On the Trail of Celtic Europe

In the third installment of an ongoing series, Celtic Life International correspondent Steve Melia pedals through the past

This is the third in a series of articles about my cycle journey across Europe, visiting sites associated with the Celts of the Iron Age and trying to understand their origins.

The last article finished in Heuneburg, on the banks of the Danube in Southern Germany. This one will describe my journey into Austria, and the World Heritage site of Hallstatt, which gave its name to the early Iron Age, and a culture from which the peoples called Keltoi by the ancient Greeks would eventually emerge. This section of the ride was one of the most beautiful, and one I was enjoying the most, until an unfortunate incident disrupted everything.

The name of the river Danube is believed to come from the Celtic goddess Danu, who is also mentioned in Irish mythology, although not much is known about her. My journey would follow the Danube, and the Eurovelo cycle route 6 along it, as far as Vienna. Hallstatt lay further south in mountainous terrain, so I planned to stop for two nights in the city of Linz and take the train and ferry from there to Hallstatt.

The Danube flows through the states of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, via some of the most beautiful towns and cities in the country, including Ulm, Ravensburg and Passau. Most of the ride is quite flat, but between Weltenburg and Kelheim the river passes through a gorge and the cycle route climbs steeply over it.

Following a tip from a German friend I took a short ferry trip with a commentary, explaining the history and legends behind the strange rock formations which overhang the boat in the narrowest stretches. One of them is called the Römerfelsen, or Roman Rock. The Romans built a fort here after they conquered the local 'Celtic' peoples. For several centuries the Danube formed the northern frontier of their province of Noricum, which also stretched into modern-day Austria. On the Austrian side of the border the route has been given a Roman brand, with information boards and reproductions of Roman milestones.

> *Before the Romans annexed it, Noricum had already progressed from a collection of tribes into a confederation led by the Norici tribe, which some writers describe as a "Celtic kingdom"*

But what does 'Celtic' mean in that context? This was the central question I kept coming back to. Today the Celts are mainly defined by language. Most historians believe the Norians spoke a Celtic language called Noric, but only two short scraps of it survive. You can find them online: the Ptuj and Grafenstein inscriptions.


Hallstatt

Compared to the spectacular German cities I had travelled through, Linz was disappointing. Much of it is taken up by a vast industrial area known as the 'Chemical Park'. I stopped there because it seemed to have the most direct public transport to Hallstatt. However, when I came to book, I discovered that part of the railway line was closed for improvement works. The journey now looked complicated, with a train, bus, train and ferry. I need not have worried; like their German and Swiss neighbours, the Austrians know how to make public transport connections work. A note on a website warned passengers not to take photographs before boarding the ferry, because everything is timed to get you there as quickly as possible, which it did.

On board the ferry I could certainly appreciate why people might want to spend time taking photographs. The thin strip of the village nestles along the opposite shore beneath steep, wooded slopes with everything reflected in the clear blue water we were about to cross.

The main attraction at Hallsatt is the Salzswelten, the oldest salt mine in the world, high in the mountain behind the village. In 1846, workers there discovered the remains of a grave and alerted the site manager, Georg Ramsauer. Fortunately, Ramsauer appreciated the significance of the finds. At a time when ancient remains were often plundered, Ramsauer took great care of the thousand or so graves his staff eventually uncovered. His assistant, Isidor Engl, made meticulous watercolour paintings of the burial sites, which archaeologists still refer to today.

Since then, over 1500 graves have been uncovered, spanning over a thousand years, but the most significant finds, the ones which led to the recognition of "Hallstatt Culture" across Europe, come from the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age (800 to 400 BC). In the late nineteenth century, archaeologists agreed to call these the "Hallstatt period," preceding the "La Tène period" described in my previous article. As La Tène culture is associated with the Celts, the Hallstatt period is sometimes described as proto-Celtic (or pre-Celtic), although that association has been challenged in recent years.


Hallstatt Museum

Earlier in my journey I listened to a radio interview with Jean-Louis Brunaux, a media-savvy French archaeologist, who believes the whole idea of a Celtic people is a dangerous myth, springing from discredited concepts of ethnic, racial, and linguistic purity, associated with the Nazis. I was intrigued enough to buy his book. I don't accept his more extreme arguments (nor would most linguists), but they piqued my interest. His provocative reference to the Nazis would prove curiously relevant later on.

A cable car carries the visitors to the salt mines up part of the mountain from where a walking trail continues to climb, past the places where the graves were found, towards the entrance to the mines. An app with a choice of languages explains the significance of each place as you walk towards

the entrance. Prehistoric peoples needed salt to preserve food. Trade in salt enabled the communities that lived here to import luxury items from the Mediterranean and develop an advanced civilization of their own. The people Ramsauer discovered, men women and children, were miners.

The temperature inside the mine is about 8 degrees, so everyone is advised to bring warm clothes - they also provide overalls. Changing and waiting for the tour to begin heightened the tension I had already picked up from listening to the app. Our guide, Tanya, had a great sense of drama, switching easily between German and English, appealing to the children as well as the adults. The tour itself was pure magic, faultlessly choreographed with light shows, 3D reconstructions and two opportunities to descend the slides used by the miners.

"Here you can choose: the slow slide or the fast one" she said. Some older people headed for the slow lane, and I joined the kids as by that point I was thoroughly regressing. On the second descent a camera caught me grinning at 28 km/h – well worth an extra €6 for the photo.

Back down in the village I felt stunned. What could possibly top that experience? I

Hallstatt Celtic Burial Grounds

had one more appointment before taking the ferry back, at the town's museum. What a contrast. After the crowds at the salt mine, it was nearly empty. Everything about it screamed low budget. The initial displays were unimaginative; one of the videos was barely audible.

I was on the point of leaving when I peered around one last corner and was hit by an emotional experience that I find difficult to explain.

There - in glass cases - for me alone in that room, were the best of Ramsauer's finds, world-famous objects I had seen online, on TV documentaries and in videos in the salt mine. Bronze urns and helmets, axe heads and ceremonial swords, an elaborate stand for holding other containers, and my favourites: stylised bronze effigies of bulls, standing alone or moulded into a bowl. I felt like running out into the street and shouting to

Karina Grömer

everyone: don't leave before seeing this!

The museum is run by a local association who collaborate with Vienna's Natural History Museum. They regularly loan objects from their larger collection. I was heading to Vienna and decided to contact one of the leading archaeologists there.

I returned from Hallsatt with a sense of privilege, of rich overflowing experience. What could possibly follow that? The answer came a few days later, in a small town near Vienna, when I opened my bag and found no camera, mobile phone or credit cards. I asked people in the market square in my faltering German if I could borrow a phone to call my number. One older woman allowed me to call but insisted on holding her phone in case I was trying to steal it. "I am from Vienna" she explained.

I headed back to where I thought they might be. They weren't there. Eventually a German man in a cafe leant me his phone and we discovered through Google Timeline that someone had taken my phone from a shop I had visited and walked off with it.

I replaced the phone and camera easily enough and reported the theft to the police, but over the following days, I was drawn into a Kafkaesque struggle with banks, insurance, and mobile phone companies. What should have been straightforward took four weeks and endless hours online to sort out.

All of that had just begun when I reached Vienna, which dampened my enthusiasm a little. The buildings of central Vienna are so impressive and reflect such a rich history that a couple of days there can feel overwhelming, so I wandered between them with no particular plan. One of the most impressive is the Natural History Museum, where I had an appointment with Karina Grömer, Director of the Department of Prehistory. Karina has been researching and writing about Hallstatt, particularly its textiles, for many years. She showed me around their Iron Age collections.

"These objects over here are amongst the ones which gave the Hallstatt period its name," she said, indicating a display of pottery and metal objects. Once again, I was looking at objects of international significance, but they felt unsurprising here in such a grand institution, surrounded by such magnificence.

I wanted to hear what Karina had to say about the relationship between Hallstatt and the Celts. She thought that talk of proto-Celts was "scientific nonsense" (though you will find many such references to Hallstatt online.) She thought the later link between La Tène culture and the Celts in Austria made more sense.

But, I pointed out, most of the ancient Greek sources, particularly the early ones, seem to place the Celts somewhere further West, particularly in France. So why do people and institutions talk about Celts at an early date in Central Europe? Her answer reflected some of Brunaux's concerns:

> *"For the Greeks and Romans, the Celts were strange tribes from the North, who wore strange clothes."*

"There was always an element of 'the other,' a bit like attitudes towards veils today. In science communication, if you say 'Celts' people understand what you mean, more or less. They came before the Romans and were contemporaries with them, for a while. The word speaks to people, but it is not part of our self-definition here in Austria, as it is for some in the British Isles. There have been many tribes here. After the Celts came the Germani, who were misused by the Nazis for their racial concepts. So, in Austria and Germany we don't go in for that deep sense of belonging. For us, it's rooted in the trauma of the Third Reich."

So Brunaux is not alone in his concerns about the potential misuse of 'searching for origins.' By this stage I had read quite a bit from, and about, those ancient sources, which seem at least as confused as the modern ones when you try to work out who or what they meant when they talked about Celts.

The uncertainty surrounding the origins and identity of the Celts has spawned many competing theories over the years. While I was travelling a Belgian linguist, Eduard Selleslagh-Suykens, published a radical new analysis. He argues that the Celtic languages emerged gradually through multiple migrations starting from the Adriatic coast, most of which is now in Croatia. This was timely for my trip as that is where I was heading next.

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