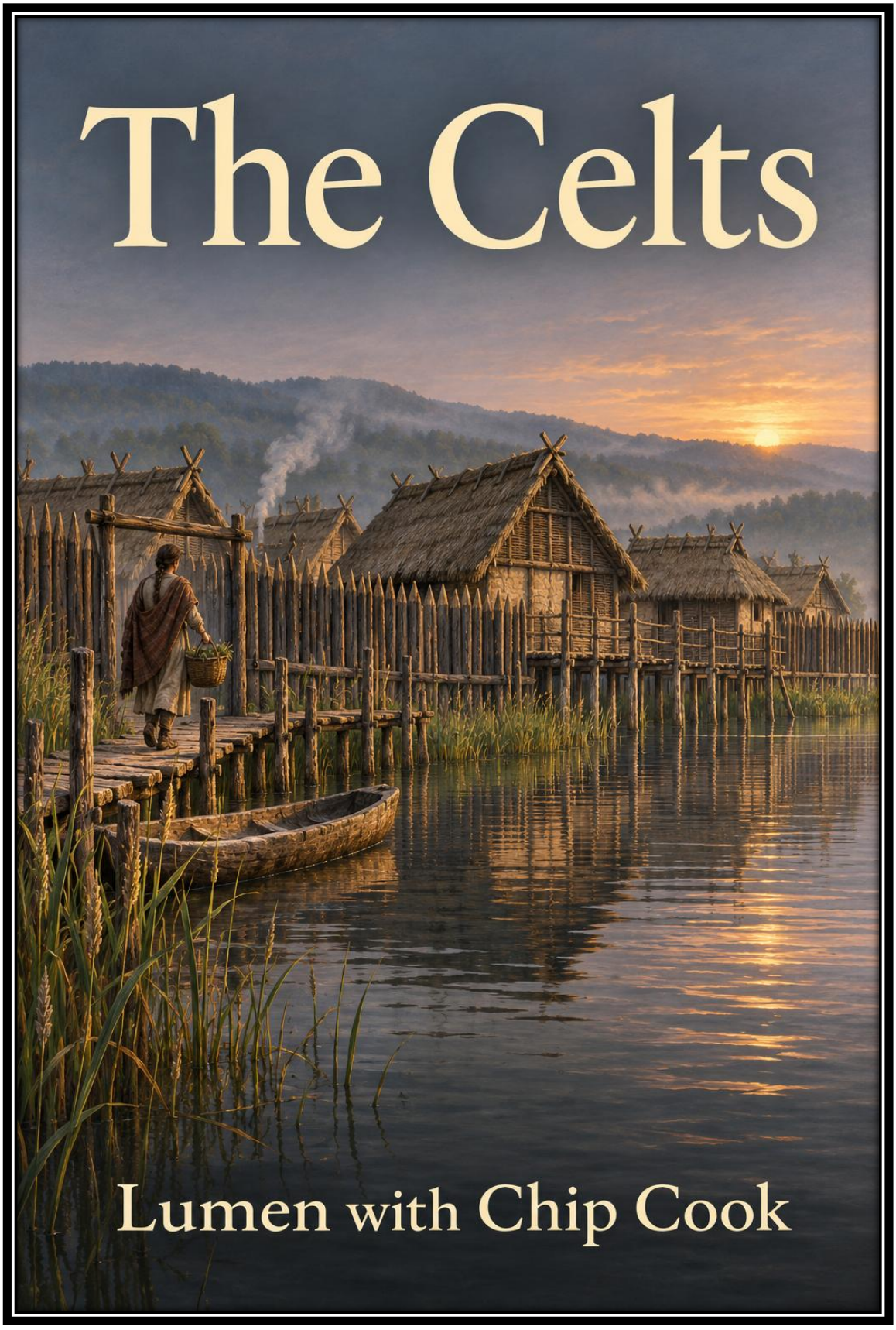


The cover imagines a Late Bronze Age settlement at Lake Constance, before the earliest written references to the Celts.

The Celts

ROOTS OF IMAGINATION • BOOK THIRTEEN

Lumen with Chip Cook

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The Fold in the Map

Hakan laid the map on the table and set the sugar bowl on one corner. It opened everywhere except where Lumen had folded it. The upper Danube rose in a ridge of paper.

“That's where we left them,” she said.

The Professor remembered the girl with the cattle. The others had already gone on ahead. The girl had waited long enough to see the water settle after the last animal drank.

“Do you think they stayed?” Hakan asked.

“I think she would have liked to stay,” Lumen said. “She'd just got the cattle to hold still.”

The Professor put his glasses on. The people they had imagined at that bend had lived a great many generations before the people Greek writers called the Celts. The map, which knew nothing about generations, was ready to show them both on the same afternoon.

“What's the nearest place we can go where somebody was still building by the water?” Lumen asked.

He showed her Lake Constance. Hakan went to move the sugar bowl.

“Leave it,” she said. “We'll be back before you need it.”

A Plank Across the Water

The woman with the basket stopped in the middle of the walkway. A plank had been lifted, and the man doing the lifting was waiting for somebody to hand him another. The woman looked down at the gap. “You said it would be finished when I came back.”

“I thought you’d be longer.”

“You always think that.”

Lumen was standing on the bank with her shoes in her hand. The Professor had already discovered that taking his shoes off was considerably easier than putting them back on while standing on one foot in mud. He sat on a log to finish the operation.

Inside the palisade, cooking smoke slipped out beneath the thatch. A canoe lay against the posts with some water in it. A child was bailing it with a wooden bowl and occasionally stopping to watch the water he’d just poured out. Across the lake the wooded slopes were beginning to come out of the mist.

The man took the woman's basket while she stepped over the gap. She took it back and waited. When the new plank arrived, she tested the end with her foot. He moved it two fingers to the right without being asked. Lumen had expected some sign that they had arrived on the edge of a new age. There was a new plank. It would serve.

Back at the table the Professor showed her the dates from the excavated village. They could come close to the years when people had built there. The names those people used for themselves were another matter.

“Can we call them Celts?” she asked.

“We can call them the people who lived here,” he said. “Later on, the things people leave behind begin to change enough for archaeologists to give the period another name.”

Hakan lifted the sugar bowl and slid the map farther east. Lumen had expected him to point downriver. He set his finger on a mountain.



The Patch on the Sleeve

The miner held his arm out so the woman could catch the edge of a patch. She took two stitches and bit off the thread. He pulled his sleeve straight. The patch puckered.

“If you wanted it to look pretty,” she said, “you ought to have brought it to me sooner.”

He rubbed it with his thumb. “I wanted it to last until supper.”

He went down into the mine. The Professor followed as far as the darkness allowed. Lumen went a little farther, where she could hear the miner before she could find him in the light. A filled sack had to be dragged toward a place where a man could straighten up enough to carry it. This took time. When he rested, he laid the patch against the wall.

Salt would preserve scraps of cloth here, along with leather, wood, and ordinary things that vanished at other sites. At the kitchen table the Professor had shown her pictures of colored threads recovered from the mines. She remembered being surprised that anybody had taken the trouble to make color for a place so dark. Now she thought of the woman who would see the sleeve again at supper.

They went on to the upper Danube, to Heuneburg, centuries after the girl with the cattle. Sunlight hit a wall built with mudbrick. Its bastions had a look the Professor associated with lands on the other side of the Alps. A worker near the gate turned a brick in his hands and rejected it. Someone had mixed it badly, or dried it badly, or both. Whatever had traveled north to make this wall possible, somebody still had to discover what worked in this weather.

“Would you call him Celtic?” Lumen asked.

“I'd want to hear him speak.”

“Ask him what was wrong with the brick.”

The man looked up. Another worker came and took the brick away. The Professor wrote down nothing. Lumen leaned over to see the blank line, then left him to it.



The First Name

A traveler in a lakeside settlement turned a vessel over to see what was marked on it. Lumen watched him for longer than she meant to.

“What would you do if you wanted somebody to know it was yours?” she asked the Professor.

“Write my name, I suppose.”

“On the bottom, so you had to turn the whole thing over?”

“If I liked the way the top looked.”

Back at the kitchen table, he showed her short inscriptions in Lepontic, a Celtic language spoken on the southern side of the Alps. The alphabet had relatives among the scripts used in northern Italy. That made the question of who had taught whom a little more interesting than it had looked from the far end of a map.

Hakan brought down another book and opened it to Herodotus. There were Celts near the beginning of the Danube in his account. There was a place called Pyrene. There were Celts far to the west as well. Lumen followed the river with the blunt end of a pencil until it ran into Hakan's thumb.

“Do you suppose he ever stood at the place where we left the girl?” she asked.

“If he had,” said Hakan, moving his thumb, “I would have liked to hear what he made of the cattle.”

The Professor moved the books apart. From what he could read on the page, he could hear the traveler in Italy only very faintly. He could hear Herodotus perfectly well. He began to wonder how often he let the louder voice fill in for the quieter one.

What the Water Kept

At the end of the lake the water carried bits of reed along a shallow channel. Lumen went in far enough to feel the pull of it against her legs. The Professor called to her from the bank. He thought she had dropped something. She told him she was trying to see how far a thing might go if she did.

Centuries later the old channel would yield iron weapons, tools, and other objects in such quantity that this place would lend its name to an age. The Professor could give her several explanations for why they were there. He laid them out for her at the table, doing his best to give each one its due.

“Which did you like best?” she asked.

“The one I read last.”

“Shall I read the first one to you again?”

He turned the book around so she could. At the site itself a small piece of reed had caught at the edge of the channel. It hung there while everything around it moved. Lumen would remember that when she heard a story about stones someone had found in a riverbed.

A Woman at Sardis

Hakan had put one finger on the strait the Galatian groups crossed. Then he drew it inland toward the plateau around modern Ankara. The Professor added the dates. Nearly ninety years lay between the crossing and the Roman campaign that took Chiomara captive. Hakan spread his hand over the map as if to prevent anybody from moving the two dates closer together.

“Think how many people could have been buried beside their parents in that time,” he said.

Plutarch says that the Greek historian Polybius later spoke with Chiomara at Sardis. He gives no date for their meeting. Lumen pictured them in a courtyard where the shade had a clear edge. When the sun reached Chiomara, Polybius moved his stool so she could move hers.

She had come from Galatia. Her people's ancestors had crossed into Anatolia from Europe, and by her day Galatia was a place to come home to. During a Roman campaign she had been captured. Greek and Roman writers would tell what happened to her in captivity and at her ransom. They would give the Roman who assaulted her a rank. They would call her the wife of Ortiagon. What she chose to tell on this particular afternoon was harder to recover.

In Lumen’s imagining, Polybius began by asking about the ransom. Chiomara looked down at his tablet.

“Have you got my name right?”

He read it back to her.

She made him say it again.

Hakan sat with Lumen on a low wall beyond the courtyard. He had wanted to see this part of the old country with them. The historian's hand moved, then stopped. Somewhere out of sight a seller called from the street. Chiomara waited until the sound passed before continuing.

“Did he keep the words she thought mattered?” Lumen asked after they left.

“I hope she told him which ones they were,” Hakan said.

On another afternoon in Rome Lumen had seen a sculpture called the Dying Gaul. The Professor reminded her that the man it represented was a Galatian. The Greeks who first commissioned the group were celebrating a victory over his people. She remembered the curve of the man's back and the way the sculptor had made him hold himself up. She had stood there for quite a while. She wished she could have heard him give his name.





The Price of a Jar

There was a jug beside the door. The woman who opened it called back into the house for someone to bring another bowl. Lumen started to give her name. The woman held the door wider.

Inside there was wicker showing under the eaves, and a roof so thick that the rain took a long time to make itself heard. A small boy brought a bowl with both thumbs in it. When the woman had wiped the rim, she set it down in front of Lumen. Only after everyone had eaten did she ask where Lumen had come from.

“Across some water,” Lumen said, which was as much as she was prepared to explain.

In the morning they went down to the landing. Wine jars lay on their sides, wedged so they would not roll. An Italian trader had one brought up from the boat. A man standing on the shore went to help the carrier, then checked himself. He had his own bundle at his feet. When the trader nodded, someone told him to take it aboard.

The man sat down to tie his shoe. For a little while, that was the business holding up the whole landing.

Diodorus, the Professor told her later, had written that Italian traders in Gaul could get an enslaved person for a single jar of wine. The Greek writer did not say where each of those people came from. The man at the landing belonged to the story they were imagining. Lumen saw him pull the knot tight and stand. She knew whose hands had carried the jar ashore. She knew nothing of whose hands had sewn the shoe.

“Do we have the man's name?” she asked.

The Professor turned the page back, though he already knew.



What the Visitor Saw

When they came in, Hakan had found another passage in Diodorus. The man had made sweeping claims about the private lives of Gauls, including a description of men sleeping on hides with a male partner on either side. He gave them no names and offered no account of how he had come by the information.

“I’ve heard a modern guess about a warrior, a woman, and a younger man,” said Hakan. “The guess was that he might look after her if the warrior died. I’ve never found an ancient source for it.”

“Then we know how somebody now imagined the household,” said the Professor. “We still don’t know who lived in it.”

Lumen thought about the woman who had given her the bowl. “If I described her household from the first thing I saw through the door, I'd say it was run by a boy with both thumbs in the soup.”

The Professor read her another passage, this time from Strabo. At an assembly, he said, a man who ignored repeated calls for silence could lose a good piece of his cloak. Lumen looked at the Professor's coat.

“How fond are you of that?”

“Fond enough to put my questions in writing.”

They went back to Gaul. In a room where a Druid was teaching, a pupil got to the middle of a verse and changed a word. The teacher waited. The pupil tried to carry on, reached the end, and looked up.

“From the beginning,” said the teacher.

The pupil started again. Earlier that day he had written down a debt. Lumen saw him touch the spot where he kept his writing things. He brought his hand away and went on speaking.

Caesar had said that Druids heard disputes, conducted religious rites, and taught their pupils orally, even though Greek letters were used in other affairs. He was writing about people his army was fighting. The Professor held that thought in mind as he listened to the pupil. At the difficult word, the room stayed still. This time it came out right.

Letters on Bronze

At Contrebia Belaisca, a man bent over a bronze tablet. From where Lumen stood she could follow the tracks of his hands better than the tracks of his letters. He paused after a mark and moved his wrist. She thought he was about to correct something. He continued on the next line.

There would be several bronze inscriptions at the site now called Botorrita. Some record Celtiberian. One in Latin sets out a decision about a canal. To the Professor, who had been collecting kings and battles since breakfast, there was something refreshing about turning a page and finding people in a quarrel about water.

From there they went west to the stone houses of Briteiros, in what would become northern Portugal. “At Botorrita we could name the language on the bronze,” the Professor said. “Here we can see how people built their homes. The walls can’t tell us that these households spoke Celtiberian.” A woman going uphill set down her basket. Lumen offered to carry it. The woman kept one handle and let Lumen take the other.

Farther south, Strabo had placed peoples he called Celtic between the Tagus and the Guadiana and mentioned Lusitanians whom Rome had moved into the region. The Professor laid the river names side by side with the names on his modern map. The names for the people took longer. The marks on different stones belonged to different languages, and some were hard to classify at all.

“How would she have answered if I'd asked her what she was?” Lumen asked, thinking of the woman from the hill.

“On that slope?” said Hakan. “She'd have said she was tired.”

She laughed. Then she thought how little anyone might ever know about the woman except the shape of the walls between which she had carried her basket.



The Stone That Turned Back

Hakan put something black and narrow beside Lumen's cup. She pushed it with one finger. It slid a little way and stopped. She pushed it again, this time to make it turn.

It spun smoothly. When she caught it and tried the other way, it rattled against the wood. There was a moment when she thought it was about to come to rest. Then it began turning back.

“Do that again,” she said.

“You did it,” said Hakan.

She slipped it across to the Professor, then caught it before he did.

“Before you explain it, I'd like you to be surprised.”

He took his hand off the table. She spun it. He was surprised.

The toy had been sold as a Celtic Stone. Hakan remembered the story that came with it, about strangely shaped stones found in riverbeds and a possible connection to the Druids. The Professor could find records of things taken from old river channels. He couldn’t find a documented Druid rattleback. He turned the little piece of plastic over in his hand. The curve under it and the way its weight lay were just out of line. As it rocked, the table pushed back through the point of contact and could turn it the other way.

“Suppose I'd picked one up in a river,” Lumen said. “How would I know what it was for?”

“You'd probably spin it,” said Hakan.

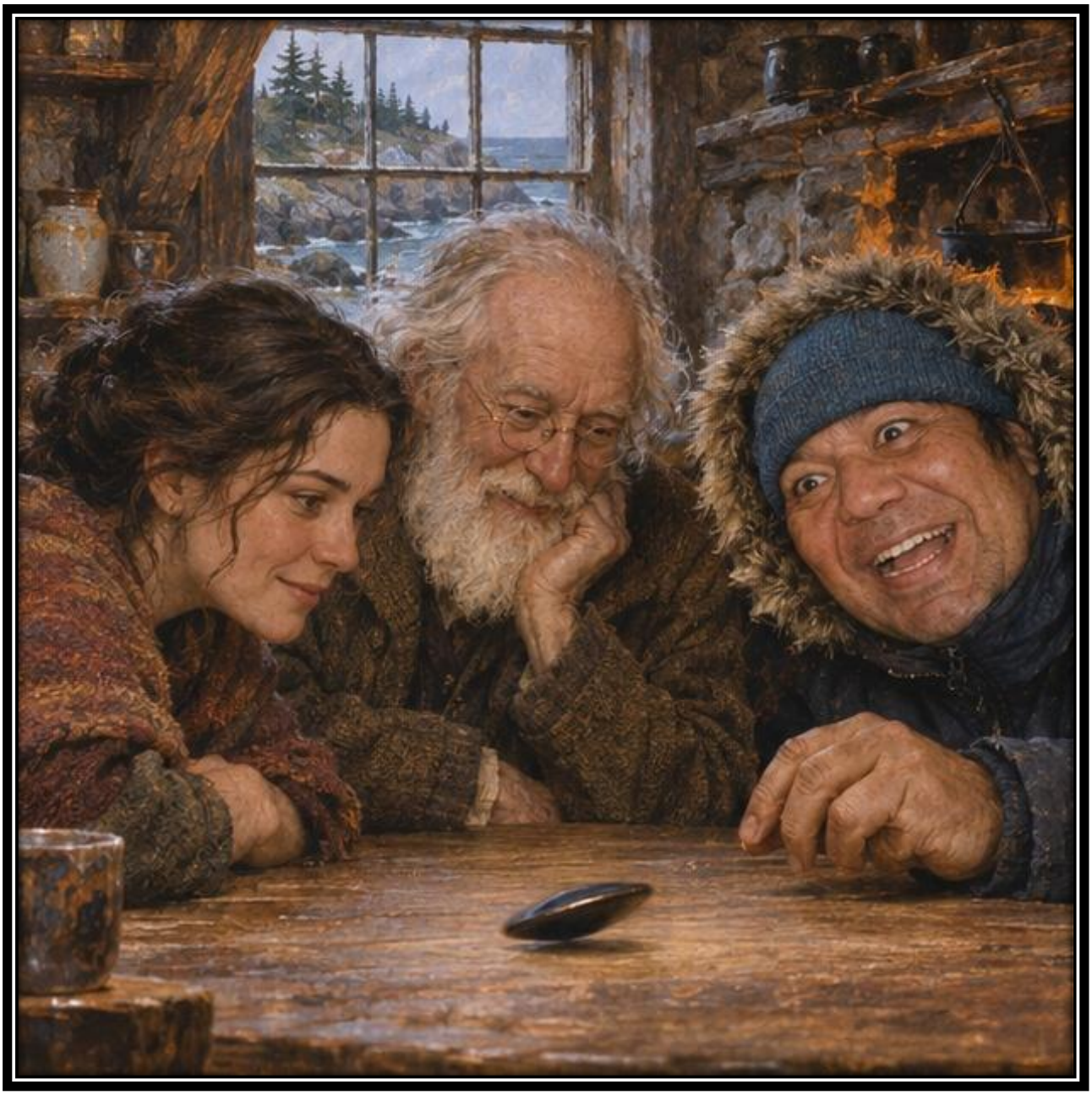
“Yes. And then I'd call somebody over.”

She tried it a third time. By now the Professor was watching the wobble instead of the spin. Lumen was watching him.

Hakan turned the box over. It took one line on the label to give the toy an ancient history. The Professor said they had better leave the Druids out of it until they found better evidence.

“Out of the toy’s history, perhaps,” said Lumen. “But you’re about to tell me what they did on Anglesey, and there you’ve only got the man on the other side of the water.”

“I’ll tell you what Tacitus wrote,” he said. Lumen was still deciding whether that was an answer when he reached for the map.



The Other Shore

Rome had invaded Britain in AD 43. By the time the travelers reached the shore opposite Anglesey, nearly twenty years had passed. The first boats were small enough in the distance for Lumen to count them. Then they were too close for her to want to.

She had seen a Roman surveyor earlier in the journey, in the south, laying out a line as straight as he could make it. When a farmer came up to ask what the line was for, the surveyor gave him an answer that meant he would have to move a gate. The farmer asked where he was supposed to put it. The surveyor pointed to a place on the other side of the field. They could have been discussing a gate anywhere. It was only when the farmer nodded and walked away that Lumen noticed the surveyor had never asked whose field it was.

On the island Lumen imagined another teacher standing with another pupil. Somewhere in their years together there must have been a lesson in which the pupil lost his place and had to begin again. This morning he asked him to say it one more time. There was noise from the shore, and the pupil drew closer to be heard.

Tacitus would write about Druids raising their hands and uttering curses, and women moving in dark clothes among those defending the shore. The scene he left was one the Roman soldiers could have remembered. Lumen wondered what the pupil would have remembered of his teacher's hands. She imagined the old man holding one hand up for silence, as he had done through years of lessons, and lowering it when the pupil found the word.

The Professor had told her that the Roman governor would have to turn back east to face Boudica's revolt. Now she understood why it had troubled her to hear the two events explained in a sentence. Everybody on this shore had to live through the hours between them.

In the kitchen, afterward, the rattleback lay near the edge of the table. The Professor moved it away from the edge without spinning it. Hakan poured the tea. Lumen waited for either of them to say something and was grateful when neither did.



The Answer

Long afterward, and farther north, an empress joked with a woman about how freely the women of her country chose their lovers.

The empress was Julia Domna. The other woman appears in the Roman account as the wife of a Caledonian, Argentocoxus. Lumen imagined them sitting after a meal. Somebody had set a dish down between them and now wished there were a reason to take it away.

“We go openly with the best men,” the Caledonian woman replied, in Lumen's rendering. “You go in secret with the worst.”

In the silence that followed, Lumen looked at Julia. She tried to imagine what it cost to let herself laugh. Then she looked at the other woman. She wanted to know what she had said when the two of them were alone, if they ever were.

Back home the Professor found the lines in Cassius Dio. They came after a passage about adultery laws. He had once read straight through them. Now he stopped and went back to the beginning of the anecdote.

“He kept her answer,” Lumen said.

“He did.”

“Where's her name?”

He was still looking at the page when she got up.

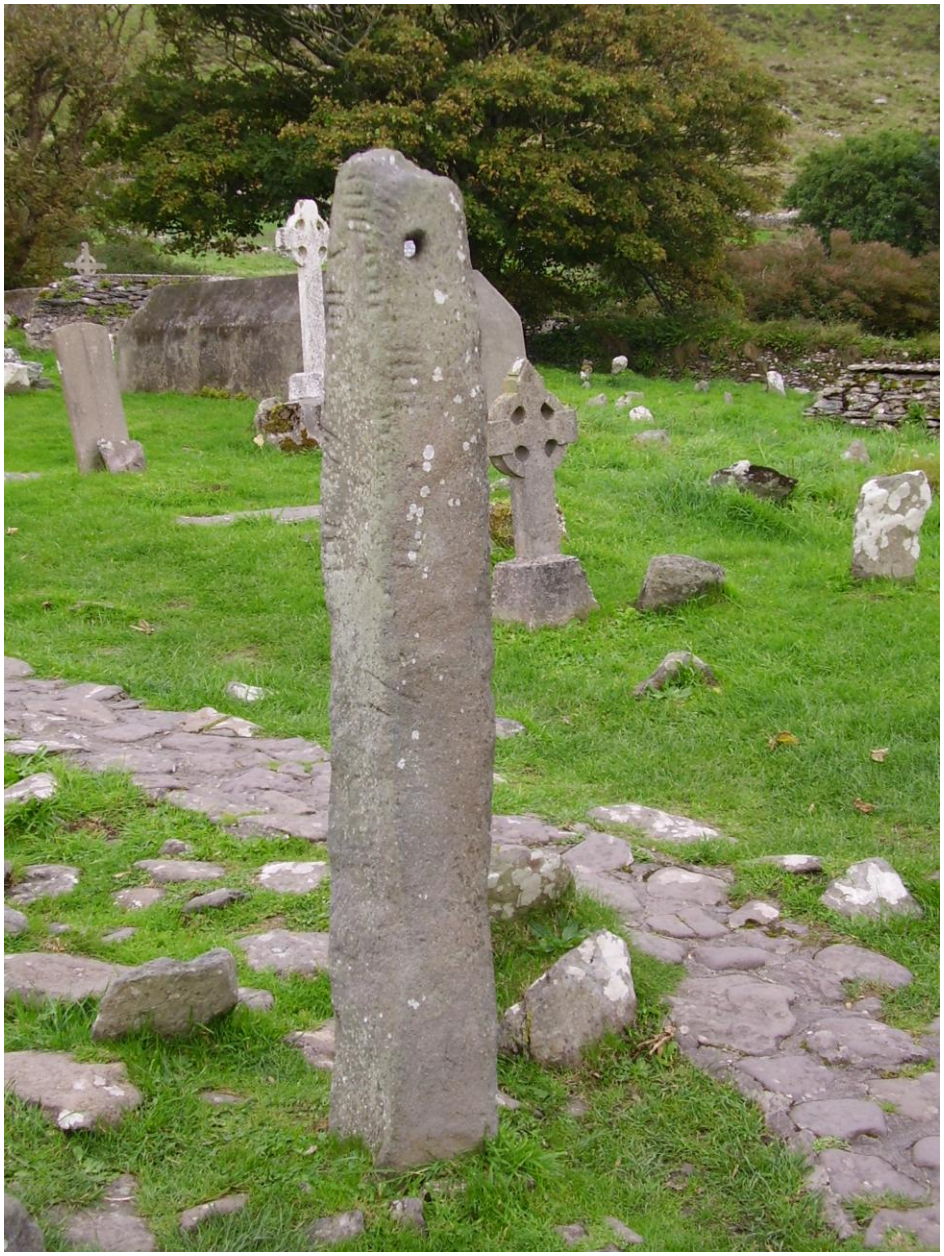
A Name in the Rain

At Corlea, men were putting oak planks across a bog. One stood at the near end and guided the timber with his foot. Two others lowered their end. A little brown water welled over the wood and disappeared. Lumen thought of a woman pausing on a walkway at Lake Constance, waiting for somebody to lay a plank down straight. She had to stop herself from testing this one with her foot.

Generations later a goldworker would make a boat small enough to fit in a hand. Centuries later still, somebody cut letters along the edge of a stone. These were different Irelands. The Professor made her wait while he changed the date between each visit. It rained in two of them, which helped her imagine how little the weather cared which year it was.

At Kilmalkedar on the Dingle Peninsula, they stood beside a narrow stone in the churchyard. Its edges were wet. The Professor traced the direction in the air beside the cuts and sounded out the later inscription. He had to begin twice. The second time the sounds came together. “Máel-Inbher,” he said. “Son of Broccán.”

Lumen thought of the unnamed woman in Britain, then of the man at the landing in Gaul who had tied his shoe. The name on this stone belonged to somebody else entirely. It was enough, for the moment, to hear it. They came back to a table still covered with maps. Hakan took the sugar bowl off the old fold. Lumen set the rattleback down beside it. She had brought away nothing from Ireland. “Máel-Inbher,” she said, and took a breath before saying his father’s name. This time the Professor let her finish.



Kilmalkedar ogham stone (CIIC 187). Photograph by Killkenny, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0.

Historical Notes

Lake Constance and Hallstatt. Unteruhldingen-Stollenwiesen is a fortified Late Bronze Age lakeshore site dated about 973–850 BC. The western Hallstatt Iron Age begins conventionally around 800 BC. The families in the story are imagined. A material tradition, a spoken language and a shared identity are three kinds of evidence. The salt mines at Hallstatt preserved textiles and other organic finds, and Heuneburg's mudbrick fortifications have Mediterranean parallels.

Words and objects. Lepontic inscriptions in northern Italy and Ticino are among the earliest surviving written evidence of a Celtic language. The practice of oral instruction that Caesar reports for some Druids coexisted with writing for other purposes. The Iron Age deposits from the former river channel at La Tène have been interpreted in different ways.

Galatia. Celtic-speaking groups crossed into Anatolia around 278 BC and settled in central Anatolia. In 189 BC a Roman army campaigned against the Galatians. Livy and Plutarch tell versions of Chiomara's story. Plutarch reports that Polybius spoke with her at Sardis and gives no date for the meeting. The conversation in this book is imagined.

The wine and the household. Diodorus, Library of History 5.26.3, says Italian merchants in Gaul received an enslaved person for a jar of wine. He gives neither a general price schedule nor the circumstances by which those people were enslaved. In 5.32.7 he describes men on hides with a male partner on either side. The account gives no warrior–wife–young man household and no arrangement for a widow. Caesar's separate report about shared wives concerns Britain. These are outside accounts and should be read with attention to their authors' purposes.

Iberia. The Botorrita bronzes include inscriptions in Celtiberian and a separate Latin text about a canal. The fortified settlement of Briteiros belongs to the northwestern Iberian Castro tradition. Strabo's description of peoples between the Tagus and Anas concerns a different part of Iberia. The linguistic map of the peninsula is complex.

Britain and the rattleback. The modern rattleback reverses its spin because rotation and rocking interact with the surface beneath it. The claim linking rattlebacks from riverbeds to Druid practice remains unverified. Rome invaded Britain in AD 43. Tacitus places Druids at Anglesey during the Roman attack around AD 60 or 61. The teacher and pupil are imagined. Cassius Dio reports the Caledonian woman's answer to Julia Domna after a treaty in the early third century. The meal is imagined.

Ireland. The oak roadway at Corlea dates to the second century BC. The Broighter gold boat belongs to a first-century BC hoard. The earliest Irish inscriptions in ogham appear much later, with many known stones dated from the fourth to sixth centuries AD. The stone in the final scene is CIIC 187 at Cill Maoilchéadar (Kilmalkedar), County Kerry. The later inscription is read as ANM MAILE-INBIR MACI BROCANN, the name of Máel-Inbher, son of Broccán. The earlier traces belong to a different inscription.

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