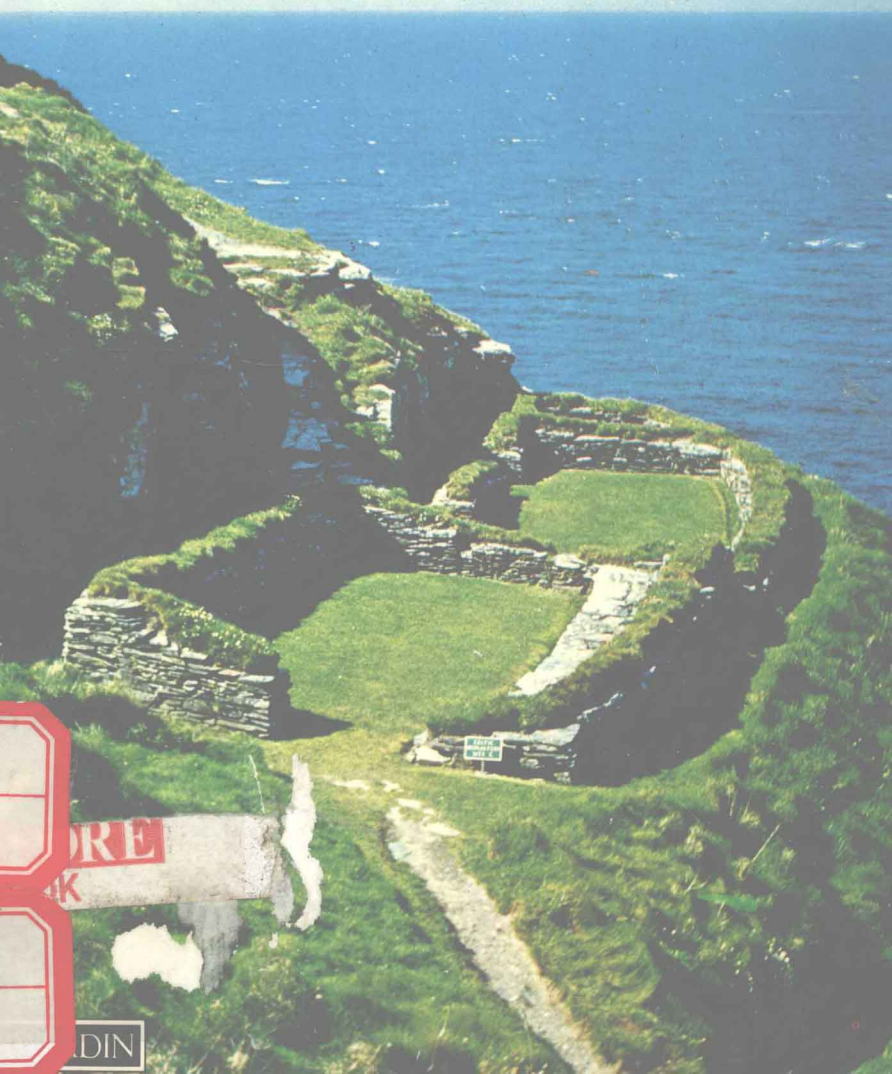


BRITAIN BEFORE THE CONQUEST

CELTIC BRITAIN

LLOYD LAING



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Celtic Britain



Granada Publishing

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A Paladin Archaeological History of the British Isles,
c.1500 BC–AD 1066

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The Author

Lloyd Laing is Senior Lecturer in Medieval Archaeology at Liverpool University. Author of *The Archaeology of Late Celtic Britain and Ireland c.400-1200 AD* and other books on archaeology, he has directed excavations in various parts of Britain and has contributed many papers to archaeological journals.

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Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Acknowledgments | 12 |
| 1 Introduction – the Celts in Europe | 13 |
| 2 Iron Age Britain | 28 |
| 3 The Roman Interlude | 137 |
| 4 The Dark Ages | 159 |
| 5 Epilogue – Celtic Twilight | 231 |
| The Best of Celtic Britain | 243 |
| Further Reading | 245 |
| Index | 249 |

Illustrations

Plates

| | | |
|----|---|----|
| 1 | Escutcheon, Aylesford bucket, Kent (British Museum) | 31 |
| 2 | The Waterloo Bridge helmet (British Museum) | 40 |
| 3 | The Battersea shield (British Museum) | 42 |
| 4 | Scabbard mount, Standlake, Oxford (Ashmolean Museum) | 43 |
| 5 | Anthropomorphic sword hilt (British Museum) | 44 |
| 6 | The Datchet spearhead (British Museum) | 47 |
| 7 | Coins of Tasciovanus, Eppillus and Verica showing horsemen (Ashmolean Museum) | 48 |
| 8 | Torrs pony cap, Kirkcudbright (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 50 |
| 9 | The Ipswich torcs (British Museum) | 52 |
| 10 | The Needwood Forest torc, Staffordshire (British Museum) | 53 |
| 11 | The largest of the Snettisham (Norfolk) torcs (British Museum) | 54 |
| 12 | 'Celtic' fields, Fifield Down, Wiltshire (Photo: Major G. W. Allen: Ashmolean Museum) | 58 |
| 13 | Philodendron, an 'Iron Age' type of pig, Acton Scott Farm Museum, Shropshire | 59 |
| 14 | Set of glass gaming pieces, Welwyn Garden City, Herts (British Museum) | 63 |
| 15 | Iron currency bars, Salmonsbury, Glos (Ashmolean Museum) | 66 |
| 16 | Iron Age pottery, All Cannings Cross, Wiltshire (Devizes Museum) | 70 |
| 17 | Iron Age pot, All Cannings Cross, Wiltshire (Devizes Museum) | 71 |
| 18 | Belgic pottery, Colchester, Essex (Colchester and Essex Museum) | 73 |
| 19 | Spanish figurine, Aust-on-Severn (British Museum) | 75 |
| 20 | Uffington Castle and Uffington White Horse (Aerofilms) | 76 |

| | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 21 | Vitrified fort, Finavon, Angus (Photo: Prof. J. K. St Joseph; Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography) | 78 |
| 22 | South Barrule hillfort, Isle of Man, showing huts (Manx Museum and National Trust) | 79 |
| 23 | Maiden Castle, Dorset, from the air (Photo: Major G. W. Allen; Ashmolean Museum) | 80 |
| 24 | Chysauster, Cornwall, from the air (Photo: Prof. J. K. St Joseph; Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography) | 84 |
| 25 | <i>Fogou</i> , interior, Carn Euny, Cornwall | 85 |
| 26 | Reconstruction of Iron Age house, Butser, Hants (Photo: P. Reynolds; Butser Ancient Farm Project) | 86 |
| 27 | Late Bronze and early Iron Age villages, Jarlshof, Shetland (Department of the Environment; Crown Copyright reserved) | 88 |
| 28 | Clickhimin, Shetland, the 'Blockhouse' (Department of the Environment; Crown Copyright reserved) | 89 |
| 29 | Broch of Mousa, Shetland (Department of the Environment; Crown Copyright reserved) | 92 |
| 30 | Intra-mural staircae of broch, Midhowe, Orkney | 92 |
| 31 | Reconstruction of Clickhimin, Shetland, in the broch period, by Alan Sorrell (Department of the Environment; Crown Copyright reserved) | 94 |
| 32 | Interior of broch of Gurness, Aikerness, showing post-broch structures, Orkney | 94 |
| 33 | The Basse-Yutz flagons (British Museum) | 95 |
| 34 | The Torrs drinking horns, Kirkcudbright (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 99 |
| 35 | The Wandworth boss (British Museum) | 99 |
| 36 | The Bugthorpe (Yorks) scabbard (British Museum) | 100 |
| 37 | The Birdlip (Glos) burial group, showing mirror (Gloucester City Museum) | 101 |
| 38 | The Desborough (Northants) mirror (British Museum) | 102 |
| 39 | The Trawsfynydd tankard (Liverpool City Museum) | 103 |
| 40 | The Capel Garmon firedog (National Museum of Wales) | 104 |
| 41 | Group of mounts from the Stanwick hoard, Yorks (British Museum) | 105 |
| 42 | The Hounslow (Middlesex) bronze boar (British Museum) | 106 |
| 43 | Human figures on bronze plaque from Tal-y-Llyn, Merioneth (National Museum of Wales) | 107 |
| 44 | Bronze plaque, Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey (National Museum of Wales) | 109 |

| | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 45 | Coin of Cunobelin (a) with 'druid' and (b) coin of Tasciovanus with 'seated priest' | 110 |
| 46 | Celtic stone head from Netherby, Cumbria (Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle) | 116 |
| 47 | Wooden male figure from Dagenham, Essex (Colchester and Essex Museum) | 120 |
| 48 | Head of wooden figure from Roos Carr, Humberside (Hull Museum) | 121 |
| 49 | Early Celtic British coins (b and e Heberden Coin Room, Ashmolean Museum) | 124 |
| 50 | Imported silver cup, Welwyn, Herts (British Museum) | 131 |
| 51 | Group of bronze objects from chieftain's grave, Lexden, Colchester (Colchester and Essex Museum) | 132 |
| 52 | Pendant made out of a denarius of Augustus, Lexden (Colchester and Essex Museum) | 134 |
| 53 | Belgic coins with Roman inspired designs | 135 |
| 54 | The Elmswell mount (Hull Museum) | 139 |
| 55 | The Silkstead girl, Hants (Winchester City Museum) | 141 |
| 56 | Coin of Carausius II (Ashmolean Museum) | 148 |
| 57 | Cadbury-Congresbury, Somerset, during excavation (Prof. P. A. Rahtz) | 151 |
| 58 | Liddington Castle during excavation (Prof. P. A. Rahtz) | 151 |
| 59 | Dinas Emrys, Gwynedd | 152 |
| 60 | Chun Castle, Cornwall | 152 |
| 61 | Inscribed stone, Traprain Law, East Lothian (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 153 |
| 62 | Native homestead, Din Lligwy, Anglesey | 155 |
| 63 | Silverware from the Traprain Treasure, East Lothian (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 157 |
| 64 | The Pillar of Eliseg (National Museum of Wales) | 160 |
| 65 | Wansdyke (Aerofilms) | 166 |
| 66 | Page from MS Harley 3859, referring to Mons Badonicus (British Library) | 171 |
| 67 | Memorial stone from Llangian, Gwynedd, commemorating a <i>medicus</i> . Fifth century | 175 |
| 68 | Free-standing cross; Carew, Pembroke. Early eleventh century (National Museum of Wales) | 180 |
| 69 | The 'Drosten' stone, St Vigeans, Angus (Department of the Environment; Crown Copyright reserved) | 186 |
| 70 | Dunadd, Argyll (Department of the Environment; Crown Copyright reserved) | 190 |
| 71 | The Mote of Mark, Kirkcudbright | 191 |
| 72 | Iron objects, Buston crannog, Ayrshire (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 193 |

| | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 73 | Bone comb, Buston, Ayrshire (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 194 |
| 74 | Bone comb, Dun Cuier, Barra (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 194 |
| 75 | Imported 'A' and 'B' ware, Tintagel, Cornwall (British Museum) | 195 |
| 76 | Chi-Rho ornamented sherd, Dinas Emrys, Gwynedd (National Museum of Wales) | 197 |
| 77 | 'E' ware beaker, Buston, Ayrshire (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 198 |
| 78 | Pictish horseman, Meigle No. 3, Perthshire (Department of the Environment; Crown Copyright reserved) | 199 |
| 79 | A drinking Pict, Invergowrie, Angus (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 199 |
| 80 | The Latinus Stone, Whithorn (Department of the Environment; Crown Copyright reserved) | 202 |
| 81 | Stone from Penmachno, Gwynedd, referring to the consul Justinus (National Museum of Wales) | 202 |
| 82 | Stone of Senacus, referring to a 'presbyter', from Aberdaron, Gwynedd (National Museum of Wales) | 203 |
| 83 | Spooyt Vane Keeill, Michael, Isle of Man (Manx Museum and National Trust) | 206 |
| 84 | Abernethy round tower | 206 |
| 85 | Cells at Tintagel, Cornwall | 207 |
| 86 | St Ninian's Isle Treasure, Shetland; (a) inscribed chape, (b) 'pepperpots', (c) hanging bowl (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 210 |
| 87 | (a) Silver pin, Oldcroft, Glos (British Museum) and (b) group of silver hand pins from Norrie's Law hoard, Fife (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 212 |
| 88 | (a) Roman triskele decorated disc brooch, Silchester (Reading Museum), and (b) Hanging bowl escutcheon from Middleton Moor, Derbys (Sheffield Museum) | 213 |
| 89 | Penannular brooch, Pant-y-Saer, Anglesey (National Museum of Wales) | 215 |
| 90 | The Hunterston Brooch, Ayrshire (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 216 |
| 91 | Clay mould for ornamental roundel, from the Mote of Mark, Kirkcudbright | 217 |
| 92 | Reconstruction of a roundel cast from a mould found at the Mote of Mark, 1913 (Drawing by D. Longley) | 217 |
| 93 | The Breadalbane Brooch (British Museum) | 218 |

| | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 94 | St John's Cross, Iona (Department of the Environment; Crown Copyright reserved) | 219 |
| 95 | 'Face cross' cross-slab, Riskbuie, Colonsay (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 220 |
| 96 | Class I Pictish symbol stone, Easterton of Roseisle (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 221 |
| 97 | The Aberlemno churchyard cross (a) and the Aberlemno roadside cross (b), Angus | 222 |
| 98 | Meikle No. 2, Angus, Pictish Class II slab (Department of the Environment; Crown Copyright reserved) | 224 |
| 99 | Arch, Forteviot, Perthshire, late ninth-tenth century (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 225 |
| 100 | Pictish pin, Golspie, Sutherland (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 226 |
| 101 | The Monymusk Reliquary (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 227 |
| 102 | The Norrie's Law hoard (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 228 |
| 103 | Penannular brooch, found near Perth (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 229 |
| 104 | One of the 'Cadboll' brooches, Rogart, Sutherland (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 230 |
| 105 | King Arthur, from the fourteenth century MS <i>Le Roman de Lancelot du Lac et de la Mort du Roi Artu</i> , MS Add. 10294, fol. 94 (British Library) | 231 |
| 106 | The Eglinton Casket (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 237 |
| 107 | Scottish powder horn, 1693 (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 238 |
| 108 | Victorian version of Hunterston Brooch (National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland) | 239 |
| 109 | Columba, from a wall painting by W. Hole (Scottish National Portrait Gallery) | 241 |

Maps

| | | |
|---|--|-----|
| 1 | Celtic Europe in the Iron Age | 20 |
| 2 | The Tribes of Celtic Britain before the Roman Conquest | 25 |
| 3 | Britain c.AD 600 | 173 |

Acknowledgments

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1 Introduction: The Celts in Europe

The story of the Celtic people is one of the most extraordinary in the history of Europe. Celtic traditions have endured despite the impact on European thought and custom of Goths, Huns, Vandals, Romans and several modern empires, yet at no time did the Celts have any sense of national identity. Today the term 'Celts' embraces many peoples with traditions as diverse as those to be found in Ireland, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany. The Celts have intermingled with most of the populations of western Europe to varying extents, and their legacy includes a host of famous place-names. The great rivers of northern and central Europe, the Rhine, the Danube, the Neckar, the Main, the Thames and many others owe their names to remote Celtic antiquity, and the names of cities such as London and Paris commemorate the presence there of otherwise forgotten Celts. From Celtic workshops have come some of the most magnificent treasures of early Europe – gold and bronze shaped into the vitally vigorous art that borrowed freely from Classical and eastern sources and which yet, like the Celts themselves, retained its peculiar brand of conservatism and individualism.

The Celts evolved at a time when written history existed only in the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. Their culture evolved systadially with the development of iron technology in Europe, and their flourishing was the greatest achievement of the European Iron Age. Eclipsed by the civilization of Rome, they enjoyed a cultural renaissance after the Roman Empire collapsed that was to leave a legacy to the modern world. From their lavish art works to their humble hermits' cells perched on remote rock stacks off the

Atlantic coast of Britain and Ireland, from their lyrical, mystical literature to their gruesome pagan religious observances, the Celts always were and remain a paradox.

Europe before the Celts

Until about the thirteenth century BC, European Bronze Age society had been remarkably static and conservative. European culture had gradually been improving its bronze- and gold-working, and developing warfare. Around 1200 BC, however, a series of events interrupted the tempo of life in both the Mediterranean world and in mainland Europe. The original cause for the upheavals may have been an exodus of nomads from Russia, who stirred up hitherto static peoples. The Mediterranean teemed with sea-borne war-bands. For a while Egypt was taken over by barbarian rulers, and even as this happened the great Hittite Empire in Anatolia crashed. Mycenae, the hub of the great prehellenic civilization of Greece, tottered and descended into the Greek Dark Ages not much later, and wild Philistines overran Palestine. The collapse of the Hittite empire had wide repercussions, not least among which was the dissemination of the secrets of iron-working, which had for long been a Hittite monopoly.

Mainland Europe benefited in three ways from the Mediterranean's misfortune. First, the barbarians learned a new technology making beaten bronze work that could be fashioned into cups and shields. Second, barbarian Europe acquired a taste for wine, and opened the door to possibilities of trade with the Mediterranean whence came the intoxicating juice. Last, but not least, an interplay of ideas between the two areas led to the development of the heavy bronze sword; aggression could never be the same again.

The Bronze Age Europeans who chiefly benefited from these innovations were the immediate ancestors of the historical Celts. Archaeology knows them by the uncomplimentary name of the Urnfielders. They buried their dead in urns in flat cemeteries, and around 1200–700 BC they spread out from their eastern European homeland until their cultural influence was felt in France, Switzerland, Germany and even Italy. The Urnfield peoples probably