

Who were the Celts?

Usually when we think of the Celts, we think: blue eyes, magical, artistic, mysterious, war-like, naked spear throwers, headhunters. Headhunters! There are many myths about the Celts.

But what is the truth?

The Celts are often called 'the invisible people'.

One problem is simply that the Celts didn't leave any written records, although we know something of their habits and customs from writers like the Roman emperor, Julius Caesar. Historians more or less agree that the Celts came to Ireland as

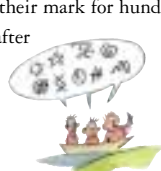
small bands of warriors.

In other words there was no big invasion of Celts as was once thought. These small

bands made a *big* impact. They brought with them the special skills to make beautiful works of art. It's believed they spoke **Continental Celtic**, a language which is now dead and which may have started the Irish (Gaelic) language.

The first of these warriors had arrived about 600BC.

The biggest numbers came about 100BC and continued to make their mark for hundreds of years after that.



Found in the sea off Ballyshannon, County Donegal, this bronze sword hilt was probably made 100 years before Christ in Gaul (now France) and shows the link between Ireland and Europe.

National Museum.



What do we know about the Celts?

Fair hair, blue eyes

That's how Celtic leaders looked. They used to dye their hair with lime-wash, which also made it very stiff (just like gel!). Some old Latin writings tell us the Celts painted their bodies with berry-juice.



Artistic Riddles

Beautiful, curving, intricate designs were painted on leather, carved on sword handles and standing stones. But we don't know what they mean. They're like riddles.



Warriors

The Celts were warriors. Their fighting and art came together with beautifully patterned weapons and gold or bronze neck-collars called **torcs**.

Clothes and jewellery

The Celts (both men and women) loved to wear **jewellery** such as finger-rings, torcs, necklaces, ankle-rings – all made from gold, bronze and amber. Women wore linen **dresses** down to their ankles. Men wore the same, but only down to their knees.



Wooden houses ...

but where's the evidence?

Archaeologists believe ordinary houses were mostly made of wood, which has long since rotted away and so there is no evidence left. To feel safe, some families probably went on living in **crannógs** (man-made island settlements) which were there from earlier times. You can visit a reconstructed *crannóg* at **Craggaunowen** in County Clare (see opposite).

Ringforts (also called raths) and hillforts may have been built in Celtic times and on into Christian times. A ringfort is a circular stone or earthen enclosure, where the family lived and kept their animals safe.

What we do know for sure is how the kings and chieftains lived. You can visit the great ringfort at **Emain Macha** (Navan Fort) in Armagh, where King Conor



MacNessa lived. **Tara** was also very important to the Celts. They held ceremonies and elected their kings there. **Rathcroghan** in County Roscommon was the headquarters of the powerful queen of Connacht, Medb (Maive).