In the third century B.C. a large body of Celtic tribes thrust themselves violently into the turbulent world of the Diadochoi, immediately instilling fear, engendering anger and finally, commanding respect from the peoples with whom they came into contact. Their warlike nature, extreme hubris and vigorous energy resembled Greece's own Homeric past, but represented a culture, language and way of life totally alien to that of the Greeks and Macedonians in this period. In the years that followed, the Celts would go on to ravage Macedonia, sack Delphi, settle their own "kingdom" and fill the ranks of the Successors' armies. They would leave indelible marks on the Hellenistic World, first as plundering barbaroi and finally, as adapted, integral elements and members of the greater multi-ethnic society that was taking shape around them. This paper will explore the roles played by the Celts by examining their infamous incursions into Macedonia and Greece, their phase of settlement and occupation of what was to be called Galatia, their role as mercenaries, and finally their transition and adaptation, most noticeably on the individual level, to the demands of the world around them. This paper will also seek to challenge some of the traditionally hostile views held by Greek historians regarding the role, achievements, and the place the Celts occupied as members, not simply predators, of the Hellenistic World.
The Celts were not unknown to all Greeks in the years preceding the Delphic incursion of February, 279. The first recorded appearance of Celts in Greece was in 369 B.C. when Dionysus I sent Celtic and Iberian mercenaries to aid his Lacedaemonian allies against the Boeotians in the Peloponnese. Dionysus apparently came into contact with them twenty years earlier when he was fighting against the Locrians and Crotonians in Southern Italy. An embassy came to Dionysus from the Senone Celts who had sacked Rome in 390 B.C., and offered to fight for Dionysus or to harass his enemies to his rear. By 358 B.C. the Celts are reported to have been fighting the Illyrians and raiding adjacent areas.

Explanations for such far-ranging movement on the part of the Celts vary greatly. The “desire for southern luxuries” and the means to achieve this end have been proposed, while the idea of simple overpopulation and its concomitant effects on food supplies and living space has enjoyed agreement by both modern archaeologists and historians of the ancient world. Whatever the explanation might be, the Celts gradually found their way from Gaul into the lands of the Mediterranean. Here their appetites for plunder would be sated through conquest of the coastal areas and along the Dardanelles. Beyond this, there was Greece.

Delphi and the Invasion of Greece

The Greece that the Celts entered in 279 B.C. was a very different land than it was in its heyday during the Classical period. The wars between Alexander’s successors led to turmoil, division and glaring regional weaknesses. Even Macedonia itself, the cradle of Philip and Alexander, was rent by dissension and internecine struggles. Ptolemy Keraunos, the assassin of Seleucus I, had finally eliminated Lysimachus as a threat at Corupedion in 281 B.C., but in the course of doing so also eliminated the northern Macedonian defenses. In February of 279 B.C., most of the Macedonians were in their homes while Keraunos’ mercenaries lay scattered about in their winter quarters. As a result, the first Celtic probes into Macedonia went unanswered. The Celts entered the country in a vast body: their numbers included warriors, women, children, slaves, camp-followers, contingents from Illyrian and Thracian tribes, and caravans of wagons bearing supplies. The warriors immediately set about plundering any riches they could find. As a mobile, unsophisticated
raiding force, the Celts avoided walled and defended towns. However, they did ravage the countryside. Raiding and plundering, the Celts moved through Thessaly where a number of land owners acted as guides and aided the Celts in order to purchase immunity for their own estates. 

Next, the Celts reached Thermopylae and engaged the Greeks in battle. Brennus, the Celtic chieftain of this contingent, sent a diversionary force into Aetolia in order to divide the Greek forces. The ruse worked, and the raiding group fired the town of Callion, almost wiping it off the map. The town of Callion was hit hard by the Celts, but probably not as bad as Greek historians would have us believe. In fact, the reports of the “atrocities” at Callion sound suspiciously similar to those that Herodotus credits the Persians with during the invasion of 480 B.C. Reports of these incursions constantly credit the Greeks with routing the Celts at almost every engagement, inflicting horrifying casualties and forcing the northern barbarians to flee. However, the Celts were still able to move virtually at will and knew no limit to their depredations. A hoplite blocking force was sent from Patra, an Achaean city, to halt the Celts. They attacked head-on, under favorable conditions, and were severely mauled. Firing from concealed positions was the only option left for the Greeks, especially the Phocians who persistently harassed the invaders. The most effective Greek fighting force was that formed by a mixed group of Aetolians.

The nature of this invasion was distinctly different for the Greeks who used the Persian invasion as “the standard by which all others were judged.” The Celts had none of the intentions that Darius or Xerxes had. Pausanius’ account of the Celtic invasion is probably dubious in its estimates of the numbers of Celtic warriors, giving wildly exaggerated figures. Again, comparisons were made with the Persian invasion. The nature of the Celtic invasion at this point, one of raiding and plundering, would certainly appear more vicious and even more alien than the Persian invasion; the Persians were a known quantity to the Greeks and one of their goals was the establishment of Greek cities as Persian dependencies. It is evident that most of the Greeks were ignorant of the Celts’ goals and possibly equated their goals with those of the Persians. Ptolemy Keraunos was given an offer by the Celts, basically amounting to blackmail, which he misconstrued as a peace proposal. He agreed to make peace on the condition that the Celts’ leaders offer themselves as hostages to “The Thunderbolt,” a proposition that they reportedly found amusing. The Celts set about thrashing the Macedonians, beheading Keraunos and, like good Celts, paraded around the head of their notable opponent on the end of a spear.

The events at Delphi that followed Keraunos’ death receive even more questionable treatment from Greek historians. Popular accounts state that the Celts were repulsed from Delphi by reinforced Greek troops which were accompanied in their defense of this most holy shrine by the spirits of long dead Greek heroes, lightning bolts sent from Apollo himself, and the “white maidens,” snowflakes that were said to harry the Celtic invaders. Regardless of the propaganda lavished upon this story, Delphi was not only taken, but occupied and
sacked. Material commemoration of the sack of Delphi abounds. Paintings in many temples of Apollo in Greece and Italy show the sack of Delphi while Propertius records that the sack was later commemorated at Delos and Rome. The ivory doors of the temple of the Palatine at Rome display carvings of the Celts sacking the shrine while a medallion found in Capua shows a Celtic warrior with his foot resting on the severed head of the Pythia. Lastly, Celtic warriors are shown against a background of the burning colonnades of Delphi on the bottom of a goblet. Even a combined army of Aetolians and Phocians were unable to prevent the now-successful raiders from making an orderly withdrawal from the city with the treasure in tow. As for the treasure itself, it was said to have been brought back to Gaul into the tribal territory of the Volcae-Tectosages where it was subsequently included in a votive offering in a sacred lake in Tolosa. The treasure was seized by the Roman Consul Quintus Servilius Caepio in 106 B.C. after the region was captured by Roman forces. The period after Delphi would see the Celts both receiving and inflicting defeats as they moved east, crossing to Asia Minor and the Seleucid East.

THE CELTS IN GALATIA AND ASIA MINOR

At the point the Celts crossed into Asia Minor their principle concerns were plundering and raiding, although their numbers had been decreased at this point owing to the return of some to Gaul and the deaths in battle of others, most noticeably at the hands of Antigonus Gonatus near Lysimacheia in 277 B.C. After a number of attempts to cross the Hellespont, all repulsed by the Byzantines, the Celts were finally 'invited' by way of a treaty with Nicomedes of Bithynia. An agreement was made upon the arrival of the Celts to divide up the territory into three parts for plunder and spheres of operation. Nicomedes used the Celts, henceforth to be called Galatians, as mercenaries against the armies of Antiochus I. It was from this time that they would begin their settlement of the region and their transition as residents of the Hellenistic World, swiftly learning the Greek language and thus becoming known as Gallograeci.

The Galatians occupied a portion of northern Phrygia consisting of dry, almost treeless rolling hills, that was already inhabited by native Phrygians. These Phrygians were eventually assimilated into the Celtic culture of their neighbors with whom they appeared to live amicably, considering that there is nothing to show that relations were anything but peaceful. By this time, Antiochus I had been driven out of Galatia and had lost the north-west part of Lydia. He was eventually killed in 261 B.C. near Ephesus,
fighting against the Galatian mercenaries of Nicomedes of Bithynia. Galatian occupation of this region now took on the trappings of settlement and extended residence rather than simply migratory predation. Raiding still continued, but the Galatians soon realized that there was more money to be made at considerably less risk through the imposition of the Galatika, a type of blackmail. Galatia also served the Hellenistic world as a recruiting ground for Galatian mercenaries to fill the armies of the Hellenistic kingdoms, an area that will be explored further in this paper. The residents of Galatia also took part in territorial expansion when the opportunity presented itself. Again, these were not simple raids outside of their territory, but full-fledged attempts at expansion. As late as 164-160 B.C., the Galatians pushed east towards Cappadocia after a series of border disputes and even extended themselves southward into parts of Lyconia until 123 B.C.

As residents of northern Phrygia, the Galatians not only provided mercenaries, but also served as a check in the territorial aspirations of certain eastern dynasts. Recognizing the potential threat that they posed, Mithridates V invited sixty Galatian chieftains to a feast in 88 B.C. and succeeded in butchering all but one of them. The sole survivor was Deiotaros, the son of Dumnorix of the Tolistobii. Deiotaros then succeeded in the nearly impossible task of uniting the Celts of Galatia under one leader. In 74 B.C., the Galatian forces drove out Zeumachus, Mithridates’ governor of Galatia, and scattered the troops of Pontus. Deiotaros later made a treaty with the Roman Republic against Mithridates who would be doggedly pursued by the forces of Pompeius Magnus. In a fitting episode of historical irony, Mithridates was later slain by a Galatian, after his own attempts at suicide failed. As a region, Galatia would never attain the celebrated glories of Ptolemaic Egypt, the Seleucid East or any of the other eastern kingdoms, but it would provide these areas with thousands of fighting troops that would spearhead many of the most notable conquests of the Hellenistic world.

THE GALATIAN MERCENARY EXPERIENCE

During the Second Century B.C. it was a common saying that no prince of the eastern kingdoms could do without his corps of Celtic warriors. This sentiment was echoed by eighteenth-century European monarchs who were said to have not been able to do without their Irish brigades. Like the Irish brigades in the armies of Austria, France and Spain, the Galatian mercenaries saw long and distinguished service as shock troops and elite units of the armies of the Hellenistic kingdoms. Their warrior-dominated culture prized martial
skill and praised valor in combat, making them perfect candidates for lengthy service as mercenaries. It is in this capacity that the Galatians received their most consistent mention, and with the exceptions of the Greeks, comprised one of the most far-ranging ethnic groups to permeate Hellenistic history. Indeed, Galatian mercenaries could be found in virtually every army that could pay, even in kingdoms that had previously warred against them. As early as 307 B.C., we find Agathocles including Celts in his army to fight against the Carthaginians in Libya. Pyrrhus of Epirus used Galatian mercenaries in 274 B.C. for a raid into Macedonia, engaging Antigonus Gonatas with a Galatian rearguard of his own. Antigonus’ mercenaries apparently refused to give ground against Pyrrhus and were slain to a man, while Pyrrhus used his same mercenaries to assault Sparta later on, after the infamous episode of the Celts plundering the royal tombs in Aegae, an action for which Pyrrhus fell under much criticism.

The benefits of employing the Galatians as mercenaries were obvious to the Hellenistic dynasts: they freed up the military age population of the area to work on the farms and in production, thus maintaining the economy; they would not have to be paid as much as Greeks or trained the same; and their reputation as hard, fearless fighters spoke for itself. At the end of their service in the field, some of the surviving Galatian mercenaries could look forward to the possibility of being garrisoned or settled in other areas. Galatian mercenaries were possibly given land to settle in Macedonia as reward for military service. In this way, the communities they formed would be able to provide future recruits which the rural population could not. Evidence for this can be found in Agathocles’ desire in 203 B.C. to procure new Galatian mercenaries for the army at Alexandria and to send away the old ones “to the garrisons and settlements.” Thus Celtic habitation of areas in the Hellenistic world was by no means limited to Galatia itself. Even in Egypt Celts could be found not only settling and living as residents, but marrying into the local population. These mixed-blood Celt/Egyptians were known as the Epigonoi by the reign of Ptolemy II. Some of their graves have been found, with painted tombstones in the cemetery of Hadra, south-east of Alexandria. The inscriptions on the gravestones give proof of their ethnicity, describing them as either Keltos or Galates.

Galatian mercenaries saw service in other regions as well. Seleucid armies used the Galatians as mercenaries, as did the Pergamene armies after 179 B.C. Ptolemaic armies, however, used Galatian mercenaries probably more than anyone else. They are recorded as serving in the army of Ptolemy Philadelphos in the latter’s struggle against Magas of Cyrene. Ptolemy III Euergetes used Celtic warriors in 245 B.C. for an invasion of Syria, capturing Antioch and overrunning Mesopotamia, Babylon, Media and much of Persia. In the reign of Ptolemy IV, four thousand Epigonoi accompanied six thousand Celts recruited from Thrace to swell the Ptolemaic army’s ranks in the battle of Raphia, thoroughly routing the troops of Antiochus. Not all Galatian service to the Ptolemies was entirely admirable, though. A reported plot to plunder the Ptolemaic treasure was uncovered and the Galatian
perpetrators were left on a small island in the Nile to die. Rather than wasting away, the Galatians were reported to have committed ritual suicide. Whether in service as mercenaries or residing as settlers, the Galatian tenure in Egypt was colorful, eventful and important to the study of the Celtic peoples within the confines of the Hellenistic World. The last record we have of the Galatians in Egypt dates to the siege of Abydos in 185 B.C.

THE GALATIANS AND THE PURSUIT OF IMAGE

Knowledge of the Celts before the sack of Delphi may have been limited for many Greeks, but after that momentous event and the subsequent diaspora of Celtic peoples throughout the Hellenistic World, a clearer picture was obtained. The Celts became more than neighbors, raiders and mercenaries to the Greeks: they became an image. It was through this image and its manipulation that many Hellenistic princes achieved greater glory and fostered their own reputations. This was an incidental phenomenon, one that bolstered the status of victorious Hellenes, legitimized their actions and championed their rule. Peter Green recognized this fact when he stated: "It followed that one sure badge of ascension in the battle of Hellenistic power seekers was a good, clean, certified victory over these peripatetic bogeymen." In a letter to the Ionian League during the winter of 167 B.C., Eumenes II not only called himself "the common benefactor of the Greeks," but also made a point to mention his struggles against the Galatians, who had resumed hostilities against the Attalids in 168 B.C. Prior to this, Eumenes had celebrated his triumph over the Galatians by establishing the Nikephoria as well as initial work on the Great Altar, both clearly unambiguous statements of Hellenistic propaganda. To crown this achievement, Eumenes also received the title Soter (Savior), a title not lost on anyone.

As valuable as it was to be able to claim victory over the Galatians, it could also be damaging to be accused of being hand-in-glove with them, regardless of how many Hellenistic rulers included Galatians in their armies. Perseus was accused by the Romans in a letter to the Delphic Amphictyony with assisting the Galatians in invading Greece and Delphi, among other things. Clearly, it paid to be on the Greek side of Hellenic/Celtic relations. Those that were usually capitalized on that fact and made a point of letting others know. The standard of boosting one's reputation was set by Antigonus Gonatas, who reputedly routed a large force of Celts in Thrace and became wildly popular as a result. Even Pyrrhus of Epirus considered his victory over Antigonus Gonatas' Celtic mercenaries as adding the most to his already famed reputation. The Galatians indirectly offered

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Hellenistic rulers a chance to solidify their reputations by successfully engaging them in combat, but also offered their political rivals an opportunity for accusing them of "guilt by association," which was potentially as powerful in damaging reputations as victories were in strengthening them. This contribution, as unintended as it was, still earned the Celts a place in the Hellenistic world, not only physically, but psychologically.

The Hellenized Galatian: Adaptation and Assimilation

Lastly, the issue of assimilation of the Celts demands scrutiny. As has been shown, the Celts distinguished themselves in military matters, gaining reputations for themselves and for others, but their actions in the Hellenistic world were not limited to the field of battle. They came essentially as raiders, established a place for themselves in history and legend, and remained as settled residents. In Galatia their culture remained intact for hundreds of years, the Galatians themselves sharing it with their allies and even embracing the culture, religion and mores of others. Plutarch mentions Camma, a Celtic woman who became a priestess of Artemis, while Attis, a Galatian priest of Cybele supported the efforts of Attalus II to check the depredations of his Celtic "countrymen." These were not individuals who continued to act as parasites and predators of the world around them, but actively participated in the politics and religion of the Greeks themselves. They would ultimately gain for themselves a place in the oikumene, becoming partially Hellenized as a result.

A perfect example of this is the inscription left on the walls of the Temple of Seti I, in the small chapel of Horus: "Of the Galatians, we, Thoas, Callistratos, Acannon, Apollonios, came, and a fox caught we here." This was left during the siege of Abydos in 185 B.C. by Galatian mercenaries in the service of Ptolemy V who visited the chapel, found what they took for a fox (most likely an Egyptian jackal) and commemorated their stay with a candid display of graffiti. More important than their presence so far from Gaul is the inscription itself. Here were Galatians who could not only write, but could write in Greek. Their Greek writing is apparently very straightforward and the spelling absolutely correct. This is not an isolated incident, either. Of all the inscriptions left by Galatians, there are none written in a Celtic language. These particular Celts Hellenized themselves so completely as to inscribe everything in Greek and to even take Greek nommes de guerre as well. Thus, the barbaroi had transformed not only part of the East, but themselves as well. They had come much farther along in this than many other non-Greeks who were to
have even more exposure to the Hellenes than the Galatians did. "The People who came out of the Darkness\textsuperscript{770} had been transformed. They stepped out of the shadows of legend and obscurity and entered in to the light of the Hellenistic World.
Notes

1 The "Successors" of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.). The Diadochi were the heirs apparent to the vast holdings acquired through Alexander’s conquests. Their vigorous struggles for hegemony and territorial aggrandizement would continue through their own heirs to become a leitmotif of Hellenistic politics.

2 Besides the few exceptions that betray a grudging respect, virtually all Greek accounts of the Celtic peoples are hostile and condescending. The Celts were portrayed as slavering, uncouth beasts.

3 Peter Green, Alexander to Actium, (Berkeley: 1991) 693.


5 Just. 20.5.


7 Barry Cunliffe, Greeks, Romans and Barbarians (New York: 1988) 36. Items from the Mediterranean were not unknown to the Gauls, who traded vigorously with Greek colonists at Massilia, and apparently developed an affinity for Greek wine, among other things.

8 Pompeius Trogus 24.4.


10 The practice of travelling along with family, camp followers and wagons was apparently common among the so-called “barbarian” peoples of Western Europe. Such a retinue, and the scale of movement clearly denote a migration with eventual settlement in mind. c.f. Caesar Bellum Gallicum I.3,5,24 for commentary on the movement of the Helvetii, and Plutarch Marius 19 for similar practice among the Ambrones.

11 Tarn, op. cit.

12 Ibid., 102.

13 Herodotus Histories 8.36.


15 Just. 24.5.1-7.

16 That is, the intentions of drawing Greece into their own empires through conquest.

17 Rankin, op. cit., 91.

18 Keraunos, "The Thunderbolt," was the nickname of this disowned son of Ptolemy I Soter (Savior).

19 Just. 24.4.

20 Green, op. cit., 133.

21 Diodorus Siculus 22.95.

22 Propertius 2.31.3.

23 The Delphic Oracle.
24 Peter Berresford Ellis, The Celtic Empire (London: 1990) 84. This poculum is reportedly from the factory of Cales.

25 Ibid., 82.

26 Votive sacrifices into bodies of water are confirmed by innumerable archaeological finds in present and former Celtic territories, a well-known example being Lake Neuchatel in Switzerland.

27 Strabo 4.1.

28 Just. 25.1.2-10. Antigonus Gonatus' reputation soared after this battle. Following the victory, he was recognized as the rightful king of Macedonia, winning back the throne that his grandfather, Antigonus Monophthalmus ("The One-Eyed") had coveted for so long.


30 Livy 38.16.12. Most likely, this plan had practical considerations in mind. However, one cannot brusquely dismiss the symbolic value of tripartite divisions that were (and still are) held so dear by the Celts.

31 Just. 26.2.

32 Peter Staehelin, Geschichte der kleinasiatischen Galater (Leipzig: 1907) 47.

33 Rankin, op. cit., 101.

34 Henri Hubert, The Greatness and Decline of the Celts (London: 1934) 47.

35 Livy 38.16, Strabo 12.5.1.

36 Ellis, op. cit., 102.

37 Appian 12.46.

38 Ellis, op. cit., 103.

39 Appian 12.111.


41 Diodorus Siculus 20.64.2.

42 Plutarch Pyrrhus 26.

43 Ibid., 26.2.

44 Ibid., 26.9.

45 Tarn, op. cit., 213.


47 Ibid., 78.

48 Polybius Histories 15.25.17.

49 Ibid., 5.65.

50 A. J. Reinach, Monuments Piots XVIII, 41.

51 Ibid.

52 Polybius Histories 8.53, Livy 37.8, 38.
53 Livy 42.55; 44.13.
54 Pausanias 1.7. Further detail for this incident is provided on page 226 of Die Wanderungen Der Kelten by Leopold Contzen (Leipzig: 1861).
55 Polybius Histories 5.65.10. c.f. G.T. Griffith, op. cit., 118 for the Ptolemaic order of battle at Raphia, including omission and definition of terms.
56 We hear an echo of the celebration of their 'defeat' in Callimachus' Hymn to Delos. Stanley Lombardo, and Diane Rayor, translators, Callimachus: Hymns, Epigrams, Select Fragments (Baltimore: 1988) 201-3.
57 Ellis, op. cit., 113.
58 Green, op. cit., 140.
59 Austin, op. cit., 331.
60 The Nikephoria was a festival established by Eumenes in honor of Attalid victories over the Celts.
61 Also commissioned by Eumenes II for the same reasons as the establishment of the Nikephoria.
62 Green, op. cit., 425.
63 Austin, op. cit., 140.
64 Just. 25.1.2-10.
65 Plutarch Pyrrhus 26.
66 Plutarch Amat. 22.
67 Austin, op. cit., 338.
68 The Greek World.
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