On The Trail of Celtic Europe

In the first instalment of an ongoing series, Celtic Life International correspondent Steve Melia pedals through the past

Four hundred metres above the city of Clermont-Ferrand in central France stands the plateau of Gergovie. It is a long slow climb to the site where Celtic-speaking Gaulish tribes once resisted the legions of Julius Caesar. Gergovie is the first of several Iron Age sites on my ride across Europe. Since leaving my home in Bristol, England, I have cycled across half of France and will spend the next few months crossing the countries of central and southeast Europe once dominated by Celtic tribes.

My interest in all things Celtic goes back many years. I was born in Liverpool - the first port of refuge for Irish emigrants looking for work or fleeing starvation during the potato famines of the mid-19th Century. My father's family were Catholics, descended from those emigrants. I have a searing memory, from an earlier cycling trip, of the Great Famine Exhibition in Skibbereen on the southern coast of Ireland.

A few years ago, I did a DNA test which showed that I am nearly half Irish. Most of the rest of my heritage, from my mother's side, is Scottish. So, I would qualify as a Celt by ancestry, but what does that really mean? Is there such a thing as a Celtic "race" and if so, where did they come from? Those questions have vexed historians, archaeologists, geneticists, and linguists. They have fascinated me for many years, leading up to this trip.

The word "Celtic" mainly refers to a branch of languages. The peoples of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Brittany speak (or their recent ancestors spoke) Celtic languages. Where and when did that branch emerge and how did it travel to the western fringes of Europe? Historians used to think they knew - they believed it arrived in the Iron Age with invaders from central Europe: the people called Keltoi by the Greeks. More recent evidence has cast doubt on that theory. There is growing support for the view that Celtic languages spread in several directions from Gaul, which is mostly in France today. Little remains of several Iron Age languages believed to be Celtic, but the few fragments we have in the Gaulish language confirm that it was definitely Celtic.

> *During the second and first centuries BC the Roman Empire expanded into Gaul, subjugating the Celtic tribes.*

In 52 BC, a local chief Vercingetorix persuaded the surrounding tribes to join him in a war of liberation. His tribe, the Arvernes, occupied several important settlements, including Gergovie, around the modern city of Clermont-Ferrand.

I approached Clermont-Ferrand from the north, passed the football stadium with Vercingetorix as its emblem, and passed the Place de Jaude, where his statue dominates the heart of the city. I passed the neo-classical facade of the Bargoin Museum and decided to go there first. It was the right decision. The Bargoin has an impressive collection of Iron Age artifacts, including many discovered at Gergovie. It puts Vercingetorix and the Gauls in the broader context of Celtic Europe, displaying their technology and the artistic styles associated with La Tène in Switzerland and Hallstatt in Austria, which lie later in my journey.

Screens in the Bargoin Museum show cinematic reconstructions of the battle of Gergovie. In one memorable moment, the Romans approach a lightly defended section of its walls. From above the ramparts the Gaulish women throw down clothes and money, baring their breasts and leaning over with outstretched arms, beseeching the invaders to spare the women and children.

That image kept returning to me as I climbed the road to Gergovie. It snakes through Mediterranean-looking suburbs and past a medieval village with a castle, before revealing panoramic views towards the mountains of the Massif Central. I stopped to take in the scene and imagine the trepidation of the defenders as they watched their enemies climbing towards them.

The new museum of Gergovie is an ultra-modern glass and metal structure perched on the edge of the plateau, looking down over the slopes where Caesar's troops made their ascent. An animated display shows how the Romans set up two camps on smaller hilltops you can see below. They created a diversion, distracting the Gaulish troops and allowing a raiding party to reach the walls unchallenged. But then, as the women begged for mercy, the Gaulish cavalry arrived, forcing them to retreat and to lift the siege. Their victory bought some respite and fleeting hope for a united Gaul, free from Roman domination. We know all this from Caesar's writings, biased though they are, supplemented by archaeological excavations, which began in the 19th century and continue today.

Some people still question the precise location of the battle but Emilie Pacaud, one of the curators, says the archaeological evidence is now clear. It took place in the spring, and they fought again in the autumn, further north, where Caesar finally prevailed. I told her where I was heading next, and she said: "La Tène? Of all the museums I have visited outside of France, the Laténium is one of the best. If you are interested in Celtic culture, you really must go there."

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On the Trail of Celtic Europe

In the second instalment of an ongoing series, Celtic Life International correspondent Steve Melia pedals through the past.

Heuneburg

In the first of these articles, I described the start of my cycle journey across Europe, visiting sites associated with the Celts of the Iron Age and trying to understand their origins. It was becoming a journey of discovery in several ways. As I travelled between the sites, I was also reading historical and archaeological books and articles, trying to unravel a mystery - who were the people the ancient writers called Celts?

Where did they come from and what, if anything, links them to the people we call Celts today?'

Some of the sites I planned to visit were on my route; others would be more difficult to reach directly. Hannibal used elephants to cross the Alps and join his Celtic allies in their assault on Rome, and I thought I might need an elephant to carry all the weight on my bike over Alpine passes. Instead, I decided to follow the pan-European cycle route, Eurovelo 6, along the rivers Loire, Rhine, and Danube, staying north of the Alps. Two of the sites I would visit by public transport. The first of them, La Tène, was two hours from Basel by train. Switzerland has one of the best rail networks in the world.

In 1857, a local fisherman working for a rich collector discovered about 40 iron objects, including eight spearheads and 14 swords, at the mouth of Lake Neuchâtel near the village of La Tène. The full significance of the find only emerged gradually over the next few years, by which time private collectors had helped themselves to many of the objects which are now scattered around the world. In total, over 2,500 objects have been recovered from that part of the lake. In 1874, an international archaeological conference agreed to name the late Iron Age as the "La Tène period" - a name still in use today. When similarities were found between the style of objects found there and Iron Age finds in France, Britain, and Ireland, La Tène culture became associated with the Celts. Many archaeologists now question that link, but you will still find it all over the Internet, and in the Laténium museum on the shores of Lake Neuchâtel at Hauterive.

The museum's press officer had warned me that the Celtic section was undergoing renovation. By the end of the year, it will house a much larger collection with interactive displays and the latest interpretations.

Despite those limitations it was well worth the visit. I passed through displays of earlier and later periods before reaching

Hôtel Palafitte

the Celtic section. There are well-preserved Roman sculptures and a huge flat-bottomed boat from the Gallo-Roman period. The Celtic section displays jewellery, weapons, a chariot wheel, and three human skulls. The objects found in the lake were put there over a long period of time. The reason for that may never be known for certain, but the preferred interpretation today is of a sacrificial site, where weapons, valued objects - and even people - were thrown into the water for ritual or religious reasons.

Before going outside to explore the surroundings I tried to operate one of the interactive displays. A girl who looked about five (I am not exaggerating) became concerned at my unsuccessful attempts. She asked me which section I was trying to enter, showed me the right way to do it and, when she was satisfied that I was following her instructions, went back to her own screen.

"So, you're the expert?" I asked her.

"I come here often," she explained.

> ***The museum is surrounded by an "archaeological park" with reconstructions of wooden dwellings from the different eras of occupation.***

The most striking of these is a "palafitte" raised on wooden piles, with a flat-bottomed boat like the one in the museum underneath. It stands on dry land, but the originals were built over the water. The Iron Age objects found at the La Tène site (about 5 kilometres east of the museum) were thrown into the water from platforms or bridges built on similar piles; a reconstruction of the bridge where the three human skulls were found can also be seen in the park.

Entrance to the museum also gives you a free ferry trip along the lake to the town of Neuchâtel, 4.5 kilometres away. The next ferry was in a couple of hours, so I decided to walk along the path that follows the shore. Along the way I passed the Hôtel Palafitte, with individual apartments jutting over the water on stilts.

The material and artistic culture called La Tène replaced the early Iron Age 'Hallstatt culture', which was named after the Hallstatt salt mines in Austria. They lay further along my journey. In the meantime, on the banks of the Danube in Southern Germany, lies the most important settlement of the 'Hallstatt period' - Heuneburg - where I was heading next.

From Basel, I followed Eurovelo 6 along the Rhine to Lake Constance, where I took a short cut, climbing over some higher ground to rejoin the route beside the Danube at Sigmaringen. On a river lined with hundreds of historic buildings, Sigmaringen Castle is one of the most impressive, but I was keen to press on - a couple of hours' ride further east lay the "Celtic city" of Heuneburg.

Like La Tène, the first archaeological discoveries at Heuneburg were made in the 19th century, but the full significance of the site has only become clear recently. At its height in the 6th century BC, Heuneburg was surrounded by an inner and an outer wall, enclosing the homes and workshops of 5,000 people within one square km. That might sound small by our standards but for its time and place it was unique. Today it is known as "the first city north of the Alps." You may also find it described as "Pyrene, the Celtic City" mentioned by the Ancient Greeks, and that's where things become more controversial.

In 1983, the village of Herbertingen opened a museum in a historic barn, a few kms from Heuneburg. As the importance of the site became clearer, in 1998 the European Union paid for a partial reconstruction of the original site. It is now an "open air museum," managed by the state of Baden-Wurttemberg. There are longer-term plans to merge the two, but my visit began in the village museum, which contains many of the original finds.

All the displays are in German, although there is a booklet available in English. If you were thinking of visiting and don't understand German, it would help to read up beforehand, and there is quite a lot available online. As Brigitte Steinacher, the curator, showed me around, I was struck by one big

Heuneburg

difference between here and La Tène.

There were craftsmen's tools, beauty accessories, fragments of textiles, and containers of Greek wine, but the only weapons were arrowheads and ornate daggers. They might have been used for hunting or ceremonial purposes instead of warfare, she said.

The heyday of Heuneburg predated the La Tène artefacts by three centuries - it was a time of relative peace and progress. Then the site was destroyed by fire, for unknown reasons, and only partially rebuilt afterwards. By the 5th century BC, it was abandoned. The La Tène culture which followed, until the Roman conquest of the Celts, was more defensive and warlike.

An "archaeological" walking circuit 8 km long connects the indoor and outdoor museums with several surrounding sites. Of these, the most important is Hochmichele, the tallest burial tumulus in Europe. In a separate room at the museum, bathed in an eerie blue light, the burial chamber of a man and a woman in a chariot has been reconstructed. I decided to ride there on the way to Heuneburg.

I found it beside a forest track, with trees obscuring its summit, from where I could hear the laughter of children. When I arrived at the top, I found myself surrounded by about 20 of them from a local primary school. They asked me to take a photograph and agreed to take one of me. They were posing lots of questions when a whistle summoned them back down. At the base of the tumulus, I met their teachers and a guide from the Heuneberg Association. When I mentioned that it was my 60th birthday, they gave me some cake, sang Happy Birthday in German and Turkish, and roped me into a mystical ceremony. I was given two sticks and told to beat them in time as we marched round the base of the tumulus, trying to raise the spirits of the Celts buried there.

The guide took me to one side. The teacher was really motivating the children, she said, but the archaeologists would be unhappy if I wrote anything about mystical ceremonies. "We have to stick to the facts," she said. "Oh, I think the readers will understand the difference," I replied, thinking of Tolkien's comment that "Celtic is a magic bag, into which anything may be put, and out of which almost anything may come."

My first impression on reaching the Celtic settlement was: I can certainly see why they built it here. The reconstructed wall stands on the edge of a precipice, dominating the river and its vast plain, 200 meters below. Behind the wall stand several wooden houses and buildings used as workshops. A larger building stands further back on its own. This was a "manor house" built after the big fire. As external threats were growing, it seems their society became more hierarchical.

Next to the houses, on a panel headed "Heuneburg - the Celtic City" is an image of Herodotus, the Ancient Greek "father of history," who described the Danube "beginning in the land of the Celts and the city of Pyrene." That quotation is the only written evidence linking Heuneburg with Pyrene, or the Celts. Unfortunately, he goes on to say that the source of the Danube lies beyond the Strait of Gibraltar, which is clearly wrong and might suggest that the "Land of the Celts" was further west.

> *Historians and archaeologists have been arguing over the meaning of those words for many years.*

La Tène - Skulls

Today, the Celts are generally defined as the peoples who speak, or used to speak, Celtic languages. So, do we know what languages the people of Heuneburg or La Tène used to speak? The short answer is no. So, should we be using the same word to describe those people as we use today for the Scots, Irish, Welsh and Bretons?

I put this question to Dirk Krausse, the archaeologist who has led the excavations of Heuneburg for the State of Baden-Wurttenburg for 20 years. He pointed out that the term was first used by the Ancient Greeks, then he turned my question round, arguing that "It was misleading to name the linguistic group 'Celtic.'" The main culprits were a Welshman called Edward Lhuyd and a Breton called Paul-Yves Pezron, who were both writing in the early 18th century. Krausse says that if they and their successors "had called the linguistic family say 'Gaulish-British-Irish,' no one would speak of Celts in Scotland or Ireland nowadays. But it is like it is - quite complicated and misleading."

Alas, had I been wasting my time seeking the origins of my ancestors and their culture, here in Central Europe? The picture was certainly more complicated than I first thought, but my search was not over yet. Since my first article about Gergovie, I have been riding backwards through time and that was set to continue with my journey towards Hallstatt. In the next of these articles, I plan to visit the salt mines and museum there and learn how recent history has influenced the German and Austrian view of their Celtic heritage.

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La Tène - Celtic Bridge

On the Trail of Celtic Europe

In the third installment of an ongoing series, Celtic Life International correspondent Steve Melia pedals through the past

This is the third in a series of articles about my cycle journey across Europe, visiting sites associated with the Celts of the Iron Age and trying to understand their origins.

The last article finished in Heuneburg, on the banks of the Danube in Southern Germany. This one will describe my journey into Austria, and the World Heritage site of Hallstatt, which gave its name to the early Iron Age, and a culture from which the peoples called Keltoi by the ancient Greeks would eventually emerge. This section of the ride was one of the most beautiful, and one I was enjoying the most, until an unfortunate incident disrupted everything.

The name of the river Danube is believed to come from the Celtic goddess Danu, who is also mentioned in Irish mythology, although not much is known about her. My journey would follow the Danube, and the Eurovelo cycle route 6 along it, as far as Vienna. Hallstatt lay further south in mountainous terrain, so I planned to stop for two nights in the city of Linz and take the train and ferry from there to Hallstatt.

The Danube flows through the states of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, via some of the most beautiful towns and cities in the country, including Ulm, Ravensburg and Passau. Most of the ride is quite flat, but between Weltenburg and Kelheim the river passes through a gorge and the cycle route climbs steeply over it.

Following a tip from a German friend I took a short ferry trip with a commentary, explaining the history and legends behind the strange rock formations which overhang the boat in the narrowest stretches. One of them is called the Römerfelsen, or Roman Rock. The Romans built a fort here after they conquered the local 'Celtic' peoples. For several centuries the Danube formed the northern frontier of their province of Noricum, which also stretched into modern-day Austria. On the Austrian side of the border the route has been given a Roman brand, with information boards and reproductions of Roman milestones.

> *Before the Romans annexed it, Noricum had already progressed from a collection of tribes into a confederation led by the Norici tribe, which some writers describe as a "Celtic kingdom"*

But what does 'Celtic' mean in that context? This was the central question I kept coming back to. Today the Celts are mainly defined by language. Most historians believe the Norians spoke a Celtic language called Noric, but only two short scraps of it survive. You can find them online: the Ptuj and Grafenstein inscriptions.

Hallstatt

Compared to the spectacular German cities I had travelled through, Linz was disappointing. Much of it is taken up by a vast industrial area known as the 'Chemical Park'. I stopped there because it seemed to have the most direct public transport to Hallstatt. However, when I came to book, I discovered that part of the railway line was closed for improvement works. The journey now looked complicated, with a train, bus, train and ferry. I need not have worried; like their German and Swiss neighbours, the Austrians know how to make public transport connections work. A note on a website warned passengers not to take photographs before boarding the ferry, because everything is timed to get you there as quickly as possible, which it did.

On board the ferry I could certainly appreciate why people might want to spend time taking photographs. The thin strip of the village nestles along the opposite shore beneath steep, wooded slopes with everything reflected in the clear blue water we were about to cross.

The main attraction at Hallsatt is the Salzswelten, the oldest salt mine in the world, high in the mountain behind the village. In 1846, workers there discovered the remains of a grave and alerted the site manager, Georg Ramsauer. Fortunately, Ramsauer appreciated the significance of the finds. At a time when ancient remains were often plundered, Ramsauer took great care of the thousand or so graves his staff eventually uncovered. His assistant, Isidor Engl, made meticulous watercolour paintings of the burial sites, which archaeologists still refer to today.

Since then, over 1500 graves have been uncovered, spanning over a thousand years, but the most significant finds, the ones which led to the recognition of "Hallstatt Culture" across Europe, come from the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age (800 to 400 BC). In the late nineteenth century, archaeologists agreed to call these the "Hallstatt period," preceding the "La Tène period" described in my previous article. As La Tène culture is associated with the Celts, the Hallstatt period is sometimes described as proto-Celtic (or pre-Celtic), although that association has been challenged in recent years.

Hallstatt Museum

Earlier in my journey I listened to a radio interview with Jean-Louis Brunaux, a media-savvy French archaeologist, who believes the whole idea of a Celtic people is a dangerous myth, springing from discredited concepts of ethnic, racial, and linguistic purity, associated with the Nazis. I was intrigued enough to buy his book. I don't accept his more extreme arguments (nor would most linguists), but they piqued my interest. His provocative reference to the Nazis would prove curiously relevant later on.

A cable car carries the visitors to the salt mines up part of the mountain from where a walking trail continues to climb, past the places where the graves were found, towards the entrance to the mines. An app with a choice of languages explains the significance of each place as you walk towards

the entrance. Prehistoric peoples needed salt to preserve food. Trade in salt enabled the communities that lived here to import luxury items from the Mediterranean and develop an advanced civilization of their own. The people Ramsauer discovered, men women and children, were miners.

The temperature inside the mine is about 8 degrees, so everyone is advised to bring warm clothes - they also provide overalls. Changing and waiting for the tour to begin heightened the tension I had already picked up from listening to the app. Our guide, Tanya, had a great sense of drama, switching easily between German and English, appealing to the children as well as the adults. The tour itself was pure magic, faultlessly choreographed with light shows, 3D reconstructions and two opportunities to descend the slides used by the miners.

"Here you can choose: the slow slide or the fast one" she said. Some older people headed for the slow lane, and I joined the kids as by that point I was thoroughly regressing. On the second descent a camera caught me grinning at 28 km/h – well worth an extra €6 for the photo.

Back down in the village I felt stunned. What could possibly top that experience? I

Hallstatt Celtic Burial Grounds

had one more appointment before taking the ferry back, at the town's museum. What a contrast. After the crowds at the salt mine, it was nearly empty. Everything about it screamed low budget. The initial displays were unimaginative; one of the videos was barely audible.

I was on the point of leaving when I peered around one last corner and was hit by an emotional experience that I find difficult to explain.

There - in glass cases - for me alone in that room, were the best of Ramsauer's finds, world-famous objects I had seen online, on TV documentaries and in videos in the salt mine. Bronze urns and helmets, axe heads and ceremonial swords, an elaborate stand for holding other containers, and my favourites: stylised bronze effigies of bulls, standing alone or moulded into a bowl. I felt like running out into the street and shouting to

Karina Grömer

everyone: don't leave before seeing this!

The museum is run by a local association who collaborate with Vienna's Natural History Museum. They regularly loan objects from their larger collection. I was heading to Vienna and decided to contact one of the leading archaeologists there.

I returned from Hallsatt with a sense of privilege, of rich overflowing experience. What could possibly follow that? The answer came a few days later, in a small town near Vienna, when I opened my bag and found no camera, mobile phone or credit cards. I asked people in the market square in my faltering German if I could borrow a phone to call my number. One older woman allowed me to call but insisted on holding her phone in case I was trying to steal it. "I am from Vienna" she explained.

I headed back to where I thought they might be. They weren't there. Eventually a German man in a cafe leant me his phone and we discovered through Google Timeline that someone had taken my phone from a shop I had visited and walked off with it.

I replaced the phone and camera easily enough and reported the theft to the police, but over the following days, I was drawn into a Kafkaesque struggle with banks, insurance, and mobile phone companies. What should have been straightforward took four weeks and endless hours online to sort out.

All of that had just begun when I reached Vienna, which dampened my enthusiasm a little. The buildings of central Vienna are so impressive and reflect such a rich history that a couple of days there can feel overwhelming, so I wandered between them with no particular plan. One of the most impressive is the Natural History Museum, where I had an appointment with Karina Grömer, Director of the Department of Prehistory. Karina has been researching and writing about Hallstatt, particularly its textiles, for many years. She showed me around their Iron Age collections.

"These objects over here are amongst the ones which gave the Hallstatt period its name," she said, indicating a display of pottery and metal objects. Once again, I was looking at objects of international significance, but they felt unsurprising here in such a grand institution, surrounded by such magnificence.

I wanted to hear what Karina had to say about the relationship between Hallstatt and the Celts. She thought that talk of proto-Celts was "scientific nonsense" (though you will find many such references to Hallstatt online.) She thought the later link between La Tène culture and the Celts in Austria made more sense.

But, I pointed out, most of the ancient Greek sources, particularly the early ones, seem to place the Celts somewhere further West, particularly in France. So why do people and institutions talk about Celts at an early date in Central Europe? Her answer reflected some of Brunaux's concerns:

> ***"For the Greeks and Romans, the Celts were strange tribes from the North, who wore strange clothes."***

"There was always an element of 'the other,' a bit like attitudes towards veils today. In science communication, if you say 'Celts' people understand what you mean, more or less. They came before the Romans and were contemporaries with them, for a while. The word speaks to people, but it is not part of our self-definition here in Austria, as it is for some in the British Isles. There have been many tribes here. After the Celts came the Germani, who were misused by the Nazis for their racial concepts. So, in Austria and Germany we don't go in for that deep sense of belonging. For us, it's rooted in the trauma of the Third Reich."

So Brunaux is not alone in his concerns about the potential misuse of 'searching for origins.' By this stage I had read quite a bit from, and about, those ancient sources, which seem at least as confused as the modern ones when you try to work out who or what they meant when they talked about Celts.

The uncertainty surrounding the origins and identity of the Celts has spawned many competing theories over the years. While I was travelling a Belgian linguist, Eduard Selleslagh-Suykens, published a radical new analysis. He argues that the Celtic languages emerged gradually through multiple migrations starting from the Adriatic coast, most of which is now in Croatia. This was timely for my trip as that is where I was heading next.

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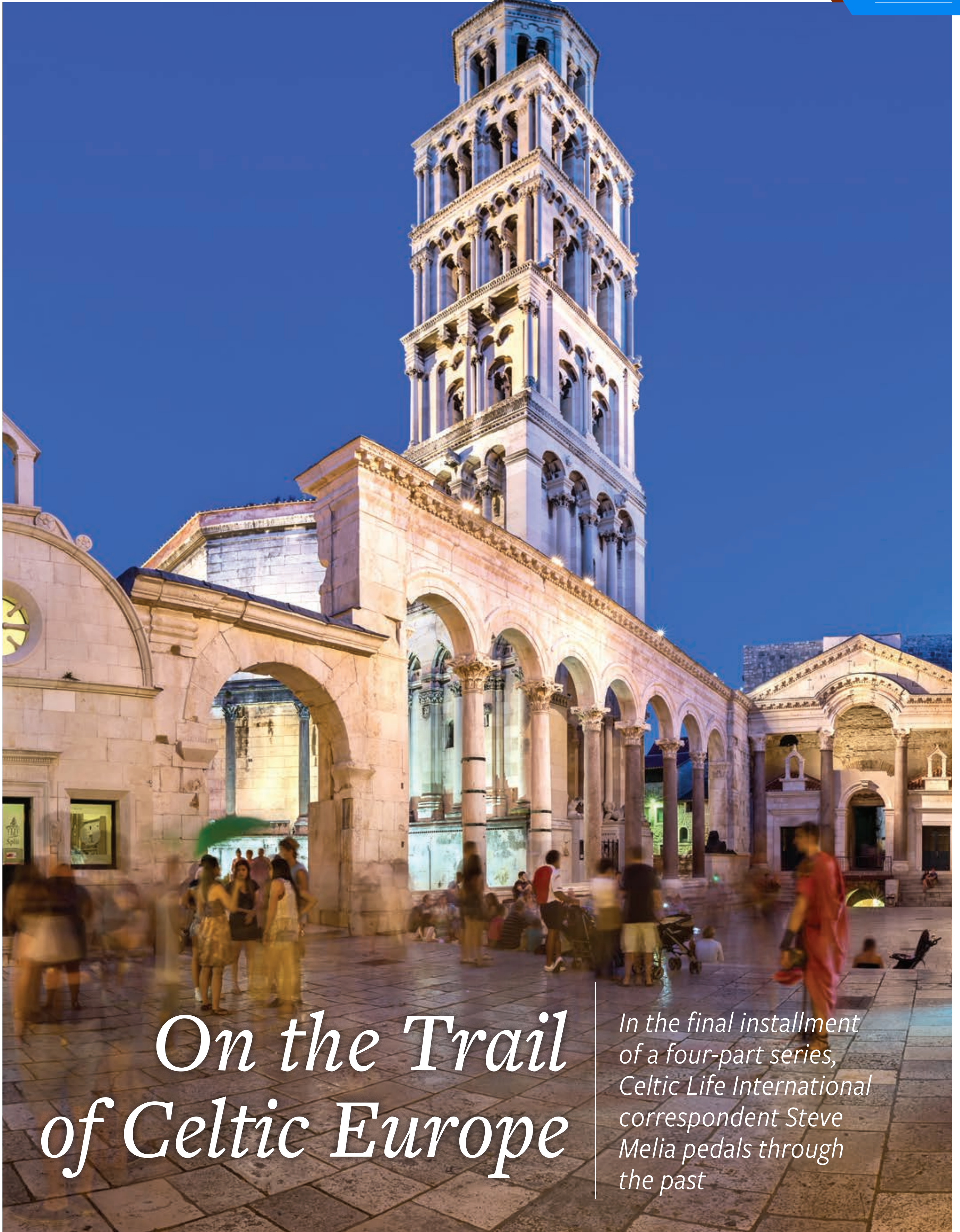


On the Trail of Celtic Europe

In the final installment of a four-part series, Celtic Life International correspondent Steve Melia pedals through the past

This is the fourth and final article about my cycle journey across Europe, visiting sites associated with the Celts of the Iron Age. The last article described Hallstatt and the Natural History Museum in Vienna. This one will cover my journey to the Croatian coast, and will try to answer the question I set out with: can the Celtic peoples really trace their ancestry and their culture back to Iron Age Europe, or is that a modern myth?

Amongst the many sources I read on my travels, two books were troubling me: The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention? by Simon James, and Les Celtes: Histoire d'un Mythe by Jean-Louis Brunaux. They are both "Celtosceptics," but Brunaux goes furthest in attacking the whole idea of a Celtic people or even Celtic languages. James points out that no ancient writers ever described the people of Britain or Ireland as Celts. Brunaux describes the constant mixing and renaming of peoples in the ancient histories of Europe and says that there is no evidence that the languages we call Celtic "originated" in any one place. They might have developed gradually in different places. If they seem similar, that is because they were influenced by contact with their neighbours. This last leg of my trip would illustrate some of their arguments, but also a weakness in that last one.

From Vienna, I turned south towards the border with Slovenia, and along the River Mura to Croatia. The northern regions of Slovenia and Croatia have little of the affluence I saw in Germany and Austria. There were a few cycle routes, but their quality was poor by comparison. I found myself riding on busier roads and poorly surfaced farm tracks. However, food, drink, and accommodation were less expensive.

Much of my ride from France had been relatively flat. In Croatia, I would do a lot more climbing, often rewarded by long views over hills or mountains covered in forests. In the 3rd century BC these hills and mountains were invaded by Celts, according to several Greek and Roman writers.

Most modern historians believe their original homelands lay in Gaul (modern France), from where they moved south into Italy and southeast through the Balkans to Greece and Turkey, propelled by population growth and a need for more land. Some of them settled in the Balkan lands, mixing with the existing Illyrian population and "profoundly changing" their culture according to Jason Abdale, who tells a cracking story of what happened next.

Over the following centuries, the Romans conquered the Western Balkans, starting along the Adriatic coast and gradually moving inland. In 6 AD, the Celtic-influenced Illyrians revolted, bravely resisting for three years until the siege of Solana, which lay later on my journey. The victorious Romans left few traces of the earlier settlements, so the sites I would visit in Croatia were mainly Roman.

Heading south towards the coast I was amused to see the village sign for Fučkovac. I shared a photograph with Facebook friends and then discovered a possible Celtic connection. According to a nineteenth century Austrian ethnographer Josef Stradner, the Fučki people were a fusion of incoming Celts with a local tribe, originally called the Secussen.

"They wear pants that remain open at the knees," he wrote, unaware that this might return to fashion centuries later.

As I explained in my second article, I was running a month later than originally planned, and the temperatures were rising. As a heatwave swept across Europe, I began getting up and starting earlier, but by 10am I was already soaking in sweat and looking for somewhere to cool off. I asked my host in a house with no air conditioning: was this heat normal? He shook his head, replying in broken German. The climate, he said, was "kaput."

My wife had arranged to meet me for a holiday in the port of Pula, where we visited the magnificent amphitheatre and the Temple of Augustus, which houses a small but impressive display of Roman artefacts. I was struck by a fragment of a statue: beside the huge leg of an emperor kneels the shrunken figure of a slave with hands tied behind his back. He is wearing trousers, a sign of Celticity, and a torque, the open-ended gold necklace worn by Celtic leaders. His head is missing, but the scene is no less moving for that.

To avoid retracing my route, I took a ferry to Zadar, further down the coast. It is a beautiful city but crammed with tourists in July. I spent as long as I could in the air-conditioned archaeological museum, which has a big Iron Age section. Many of the artefacts were marked as "La Tène" culture, recalling my visit there in my second article. Some bronze axe heads were marked simply "Celts." It was interesting to find Celtic influences this far south, so I decided to ask the experts for some explanation.

Danijel Džino, a Croatian archaeologist at Macquarie University in Australia, told me that "evidence for Celtic settlement in what is today Croatia is very slim." There is evidence of influence, but mainly in the north of the country. Natalija Čondić, an advisor at the museum, said the 'La Tène' artefacts were probably made in that style by the local Liburnians, illustrating one of the points made by James and Brunaux.

Celtic Warriors Buried at Maiden Castle, Dorset

Steve and Sara Melia

Just as eating pizzas and drinking espressos doesn't make you Italian, the styles of ancient artefacts cannot tell us the ethnicity of the people who made or used them.

As I waited for those replies I carried on riding through the heat. I was following the Eurovelo 8 cycle route, but much of it was on the main coast road, with its tourist traffic and heavy lorries. I was no longer enjoying the experience. I had wanted to finish in Greece, but a friend there told me it had reached 43°C, which made up my mind. I would go there at another time of year. For now, I would take the ferries and trains from Split back to England, where I had read about an important Celtic site not far off my route home.

Before I left Croatia, there were two more places I wanted to visit. The remains of Solana, the provincial capital where the Romans finally crushed the Illyrian Revolt, are hugely impressive, once you find your way through the allotments or the hotel car park which conceal its entrances. Next to the ferry port, the historic centre of Split is a unique example of a "living museum" - it is built in and around the Temple of Diocletian, the Roman emperor who persecuted the early Christians and martyred many of the early saints.

I boarded the overnight ferry to Ancona in Italy that evening. During the late Iron Age, that area was settled by a Celtic tribe, the Senones. They migrated from Gaul in the 4th century BC, leaving the rest of their kindred in the area southwest of Paris. As the Romans also conquered them, they have left few visible remains, but Ancona's archaeological museum has a major section about them. The only problem was, it was closed on Mondays, which is when I arrived. I found it on the side of a hill opposite a Roman mosaic. The back door was open, so I decided to try my luck. The caretaker spoke no English, so I typed a request into Google Translate. Was there any chance of a quick look at the Senones collection? She called another woman, who spoke some English and sounded hopeful. She went to see the director and came back with a bunch of keys, which got me excited, but she shook her head. In any case, she said, much of that collection was on loan in China. If I emailed the director, he would send me some photographs (they never did). Oh well, it was worth a try.

While I was away, England had suffered a record-breaking heatwave but when I arrived in Poole there were fluffy clouds and temperatures in the mid-twenties. A gentle tailwind carried me west towards the county town of Dorchester. This was heaven.

Two kilometres southwest of Dorchester, the Iron Age hillfort of Maiden Castle appears on a long flat hilltop. The road finishes in a car park with a track climbing the last few hundred metres to the top. It is the largest British hillfort, though not as big as continental sites such as Gergovie in my first article. Like Gergovie it was more than a military structure - as conflict grew in Iron Age society much of the surrounding population moved inside it.

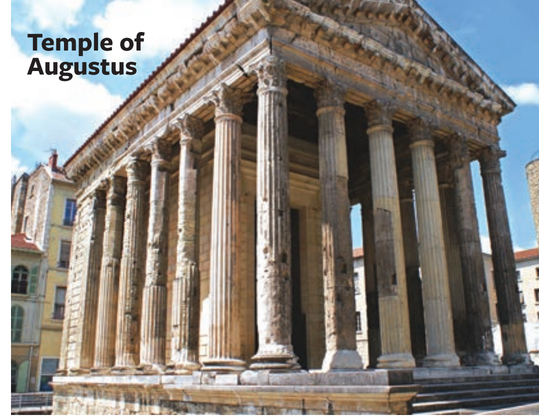
By the late Iron Age, it was occupied by the Durotriges, one of several Celtic peoples who settled in western Britain. In the 1930s a pioneering archaeologist, Mortimer Wheeler, astounded the nation with his findings of a bloody battle during the Roman invasion of 43 AD. They left a "war cemetery" at the eastern end of the site with the shocking remains of a skeleton pierced by a Roman arrowhead in the spine.

As in Gergovie, I walked around the earth ramparts and tried to imagine what it might have been like for defenders surrounded by a bigger, better-equipped army below. Only this time, the story has a different ending.

In the Dorset Museum, I met Kat Broomfield, Collections Manager and Barry Fitzgerald, a volunteer and former police officer whose job used to involve identifying human remains. They showed me their Iron Age collection, including the famous skeleton with the Roman arrowhead - or was it?

Barry explained: "Mortimer Wheeler was a great self-publicist. He wasn't beyond stretching the facts to tantalize the audience. His wife was more competent, archaeologically, but she died before their findings were published. From radiocarbon dating, we now know, the site was almost abandoned by the time the Romans arrived."

Despite growing counterevidence, the myth of the Roman siege of Maiden Castle persisted until a team from Bournemouth University fully debunked it in 2019. Barry told me they have some more "explosive findings" on the way. I asked Durotriges Project Co-director Paul Cheetham if he could tell me more, but he was staying tight-lipped on that for the moment. He agreed that the Durotriges were a Celtic people but added that "the overarching term Celtic is extremely problematic when you try to tie it down in any practical sense."


Temple of Augustus

For archaeologists, that conclusion is understandable. Archaeological finds cannot tell us what language people spoke unless they leave writings, which the early Celts did not. We now know that La Tène culture, with its swirling patterns and strange animals, spread widely amongst Celtic-speakers - and many others. The idea of an enduring Celtic culture, starting in Iron Age Europe and continuing to modern Ireland and Scotland is, unfortunately, a myth.

> *So, the only workable definition we are left with is linguistic - a Celt is someone who speaks, or whose recent ancestors spoke, a Celtic language.*

There is no straightforward link between the Celts of today and the people called Keltoi in ancient times, but Brunaux goes too far in denying any ancestral links. Languages may spread organically on a continent but there is only one way that Celtic languages could possibly have reached Britain and Ireland: because the people who spoke them, or earlier versions, moved here. And we know that people did move in large numbers earlier than previously thought. The latest DNA evidence suggests large-scale migration from France to England in the late Bronze Age, and from Spain to Ireland even earlier. Those migrants probably brought the two branches of the Celtic languages, but we cannot be sure, not yet.

The Celtosceptics are right to warn against the delusion of ethnically pure ancestors. There is no purity in the story of the Celts. Instead, there has been migration and mixing, conquests, and resistance - and for those who search, a few tantalizing facts surrounded by uncertainty. That is what makes it so fascinating. For as long as that uncertainty remains, the search will continue.

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