

# THE IRON AGE

**c.700BC – AD43**

FROM DOT TO DOMESDAY

Prehistory

## III: First Contacts

Around 325BC, Pytheas, a Greek from the Mediterranean port of [Massalia](#), embarked on a voyage to explore the northern coasts of Europe. His motivation may have been commercial, seeking sources of tin and amber. He, apparently, travelled widely in Britain, which was unknown territory to the classical world. On his return to Massalia (c.320BC), Pytheas wrote a book: 'Peri tou Okeanou' (On the Ocean). Unfortunately, this book has not survived. However, fragments are found in the works of other authors. [Pliny the Elder](#) (AD23–AD79), in his 'Natural History', writes:

“Opposite to this coast is the island called Britannia, so celebrated in the records of Greece and of our own country [i.e. Rome]. It is situate to the north-west, and, with a large tract of intervening sea, lies opposite to Germany, Gaul, and Spain, by far the greater part of Europe. Its former name was Albion; but at a later period, all the islands, of which we shall just now briefly make mention, were included under the name of “Britanniæ”... Pytheas and [Isidorus](#) say that its circumference is 4,875 miles.”

'Natural History' Book IV Chapter 30

Actually, an earlier spelling of 'Britannia' was 'Pretannia'. It seems then that, when Pytheas arrived, the inhabitants of 'Albion', as they called the island, were themselves called the 'Pretani' or 'Priteni'. So it was that Albion became known as Pretannia, and then Britannia, to the classical world. Pliny's source was not Pytheas' original text. He got his information second hand, from a, now lost, work by Timaeus of Tauromenium (c.356BC–c.270BC). Timaeus was a Greek of Sicilian birth, as was Diodorus Siculus (c.90BC–c.30BC). Diodorus also made use of Timaeus in his own work, which he called: 'Bibliotheca Historica' (Library of History). Though he doesn't say, it seems clear that Diodorus' information about Britain originated with Pytheas. Diodorus says:

“Britain is triangular in shape, very much as is Sicily, but its sides are not equal. This island stretches obliquely along the coast of Europe, and the point where it is least distant from the mainland, we are told, is the promontory which men call Cantium [Kent], and this is about one hundred stades from the land, at the place where the sea has its outlet, whereas the second promontory, known as Belerium [the Penwith peninsula of Cornwall], is said to be a voyage of four days from the mainland, and the last, writers tell us, extends out into the open sea and is named Orca. Of the sides of Britain the shortest, which extends along Europe, is seven thousand five hundred [stades](#), the second, from the Strait to the [northern] tip, is fifteen thousand stades, and the last is twenty thousand stades, so that the entire circuit of the island amounts to forty-two thousand five hundred stades. And Britain, we are told, is inhabited by tribes which are autochthonous and preserve in their ways of living the ancient manner of life. They use chariots, for instance, in their wars, even as tradition tells us the old Greek heroes did in the Trojan War, and their dwellings are humble, being built for the most part out of reeds or logs. The method they employ of harvesting their grain crops is to cut off no more than the ears and store them away in roofed barns, and then each day they pick out the ripened ears and grind them, getting in this way their food. As for their

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habits, they are simple and far removed from the shrewdness and vice which characterize the men of our day. Their way of living is modest, since they are well clear of the luxury which is begotten of wealth. The island is also thickly populated, and its climate is extremely cold, as one would expect, since it actually lies under the Great Bear. It is held by many kings and potentates, who for the most part live at peace among themselves.

But we shall give a detailed account of the customs of Britain and of the other features which are peculiar to the island when we come to the campaign which Caesar undertook against it....

Unfortunately, the material Diodorus is referring to here was either never written or has been lost.

.... Now we shall discuss the tin which the island produces. The inhabitants of Britain who dwell about the promontory known as Belerium are especially hospitable to strangers and have adopted a civilized manner of life because of their intercourse with merchants of other peoples. They it is who work the tin, treating the bed which bears it in an ingenious manner. This bed, being like rock, contains earthy seams and in them the workers quarry the ore, which they then melt down and cleanse of its impurities. Then they work the tin into pieces the size of knuckle-bones and convey it to an island which lies off Britain and is called Ictis; for at the time of ebb-tide the space between this island and the mainland becomes dry and they can take the tin in large quantities over to the island on their wagons. (And a peculiar thing happens in the case of the neighbouring islands which lie between Europe and Britain, for at flood-tide the passages between them and the mainland run full and they have the appearance of islands, but at ebb-tide the sea recedes and leaves dry a large space, and at that time they look like peninsulas.) On the island of Ictis the merchants purchase the tin of the natives and carry it from there across the Strait to Galatia [Gaul]; and finally, making their way on foot through Galatia for some thirty days, they bring their wares on horseback to the mouth of the river Rhône.”

‘Bibliotheca Historica’ Book V Chapters 21 & 22

As an adjunct to his campaigns in Gaul, Julius Caesar mounted expeditions to Britain in 55BC and 54BC. Although his sojourns in Britain were short, and confined to the south-eastern corner, Caesar’s observations, recorded in his commentaries on ‘The Gallic War’, are first hand:

“The interior of Britain is inhabited by a people who, according to oral tradition – so the Britons themselves say – are aboriginal; the maritime districts by immigrants who crossed over from Belgium to plunder, and attack the aborigines, almost all of them being called after the tribes from whom the first comers were an offshoot. When the war was over they

remained in the country and settled down as tillers of the soil. The population is immense: homesteads, closely resembling those of the Gauls, are met with at every turn; and cattle are very numerous. Bronze or Gold coins are in use, or, instead of coins, iron bars of fixed weight. Tin is found in the country in the inland, and iron in the maritime districts, but the latter only in small quantities; bronze is imported. Trees exist of all the varieties which occur in Gaul, except the beech and the fir. Hares, fowls, and geese they think it impious to taste;

Earlier (Book II Chapter 4), Caesar had made a remark concerning a king of, one of the Belgic tribes, the Suessiones: “Within the memory of men still living, their king had been Diviciacus, the most powerful prince in the whole of Gaul, who was overlord not only of a large part of the Belgic territory, but also of Britain.”

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but they keep them for pastime or amusement. The climate is more equable than in Gaul, the cold being less severe.”

‘The Gallic War’ Book V Chapter 12

“By far the most civilized of all the natives are the inhabitants of Kent – a purely maritime district – whose culture does not differ much from that of the Gauls. The people of the interior do not, for the most part, cultivate grain, but live on milk and flesh-meat and clothe themselves with skins. All the Britons, without exception, stain themselves with woad, which produces a blueish tint; and this gives them a wild look in battle. They wear their hair long, and shave the whole of their body except the head and the upper lip. Groups of ten or twelve men have wives in common, brothers generally sharing with each other and fathers with their sons; the offspring of these unions are counted as the children of the man to whose home the mother, as a virgin, was originally taken.”

‘The Gallic War’ Book V Chapter 14

According to Diodorus Siculus (‘Bibliotheca Historica’ Book V Chapter 28), moustaches were, in Gaul anyway, a fashion of the nobility: “Some of them [Gallic men] shave the beard, but others let it grow a little; and the nobles shave their cheeks, but they let the moustache grow until it covers the mouth. Consequently, when they are eating, their moustaches become entangled in the food, and when they are drinking, the beverage passes, as it were, through a kind of a strainer.”

Diodorus Siculus describes the apparel of men in Gaul, though it seems clear that his comments would apply as well to, at least parts of, Britain:

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“The clothing they wear is striking – shirts which have been dyed and embroidered in varied colours, and breeches, which they call in their tongue *bracae*; and they wear striped coats, fastened by a buckle on the shoulder, heavy for winter wear and light for summer, in which are set checks, close together and of varied hues. For armour they use long shields, as high as a man, which are wrought in a manner peculiar to them, some of them even having the figures of animals embossed on them in bronze, and these are skilfully worked with an eye not only to beauty but also to protection. On their heads they put bronze helmets which have large embossed figures standing out from them and give an appearance of great size to those who wear them; for in some cases horns are attached to the helmet so as to form a single piece, in other cases images of the fore-parts of birds or four-footed animals... Some of them have iron cuirasses, chain-wrought, but others are satisfied with the armour which Nature has given them and go into battle naked.”

‘Bibliotheca Historica’ Book V Chapter 30

Julius Caesar, who campaigned in Gaul during the years 58–51BC, is the earliest source to provide details of, the priestly, Druids:

“Everywhere in Gaul two classes only are of any account or enjoy any distinction; for the masses are regarded almost as slaves, never venture to act on their own initiative, and are not admitted to any council... One of the two classes consists of the Druids, the other of the Knights [i.e. the nobility]. The former officiate at the worship of the gods, regulate sacrifices, private as well as public, and expound questions of religion. Young men resort to them in large numbers for study, and the people hold them in great respect. They are judges in nearly all disputes, whether between tribes or individuals; and when a crime is committed, when a murder takes place, when a dispute arises about inherited property or boundaries, they settle the matter and fix the awards and fines. If any litigant, whether an individual or a tribe, does not abide by their decision, they excommunicate the offender – the heaviest punishment which they can inflict. Persons who are under such a sentence are looked upon as impious monsters: everybody avoids them, everybody shuns their approach and conversation, for fear of incurring pollution; if they appear as plaintiffs, they are denied justice; nor have they any share in the offices of state. The Druids are all under one head, who commands the highest respect among the order. On his death, if any of the rest is of higher standing than his fellows, he takes the vacant place: if there are several on an equality, the question of supremacy is decided by the votes of the Druids, and sometimes actually by force of arms. The Druids hold an annual session on a settled date at a hallowed spot in the country of the Carnutes – the reputed centre of Gaul. All litigants assemble here from all parts and abide by their decisions and awards. Their doctrine is believed to have been found existing in Britain, and thence to have been imported into Gaul; and nowadays most people who wish to acquire a thorough knowledge of it go there [to Britain] to study.

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The Druids, as a rule, take no part in war, and do not pay taxes conjointly with other people: they enjoy exemption from military service and immunity from all burdens. Attracted by these great privileges, many persons voluntarily come to learn from them, while many are sent by their parents and relatives. During their novitiate it is said that they learn by heart a great number of verses; and accordingly some remain twenty years in a state of pupilage. It is against the principles of the Druids to commit their doctrines to writing, though, for most other purposes, such as public and private documents, they use Greek characters. Their motive, I take it, is twofold: they are unwilling to allow their doctrine to become common property, or their disciples to trust to documents and neglect to cultivate their memories; for most people find that, if they rely upon documents, they become less diligent in study and their memory is weakened. The doctrine which they are most earnest in inculcating is that the soul does not perish, but that after death it passes from one body to another: this belief they regard as a powerful incentive to valour, as it inspires a contempt for death. They also hold long discussions about the heavenly bodies and their motions, the size of the universe and of the earth, the origin of all things, the power of the gods and the limits of their dominion, and instruct their young scholars accordingly.

The second of the two classes consists of the Knights. On occasion, when war breaks out, as happened almost every year before [Caesar's](#) arrival, the Knights either attacking or repelling attack, they all take to the field, and surround themselves with as many armed servants and retainers as their birth and resources permit. This is the only mark of influence and power which they recognize.

The Gallic people, in general, are remarkably addicted to religious observances; and for this reason persons suffering from serious maladies and those whose lives are passed in battle and danger offer or vow to offer human sacrifices, and employ the Druids to perform the sacrificial rites; for they believe that unless for man's life the life of man be duly offered, the divine spirit cannot be propitiated. They also hold regular state sacrifices of the



The Waterloo Helmet (150–50BC) is in the care of the

Caesar is, of course, writing from first hand experience, but it would appear, from the writings of Diodorus Siculus and Strabo he has simplified the structure of the Gallic learned/priestly class – using Druid as an umbrella term. Strabo ('Geography' Book IV Chapter 4) puts it in a nutshell: "Among all the Gallic people, generally speaking, there are three sets of men who are held in exceptional honour: the Bards, the Vates and the Druids. The Bards are singers and poets; the Vates, diviners and natural philosophers; while the Druids, in addition to natural philosophy, study also moral philosophy. The Druids are considered the most just of men, and on this account they are entrusted with the decision, not only of the private disputes, but of the public disputes as well ..."

Diodorus Siculus and Strabo echo Caesar, in asserting that it was the Druids who oversaw sacrifices, but they add that observations of a sacrificial victim's death throes were used for divination. However, whilst Diodorus reckoned that the death-blow was a knife thrust above the midriff, Strabo says it was a sword blow to the back. Strabo continues ('Geography' Book IV Chapter 4): "We are told of still other kinds of

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same kind. They have, besides, colossal images, the limbs of which, made of wickerwork, they fill with living men and set on fire; and the victims perish, encompassed by the flames. They regard it as more acceptable to the gods to punish those who are caught in the commission of theft, robbery, or any other crime; but, in default of criminals, they actually resort to the sacrifice of the innocent.

The god whom they most reverence is Mercury, whose images abound. He is regarded as the inventor of all arts and the pioneer and guide of travellers; and he is believed to be all-powerful in promoting commerce and the acquisition of wealth. Next to him they reverence

Apollo, Mars, Jupiter, and Minerva.

Their notions about these deities are much the same as those of other peoples: Apollo they regard as the dispeller of disease, Minerva as the originator of industries and handicrafts, Jupiter as the suzerain of the celestials, and Mars as the lord of war. To Mars, when they have resolved upon battle, they commonly dedicate the spoils: after victory

they sacrifice the captured cattle, and collect the rest of the booty in one spot. In the territories of many tribes are to be seen heaps of such spoils reared on consecrated ground; and it has rarely happened that any one dared, despite religion, either to conceal what he had captured or to remove what had been consecrated. For such an offence the law prescribes the heaviest punishment with torture.

The Gauls universally describe themselves as descendants of [Dis Pater](#), affirming that this is the Druidical tradition. For this reason they measure all periods of time not by days but by nights, and reckon birthdays, the first of the month, and the first of the year on the principle that day comes after night. As regards the other customs of daily life, about the only point in which they differ from the rest of mankind is this – they do not allow their children to come near them openly until they are old enough for military service; and they regard it as unbecoming for a son, while he is still a boy, to appear in public where his father can see him.

It is the custom for married men to take from their own property an amount equivalent, according to valuation, to the sum which they have received from their wives as dowry, and lump the two together. The whole property is jointly administered and the interest saved; and the joint shares of husband and wife, with the interest of past years, go to the survivor.

Husbands have power of life and death over their wives as well as their children: on the death of the head of a family of high birth, his relations assemble, and, if his death gives rise to suspicion, examine his wives under torture, like slaves, and, if their guilt is proved, burn them to death

[British Museum](#). It was dredged from the River Thames, at Waterloo Bridge, in the early 1860s. Made from sections of bronze-sheet, held together with bronze rivets, it was once decorated with red glass studs. It would have been a display or ceremonial item, rather than a practical piece of armour, and it is, apparently, the only horned Iron Age helmet ever found in Europe.

human sacrifices; for example, they would shoot victims to death with arrows, or impale them in the temples, or, having devised a colossus of straw and wood, throw into the colossus cattle and wild animals of all sorts and human beings, and then make a burnt-offering of the whole thing.”

When Caesar writes of Mercury, Apollo, etc. he is Romanising the actual names of the native deities – i.e. selecting the nearest equivalent from the Roman pantheon of gods. Incidentally, Caesar notes (Book VI Chapter 21) that, in contrast, the Germans: “... have no Druids to preside over public worship and care nothing for sacrifices. The only deities whom they recognize are those whom they can see, and from whose power they derive manifest benefit, namely, Sun, Moon, and Fire: the rest they have not even heard of.”

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with all kinds of tortures. Funerals, considering the Gallic standard of living, are splendid and costly: everything, even including animals, which the departed are supposed to have cared for when they were alive, is consigned to the flames; and shortly before our time slaves and retainers who were known to have been beloved by their masters were burned along with them after the conclusion of the regular obsequies.”

‘The Gallic War’ Book VI Chapters 13–19

Everything that Caesar says about Gallic customs might not be relevant to Britain, but what he says about Druidism, presumably, *is* relevant to Britain – Druidism’s supposed, birthplace. Similarly relevant is the following note, made by Pliny the Elder in his ‘Natural History’, concerning mistletoe:

“Upon this occasion we must not omit to mention the admiration that is lavished upon this plant by the Gauls. The Druids – for that is the name they give to their magicians – held nothing more sacred than the mistletoe and the tree that bears it, supposing always that tree to be the robur [common oak]. Of itself the robur is selected by them to form whole groves, and they perform none of their religious rites without employing branches of it; so much so, that it is very probable that the priests themselves may have received their name from the Greek name for that tree....

‘Drus’ is the Greek for an oak tree. The meaning and derivation of the word ‘Druid’ is *still* the subject of conjecture.

.... In fact, it is the notion with them that everything that grows on it has been sent immediately from heaven, and that the mistletoe upon it is a proof that the tree has been selected by God himself as an object of his especial favour. The mistletoe, however, is but rarely found upon the robur; and when found, is gathered with rites replete with religious awe. This is done more particularly on the sixth day of the moon, the day which is the beginning of their months and years, as also of their ages [i.e. timekeeping cycles], which, with them, are but thirty years. This day they select because the moon, though not yet in the middle of her course, has already considerable power and influence; and they call her by a name which signifies, in their language, the all-healing. Having made all due preparation for the sacrifice and a banquet beneath the trees, they bring thither two white bulls, the horns of which are bound then for the first time. Clad in a white robe the priest ascends the tree, and cuts the mistletoe with a golden sickle, which is received by others in a white cloak. They then immolate the victims, offering up their prayers that God will render this gift of his propitious to those to whom he has so granted it. It is the belief with them that the mistletoe, taken in drink, will impart fecundity to all animals that are barren, and that it is an antidote for all poisons. Such are the religious feelings which we find entertained towards trifling objects among nearly all nations.”

‘Natural History’ Book XVI Chapter 95

Julius Caesar found that Kentish culture was very much like Gallic culture, but Druidism in Britain was certainly not confined to the south-east of England. In the years following the Roman invasion of AD43, the Druids of Anglesey, off the coast of north-west Wales, were in the forefront of the British resistance. In AD60, the Romans decided to subdue the island:

“On the shore stood the opposing army with its dense array of armed warriors, while between the ranks

In 1942, during construction work at an airfield, a collection of metalwork, and a large number of

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dashed women, in black attire like the Furies, with hair dishevelled, waving brands. All around, the Druids, lifting up their hands to heaven, and pouring forth dreadful imprecations, scared our soldiers by the unfamiliar sight, so that, as if their limbs were paralysed, they stood motionless, and exposed to wounds. Then urged by their general's appeals and mutual encouragements not to quail before a troop of frenzied women, they bore the standards onwards, smote down all resistance, and wrapped the foe in the flames of his own brands. A force was next set over the conquered, and their groves, devoted to inhuman superstitions, were destroyed. They deemed it indeed a duty to cover their altars with the blood of captives and to consult their deities through human entrails."

[Tacitus](#) (c.AD55–c.AD117) 'Annals' Book XIV Chapter 30

animal bones, were found in peat extracted from the edge of a small, boggy, lake, called Llyn Cerrig Bach, on Anglesey. This was, of course, during World War II and, though the director of the [National Museum of Wales](#), Sir Cyril Fox, was contacted, and spent two days at the site, it was not excavated. The [metalwork](#) – over 150 bronze and iron objects – and a sample of the bones were taken to the National Museum, in Cardiff. It is thought that the items were offerings to the gods – cast into the water between 300BC and AD100. Though the site engineer, apparently, claimed there were human bones, none were reported amongst those taken to Cardiff. It is possible, however, that evidence suggestive of human sacrifice was considered inappropriate in time of war, and was intentionally disregarded. In view of Tacitus' story, it is tempting to associate Llyn Cerrig Bach with Druidic ritual.



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Translations:

Strabo 'Geography' by H.L. Jones

Julius Caesar 'The Gallic War' by T. Rice Holmes

Diodorus Siculus 'Bibliotheca Historica' by C.H. Oldfather

Pliny the Elder 'Natural History' by John Bostock & H.T. Riley

Tacitus 'Annals' by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb

**IV: A Way of Death**