

Celtic

Practices

A number of scholars now believe that the ancient Celts did not live in Britain but were confined to the European continent, with settlements located as far east as Turkey.¹ For the purposes of this website, I have ignored any association of the Celts with Britain.

The Celts were a diverse group of independent tribes and thus practiced a great variation in terms of regional difference and during separate time periods. However, we can see trends in various periods of Celtic culture.

The Urnfield developed a culture of cremation of the dead, and then burial in urns. The Urnfield culture lasted until the start of the Hallstatt period, when the Celts began the practice of inhumation, or full body burial, often including grave goods. Finally we have the La Tene culture that further embellished the interred with more elaborate grave goods and items which would be needed for the individual's next life, or afterlife.²

While the Celts did not have a written language we do know something of their views on death. We know that it was the custom to burying grave-goods with the dead, or slay a wife or slaves on the tomb. We also know that they had the belief in the presence of ancestral ghosts remaining around the hearth and even buried their dead around the hearth.³ Additionally, The Celts belief in an afterlife was so strong that they would put off the payment of debts until they met on the other side. So, the idea of burying objects that would be of help on the other side was not unusual.⁴

We also know that the Hallstatt period it was the custom to bury the body. The wealthier being buried in four wheeled wagons, the vehicles of farming based communities. Later, in the La Tene period we see a switch to cremation followed by burial of ashes. During the La Tene period we find the ashes sometimes interned with two wheeled chariots, indicating a switch to a more militaristic society.⁵

The La Tene burial rituals appeared to be highly festive and elaborate. Held under a mound, deceased people were placed within a wooden chamber that was fashioned from oak. Inside, an array of personal items is included. Personal ornamental items are also added to the deceased, which are thought to give the deceased power in the afterlife.⁶

There is also an association of rams with the dead. Clay andirons have been found (horizontal bar upon which logs are laid for burning in an open fireplace) with rams heads. Additionally, figurines of a ram have been found in Gaulish tombs, and it is associated with the god of the underworld.⁷

The dead were also fed at the grave or in the house. In Ireland, after a death, food is placed out for the spirits, or, at a burial, nuts are placed in the coffin. In some parts of France, milk is poured out on the grave.⁸

Archaeological evidence shows the importance of the feast for the dead. These include in almost all cases a big feast in the area of the graveyard, of which sometimes diverse animal bonce can be located, including a pieces

¹ Jarus, By Owen. "History of the Celts." LiveScience. TechMedia Network, 07 Apr. 2014. Web. 03 Oct. 2014.
<http://www.livescience.com/44666-history-of-the-celts.html>

² Slipsager, April. "Iron Age Celtic Religion." AprilSlipsager – Iron Age Celtic Religion. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.
<http://aprilslipsager.wikispaces.com/Iron+Age+Celtic+Religion>

³ Macculloch, J.A. "The Religion of the Ancient Celts." Religion of the Ancient Celts. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 Oct. 2014.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14672/14672-h/14672-h.htm%23chap10#chap10>

⁴ Slipsager, April. "Iron Age Celtic Religion." AprilSlipsager – Iron Age Celtic Religion. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.
<http://aprilslipsager.wikispaces.com/Iron+Age+Celtic+Religion>

⁵ Slipsager, April. "Iron Age Celtic Religion." AprilSlipsager – Iron Age Celtic Religion. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.
<http://aprilslipsager.wikispaces.com/Iron+Age+Celtic+Religion>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Macculloch, J.A. "The Religion of the Ancient Celts." Religion of the Ancient Celts. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 Oct. 2014.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14672/14672-h/14672-h.htm%23chap10#chap10>

⁸ Ibid.

of meat and a container with drink (most often beer, but in some cases wine). Additionally other grave goods were interned after being ritually destroyed or 'killed'.⁹

Deities and Important Concepts

- Donn (the dark one)
The lord of the dead whom the Celts believed they descended from.

Donn was the chief of the Sons of Mil, a mythological race who invaded Ireland, ousting the Tuatha Dé Danann. Donn slighted Ériu, one of the goddesses for whom Ireland was named. He was drowned off the south-west coast of the island. A place near this spot, on a small rocky island named 'Tech nDuinn' ('the House of Donn'), became Donn's dwelling place as god of the dead. This house was the assembly place for the dead before they began the journey to the otherworld.¹⁰
- The otherworld
"The Fortunate Isles" in the western sea, or at other times underground (such as in the Sídh) or right alongside the world of the living, but invisible to most humans. The other world was seen as a place of light and joy, a type of paradise.

Modern Adaptations

- Bury goods that meant something to the deceased with them.
- Speak about meeting them in the otherworld on the blessed Isle where their exist nothing but joy.
- Burn or bury a picture of a vehicle. This should be a picture of a vehicle that meant something to the deceased. The vehicle could be taken as a representative of a smooth transition.
- Call upon Donn to greet the newly dead and welcome them to the afterlife.
- Bury a figure of a ram's head to represent the god of the underworld.
- Place nuts and/or pour milk on the grave site. This can also be done in front of an altar with the cremated remains of the deceased.
- Have a feast to honor the dead. It is especially appropriate to share some food at the gravesite so one could pass around some bread or cakes at the funeral.

Sample Readings

As stated, the Celts did not have any written language. The following is offered as a reading that reflects the spirit of the beliefs of the Celts and would be appropriate to use.

Excerpt from The Isles of The Happy (an ancient Irish Poem)¹¹

There is a distant isle,
Around which sea-horses glisten:
A fair course against the white-swelling surge—
Four pedestals uphold it.

A delight of the eyes, a glorious range
Is the plain on which the hosts hold games:
Coracle contends against chariot
In Silver-white Plains to the south.

Pedestals of white bronze underneath
Glittering through ages of beauty:
Fairest land throughout the world,
On which the many blossoms drop.

⁹ Karl, Raimund. "Celtic Religion: What Information Do We Really Have?" N.p., n.d. Web. 9 Oct. 2014.

http://draeconin.com/database/celtreli.htm#DEATH_RITUALS

¹⁰ "Donn." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 24 Aug. 2014. Web. 03 Oct. 2014. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donn>

¹¹ Meyer, Kuno. "Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry.", by Kuno Meyer. N.p., 17 Apr. 2010. Web. 16 Oct. 2014
http://www.gutenberg.org/files/32030/32030-h/32030-h.htm#MYTH_AND_SAG

An ancient tree there is in bloom,
On which birds call to the Hours:
In harmony of song they all are wont
To chant together every Hour.

Colours of every shade glisten
Throughout the gentle-voiced plains:
Joy is known, ranked around music,
In Silver-cloud Plain to the south.

Unknown is wailing or treachery In the homely cultivated land:
There is nothing rough or harsh,
But sweet music striking on the ear.

Without grief, without gloom, without death,
Without any sickness or debility-
That is the sign of Evin:
Uncommon is the like of such a marvel.

A beauty of a wondrous land,
Whose aspects are lovely,
Whose view is wondrous fair,
Incomparable is its haze.

Then if Silverland is seen,
On which dragon-stones and crystals drop-
The sea washes the wave against the land,
A crystal spray drops from its mane.

Wealth, treasures of every hue
Are in the Land of Peace-
a beauty of freshness:
There is listening to sweet music,
Drinking of the choicest wine.

Golden chariots on the plain of the sea
Heaving with the tide to the sun:
Chariots of silver on the Plain of Sports,
And of bronze that has no blemish.

Steeds of yellow gold are on the sward there,
Other steeds with crimson colour,
Others again with a coat upon their backs
Of the hue of all-blue heaven.

At sunrise there comes
A fair man illumining level lands:
He rides upon the white sea-washed plain,
He stirs the ocean till it is blood.

A host comes across the clear sea,
They exhibit their rowing to the land:
Then they row to the shining stone
From which arises music a hundredfold.

It sings a strain unto the host
Through ages long, it is never weary:
Its music swells with choruses of hundreds-
They expect neither decay nor death.

Many-shaped Evna by the sea,
Whether it be near, whether it be far-

In which are thousands of many-hued women,
Which the clear sea encircles.

If one has heard the voice of the music,
The chorus of little birds from the Land of Peace,
A band of women comes from a height
To the plain of sport in which he is.

There comes happiness with health
To the land against which laughter peals:
Into the Land of Peace at every season
Comes everlasting joy.

Resources

- The Religion of the Ancient Celts
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14672/14672-h/14672-h.htm#chap10>
- Iron Age Celtic Religion
<http://aprilslipsager.wikispaces.com/Iron+Age+Celtic+Religion>