

# The celtic people: culture



## **Celtic People Culture**

There is a considerable amount of confusion and discussion about the origins, lifestyle, and culture of the Celtic people, also known as Gauls. The reason for the historical confusion and conjecture is that the Ancient Celtic people did not keep written records or documents about themselves or their culture.

The Celts believed that writing was for the weak-minded. Information about the Ancient Celts has been pieced together from archeological evidence and the historical accounts from other civilizations and cultures about the Celtic people. Predictably, this means that there are many varying ideas and schools of thought on this ancient group of people. Despite the varying information, I chose the Celts because I find their religion interesting and mysterious.

Archaeologists believe that the first direct descendants of the Celts can be traced back to approximately 1000 B. C., which was also the European Bronze Age. These people were called the Urnfield people and were residing in Southern Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. They were known as the Urnfield people because of their custom for cremating their dead and placing their ashes in urns and burying them in a cemetery-like field.

The next place that the Celts can be found in history is in 800 B. C. This is the place where history actually begins to refer to these people as Celts. They had taken up residence in the southern Germany's Danube Valley. These people followed the customs of their early descendants, the Urnfield people. The Celts were a tribalistic nation who spoke an Indo-European

language and have been noted to be tall, have fair complexions, and light red or blonde hair.

The Celtic people began expanding into much of northern Europe occupying parts of the land from the British Isles to Gallatia. The Celts were considered barbarians and were feared by other European cultures because of their fierceness and tenacity when engaging in battle. When engaged in warfare the Celts would paint their faces and bodies in order to appear grotesque, scream and yell when attacking, and implement the use of trained vicious dogs.

Despite their reputations as fierce warriors and barbarians, archaeological findings have shown that the Celtic people did possess other skills besides that of being warriors. They worked well with iron and learned to make weapons and tools that proved to be superior to other cultures. They also were farmers, traders, miners, and used iron and metals for other practical purposes than that just warfare. They had their own coinage, invented iron rimmed wheels, and horseshoes.

According to archaeological findings their culture was as rich as the Greeks or Romans. Their women were fierce fighters, given equal status with men, served in government positions of power, and owned their own property, which they would retain even after they were married.

The Celts were very social people. Their culture was very uniform and those Celts traveling from city to city had no problem adjusting to a new city. The Celts also welcomed visitors, other than Celts, and were very hospitable, offering the visitor food and drink before enquiring the reason for their visit.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-celtic-people-culture/>

In 400 B. C. the Celtic barbarians descended from the Alps and overtook and ousted the Etruscans from the Po Valley despite the help that the Etruscans obtained from the young Roman Empire. This barbarian attack and displacement by the Celts resulted in the diminishing of the Etruscans from being a large factor in the development of history. From 380 B. C. through 428 B. C., the Romans and Celts fought fiercely, until the Romans, under the rule of Julius Caesar, defeated the Celts in Gaul.

The defeat of the Celts was possible because of the fighting amongst themselves. Although their culture was relatively uniform and the tribe fought together against outside enemies, one tribe would commit some infraction against another and they would engage in tribal battles, thereby weakening their uniformity against the Romans and other enemies and invaders. When the Roman Empire fell in 476 A. D. Germanic tribes began to invade the lands where the Celts dwelt and many Celtic tribes were conquered by Germanic tribes. The rest of Celtic tribes were incorporated into other ancient societies.

The Celts religion was considered a pagan religion, as were many other religions that existed during the Iron Age in Europe. One thing that I found very interesting was the Celts veneration of the human head. The Celts believed that the head was the soul and center of emotions. It symbolized divinity and the powers of the other-world. They believed that a severed head could move, speak, sing and ward off evil.

The Celts would attach the heads of their enemies to a fence or pole near their homes and when the enemy approached they believed the head would

start crying and warn them of the enemy approach. They believed that the possession of an enemy's head, because of its spiritual meaning, was a prestigious conquest for any Celtic warrior. The Celtic warriors frequently used the severed heads as drinking cups.

The ancient Celts religion was polytheistic and entrenched in mythology. The Celts, as a whole, recognized over three hundred gods and goddesses. In addition, each tribe had their own deities that they worshipped. Lug, also called, Llew, Lug, Lugus, Lugh, Lugos and Lug Samildananch, is a God whose name and references are found through nearly all historical accounts of the Celtic religion during the Iron Age.

He is believed to be one the main gods worshipped by the Celts. Julius Caesar likened him to the god Mercury. According Celtic mythology, Lug was a later comer to the list of worshipped deities. He is described as a young man whose weapons were a throwing spear and the sling. Lug is not only a warrior but also a master of all crafts and skills that are necessary to society. He was considered the protector of the Celtic society and oversees the harvest. He is also known for his inspiration and intuition. He is also known as “ the little god

Another god that was widely worshipped and considered, by many, the main God is Dagda and also known as Morrigan. He has often been compared to Odin or Zeus. Dagda is the god of the earth, treaties, the ruler of life and death, knowledge, rebirth, prosperity, magic, and knowledge. He is known as the “ good god” because he is all powerful and also known as the “ great

father” or “ all father” who rules over the other gods and mankind. It is also believed that Dagda poured all human life from a magic cauldron or cup.

Dagda possesses a magic cauldron whose contents are a never ending source of food and fruit trees that were never barren. He also possesses a magic harp that when played summons the seasons and a large club that when one end was used could kill men and when the other side was used could restore a man’s life.

The Druids were the priests of the Celtic religion. The Druids were educated men who could speak Latin and Greek fluently. Their role in the Celtic society was similar to the Shaman as well as handling education, politics and legal matters. They typically went through 20 years of intensive training to learn ancient verse, philosophy, astronomy, and the wisdom and pantheon of the many gods. They did not write anything down.

They depended upon memory for their religious practices and laws. They were divided into three classes: bard, ovate, and druids. The bards were musicians, poets, and artists. The ovates were the priests, diviners, and seers. The druids were the judges, lawyers, and those who handled legal issues and matters. Occasionally, females were permitted to join the class of the druids.

It was not unusual in ancient civilizations for the holy men to play such a wide and powerful role in society because they were the ones that possessed the most education and the ability to read and write. Additionally, the concept of the separation of church and state had no meaning or necessity in their societies. Nearly every ancient civilization practiced polytheism and

<https://assignbuster.com/the-celtic-people-culture/>

believed that various gods ruled the occurrences in nature that would either bring blessing or cursing depending on the behavior of the members of each society.

Lawful and governmental matters were not separate from their religious customs. The gods must be appeased in all aspects of the society's behavior and actions. The civilization's code of morality and laws were centered on maintaining "good" behavior that was acceptable to the gods or goddesses or punishing bad behavior that did not follow the gods or goddesses' desires and values.

It must be stressed, once again, that the Celts did not keep records of their culture or religious beliefs. The records from this time come from the writings of other cultures, a considerable amount from the Romans, especially Julius Caesar. Additionally, the Celts were a tribal group of people spread all over Europe and their beliefs about religion and their gods varied from tribe to tribe with a few unifying themes, such as that of the god Dagda, priestesses, and the god Lug.

With that said, the Celts religion was very much entrenched in nature. There is speculation that sacrifices, including human, was not unheard of in their religious celebrations. It is believed that the Celts sacrificed war prisoners or criminals. However, there is considerable speculation that the stories of sacrifices were made up by neighboring civilizations because of the Celts barbaric behavior.

The ancient Celts believed in the continuity of the human spirit/soul. There are a couple of different things that the Celts believe can happen to a

person's spirit. One thing that can happen is transmigration, which is the passing of one's spirit/soul in another, being or objects in this world, also known as the Middleworld. The Celts believed that one's spirit upon " death" could pass into another person, a tree, animal, plant or other parts of nature.

They also believed that a person's spirit could also pass into the Otherworld, which is associated with the sea. Those who have died are believed to live on islands or magical lands located in the sea. The belief in the continuity of the spirit is evident in the fact that Celts buried items with the deceases that would be needed by the deceased in the Otherworld. Additionally, agreements were made to repay loans in the Otherworld.

The Otherworld is a place that is a mirror image of this world except that it is a place of peace, harmony and happiness. Those who have passed on to the Underworld experience no pain, sickness or aging. The dead are believed to enjoy lavish banquets and beautiful music. Those who have passed to the Otherworld also engage in sports and athletic competition. All of these wonderful things are experienced while those in the Underworld are waiting until it is time to return to the Middleworld.

Celts did not believe in the external manifestation of an evil being. They believed that people were solely responsible for their actions both good and bad. They believed that the divine spirits or deities did not dole out retribution but allowed one's spirit to develop through countless transmigration experiences. They believed that, at some point, all that is spiritual would reunite with the Eternal Creator.



The Celts celebrated the natural rhythms of nature with four celebrations, but their year was divided into two times, the dark, which was Samhain and the light, which was Beltane. The Celts celebrated The Feast of Samhain on over a span of three days, which included October 31<sup>st</sup> and November 1<sup>st</sup>. Samhain was also known as “ The Three Nights of Summer’s End”.

This celebration marked the end of summer and harvest, and because it was dark and cold it was a time that was associated with human death. Samhain also ended the Celtic year, so it was also like our modern New Year’s Eve. Samhain was the god who was known as the ‘ Lord of the Dead” who ruled the Otherworld. But, there is no relationship between Samhain and the Christian belief in the devil, because the Celts did not believe in a physical manifestation of evil.

One of the most important traditions of Samhain included extinguishing all fires. The citizens would then light a community bonfire. The members of each family would light torches that would be used to re-kindle their heart fires and would be kept burning throughout the year, which symbolized the bonding of the families in each village.

Villagers would also cast the bones of slaughtered cattle in the bonfire as a means to ask the gods to grant their wishes, bless their upcoming year, heal their ailments and as a show of thanksgiving for the harvest. It is also believed that animal sacrifices were performed during this festival for the same reasons.

One very interesting aspect of this celebration is the Celts belief that the veil between this world and the Otherworld was very thin on the October 31<sup>st</sup>. The thinness allowed the dead to re-enter this world, those from this world could cross over to the Otherworld or those that were waiting to be reborn would also do so.

A considerable amount of preparation was done to welcome these Otherworld visitors, especially dead ancestors. Food and drink was put out and extra places set at the table so that those who crossed over would be welcomed and enjoy the hospitality of the celebration. The villagers also left doors, gates, and windows open so that the Otherworld visitors had free access to their homes.

I will address some similarities between our modern day Halloween and the Ancient Celts celebrations. However, I must say that there was so much differing information about the specific customs that I will try to be as accurate and comprehensive as possible. In regard to bobbing for apples, it was believed that apples were a sacred fruit and if the dead would eat the sacred fruit, they would experience a blissful immortality.

Sometimes visitors from the Otherworld were not friendly. There was always the possibility that someone who had passed to the Otherworld was angry or had a grudge against someone who existed in the Middleworld. These “ghosts” could be cause trouble or damage crops. So, the anticipation of Otherworld visitors was sometimes a source of unease or fear for those who were still living.

This is where the idea of treats and jack-o-lanterns comes from. Celts would set out treats in order to appease the dead or to treat those dead spirits who were welcome. It is also believed that the custom of wearing costumes was to blend in with spirits or scare them if they had sinister intent. Another way to ward off angry spirits was to carve the image of spirit guardians onto turnips and set them on their doorsteps.

Samhain was also a time of divination. The priests believed that since spirits were free to enter this world and the veil between the Otherworld and this world was thin that the ability to predict the future, make sacrifices, and implore the gods for the villages needs was at it highest peak.

I know that there were other festival, such as Beltane, which is associated with May 1<sup>st</sup> or May Day and it was really interesting to read about also. But, I know that you wrote that the paper should be brief so I won't write all that down. I did want to talk about Samhain because I thought it seemed to be the most important and interesting of the festivals and most recognized with some of the customs of our modern day Halloween.

### **Works Cited**

<http://allsaintsbrookline.org/celtic/samhain.html>

<http://altrigion.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ&sdn=altrigion&zu=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.druidsofbion.org%2FFactsDruids.html>

<https://assignbuster.com/the-celtic-people-culture/>

[http://altreligion.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm? zi= 1/XJ&sdn= altreligion&zu= http%3A%2F%2Fwww. adf. org%2Farticles%2Fcosmology %2Fotherworld. html](http://altreligion.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ&sdn=altreligion&zu=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.adf.org%2Farticles%2Fcosmology%2Fotherworld.html)

[http://www. catholicexplorer. com/explore4325/atd/how-the-devil-did-satan-t. shtml](http://www.catholicexplorer.com/explore4325/atd/how-the-devil-did-satan-t.shtml)

[http://concise. britannica. com/ebc/article-9370697/Lugus](http://concise.britannica.com/ebc/article-9370697/Lugus)

[http://www. daire. org/names/deities. html](http://www.daire.org/names/deities.html)

[http://experts. about. com/e/c/ce/Celtic\\_mythology. htm](http://experts.about.com/e/c/ce/Celtic_mythology.htm)

[http://www. geomacc. com/historical/celts. html#druids](http://www.geomacc.com/historical/celts.html#druids)

[http://www. historylearningsite. co. uk/fall\\_of\\_ancient\\_rome. htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/fall_of_ancient_rome.htm)

[http://www. ibiblio. org/gaelic/celts. html](http://www.ibiblio.org/gaelic/celts.html)

[http://www. imbas. org/articles/basic\\_celtic\\_deity\\_types. html](http://www.imbas.org/articles/basic_celtic_deity_types.html)

[http://www. marvunapp. com/Appendix/dagda. htm](http://www.marvunapp.com/Appendix/dagda.htm)

[http://members. aol. com/porchfour/beliefs/celtic. htm](http://members.aol.com/porchfour/beliefs/celtic.htm)

[http://www. meyna. com/mayday. html](http://www.meyna.com/mayday.html)

[http://paganwiccan. about. com/od/celticpanth/p/dagda. htm](http://paganwiccan.about.com/od/celticpanth/p/dagda.htm)

[http://www. reference. com/browse/wiki/Celt](http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Celt)

[http://www. shagtown. com/days/celtic. html](http://www.shagtown.com/days/celtic.html)

<https://assignbuster.com/the-celtic-people-culture/>

<http://www.shee-eire.com/Magic&Mythology/Gods&Goddess/Celtic/Gods/Dagda/Page1.htm>

[com/Magic&Mythology/Gods&Goddess/Celtic/Gods/Dagda/Page1.htm](http://www.shee-eire.com/Magic&Mythology/Gods&Goddess/Celtic/Gods/Dagda/Page1.htm)

<http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/Byrnes-celebrations/halloween.html>

[edu/tlresources/units/Byrnes-celebrations/halloween.html](http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/Byrnes-celebrations/halloween.html)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic\\_polytheism#Druids](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_polytheism#Druids)

<http://sacredfire.net/festivals.html>

Time Frame 600-400 B. C. Time-Life Publications 1987. p. 111-118

<https://assignbuster.com/the-celtic-people-culture/>