

# Our fiery ancestors

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand**

Band (Jahr): **33 (1970)**

Heft [4]

PDF erstellt am: **12.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-942208>

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# OUR FIERY ANCESTORS

## CELTIC ORIGINS

The Greeks used the name "Celts" in a very wide sense to describe all the fair-haired peoples dwelling north of the Alps. During the last millennium before Christ the Celts had wandered and settled over much of the area between the Atlantic and the Black Sea. They penetrated into France, the British Isles, and Spain; by the fifth century B.C. they had reached Italy; they drifted down the Danube valley and left settlements in Asia Minor; they held the area of modern Germany perhaps as far as the Elbe and also Bohemia. These peoples formed neither a political nor, in any proper sense, a racial unity. But there was among them sufficient homogeneity for ancient authors to consider them as a whole, distinct, on the one hand, from the more highly civilised Greeks and Romans of the Mediterranean basin, and, on the other, from the less advanced Germanic tribes which lay to their north and east. It is Celts whom the opening historic record shows in possession of much of Switzerland, superimposed on the Ligurians, who themselves represented a later layer of settlement than the neolithic and bronze age men who had made their homes on platforms supported by piles rising out of the waters of the Swiss lakes. And it is from a Swiss rite, at the egress of the River Zihl from Lake Neuchatel, occupied, it would see, by Celts from c. 250 to c. 100 B.C., that the culture of Celtic Europe during the later iron age has been given its name of the La Tene civilization.

## A SECRET COUNTRY

Neither the Alps nor the lands immediately to the north of them were well known to the Greeks, and no description has survived earlier than that of the historian Polybius c. 130-120 B.C. From this time onwards recurrent conflict between Celts and Romans caused the latter to set down in writing what they could discover of the peoples who then inhabited the Swiss area. Though predominantly they were not exclusively Celtic; the upper valley of the Rhine from Lake Constance to the high mountains of Grisons was occupied by the Raeti, a wild and barbarous segment of the Veneti of north-east Italy, who themselves formed a distinct group of peoples of the Indo-European family. Speaking roughly, the line of division between Celts and Raeti ran from Lake Constance southwards to the valley of the Linth, and thence to the St. Gotthard. But the boundary was not rigid, and in the mountains it can hardly be drawn. We do not know whether Raeti or Celts held Uri; each in turn appears to have occupied Glarus; perhaps at this date Urseren was not settled at all. Moreover, the superior culture of the Celts seems to have exercised a pervasive influence well inside Raetian territory. Yet at least it is clear that when men first began to describe the inhabitants of

Switzerland they distinguished between two dominant races; the composition of the layers beneath cannot be determined precisely.

Among the Celts a number of different peoples can be named and localised. The valleys of the Ticino and the Vorderrhein were occupied by the Lepontii, whose Celtic culture was strongly tinged by that of the primitive Ligurian inhabitants. Four Celtic tribes held the Valais, and Geneva and the region to the south of its lake belonged to the Allobroges, who had been conquered by the Roman in 121 B.C. and incorporated into the province of **Gallia Narbonensis**. To the west of the Jura, between Rhine and Rhone, was the territory of the Sequani; it was perhaps not till the middle of the first century B.C. that the Raurici became established in the neighbourhood of Basle. Most extensive of all were in the lands of the Helvetii. On the east they marched with those of the Raeti; to the west they were limited by the Jura; to the south by the Alps and Lake Geneva. Northwards their boundary was indeterminate; at one time it had extended to the River Main, and at the beginning of the first century B.C. there were still Helvetian settlements to the north of the Rhine. But here was being felt the increasing pressure of the Germanic tribesmen, who, driven by what impulses we cannot know, were moving relentlessly from their homes in north-eastern Europe towards the kindlier climates of the south.

#### CELTS AND GERMANS

It is unnecessary to suppose a primordial and permanent antagonism between Celts and Germans; indeed, so much Celtic influence did the latter absorb that it is sometimes difficult to be certain of their identity. Thus when in the last decade of the second century B.C. a branch of the Celtic Helvetii, the Tigurini, allied themselves with the Germanic Cimbri to raid the Roman provinces, it remains doubtful whether the third party to the plan, a tribe called the Teutoni, were Celts or celticized Germans. However this may be, the movement seemed for a time to imperil the Roman republic. By 107 B.C. the Tigurini had defeated a Roman army and slain a Roman consul on the middle Garonne; two years later the united Celtic and Germanic hordes broke two consular armies on the lower Rhone in the neighbourhood of Orange. After ravaging Gaul and marching about in Spain they planned nothing less than a double attack on Italy. The Teutoni were to advance from Gaul along the coast; the Cimbri and the Tigurini were to cross the eastern Alps into Lombardy. The danger to Rome was averted by the military genius of Marius. In the autumn of 102 B.C. he crushed the western division of the invaders at Aix in Provence; in the following summer he annihilated the Cimbri near Verucelli. The Tigurini, who had remained in reserve in the Alps to the east of the Brenner Pass, escaped the slaughter and returned to the north, perhaps at this time taking up their permanent settlement in south-west Switzerland about Avenches.

Commonly it is the activities of the Cimbri in these events which have attracted most attention, for they provide the first instance of conflict between the Romans and Germans who were ultimately to overrun the Roman empire in the west. No less significant is the part played by the Celts, the Tigurini, and perhaps also the Teutoni. They appear as belligerent peoples, capable in this instance of co-operation with the Germans. But the alliance of Celt and German was a matter of temporary convenience which did not long check Germanic penetration into Celtic territory. A generation after the expedition of the Cimbri the German advance southwards had become more urgent, and it was favoured by divisions among the Celts. When about 70 B.C. the German leader Ariovist led his confederation of tribes across the Rhine near Mainz, he was welcomed by the Sequani of Alsace as an ally against their enemies, the Celtic Aedui of central Gaul. But the ally soon showed that he intended to be master; by 61 B.C. Ariovist had shattered the Aedui; then he turned to deprive the Sequani of their lands. A wedge of German settlement threatened to separate the Celts of Switzerland from those of the west. At this the Helvetii took fright, and planned a mass migration from the area south of the Rhine where many of them, who had been forced from their more northerly homes by the pressure of the Germans during the last two generations, had hardly yet had time to become established settlers. Their goal was the Atlantic seaboard of south-west Gaul, known to some of the elders by the expedition of the Tigurini nearly half a century before.

This project, instigated by the nobleman Orgetorix and complicated by his personal ambitions of achieving kingship over the Helvetii and of promoting a confederation of monarchies among the peoples of Gaul, persisted beyond his death. By the spring of 58 B.C. the Helvetii were ready to start their journey; contingents of other Celtic peoples had joined to swell the total to 368,000 men, women and children; the fighting men may be estimated at a quarter of that figure. The evacuation was to be complete and final; the Helvetii had burnt their towns, their villages, their crops. Their easiest route to the mouth of the Garonne was to cross the Rhone at Geneva, and then, skirting the southern end of the Jura, to pass through the Roman province of Transalpine Gaul. For permission to do this they addressed themselves to the Roman authority. That authority was Caesar, and permission was refused.

**(To be Continued.)**

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## **GROUP TRAVEL**

Mrs Messmer advises that Tour No. 1 had to be cancelled but Tour No. 2 is still open for further participants.