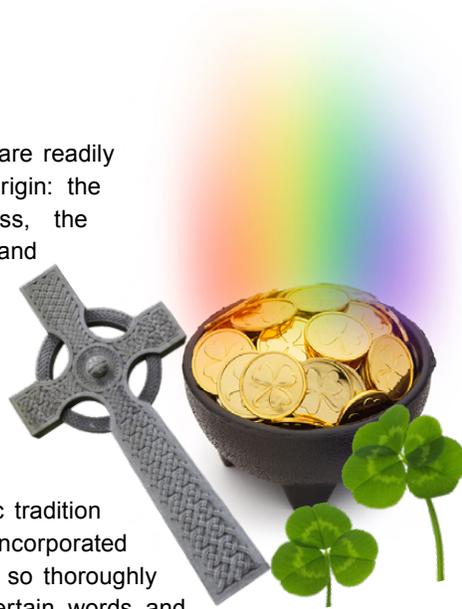




This course has two stories to tell: one that takes place in the heart of Europe and one that takes place on the periphery of Europe. The course explores the connection between these two phenomena: the fierce warriors of the continent who gave the Romans a challenge and the residents of Ireland and the other Celtic realms who kept ancient traditions alive in the face of relentless pressure from centralizing monarchies, especially England and France. This course will also tell the story of how those traditions were spread around the world by emigrants from the Celtic realms.

## Celtic Culture

- Some of these phenomena are readily recognizable as Celtic in origin: the shamrock, the Celtic cross, the mischievous leprechaun and his pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the banshee who wails mysteriously to signal a death, the Highland bagpipe, and the tartan, among many others.
- But some elements of Celtic tradition and vocabulary have been incorporated into modern western culture so thoroughly that the Celtic origins of certain words and customs are not readily known. For instance, many words have come into English from the Irish language, which is sometimes referred to outside of Ireland as Gaelic. For example, the words *phony* and *smithereens* have Irish origins.



- For many people, Celtic culture really means Irish culture. Irish culture has of course been spread around the globe by the Irish diaspora, the many millions of people who trace their descent to the island of Ireland. Lots of people who find themselves fascinated by Irish culture do not have Irish heritage; they just like Irish music and dancing. Think of the enormous success of the Irish dancing show *Riverdance* or the popularity of singers such as Enya.
- Irish writers have also made a huge impact on the world. Four Irish authors have won Nobel Prizes for literature, a remarkable achievement considering that the entire population of Ireland, north and south, is only seven million. That's less than one percent of the population of Europe.
- Celtic art styles have also become popular around the world. The dense abstract patterns familiar from the medieval Irish manuscript the *Book of Kells* can now be found on everything from tea towels to t-shirts to tattoos.
- The reach of Irish culture of course extends beyond the realm of the fine arts. There are Irish pubs in every corner of the globe, from Hong Kong to Buenos Aires, and St. Patrick's Day parades can be found almost



everywhere. Millions and millions of people take pleasure in wearing green and declaring themselves Irish for a day.

- But there is a major paradox at the heart of the Celtic craze. The Celtic realms themselves are tiny. The island of Ireland itself has a population of only about six and a half million people, but it contains two political entities: the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, which is a part of the United Kingdom.
- In total, the areas that identify themselves now as part of the Celtic world—what some people call the Celtic Fringe—have a combined population of only around 20 million people. So how did the Celtic phenomenon spread so far and wide? That is one of the main questions this course will try to answer.

## A Version of Celtic History

- According to the version of Celtic history this course's professor originally learned, the Celts are a people who arose in central Europe in the middle of the first millennium BC. There, they created a culture that produced a particular art style that focused on beautiful abstract patterns and stylized animals.
- But besides being artists, they were also dedicated warriors, determined to win glory in battle. The Celts spread out from their Central European homelands throughout Europe. When they campaigned to the south and the east, they clashed with the Romans and the Greeks, who wrote the first descriptions we have of them, some of which are truly bloodcurdling.
- In addition to sacking the city of Rome in 390 BC, the Celts desecrated the shrine of Delphi in Greece, the home of the famous oracle, in 279 BC. Afterward, they established themselves in central Anatolia, which is now Turkey, becoming the ancestors of the Galatians that we know of from the New Testament.

- The Celts also spread west, into Gaul (what is now France) and down into Spain. Then, around 200 BC or so, they took to the seas and invaded Britain and Ireland, where they conquered the native inhabitants and established their own culture and language.
- At one point, then, the Celts dominated most of the continent of Europe, even extending down into northern Italy, where the Romans were hard pressed to restrain their advances. A map of Europe would show a uniform Celtic hegemony from Ireland to Greece and from Spain to Austria.



- But then, the tide turned against the Celts. Slowly, the Romans pushed the Celts back. The Romans conquered Spain first, then Gaul, and finally Britain, though they never managed to subdue the entire island. They left the wild north of Britain, what is now Scotland, unconquered, and they never even tried to conquer Ireland. But when the Romans were forced to withdraw from Britain, the Celts took up arms again and bravely fought

a series of unsuccessful battles against a new group of invaders, the Anglo-Saxons.

- The Celts were driven into the more remote corners of the island of Britain: the beautiful, mountainous north and west and southwest. Some of them migrated to western France to the region now known as Brittany, and even to northern Spain, where some remnants of Celtic populations also survived. These regions on the periphery of Western Europe, along with the entire island of Ireland, became known much later as the Celtic Fringe.
- Thus, the story goes, only in these remote parts of Britain and in Ireland, plus Brittany and northern Spain, did the original Celtic civilization that had once covered most of Europe manage to survive. Over the centuries, the Celts clung to their cultural autonomy by cultivating their distinctive traditions in music and literature and art. All the while, they progressively came to be dominated by the strong nation-states that arose in England, France, and Spain.
- This version of the history of the Celts as a people that once ruled Europe has been enormously influential in the modern world. However, recent scholarship has uncovered evidence that the story is much more complicated, and more interesting, than we used to think.

## A More Complicated Version

- It is becoming clearer and clearer that the definition of *Celtic* is much harder to pin down than scholars have traditionally believed. Several key traits—primarily their language, their art, and their social and military customs—have usually identified the Celts, as we read about them in the works written about the Celts by Greek and Roman authors.
- The idea has been that the Celts came with a Celtic cultural package: all Celts spoke Celtic languages, produced Celtic art, and did stereotypically Celtic things, like, for instance, collecting and revering severed human heads.

- Today, we associate the Celts primarily with Ireland and the British Isles. The trouble is that modern scholarship is causing the Celtic hypothesis to unravel. It turns out that the peoples of Ireland and Britain may have had no ethnic connection to the peoples on the continent of Europe. Scholars no longer believe that there was one unified Celtic culture spread by a specific group of people who shared a common genetic descent.
- Instead, it looks as though the traits we associate with the Celts today, such as their language and their art, may have spread around Europe to various peoples who had no genetic connection to each other, and these characteristics may not have started in the same place.
- The art we think of as Celtic may have developed in one part of Europe, while the language we think of as Celtic may have developed in another part of Europe. It is no longer necessarily the case that we can pin one specific set of cultural features to one specific group of people. This new scholarly approach to the Celts flies in the face of centuries of settled beliefs about where the Celts came from and how they spread.
- Note that something is definitely lost if we abandon the old model. The earlier idea has Celts on the move, conquering Europe and then surviving against all odds in Ireland and the fringes of Britain. This makes the Celts look extremely powerful, and it gives them a kind of romantic status as the last remnants of a lost civilization. But the problem with the model is that it's probably not true.
- There is very little evidence to support the idea that there ever was a strictly Celtic civilization. People from different parts of the so-called Celtic world in 200 BC probably wouldn't have understood the question if they were asked if they were Celts. People in Ireland would have had no notion of being part of a unified civilization that extended all the way to the Galatians in Turkey.
- At the start of a course about the Celts, it may seem surprising to attack the very idea of identifying the Celts as one unified people. But rest

assured: the Celtic phenomenon is even more interesting than the old model would suggest.

- We are left with three fascinating questions this course will examine:
  1. What happened among the disparate peoples who have been identified as Celtic to make them adopt the cultural traits that we associate now with Celticness? In other words, how do cultural identities form in the first place?
  2. If the Celts were not a united people, how did this idea of the Celts as a single people arise in the first place?
  3. Why has the culture that came to be associated with the Celts been so successful around the world?

## Evidence

- To tell the story of the Celts, this course will discuss several kinds of evidence. Scholars like to talk in terms of evidence, which is simply the material they use to create a picture of what happened in the past.
- History is this course's professor's own discipline. The most important method used by historians is the analysis of written texts. We can learn a lot about the Celts from the works written by the ancient Romans and Greeks who encountered them. The ways in which we analyze texts can change over time. History is a discipline that is always renewing itself.
- Textual analysis has many drawbacks as well as advantages. We are limited by what remains. There are many things we'd like to know about the past, but if nobody chose to write them down, or if texts that recorded this information were lost, we are out of luck. We are also at the mercy of the biases of those who wrote the texts that do survive.

- Another discipline that is absolutely essential to understanding the Celts is historical linguistics. This is the study of how languages are related to each other and how they change over time.
- Linguistics, like textual analysis, has its own drawbacks. Languages are very complex. If someone is trying to see relationships between languages, it can be easy to focus on the features that look similar and ignore the differences, or vice-versa, so caution is required.
- Another important academic discipline that is vital to study of the Celts is archaeology, which really developed as an academic discipline starting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeologists work without any texts at all, although of course they are happy to draw on texts when they prove helpful. Their work is focused almost entirely on physical artifacts.
- The drawback of archaeology is the artifacts cannot talk. We cannot be sure from looking at pots or brooches what languages their owners spoke or what ethnic groups they considered themselves to be members of. And we are also limited by what has happened to survive and what archaeologists have happened to find. But a new kind of information may help fill in the gaps: DNA evidence.



## Suggested Reading

Caesar, *The Conquest of Gaul*, books 7–8.

Collis, *The Celts*.

Livy, *Early History of Rome*, book 5.

Moody, Martin, and Byrne, *A New History of Ireland*, chapter 4.