A united Gaul forming a single nation animated by the same spirit can defy the universe.

(Caesar, De Bello Gallico,VII.29)

Although Celtic expansion on the Balkan peninsula is generally associated with the ‘invasion’ of the second Brennos* in 279/278 BC, in fact this process had already begun almost a century earlier. In 360/359 BC, as part of the continuing mass movement which had shortly before seen the Celtic tribes led by Brennos I expand into the Italian peninsula and sack Rome in 390 BC, the Celts defeated the Illyrian Ardiaoi tribe who inhabited the area of today’s eastern Montenegro (Theopomp. fr. 41; Ath. X 60; Domaradski 1984: 69; Pajakowski 2000:259–260; Mac Congail 2008:5). This was to mark the beginning of a process which would fundamentally alter the geopolitical and cultural status quo in southeastern Europe.

In 335 BC Celtic chieftains met with Alexander the Great on the Danube during armistice and alliance negotiations (Arrianus Anab. I, 4, 6–8; Strabo vii, 3,8). Of this encounter Strabo informs us:

“And Ptolemaeus, the son of Lagus, says that on this expedition the Cetti who lived about the Adriatic joined Alexander for the sake of establishing friendship and hospitality, and that the king received them kindly and asked them when drinking what it was that they feared most, thinking that they would say himself, but that they replied that they feared no one, unless it were that the sky would fall on their heads”.

Archaeological data also illustrates that by the time of this encounter with Alexander Celtic settlement in today’s western Romania (Transylvania, Oltenia), was already a fact (Pârvan 1924; Crișan 1971; Berecki 2008). In the wake of Alexander’s death, and the resultant power struggle among his successors, the migration of Celtic tribal groups into the central and southern Balkans gathered pace. A growing body of archaeological evidence from western and northern Bulgaria (see ‘Ethnic Cleansing?’ and ‘Shields’ articles), supplemented by recent numismatic discoveries, particularly Celtic ‘Paeonia model’ coinage (Patraos ‘imitations’ – 335–315 BC) from the Vidin and Pernik regions of western Bulgaria, (Mac Congail/Krusseva 2010; see also Numismatics section 11 – ‘Paeonia’) provides further evidence of the presence of Celtic tribes in this area in the last decades of the 4th c. BC.

The nature of the Celtic expansion can be observed from the funerary evidence in the newly settled areas, and the fusion of cultures to be observed in the new communities. For example, within the cemetery at Muhl – Kocsmdomb in Hungary it was observed that the Celts and the Scythians were buried on the same plot, although each ethnic group carefully preserved its specific funerary rite and ritual (Hellebrandt 1999, 233–236, Fig. 192). Another example is the cemetery from Pișcolt in north-western Romania, in which a series of cremation burials preserved several funerary elements that belonged to the pre–Celtic period, for example the graves M 198 and M 203 (Németi 1989:62). At Fântânele in Transylvania the funerary rite and ritual belong exclusively to the Celtic tradition, but 80% of the graves dating from Lt B2 contain local pottery, which illustrates a rapid integration of the indigenous population (Rustoiu 2011). The same phenomenon is to be observed in areas of Illyria and Thrace where the Celts settled during this period (see ‘Ethnic Cleansing?’ article).
In 310/309 BC a further large scale movement of Celtic tribes in the western Balkans caused widespread panic and forced another Illyrian tribe – the Autariatae – to flee en masse. This expansion, led by a chieftain called Molistomos, caused such terror that it is referred to in classical sources as a ‘natural disaster’. The fleeing Illyrians flooded into the territory of the Paeonian king Audoleon, who called on the Macedonians for help. As a result of these events, the Macedonian general, Kassandros, settled 20,000 of the Autariatae in the Orbelos area (on the modern Greek/Bulgarian border) as military settlers in order to establish a buffer zone protecting Macedonia’s northern border from further Celtic expansion (Diodorus Siculus Bibliotheca historica XX. 19.1).

A few years later Celtic tribes had expanded further eastwards and by the turn of the 4th century BC had reached the Haemus/Balkan mountains of today’s central Bulgaria, where they clashed with Kassandros’ Macedonians (Plinius Naturalis historia XXX.30.53; Seneca, Quaestiones naturales III. 11.3) The Celtic presence in today’s northern and western Bulgaria at the end of the 4th c. BC supports recent theories that the subsequent phase of Celtic expansion was in fact launched from the area of today’s southwestern Bulgaria (Boteva 2010).

Thus, it was in Thrace that the second phase of the Celtic expansion began. The nature of this migration, which had hitherto been gradual and largely peaceful in nature, changed
fundamentally as the Celtic tribes came into contact with the Hellenistic world in the form of the Hellenized Thracian aristocracy, who had a vested interest in preserving the geo-political status quo in the region, and the dominant political and military power in southeastern Europe – the Macedonians.

The resulting clash of civilizations would culminate in the defeat of the Thracian Triballi and Getae tribes, the destruction of successive Macedonian armies by Bolgios and Brennos, Macedonia itself being overrun, and ultimately the Celtic invasion of Greece in 278 BC (see "The Thunderbolt" article). This rapid sequence of events led to subsequent Celtic settlement in large areas of Thrace, and the establishment of the Celtic state of Galatia in today's Central Turkey (Polybius, Historia universalis iv, 45–52; Pausinias, Descriptio Graeciae I. 4.1–6; X.19. 5–12; M. Iunianus lustinus, Historiarum Philippiarum Pompei Trogi epitome XXIV. 4–8; XXV. 1–2; Appianus, Illyrica 8–14; Titus Livius, Ab urbe condita XXXVIII. 16. 1–9; memnon, De Heracleae Fr. 11 = Photius, Bibliotheca, Cod. 224, p.227b).

* It appears that Brennos, the name given in classical sources for both the Celtic leaders, he who sacked Rome and he who led the attack on Delphi, is not in fact a personal name, but a military title given to the overall commander of a Celtic army drawn from different tribes. The title comes from the Proto-Celtic *brano– = Raven, and seems to have had been used in the sense of 'Warlord'. (see also 'Birds of Prey' article).


Pârvan 1924, Considération sur les sépultures celtiques de Gruia , Dacia I, 1924, p. 35–50.
