

K = Kevin; M = Michael; T = Tyler.

Begin Transcript:

00:00:07 K

Hello and welcome to *Fabula Celtica: A Celtic Studies Podcast*.

00:00:11 T

With Tyler Baxter.

00:00:12 M

And Michael Frim.

00:00:13 T

Season 1: Ancient Ireland, Episode 4: The Enigmatic Iron Age.

00:00:24 T

There were once three kings who held sovereignty over Ireland in succession. They would rule in seven-year cycles and then hand over the sovereignty to the next person in their group of three.

00:00:39 T

One was Cimbaeth, who came from Findabair of Mag Inis in County Down. Another was Aed Ruad who is associated with the waterfall of Eas Ruad in County Donegal.

00:00:55 T

There was also Díthorba, whose family came from Uisneach in what is known, in the legendary sources, as the very centre of Ireland.

00:01:06 T

But while their reign in these cycles went very well for three cycles apiece, Aed eventually died, leaving only his daughter Macha to inherit. And so when it was Aed's turn to claim the kingship from Díthorba, Macha went in his place.

00:01:29 T

And Díthorba and his sons were not pleased with the idea of a woman ruling over them, so Macha claimed her sovereignty through battle, defeating Díthorba, killing him, and exiling his sons into Connacht.

00:01:47 T

She married Cimbaeth, the other ruler of the three, and passed on sovereignty to him, but eventually became worried about Dithorba's sons and whether they would try to come claim the kingship once again.

00:02:04 T

And so, she disguised herself as a leper by covering herself with rye dough, and went to find Dithorba's sons, as they were hiding out in some woodlands.

00:02:18 T

When she came upon them, they asked for news and then invited her to sit by the fire, and one of them commented that 'the hag has a pretty eye.'

00:02:30 T

And he implied that he would be delighted to sleep with her, despite her condition, so she led him off into the wood so they could be alone, and she tied him up, gagged him, and then came back to the fire.

00:02:49 T

And his four brothers asked where he had gone and she said, 'oh, he was ashamed for having slept with a leper.'

00:03:00 T

The next brother said, 'well, I wouldn't be ashamed for that. You have a lovely eye, after all.' And so, she took *him* into the wood, tied him up, gagged him and came back again for each brother in turn.

00:03:16 T

After all of them had been restrained, she brought them back to her people in Ulster. All at once, they said that they, the sons of Dithorba, should be put to death.

00:03:32 T

'That is not just,' said Macha, 'for that would be contrary to law; but let them be made slaves of and let the task be imposed on them of building a fort for me which shall be the capital of the province for ever.'

00:03:47 T

And she marked out the shape of the fortress for them with the brooch, which in Irish is *eó*, of gold that was at her neck: in Irish neck is *muin*. Hence came the name of this new fortress, Emain, that is *eó* and *muin*, that is. the brooch at the neck of Macha.

00:04:11 T

So I have just recited a little story, usually called Macha Mongruad, Macha of the Red Tresses, which is one of the *dindshenchas* stories, one of the place-lore stories for the name of the royal site of Ulster, Navan Fort or, in Irish, Emain Macha [Mod. Ir. Emhain Mhacha].

00:04:35 T

And I am delighted to be joined today by a postgraduate Masters student from University College Cork, I'm going to go ahead and let him introduce himself.

00:04:55 M

Hi, I'm Michael Frim. Thank you so much for having me here. Very excited to be discussing Celtic Studies.

00:04:57 T

Yes, thank you for being here, Michael. So, for those of you who are just joining us for the first time, my name is Tyler Baxter. I also have a postgraduate qualification from University College Cork, myself, as well as a Masters in Celtic Studies from University of Wales Trinity Saint David. But I do recommend that you go back to our previous episodes as this is, sort of, a serial podcast, and each episode does build on the next, and today we're talking about Iron Age Ireland, which is oftentimes called the 'enigmatic' Iron Age in Celtic Studies circles, because what evidence we have about it is very intriguing, but very fragmentary, and this makes it quite difficult to understand really what was going at in at this time that we know a lot of important things happened.

00:05:52 T

In fact, even though the Bronze Age is earlier, we have better archaeological sources for the Bronze Age, and many people feel like we understand that better than the Iron Age, even though the Iron Age is more recent: for the Iron Age, we're talking roughly 600 BCE to about 400 CE.

00:06:13 T

This tale of Macha Mongruad which is supposed to take place, According to the Annals of the Four Masters, just a touch before the proper Iron Age has really started. But the Annals of the Four Masters was composed in the early 1600s so, talking about a time period that was a good millennium before that is, it's hard to say that it's terribly accurate dating.

00:06:40 T

We also get this story in the Book of Leinster, as well as in Jeffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* or *The History of Ireland*. And Michael, I'm curious, have you heard this particular story about Emain Macha before?

00:06:59 M

I actually haven't heard that story before. My background's in archaeology, so I'm familiar with Navan Fort, but more so from an archaeological perspective rather than from it's stories within

the medieval period. And to be honest, that story is really interesting because a lot of these Iron Age and Bronze Age and Neolithic sites that exist on the Irish landscape, many, many of them, do: a lot of them within the medieval cultural memory exist or as something built by prehistoric ancestors of or, I shouldn't say ancestors, *prehistoric inhabitants* of Ireland not related to the current Irish or the medieval Irish peoples. So, it's interesting to have this Fort this this archaeological site being associated with a member of the of their, you know, cultural history. They associated this fort with themselves rather than, say, Newgrange or some of the other places that they associated with, you know, the mythical Tuatha De Danann. And so that's, you know, that's something interesting.

00:08:08 T

Yes, yes, I very much agree with that, and something else I find really interesting about this tale is that these three kings are said to reign over Ireland, sort of, in its entirety, I guess, High Kings, essentially. And they're trading this role in this succession between each other, but all three of the kings are said to be associated with Ulster, specifically, when in many of the medieval sources, the *majority* of the medieval sources, I would say the legendary centre of kingship is in Meath at Tara or to some extent at Uisneach, and indeed Díthorba, one of the three kings, is said to have been the son of a man who is from Uisneach, but the other two are strongly associated with locations in Ulster, in Down and Donegal. So it's an unusual placement of where these people are coming from, and I agree that at such an early date it's somewhat surprising that we have what seemed to be mortal kings ruling. Though, Macha herself may seem a little bit more supernatural in spite of her very practical disguise as a leper using rye dough, we might expect in a lot of other stories with a similar figure for her to magically transform into a hag of some kind, but here it's more down to Earth, I suppose.

00:09:46 T

So, this whole story is one of a couple of stories, perhaps more than a couple, but one of two that I'm familiar with, at least, of how this site, Navan Fort or Emain Macha, gets its name. The site at Emain Macha actually is located in County Armagh, it is very close to the city or town, depending on how you want to define it, of Armagh itself in what is now Northern Ireland.

00:10:23 T

But the name in Irish for Armagh is also a name with the place name element 'Macha' in it. The Irish is Ard Macha or 'the height of Macha'. So we have this this strong associat[ion] with Macha in this general region.

00:10:44 T

And she, very early in the medieval period, seems to become a character, even though it's quite likely that this is just some sort of place name, originally. It seems to, in fact, come from a form of the word *mag*, meaning plain. So really, originally, something that means 'plain' becomes this personal name.

00:11:08 M

Could that have been a process of just a regular old placename of an important place, and then the people think to themselves, well, this is a very important place, shouldn't this have some kind of equally important name? Could that be that kind of process going on here?

00:11:24 T

Yeah, yeah, I think what's happening. The vast majority of the time, if not every time with these stories about how places came to get their name, is. So, the story is always developed after the name is there. And I would say it's very frequently developed after the rationale behind the name, it has been lost and so a new tale is invented... though, we always have to wonder whether there is some amount of cultural memory that actually does have some amount of truth to the original naming of the place.

00:11:59 M

It's also important to add there, I would say, you know, the names of places in the histories of places have very important political implications. So if you were an Ulster king, say, and wanted to claim some, you know, some cachet throughout all of Ireland, it would be, it would be pretty nice to have a kind of to have a story where you could point to Navan Fort in Ulster and say 'Oh yes,' you know, 'my predecessors, they were kings of Ireland according to this story.' So, you know, these place names might also have political implications as well for, you know, how did these stories come about?

00:12:37 T

Yes. Yes. I think that's very true when that makes this story even more interesting in that sense of, sort of, where it is located in our sources, having it come out of the Book of Leinster. Obviously the Book of Leinster is named for the province of Leinster, but this is a story that clearly has an Ulster bias. We also see it coming up in the Annals of the Four Masters, which is sort of an attempted compilation of all the other different annals that existed in Ireland up to that point. And to remind listeners, the annals are sort of like, almost, short diary-esque entries about individual years that are recorded over time in different locations.

00:13:31 T

And they're supposed to be historical, especially once you get to the point where the monks who are writing these annals are writing them contemporarily with the events that are occurring. But, oftentimes, as we can see with the Annals of the Four Masters in particular, they also like to work their way backwards and things get less likely to be true the further back in time they go.

00:13:56 T

So, with the Annals of the Four Masters, this was composed with a political aim to really give the Irish, and the Irish history, cultural leverage and suggest that the Irish culture was of value at a time when the English were colonising Ireland and claiming a lot of power in Ireland. But, they had this sort of anti-English bias, and so you get interesting things happening like they change what would have been a title of 'king' to things like lords because they only want kings being this very prestigious title that only applies to really the High King of Ireland. And so here in this particular place where this story appears in the Annals of the Four Masters, we still get that

'king' title because these are kings over all Ireland, when that is fairly exclusive and fairly rare in the annals overall.

00:15:04 M

And I think that speaks to the politicisation of history throughout human existence, that our pasts have important power in the present, whether it's place names of Navan Fort in the early medieval period, or the history of Ireland in the Annals of the Four Masters. History has political importance.

00:15:28 T

Yes, yes indeed.

00:15:30 T

So, let's take this medieval tale and this medieval perception of this location and of its political significance, and let's look at what the archaeology tells us about this site at Navan Fort or Emain Macha.

00:15:47 T

So, in addition to its location in Ulster in County Armagh, we know that this site goes back to at least the Late Bronze Age. We have evidence of a ring of timber poles that was erected within a ring ditch in about the 8th century CE.

00:16:08 T

And we have evidence in the 4th century BCE of a new wooden structure with a sort of figure-of-eight shape to it that seems to have probably been a round house in sort of [the] smaller [part of this] figure-of-eight earthen structure that's still there, along with a larger open pen, most likely, it would be attached or adjacent to that round house [in the larger part of the figure-of-eight].

00:16:35 T

It was probably occupied by a person of high standing, given both, sort of, its hilltop location, the work that would have gone into putting it together, and also some of the artifacts found at the site, which we'll be getting into in a few minutes.

00:16:51 T

And it was rebuilt several times. So it's a place that gets continuous use for a long while.

00:17:01 T

Now, among the finds at the site, some of the artifacts, there have been more commonplace things like a chape, which is the metal end from a scabbard, but there are some rather surprising things like very finely decorated brooch of a very specifically Irish style that we don't really see anywhere else. It's a fibula-style brooch where, I don't know how well I'm going to be able to describe this, Michael. I might have to show you the picture and see if you can get a

better description than me. But it's sort of a, if you can picture in your head a vertical oval with, sort of, pointed ends that comes down. At the bottom end of the oval it opens up again and it spreads out in, sort of, a fan shape, I suppose. It's sort of like an upside down folding fan that's open, so you get this oval attached to this folding-fan shape.

00:18:07 T

And within the center of the oval, there is a place where a red enamel [decoration] would have originally been inserted. That would make it quite a striking little piece. I think it's made out of bronze, not entirely sure. I haven't been able to find a source that describes what type of metal it's made out of, but it's got a bronze colour.

00:18:32 M

To it sure looks like bronze.

00:18:33 T

Yeah, yeah.

00:18:35 T

And this is a very different style from the earlier and more typical sort of penannular approach that's basically a circle with the little pin hanging onto it.

00:18:53 T

This is worth pointing out, I think, because in this story about Macha she draws out the shape of the fort she wants built by the sons of Dithorba using her brooch. So we have a very interesting, very unusual style of brooch. I think there's only about five of these brooches that have been found in Ireland and this particular style has not been found anywhere else, but one of them was found here.

00:19:24 T

We also have a very, very strange artifact to find in Ireland. The skull of a Barbary ape which is native to Africa, and I don't know if you have any thoughts about that Michael, but that that seems a little out of place.

00:19:45 M

From an archaeological perspective, when you have something like that you know there is long distance trade going on: either long distance in the sense of the skull of a Barbary monkey was taken from Africa and traded by stationary groups all the way through Europe, or perhaps across the Mediterranean, and then eventually to Ireland, maybe through Britain, or you're having, you know long distance trade directly with Ireland. Something like that. But you know, how does a Barbary monkey get there? Clearly through human contact with the continent?

00:20:20 T

Yes, yes. And really across continents, which is, which is quite incredible. Which I think speaks to that idea that whoever resided here must have been very, very wealthy. This is going to be something that is going to be very difficult to acquire, and it's something that is likely going to be very expensive to acquire. Especially, and I love to imagine that this was a living monkey when it arrived, and was a pet; that is just a delightful image in my mind.

00:20:52 M

There is, I'll say, comparing this to some American archaeology, there are some examples in the American Southwest of material culture involved with macaw feathers and various macaw things. Macaws must have come from much farther south, and there's also some artistic depictions of traders with cages, with, you know, macaws in them. So, you have in that case, very clear evidence of, there is long distance trade going on with live animals and there are these animal products from you know much farther distances, much farther to the south. So clearly, you know, throughout the world, humans were interested in exotic animals and trading for exotic animals, and one wonders if this if this monkey was alive when it when it first got there.

00:21:45 T

Yes, yes. One really must wonder. And it just goes to show that this idea of globalisation is hardly new. Lots of people are treating it as though it's this new thing. But no, no. We've got we've got globalisation going on as early as the Iron Age, if not earlier.

00:22:05 T

Now, the reason that I want to bring up Navan Fort specifically in our discussion of the Iron Age—well there there's two reasons, really—one is because it's an excellent example of the so-called 'royal sites' that we see come up again and again in the medieval sources. Each of the five medieval provinces, Ulster, Leinster, Connacht, Munster and Meath have a royal site associated with them. But Emain Macha, I think has the most interesting archaeology to it, and it goes far beyond the short outline that we provided so far.

00:22:45 T

What this site is by far most well-known for is this very mysterious event that occurred with a wooden structure at the site.

00:22:57 T

There is evidence—very good, concrete evidence—of a large central structure that was some sort of wooden roundhouse that measured about 40 meters, or about 130 feet, in diameter at the site, which is quite sizable.

00:23:20 T

It would have been built with, sort of, concentric rings of poles to keep up the roof, and those poles would have gotten taller and taller as you go towards this very central pillar. So, if you imagine this circle with a bunch of smaller circles made-up of vertical poles, and then as you get closer and closer, there's finely one singular pole in the centre and these all get taller as they go

towards that centre pole and the centre pillar is estimated to have been as tall perhaps as 13 meters or 42 feet. And the pillar there, through dendrochronology, there is enough of it that remained that we were able to identify it as, to 95 BCE. So, a very precise dating for when this structure would have been in place.

00:24:13 T

Now what's strange about it is that it's clearly a structure that took a lot of time and a lot of resources to put together, but it seems like it was only used for a few years and then it was filled up with limestone rocks, the wooden portion was set on fire, and the whole thing was covered up with a mound of earth... and we have no idea why.

00:24:44 T

And there is some evidence that the stones come, the limestone rocks that that were used to fill in the structure, come from an older monument in the area. The soil that was used to create the mound seems to be composed of different types of soil, suggesting they were brought from various surrounding areas. But we can't really piece together what the meaning of this act is. It doesn't seem like it was, you know, an act of warfare or vandalism. There's way too much work that went into getting rid of this site or turning it into this mound. And no one's really come up with a satisfying answer as to what the heck went on here beyond 'ritual', which is always the cop-out option in archaeology.

00:25:37 M

Very much so, yeah, I think. I mean, this is just one of those weird archaeological mysteries, the kind of thing that you read about as a student. And then it makes you want to study archaeology.

00:25:47 M

And ritual really is the catch-all term for I have no idea what's going on. 'Something weird that these people were doing' is essentially what ritual means in an archaeological context.

00:26:03 M

It's one of those fascinating things that we may never really fully understand what happened, but we have all of this evidence and all we can do is put it out there, right?

00:26:15 T

Mhm.

00:26:16 T

And unlike Newgrange (episode 2 for listeners!) where we were able to connect a story that still was being told in the medieval period that had this element of solar alignment seemingly embedded within it, which is an archaeological feature at Newgrange that would have been obscured during the medieval period and suggested, it suggests the possibility of cultural memory having some amount of recognition of the original usage of Newgrange.

00:26:55 T

Here, we don't really have any stories about Emain Macha that speak to this idea of this ritual burning. So, it seems that it was something that the medieval people were not even aware of, which is fair enough, I suppose. If it was burned down and covered in 100 BCE, about 500, 600 years before the medieval period really properly began, but it is a shame that nothing in terms of the storytelling seems to have come down, that that could really explain this.

00:27:32 T

Now, this isn't an entirely isolated incident. There is some similar evidence for repeated building and burning at the royal sites of Tara in Meath, and at Dun Ailinne or Knockaulin in Leinster. But the evidence there is not quite as good as what we have at Emain Macha, which is why this tends to be the site that's discussed in this particular context.

00:28:03 M

Also, [I'll] add that burning at the tops of mounds is something that's present in a lot of stories and a lot of archaeology. There's in fact a whole, whole archaeological class of burnt mounds. I forget the Irish name for it, but there's something there. Though, I think that tends to be more about, you know, cooking on top of mounds. But things like the story of the Saint Patrick and Tara.

00:28:27 T

Yes, yes.

00:28:29 M

There's something there's something important about fire, which I think makes sense from the perspective of human history and human thought and ritual, ritual purpose. But there's something about fire and mounds that exists in the Irish medieval mind.

00:28:44 T

Yeah, it also makes me think of and, we're actually going to talk about that particular story of Saint Patrick in a few episodes, God willing, but—'God willing' was an intentional joke just for those out there listening, since we're talking about Saint Patrick—but the idea of burning with a mound also reminds me of several stories where humans, typically, attack and try to destroy, or successfully destroy, the *side*, they destroy *sid* mounds, they destroy these fairy hills or elf mounds, whatever you want to call them. And I wonder if there is perhaps also some resonance with that, the sort of an act of destruction involving mounds.

00:29:38 M

There's something about fire and permanence. I mean, we even see that in modern, modern folklore, modern storytelling, Game of Thrones, fire, fire as the permanent, the permanent way to kill. There's something about fire in human thoughts.

00:29:53 T

Yeah. One unfortunate thing I think about fire as a symbol is that there are a bajillion ways to interpret it, so we can definitely say there's something there, there's a pattern, but it's actual meaning will continue to elude us because there are so, so, so many ways you could interpret it.

00:30:09 T

Now this, I think is a good sampling of why we consider the Iron Age to be so enigmatic. We have more sites with similar mysteries to this. One of my personal favourites is a site called Corlea Trackway, which is located in county Longford. This was an Iron Age trackway that was built out of wood planks that were put across a bog in order to allow passage over the bog, apparently.

00:30:48 T

But just like with the archaeology of Emain Macha, a lot of what's going on here doesn't add up in terms of practical uses for this trackway.

00:30:58 T

So, to try to give an overview of the site, the location of this this wooden trackway is a place where you would have had not only bog but also quicksand, ponds, and the whole thing surrounded by dense woodlands, which gives you the timber you need to create this wooden trackway. It's built from split oak planks that are laid on top of raised rails. It would have been suitable for wheeled traffic as well as foot traffic. The main track is about a kilometre long with, also, some branches splitting off of it.

00:31:45 T

What's rather strange about it is that it doesn't seem like any of these tracks really lead anywhere. O'Sullivan, in an article in the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, volume 107, which was published in 2007, says quote, 'There is a growing sense that these were not structures designed to cross the bog, but to get into the bog' end quote. So again, the fallback of ritual seems to be the best we can do here, because why are you trying to get into this very difficult area to get into, especially when. And here's the other part of this that I think is really interesting is that these people clearly had the engineering expertise to build a trackway that could last for a very long time, but they built this trackway in such a way that it would have sunk into the bog in only a few years. So, it was not built to last. It was built as a temporary structure and so much like Emain Macha, we're getting something that was temporary use that doesn't have any clear practical usage and it really, I guess is returned to the earth at the end.

00:33:06 M

I may, I may push back a little bit on, you know, saying that the archaeologists here are going to their fallback of ritual. Well, I'm a big fan of, you know, of criticizing, you know, the fallback of ritual. I think there is a lot of evidence for these Iron Age peoples viewing bogs in a ritualistic way. There's a lot of evidence for bog deposits of food, of human, of human corpses as well. If anyone is in Dublin, highly recommend going to the National Museum of Archaeology, they have some bog bodies actually, with some incredibly exciting research going on around those finds.

So clearly these people viewed bogs as places for some kind of some, for some reason, as places for deposit, presumably ritualistic deposit.

00:34:09 M

So I think having a track way to get into a bog, even if it were temporary, even if it weren't going anywhere, so to speak, is not necessarily a surprising thing for peoples who were clearly wanting to deposit things in bogs for whatever reason. But I think ritual as much as that is a problematic term being used as a catch all I think here is not as problematic as in other places.

00:34:35 T

Sure, sure, I think that's fair and we have talked about this earlier in the podcast about this idea of deposits into bogs and other sorts of deep places, bodies of water as well, that we see from as early as the Bronze Age. So this seems to be a tradition that is continuing for a very long time, going from the Bronze Age into the Iron Age. And who knows, perhaps beyond.

00:35:01 T

Now, this particular story of this causeway that wasn't really built to last, reminds me of an anecdote from a longer story that we have visited earlier in this podcast. When we looked at Newgrange, we looked at the very first little bit of a tale known as the 'Wooing of Etain' or *Tochmarc Etaine*.

00:35:25 T

And in this same story, the 'Wooing of Etain', further in, I think roughly about the halfway point, we see a character of the Tuatha De Danann named Midir, whose name means something like 'the judge', and he is trying to win the hand of a particular character, Etain, who is supposed to be the most beautiful woman in Ireland. In order to woo her, Midir is tasked with completing a number of impossible feats by a king by the name of Eochaid /yok-ith/ or Eochaid /ek-ith/ who has, at this particular moment in the story, he has already married Etain. And Midir had—it's very complicated, but Midir had married Etain himself in a past life, and he wants her back.

00:36:22 T

And so Midir goes to complete these tasks for Eochaid and one of the tasks that he's been assigned is to build a causeway over a bog. But Midir tells the king that he must not be watched while this occurs. He must be allowed to build this causeway without any of Eochaid's people coming and gawking at him. And Eochaid, of course, says sure, no one will watch you, *wink*, and sends a spy to watch anyways.

00:36:59 T

Well, Midir goes to this particular bog. It's not, I can't remember exactly where it's supposed to be located, it's not the same location as what we're talking about with the Corlea trackway. But there are resonances, because we're told that Midir summons a whole bunch of other members of the Tuatha De Danann to help him build this trackway overnight—he's supposed to do it in a single night—and he manages to complete this impossible task, thanks to all this assistance, while this spy is secretly watching him. But we're told, quote, 'there had not been a better

causeway in the world, had not a watchman set on them. Defects were left in them.' end quote. So, there are some sort of unexplained defects. It doesn't say what they are, but these defects seem to be purely because their progress has been watched by a mortal onlooker, and it just reminds me very much of this same idea with Corlea trackway, where perhaps it's not really a defect, I mean, it seems the intention is that this would sink into the bog, but this idea of it being temporary, that this idea of it being something that is not going to last.

00:38:20 T

So, Speaking of the Tuatha De Danann, the last topic that I'd like to look at in this episode today is about the material culture of the Iron Age in Ireland.

00:38:36 T

And a lot of what we see of Iron Age material culture evolves, but into the medieval period, but there are still elements from the Iron Age that that transition into the medieval period and are reused and, sort of, continue growing.

00:38:55 T

In the Lebor Gabala, the Book of the Takings of Ireland, the Tuatha De Danann, the 5th takers of Ireland, are said to come from these four magical islands in the north, and they bring from each island a different fantastical item.

00:39:15 T

And I'm going to read quotes about what they brought from each island as an entry point to looking at Iron Age material culture, and the sorts of objects and artifacts that we get during the Iron Age period.

00:39:29 T

Quote 'From Failias was brought the Lia Fail which is in Temair, and which used to... cry under every king that should take Ireland. From Goirias was brought the spear which Lug had : battle would never go against him who had it in hand. From Findias was brought the sword of Nuadu : no man would escape from it ; when it was drawn from its battle-scabbard, there was no resisting it. From Muirias was brought the cauldron of The Dagda ; no company would go from it unsatisfied.' End Quote. And that is from volume four of Macalister's translation of the *Lebor Gabala Erenn*.

00:40:15 T

So the Tuatha De Danann have a very clear connection in their descriptions and in their material culture to the idea of craft and to the idea of skilfully created artifacts and tools. And among the most significant members in terms of the stories and in terms of who always gets mentioned when the Tuatha De Danann are in a story, are these four people known as the Four Craftsman, usually.

00:40:49 T

There is Goibniu, the Smith, Credne, the Brazier, who would be a worker in fine metals where[as] Goibniu would be working with, you know, iron and bronze. There's Luchta or Luchtaine the wright or carpenter. And, strangely, also gripped in with these three, is Dian Cecht the physician, who you wouldn't normally think of a physician as a craftsperson, per se, but this is also the person who is responsible for designing a silver prosthetic arm for King Nuada of the Tuatha De Danann when he loses his arm in the First Battle of Mag Tuired, and from that point forward Nuada gains the epithet Airgetlam, Silver Hand.

00:41:33 T

And this idea that the Tuatha De Danann both bring these valuable objects from their homeland in these mysterious magical islands, and that they have this continuing tradition of craft, really speaks to the importance of craft and skilful artistry in the stories about them.

00:42:04 T

So with that as sort of a legendary framework for how early inhabitants of Ireland looked at and valued artistry, and valued tools, let's go ahead and look at what we actually have for evidence of Celtic art in Ireland during the Iron Age.

00:42:31 T

This is a good point to also pause and Michael, I'm definitely going to get your input on this as well. As students of Celtic studies, one of the first things we learn is the problems that are involved with using the term Celtic in the first place.

00:42:50 T

And I said earlier in the podcast that in general, I'm going to be using a linguistic definition for this, but I think we should pause because we're going to be talking about Celtic from here on out. Celtic is really a term that becomes relevant to Ireland in the Iron Age is when we start seeing evidence of quote, un-quote 'Celtic' cultures in the material culture and in the linguistic evidence.

00:43:18 T

So there are kind of a few different categories that we could draw upon for a definition of Celtic. So one would be the definition that a historian might use and a typical historian would say, well, we should label things Celtic only when they're labelled as such by the historical sources. So the word that we use in English, 'Celts', comes from a Greek word *Keltoi*, which was a general term for people of the North and West of Greece. And it was synonymous with the Roman Galli, or Galatae, which from which we get the name Gaul for roughly modern day France and for the Gaulish people, the continental Celtic people of that area. It's also the Galli in also the basis of Galicia, a name for our region in Spain that is associated with the Celtiberians or the Hispano-Celtic people, and we have, for example, what's the region in Asia Minor?

00:44:41 T

Galatia, no.

00:44:50 M

Galatia.

00:44:51 T

Yeah. OK. Yeah, so, we also have Galatia in modern day Asia Minor, which has sparse but extant evidence of a Celtic speaking peoples there. So all of these come from the Roman Galli or Galatae, names for the continental Celtic people.

00:45:13 T

But that totally excludes all the people that we consider Celtic in Britain and Ireland. And it is a definition that sometimes groups and people who most would not consider Celtic. So there is there's a lot of issues with this definition of purely going off of the appellation of Celtic in the historical sources.

00:45:40 T

Another category is the archaeological definition of what it means to be Celtic, which is based purely on the material culture that the archaeology gives us. And so this would usually be a definition where we talk about Celtic people being the people who were involved in the Hallstatt and La Tene cultures which originate on the continent and the La Tene culture which we'll be talking about in a minute sort of comes over, it sort of replaces. I suppose the Hallstatt culture in the same area and much of what we have of La Tene yle does make its way into Britain and Ireland and so therefore we could say, well, yeah, this is roughly equating to the people we now consider Celtic.

00:46:36 T

But this also brings in the issue of the idea that just because a people use a particular type of material artifact or or have that particular type of material artifact, that doesn't necessarily make them a people of the culture who originally crafted that artifact. It's the idea of if you drive a Japanese car, are you necessarily Japanese? Well, clearly not. So it's more of a probabilistic overlap rather than a one of certainty.

00:47:08 T

And then the final main category of what it means to be Celtic is a linguistic one, it's the one that I tend to use. I think it's the one with the fewest problems. So it has its problems of its own, which is to discuss people who do or historically did speak a language belonging to the Celtic branch of the Indo-European languages, whether it's an extinct Celtic language or whether it is an extant one.

00:47:37 M

I think this is all to say this question of who were the Celts? When did they arrive in Britain and Ireland? Where were they in continental Europe? is an extremely difficult and complicated question, one which can be discussed and left unanswered after a whole class. I know this for a fact. Is there was a class in my undergrad called who were the Celts? But I think taking the most

expansive definition that you can something that confused me as a student learning about this is there were Celts in the continents in France fighting the Romans, the whole, the whole of Julius Caesar's *Gallic War* is about fighting various Celtic groups. And somehow at some point in history, these Celtic groups from the continent ended up in Britain and Ireland. How that happened, difficult question. When that happened, difficult question. But this you know, all of these definitions are secondary definitions by modern scholars to understand the past the question of who were these people? What did they consider themselves? Did the peoples of Britain and Ireland understand themselves to be associated with the Celts of the continent? That's a question we will probably never be able to answer. So all of this is to emphasize this is a complicated issue.

00:48:58 T

Yes, it is, and maybe it's even the wrong question. Maybe it's a question that asking when the Celts arrive begin in in Britain and Ireland. It's maybe just a question that that is poorly phrased in the first place. There's, yeah, there's a lot to dig through there. We'll have to certainly at some point look at Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. I had the opportunity to go through that section where he describes the Celtic cultures as he perceived them and translate it myself, which was, which was quite delightful. He also discusses Germanic people in this so it's a combination of Germanic peoples and Celtic peoples. And he recognized the distinction between them.

00:49:47 M

Very weird descriptions in the *Gallic Wars*, very clearly, very ahistorical descriptions as well.

00:49:52 T

Well, I think it's it's a lot of a lot of propaganda is involved, but there are still, you know, it's one of our most expansive accounts. So even if we have to take it with a large grain of salt, or rather, I guess a fistful of salt would be more appropriate, there, there still may be some value to be gained from it at the very least it's entertaining.

00:50:14 M

As with, as with every historical source.

00:50:18 T

Yes.

00:50:18 M

One must be careful, but it's very useful to to understand or a very important source to understand continental Celticism.

00:50:21

Yes, that is to say, dear listeners, take everything here forward with the view that when I say 'Celt' it has a lot of issues and a lot of baggage attached, but for the most part I'm talking

linguistic Celts, and today is going to be an exception because we're going to look at La Tene art in Ireland, specifically, so this would be more of the archaeological definition of Celtic.

00:50:58 T

And we'll look more at the linguistic element in a future episode, actually, perhaps even next episode... yes, next episode.

00:51:07 T

So let's go ahead and try to describe, in audio format, which can always be difficult when we're talking about material objects, but let's try to describe what we mean when we talk about La Tene style.

00:51:22 T

So, there are, if you, listener, would be interested in looking at some, sort of, very elaborate, very frequently referenced examples of peak La Tene, there are a couple of examples outside of Ireland that I would refer you to.

00:51:43 T

One are the, oh, I might pronounce this poorly, but the Basse-Yutz flagons B-A-S-S-E-hyphen-Y-U-T-Z found in France and dated to the mid 5th century BCE, and another one very worth looking at and one that Celtic enthusiasts are likely have come across already is the Gundestrup Cauldron, which was found in Denmark and is dated to somewhere between, and this is quite a wide range, but, somewhere between 200 BCE and 300 CE.

00:52:19 T

So, La Tene art in general, and then I'll try to describe these two artifacts as best I can, and Michael, maybe you can help me with that. But La Tene art in general I would say is typified by either inscribed or inlaid patterns that consist of a lot of swirls, kind of, these patterns that seem to have a lot of movement to them. There tends to be a lot of symmetry. They tend to use very stylised vegetable in animal shapes and forms. And I think what a lot of people imagine when they think of the idea of 'Celtic art' is something along the lines of La Tene.

00:53:06 T

The Basse-Yutz flagons, for instance, are these large flagons that would have been used for wine or some other kind of drink. They're jars that are based off of a more kind of typical Etruscan flagon where the Etruscan flagon would have just been a fairly basic jar-shape. It's got a narrower neck than the body of the flagon and the main body of the flagon is a little bit rounded. It's got this sort of sharp spout on it and it's got this big thick handle. And the Basse-Yutz flagons are clearly based on this design, but they've made the base of the jar much more narrow, sort of a concave curvature to them as they go up to the top. They've got the big, thick handle has been replaced by a stylised dog or something that it's very long body and these little swirls around its shoulders and along its neck and in its ears. You've got these intricate patterns along the base of the flagons and around the spout. And it's very, very beautiful; very striking.

00:54:28 M

It really emphasizes the skill and artistry of whoever was making this. The miniscule details and really, really, beautiful animal depictions, here. I'll let you continue the description, but I really have to emphasize the beauty and the artistry that went into this.

00:54:46 T

Yeah, they're gorgeous. And but they're certainly not naturalistic; very stylised.

00:54:52 M

Very stylised, absolutely.

00:54:55 T

And we get that even more so, I think, in the Gundestrup Cauldron, which for anyone who hasn't had a chance to see this before, it's well worth looking up a few pictures. There's a couple of panels of it that are particularly famous, so I'll describe in a little bit more detail, but this cauldron was found in several pieces which can interlinked together and and that they've been put back together. But they're there's sort of these panels that connect to form this cauldron, this silver-coloured cauldron.

00:55:25 T

I think it is made out of silver. I'm not 100% sure on that, and I don't remember.

00:55:29 M

At the very least, it looks like it's made of silver.

00:55:31 T

It looks like it's made of silver. Maybe it's just silver coated, but each and every panel has some sort of unique design on it that features aces and people and animals and vegetation. And each one's unique, and it's very unusual in that not only are the out facing parts of each panel designed in this way, but also the inward facing parts of each panel have a unique design. So, you get twice as many designs if you look both on the outside and the inside.

00:56:11 T

And this is one place where we get the image of a apparently a god, a horned god, with these antlers coming out of his head. Who people frequently identify with a figure called Cernunos. And he is wearing a torque which is a very Celtic ornamentation that goes around the neck. We have him holding up a torque as well in one hand and holding a snake with, like, ram horns in the other hand, and he's surrounded by all these animals, most, of whom are turning to face him as though they want to be in his presence.

00:56:55 T

We have another image that is on one of the inside panels that has been thought of by some as possibly depicting reincarnation, perhaps. We've got these soldiers, apparently: they're wielding

shields and spears, and there are some trumpeters behind them and they're all marching toward this very large giant figure who seems to be dunking them in some sort of cauldron or some sort of vessel. And as they come out of the vessel, they are all now mounted upon horses. So it's perhaps depicting a ceremony of, I guess, progressing through military ranks: you're moving from being a foot soldier to a cavalry soldier; or it could be talking about reincarnation, or it could be something else.

00:57:50 M

This panel has also been associated with, I know we're talking about Ireland a lot, but, associated with the Welsh story, the Mab-, one of the branches of the Mabinogi. in which a cauldron is used to reincarnate dead warriors.

00:58:04 T

Yes, the second branch I believe.

00:58:06 M

Yes.

00:58:08 T

Yes, yes. Yeah, I love whenever we can find the parallels to the Welsh stuff as well. That's where I really started with my Celtic Studies academics was more in the realm of Wales and then it shifted to Ireland, which I suppose is natural enough, having it moved to Ireland.

00:58:28 T

But with the La Tene culture in general, so we'll get to its role in Ireland in a minute, but it begins, we first get evidence of La Tene culture around 400 BCE on the continent, and we're looking at a homeland in really very roughly modern day France and kind of north of the Alps of Italy as well. And that spreads into several areas. It spreads into northern Italy, it spreads out into the east as well into, kind of, the Balkans, I suppose, and it continues spreading to the point where by 200 BCE it's covered, there's, well, I guess there's Celtic evidence of Celtic speaking peoples, not necessarily always with La Tene. I'll, I'll get where the La Tene is in a second, but there are Celtic speaking peoples all across the continent all the way into Spain all the way out into Asia Minor by 200 BCE, and there is a certain amount of intersection with La Tene culture. It's still mostly around France, is kind of the starting point, and then to the east of that, but it's also spread into parts of Britain and parts of Ireland and in the case of Ireland specifically, we really only get La Tene art in the northern half of the island. We don't see much at all in the southern half, which is interesting.

01:00:09 M

Interesting because the northern half would be the farthest away from from the continent, from the center of this cultural complex.

01:00:14 T

Right, right. I think it speaks to a transition from Britain into Ireland and perhaps is suggesting that whatever La Tene is in Britain, is spreading from a part of Britain that has easier access to the northern half of Ireland as opposed to the south.

01:00:36

And one might ask then, is this material culture associated with the migration of people? Is it associated with trade, really emphasizes some of the problems you were talking about with this archaeological definition of, we have this cultural complex, clearly it's all over the Celtic world, but who are the people using these, this material culture?

01:00:55 T

Right, right. Yeah. And so, I have a quote here from a text called the *Atlas of the Celts*, which has about a million editors, so I'm not going to list those off in audio format, but I'll put it in the show notes. But the *Atlas of the Celts* says, quote, 'the problem is that we simply do not know what was happening and what was the nature of society in Ireland, in the formative centuries of the early Iron Age', end quote.

01:01:21 T

And so with that framing, we're not sure either how or with what kinds of people La Tene arrived in Ireland, exactly as you're saying, Michael.

01:01:36 M

It's very rare to have academics so explicitly say 'we don't know what's going on.'

01:01:41 T

Uh-huh, and another reason why we oftentimes we'll call this the enigmatic Iron Age. There's just so much that we don't know. And boy, it would be exciting if we did.

01:01:52 T

But just because La Tene is associated with Celtic speakers, it's not a guarantee that people who have this La Tene culture are Celtic speakers. We do also know, and we'll be talking about this in the next episode, but we do also know that the Celtic language that becomes Irish is coming in sometime during the Iron Age, but how strongly linked that is with the incoming of La Tene culture is also really difficult to say.

01:02:22 M

Hard to link language with material culture.

01:02:25 T

It is, yes, it is indeed.

01:02:29 T

So, what are we seeing in Ireland in terms of La Tene? Well, we're seeing a development that's quite specifically Irish of this idea of latent culture and something called the scabbard style, which as it sounds, is a particular way that the Irish at this period designed their scabbards that they their sword scabbards they would inlay or inscribe this very La Tene swirling symmetrical patterns on their scabbards, and we have a few of these. They seem to have derived this from British and continental prototypes, but the evidence is very fragmentary, which makes it difficult to say a whole lot about.

01:03:22 T

And just a couple more, well, another, one more quote from the *Atlas of the Celts*, I think is useful, they say, quote 'The arrival of La Tène in Ireland has been linked to the arrival of the Celts in Ireland, but the archaeological evidence does not support this. Although large-scale immigration at this time can be discounted, the gradual infiltration and expansion of élite warrior groups cannot be dismissed so easily' end quote.

01:03:50 T

So, there is an old theory that now very few scholars subscribe to, if any, that there was a Celtic invasion of Britain and Ireland around this time, and that's how we get Celtic speakers in Britain and Ireland. That's how we get La Tene culture coming into Britain and Ireland. But the archaeology basically says no, there's no mass movement of people that we can justify at this time period. So, we have to set that aside and what the *Atlas of the Celts* is saying is that, well, there could have been a small group of people, this 'elite' group of people, and perhaps because they were elite and looked up to maybe they were able to spread the language that they brought in this much smaller group to a larger community.

01:04:39 T

Another useful quote, this one is from *Exploring the World of the Celts*, says quote, 'the idea of large scale immigrations of Celts in the Iron Age fits the archaeological evidence no better in Ireland than it does in Britain. The pattern is rather one of strong continuity with the preceding Bronze Age, followed quite late by the adoption of the La Tène artistic tradition—which was adapted to the needs of Irish society' end quote.

01:05:05 T

And so that's really just reinforcing what we've already said. But I think that last bit about its adaptation to, into Irish society is telling us that this is not purely a trade-based influx of La Tene art, at least after a certain point, the Irish are making La Tene their own and they're using it for their own purposes.

01:05:26 T

So, if we think about this archaeologically, what we've got is no evidence of large-scale invasion or population movement, scant early finds of Celtic material culture, and, something that's really interesting, is a big part of La Tene culture in the continent are chariot burials, so you would have someone interred with a chariot, and Chariots turn up all the time in our medieval stories. But there has never been a single chariot found in Ireland archaeologically, which is really

interesting because chariots and chariot builders also show up in the early Irish law texts, so it's like the Irish really wanted them to exist, but we have yet to actually find one, and maybe they're there and we just haven't found one yet. But the evidence is just completely lacking.

01:06:21 M

Wow, I wasn't aware of that. That's fascinating.

01:06:23 T

Yeah, it's one of my favourite little tidbits, is the total lack of chariots.

01:06:30 T

And as far as, sort of, a linguistic perspective on this goes, we have this theory that's being proposed by the *Atlas of the Celts*, sort of implicitly, that minority warrior-elites might have come in and been able to spread their language through their prestige, but historically, when we've seen the small elite groups come into new locations, that's not what usually happens. So, for example, when the Normans came into England, Norman French did not ultimately replace English as the main language of that area.

01:07:15 T

Insular Celtic languages, we know were being spoken—so when I say insular Celtic, that's island-based Celtic, I suppose, as opposed to continental Celtic, so we're talking Welsh, Irish, Manx, Scottish Gaelic, Cornish, and because it is related to Welsh and Cornish, we're also talking about Breton, even though that moved to the continent at a certain point. So, in Insular Celtic languages were being spoken by the time of the earliest inscriptions in Ireland, which are the ogham stones or ogham stones, depending on your, how modern you want your pronunciation to be, but those we have from about 400 CE. So we know Irish was being spoken across the whole island by that point. But we have no evidence of what the earlier language would have looked like before then; we have no inscriptions. We do have a little bit of place name evidence in from classical writers, especially from Ptolemy's map, but it's very Latinised and it's hard to get a lot from that. So that's all to say we have a few little hooks that we can use to speculate from, but not nearly enough to speculate, something that is a complete picture of what's going on.

01:08:53 T

That all said, one theory that I think is worth looking at for a moment is that the archaeological evidence, as I was saying, shows strong continuity with Bronze Age traditions in Ireland. And we know that Celtic speakers were spread across a wide part of Europe as early as the 6th century BCE, which is kind of the time we're talking about as far as the early Iron Age in Ireland. It's possible, perhaps, that Celtic languages could have evolved gradually and simultaneously over a large area, so perhaps there was a language that was evolving in Britain and Ireland around the same time as what was happening in the continent, and that down to some sort of common heritage between the peoples in those areas. And if there was a common heritage that could explain the ready acceptance of La Tene culture into Ireland, because if there was a common heritage there is like there are likely links within the worldview of those peoples, there is already

kinship between those peoples and that could influence the adaptation or the adoption of new art styles. This idea also fits better with the archaeological evidence, which provides little support for those westward migrations of Celtic peoples.

01:10:24 M

I'd also add it's just interesting from an archaeological perspective, you often learn about the theoretical frameworks that are, that are producing the questions that archaeologists are asking. An older framework, I guess the original framework of modern archaeology that has been really prevalent in European archaeology is culture history, which is really focused on defining, classifying cultural, material culture, cultural complexes, saying this grouping of pottery is this type, that grouping of pottery is that type, and using those material culture classifications to understand diffusion patterns and how certain types of material culture influenced others. How they moved from region to region and thereby understanding how people were migrating, how people were communicating, how people were interacting with each other. That's very prevalent in European archaeology. American Archaeology has their own theoretical frameworks that have influenced their thinking, their theory, their, the questions that they're asking. So, you know, not sure how this influences our understanding of La Tene archaeology and its spread. But just interesting to note, from an archaeological perspective, I suppose it's no surprise that this very European question of how did continental Celtic culture influence Insular Celtic culture, how did it get to the islands, etc? would be really focused on cultural diffusion migration patterns, of migration patterns, trade patterns, things like that. This this very culture historical framework being used here.

01:12:11 T

Yeah, I think it really speaks to how aware we need to try to be and that's going to be very difficult of those underlying theories and preconceptions that we're bringing with us when we go into looking at this material and these sort of assumptions that we're making, that we don't even realize we're making a lot of the time. So if we can be cognizant about the theories that are coming into this, if we can be cognizant about what past scholarship has done and how that scholarship has evolved and what things have changed in in how people think. I think that will really help us in these conversations going forward in providing as wide and as fair a picture as we can when we're talking about these early people.

01:13:03 M

And this is not to say that one framework is better or worse than another. They're all different and provide their own ways of thinking. Just useful to have the context of what we're, what, what are the questions? Where are they coming from? Why are they being asked in this context? is useful to frame these discussions of European archaeology.

01:13:25 T

Yes, and I think it's valuable to embrace the contradictions that come about from looking at these different views and valuable to embrace a certain amount of uncertainty, especially when we're looking at such an early period before we have even writing that's native to Ireland to draw upon.

01:13:47 M

I think, I think here would be a great place to leave it.

01:13:50 T

Yeah, OK. So next time we will be looking more at the language aspect of this, but oh, and actually, we'll be finishing looking at the Lebor Gabala, the Book of the Takings of Ireland, with the final taking by the Sons of Mil, so looking at the legendary account of the ancestors of the modern Irish, which is very exciting. But for now it's *slán go fóill* and *go raibh maith agat*, and we'll talk to you all soon.

01:14:20 M

Thank you for listening to Fabula Celtica with

01:14:23 T

Tyler Baxter

01:14:24 M

And Michael Frim. Follow us @fabulaceltica on Twitter, Instagram or Blue Sky, or e-mail us at fabulaceltica@gmail.com.

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