

**Celts myths and religion in the Iberian Peninsula and Great-Britain: a common origin?**

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**Celts myths and religion in the Iberian Peninsula and Great-Britain: a common origin?**

**1- Objectives of the work**

There has always been speculation about the origin of the name “Celt”, and many countries reclaim a common Celtic origin for its myths of origin of the nationality. Scotland, Ireland, France, Belgium, Portugal and Spain reclaim the epithet of “heirs of Celts” celebrating the celticity with festivals of folklore, Inter-Celtic music, Celtic congresses, movements, etc. The Celtic League is based on linguistic similarities, and only recognizes “six Celt nations”, the regions of the European west fringes, located in Britain, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, the Cornwall and the Island of Man, refusing the denomination of Celt to Galiza, and other regions of the Iberian Peninsula. In the bookstores and in the internet, there abound books, sites, blogues, on the Celts adding, most of the times, a golden mystic and often a nationalist and racist content to them. My objective is to analyze the mythology and religion of the Iberian Peninsula and Great-Britain that can be associated, affiliated as having the same origin on the basis of new and old scientific theories. I will also look upon the myths and religion of the Lusitanian, a set of ethnic group, family related and celtized by miscegenation, with a preponderant role in the origin of the Portuguese nation and also on some of the original myths of Great-Britain.

**2. Controversies of the origins of Celts**

In the *Priberam of the Portuguese Language* dictionary, **Celt**:1. It is said of the inhabitant of the Celtic, part of the old Gaul; 2. Of Celts; 3 Language of Celts; 4.

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People of Indo-European origin, who inhabited a vast territory, from Turkey, to Great-Britain.<sup>1</sup>

In the Infopedia, dictionary online of the Porto Editora, Celt (Of lat. *celta-*, “celta”) is synonym of, 1. Referring to the Celts, 2. Belonging to the Celts <sup>2</sup>

The uncertainty of the origin of these peoples comes from the complexity and diversity due to the continuous mixture of cultures and ethnicity. From the two main definitions of the term Celt, the first one is given by the Greek-roman authors of the Antiquity and the second is a modern definition, based on a **linguistic, anthropological, archaeological, historical and genetic** approach. Thus, for **various Greeks and Romans authors**, Celts were identified as peoples who inhabited the Europe Continental and not Britain or Ireland.

We can distinguish two distinct periods of the Celtic peoples, through archaeological findings and their dating, bearing in mind toponyms and their migration to Western Europe. **The first** period is that of the **Hallstatt culture**, which extends from about 1200 BC until around 500 BC, and is divided by archaeologists into four phases: 1.Hallstatt A and B - the late Bronze Age (1200-800 BC), 2.Hallstatt C - early Iron Age (800-600 BC) with the first iron swords. 3. Hallstatt-D with daggers found in graves from 600 to 500 BC. There are also differences in ceramics and works of art with elaborate jewelry made of bronze and gold, and stone stelae, like the Warrior Hirschlanden. The Eastern Hallstatt cultural zone included Croatia, Slovenia, western Hungary, Austria, Moravia and Slovakia, and was distinguished from a western cultural zone which includes northern Italy, Switzerland, eastern France, southern Germany and Bohemia that expanded by moving into the west of the Iberian Peninsula, Great Britain and Ireland. This migration was based on a common language that would be the Celtic originated from the Indo-European. The second period of migration, occurred with the called **La Tene culture**, which emerged from the ancient culture of Hallstatt, developed

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.priberam.pt/dlpo/default.aspx?pal=l%u00edngua+celta>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.infopedia.pt/lingua-portuguesa-ao/Celtas>

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and flourished during the late Iron Age from 450 BC until the Roman conquest in the first century BC, in eastern France, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, the Czech Republic and Hungary and that suffered from a rich Mediterranean influence from Greek, and Etruscan civilizations. Successive waves of invasions took place from the fourth century BC, till the first century AD. These migrants were from small independent tribes that occupied the north of Italy, Cisalpine Gaul, and northwest of the Iberian Peninsula. The indigenous peoples were dominated, and were taught their language, customs, and religion derived from the Celt. Druidism was common to all Celtic groups.

Broadly speaking, “Celt” is the denomination given to the set of peoples and tribes of the Indo-European linguistic family which spread, from 2000 BC, through most part of the northwest of Europe and whose domain in 5<sup>th</sup> century BC embraced the Iberian Peninsula, Ireland and England, and Minor Asia, where they were known as Galatians. **Archaeologists** denominated Celts as the peoples who shared the same culture and a specific style of art associated to the cultures of **Hallstatt** and **La Tène**, and who proceeded from the mixture of descendants of the Danubian Neolithic farmers and shepherds from the steppes. The peoples of the continental Europe, Ireland and the British Islands define themselves as Celts as they feel they share these cultures. There were many tribal groups we can identify as Celts such as, the Britons, Gallic, Celtiberians Scots, Eburones, Hollanders, Belgians, Galatians, Trinovantes, Caledonians, Lusitanian, and so on...Many of these groups originated the name of Roman provinces in Europe, and consequently some of its medieval and modern state-nations. By virtue of the Ireland isolation until the seventeenth century, Celtic groups preserved their roots and traditions there as well as linguistic traits and toponymics.

Recently, in 2004, **genetic studies** carried by Daniel Bradley, of the Trinity College de Dublin, challenged these ideas by proving that the genetic ties between the inhabitants of Celtic areas of Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Brittany and Cornwall are very strong and that, among all other peoples of Europe, the closest genetic traits of these are located in Iberian Peninsula. Daniel Bradley proposes, similarly, a previous origin of at least 6000 years to the communities of the Atlantic coast. Migratory groups that gave rise to the Celtic peoples of northwestern Europe would have left the Atlantic coast of the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the last Ice Age and occupied lands, recently freed from the ice

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cover in northwestern Europe, spreading later to the more continental areas distant from the sea.<sup>3</sup>

" Early historians believed the Celts - thought to have come from an area to the east of modern France and south of Germany - invaded the Atlantic islands around 2 500 years ago. But archaeologists have recently questioned that theory and now Bradley, from Trinity College Dublin, and his team, say DNA evidence supports their thinking. Affinities don't point eastwards to a shared origin. Geneticists used DNA samples from people living in Celtic nations and compared the genetic traits with those of people in other parts of Europe. The study showed people in Celtic areas: Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Brittany and Cornwall, had strong genetic ties, but that this heritage had more in common with people from the Iberian Peninsula."What we would propose is that this commonality among the Atlantic facade is much older... 6000 years ago or earlier," Bradley told Reuters. He said people may have moved up from areas around modern-day Portugal and Spain at the end of the Ice Age. The similarities between Atlantic "Celts" could also suggest these areas had good levels of communications with one another, he added."

The geneticist Bryan Sykes, also confirms this theory in his book *Blood of the Isles* (2006), from a study conducted in 2006 by a team of geneticists at Oxford University, with DNA samples collected from 10,000 volunteers in the UK and Ireland. He concluded that the Celts, who inhabited these lands, Scottish, Welsh and Irish, were descendants of the Celts in the Iberian Peninsula who migrated to the British Isles and Ireland between 4000 and 5000 a. C.<sup>4</sup>

"The Celts of Ireland and the Western Isles are not, as far as I can see from the genetic evidence, related to the Celts who spread south and east to Italy, Greece and Turkey from the heartlands of Hallstatt and La Tene...during the first millennium BC...The genetic evidence shows that a large proportion of Irish Celts, on both the male and female side, did arrive from Iberia at or about the same time as farming reached the Isles. (...)The connection to Spain is also there in the myth of Brutus.... This too may be the faint echo of the same origin myth as the Milesian Irish and the connection to Iberia is almost as strong in the British regions as it is in Ireland. (...)"

Another Oxford University geneticist Stephen Oppenheimer, supports this theory in his book *The Origins of the British* (2006). These studies also led to the conclusion that the early Celts had their origin not in Central Europe, but among people who took refuge in the Iberian Peninsula during the last Ice Age. Studies at the University of Wales argued that the inscriptions on stellae found in the southwest of the Iberian Peninsula show that the Celts of Wales came from southern Portugal and southwestern Spain.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/1211427/posts>

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bryan\\_Sykes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bryan_Sykes)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/stephenoppenheimer/origins\\_of\\_the\\_british.html](http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/stephenoppenheimer/origins_of_the_british.html)

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“And what of the Celts we know – the Irish, Scots and Welsh? Scholars have traditionally placed their origins in Iron Age Central Europe, but Oppenheimer’s new data clearly show that the Welsh, Irish and other Atlantic fringe peoples derive from Ice Age refugees in the Basque country and Spain. They came by an Atlantic coastal route many thousands of years ago, though the Celtic languages we know of today were brought in by later migrations, following the same route, during Neolithic times. “

It is based on these ideas, recently divulged, that I propose to decompose, in a generic way, some aspects of religious and mythical aspects of the Celts that would be the common prerogative of the people living in Iberian Peninsula and in Britain at these times. But first, I need to enliven the concept of the Celts given by the authors of the Greek-Roman antiquity.

**3. The Celts and the Greco-Latin authors**

The Romans and Greeks were authors of many descriptions and stories, which have been preserved until today, about the Celtic sorting them in three distinct ways:

1. Celtic (Latin *Celtae* in Greek *Κελτοί*, transl. *Keltoi*);
2. Galatians (*Galatae* in Latin, Greek *Γαλάται*, transl. *Galatai*);
3. Gauls (Latin *Gallai*, *galli*; Greek *Γάλλοι*, transl. *Gallois*)

Until the time of Caesar, they were taken as Germans. The Romans called the Celts of the European continent as *celtae*; the Celts of Ireland and the British Isles, were never called as Celts, by Romans or even by themselves, but of Hibernia (Hibernian) and *Britanni* and only began to be called Celts in the sixteenth century. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Greek historian Hecataeus of Miletus, made the first literary reference to the Celts (*Κελτοί*), referring to the origin of the Ligurian coast as "Keltika". He believed that the land formed a disk surrounded by ocean and river that were divided into four quadrants determined by the Mediterranean and Black Seas (west-east) and Istros rivers (Danube) and Nile (north-south). For this author, there was nothing west of the Pillars of Hercules (Gibraltar) and south of Tartessos (Spain). He states that the Celtic country was close to Massalia (Marseille), a colony of Greek merchants. He refers to Narbonne (Narbonne) as a city of commerce and Celtic Nirax (Norea, Austria) as a Celtic city.

In the fifth century BC Herodotus of Halicarnassus, considered as the "father of history" by Cicero, located the Celts beyond the Pillars of Hercules as neighbors of Coni,

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inhabitants of the regions of Alentejo and Algarve, southern Portugal, on a date prior to the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, before they were fully integrated into the Roman province of Lusitania,

"The Ister River is born in the land of the Keltoi in the city of Pyrene and runs through the center of Europe. The Keltoi live beyond the Pillars of Hercules, they are neighbors to the Kynesioi and are the most western of all nations which inhabit Europe. And they also, stretch across Europe to the borders of Scythia (Eurasia)."

After him, Plato commented on the warrior mentality and taste of alcoholic beverages by Celtic. Estrabon of Amasa, a Greek geographer and contemporary of Tito Livio quoted Eratosthenes, a Greek astronomer from the third century BC, that located the Celts in Western Europe,

"Eratosthenes says that up to Gades (Cadiz), the exterior (Iberia) is inhabited by the Galatians ,and if the western part of Europe is occupied by them ,he forgot them in his description of Iberia as he never alludes to the Galatians (...) "Ephorus, in his reports, makes Celtic is so excessive in its size, which he attributes to the regions of most of the Celtic regions, as far as Gades, what we now call the Iberian Peninsula."

In his book, *Historical Memories*, Estrabón, dedicates a chapter to the Lusitania,

"North of the Tagus is Lusitania, occupied by the most powerful people among all the Iberians, who have maintained a long war against the Romans. It is bordered to the south by the Tagus (Tejo). Lusitania is a very fertile country, cut by large and small rivers most of them navigable. The best known, beyond the Tagus (Tejo) are (Mondego) and Vaccua (Vouga). The northern boundary is the Durius (Douro). Lusitania was home to several people who had different names. Each formed a small republic, which had its own laws, traditions and customs. It is occupied by about 50 different people. The Lusitanos are adept of ambushes; they are agile, clever and devious. (g.) All the inhabitants of the mountain are sober, drink water, sleep on the floor and wear long hair (... )".

Políbio and Posidonius of Apamea also mention the Celts according to later authors. Already in the first century BC, Diodorus Siculus refers to the difference of the names given to Celtic by Romans and Greeks:

"And now, it is useful to distinguish which is unknown to many: The people who dwell within, above Massalia, the slopes of the Alps, and on this side of the Pyrenees mountains are called Celts, while the people that are set up this Celtic land, in parts which extend to the north, both along the ocean and along the Mountain Hercinian, and all people who come after them, as far as Scythia, are known as Gauls, Romans however, include all these nations under a single name, calling them one and all of Gauls."

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<sup>6</sup> Heródoto, v, 49 <http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtas>

<sup>7</sup> <http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtas>

<sup>8</sup> <http://imperialromano-marius70.blogspot.com/2005/07/lusitnia-estrabo.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtas>

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This author, wrote the first known biography of Viriato, one of the best known Lusitanian heroes and he considers the Lusitanian as Celtic, adding,

"They are the strongest among the Iberians "and" the bravest of all the Cimbri (Germanic or Celtic)"<sup>10</sup>

Julius Caesar, Roman pro-consul, reports the military conquest of all Gaul, with the exception of the Province Narbonensis, now Provence, in his work, *De Bello Gallico*. Caesar was the first author to distinguish between the Celts and the Germans, by the language. He commented that the Helvetii from Switzerland and southern Germany used the Greek alphabet to record the population census and the druids refused to register in writing, their verses, but they were using the Greek alphabet for the public and personal transactions. The people who lived on the right side of the Rhine, the Celtic lands of the North, called themselves Germans and Swabians. This author identified the territory of the Channel to Lugdunum (Lyon), as being inhabited by Celts or Gauls. Tito Livio, in *his History of Rome*, describes the character of the Lusitanian as mercenaries in the service of Hasdrubal a Carthaginian general in the war against the Romans, in the Second Punic War,

"Agile, warlike, restless. The Hispania is distinct from Italica, more ready for war because of the rough terrain and the genius of men. ",<sup>11</sup>

In Plinio, the Elder there are many references to the Celtic world, the Lusitania and the Druids who used medicinal plants such as mistletoe oak, or Licorice verbena and their rituals. After the Roman occupation, the Roman province of Lusitania retains the name, but little is said about the Lusitanian. Most of the Celtic tribes were assimilated by the Romans, preserving much of their livelihood, despite the invasion and subsequent acculturation with Christianization. Romanization is effective from the first century BC on, with the conquest of Gaul by Julius Caesar, and Brittany in the first century AD by Emperor Claudius. Only the regions of Ireland and northern Scotland were left out from the influence of the Roman Empire.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lusitanos>.

<sup>11</sup> [http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invas%C3%A3o\\_romana\\_da\\_pen%C3%ADnsula\\_Ib%C3%A9rica](http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invas%C3%A3o_romana_da_pen%C3%ADnsula_Ib%C3%A9rica)

#### 4. Religions and myths

There is a rich mythology of Irish and British origin. We may refer to the Irish hero Cú Chulainn, who faces the forces of Queen Maeve, to defend his county. Another basic narrative is that of *Book of Invasions*, which tells the legend of the sons of Mile Espáine, the soldier of Hispania, or Milesius, the ancestor of the inhabitants of Ireland, who represent the Goidelic Celts. As for the British, there is always the legendary King Arthur and Boadicea who fought against the Romans. Another myth in Britain, arguably one of the oldest in Western Europe, but of which little is known, is the myth of Cernunnos, also called Slough Feg or horned God. He seems to be the god of fertility and prosperity but is also known as god of the underworld. In Cumbria and Westmorland, it is called Belatucrados the Shiny. The annual calendar had also several mystical festivals like Imbolc, celebrated on February 2 and the Belthane May 1, as well as celebrations of the equinoxes and solstices. Among the deities there is Taitiu and Macha, adored in the region of Ulster, the goddess of nature, and Epona, the goddess of horses.

As for **Lusitania**, its name is presumably taken from the name of worshipers of the god Lug, which means light, bright. They called this part of Lusitania as the land of light. The Romans translated it into Lug, lux. Another myth is that of Lusitanian Chief Viriato. Zephyr is also a god of the west wind, and announcing spring. There are numerous gods in the Lusitanian mythology such as Atégina, identified by the Romans as Prosepina. With Endovelicus, she may have been the main deity of a Trinity, south of the Tagus. Endovelicus was the best known of the Gods of the Lusitania. Recent investigations show that Endovelicus is present in a larger geographic area than previously thought. Leite de Vasconcelos explained that the Celtic name Andevellicus, is compared with Welsh and Breton names, giving him the meaning of "Very Good God, "the same epithet of the Irish god Dagda. Even the Romans worshiped him for his ability to protect. Archangel Michael has the role of Endovelicus as a patron of Portugal. There were others like Ares Lusitani, Revalanganiteco, Ilurbeda, Trebaruna, Borman, Navia and Taogonebiago.

There are many issues to be raised about a common origin of these populations and in my view, there is a common core that existed and persisted. We must rescue this

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common past, for its historical and mythological relevance. This mythic consciousness is at its highest nowadays as we question Celtic mythology and its mysteries. Although much of its speculation is unreliable, it still fascinates and attracts us. The myth is a narrative that revives a primeval reality.

For Mircea Eliade, Romanian philosopher, the myth is a vital ingredient of human civilization, that far from being a vain fable is instead a living reality, is not an abstract theory or an artistic fantasy, but a true encoding of primitive religion and practical wisdom. "<sup>12</sup>

We should not ignore the mythology of the past as we face the future.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.mundodosfilosofos.com.br/mito.htm>