Reflections of an Empire: The British Celts as Indicators of Roman Self-Perception

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The Celts of Britain survive today primarily as figures in the collective imagination of popular culture: high priestesses performing sacrificial rites within a sacred grove; blue-painted warriors ferociously brandishing spears. These modern perceptions have their roots in texts far more ancient than *The Mists of Avalon*; indeed, they may be traced to the first contact between Celts and the "civilized" world of the Roman Empire. In some ways, the interactions between the Britons and the Romans are exactly what one might expect of the meeting between a civilized culture and primitive tribes. Parallels have been drawn, therefore, between Roman views of the Celts and nineteenth-century European attitudes toward Africa and South America. Yet beyond the fulfillment of historical trends, Roman texts—which alternately depict the ancient Britons as primitive brutes and as noble savages—are highly reflective of two driving forces within the empire's cultural identity. These drastically different perceptions embody an identity crisis of sorts: the contradiction between the conviction in the glorious destiny of the empire and the disillusioning suspicion of having strayed too far from the celebrated traditions of the past.

First, it bears observing that, outside of the woefully incomplete archaeological record, little can be learned about the British Celts that is not first filtered through the lens of Roman perception. The Celts were a people without a written language, and thus they unfortunately left us with no primary documents from which to draw conclusions. Knowing this, the importance of examining the potential effects of this Roman "filter" becomes clear: a reliance on secondary sources necessitates understanding the agenda and bias of the intermediary. Although this process may not always grant a more complete understanding of the Celts, it certainly offers

opportunity to better understand how Romans viewed themselves, since they derived pride for their civilized existence by highlighting the barbaric acts of others, yet they were nonetheless plagued with notions of self-doubt and a penchant for nostalgia.

Within numerous Roman texts detailing the centuries of interaction between Rome and Britain, some of the most striking depictions paint a larger-than-life image of the British Celt as a vicious and brutal warrior, primitive in both act and thought. Indeed, a large number of Roman sources chose to focus on this element of Britain's native inhabitants, pinpointing the brutality of the Celts as the defining characteristic of the people.[1] In the words of Strabo, a geographer writing in the first century AD, "The whole nation is war-mad, both high spirited and ready for battle."[2] Descriptions of the Britons in battle are often vivid with terrifying images, describing an "opposing army with its dense array of armed warriors, while between the ranks dashed women, in black attire like the Furies, with hair disheveled, waving brands"[3]—clearly an uncivilized and unreasonable foe.

Outside of the general observations on the nature of the Celts, Roman writers often chose to illustrate specific examples of Celtic brutality—in particular, the abhorrent practice of human sacrifice. Although Lucan's descriptions of "altars horrible / On massive stones upreared; sacred with blood"[4] refer to the Celts of mainland Europe, the religious rites remain largely consistent across the Celtic world. Indeed, Tacitus records the incidence of human sacrifice in the British Isles, noting, "They deemed it indeed a duty to cover their altars with the blood of captives and to consult their deities through human entrails."[5] From references to these "hateful rites," one might conclude that human sacrifice was a frequent staple in Celtic religious life. Some modern historians, however, would hasten to point out that little archaeological evidence suggests the widespread practice of human sacrifice.[6] While lack of evidence certainly does not allow us to

conclude that such rites did not occur, the dearth of any non-Roman corroboration rightfully leads one to wonder if the practice was carried out as often as the empire's writers might assert. To complicate matters further, it is interesting to consider the Romans' staunch condemnation of human sacrifice, while they themselves were occasionally known to engage in such practices in prior years. The Romans cannot be accused of outright hypocrisy, for human sacrifices were in fact banned; it is likely, however, that these memories of a more brutal and inhumane time lingered uncomfortably in their consciousness.

Although the Romans themselves were guilty of wartime atrocities, they often portrayed the Britons as uncivilized combatants. In a particularly graphic passage, Dio Cassius relates the wanton bloodshed of a Celtic revolt:

> They hung up naked the noblest and most distinguished women and then cut off their breasts and sewed them to their mouths, in order to make the victims appear to be eating them; afterwards they impaled the women on sharp skewers run lengthwise through the entire body. All this they did to the accompaniment of sacrifices, banquets, and wanton behaviour.[7]

The cruelty toward women described in this passage is a blatant violation of the Romans' notion of "civilized warfare."

Although the emphasis on the savagery of the Celts might suggest that the Romans rightfully feared their neighbors to the north, it also suggests that such a fear was not typically coupled with respect. Even in times of peace, some Romans felt little affinity for the Celts and referred to them collectively with the diminutive *brittunculi* (little Britons), a distinctly derogatory term.[8] Condescension, furthermore, often accompanied contempt. Descriptions of Celtic religious rites, when not focused on the barbarism of the practitioners, often centered on

the supposedly simple and irrational components of Celtic belief. Diodorus, a Greek historian during the first century BC, observed in his writings that Celts appeared to believe strongly in the immortality of the soul.[9] Lucan, many years later, clearly mocks this idea:

> Happy the peoples 'neath the Northern Star In this their false belief; for them no fear Of that which frights all others: they with hands And hearts undaunted rush upon the foe And scorn to spare the life that shall return.[10]

Thus, according to Lucan, Celtic bravery is merely a product of a simple-minded and woefully incorrect religious belief. The philosopher Pliny, while avoiding the distinct condemnation of Lucan, nevertheless writes with a hint of condescension as he describes the Celts' reverence for the oak tree and the rites surrounding it.[11]

The native Britons, furthermore, in addition to being perceived as irrational in their religious beliefs, were often seen as childlike and simple in their social behavior. The Celts, it would appear, valued eloquence very highly, and "the importance of eloquence, the paramount need of an illiterate people to make a desired impression by the spoken work, is largely responsible for many of their characteristics which appeared as childish weaknesses to their more advanced contemporaries."[12] In conjunction with appearing easily swayed by the spoken word, Celts were also often perceived as being highly sensitive about issues of honor, as well as being prone to violent outbursts in response to supposed slights. Many Roman writers would assert that of all the driving forces behind the Britons' warlike society, courage was certainly not one of them. The Roman army was often frustrated by the style of fighting practiced by Britain's natives because they were noisy, disorderly, and not above retreating in order to avoid defeat. "Even when they did assemble," Dio Cassius complains, "they would not come to close quarters with the Romans, but took refuge in the swamps and the forests, hoping to wear out the invaders in

fruitless effort."[13] Tacitus, in his biography of Agricola, makes a similar observation, claiming, "These are the men who last year attacked one legion like thieves in the night—and you defeated them by raising the battle-cry. There are the greatest runaways of all the Britons . . . what is left is a band of frightened cowards."[14]

Through all of these unflattering and sometimes outright condemnatory descriptions, these Roman writers effectively established a dichotomy between the two peoples, implicitly and explicitly depicting the divide between what is irrational, savage, and cowardly—the Celts—and the Roman qualities of reason, civilization, and honor. Although the Britons might go to battle simply to satisfy their violent urges, Romans must operate under the guise of honorable intentions.[15] Ultimately, in constructing this divide, the Romans reasserted the empire's sense of self and nonself, heightening the impression of "otherness" and dividing the known world between civilized individuals and the howling hordes.

Through the emphasis on the shortcomings of the "other," Romans justified their regime and instilled a sense of honor and pride in their glorious destiny. Yet the Celts of Britain were not used solely as an example to illustrate the brilliance of the empire. They served, for many, as a means to critique the empire. As is evidenced by many of Rome's writers, the notion of the "noble savage" did not begin with Jean-Jacques Rousseau but is in fact present in many of the Roman discussions of the Celts, often with "nobility exaggerated to scold Roman decadence."[16] Some saw the contrast of peoples not as a divide between savagery and civilization, but more as the divergence between the honor of the "Old Ways" and the moral decay of the indulgent empire. Indeed, many writers imbue the Celts with eloquence, dignity, and a very Roman perspective on issues of liberty and honor. For instance, Roman scholars lauded the Druids, the "intellectual elite dedicated to philosophic inquiry," for their philosophy and wisdom.[17] Druids

were described as bastions of reason, "the most just," or "the most righteous" of men.[18] This romanticization of the Celts extends into the modern world, and it undeniably has its roots in the writings of several classical historians and ethnographers.

By far the largest source for this laudatory image of the Britons is found within the fictionalized speeches attributed to various Celtic leaders and recounted by Roman historians such as Tacitus and Dio Cassius. Typically, these speeches describe the many trials of the Celtic peoples under the thumb of Rome and urge violent and swift reprisal against their oppressors. These fictional speeches were tied to actual rebellions, yet the words themselves were no doubt largely created in the minds of the Roman writers. Boudicea, a British noblewoman, led perhaps one of the most famous rebellions against the Romans. In a passage of his *Annals,* Tacitus quotes Boudicea appealing to a righteous wrath:

> It is not as a woman descended from noble ancestry, but as one of the people that I am avenging lost freedom, my scourged body, the outraged chastity of my daughters. Roman lust has gone so far that not our very persons, nor even age or virginity, are left unpolluted. But heaven is on the side of a righteous vengeance.[19]

Boudicea was not the only Celt who was supplied with words of liberation and vengeance by virtue of a Roman historian. Tacitus describes a similar speech in his biography of Agricola, in which the leader Calgacus condemns the Roman Empire in poetic terms, explaining, "They are the only people on earth to covet wealth and poverty with equal craving. They plunder, they butcher, they ravish, and call it by the lying name of 'empire.' They make a desert and call it 'peace.'"[20]

In these passages, the Britons are undeniably portrayed as victims of a greedy empire. In contrast, they desire nothing other than liberty, and they chafe at the limitations of their

obligation to Rome. In stark contrast to the brutal war for war's sake that is presented in other passages, the Celts are considered to have a legitimate and even honorable motivation for their fight against the empire. These Roman writers, furthermore, do not hesitate to further vilify Rome through the words of the Britons. Dio Cassius attributes to Boudicea a particularly colorful speech in which she mocks the Roman people for being "slaves to a lyre-player and a poor one too. Wherefore may this Mistress Domitia-Nero reign no longer over me or over you men; let the wench sing and lord it over Romans, for they surely deserve to be the slaves of such a woman after having submitted to her so long."[21] This criticism extends past the emperor to the people of Rome, as Boudicea later comments:

> They are vastly inferior to us: there is also the fact that they cannot bear up under hunger, thirst, cold, or heat, as we can. They require shade and covering, they require kneaded bread and wine and oil, and if any of these things fails them, they perish; for us, on the other hand, any grass or root serves as bread, the juice of any plant as oil, any water as wine, any tree as a house.[22]

Such passages suggest that, to many Romans, the lifestyle of the Britons did not prove their brutish nature, yet was instead indicative of a purer form of existence, one perhaps reminiscent of the earlier, honorable days of Rome. The empire, said some, had grown weak and decadent in its later years, turning away from the simple lifestyle so lauded by Cato and supposedly practiced by Rome's forefathers. Thus, in the minds of many, the Celts came to symbolize the glories of an older Rome, a Rome before the masses were pacified by circuses and before the will of a single man dictated the future of the empire.

Not surprisingly, those who subscribed to such flattering depictions of the Britons were typically individuals disenchanted with the contemporary political scene; often they had

Republican tendencies and an adherence to Stoicism. Tacitus is an excellent personification of this profile, and his works do contain significant examples of the "noble savage" perspective.[23] Yet this perspective is not consistent; as previously mentioned, many of his writings also highlight the barbarism and savagery of the Celts. Dio Cassius, too, demonstrates a certain balance between the two viewpoints. These two opposing philosophies regarding the nature of the "other" suggest, ultimately, a somewhat conflicted view of the self, for in their relationship to the barbarians, Romans reveal much about their own identity.

Clearly, the duality of Roman self-perception transcends squabbling between two factions; in many instances it is an internalized struggle, one realized individually by many of Rome's citizens. This conflict is embodied in the two discrete views of the Celts, one of barbarians and one of "noble savages." In these two very different perceptions of "the other" are embodied two possible views of the self. On the one side, citizens of Rome are faced with the glories of the empire, a greatness of achievement and spirit for which it was clearly destined. On the other, the people perceive a moral and political decay, a lack of respect for the ways of the past that may easily become the empire's downfall. The Britons—not as they were, but as Romans chose to see them—served as a looking glass that reflected both the pride and the fear of the empire. In the Celts' barbarism, the Romans saw the splendor of their civilization; in the Celt's simplicity of life, Roman citizens witnessed an uncomfortable reminder of an empire that had grown debased by luxury. The study of the Celts may be forever woefully incomplete, so that we must rely on evidence that is unmistakably biased. Yet Romans, in an effort to depict the ancient Britons, have instead offered a captivating self-portrait—a portrait of great achievements, arrogance, and, perhaps most poignantly, self-doubt.

Notes

1. Some historians have suggested that the Roman view of the Celts was particularly skewed, as the primary interaction between the two groups tended to be on the battlefield. The Romans perceived the Celts to be a culture consumed by war simply because war was essentially the only context the Romans witnessed them in. see Peter S. Wells, *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 59.

2. Nora Chadwick, *The Celts* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1970), 131.

3. Tacitus, *Annals*, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Broadribb 14.31.

4. Ibid., 111.453 - 61.

5. Ibid., 14.31.

6. For example, see Peter S. Wells, *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 12.

7. Dio Cassius, *History of Rome,* 62.1 - 13.

8. Taken from letters excavated at the Roman fort of Vindolanda, which was then the northern border of the Roman Empire. See Alan K. Bowman, *Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier* (London: British Museum Press, 1994), 29.

9. Graham Webster, *Celtic Religion in Roman Britain* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1986), 19.

10. Lucan, "Pharsalia," trans. Sir Edward Ridley 1.506 - 20.

11. Pliny the Elder, *Natural Histories*, ed. E. H. Warmington, trans. H Rackman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 16.295.

12. Chadwick, *Celts*, 47.

13. Dio Cassius, *History of Rome*, 60.1920.

14. Tacitus, *Agricola*, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Broadribb, 34.

15. Particularly during the early expansion of the Republic, Roman leaders often sought moral justification for the entrance into war, citing, for instance, the pleas of a local leader for aid in fending off an attack.

16. Derek Williams, *Romans and Barbarians* (London: Constable, 1998), 23.

17. Ibid., 136.

18. Stuart Piggott, *The Druids* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 95.

19. Tacitus, *Annals*, 16.31.

20. Tacitus, *Agricola*, 30.

21. Dio Cassius, *History of Rome*, 62.1–13.

22. Ibid.

23. As a Stoic, Tacitus believed staunchly in the concepts of self-control and independence. His attitude toward the Britons "was largely conditioned by his Stoic training and Republican sympathies: he was prepared to praise those who fought bravely against Rome and especially those who behaved with dignity in defeat." Webster, *Celtic Religion*, 20.

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