

IRELAND: ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

Ireland and Europe

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The equation of 'civilization' with cities, centralized government and literacy has long prejudiced us against societies displaying few or none of these characteristics. For societies of this kind with which they were acquainted—such as the Celts—the Greeks and Romans used the term 'barbarian,' with perjorative connotations that survive to this day. Moreover, their possession of writing provided the Greeks and Romans with a weapon of almost insuperable power against their non-literate contemporaries: history is written by the literate, so the non-literate become the victims of literate prejudice.

This issue of *Expedition* provides an opportunity to question such prevailing attitudes by its consideration of Ireland which, in its European context, has many valuable lessons for both archaeologist and historian. For it is now possible to argue that the 'barbarians' of Europe were not the cultural laggards of popular presentation, dependent upon their 'civilized' neighbors for any and all cultural innovations, but that they developed their own societies along their own lines. These lines intersected with the societies of western Asia and the Mediterranean, to be sure, but they were in many ways separate, and no less important to the eventual emergence of medieval and modern Europe.

The first identifiable human occupation of Ireland was about the 7th millennium B.C. by Mesolithic hunting and gathering groups—not until the 5th millennium B.C. did Neolithic farming economies appear in northwestern Europe. The domestication of sheep and goats, and the cultivation of wheat and barley, began about 9,000-8,000 B.C. in western Asia, and by the 7th millennium B.C. had reached the Aegean, to spread throughout most of Europe dur-

ing the next 2,000 years or so.

The most conspicuous surviving element of the northwestern European Neolithic cultures, however, must now be seen as indigenous rather than introduced from the same southeastern source: the megalithic tombs and allied monuments. Formerly thought to be derived from original models in the eastern Mediterranean, they have been shown by radiocarbon dating to be earlier than those supposed prototypes. This in itself demonstrates an intriguing inventiveness, and the earliest of the chronologically long series of these tombs must now rank as the world's earliest known monumental stone structures.

Professors Hawkins and Thom, moreover, have argued that many of these monuments were laid out by means of geometrical theorems (such as the right-angled triangle) and were designed for a variety of astronomical observations and calculations. These interpretations imply that precise and detailed information was transmitted over wide areas and over long periods of time. And this, in turn, suggests some class of specialists whose responsibility and function this was. If these inferences are correct, then intellectual investigation and learning must be attributed to these societies, despite their lack of any known system of writing.

Classical authors, writing during the last few centuries B.C., refer to the 'druids' in Celtic society as both learned and highly regarded. Caesar said that the druids of Gaul met annually at a location in central Gaul, and were immune from molestation in crossing tribal boundaries—this seems particularly significant since Celtic Gaul lacked centralized government, being composed of numerous tribes and tribal confederacies.

The adoption of Christianity in 5th

century A.D. Ireland led to the rapid adoption of writing also, since this was a necessary component of the new religion. The spread of writing to secular affairs provides us with a mass of native documentation of this Celtic society in the earlier Medieval period, and it is clear that this society remained essentially traditional. Thus Ireland provides us with the very unusual situation of detailed documentary information on a society without towns and without centralized government—in most respects, apparently a characteristic 'barbarian' European society.

The learned class of earlier Medieval Ireland (jurists, bards, poets, genealogists, historians, etc.) enjoyed high social status and immunity from violence. With the one major substitution of Christian priests for pagan ones, then, this learned class appears remarkably similar to the 'druids' of later prehistoric Celtic societies as described by Classical authors, and it seems entirely reasonable to propose that there was direct continuity. Indeed, the international reputation for scholarship that Irish clerics rapidly acquired itself suggests that they were the inheritors of a strong and established native tradition of

learning. (See B. Schauman, p. 34.)

Thus we can argue that the prehistoric Celts had a class of specialists whose responsibilities included the transmission of native learning, law, and literature, without the aid of writing. This, in turn, gives some support to the inference, adduced above, for the existence of such a class much earlier, in the Neolithic.

It is possible to argue, then, that there may have been a tradition over much of prehistoric Europe of a learned class, which may be inferred for the Neolithic, of which we get tantalizingly brief glimpses from Classical authors in the Iron Age, and who finally emerge into explicit and detailed view when they adopt literacy, along with Christianity, in the early Medieval period. It is worth noting, also, that skilled craftsmen too were accorded high status in early Medieval Ireland, which does not seem out of keeping with the superb design and workmanship they created. And here we may bear in mind that many of the motifs regularly employed in this art were derived directly from the La Tène art of the later prehistoric Celts—again testifying to a vigorous continuity of native, non-classical traditions.



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