

The Celts

Advanced

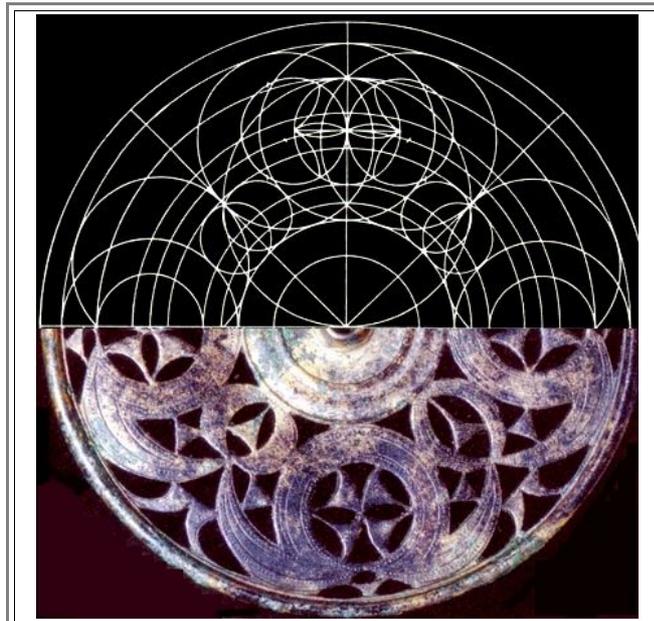
The Celts were people that shared enough cultural traits and some genetic peculiarities to make them a specific culture, tribe, ethnicity or whatever you like to call it. They were about and prominent from about 700 BC - 0 BC/AD. In their heydays they inhabited large parts of Northern Europe and parts of Anatolia, see the map below. However, at no point in time was there a "united" Celtic kingdom or, in other words, there was no common politics or political unity. It is also important to know that the public image of the Celts, and that includes the learned part of the public, has not all that much to do with historic truth. Celtic history became fashionable in the 19th century and still is in some parts of the world. Some modern states or territories like France, Wales or Scotland claimed and claim Celtic origin while others (like Nazi Germany) renounced it in favor of Germanic roots. This had not much to do with historic truth as far as we know it. Parts of South Germany, for example, were definitely core regions of the Celts around 500 BC and later, while Southern Scotland, as far as we know, had never been inhabited by Celtic speaking people. The Celts were commonly associated with the so-called **La Tène culture**, thriving from about 500 BC (beginning of younger European iron age) to 100 BC in what is now Western Switzerland / Eastern France / South Germany. In a more modern view, however, their roots go back to the older **Hallstatt culture** (800 BC - 600 BC or Early European Iron Age).

The following points may be useful in defining Celtic identity:

- Their language. An Indo-European language, remnants of which can still be found in Wales and Scotland. Since the Celts did not bother to write anything down, we don't know all that much about how they spoke 2000 and some years ago.
- Their religion. About which we don't know much firsthand either. The writings of others (Romans, Greeks) about Druids and mistletoes and so on must not be believed without restrictions. But special holy places, sacrifices, and certain cults with skulls must have played a role.
- Their looks and outfits. Male Celts typically sported a moustache and liked to wear colorful clothes. Look at the "Asterix the Gaul" comics - they got it about right as far as we know.
- Their technology. The Celts were the early iron masters in Europe, it seems; see below.
- Their fighting style. They went into battle stark naked, only wearing golden armllets and torques (= neck ring), if we can believe the Roman writers. "[They plied their swords in in true barbaric fashion, and with no skill at all, in mere slashing blows to head and shoulder,...](#)" writes Plutarch (45 AD - 120 AD). The Romans were terrified anyway.

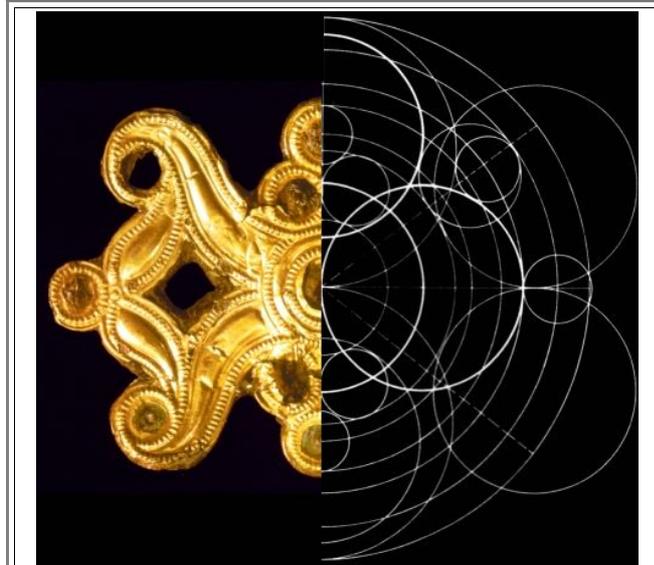


- Their art. Celtic art is almost synonymous with intricate ornaments based on geometry. Their sculptures, however, were not quite up to the standards set by others.



**Celtic Bronze ornament and geometric design
from around 450 BC**

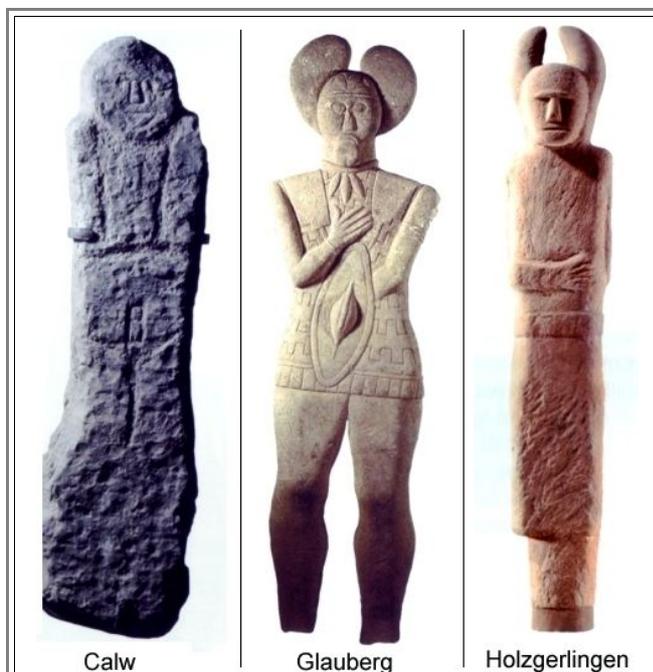
[Source](#)



**Golden ornament from the "Kleinaspergle" (around 500
BC)**

Source: "Kelten am Hohenasperg", Keltenfürst Verlag 2010;
Landesmuseum Stuttgart

- Here are some Celtic sculptures or self-portraits, usually found in connection with large graves. Compare to the Greek / Roman sculpture below. Those Celtic sculptures look to me like sculptures I might have made while trying to do something like those Greek masters. Of course, there is always the possibility that the Celtic artists would have been perfectly capable of producing "classical" sculptures but chose a more abstract and primitive style for reasons of their own.



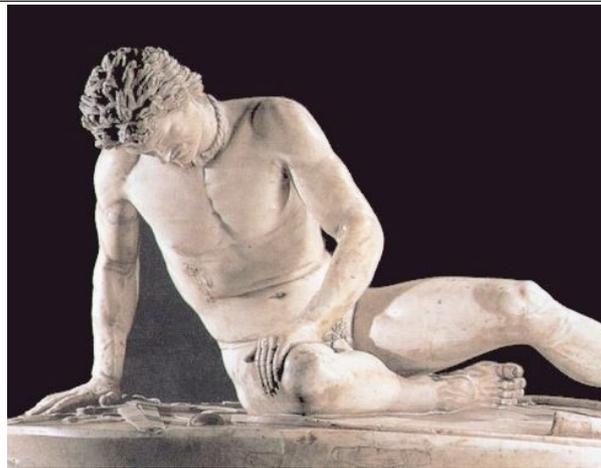
Calw

Glauberg

Holzgerlingen

Celtic sculptures from around my romping grounds; 500 BC

Source: "Kelten am Hohenasperg", Keltenfürst Verlag 2010; Landesmuseum Stuttgart and all over the Net



Dying Celt. Roman copy of Greek original from 220 BC

Source: Musei Capitolini, Rom; all over the Net

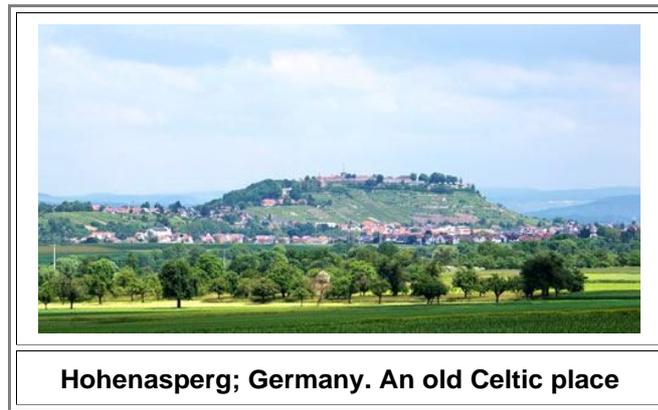
▶ The Celts had neighbors who gave them names of their own:

- The Germanic tribes in the North called them **Walah**, meaning "foreigner", "stranger", "Roman" or "Celtic-speaker". Variations of "Walah" are still prominent today in names for places or tribes like "Wales", "Walachia", "Walloons" and in many German names like Walchensee. Changed to "welsch" it is still the designation of foreign and suspicious people speaking Romanic languages (like the French or Italians) in parts of Germany and particularly Austria.
- The Greeks called them **Galats** or Galatians and that name stuck to the Celts settling in Anatolia for a while. Hence "Galata" as part of Anatolia and possibly the Galatea tower in Istanbul and so on.
- The Romans called them **Galli**, sort of short for Galatia. One tends to see that as the root of the later "**Gauls**". Wrong. Gaul comes from Old French "Gaule". That was how the old French pronounced the German "Walah". This is one of the reasons why the Germans have the urge to [invade Gaul](#) every now and then.

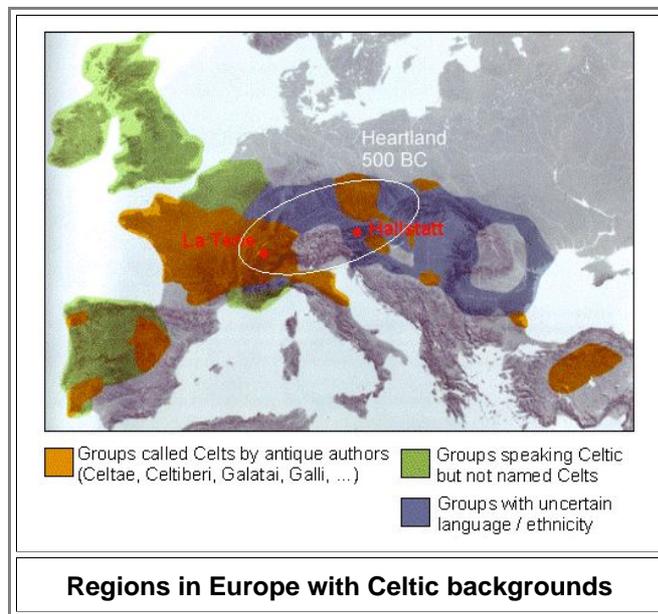
▶ The early Hallstatt Celts burned their dead and thus did not leave many traces. But around 600 BC inhumation became popular. Important people were buried in large subterranean rooms, containing lots of treasure, and the burial place then was covered with an artificial hill or mound that could assume momentous proportions. There were very important people now because after 600 BC some Celtic tribes had erected major **cities**, typically on top of hills, from where large territories were ruled and intensive trade with other regions was conducted. According to recent excavation results, these cities might have had up to 10.000 inhabitants - making them to some of the biggest cities of their time.

The Celts in what is now Austria, Southern Germany and France were essentially ready to evolve into a High Culture

like the Greeks, Etruscians or - later - the Romans but somehow blew it. I blame it on the French. One big Celtic "city" was right next to the town I grew up in, on the "Hohenasperg", a rather well visible "Berg" (= mountain or hill), see below. The so far biggest one, the "Heuneburg", is found about 100 km to the South. There are plenty of tumuli in the general region. One of them, the "**Kleinaspergle**" (little Asperg) close to Hohenasperg was about the first to be investigated in 1877, and the central [Stuttgart museum](#) is full of Celtic artifacts.



The Non-Celtic folks in Europe were likely to encounter Celts sooner or later between about 400 BC and 200 BC. These guys then moved around quite a bit, as the map below demonstrates.



Some of the more memorable business travels of the Celts include:

- The first **sacking of Rome** in 387 BC. Sacking means filling loot in sacks (plus a bit of raping and killing on the side), a fun activity at least for the sackers if not for the

Some of the more memorable business travels of the Celts include:

- The first **sacking of Rome** in 387 BC. Sacking means filling loot in sacks (plus a bit of raping and killing on the side), a fun activity at least for the sackers if not for the sackees. The Celts under their Chieftain **Brennus** won the battle at the river Allia and did some extensive sacking. The picture of Brennus, however, says more about the guy who painted it and the "Zeitgeist" of that epoch than about Brennus. His outfit is purely fictional.
- Invasion of Greek / Delphi in 279 BC. This time, however, the Greeks won and kicked them out. Some of the guys, it appears, then settled in Serbia and North-East Bulgaria (home of



Brennus contemplating the upcoming [joys of sacking](#)

- the
Thracians
then).
- Asia Minor
adventure
around 278
BC. It
appears
that
somebody
there hired
about 20
000 Celtic
warriors to
do his dirty
work, which
they may or
may not
have done.
What they
did,
however, is
to settle
permanently
in Anatolia,
in an area
later know
as Galata;
see above.
The
"Galata"
misbehaved
and were
not well
liked. The
apostle
Paul
specifically
addressed
the
"Galatians"
in his
letters,
quite likely
the people
with some
Celtic
ancestry
living in
Anatolia,
and urged
them to
behave
themselves.

We know about
these things
mostly from
antique writings of
Non-Celts, and we
should take all that
with a grain of salt
if not a whole bag.
The writers were
either from those
who lost against
the Celts, or from

the ones who won.
In either case the tendency is to portray them negatively.
The Celts certainly did get around. If they did that because they simply were blood-thirsty uncivilized barbarians, bent on robbing and pillaging, or because (known) climate changes forced them out of their more Northern habitats is an open question.

After 200 BC their influence declined and they were confined to their heartlands in France / South Germany. That's where **Caesar** encountered them in the first century BC; he has much to say about these encounters in his "De Bello Gallico".

Caught between the Germanic tribes from the North-East and the Romans from the South, Celtic culture went down and disappeared, more or less by assimilation - except in the more remote corners of Europe like Ireland and Scotland.



Ornaments in the 710 AD "Book of Lindisfarne from Ireland"

Celtic and Germanic style mix. The braided bands, often associated with Celtic, are actually Germanic.