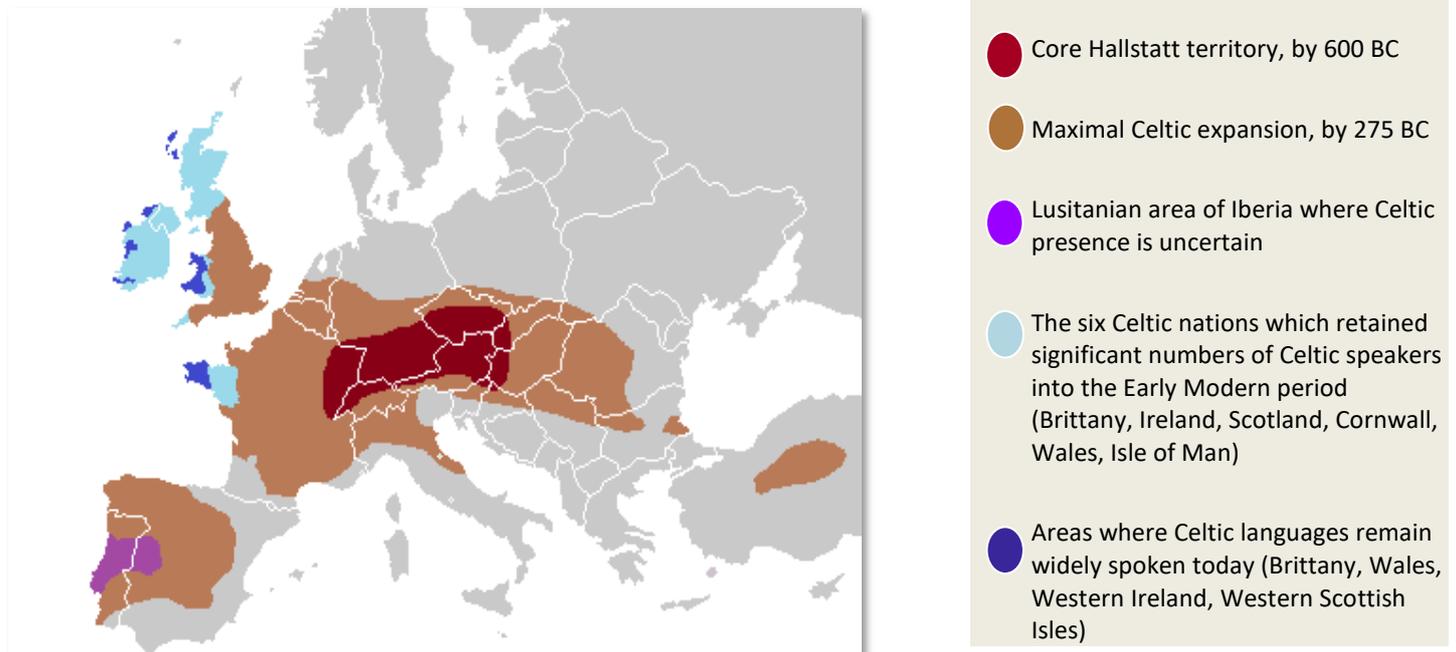


Who are Celtic people?

The Celts were people in Iron Age in Europe who spoke Celtic languages and had cultural similarities. Their cultural legacy still spans across Europe, and some populations still speak Celtic languages and keep their culture alive (Brittany, Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, Wales, Isle of Man).

The first people to adopt cultural characteristics regarded as Celtic were the people of the Iron Age Hallstatt culture in central Europe (800–450 BC), named for the rich grave finds in Hallstatt, Austria. Thus this area is sometimes called the 'Celtic homeland'.

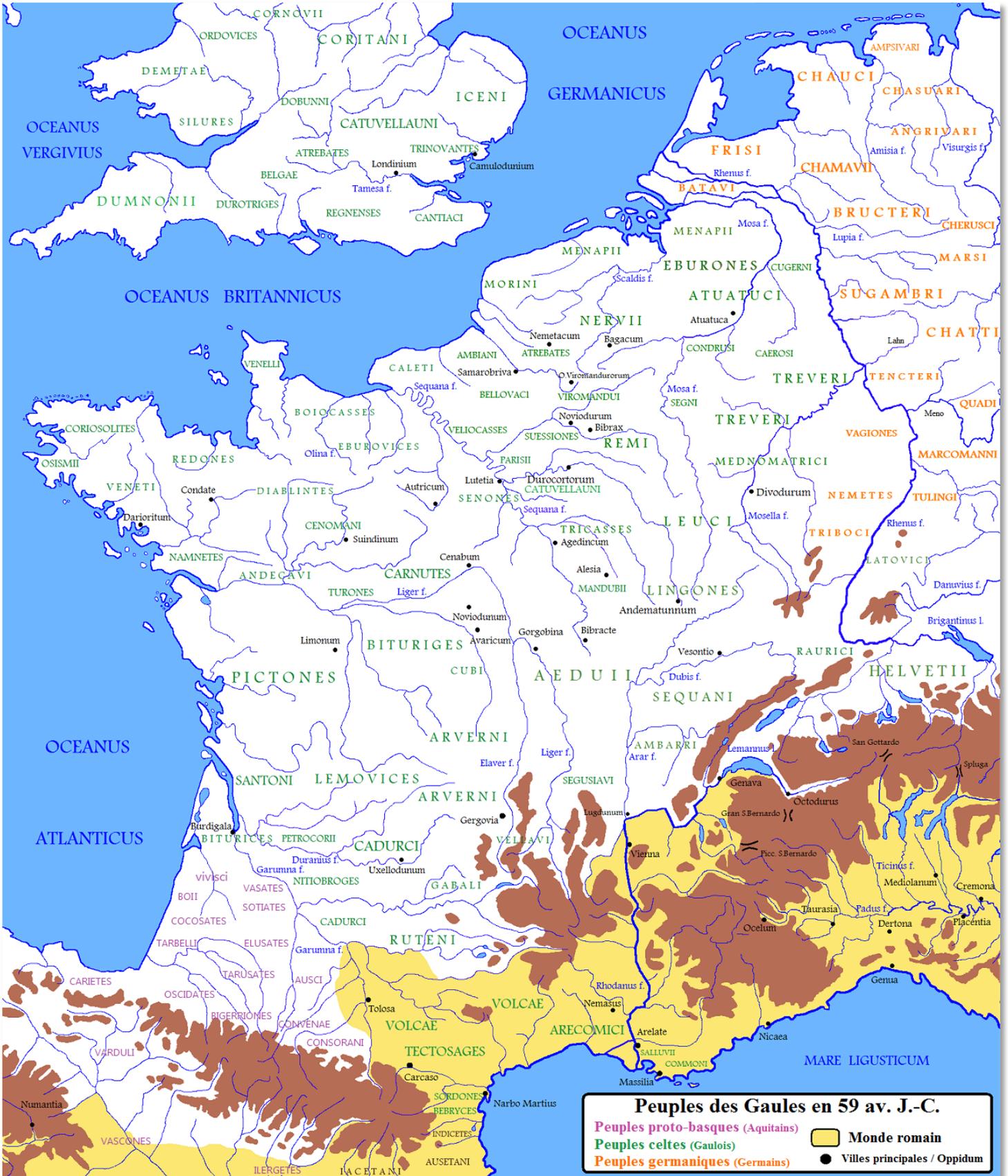
The La Tène culture (named after the important Celtic site near Neuchâtel, Switzerland) developed and flourished during the late Iron Age (from 450 BC to the Roman conquest in the 1st century BC) by diffusion or migration to the British Isles (Insular Celts), Western Europe (eastern France, Switzerland, Austria, southwest Germany), Bohemia (Czech Republic, and Slovakia), the Iberian Peninsula (Celtiberians, Celtici, Lusitanians and Gallaeci), northern Italy (Golaseccans and Cisalpine Gauls) and, following the Gallic invasion of the Balkans in 279 BC, as far east as central Anatolia (Galatians). It developed out of the Hallstatt culture without any definite cultural break, under the impetus of considerable Mediterranean influence from Greek, and later Etruscan civilizations. A shift of settlement centres took place in the 4th century.



Diachronic distribution of Celtic people (Map credit: Wikipedia.org)

Celtic tribes settlements

- In **Cisalpine Gaul**, the Romans knew the Celts then living in what became present-day France as Gauls. The territory of these peoples probably included the Low Countries, the Alps and present-day northern Italy.
- In **Transalpine Gaul**, there was an early, although apparently somewhat limited, Celtic (Leponitic, sometimes called Cisalpine Celtic) presence in Northern Italy.
- In the **British Isles**, Britannia was the name Romans gave to Celtic area, based on the name of the people: the Britanni. Some closely fit the concept of a tribe. Others are confederations or even unions of tribes. The Insular Celtic languages spread throughout the British Isles in the course of the British Iron Age and soon split into the two major groups, Goidelic in Ireland and Brittonic in Great Britain, corresponding to the population groups of the Goidels (Gaels) on one hand and the Britons and the Picts on the other.
- In **Iberia**, three divisions of the Celts were assumed to have existed: the Celtiberians in the mountains near the centre of the peninsula, the Celtici in the southwest, and the Celts in the northwest (in Gallaecia and Asturias).
- In **Balkans** (Dacia, Thrace, and Illyria), some Celts closely fit the concept of a tribe. Others were confederations or even unions of tribes.
- In **Anatolia**, Gauls immigrated in the 3rd century BC from Thrace into the highlands of central Anatolia (modern Turkey). These people, called Galatians, were eventually Hellenized, but retained many of their own traditions.



Regions of Cisalpine Celtic tribes (Gauls) before the Roman conquest, 59 BC (Map credit: Wikipedia.org)



Regions of British Celtic tribes after the Roman conquest, AD 150

Celtic oppida settlements

Origin of oppida

An oppidum (plural oppida) is a large fortified Iron Age settlement. Most were built on fresh sites, usually on an elevated position. Such a location would have allowed the settlement to dominate nearby trade routes and may also have been important as a symbol of control of the area.

The development of oppida was a milestone in the urbanisation of the continent as they were the first large settlements north of the Alps that could genuinely be described as towns. Outside Greece and Italy, which were more densely populated, the vast majority of settlements in the Iron Age were small, with perhaps no more than 50 inhabitants. While hill forts could accommodate up to 1,000 people, oppida in the late Iron Age could reach as large as 10,000 inhabitants. Oppida are associated with the late Celtic La Tène culture, emerging during the 2nd and 1st centuries BC.

Geographical distribution

Oppida spread across Europe, stretching from Britain and Iberia in the west to the edge of the Hungarian plain in the east. They continued in use until the Romans began conquering Europe. North of the River Danube, where the population remained independent from Rome, oppida continued to be used into the 1st century AD.



Distribution of existing oppida, discovered or described in ancient textbooks (Map credit: Oppida.org)

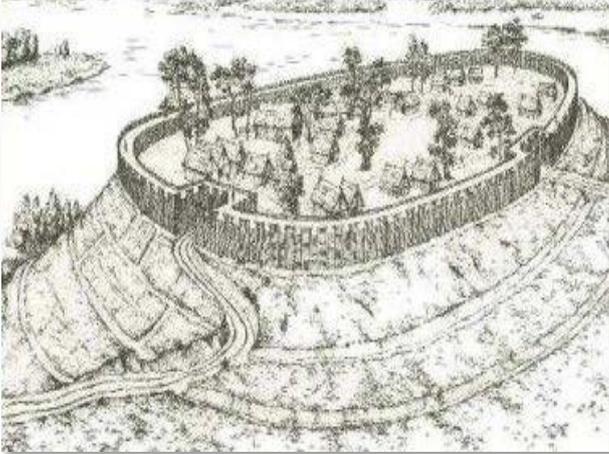
End of oppida

The conquest of Gaul by the Romans in 52 AC sounds the end of oppida. The Romanization of Celtic society will gradually lead to abandonment of oppida in favour of the new cities created by the Romans in the lowlands. The "Pax romana" following the conquest also removes the need of fortifications to protect themselves. In 15 BC, most oppida are abandoned. The population migrated to the lowland cities easily accessible to merchants. Many cities have been created near the old oppida, along the new Roman tracks.

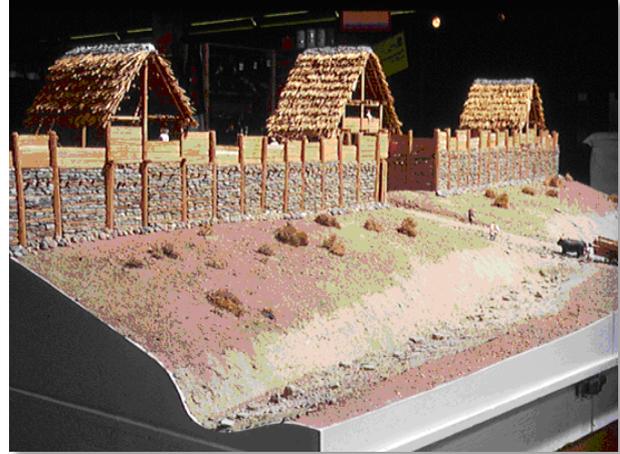
Architecture and building of oppida

An oppidum can be identified by four features:

1. **Chronology:** The settlement dates from the late Iron Age, i.e. the last two centuries BC.
2. **Size:** The settlement has to have a minimum size of 30 hectares (74 acres).
3. **Topography:** Most oppida are situated on heights, but some are located on flat areas of land.
4. **Fortification:** The settlement is surrounded by a wall, usually consisting of a façade of stone, a wooden construction and an earthen rampart at the back. Gates are usually Zangentore (inset doorway).



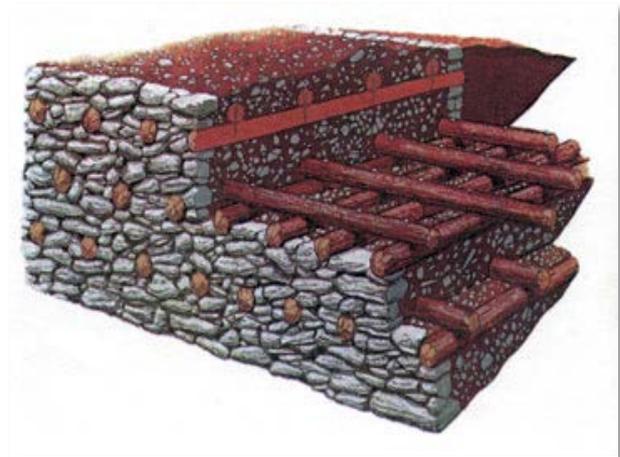
Oppida were often situated on heights, and protected by natural barriers such as cliffs, rivers, etc.



Remparts protecting the oppida were topped with palisades and combined with extensive bank and ditch earthworks.



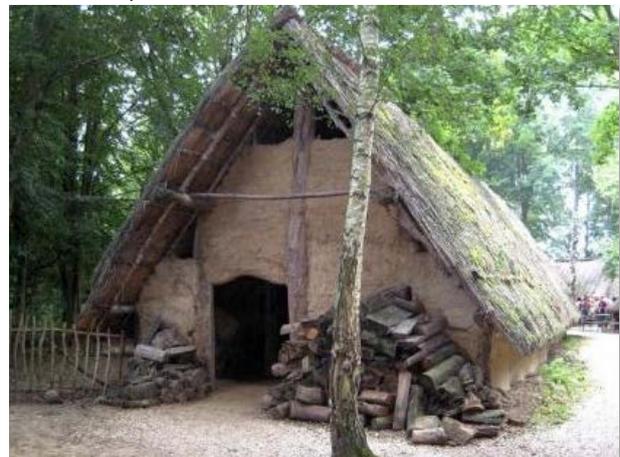
Typical Celtic fortified fences (rempart) were topped with palisades and measured about 4m height and 4m depth.



Oppida remparts were made of a timber frame nailed together and supported with stones and earth. The Romans called the structure "Murus Gallicus", and their resistance to invasion was an issue to Roman conquest.



Entrances were typically protected by inset doorways, also known as "Celtic Zangentore".



The Gauls lived in houses made of wood or cob (a mixture of earth and straw) covered with a thatched roof.

(Image credits: Pédagogie.ac-toulouse.fr, Vully-expo02.ch, Archeoplus.ch)

Celtic mythology and cosmology

Celtic religion

Like other European Iron Age tribal societies, the Celts practised a polytheistic religion. Many Celtic gods are known from texts and inscriptions from the Roman period. Rites and sacrifices were carried out by priests known as druids. The Celts did not see their gods as having human shapes until late in the Iron Age. Celtic shrines were situated in remote areas such as hilltops, groves, and lakes.

Celtic religious patterns were regionally variable; however, some patterns of deity forms, and ways of worshipping these deities, appeared over a wide geographical and temporal range. The Celts worshipped both gods and goddesses. In general, Celtic gods were deities of particular skills, such as the many-skilled Lugh and Dagda, while goddesses were associated with natural features, particularly rivers (such as Boann, goddess of the River Boyne). This was not universal, however, as goddesses such as Brighid and The Morrígan were associated with both natural features (holy wells and the River Unius) and skills such as blacksmithing and healing.

The Celts had literally hundreds of deities, some of which were unknown outside a single family or tribe, while others were popular enough to have a following that crossed lingual and cultural barriers. For instance, the Irish god Lugh, associated with storms, lightning, and culture, is seen in similar forms as Lugos in Gaul and Lleu in Wales. Similar patterns are also seen with the continental Celtic horse goddess Epona and what may well be her Irish and Welsh counterparts, Macha and Rhiannon, respectively.



Epona, goddess of the horses



Cerunnos, god of fertility and wealth



Taranis, god of the sky

(Image credits: Centre national de documentation pédagogique)

Celtic cosmology

Triplicity is a common theme in Celtic cosmology, and a number of deities were seen as threefold. This trait is exhibited by The Three Mothers, a group of goddesses worshipped by many Celtic tribes (with regional variations). This triplicity is reported on the typically celtic symbols and ornaments such as the Triskel and the Triquetra, exhibiting 3 branches. Roman reports of the druids mention ceremonies being held in sacred groves. La Tène Celts built temples of varying size and shape, though they also maintained shrines at sacred trees and votive pools.

Celtic druids

Druids fulfilled a variety of roles in Celtic religion, serving as priests and religious officiants, but also as judges, sacrificers, teachers, and lore-keepers. Druids organised and ran religious ceremonies, and they memorised and taught the calendar. Other classes of druids performed ceremonial sacrifices of crops and animals for the perceived benefit of the community.

One of the few things that both the Greco-Roman and the vernacular Irish sources agree on about the druids is that they played an important part in pagan Celtic society. In his description, Julius Caesar claimed that they were one of the two most important social groups in the region (alongside the equites, or nobles) and were responsible for organizing worship and sacrifices, divination, and judicial procedure in Gaulish, British and Irish society.

Celtic symbols and knots

Triplicity is a common theme in Celtic cosmology, and a number of deities were seen as threefold. This triplicity is reported on the typically Celtic symbols and ornaments such as the Triskel and the Triquetra, exhibiting 3 branches. Another feature of Celtic symbols is the use of only one thread and interlaced lines to form endless loops. This highlights the Celts' belief in the interconnectedness of life and eternity.



The Triskel
The 3 branches represent air, water, fire; the centre represents the earth



The Triquetra
The 3 branches represent the triple divinities: the mother, the daughter, and the grandmother



The Celtic Dara knot
Represents the root system of the oak tree



The Celtic cross
The 4 branches represent air, water, fire, earth; the centre represents the ether

