Ancient Acadians: Celtic people cast in heroic, robust traditions

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Social historians have noted that rural life in France changed only by degrees from Celtic times to the French Revolution. Who were the Celts, who seemingly had such a lasting effect upon rural France?

They came out of the East about 500 B.C. and spread over much of western Europe. By 300 B.C. they were well-established in what is now France, England, Scotland and Ireland.

The Celts were feared by Roman conquerors.

The Greeks and Romans regarded them as barbarians, and feared them, regarding them as energetic, quick-tempered and "war-minded." But Celtic farmers established a strong agricultural base with their iron plows, and their craftsmen created a brilliant art style. By the first century B.C., a truly urban society had begun to develop in many areas.

It was against these people that the Roman armies moved in the first century B.C., beginning with Julius Caesar's campaign in Gaul. When the Roman world collapsed in the fifth century A.D., Celtic culture once more emerged.

The picture that comes down to us is a people of heroic tradition who lived as prosperous craftsmen and farmers, often engaging in cattle theft. They worshiped gods who lived in sacred groves. They admired skilled craftsmen and intellectual achievement, but they admired courage and bravery more. They were avers to butcher and fisher and were quarrelsome—fighting each other at the drop of an insult, and often for the sheer joy of physical combat.

They brought civilization to Europe, inventing the iron plow, the iron scythe and the earliest version of the reaping machine. They built the first roads, and invented the iron plow, the harrow and the assembly line. They established a pattern of intensive farming that can still be discerned today.

They scorned the written word, honoring their bards and poets, who composed their histories in forms of verse. The Celt's allegiance was always to his tribe, and tribes often at war with one another.

The heartland of this amorphous Celtic culture, of course, was France, which the Romans called Gaul. Gaul was fertile and well-cultivated by the Celts. Figs, grapes and olives grew in the south, wheat and millet in the north. There was also abundant livestock—cattle, horses and pigs.

They seem to have been the first Europeans to wear pants, and they favored bright colors in clothing, especially reds. The Celtic noblemen sometimes wore knee-length skirts, and early fore-runners of the kilt. And they seem to have been the first Europeans to bathe with soap. They dressed with them advanced ideas of carpeting, dressing aids and axes daffy, building hill forts and houses, and on the rivers, boats.

The Celts' favorite meal seems to have been boiled or roasted pork, fowl, game and fish, along with honey, butter, cheese, curds, milk, wine, meat and beer. They invented the barrel to hold their beverages. They ate with their fingers. They were no beds. They slept on the floor, covered with the skins of animals. When not fighting or feasting, men played games. The favorite game of young men and boys was hurling, a game on the order of hockey, which is still played in Ireland.

The main preoccupation of the Celts was warfare. They went naked into battle, but first worked themselves up into a fury, and then fighting wildly, like madmen.

They lived in a highly-structured society, in which Celtic chieftains had a number of "clients" to whom he allotted property in return for tribute in the form of goods and services. They had many slaves, taken in war, who were at the bottom of the social ladder. European feudalism may have emerged from this Celtic structure of client and client, or lord and man.

Conquest never erased Celtic heritage.

The Roman conquest of Gaul never erased the Celtic substrata. Roman colonies were established only in the South. Roman officials lived in the towns. Celtic noblemen and their sons took Latin names, but in the countryside, farm from the towns and highways, Celtic life remained as before.

(Editors' Note: Truman Stacy, a journalist for half a century, is the author of Louisianna's French Heritage, and a number of articles in newspapers and historical journals. This is the fifth of a six-part series.)