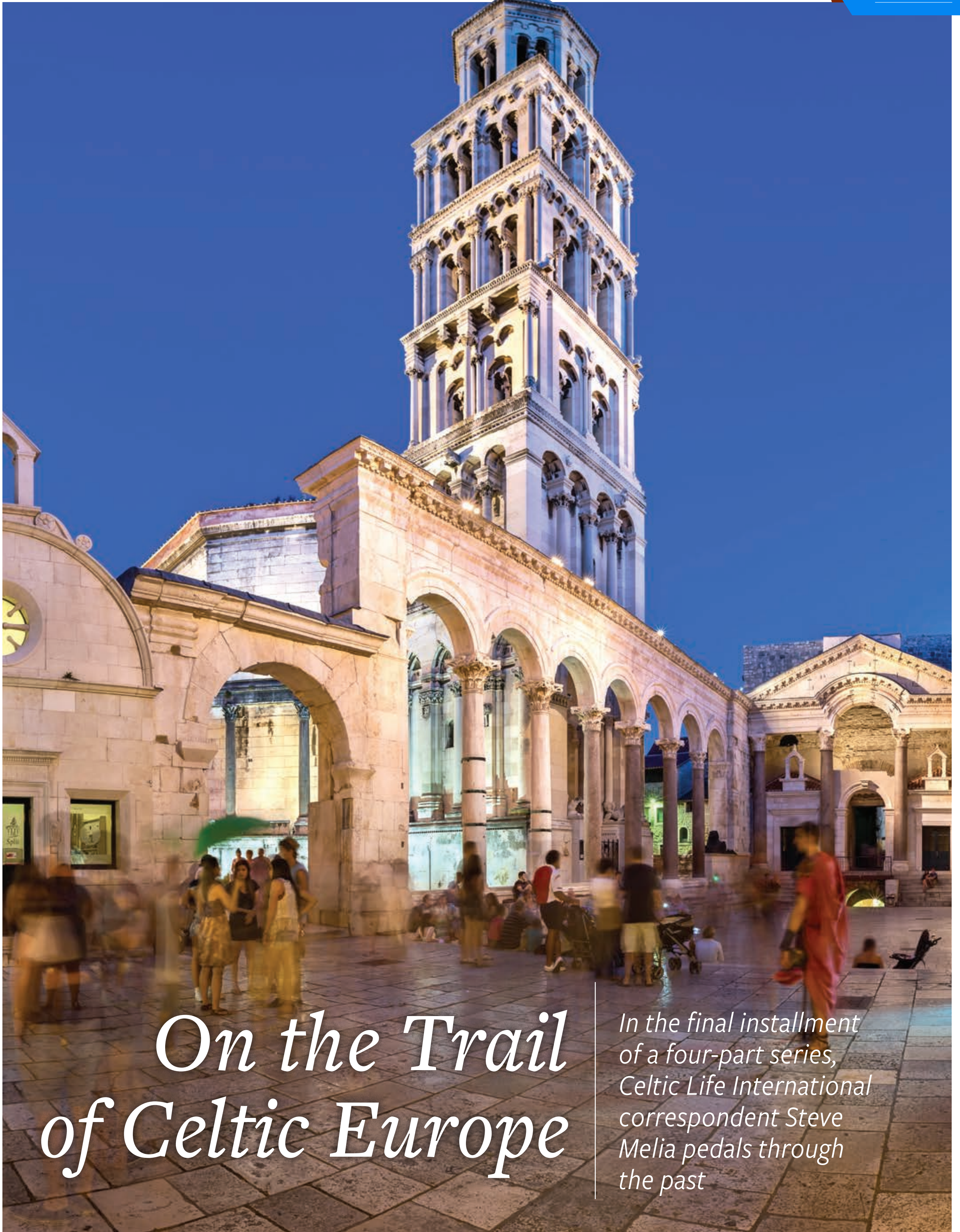


On the Trail of Celtic Europe

In the final installment of a four-part series, Celtic Life International correspondent Steve Melia pedals through the past

This is the fourth and final article about my cycle journey across Europe, visiting sites associated with the Celts of the Iron Age. The last article described Hallstatt and the Natural History Museum in Vienna. This one will cover my journey to the Croatian coast, and will try to answer the question I set out with: can the Celtic peoples really trace their ancestry and their culture back to Iron Age Europe, or is that a modern myth?

Amongst the many sources I read on my travels, two books were troubling me: The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention? by Simon James, and Les Celtes: Histoire d'un Mythe by Jean-Louis Brunaux. They are both "Celtosceptics," but Brunaux goes furthest in attacking the whole idea of a Celtic people or even Celtic languages. James points out that no ancient writers ever described the people of Britain or Ireland as Celts. Brunaux describes the constant mixing and renaming of peoples in the ancient histories of Europe and says that there is no evidence that the languages we call Celtic "originated" in any one place. They might have developed gradually in different places. If they seem similar, that is because they were influenced by contact with their neighbours. This last leg of my trip would illustrate some of their arguments, but also a weakness in that last one.

From Vienna, I turned south towards the border with Slovenia, and along the River Mura to Croatia. The northern regions of Slovenia and Croatia have little of the affluence I saw in Germany and Austria. There were a few cycle routes, but their quality was poor by comparison. I found myself riding on busier roads and poorly surfaced farm tracks. However, food, drink, and accommodation were less expensive.

Much of my ride from France had been relatively flat. In Croatia, I would do a lot more climbing, often rewarded by long views over hills or mountains covered in forests. In the 3rd century BC these hills and mountains were invaded by Celts, according to several Greek and Roman writers.

Most modern historians believe their original homelands lay in Gaul (modern France), from where they moved south into Italy and southeast through the Balkans to Greece and Turkey, propelled by population growth and a need for more land. Some of them settled in the Balkan lands, mixing with the existing Illyrian population and "profoundly changing" their culture according to Jason Abdale, who tells a cracking story of what happened next.

Over the following centuries, the Romans conquered the Western Balkans, starting along the Adriatic coast and gradually moving inland. In 6 AD, the Celtic-influenced Illyrians revolted, bravely resisting for three years until the siege of Solana, which lay later on my journey. The victorious Romans left few traces of the earlier settlements, so the sites I would visit in Croatia were mainly Roman.

Heading south towards the coast I was amused to see the village sign for Fučkovac. I shared a photograph with Facebook friends and then discovered a possible Celtic connection. According to a nineteenth century Austrian ethnographer Josef Stradner, the Fučki people were a fusion of incoming Celts with a local tribe, originally called the Secussen.

> *"They wear pants that remain open at the knees," he wrote, unaware that this might return to fashion centuries later.*

As I explained in my second article, I was running a month later than originally planned, and the temperatures were rising. As a heatwave swept across Europe, I began getting up and starting earlier, but by 10am I was already soaking in sweat and looking for somewhere to cool off. I asked my host in a house with no air conditioning: was this heat normal? He shook his head, replying in broken German. The climate, he said, was "kaput."

My wife had arranged to meet me for a holiday in the port of Pula, where we visited the magnificent amphitheatre and the Temple of Augustus, which houses a small but impressive display of Roman artefacts. I was struck by a fragment of a statue: beside the huge leg of an emperor kneels the shrunken figure of a slave with hands tied behind his back. He is wearing trousers, a sign of Celticity, and a torque, the open-ended gold necklace worn by Celtic leaders. His head is missing, but the scene is no less moving for that.

To avoid retracing my route, I took a ferry to Zadar, further down the coast. It is a beautiful city but crammed with tourists in July. I spent as long as I could in the air-conditioned archaeological museum, which has a big Iron Age section. Many of the artefacts were marked as "La Tène" culture, recalling my visit there in my second article. Some bronze axe heads were marked simply "Celts." It was interesting to find Celtic influences this far south, so I decided to ask the experts for some explanation.

Danijel Džino, a Croatian archaeologist at Macquarie University in Australia, told me that "evidence for Celtic settlement in what is today Croatia is very slim." There is evidence of influence, but mainly in the north of the country. Natalija Čondić, an advisor at the museum, said the 'La Tène' artefacts were probably made in that style by the local Liburnians, illustrating one of the points made by James and Brunaux.

Celtic Warriors Buried at Maiden Castle, Dorset

Steve and Sara Melia

Just as eating pizzas and drinking espressos doesn't make you Italian, the styles of ancient artefacts cannot tell us the ethnicity of the people who made or used them.

As I waited for those replies I carried on riding through the heat. I was following the Eurovelo 8 cycle route, but much of it was on the main coast road, with its tourist traffic and heavy lorries. I was no longer enjoying the experience. I had wanted to finish in Greece, but a friend there told me it had reached 43°C, which made up my mind. I would go there at another time of year. For now, I would take the ferries and trains from Split back to England, where I had read about an important Celtic site not far off my route home.

Before I left Croatia, there were two more places I wanted to visit. The remains of Solana, the provincial capital where the Romans finally crushed the Illyrian Revolt, are hugely impressive, once you find your way through the allotments or the hotel car park which conceal its entrances. Next to the ferry port, the historic centre of Split is a unique example of a "living museum" - it is built in and around the Temple of Diocletian, the Roman emperor who persecuted the early Christians and martyred many of the early saints.

I boarded the overnight ferry to Ancona in Italy that evening. During the late Iron Age, that area was settled by a Celtic tribe, the Senones. They migrated from Gaul in the 4th century BC, leaving the rest of their kindred in the area southwest of Paris. As the Romans also conquered them, they have left few visible remains, but Ancona's archaeological museum has a major section about them. The only problem was, it was closed on Mondays, which is when I arrived. I found it on the side of a hill opposite a Roman mosaic. The back door was open, so I decided to try my luck. The caretaker spoke no English, so I typed a request into Google Translate. Was there any chance of a quick look at the Senones collection? She called another woman, who spoke some English and sounded hopeful. She went to see the director and came back with a bunch of keys, which got me excited, but she shook her head. In any case, she said, much of that collection was on loan in China. If I emailed the director, he would send me some photographs (they never did). Oh well, it was worth a try.

While I was away, England had suffered a record-breaking heatwave but when I arrived in Poole there were fluffy clouds and temperatures in the mid-twenties. A gentle tailwind carried me west towards the county town of Dorchester. This was heaven.

Two kilometres southwest of Dorchester, the Iron Age hillfort of Maiden Castle appears on a long flat hilltop. The road finishes in a car park with a track climbing the last few hundred metres to the top. It is the largest British hillfort, though not as big as continental sites such as Gergovie in my first article. Like Gergovie it was more than a military structure - as conflict grew in Iron Age society much of the surrounding population moved inside it.

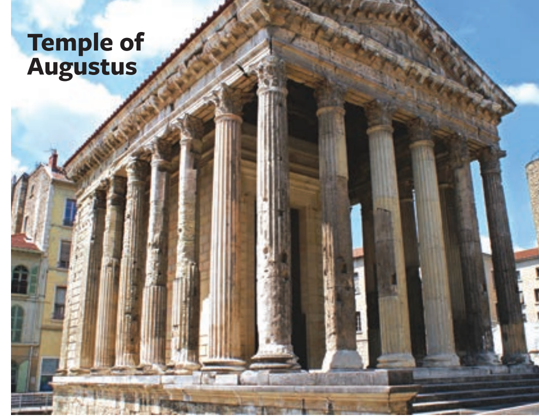
By the late Iron Age, it was occupied by the Durotriges, one of several Celtic peoples who settled in western Britain. In the 1930s a pioneering archaeologist, Mortimer Wheeler, astounded the nation with his findings of a bloody battle during the Roman invasion of 43 AD. They left a "war cemetery" at the eastern end of the site with the shocking remains of a skeleton pierced by a Roman arrowhead in the spine.

As in Gergovie, I walked around the earth ramparts and tried to imagine what it might have been like for defenders surrounded by a bigger, better-equipped army below. Only this time, the story has a different ending.

In the Dorset Museum, I met Kat Broomfield, Collections Manager and Barry Fitzgerald, a volunteer and former police officer whose job used to involve identifying human remains. They showed me their Iron Age collection, including the famous skeleton with the Roman arrowhead - or was it?

Barry explained: "Mortimer Wheeler was a great self-publicist. He wasn't beyond stretching the facts to tantalize the audience. His wife was more competent, archaeologically, but she died before their findings were published. From radiocarbon dating, we now know, the site was almost abandoned by the time the Romans arrived."

Despite growing counterevidence, the myth of the Roman siege of Maiden Castle persisted until a team from Bournemouth University fully debunked it in 2019. Barry told me they have some more "explosive findings" on the way. I asked Durotriges Project Co-director Paul Cheetham if he could tell me more, but he was staying tight-lipped on that for the moment. He agreed that the Durotriges were a Celtic people but added that "the overarching term Celtic is extremely problematic when you try to tie it down in any practical sense."


Temple of Augustus

For archaeologists, that conclusion is understandable. Archaeological finds cannot tell us what language people spoke unless they leave writings, which the early Celts did not. We now know that La Tène culture, with its swirling patterns and strange animals, spread widely amongst Celtic-speakers - and many others. The idea of an enduring Celtic culture, starting in Iron Age Europe and continuing to modern Ireland and Scotland is, unfortunately, a myth.

> *So, the only workable definition we are left with is linguistic - a Celt is someone who speaks, or whose recent ancestors spoke, a Celtic language.*

There is no straightforward link between the Celts of today and the people called Keltoi in ancient times, but Brunaux goes too far in denying any ancestral links. Languages may spread organically on a continent but there is only one way that Celtic languages could possibly have reached Britain and Ireland: because the people who spoke them, or earlier versions, moved here. And we know that people did move in large numbers earlier than previously thought. The latest DNA evidence suggests large-scale migration from France to England in the late Bronze Age, and from Spain to Ireland even earlier. Those migrants probably brought the two branches of the Celtic languages, but we cannot be sure, not yet.

The Celtosceptics are right to warn against the delusion of ethnically pure ancestors. There is no purity in the story of the Celts. Instead, there has been migration and mixing, conquests, and resistance - and for those who search, a few tantalizing facts surrounded by uncertainty. That is what makes it so fascinating. For as long as that uncertainty remains, the search will continue.

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