Christianity in the 5th century AD. While inscriptions in a uniquely Celtic alphabet called Ogham have been discovered on stones and monuments throughout the British Isles,¹⁴⁶ it remains unclear whether the alphabet was developed independently or as a result of Roman contact, and whether it was ever used for purposes other than demarcating territorial boundaries. Evidence for Ogham's pre-Roman origination seems more strongly compelling, especially the mention of Ogham in the Irish epic,

the *Táin Bó Cúailgne*, which far predates known Roman Catholic or even simply Roman influence on the Irish. In any case, the fact remains that the pre-Roman Irish left no known written records of their culture that have existed to the present day.¹⁴⁷

Consequently, the only surviving accounts of Irish geography, history or culture that predate the Christianization of the island come primarily from travelers and historians who were Roman or from territories under the dominion of Rome. The writings of such authors often lack objectivity, and must therefore be interpreted through the lens of the authors' culture. The prevailing Roman view of early Ireland as a remote, desolate land populated by barbarous races grew not from empirical evidence, but from imperialist geopolitical philosophy.

Roman Geography: The Further from Rome, the Further from Validity

In order to understand Roman views of Ireland, one must examine Roman notions of geography. Natural philosophers in ancient Rome believed in the Ptolemaic model of celestial motion, wherein a spherical sun revolved around a spherical Earth.¹⁴⁸ According to this model, the sun's radiation heated the Earth and resulted in the division of the Earth's surface into five climatic zones based on their proximity to the sun's orbit. The equatorial zone in the middle of the globe received the brunt of the solar discharge and was therefore too hot for human habitation. The polar regions, at the ends of the earth, were frozen wastes equally unsuitable for human life. Roman geographers therefore considered only the temperate regions located between the poles and the equator habitable. However, the supposedly impassible deserts and/or boiling seas of the equatorial zone rendered the southernmost temperate region inaccessible to the Romans.¹⁴⁹ Accordingly, to the Roman mind, the whole of the knowable habitable world existed above the equator, and conveniently centered around the Mediterranean (which in Latin means

"Middle-of-the-Earth"), in the midst of which (none-too-surprisingly) lay the Italian peninsula and the city of Rome.

No Civilization without Citizens, no Citizens without Cities

From her position at the center of the known world, Rome was ideally situated to serve as focus of the global exchange of goods and ideas. As the empire expanded, the Roman people were able to concentrate what they considered the finest aspects of conquered civilizations in the capital, making Rome the cosmopolis of the ancient world. In assuming that they had the best of all possible human innovations at their fingertips, Romans felt secure in the knowledge that anything unknown to Rome was not worth knowing. Ireland, at the Northwestern-most fringes of the European continent, could, according to popular opinion among the Roman citizenry, boast nothing of value to the Empire.¹⁵⁰

The idea of the citizen also informed Roman views on Ireland. Etymologically, the word "civilization" derives from the Latin word *civis*, meaning citizen. *Civis* formed the root of the word *Civitas*, which meant city.¹⁵¹ Logically, the concept of civilization was therefore intimately connected in the Roman mind with cities and civic life. As far as the Romans were concerned, a civilization could not truly exist without cities. Because most historians agree that no major population centers existed in Ireland until the Viking invasions of the 8th century,¹⁵² the Irish would have embodied the Roman definition of uncivilized; they were literally "city-less".

Roman Anthropology: The Further from Rome, the Further from Humanity

Romans further reasoned that peripheral nations must be inferior on the basis of physiology. Roman medical thought derived from the Hippocratic notion of the four humors, which held that good health results from balance of the four essential bodily fluids: phlegm,

yellow bile, black bile, and blood.¹⁵³ The theory maintained that climate regulated the balance of the humors, and that excessive heat or cold could make them become unbalanced, causing problems in health and temperament among the afflicted. Romans suspected that the frigid air near the polar regions produced an excess of blood, or sanguinity, which rendered the inhabitants of those regions irrational and prone to violence. In the far south, the intense sunlight produced an overabundance of phlegm, or phlegmatism, which made the southerners lazy and self-indulgent. As the Romans saw it, only the temperate Mediterranean seacoast cultivated the perfect balance of humors to create the ideal human being.¹⁵⁴

In the most extreme cases, less desirable climates could make men not only ruthless or slothful, but monstrous. The frozen steppes of Russia were thought to be peopled by the Panotti, a race with long, flexible earlobes they could wrap around their bodies to retain heat during wintry Siberian nights.¹⁵⁵ The scorching heat of Saharan Africa created mutants called Blemyae and Megapods, creatures who, respectively, lacked heads or sheltered under their enormous feet to keep their brains from suffering sunstroke.¹⁵⁶ The outer-reaches of Scythia (of temperatures unknown to the Romans, but suspected to be extremely inhospitable because of their distance from Rome) provided a homeland for the Cynocephali, or "dog-heads", who were aptly named and purportedly had a taste for human flesh.¹⁵⁷

The Romans believed that Ireland, because of its remote northerly location, was incredibly cold; the Latin name for Ireland, Hibernia, roughly translates to "Winterland".¹⁵⁸

The only island thought to exist beyond Ireland was Thule, a semi-mythical island that might loosely correspond to Iceland. The Roman writer Virgil invented the island of Thule as a symbolic representation of any lands that might exist in the vast ocean thought to occupy the

western hemisphere of the Earth, but it was appropriated by subsequent writers such as Claudian as a poetic device, and later considered an actual landmass.¹⁵⁹ The Romans considered Thule too inhospitable for human settlement, and thought little better of Ireland. Based on the assumption that Ireland was among the coldest places on Earth, Romans speculated that its inhabitants must be utter barbarians, and potentially sub-human. This attitude is attested in Strabo's *Geography*, published circa 7 AD:

"Ierne (Ireland) [is] a wretched place to live because of the cold, beyond which the lands are considered uninhabitable...completely wild people live a wretched existence because of the cold"¹⁶⁰

Strabo goes on to chronicle the alleged barbarities of the Irish people, including incest and cannibalism:

"Concerning the island, I have nothing to certain to tell except that its inhabitants are more savage than the Britons, since they are man-eaters as well as heavy eaters, and since, further, they count it an honorable thing, when their fathers die, to devour them and openly to have intercourse, not only with the other women, but also with their mothers and sisters."¹⁶¹

Predictably, archeological and anthropological evidence has demonstrated that Strabo's accusations are laughably apocryphal. In lambasting the Celts for imagined barbarities, the Romans were far more backward than the ancient Irish themselves, who (although they often understandably disliked the Romans) evidently never supposed them to be less-than-human. Amazingly for a culture that purportedly esteemed reason, the Romans still tried to represent the Irish to their countrymen as monsters even after they had begun to regularly encounter and engage in trade with Irish merchants.

Amended Opinions: Their Country is Good, but not so Their Countrymen

As trade with the Irish increased after the completion of the Roman conquest of southern Britain in the 1st century AD, the Romans came to realize that their initial idea of Ireland as a sub-arctic wasteland was a misconception.¹⁶² Although they amended their condemnation of the land, however, they continued to disparage its inhabitants because of Roman military ambitions in the Britannic archipelago. Ireland was of strategic interest to Rome because of its proximity to her colonies in Britain and Spain. If in the future the Empire had elected to invade Ireland, Roman propaganda denouncing the Irish as barbarians would have helped justify the conquest and increase popular support for the war.¹⁶³

The historian Tacitus, in writing in his work *Agricola* around 95 AD, details both the new Roman conceptions of Irish geography and climate arising from Romano-Hibernian trade, and the growing appetite for – and potential tactical benefits of – invading the island.

"Ireland, lying between Britain and Spain, and easily accessible also from the Gallic sea, might serve as a very valuable link between the provinces that form the strongest part of the empire. It is small in comparison with Britain, but larger than the islands of our sea. In soil and climate, it is much like Britain; and its approaches and harbors have become better known from merchants who trade there...I have often heard Agricola say that Ireland could be reduced and held by a single legion with a fair sized force of auxiliaries, and that it would be easier to hold Britain if it were completely surrounded by Roman armies, so that liberty was banished from its sight."¹⁶⁴

One of the loudest and most well-respected voices contributing to the din of anti-Irish propaganda around the turn of the 1st millennium BC belonged to none other than Julius

Caesar.¹⁶⁵ Having recently conquered the Celtic tribes of Gaul and Britain, he was counted the preeminent Roman authority on the peoples of the Britannic archipelago. In his chronicle of the Celtic wars, *De Bello Gallico*, Caesar reaffirms the stereotypes of cannibalism and incest ascribed the Celtic peoples by earlier Greco-Roman authors. He also reinforces the notion that the degree of human civilization corresponds inversely to a culture's distance from Rome. Although this philosophy no longer had to do with "scientific" ideas about climate and Hippocratic humor theory, it still strongly influenced Roman perceptions of foreign cultures. Caesar writes in *De Bello Gallico* of Ireland's neighbor, Britain, saying:

"Of all the island's inhabitants, by far the most civilized are those who live in Cantium [Kent], a region that is entirely coastal... Inland, the people for the most part do not plant grain-crops, but live on milk and meat and clothe themselves in animal skins. All the Britons paint themselves with woad, which produces a dark blue color, and by this means they appear more frightening in battle. They have long hair and shave their bodies, all except for the head and upper lip. Groups of ten or twelve men share their wives in common, particularly between brothers or between father and son."¹⁶⁶

In indicating that Kent is the most civilized part of the archipelago, Caesar implies that the more northerly regions are increasingly less civilized with distance. Ireland, as the far northeastern island, would logically be the most barbarous area, and therefore wholly incapable of self government.

Christian Reinterpretations and the Appropriation of Roman Stereotypes

The predicted invasion of Ireland by Roman armies never came to pass. On the one hand, it proved unnecessary; by asserting naval control over the Irish Sea, Roman authorities ensured

that they could seal the porous British borders against the arrival of Irish reinforcements and escape by refugee Britannic resistance fighters.¹⁶⁷ On the other hand, any invasion plans were indefinitely suspended by the withdrawal of Romano-Britannic troops to the continent to defend the Roman heartland against invading Goths and Vandals in the 5th century AD.¹⁶⁸ Significantly, although the political power of Rome was spent, the Roman Catholic church only grew in influence, and eventually came to exert authority over Ireland in a way the Roman military could have only imagined.

As monasticism and Christian devotion increased in Ireland, Irish Christians strove to incorporate their homeland more favorably and prominently in the narrative of Romano-Christian history. Irish monks integrated Fénus, the mythological ancestor of the Irish, into the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel. By claiming that he had constructed spoken Irish by combining the most pleasant aspects of the 72 primal languages after the initial linguistic division by Divine Providence, Irish authors established a literary tradition in which Irish was the most beautiful language on Earth.¹⁶⁹ In the same origin story, the Irish annals explain why Ireland was called Hibernia. Because the island's winters were mild, the name clearly could not (in the opinion of the Christian Irish) derive from the Latin word for winter. Instead, because of the near homophony between the words 'Hibernia' and 'Iberia', the Irish writers conjectured that their ancestors must have emigrated to Ireland from the Iberian peninsula.¹⁷⁰

Unfortunately, the influx of the new religion jeopardized the extant cultural fabric of the Irish people. The Gaels associated Catholicism with the Roman citizenry; for many, conversion to one meant conversion to the other, with the tragic result that many intrinsically valuable and uniquely Celtic cultural expressions were renounced with the pagan faith they had come to symbolize. A notable casualty of the wholesale adoption of Roman thought was Irish ancestral

pride. In becoming the heirs of Roman culture by adopting the Roman Church, the Irish could no longer dismiss off-hand the Roman histories that cited their forbears as the practitioners of barbarous and inhuman acts. Instead, Irish authors were forced to admit that while these abominations might have occurred, they were the misguided rituals of pagans, and therefore did not reflect on the moral tendencies of the Christian Irish.¹⁷¹

Far from merely acknowledging the Greco-Roman accounts of ancient Ireland, some authors even used them as vehicles for celebrating and reshaping Irish identity. Because the Scythians, like the pre-Christian Irish, were alleged by historians such as Strabo and Diodorus Siculus to have practiced cannibalism, some Irish chroniclers hypothesized that the Scythians might be Irish ancestors, and proposed that *Scotti*, a colloquial Latin word for Gaels, might be related to the word *Scythi*, the tribe from which Scythia derives its name.¹⁷² Interesting though it may be, the apocryphal story obscured the word's true origins for generations of scholars, demonstrating the high price of Romanization.

Celtic Evangelism

Not all aspects of Romano-Hibernian syncretism degraded Irish culture. Ireland's location at the edge of the Roman world, once thought of by Romans as a liability, suddenly had positive implications for Irish identity in the post-Roman period. By becoming Christian, the Irish felt that they had fulfilled Christ's apostolic mission to spread His gospel to "the ends of the Earth".¹⁷³ As such, the Irish of the period saw themselves as integral to the evolution of Christendom, and set out to prove it. Irish missionaries such as Columbanus spread Christianity throughout continental Europe, rekindling the faith where it had dwindled, and witnessing to the Germanic tribes who now controlled the former Roman territories, including Italy.¹⁷⁴ Ironically,

by the 7th and 8th centuries, the very Irish that the Romans once lambasted as barbarians were now bringing civilization to the relative savages living in what once had been the Roman empire.

The Invention of Punctuation

A great contribution of early Celtic Christians to the modern world that arose from Irish monasticism is so ubiquitous that it is often taken completely for granted. Although punctuation seems obviously necessary to Western Culture today, it never occurred to the Romans. They wrote in a style which historians aptly dub *scripta continua*, or continuous writing.¹⁷⁵ It had no commas, periods, apostrophes, hyphens, question marks, exclamation points, accents or any of the other non-lexical markings that crowd modern pages.¹⁷⁶ More shockingly, it also omitted spaces.¹⁷⁷ Because they learned Latin from the nursery, Roman writers knew what Latin words looked like, and could differentiate them on a page without needing spaces between them. Spaces seemed superfluous, and wasted valuable room that could be otherwise employed to accommodate more words.

Roman Catholic monks in Ireland, by contrast, often learned Latin and its writing system as a second language, and preferred to leave spaces between words so that they could more easily identify them on the page. When learning to recite written Latin, they also liked to mark pauses in the text so that they could more adequately inflect it.¹⁷⁸ Eventually, the system of pausal indicators created by Irish monks was expanded and standardized to uniformly indicate complete thoughts (.), partial thoughts (,), excitement (!), inquisitiveness (?) and even open-endedness (...). As they reeducated the rest of Europe, the Celts' new method of Latin transcription became the norm, and forever changed the appearance of the written word.

What Happened to Celtic Achievement?

One might wonder how it is that we in the developed, post-modern world still have issues with class and gender equality if the Celts had effectively resolved them before the birth of Christ, or why the Romans got the credit for building Europe's first roads. Also worth questioning is how a people as civilized as the Celts have been yoked for centuries to the demeaning and undeserved stigma of barbarism. Few scholars have attempted to answer the questions, but the historical narrative reveals tantalizing clues for those who would try.

Roman cultural imperialism was almost certainly a factor. The Romans harbored a virulent hatred of all things Celtic from the time of the Senone sack of Rome to fall of the empire in the 5th century. The example of Carthage proves that the ancient Romans were not above completely eradicating a subject people's culture as an act of vengeance, and there is no reason to suppose that they would have treated the Celts otherwise. The notorious self-assurance – even arrogance – of the Roman populace was manifest in its histories, and degrading a once-great enemy to barbarian status in the historical record and claiming that culture's achievements for Rome would have doubtless appealed to Romans desiring to bolster national pride.

Another damning factor might ironically have been the astronomical extent to which the Celts surpassed their neighbors in terms of cultural enlightenment. What we today look on as progressive, the Mediterraneans, Iberians, and Germans who surrounded the Celts often considered alien, or even abominable. Particularly abhorrent to the Romans, for instance, was gender equality, which would have entirely upset the male entitlements of the patriarchal Latin social order. All-in-all, Celtic social and technological advancement might have invoked the same hostile incredulity in contemporary non-Celtic cultures as the innovations proposed to the

English by the eponymous fictional protagonist of Mark Twain's novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthurs' Court*, entailing a similarly sudden and complete rejection of the Celt's progressive ideas.

The final factor that might have contributed to the partial disintegration of the Celtic cultural legacy was reticence on the part of the Celts themselves to don their ancestors' laurels. It is understandably difficult for a defeated people to argue the superiority of their society to their oppressors. Just as many members of the enslaved African-American community felt compelled to adopt a subservient and self-effacing "Uncle Tom" mentality during their captivity in the decades preceding the American Civil war, many Romanized Celts and their descendents might have seen no academically defensible alternative but to become the eager proponents of the Roman perspective of Celtic history, or at least felt that they could not justifiably make a serious effort to approach the topic from a fresh perspective.

Over the previous two centuries, this traditional Roman bias in Celtic scholarship has provoked a revisionist, pro-Celtic backlash in some academic circles. Although this turn of events marks a positive reversal in the prevailing paradigm in Celtic studies, it has ironically produced a tendency toward Celtic bias that has jeopardized the popular credibility of even the most respectable Celtic apologists, with the unfortunate result that even compelling new evidence for Celtic social and technological sophistication has often been dismissed by traditionalist historians before even being examined.

In Conclusion: Acknowledging the Celtic Contribution

In many ways, the Celts have suffered diaspora and cultural decline since their heyday in the *La Tène* period. Driven from their heartland in central Europe to the westernmost fringes of

the continent, and subjected to numerous abuses at the hands of the Romans, Visigoths, Vikings, and Saxons, the Celts have lost much of their cultural patrimony. That so little is known about them in comparison to their contemporaries is a tragedy, but not an irredeemable one. Every year, new archeological discoveries bring scientists and historians ever closer to a complete, unclouded understanding of what the Celtic world was like. Even without the revelations to come, the aspects of Celtic culture that are known to us – that are indeed part of us, be it in lineage, tradition, or inspiration – still reveal the greatness of the society that produced them. That enough remains of the Celts after the ravages of time and conquest to have shaped the world in their image, albeit indistinctly, is a testament to the glories of their civilization.

And a civilization it was. Although the Romans conceptualized civilization as belonging only to those cultures with large cities organized according to social patterns resembling their own, modern anthropologists now define the term far less ethnocentrically. The Celts had a well-developed pantheon of gods whose worship was directed by a highly organized priesthood, and devised a highly sophisticated cosmology that has come to effect modern understandings of the later-adopted Christian religion. Furthermore, they were the first European society to equally respect men and women, to allow female military service, to condone social mobility, and to perfect blacksmithing and transcontinental highway construction. These are attributes characteristic of a civilized society, and ought to rank the Celts among the greatest civilizations of European antiquity.

- ¹ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts*. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.73
- ² Ibid., p. 122
- ³ Ibid., p. 148
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 129-134
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 22
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ John King, *Kingdoms of the Celts*. (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2000), p.21-22
- ⁸ Ibid, p. 21-22
- ⁹ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts*. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.23
- ¹⁰ John King, *Kingdoms of the Celts*. (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2000), p.14-15
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 14-15
- ¹² Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts*. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.15
- ¹³ T.W. Rolleston, *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race* (London: CRW Publishing Limited, 2004), p.32
- ¹⁴ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts*. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.15
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p.15
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ John King, *Kingdoms of the Celts*. (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2000), p.26-27
- ¹⁸ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts*. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.22
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p.24-26
- ²⁰ Ibid., p.24
- ²¹ T.W. Rolleston, *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race* (London: CRW Publishing Limited, 2004), p.32
- ²² Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts*. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.24

- ²³ John King, *Kingdoms of the Celts* (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2000), p.10-11
- ²⁴ Ibid., p.10-11
- ²⁵ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.129-139
- ²⁶ Ibid., p.132
- ²⁷ Ibid., p.133
- ²⁸ John King, *Kingdoms of the Celts* (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2000), p.71-73
- ²⁹ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.133
- ³⁰ Ibid., p.132-133
- ³¹ John King, *Kingdoms of the Celts* (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2000), p.10-11
- ³² Ibid., p.11
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Corbishley et al., *History of Britain & Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.35
- ³⁷ John King, *Kingdoms of the Celts* (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2000), p.11
- ³⁸ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.37
- ³⁹ Ibid., p.37
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p.35
- ⁴² Ibid., p.37
- ⁴³ Ibid., p.76
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p.205
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., p.206

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.206

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.70

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ John King, *Kingdoms of the Celts*. (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2000), p.17

⁵² Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts*. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.73

⁵³ Hazel Mary Martell, *The Ancient World* (New York: Kingfisher Publications, 2001), p.80

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.80

⁵⁵ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.73-78

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.206

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.70

⁶¹ Ibid., p.56

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⁶³ Ibid., p.30

⁶⁴ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.57

⁶⁵ Ibid., p.57

⁶⁶ John King, *Kingdoms of the Celts* (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2000), p.30

⁶⁷ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.59-62

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.57

⁶⁹ Ibid., p.60

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., p.57-60

⁷³ Ibid., p.60

⁷⁴ John King, *Kingdoms of the Celts* (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2000), p.53

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.29

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.30

⁷⁸ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.37-39

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.60

⁸⁰ John King, *Kingdoms of the Celts* (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2000), p.29

⁸¹ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.24

⁸² Ibid., p.24

⁸³ John King, *Kingdoms of the Celts*. (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2000), p.27-29

⁸⁴ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts*. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.42-43

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⁸⁶ Ibid.

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⁸⁸ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p. 157

⁸⁹ Corbishley et al., *History of Britain & Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.39-41

⁹⁰ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p. 55

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⁹² Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.42-43

⁹³ Ibid., p.170

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

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⁹⁹ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts*. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.29-30

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¹⁰¹ Ibid., p.175

¹⁰² Ibid., p.29-30

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.170

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.112

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.176-177

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.112

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., p.87

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Damian Bracken, "To the Waters and The Wild: A Brief History of the Irish" (Cork, Ireland: UCC Press, 2012), p. 5

¹¹⁵ John King, *Kingdoms of the Celts* (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2000), p.50

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p.50

¹¹⁷ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.169-173

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p.172

¹¹⁹ T.W. Rolleston, *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race* (London: CRW Publishing Limited, 2004), p.10-12

¹²⁰ Ibid., p.117

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¹²⁵ Ibid., p.170-174

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¹²⁷ Ibid., p.170-174

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¹³³ Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.181

¹³⁴ Ibid., p.181

¹³⁵ Ibid., p.181

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p.169-174

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Geo Athena Trevarthen, *Celtic and Irish Mythology* (Lane Cove, Australia: Global Book Publishing, 2003), p.223

¹⁴² Peter Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), p.174

¹⁴³ Damian Bracken, "To the Waters and The Wild: A Brief History of the Irish" (Cork, Ireland: UCC Press, 2012), p. 5

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¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p.16

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¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p.16

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¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p.3

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.