

Exploring Celtic Civilizations

An Online Celtic Studies Coursebook

Strabo, Geography

Strabo (c.64 BCE – c.AD 24) was a Greek geographer who was born in Pontus (modern Turkey) and travelled in the eastern Mediterranean. His text about Gaul draws heavily upon Posidonius, although he also uses Polybius and Pythaeas as sources.

The following is an adaptation of [the first section] *The Geography of Strabo*, ed. and trans. H. C. Hamilton and W. Falconer. London: George Bell & Sons, 1903. [from 6.4.2 onwards] *The Geography of Strabo*, ed. H. L. Jones. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924.

§ 3.3.5. The Artabri [a Celtic nation] are the last of the people [on the coast of north-west of modern Galicia]. They inhabit the promontory called Nerium [modern Cape Finisterre], which is the boundary [of Iberia] on its western and northern sides. Around it dwell the Celtici, a nation related to those who are situated along the Guadiana [modern Anas]. It is said that this last-named nation, together with the Turduli, went on an expedition to Nerium and fell out with each other after they had crossed the river Lima. Not only did this mutiny happen but their leader also died, and so they remained scattered there. This is the reason the river was called the Lethe [“oblivion, amnesia”].

The Romans put a stop to this by conquering them and changing many of their cities into villages, as well as colonizing some of these cities themselves. The people of the mountains, as was natural, were the first to initiate this lawless way of life: they lived simply and with few possessions, and so they coveted the goods of others, who had to take up weapons and defend themselves, abandoning other productive activities, such as agriculture. Thus it happened that despite its natural advantages, their country came to be inhabited by bandits and barren through neglect.

The Artabri established many cities around the Gulf, which mariners and those familiar with the places call “the Port of the Artabri.” At the present day the Artabri are denominated the “Arotrebæ.” About thirty different ethnic groups occupy the country between the Tagus and the Artabri. The country is fertile in grain, cattle, gold, silver, and numerous other resources. Despite this, the majority of its inhabitants, failing to produce wealth from the ground, passed their lives in raiding and continual warfare, both between themselves and their neighbours, whom they used to cross the Tagus to raid.

§ 4.1.1. Next in order [after Iberia] comes Celtica beyond the Alps, the configuration and size of which has been already mentioned in a general manner; we are now to describe it more particularly. Some divide it into the three nations of the Aquitani, Belgae, and Celts. Of these the Aquitani differ completely from the other nations, not only in their language but in their figure, which resembles more that of the Iberians than the Galatæ. The others are Galatæ in countenance, although they do not all speak the same language, but some make a slight difference in their speech; neither is their polity and mode of life exactly the same. [...]

§ 4.1.5. The Massilians live under a well-regulated aristocracy. [...] Their prosperity has in a great measure

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there is no longer the same attention paid by the inhabitants of Marseilles to these objects. The aspect of the city at the present day is a proof of this. For all those who profess to be men of taste, turn to the study of elocution and philosophy. Thus this city for some little time back has become a school for the barbarians, and has communicated to the Galatæ such a taste for Greek literature, that they even draw contracts on the Grecian model. While at the present day it so entices the noblest of the Romans, that those desirous of studying resort thither in preference to Athens. These the Galatæ observing, and being at leisure on account of the peace, readily devote themselves to similar pursuits, and that not merely individuals, but the public generally; professors of the arts and sciences, and likewise of medicine, being employed not only by private persons, but by towns for common instruction.

§ 4.1.13. But the Tectosages dwell near to the Pyrenees, bordering for a small space the northern side of the Cevennes; the land they inhabit is rich in gold. It appears that formerly they were so powerful and numerous, that dissensions having arisen amongst them, they drove a vast multitude of their number from their homes; and that these men associating with others of different nations took possession of Phrygia, next to Cappadocia, and the Paphlagonians. Of this those who are now called the Tectosages afford us proof, for [Phrygia contains] three nations, one of them dwelling near to the city of Ancyra, being called the Tectosages; the remaining two, the Trocmi and Tolistobogii.

The resemblance these nations bear to the Tectosages is evidence of their having immigrated from Celtica, though we are unable to say from which district they came, as there does not appear to be any people at the present time bearing the name of Trocmi or Tolistobogii, who inhabit either beyond the Alps, the Alps themselves, or on this side of the Alps. It would seem that continual emigration has drained them completely from their native country, a circumstance which has occurred to many other nations, as some say that the Brennus, who led an expedition to Delphi, was a leader of the Prausi; but we are unable to say where the Prausi formerly inhabited. It is said that the Tectosages took part in the expedition to Delphi, and that the treasures found in the city of Toulouse by the Roman general Cæpio formed a portion of the booty gained there, which was afterwards increased by offerings which the citizens made from their own property, and consecrated in order to conciliate the god. And that it was for daring to touch these that Cæpio terminated so miserably his existence, being driven from his country as a plunderer of the temples of the gods, and leaving behind him his daughters, who, as Timagenes informs us, having been wickedly violated, perished miserably.

However, the account given by Posidonius is the more credible. He tells us that the wealth found in Toulouse amounted to somewhere about 15,000 talents [units of money], a part of which was hidden in the chapels, and the remainder in the sacred lakes, and that it was not coined [money], but gold and silver in bullion. But at this time the temple of Delphi was emptied of these treasures, having been pillaged by the Phocæans at the period of the Sacred war and supposing any to have been left, it would have been distributed amongst many. Nor is it probable that the Tectosages returned home, since they came off miserably after leaving Delphi, and owing to their dissensions were scattered here and there throughout the country; there is much more likelihood in the statement made by Posidonius and many others, that the country abounding in gold, and the inhabitants being superstitious, and not living expensively, they hid their treasures in many different places, the lakes in particular affording them a hiding- place for depositing their gold and silver bullion. When the Romans obtained possession of the country they put up these lakes to public sale, and many of the purchasers found therein solid masses of silver. In Toulouse there was a sacred temple, held in great reverence by the inhabitants of the surrounding country, and on this account loaded with riches, inasmuch as there were many who offered gifts, and no one dared to touch them.

of his beaks (for their ships were constructed of solid wood), but whenever their ships were borne near to his by the wind, the Romans tore the sails by means of scythes fixed on long handles: for the sails [of their ships] are made of leather to resist the violence of the winds, and managed by chains instead of cables. They construct their vessels with broad bottoms and high poops and prows, on account of the tides. They are built of the wood of the oak, of which there is abundance. On this account, instead of fitting the planks close together, they leave interstices between them; these they fill with sea-weed to prevent the wood from drying up in dock for want of moisture; for the sea-weed is damp by nature, but the oak dry and arid. In my opinion these Veneti were the founders of the Veneti in the Adriatic, for almost all the other Celtic nations in Italy have passed over from the country beyond the Alps, as for instance, the Boii and Senones. They are said to be Paphlagonians merely on account of a similarity of name. However, I do not maintain my opinion positively; for in these matters probability is quite sufficient. The Osismii are the people whom Pytheas calls Ostimii; they dwell on a promontory which projects considerably into the ocean, but not so far as Pytheas and those who follow him assert. As for the nations between the Seine and the Loire, some are contiguous to the Sequani, others to the Arverni.

§ 4.4.2. The entire race which now goes by the name of “Gaulish” or “Galatae” is warlike, passionate, and always ready for fighting, but otherwise simple and not malicious. If irritated, they rush in crowds to the conflict, openly and without any circumspection; and thus are easily vanquished by those who employ stratagem. For any one may exasperate them when, where, and under whatever pretext he pleases; he will always find them ready for danger, with nothing to support them except their violence and daring. Nevertheless they may be easily persuaded to devote themselves to anything useful, and have thus engaged both in science and letters. Their power consists both in the size of their bodies and also in their numbers. Their frankness and simplicity lead then easily to assemble in masses, each one feeling indignant at what appears injustice to his neighbour.

At the present time indeed they are all at peace, being in subjection and living under the command of the Romans, who have subdued them; but we have described their customs as we understand they existed in former times, and as they still exist amongst the Germans. These two nations, both by nature and in their form of government, are similar and related to each other. Their countries border on each other, being separated by the river Rhine, and are for the most part similar. Germany, however, is more to the north, if we compare together the southern and northern parts of the two countries respectively. Thus it is that they can so easily change their abode. They march in crowds in one collected army, or rather remove with all their families, whenever they are ejected by a more powerful force. They were subdued by the Romans much more easily than the Iberians; for they began to wage war with these latter first, and ceased last, having in the mean time conquered the whole of the nations situated between the Rhine and the mountains of the Pyrenees. For these fighting in crowds and vast numbers, were overthrown in crowds, whereas the Iberians kept themselves in reserve, and broke up the war into a series of petty engagements, showing themselves in different bands, sometimes here, sometimes there, like banditti. All the Gauls are warriors by nature, but they fight better on horseback than on foot, and the flower of the Roman cavalry is drawn from their number. The most valiant of them dwell towards the north and next the ocean.

§ 4.4.3. Of these they say that the Belgæ are the bravest. They are divided into fifteen nations, and dwell near the ocean between the Rhine and the Loire, and have therefore sustained themselves single-handed against the incursions of the Germans, the Cimbri, and the Teutons. The bravest of the Belgæ are the Bellovaci, and after them the Suessiones. The amount of their population may be estimated by the fact that formerly there were said to be 300,000 Belgæ capable of bearing arms. The numbers of the Helvetii, the Arverni, and their allies, have already been mentioned. All this is a proof both of the amount of the population [of Gaul], and, as before remarked, of the fecundity of their women, and the ease with which they rear their children. The Gauls wear the sagum [cloak], let

The equipment [of the Gauls] is in keeping with the size of their bodies; they have a long sword hanging at their right side, a long shield, and lances in proportion, together with a *madaris* somewhat resembling a javelin; some of them also use bows and slings; they have also a piece of wood resembling a *pilum* [heavy Greek javelin], which they hurl not out of a thong, but from their hand, and to a farther distance than an arrow. They principally make use of it in shooting birds. To the present day most of them lie on the ground, and take their meals seated on straw. They subsist principally on milk and all kinds of flesh, especially that of swine, which they eat both fresh and salted. Their swine live in the fields, and surpass in height, strength, and swiftness. To persons unaccustomed to approach them they are almost as dangerous as wolves. The people dwell in great houses arched, constructed of planks and wicker, and covered with a heavy thatched roof. They have sheep and swine in such abundance, that they supply *saga* and salted pork in plenty, not only to Rome but to most parts of Italy.

Their governments were for the most part aristocratic; formerly they chose a governor every year, and a military leader was likewise elected by the multitude. At the present day they are mostly under subjection to the Romans. They have a peculiar custom in their assemblies. If any one makes an uproar or interrupts the person speaking, an attendant advances with a drawn sword, and commands him with menace to be silent; if he persists, the attendant does the same thing a second and third time; and finally, [if he will not obey,] cuts off from his *sagum* so large a piece as to render the remainder useless. The labours of the two sexes are distributed in a manner the reverse of what they are with us, but this is a common thing with numerous other barbarians.

§ 4.4.4. Amongst [the Gauls] there are generally three divisions of men given special status: the bards, the *vates*, and the druids. The bards composed and chanted hymns; the *vates* occupied themselves with the sacrifices and the study of nature; while the druids joined to the study of nature that of moral philosophy. The belief in the justice [of the druids] is so great that the decision both of public and private disputes is referred to them; and they have before now, by their decision, prevented armies from engaging when drawn up in battle-array against each other. All cases of murder are particularly referred to them. When there is plenty of these they imagine there will likewise be a plentiful harvest. Both the druids and others assert that both the soul and the world are indestructible, but that sometimes fire and sometimes water have overwhelmed them.

§ 4.4.5. To their simplicity and vehemence, the Gauls join much folly, arrogance, and love of ornament. They wear golden collars round their necks, and bracelets on their arms and wrists, and those who are of any dignity have garments dyed and worked with gold. This lightness of character makes them intolerable when they conquer, and throws them into consternation when worsted. In addition to their folly, they have a barbarous and absurd custom, common however with many nations of the north, of suspending the heads of their enemies from their horses' necks on their return from battle, and when they have arrived nailing them as a spectacle to their gates. Posidonius says he witnessed this in many different places, and was at first shocked, but became familiar with it in time on account of its frequency. The heads of any illustrious persons they embalm with cedar, exhibit them to strangers, and would not sell them for their weight in gold. However, the Romans put a stop to these customs, as well as to their modes of sacrifice and divination, which were quite opposite to those sanctioned by our laws. They would strike a man devoted as an offering in his back with a sword, and divine from his convulsive throes. Without the druids they never sacrifice. It is said they have other modes of sacrificing their human victims; that they pierce some of them with arrows, and crucify others in their temples; and that they prepare a giant figure of hay and wood, into which they put cattle, beasts of all kinds, and men, and then set fire to it.

§ 4.4.6. It is well known that all the Celts are fond of disputes and that homosexuality is not considered shameful

§ 4.5.2. [on Britain] The greatest portion of the island is level and woody, although many tracts are hilly. It produces corn, cattle, gold, silver, and iron, which things are brought thence, and also skins, and slaves, and dogs sagacious in hunting; **the Celts** use these, as well as their native dogs, for the purposes of war. The men are taller than **the Celts**, with hair less yellow; they are slighter in their persons. As an instance of their height, we ourselves saw at Rome some youths who were taller than the tallest there by as much as half a foot, but their legs were bowed, and in other respects they were not symmetrical in conformation. Their manners are in part like those of **the Celts**, though in part more simple and barbarous; insomuch that some of them, though possessing plenty of milk, have not skill enough to make cheese, and are totally unacquainted with horticulture and other matters of husbandry. There are several states amongst them. In their wars they make use of chariots for the most part, as do some of **the Celts**. Forests are their cities; for having enclosed an ample space with felled trees, they make themselves huts therein, and lodge their cattle, though not for any long continuance. Their atmosphere is more subject to rain than to snow; even in their clear days the mist continues for a considerable time, insomuch that throughout the whole day the sun is only visible for three or four hours about noon; and this must be the case also amongst the Morini, and the Menapii, and among all the neighbouring people.

§ 4.5.3. [Cæsar] gained two or three victories over the Britons, although he had transported over only two legions of his army, and brought away hostages and slaves and much other booty. At the present time, however, some of the princes there have, by their embassies and solicitations, obtained the friendship of Augustus Cæsar, dedicated their offerings in the Capitol, and brought the whole island into intimate union with the Romans. They pay but moderate duties both on the imports and exports from Celtica; which are ivory bracelets and necklaces, amber, vessels of glass, and small wares; so that the island scarcely needs a garrison, for at the least it would require one legion and some cavalry to enforce tribute from them; and the total expenditure for the army would be equal to the revenue collected; for if a tribute were levied, of necessity the imposts must be diminished, and at the same time some danger would be incurred if force were to be employed.

§ 4.5.4. There are also other small islands around Britain; but one, of great extent, Ierna [Ireland], lying parallel to it towards the north, long, or rather, wide; concerning which we have nothing certain to relate, further than that its inhabitants are more savage than the Britons, feeding on human flesh, and enormous eaters, and deeming it commendable to devour their deceased fathers, as well as openly to have commerce not only with other women, but also with their own mothers and sisters. But this we relate perhaps without very competent authority; although to eat human flesh is said to be a Scythian custom; and during the severities of a siege, even **the Celts**, the Iberians, and many others, are reported to have done the like.

§ 6.4.2. After having rid themselves of these enemies, the Romans first made all the Latini their subjects; [they] then stopped the Tyrrheni and the Celti who lived about the Padus from their wide and unrestrained licence; then fought down the Samnitae, and, after them, the Tarantini and Pyrrhus; and then at last also the remainder of what is now Italy, except the part that is about the Padus. [...] Further, those of the Illyrians and Thracians who were neighbors to the Greeks and the Macedonians began to carry on war against the Romans and kept on warring until the Romans had subdued all the nations this side of the Ister [Danube] and this side of the Halys. And the Iberians, Celti, and all the remaining peoples which now give ear to the Romans had the same experience. As for Iberia, the Romans did not stop reducing it by force of arms until they had subdued the whole of it, first, by driving out the Nomantini, and, later on, by destroying Viriathus and Sertorius, and, last of all, the Cantabri, who were subdued by Augustus Caesar. As for Celtica (I mean Celtica as a whole, both the Cisalpine and Transalpine, together with Liguria), the Romans at first brought it over to their side only part by part, from time to time, but

§ 7.3.2. [...] For at the present time these nations [Scythians and Sarmatians], as well as the Bastarnian nations, are mingled with the Thracians (more indeed with those outside the Ister [Danube], but also with those inside). And mingled with them are also the Celtic nations: the Boii, the Scordisci, and the Taurisci. The Taurisci are called also “Ligurisci” and “Tauristae.”

§ 7.3.8. And Ptolemaeus, the son of Lagus, says that on this expedition **the Celts** who lived about the Adriatic joined Alexander for the sake of establishing friendship and hospitality, and that the king received them kindly and asked them when drinking what it was that they most feared, thinking they would say himself, but that they replied they feared no one, unless it were that Heaven might fall on them, although indeed they added that they put above everything else the friendship of such a man as he. And the following are signs of the straightforwardness of the barbarians: first, the fact that Syrmus refused to consent to the debarkation upon the island and yet sent gifts and made a compact of friendship; and, secondly, that **the Celts** said that they feared no one, and yet valued above everything else the friendship of great men.

§ 7.5.2. A part of this country [Illyria] was destroyed by the Dacians when they conquered the Boii and Taurisci, Celtic nations under the rule of Critasirus. They claimed that the country was theirs, although it was separated from theirs by the River Pathissus which flows from the mountains to the Danube near the country of the Scordisci who are called Galatae, for these too lived intermingled with the Illyrian and the Thracian nations. But though the Dacians destroyed the Boii and Taurisci, they often used the Scordisci as allies. The remainder of the country in question is held by the Pannonii as far as Segestica and the Danube, on the north and east, although their territory extends still farther in the other directions. The city Segestica, belonging to the Pannonians, is at the confluence of several rivers, all of them navigable, and is naturally fitted to be a base of operations for making war against the Dacians; for it lies beneath that part of the Alps which extends as far as the country of the Iapodes, a nation which is at the same time both Celtic and Illyrian.

§ 12.5. The Galatians, then, are to the south of the Paphlagonians. And of these there are three nations; two of them, the Trocmi and the Tolistobogii, are named after their leaders, whereas the third, the Tectosages, is named after the nation in Celtica. This country was occupied by the Galatae after they had wandered about for a long time, and after they had overrun the country that was subject to the Attalic and the Bithynian kings, until they decided to settle down and were given the present Galatia, or “Gallo-Graecia,” as it is called.

Leonnorius is generally reputed to have been the chief leader of their expedition across to Asia. The three nations spoke the same language and were the same in every way; and each was divided into four portions which were called “tetrarchies,” each tetrarchy having its own tetrarch, and also one judge and one military commander, both subject to the tetrarch, and two subordinate commanders. The Council of the twelve tetrarchs consisted of three hundred men, who assembled at Drunemeton, as it was called. Now the Council passed judgment upon murder cases, but the tetrarchs and the judges upon all others. Such, then, was the organization of Galatia long ago, but in my time the power has passed to three rulers, then to two; and then to one, Deïotarus, and then to Amyntas, who succeeded him. But at the present time the Romans possess both this country and the whole of the country that became subject to Amyntas, having united them into one province.

The Trocmi possess the parts near Pontus and Cappadocia. These are the most powerful of the parts occupied by the Galatians. They have three walled garrisons: Tavium, the emporium of the people in that part of the country, where are the colossal statue of Zeus in bronze and his sacred precinct, a place of refuge; and Mithridatium, which

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