The Iron Warlords

Iron

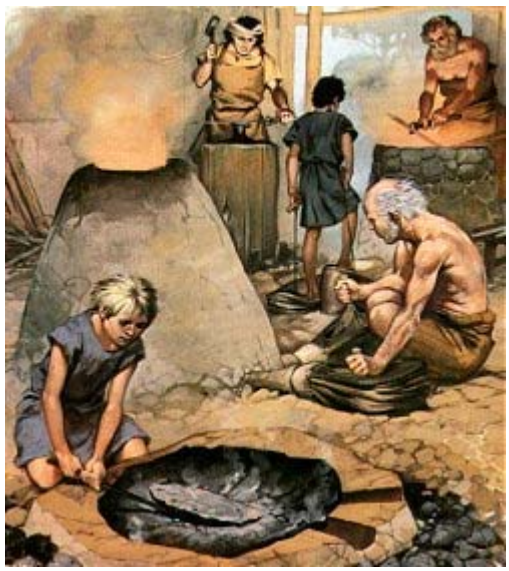
We believe that the secret of iron making originated with the Hittites in northeastern Asia Minor, around 1400 BC. Within a couple of hundred years the technology was being spread widely through the Middle East and into barbarian Europe by itinerant ironsmiths.

By 800 BC, in Eastern Europe there lived warrior peoples who had learned how to mine iron. These fierce and hostile tribes rampaged through Europe terrorising communities with their superior iron weapons. They fought their way gradually from the shores of the Black Sea to Ireland, nearly 2000 miles away. These warlords were of Celtic race and they brought to the British Isles not only not only a new technology but also a new style of life that was aggressive and fearful. For the first time in these islands settlements were built to withstand possible attack.

Iron making

To make bronze, ingots of copper and tin had to be heated until the metals became liquid, then the hot fluid was poured into moulds and allowed to cool. Iron could not be treated successfully this way. Even when they succeeded in attaining high enough temperatures to melt iron, the metal, when poured into a mould and allowed to cool slowly, crystallised and became a rigid, brittle substance, unsuited for tools and weapons.

Early smiths discovered that if the iron was heated and reheated over a bed of burning charcoal crystallisation could be checked. They had to hammer the iron every time they heated it, forming it into the desired tool or weapon without the use of a mould. When they had achieved a satisfactory shape the smith heated the finished product once again and plunged it into a bath of cold water. The sudden chilling prevented the iron from developing weak points because of partial crystallisation.



Iron became the most important metal in these times because it was so plentiful and was available to all, not just the wealthy, if you knew how to work it. It was also much stronger than bronze and could be sharpened very effectively. Those who knew about iron saved bronze for jewellery and ornamental use.

The Celts

Wave upon wave of Celtic people came to Scotland and settled here. From the earliest days to the first century BC the whole of south Scotland, and much of the

Highlands, was gradually covered in a number of small settlements cut from the woodlands with axes of iron.

Early Settlements

In each of the Celtic settlements there were usually a dozen houses surrounded by a stout timber palisade (wall) to keep out warring neighbours. In the North and the West where there were very few trees the settlements were built of stone, but they were still built to the same design. Often they built **Brochs** beside their huts into which they would retreat if they came under attack. These were huge circular, stone constructions, much wider at the base with a tiny entrance. The people could herd their livestock into the brochs if necessary, as these were kept stocked with supplies of food. Water supplies, or even a well inside, ensured the survival of a tribe under threat.

During peacetime the Celtic settlers lived very much in the way that the Bronze Age farmers lived. They tended herds and flocks of cattle, sheep, goats and pigs. In Scotland, however, they did not use the plough for many centuries.

Hill Forts

In some parts of Scotland the Celts brought a new feature to Scotland's landscape. On hills and high grounds, Celtic hill forts were built. In the centuries to come more than fifteen hundred would be built, some smaller than a football pitch and others twenty times more than an area enclosing whole villages and towns. These were usually vitrified forts.

Crannogs

The Celts had other very effective ways of making their living places safe. They built Crannogs, which were floating wooden settlements on lochs and moors. A floating platform would be built from wood and upon this floating platform they would build a round hut approximately fifteen metres in diameter. Around the timber walls of the crannogs, there was a walkway, and on the side looking over the loch access for a harbour. A narrow causeway reached the shore. The people who lived here planted crops in nearby fields, and could

withdraw to their Crannogs should danger threaten.

The Tribes

The Celtic tribes were very often at war, and from their hilltop towns, forts and crannogs, they fought many battles to settle scores old and new. They raided and plundered the herds and flocks of neighbouring tribes. Although the Celts were never united under one leader, so never governed an empire they did have control of Europe for many hundreds of years. The Celts usually split up into tribes, which, although they shared the same language, shared little else, and were in almost constant conflict. At one time there were sixteen or so of these tribes in Scotland.

During the seven centuries of their dominance in Europe the Celtic tribes made a mark so deep that it would never be erased. In Scotland they pushed the native peoples aside and took over their lands. But the skills they brought with them transformed the way of life here. Although not mentioned above, the Celts were a highly artistic race who left artefacts and in the Highlands of Scotland Pictish Symbol Stones which give us some clues about the way of life of these warlike, but illiterate, tribes.

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The Celts

The first Celts came to Scotland around 700 BC.

The whole of the south of Scotland, up to the very edges of the Highlands, became covered in small settlements made from the trees they had chopped down with their iron axes. These settlements were usually made up of about six huts surrounded by a wooden palisade (large fence) to deter warring neighbours. But in the north and west, where trees were scarce, they built with stone as much as they could, in the same style.

They were farmers, cultivating wheat, oats and barley, and keeping pigs, herds of cattle, and flocks of sheep and goats. They depended on their livestock for food much more than they did their crops.

The Celts knew the skill of weaving, using a strong wooden frame called a loom and threads hung from its top cross bar, each pulled taut by a weight of baked clay or stone hanging near the floor. Fleece, shorn from their sheep using a sharp knife and spun into yarn, was woven to make woollen fabric. They used a wooden shuttle to pass the weft threads under one and over the next of the weighted warp threads, which were raised and lowered to let the shuttle pass easily. This was how they created the brightly coloured woollen clothes the Iron Age Celts loved.

They also wove other materials, basketwork and matting from rushes, wattle hurdles from thin or split branches, which they used for walling.

They also worked in leather, making clothing and harnesses, and even containers, which were easier to carry than the pottery ones previously used.

The Brochs

Last week we referred to the Brochs built in the north and west of Scotland for defence.

Here is an illustration of the Broch of Mousa in the Shetland Islands.

The walls would be around fifteen metres high, too high to scale. The entrance was a door so small that a battering ram could not be used, as men could not work in such a small space while the defenders fired at them from above.

All the evidence suggests that brochs were for defence, but who would have had the means and the will to attack these people? Clearly they feared an enemy who used sophisticated weapons of war. Since the brochs were never far from the shore presumably they expected an attack to come from the sea. What did the attackers want from the Celts? Could they want the people themselves, for slavery.

Possibly these invaders had weapons such as the battering ram, and they certainly used boats to travel around. If they were searching for slaves this description certainly fits the Romans.

They were indeed greatly feared by many civilisations, as they gathered slaves for their vastly growing empire. Around 2000 years ago the Romans were starting their conquest of Britain. A Roman historian, named Tacitus, wrote that slaves were one of many great prizes of the conquest of Britain, and he also wrote about the Orcades, which is another name for Orkney (where the majority of the brochs were found). But this has still to be proved beyond doubt and the investigations continue.

But there is another aspect to the mystery of the brochs. Remains of over five hundred of them are scattered around the north of Scotland, who chose the original design, why did everyone follow this standard, and why didn't anyone else try their hand at making different styles? Maybe we're looking through the mists of time to see one brilliant mastermind mason who thought up the idea of the brochs as a brilliant defence of his country and its people. Maybe the many tribes communicated with each other more than we realise.

The Tribes

The Celts were never one kingdom. They ruled most of Europe but never as one people. They had families, which gathered and formed clans, which gathered and formed tribes. By this time Scotland had at least 16 tribes.

They were all loyal to their own kings and queens, and had places where they would meet, like markets, where people of their own tribe could come to exchange goods, news, and any produce.

There were the Damonii, who lived in the west, an area that covered from what is now known as Ayrshire, all the way to Clyde. Then, further south were the Novantae, whose territory spread over Galloway and Dumfries. On the other side of Scotland (the east coast) where the Votadini, whose people lived as far north as the River Forth. The Votadini had their capital on a hill in East Lothian called Traprain Law. Twenty miles away from Traprain Law there was another Votadinian centre, they called it Din Eidyn, we call it Edinburgh. The fourth of these southern tribes, the Selgovae, held the area between the Votadini (in the east) and the two western coast tribes.

The other 12 tribes lived to the north of Scotland, above the Forth and Clyde. They ranged from the Epidii in the Mull of Kintyre to the Cornovii in Caithness, and from the Cerones in northwestern highlands to the Taezali, whose territory is now known as Aberdeenshire.

Throughout the time of the Celts Scotland was raged with the harsh sound of the carnyx (the Celtic war trumpet) as the neighbouring tribes battled it out over whose territory was whose; riding on horse and carriage the tribes would fight until their demise. For seven centuries they battled, and these tribes made their mark so deeply that Scotland would never forget. Over all that time there were different waves of Celtic people arriving and dominating Scotland. In later episodes we shall look at the different strains of Celtic peoples including the Picts.

While many people contributed to Scotland's foundations, it was the Celts who left the biggest impact on Scottish nationality. Even today Celtic blood still runs wildly through the veins of many Scots and Celtic culture and language continues to be preserved and valued, particularly among the Gaels, (The Gaeltachd), who are strongly ensconced in the west of Scotland.

Indeed, one of the major sponsors of our project is An Comunn Gaidhealach who promote traditional language and culture in many ways, but particularly through the many competitions they organise annually, the largest of which is The Royal National Mod. See the link to The Mod below.

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