CELTIC DEATH

Mac Congail

According to your [the druids’] authority, the shadows do not strive for the silent abodes of the underworld and for the pale realm of the deep sovereign of the dead: The same spirit directs the limbs in a different region (orbe alio). If you sing an approved truth, death is the centre of a long life.

Lucanus (Bellum Civile 1.454–458)
After centuries of archaeological research, life and death among the Iron Age European population remains shrouded in mystery. However, recent anthropological analysis of burials sites in Eastern Europe is gradually shedding light on many aspects of everyday life and the enigmatic death rituals of Europe’s ‘barbarian’ population.

Although a significant number of inhumation burials are also found at Celtic burial complexes, particularly in the initial settlement phase of eastern expansion, the dominant burial rite here, as in other parts of Europe during this period, was cremation. It also appears probable that many of the inhumation burials in a Celtic context may be explained by the burial of individuals from outside the local Celtic population living within the community, as is the case, for example, with the burial of a Thracian female at Remeta Mare in Romania.

Female Inhumation Burial (#3) from the Celtic cemetery at Remetea Mare, Romania

*Both the funerary rite (inhumation rather than cremation – unique at the cemetery) and inventory illustrate that the woman came from a community markedly different from the one in which she died, in this case probably from a Thracian group (Triballi?) south of the Danube, and reached the Celtic community at Remetea Mare following a matrimonial alliance established between the Celts and the Thracians, sometime in the first half of the 3rd century BC. (See ‘Barbarian Brides’)*
CREMATION

Recent anthropological analysis at various sites has allowed us to at least partly reconstruct the complex ritual associated with Celtic cremation burials during this period. According to the degree of burning at different anatomical elements it has been possible to conclude that the corpse was laid on the funeral pyre on their back (Hincak, Guštín 2011). Logically, cremations were usually of individuals although there are a number of cases of multiple cremation burials such as the double burial of a male and female (burial No. 5), or a triple burial of a man, woman and child (burial no. 10) at the Celtic burial complex at Dobova in Slovenia (loc cit). A double cremation burial has also recently been recorded at Sremska Mitrovica in Serbia Tapavički-Ilić, Filipović 2011; see ‘The Warrior and his Wife’ article).

Reconstruction of the Celtic (Scordisci) Cremation Burial from Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia

(after Tapavički-Ilić, Filipović 2011)
At Ludas in Hungary 8 double burials have been recorded. In two cases the cremated remains of two adults (burials 711, 1009), in five cases an adult and a child (burials 686, 699, 725, 1051, 1267), and in one case a newborn and a child (burial 1139) were placed in the grave together. The case of burial 1139 at that site is a further example of the mysteries that continue to surround such Celtic burials, especially those of children. In this burial the remains of a new born child and those of an older child (Infans I) were found. The two children could have been cremated together, however, the missing skeletal elements of the older child raises issues for which there are no satisfactory answers. Furthermore, in some child burials at this site the total absence of skull bones can be observed. In burial 1267, among the remains of an adult female, cremated skeletal bones of a child were detected, but the infant’s skull fragments were not present at all. From burial 1051, among calcined skeletal bones of a child aged around 1 year old, skull fragments of an adult were documented. In this case the mixed remains of the two individuals imply cremation on the same pyre. There is no explanation so far why the skeletal elements of the adult and the skull bones of the child were missing from the grave (loc cit).

Position of cremated human remains in grave 711 at Ludas

(after Hincak, Guštin 2011)
In burial 711, near to the cremated remains of an adult female aged around 24, bone fragments of another adult female were documented around bracelet no. 5. However, in this case the bone fragments of the two individuals show signs of exposure to different temperatures which implies that they were cremated on separate pyres.

Remains of the Funeral Pyre from the Central Celtic Burial (#10) at Karakochochovata Tumulus (Braty Daskalovi)

(after Tonkova et al 2011)

ANIMAL BONES

One of the features which marks late Iron Age cremation burials throughout Eastern Europe is the presence of animal bones, both burnt and unburnt, intermingled among the human remains. This phenomenon has been recorded throughout the area settled by the Eastern Celts, from sites such as Gordion in Galatia (cite), Kalnovo in Bulgaria (see ‘Kalnovo’ article), Dubovo and Brežice in Slovenia (cite), Ludas in Hungary (cite), etc.
Brežice, Slovenia grave 56: Human and animal remains and bronze fibula and finger-ring decorated with the pseudo-filigree technique

(after Jovanović A. 2011)
Grave 56 at Brežice was discovered at a depth of 0.95m. has a simple interred oval pit shape of 0.95 x 0.60 m in size and 0.15 m in depth. The grave is typical in terms of shape, size and spatial organization at the cemetery. The grave goods were found in the central part of the burial pit together with a small heap of burnt bones. At the bottom of the pit were a small spindle whorl, an iron ring, other iron items and an iron sickle, next to which lay the iron chain and pieces of bronze. The described pieces of bronze belonged to a fragment of a bronze anklet and bracelet with a knobbled protrusion, while a hollow bracelet and a buckle (dress pin) of the Brežice type were identified among the group of iron objects besides the bronze anklet and bracelet. Fragments of a plaited belt chain lay most likely in the group of iron objects with the sickle. Above this group was a larger concentration of bones, atop which was placed a bronze fibula with a bronze finger-ring, a fragment of iron, and a spindle whorl. Based on the results of anthropological analyses conducted a female of approximately 35-40 years of age was buried in grave 56. Through the analysis of osteological remains bone and teeth remains of pig were determined, most probably wild boar (Sus scrofa ferus L.), a year and a half or 2 years old. The colour of all the fragments is grey to grey-white, suggesting that the bones were burnt at a high temperature and that the pig was brought to the pyre in the beginning or during the cremation of the body (cite).

Legend: Sus sp.- pig, Bos sp.-cattle, O/C/C- sheep, capra, roe deer (Ovis aries, L., Capra hircus, L., Capreolus capreolus, L.), Indet.-indeterminate

Proportion of cremated animal remains from the Brežice site

(after Hincak, Guštin 2011 )
BAGS OF BONES

Following cremation, the bones of the deceased were collected and placed in a vessel which functioned as funerary jars.

Ceramic vessel of the ‘Zepino Type’ used as a funerary vessel at the Celtic female (No. 10) burial at Karakochovata Tumulus, Bratya Daskalovi, Bulgaria

(after Tonkova et al 2011; see ‘Killing the Objects’ and ‘Heart of Thrace’ articles)
Recent evidence from both eastern and western Europe also indicates that the bones were frequently collected in containers of a perishable nature. An analysis of the various forms of cremated bone depositions in the La Calotterie cemetery in Belgium dating to the middle La Tène period revealed that the remains deposited in circles were originally put into perishable containers, i.e. pouches made of leather or textile (enveloppe souple by French terminology). There are also examples for rectangular and scattered deposition of ashes (Le Goff Et Al. 2009, 116–123). Analogues for perishable containers were documented in the cemetery of Ludas in Hungary as well. Examination of the archaeozoological material has shown that the positions of certain bones imply the use of rectangular containers in graves (Méniel (2006, 345–366).

At Ludas, ashes deposited in circular heaps were most possibly placed in circular containers, like in wooden buckets, wicker baskets, leather or textile pouches. In some cases, on top of the heaps of cremated remains, unburnt metal ornaments, chiefly fibulae were recorded (e.g. 962, 1050, 1057, 1157). Since no sign of heat exposure was detected on the fibulae, these objects were unlikely parts of the garment worn during the cremation process. This phenomenon raises the possibility that the remains were placed into textile pouches held together by fibulae. Rectangular depositions of ashes – similarly to the rectangular deposition of animal bones – were presumably put in wooden containers, e.g. wooden tray, wicker basket, etc. (Tankó & Tankó 2012). A similar use of perishable (fabric/leather) containers has been recorded at the Dobova and Brežice sites in Slovenia (Hincak, Guštin 2011).

Unburned bronze fibula on cremated human remains in grave 962 at Ludas

(after Tankó & Tankó 2012)
Examples of deposition of cremated human remains and its hypothetical interpretations.

(after Tankó & Tankó 2012)

BURIAL GOODS

The grave inventory of Celtic burials varies greatly depending on regional factors, and are covered in separate articles, as is the pan-European practice of ‘Killing the Objects’. The question of why only certain objects in burials were ritually deformed remains one of the great mysteries associated with Celtic ritual and religion (see ‘Killing the Objects’).
Recently discovered burial goods from Grave 11 at Szabadi (Hungary) containing both ‘killed’ and intact items.

(After Tušek, Kavur 2011)

LIFE EXPECTANCY

Anthropological data indicates that life in Celtic society varied greatly from that in the Graeco-Roman world. For example, at the Celtic (Galatian) settlement at Gordion (see ‘Galatia’ article), the first comprehensive bioarchaeological approach to these population groups from central Turkey, data drawn from 47 individuals excavated from the Lower Town area of the site: 21 Later Hellenistic/Celtic (late 3rd to 2nd centuries BC) and 26 Roman (1st to 2nd centuries AD), showed that the two sub-samples have markedly different paleodemographic profiles. The composition of the Celtic group is unusual, with very few infants (5%) and primarily young or middle aged adults (52%), whereas the Roman sample has many infant burials (27%) and less than half young or middle aged adults (35%) (Selinsky 2012).

A similar demographic picture as to be observed from anthropological analysis of Celtic graves from the burial complexes at Brežice and Dobova in Slovenia. At Brežice the curve for female and male samples shows a high probability of death in adultus 1 (20 – 29 years) and adultus 2 groups (30-39 years). A similar picture is to be observed at the Dobova site.
The distribution of population according to age and sex at Brežice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Indefinable</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infans</td>
<td>0-14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Juveniles</td>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adultus I</td>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adultus II</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maturus I</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maturus II</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
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</table>

Distribution of deads by age categories of site Dobova-Kosovka.
Life tables at Brežice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>( D_x )</th>
<th>( d_x )</th>
<th>( l_x )</th>
<th>( q_x )</th>
<th>( l_{x+1} )</th>
<th>( T_x )</th>
<th>( e_x )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24.56</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0.246</td>
<td>877.19</td>
<td>1833.33</td>
<td>18.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29.82</td>
<td>75.44</td>
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<td>605.26</td>
<td>956.14</td>
<td>12.67</td>
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<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35.09</td>
<td>46.61</td>
<td>0.769</td>
<td>280.70</td>
<td>350.88</td>
<td>7.69</td>
</tr>
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<td>40-49</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.77</td>
<td>10.53</td>
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<td>61.40</td>
<td>70.18</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend: \( D_x \)-the number of persons died at age \( x \), \( d_x \)-number of deaths in percentage, \( l_x \)-survivors, \( q_x \)-probability of death, \( l_{x+1} \)-total number of year (all individuals) between \( x \) and \( x+1 \), \( T_x \)-total number of year's for population, \( e_x \)-life expectancy.

Distribution of dead by age category at Brežice
Distribution of the population according to age and sex at the Brežice site

(Graphs after Hincak, Guštin 2011)

The mortality rate for women is highest in the Juvenilis phase (15-19) (12%), and Adultus 1 phase (20-30) (18%). This statistic is much higher than for males in the same group and indicates a high mortality rate in childbirth. Average life expectancy for males was higher than for females in all groups. Thus, females in the juvenilis group (14 – 19 years) were expected to live, on average, for only 16 years, while a male lived for a further 21.5 years.

Most striking at Brežice is the fact that only 6 individuals were recorded from the Maturus stage (over 40 years of age) – 5 from the Maturus 1 phase (40 – 49 years) and only one male individual over the age of 50. No individuals over the age of 60 were found. Based on the above statistics, the average life expectancy at the Celtic settlements did not exceed 40 years of age, which undoubtedly had a significant impact on their perception of life and death – a perception which varied greatly from that of modern society.

Extensive anthropological research at other Celtic sites across Europe is required to further elucidate our understanding of the Iron Age society. However, the studies outlined above allow a glimpse into a population society that lived, not only in a different time from us but, in many respects, in a different reality.


