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Prospectus

The people we know of today as the Celts, also known historically as the Gauls, can be traced back to around 1000 BCE during the Iron and Bronze ages. Their roots are extremely widespread throughout much of Western Europe in France, Germany, Great Britain, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and Spain among other regions, making their exact origins exceedingly difficult to pinpoint. Much of what historians know about the Celts deals with the multiple migrations across primeval Europe, often to escape from the Greeks and Romans, and there have continually been pervasive and long lasting images of the Celts as a primitive and barbaric people. Leading archaeologists who specialize in the Celtic people have been trying to replace those images with a more accurate picture.

Preliminary Hypothesis

By studying Celtic archaeology – surviving burials, megaliths, and the abundant monuments spread throughout the British Isles and Western Europe – we can better understand the origins and culture of the ancient Celtic people. A culture that for centuries lived without a written language, the Celts left behind many stone structures and priceless artifacts that can potentially help us unearth the true identity of a mysterious race of ancient people.

Abstract

*…Then the witches rushed through the air with great cries, and fled back to Slievenamon, uttering strange curses on the Spirit of the Well, who had wished their ruin - but the woman and the house were left in peace, and a mantle dropped by one of the witches in her flight was kept hung up by the mistress in memory of that night; and this mantle was kept by the same family from generation to generation for five hundred years after[[1]](#footnote-1)*

When you read a story or listen to someone else tell a story, you take for granted the fact that there will be a beginning, middle, and an end. But what if you were only given the middle and the end? The history of the Celtic people has long been shrouded in mystery precisely because we as historians have been left without a beginning to the story. Whereas with ancient societies like the Greeks and Romans we think of things like democracy, Michelangelo, and Corinthian architecture, with the Celts we are left largely to our imaginations as to what they were like. Today there are roughly seventy million people that can claim Irish heritage[[2]](#footnote-2), yet when many people conjure up Ireland in their minds they are bombarded with romanticized images of leprechauns, fairy circles, Stonehenge, and gold at the end of the rainbow.

The lack of a written language has also left historians at a disadvantage, which is why the contemporary research on the ancient Celts is primarily being done by archaeologists. The transition from history to archaeology and an explanation for how archaeology can help us understand history and culture from a different perspective can be found on a website entitled “Archaeology for Educators.” “Unlike history, which relies primarily upon written records and documents to interpret great lives and events, archaeology allows us to delve far back into the time before written languages existed and to glimpse the lives of everyday people through analysis of things they made and left behind.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is not just the actual digging up of burials or decoding cryptic stone monuments that drives the progress being made in the field of Celtic archaeology; rather it is the identity that is being formed slowly over time which gives us a more complete picture of who these people were. Even today we struggle with the concept of identity: is it culture? Genetics? Language? Environment? Is identity something that we are born with, or is it created? There is nothing wrong with lending an air of mysticism to the Irish culture, but unless we put forth an effort to fully explore this aspect of the world’s history we risk having it be lost forever. The origins of the Celts and how they have changed over time may not be at the forefront of contemporary history, but unless we continue to explore and investigate what these people left behind there will always be that curiosity as to how the story began.

Annotated Bibliography

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Ancient Celts.* Oxford University Press: Penguin Books, 1997.

One of the leading contemporary experts on Celtic archaeology, Barry Cunliffe is currently a professor of European Archaeology at Oxford University. His book explores the cultural diversity between the numerous Celtic tribes and strives to differentiate between the ancient Celtic identity and the more modern romanticized Celtic identity. His investigations into the ancient archaeological finds and classic literature of the ancient Greeks and Romans are accompanied by a stunning variety of colorful maps, sketches, and photographs. Cunliffe’s research is authoritative yet largely unbiased, allowing readers to make their own interpretations about the true Celtic identity.

Dietler, Michael. “Our Ancestors the Gauls: Archaeology, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Manipulation of Celtic Identity in Modern Europe.”*American Anthropologist* 96, no. 3 (Sep., 1994): 584-605

“Given that ethnicity and nationalism are such powerful forces in modern Europe, it is crucial for anthropologists to understand the historical processes through which identities are constructed and transformed…”(p. 585). Written from the view of an anthropologist rather than an archaeologist, Dietler’s article in the American Anthropologist Journal explores the potential role of archaeology in understanding the complexity of the Celtic identity and how it has changed over time from the Iron and Bronze Age to the modern era. The article discusses what is already commonly known to archaeologists as well as the more complex aspects of Celtic heritage that are as yet unknown.

Éluère, Christiane. *The Celts: First Masters of Europe (New Horizons).* Thames & Hudson, 1993.

Not a book per se, Christiane Éluère has put together a small encyclopedia of Celtic archaeology. The encyclopedia is focused on the Hallstatt origins of the Celtic people, the Iron Age, and the Roman conquest. While it is a small and rather unimposing book, Éluère has put together a stunning archaeological guide complete with incredible photographs, sketches, and illustrations of ancient Celtic art, as well as a compilation of quotes from historians who have studied this complex subject. Though it contains mostly basic and rudimentary information about Celtic archaeology, the encyclopedia is an important visual contribution to the field that is sure to spark interest in even the most amateur of historians and archaeologists.

James, Simon. *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention?* University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.

A triple threat – archaeologist, write, and university professor – James Simon has written one of the more controversial books in the field of Celtic archaeology. He delves deeply into the idea of identity and how it is constructed, specifically the Celtic and British identities. His alternative and largely controversial argument is that the Celtic peoples have been dangerously romanticized and are more of a modern invention that a separate and ancient race. Though not necessarily stating outright that the Celts didn’t exist, Simon investigates the differences between ethnicity and nationality. His arguments and evidence have been extremely persuasive for many historians, and this book has prolonged the debate centered on the Celts and their origins

Milligan, Markus, “Major and Unique Celtic Tomb Found,” *Heritage Daily: Arch News*, December 29, 2010. www. archnews.co.uk/world-archaeology/european-archaeology/4508-major-and-unique-celtic-tomb-found.html

This article was written at the end of 2010, and it presents one of the most exciting and recent finds for Celtic archaeologists. Many people are unaware of the belief that the Celts originated in Germany, and this article discusses the archaeological find that took place in Heuneburg in Southern Germany, considered a “milestone in the study of Celtic culture.” While this is a relatively small article, it is evidence of the groundbreaking new efforts that archaeologists are currently involved with in order to better understand where the Celtic peoples came from. Being able to excavate an entire 2600 year-old burial rather than discovering it piece by piece shows the big strides being made in archaeology, strides that can only get bigger over time,

Thompson, Tok. *Ireland’s Pre-Celtic Archaeological and Anthropological Heritage.* Edwin Mellen Press, 2006.

A researcher at the Centre for Irish-Scottish studies at Trinity College in Dublin, Tok Thompson has created an amazing book that incorporates not only archaeology but ethnography, anthropology, history, and mythology among other things. The book explores the changes in Celtic culture over time through these many lenses, giving readers a deeper and more powerful insight into the Celtic peoples. Thompson addresses the appealing mysteries behind the Celts and looks at why, in his opinion, the Celtic culture has been previously under-appreciated. As far as its academic value, the book contains a great deal of research and information that provides readers with another example of mostly unbiased research on the Celtic people.

Comprehensive Research Plan

I will start my research off with four weeks at the archaeology archives at Oxford University in the U.K. Not only is Oxford one of the leading academic universities in the world, they also happen to have one of the best archaeological archives dealing with Celtic history. Some of the most well known Celtic archaeologists are affiliated with the university as well – Paul Jacobsthal, Stuart Piggot, O.G.S. Crawford, and Barry Cunliffe – who would be an invaluable resource for projects dealing with this topic.

The next four weeks will be spent at the Prifysgol Bangor University in North Wales. Bangor is another leading university in history and archaeology, currently supporting two research institutes: WISCA (Welsh Institute for Social and Cultural Affairs) and IMEMS (Institute for Medieval and Early Modern Studies). Both WISCA and IMEMS have numerous technological resources available for use, as well as countless primary sources that have been collected over many years of research. I’m particularly interested in the seminars held by archaeologists affiliated with Bangor University that are combined with guided archaeological digs.

After spending eight weeks working with archaeologists and professors at the university archives, the next step would be to spend the remaining eight weeks at actual archaeological sites: four weeks at Heuneburg, two weeks at La Tene, and two weeks at Lough Gur. Heuneburg is a Celtic hill fort in Southwestern Germany and is the location of a recent find where archaeologists discovered a 2600 year old burial. This site represents the forefront of Celtic archaeological research. La Tene is a dig site in Switzerland that was first discovered in the 1850s and has continued to yield results throughout the years. The final site, Lough Gur, resides in County Limerick in Ireland. A very enigmatic site dating back to the Stone Age, Lough Gur contains abundant megaliths, hill forts, stone circles and more. Each of these three sites is important to the field in different ways, but in a research project of this caliber none should be overlooked.

1. Apples4theteacher.com, “St. Patrick’s Day Short Stories: The Horned Women,” http://www.apples4theteacher.com/holidays/st-patricks-day/short-stories/the-horned-women.html (accessed April 4, 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Holwell, “A Brief History of Ireland,” genealogypro, genealogypro.com/articles/Irish-history.html (accessed April 2, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. SAA, “Archaeology for Educators: What is Archaeology?” Archaeology for the Public, www.saa.org/publicftp/public/educators/03\_whatis.html (accessed March 31, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)