

# **Iron Age Ireland**

**and the arrival of  
Celtic Society**





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**Iron ore is more common and therefore cheaper than copper.**

**However, it was slow to replace copper and bronze, because it is technologically more difficult to produce.**

**It was not until about 600 B.C., that iron-using tribes, wealthy because of their mastery of this metal, established themselves, in central Europe.**

**These powerful tribes, spread across Europe, were closely linked, by a common language, similar religious beliefs, by their appearance and by their way of life.**

**The Greeks called them Keltoi. We know them as Celts.**

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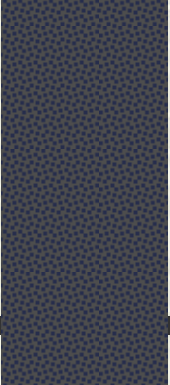


**We know the Celts were firmly established in Ireland by about 150 B.C.**

**With their superior weapons, they completely dominated the aboriginal stone age hunters, early farmers, bronze age metalworkers and the herdsman, who had lived in Ireland for thousands of years.**

**Pockets of these ancient people survived for centuries as distinctive groups, under Celtic over-lordship. But generally the rich culture of the strong iron-age Celtic immigrants blended with the ancient Irish, to produce a way of life described in the "Tain".**

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**Life settled down mainly as an agricultural country with a population of perhaps, a half million people.**

**The island was divided into at least 150 small kingdoms, called "Tuatha".**

**Battles were rare, often just single combat affairs, between heroes, but they were sung about for centuries.**

**By the fifth century A.D. the country could be said to have become completely Celticised, sharing a common culture and a common language. This Celtic language, the last remnants and culture of which still survive, in the Irish-speaking households of the west of Ireland today.**

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## **Where did the Celts come from???**

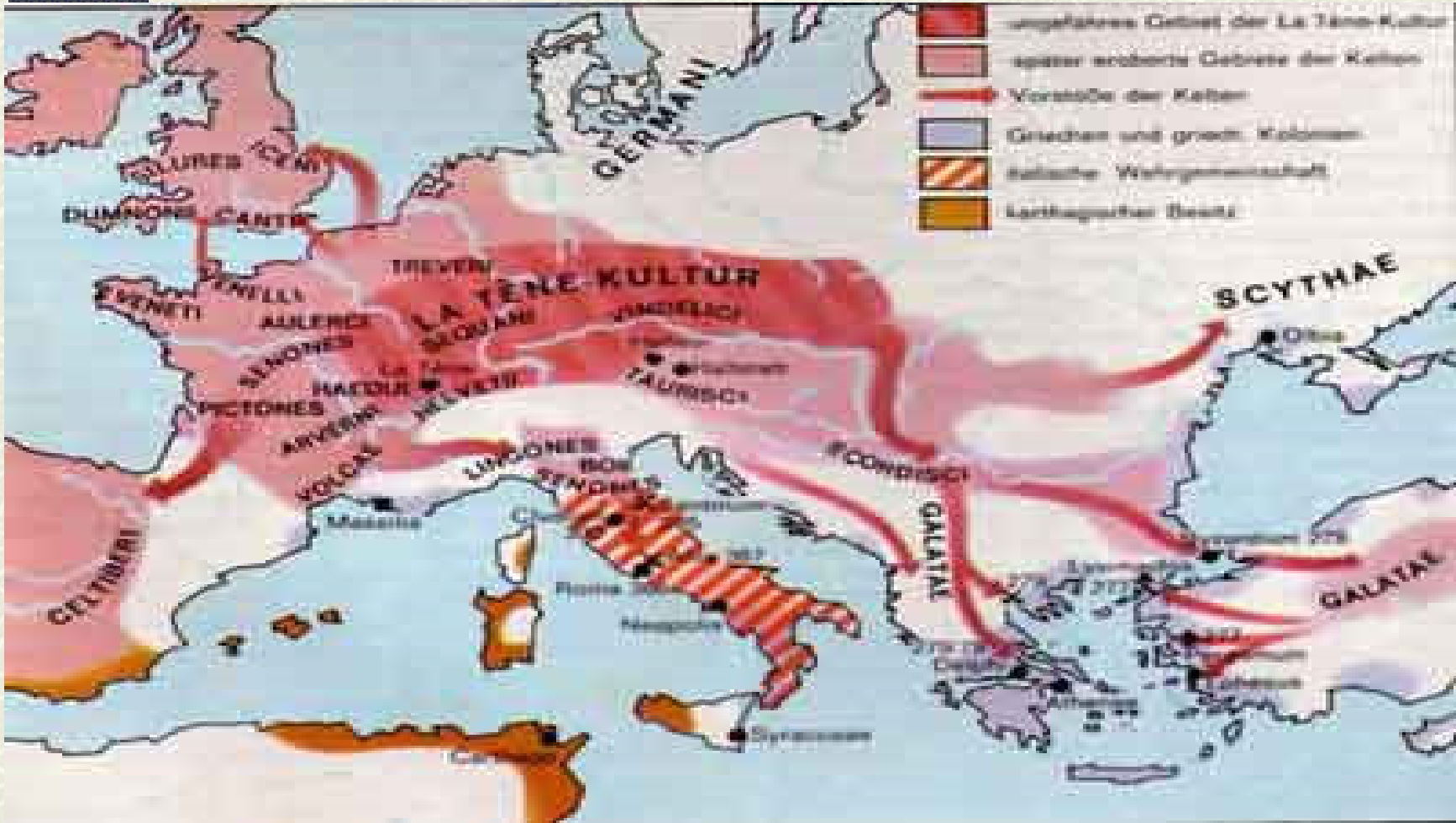
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**The archeological site of La Tene is on the northern edge of Lake Neuchatel, Switzerland. The name of this site gives its name to the cultures of the late Iron Age in Europe with the earliest being in the sixth century. The people associated with this culture are the most successful people, commonly known as the Celts, and this site is a representative site for the Celtic development and expansion.**

**La Tene was discovered in 1857 by Hansli Kopp. What Kopp found at the site was ancient iron weapons and timber piles driven into the bed of the lake. Between the years of 1860 and 1880 the lake was dredged and drained, exposing human remains, swords, spearheads, tools, and shields.**

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# Where is La Tène?



# La Tene



**La Tene today**

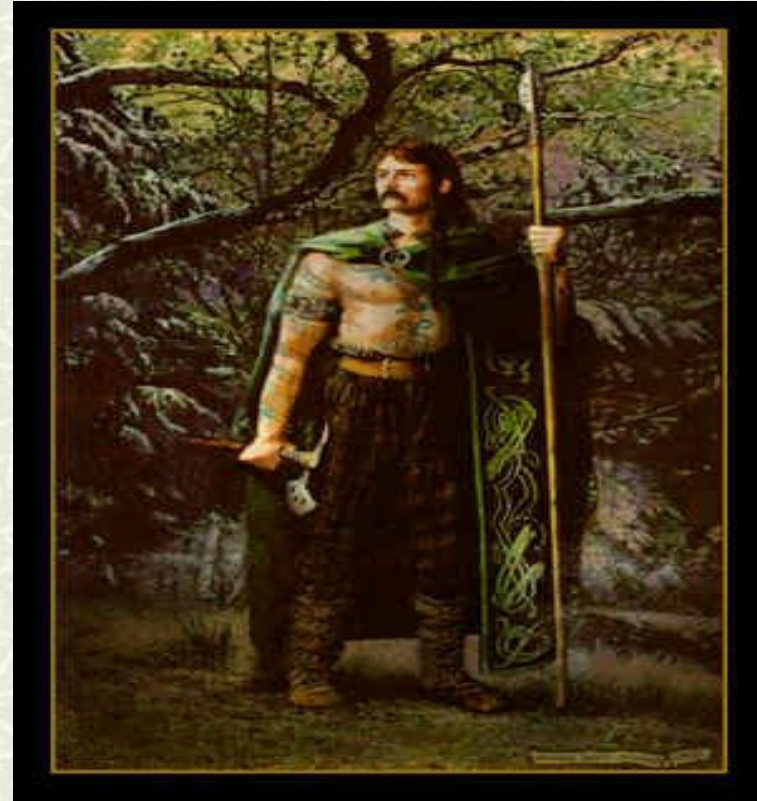
## Where is Halstatt???



# Halstatt



**Halstatt today**



**Image of a Celt**

# Historical Descriptions of the Celts

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**Polybius, a Greek historian, recording a description from a battle in 222 BC said**

**“I say not usually, but always, in everything they attempt, they are driven headlong by their passions, and never submit to the laws of reason.”**

**This is a description that survives to this day as the Irish are often referred to as a stubborn people who enjoy fighting.**

**Strabo, also a Greek historian, geographer and philosopher said**

**“They try not to become stout and fat-bellied, and any young man who exceeds the standard length of the girdle is fined.” According to him, the Celtic people were a vain lot.**

**Another description tells of their love of decorative ornaments, their love of jewelry adorning their arms and necks.**

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**Irish sources have described the Celts as fair haired, light skinned and oval faces.**

**Strabo however seemed concerned with hair, and describes their hair as**

**“not naturally blonde because of the use of artificial means to increase the natural quality of color. They continually wash their hair with lime wash and draw it back from the forehead to the crown and to the nape of the neck, with the result that their appearance resembles that of the Satyrs or Pans, for their hair is so thickened by the treatment that it differs in no way from a horse’s mane.”**

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**The Romans under Caesar described the Celts as**

**barbaric and frightening, often going into battle naked and, with the use of the herbal dye woad, painted their body blue and run head long into the fight screaming and yelling.**

**Some Roman writers described their use of human sacrifice as they would behead the enemy and adorn their homes with them or burn them in large wickerwork containers.**

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## **The Homes of the Celts**

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**The Celts built houses of clay, wood, stones, leather skins, and mixtures of these materials. Sometimes portions of their homes were built underground for better insulation.**

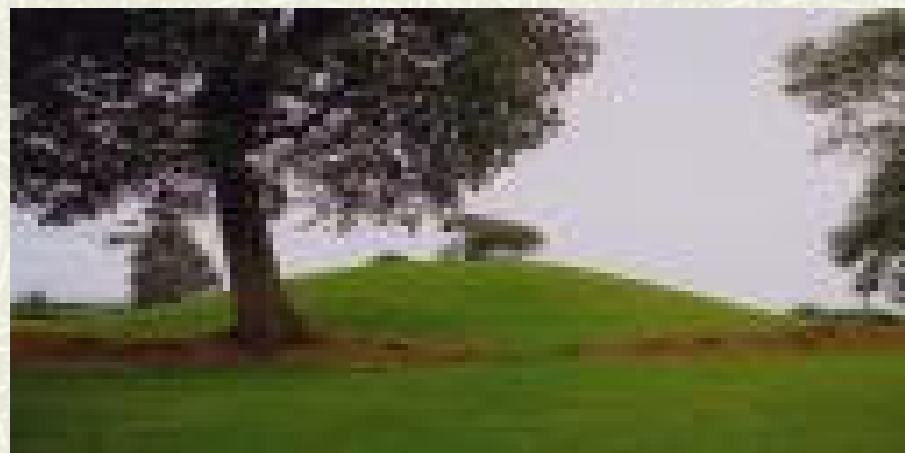
**Within tribal communities, there would often be a bakehouse that was used by everyone, and the Celts would gather to bake breads in heated dome ovens made of clay.**

**In the homes, there would usually be a central heating fire which was kept lit for warmth and cooking.**

**The Celts were hunters, gatherers, and farmers, and were very aware of the seasons, the cycles of the Earth, phases of the moon, and their lives revolved around the constant changes the Earth would endure.**

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## Examples of Ring Forts



# Ringforts

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**Ireland contains the sites of many ancient, abandoned Celtic settlements, some of which date back to almost prehistoric times. Formations of great earthworks, such as ring-forts, are thought to have been constructed during the Iron Age, and many examples survive to this day.**

**By far the most commonly occurring archeological site is the ring-fort, which surrounded a single dwelling place. Called *raths* (earthwork), *cashels* (stonework), and *duns* (more adequately defended sites), these fortifications surrounded a central house, usually thatched with heather and banked with earth.**

**The entire construction was roughly circular, and some of them lasted long enough to build up their surrounding *raths* prodigiously (such as the early Christian *rath* located in Deer Park Farms, County Antrim.)**

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## Celtic Hill-fort



**The term hill fort is commonly used by archaeologists to describe fortified enclosures located to exploit a rise in elevation for defensive advantage. This fortification consists of one or more circular or sub-circular earth or stone ramparts, often with external ditches, following the contours of the hill.**



**The Hill of Tara was an important site throughout the Celtic period where it was a royal centre and, ultimately, the seat of the High King of Ireland.**

## Promontory Forts

**Some of the most well defended hillforts were built with one edge at the top of a cliff. So-called promontory forts were built both on inland mountains and coastal cliffs.**

**The fort consists of three irregular semicircles, each a line of defense. Aside from the walls, one mode of defense is a band of stones set in the ground. Called a **chevaux-de-frise**, the stones are closely packed, set at an angle and intended to thwart an attack up the slope. Fortunately for the peaceful visitor to Dun Aengus, an intact chevaux-de-frise does not surround the fort, but the debris of such a defensive use of stone makes the walking trip to the fort slow and hazardous. The inner wall is awesome, thirteen feet thick and eighteen feet high in places, immortared with stone laid by hand upon stone. The enclosed space is 150 feet north and south and 140 feet east and west. The cliff at the western edge of the fort is as sheer as the Cliffs of Moher, but at 300 feet not as steep**

# Images from Dun Aengus Promontory Fort, Aran Islands



## View of Dun Aengus from the air



# Souterrains



**Stone lined passages inside forts – for storing food or used as hiding places in times of attack**



**They can be simple passages, sometimes roofed with suitable and convenient **standing-stones** or **ogham-stones**, or they can be complex labyrinths with defensible 'creeps' or stile-like obstacles. Thousands must have been mere underground tunnels. Several souterrains were dug into the passage-tomb at Knowth, and one can still be seen at Dowth, county Meath.**

## **Chevaux de frise**



**An area strewn with jagged rocks outside a fort to make it harder for any attackers to charge at speed**

## Political Structure in Celtic Ireland

Ireland was ruled by a series of perhaps 100 to 200 kings, each ruling a small kingdom or *tuath*. The kings came in three recognised grades, depending on how powerful they were.

A *rí túaithe* was the ruler of a single kingdom.

A 'great king', or *ruiri*, was a king who had gained the allegiance of, or become overlord of, a number of local kings.

A 'king of overkings', or *rí ruirech*, was a king of a province.

Ireland had between 4 and 10 provinces at any one time, because they were always in a state of flux as their kings' power waxed and waned.

Each province had a **royal site**, a place where important events took place. In 100AD there were royal sites at Emain Macha, near Armagh; Tara, county Meath and Dún Ailinne, county Kildare as well as other locations.

## **Choosing a Celtic Chieftain of the Tuath**

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**The chieftainship was not hereditary and they were “elected” from any one of the males from the “deirbhthine” or the descendants of a deceased chieftain to the fourth generation i.e. one stood little chance of being elected unless at least a great-grandfather had been a chieftain.**

**This meant that the chieftain was elected from the leading clan families who was considered the fittest to lead, as demonstrated by the strength of his following.**

**The advantage of this system was that a son who was not considered capable, did not automatically succeed his father.**

**The disadvantage is that the system sometimes led to bitter disputes and even bloody warfare among rival candidates.**

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## **The Aos Dana**

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**These were the wise men (occasionally women) of the Clan and would include**

**Brehons (judges), Druids (priests), Fili (poets / historians) and Doctors of the Clan.**

**Craftsmen also belonged to the Aos Dana and goldsmiths, blacksmiths and carpenters were especially valued for their various skills.**

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## **Brehon Laws and Brehons (judges)**

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**The Brehon laws were responsible for regulating a large part of social life even in ways that would fall outside the legal system of today.**

**The laws set out codes of behaviour that all members of a blood family had to adhere to.**

**Within Celtic society there existed a clearly defined system of rank or caste (which was transient) - serfs/ peasants; freemen/craftsmen; warriors; nobles; kings and priesthood.**

**The Brehons, or judges, were of the Druid priesthood caste. If they made ill-judgements they were expected to forfeit their fee and pay damage costs.**

**Codes of behaviour and levels of responsibility were laid down in the laws for each caste. The higher ranks had the most restrictions placed on them.**

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## Druids or Celtic priests



**Druids** were a major power within the Celtic empire, with all public and private affairs subject to their authority as judges.

In this function as judges the power of the druids was virtually absolute.

Their decisions often involved entire families, in accordance with Celtic law that spelled out that all of the wrongdoer's immediate relatives could be held responsible for his/her misdeed.

The offender's family was responsible for seeing that the order of sentence was obeyed.

By involving families and holding them legally responsible in a legal dispute, Celtic law brought tremendous pressure upon potential wrongdoers.

If the family defaulted on the judgment made by the Druids, the entire family would be disgraced, as far as four generations

## **The Celts were a pastoral people.**

**This means that they based their farming on cattle.  
Wealth was measured in the number of cattle a man owned.**

**Fines imposed by Brehons were paid in cattle.  
Wars were fought over cattle, the most famous being that  
told of in the Tain**



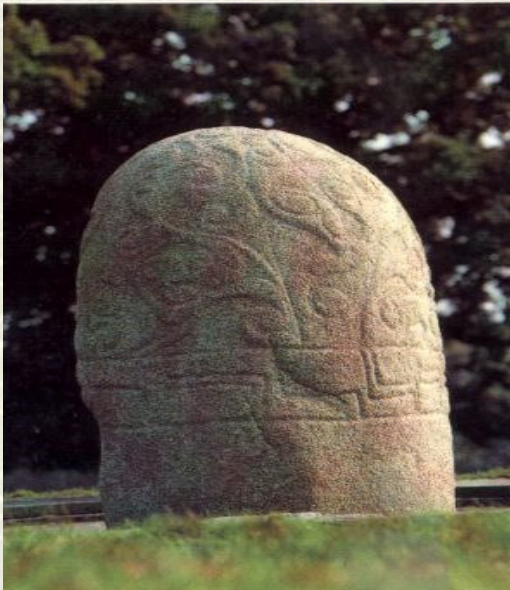
**A farm in Celtic Ireland**

# Celtic Crafts



Both Celtic men and women liked to wear bracelets and brooches. On special occasions warriors and rich people wore torcs around their necks.

This is called the **Broighter Collar**. It was made from gold around 100 A.D.



This was probably a special hold stone for the Celts. It is called the **Turoe Stone** from the place where it was found in County Galway.

**Art and decoration remained relatively primitive until the arrival of the Celts, a migration that was probably complete by the 3rd century BCE.**

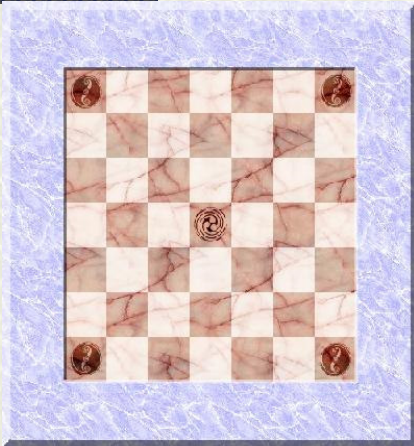
**Early Celtic art expressed itself in gold and silver personal ornaments and such bronze and iron implements as swords and bridle bits.**

**These objects were decorated with engraved designs or raised relief; the distinctive Celtic style emphasized abstract geometric figurations based on circles, spirals, and curved lines.**

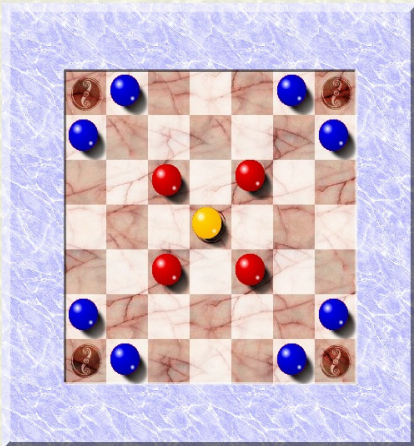
# Pastimes in Celtic Ireland

## Board Games

### (a) brandubh



Brandubh (pronounced bran-DOO) is a Gaelic-Celtic board game played on a board that is 7 squares by 7 squares, and appears to be distantly related to tafl, although is played in a different manner. It is played with two sides, with 13 pieces between them, representing the King, the Princes and the Barons. It is a tactical game considered to be at least 10 centuries old.



The pieces are laid out with the King in the middle, surrounded by his four Princes defending against the Barons as shown in this diagram. Here Gold is chosen to represent the King, Red the Princes and Blue the Barons.

### (b) ficheall - Chess



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## **Other Pastimes**

Hurling (baire) – an ancient form of the modern game

Hunting and Fishing

Poetry and Storytelling

Poets or fili were highly trained and well respected.

Because nothing was written down then everything was learned by heart and recited in public. All stories or news was passed on by word of mouth.

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# Celtic Religious Beliefs

## Gods

The Celts worshipped many Gods. Some of the Gods worshipped included: **Dagda**

The Dagda was the father God of the Celts they called him the Good God because he protected their crops. He was king of the Tuatha Dé Danann and ruled over Uisnech in Co. Meath. He had a cauldron called the Undry which supplied unlimited food and was one of the magical items the Tuatha brought with them when they first landed on Ireland. He also had a living oak harp called Uaithne which caused the seasons to change in their order and also played three types of music, the music of sorrow, the music of joy and the music of dreaming.



**Image of Dagda**

## God - Lugh

The God Lugh was the God of Light or the harvest, a festival was held in his honour in August called Lughnasa, August was his sacred month. He was reputed to be the divine father of Cúchulainn whom he conceived with Dechtire when he carried her away to his palace beneath Brugh na Boinne.

He was known as Ildánach which means master of all arts and crafts. When he first went to the palace of the King Nuada he was stopped at the door by the sentry who said only those with a skill may pass. Lugh said he was a wright but he got the reply that they had one already and so Lugh named all his professions in turn: smith, champion, harper, poet-historian, sorcerer, physician, cupbearer, craftsman in metal only to be told the Tuatha Dé already had experts in these. So then Lugh asked had they got one man who had the whole combination of skills and the reply was no and so he was allowed enter.



**Image of Lugh**

# Celtic Festivals

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## **Imbolg** - in honour of goddess Brigid

This is the time when the first shoots of many plants begin to break the still cold ground.

Brigid, as the creative force in both tribe and land, unites the two main themes of Imbolc; a reawakening of the fertility of the land and a new agricultural cycle.

The Goddess is invited to bless this process,  
Feb. 1 or 2.

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## **Bealtaine** - in honour of goddess Bel.

Traditionally, all fires were extinguished on the eve of Beltaine, to be re-lit from the sacred 'needfire' kindled at dawn. Beltaine is the time when the cattle are put out for summer grazing on the higher slopes. The cattle were driven through the sacred Beltaine fires for purification. The sacred fire would also, it was believed, bring protection, good fortune and fertility to the people. It was also the time when Celtic warriors would put their fighting skills to the test in the challenges of the Beltaine Games. With the hard work of planting accomplished, it was a time when the clans came together in celebration of the sun and to hope that the crops would grow and flourish in the months ahead.

The beginning of the summer

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## **Lughnasa** - in honour of Lugh for a good harvest

This is the main harvest festival and the name of the month of August in the Irish language. It represents the culmination of the year long relationship between people and the Earth. The main theme is reaping the bounty of the land, followed by a communal feast of the first fruits. This includes cultivated crops and wild growing fruit. There was a recent tradition in Ireland of young people going out to playfully collect wild bilberries followed by great This is also a time to reaffirm the tribe or communities' sense of unity and the individuals' sense of belonging. Great fairs were held at Lughnasadh including horse races, games involving fertility magic, Bardic recitations, music and dancing.

August 1st.

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## **Samhain** - in honour of Dagda

It is the last of the harvest festivals and dark counterpoint to Beltaine, beginning the rule of Darkness and celebrating the Crone. It is also the first day of the new year.

A night where life and death, opposites but part of the same whole, are celebrated together.

Samhain is also the Feast of the Dead when we honor our ancestors. It is a time for families to gather and hear the old tales.

On Samhain Night, the dead return to visit with the living. It is traditional to set a place at the table for the ancestors and to leave food outside for the 'Sidhe" (pr. shee) and the "pooka", the fairy folk and mischievous spirits.

October 31st

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# Burial Customs in Celtic Ireland

## Cist Graves

Most burials  
were in cist  
graves – bodies  
were sometimes  
cremated



*Cist grave found at Glassamuckey, Co. Duólin*

## **Monoliths**

Megalithic tombs  
were not built by the  
Celts but some graves  
were marked by a  
Single monolith



	R		N		Q		I
	Ss		S		C		E
	Ng		F		T		U
	G		L		D		O
	M		B		H		A

**O  
G  
H  
A  
M**

The ancient Celts had a form of writing called ogham (pronounced OH-yam). It was the writing of Druids and Bards. Ogham is also called 'Tree Alphabet' because each letter corresponds to a tree and an associated meaning. The letters were, in fact, engraved onto sticks as well as larger standing stones.

In keeping with Druidic concepts, each of the Ogham's twenty letters bears the name of a tree. A-Ailim (Elm), B-Bithe (Birch), C-Coll (Hazel), for example. The Celts had an oral tradition so it was not used to write stories or history as these were memorized.

The Ogham alphabet contains twenty letters and is read from the bottom up.

The letters are constructed using a combination of lines placed adjacent to or crossing a midline. An individual letter may contain from one to five vertical or angled strokes. Vowels were sometimes described as a combination of dots. The midline was, most often, the edge of the object on which the inscription was carved.

## Grave Goods

These included tools,  
Weapons, jewellery and  
Food – it explained the  
Celtic belief in the  
Afterlife (life after death)



# Questions

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- 1. When did the Celts arrive in Ireland and how did they manage to take over the land?**
  - 2. Name one area, in Europe that the Celts originated from?**
  - 3. Give a simple description of what a Celtic warrior looked like?**
  - 4. Describe any one (1) of the forts built by the Celt**
  - 5. Choose one of the following and explain:  
(a) choosing a chieftain; (b) Brehon Laws; (c) Druids**
  - 6. Choose either one (1) Celtic God or one (1) Celtic Festival and explain it?**
  - 7. What is an ogham stone?**
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