

History of the Celts: 500BC-600AD

Spread of the Celts: from the 5th century BC

By the 5th century BC vigorous tribes are spreading outwards from their original homeland east of the Rhine, in places such as [Hallstatt](#) and [La Tène](#). With the advantage of iron weapons, they are able to press east into the Balkans and west into [France and Spain](#). Considerably later, in about 300 BC, they cross the Channel to [Britain](#). They are the Celts.

The Celts are great story-tellers, great drinkers and great fighters - with a liking for single combat, after which the victor proudly displays the severed head of his opponent. Soon they begin to trouble their very different neighbours, the sober and disciplined Romans.

The Celts push south through the Alps, raiding and marauding. In about 390 they even reach and sack [Rome](#). Many of them stay in Italy, settling in an area from the Alps to south of Milan. The Romans call them Gauls, and distinguish their two nearest territories as Cisalpine Gaul ('this side of the Alps', as seen from Rome) and Transalpine Gaul ('across the Alps').

Much of Cisalpine Gaul comes under Roman control after a campaign in 225, but the Celts here remain unreliable; a few years later many of them side with [Hannibal](#). Beyond the Alps, southern Gaul becomes a Roman province in 121. The rest of Gaul escapes the grasp of Rome until the arrival of Caesar.

Caesar's years in Gaul: 58-50 BC

Caesar is away from Rome for eight years. During this time he systematically subdues the Celtic tribes in Gaul, making separate alliances with their many independent chieftains. He even adventures beyond the natural boundaries of Gaul - the region framed by the Alps, the Rhine, the Atlantic and the Pyrenees.

In 55 and again in 53 he bridges the Rhine for brief campaigns into Germany. Twice in the same period he crosses the Channel to test the mettle of the Celts in Britain (see [Caesar in Britain](#)). According to Plutarch, writing 150 years later, this expedition is the first to prove to certain sceptical scholars in Rome that Britain really exists.

Celtic tribes and Caesar: 55-54 BC

It is not known precisely when the [Celts](#) first enter Britain in their steady expansion outwards from central Europe. But [Caesar](#) states, in his own account

of his campaigns, that they have been migrating across the Channel since at least the 2nd century BC.

Caesar makes his first tentative excursion to Britain in August of 55 BC. He lands on the coast of Kent, meeting considerable opposition from the cavalry and war chariots of the neighbouring Celtic chieftains. After staying long enough to demonstrate to the British the strength of a Roman legion, he returns in September to Gaul.

During the winter Caesar builds 600 new ships. He sails again, in July of 54 BC, with five legions and 2000 cavalry. They are sufficient to bring him north of the Thames into the territory of Cassivellaunus, the tribal chieftain chosen to lead the British forces. Caesar easily captures the Celtic leader's primitive stronghold, and removes from it a large herd of cattle. But by the time he sails away again, in September, little has been achieved - except that Cassivellaunus has agreed to a treaty and has promised an annual tribute. It is unlikely that any tribute is paid.

The Celtic chieftains of Britain have almost exactly a century before they are again disturbed by the Romans.

Caesar's campaigns into Germany and Britain suggest that he considers Gaul itself secure. The year 52 BC proves him wrong. The Celts find an inspiring leader in Vercingetorix, a young chieftain of the Averni. His early successes against Roman contingents are in the absence of Caesar, who has been wintering south of the Alps. But the great general's arrival does not make quite the difference to which he has become accustomed.

Caesar is besieging the town of Gergovia when Vercingetorix attacks and routs the Roman forces, killing 700. This is Caesar's first defeat in all his years in Gaul. It prompts many more tribes to come out in support of the rebels.

The next siege in the campaign reverses the situation. Vercingetorix holds the fortress of Alesia. Caesar and his troops, attempting to blockade the garrison, are themselves threatened by a large army of Gauls. But when the Romans win the first major battle between the two sides, the Gauls melt away. To save further lives, Vercingetorix rides out of the town and surrenders - in a dramatic gesture of [Celtic chivalry](#).

He is kept in captivity for six years, until Caesar finds the right moment to lead him through the streets of Rome in a [triumphal parade](#).

Celtic Britain: 1st century BC - 1st century AD

The Celtic kings of southern Britain make good use of the years following Caesar's incursions. His failure to do more than come and see, without conquering, convinces them that the Channel is a safe defence. The natural extremity of the

Roman empire is the coast of Gaul.

Even Gaul is hard for the Romans to hold. After [Caesar's conquest of Gaul](#) there are several uprisings by local chieftains. They are encouraged in this by the Celtic chieftains of Britain, their kinsmen and - against Rome at least - their natural allies. Yet increasing contact with Roman civilization is at the same time bringing wealth and sophistication to Britain.

The Celts of Britain benefit, through [trade](#), from the proximity of Roman Gaul. It is a familiar pattern of international commerce that raw materials move inwards from the primitive extremities of a region, in return for manufactured goods sent back from the centre.

Across the Channel from Britain go gold, silver, iron, grain, wool, hides and cattle (a list to which a contemporary author, Strabo, adds hunting dogs and slaves). Back from Rome come glass, jewellery and other luxuries.

The rulers of the Celtic tribes of Britain become, during this period, more prosperous and more powerful - but, in most cases, no more friendly to Rome. The tendency is personified in a chieftain regarded by the Romans, during the reign of [Augustus](#), as the king of Britain.

The Romans call him Cunobelinus; his Celtic name is Cunobelin; he is famous in English as Cymbeline. He may be either the grandson or great grandson of Cassivellaunus, who faced Caesar's invasion. In a reign of about thirty-five years Cymbeline cunningly avoids provoking the Romans, while offering them no concessions. The man is clearly dangerous. The conquest of his large offshore island is increasingly seen in Rome as a necessary task.

The event which finally precipitates the invasion is the death of Cymbeline soon after AD 40. One of his sons, Amminius, known to be pro-Roman, has recently been exiled by the stronger anti-Roman faction at Cymbeline's court. Amminius goes to Rome for help, during the reign of the emperor [Caligula](#). When Cymbeline dies, two other sons - known to be anti-Roman - inherit his power. They are Caractacus and Togodumnus.

By the time the Romans are ready to invade, in AD 43, Claudius has recently been chosen as emperor. With a reputation for feebleness, he needs a striking success of some kind. He takes a personal interest in the campaign against Britain.

The Roman conquest of Britain: AD 43-51

Four Roman legions land in Kent in AD 43. The two sons of [Cymbeline](#) attempt to hold them at the Medway but are defeated (an engagement in which Togodumnus is killed, leaving Caractacus in sole command of the British forces). The Britons then retreat beyond the Thames, at which point the Romans call a halt in their

pursuit. They are waiting for the public-relations part of the exercise.

A few weeks later the emperor Claudius reaches the southern bank of the Thames, in the region of what is now London, with fresh troops and even a few elephants. He is here to lead the advance on Caractacus' capital at Camulodunum, or Colchester.

There is little further opposition, for the Celtic troops - without breastplates or helmets - are no match for the solid weight of a [Roman legion](#), advancing like a human tank. The emperor enters Colchester in triumph, cheered by his army. Later a temple is erected here to Claudius as a god; its site is now Colchester Castle.

After the rapid defeat of Caractacus, chieftain of the Belgae in southeast Britain, other Celtic tribes quickly come to terms with the Romans. Some are accepting defeat. But others, such as the [Iceni](#) in East Anglia, already have friendly relations with the Romans - preferring them to the Belgae. Rome leaves such chieftains in power, as allies.

The result is that in the short space of four years the whole of southern Britain is safely under Roman control. In AD 47 Roman troops are able to build a raised road, with a ditch on either side, defining the northern edge of this safe territory. Known as the Fosse Way, it stretches from Lincoln to south Devon.

But beyond the Fosse Way there is trouble for the Romans in the shape, once again, of Caractacus. He has escaped alive from his defeats. Now he is organizing resistance among the Welsh tribes. Caractacus himself is captured in AD 51, but the Romans are unable to subdue the Welsh for another thirty years.

The campaigns of Agricola: AD 77-84

Little progress is made in pacifying Wales until the arrival in Britain of Agricola. More is known of Agricola than of any other Roman general of comparable stature, because he takes the wise precaution of having a historian as a son-in-law. Agricola's appointment as governor of Britain and the marriage of his daughter to [Tacitus](#) occur in the same year - AD 77.

Agricola rapidly succeeds in conquering the Welsh tribes, even in Anglesey. To consolidate his gains he stations the 20th legion in an encampment on the river Dee. *Castra Devana* ('camp on the Dee') becomes one of the most important Roman strongholds in Britain. Its modern name, deriving from 'Castra', is Chester.

In AD 78-9 Agricola brings the north of England under Roman control. In 80 he establishes a line of defensive outposts across Scotland's narrowest point, between the Clyde and the Forth. In the following three years he presses steadily further north into the wilds of Caledonia (the Roman word for Scotland, from the name of its leading tribe). Finally, in AD 83, he wins a major victory over the Caledonii at

an unidentified place called Mons Graupius - probably almost as far north as Aberdeen.

Meanwhile Agricola has also very effectively governed the rest of Britain. It has been an impressive seven years. It is lucky indeed that there is a [historian in the family](#) to record them.

[Tacitus](#) explains that his father-in-law has to deal in Britain with people 'living in isolation and ignorance' who are therefore 'prone to fight'. As a distraction Agricola introduces the Celts to the trappings of Roman luxury. Yet baths and sumptuous banquets, the historian candidly admits, are merely another aspect of [Britain's enslavement](#).

In the same vein, the son-in-law reveals that Agricola dreams of conquering [Ireland](#). He believes that it could be controlled by a single legion, and that it would be 'easier to hold Britain if it were completely surrounded by Roman armies, so that liberty was banished from its sight'. It never happens. Ireland (or Hibernia), alone in western Europe, remains free of the Romans.

Britannia: 2nd - 4th century AD

[Hadrian's Wall](#), established from the 2nd century AD as the frontier of Roman rule in the [British Isles](#), enables England and [Wales](#) (as they will later become) to settle down together as Britannia, the most northerly Roman province.

On the whole the Celtic chieftains of Britain adapt willingly to Roman customs and comforts. They learn to live in villas, they speak Latin, they benefit from trading links with the empire (British wheat and wool are much in demand), and they become Roman citizens. The tribal centres develop into thriving Roman towns, around the *forum* (market place) and *basilica* (town hall).

Roman Britain never achieves the prosperity or sophistication of Gaul, and it has the disadvantage of being cut off from the centre whenever Gaul is controlled by rebellious Roman armies or invading barbarians. Even so, Britannia has much in common with other provinces of the empire.

It has its great villas, and it is significant that one of the grandest - a palace at Fishbourne with superb mosaic floors, discovered in 1960 - is believed to have belonged not to a Roman governor but to a Celtic chieftain. It was probably the headquarters of Cogidubnus, ruler of a tribe in southern England in the late 1st century AD.

Celtic retreat: 5th - 6th century AD

The threat to the Roman empire from Germanic tribes, in the 5th century, leaves the Romanized Celts dangerously exposed to barbarian aggression. Gaul is overwhelmed by [Visigoths, Burgundians and Franks](#). In Britain, after the withdrawal of the Roman legions, the Celtic chieftains are confronted with invasions along the east and south coast from [Saxons and Angles](#).

The struggle against the invaders provides the British Celts with one last hero, King Arthur, who may be more fiction than fact. But inexorably the Celtic tribes are pushed westwards out of England, surviving only in the western extremity of Cornwall and in Wales.

The same westward pressure in Gaul confines the Celtic culture to the northwest tip of the region, Brittany. This area also becomes a refuge in the 6th century for Celts migrating from southwest England to escape the advancing Saxons. From this derives the strong cultural link between the Cornish and the Bretons.

In these various regions Celtic languages survive through the centuries. There are two main groups: Gaelic, spoken in Ireland and Scotland and until recently in the Isle of Man; and Brythonic, the language in differing forms of the Welsh, the Cornish and the Bretons.