

The inhabitants of Britain and Ireland are often called Celts, despite no historical source referring to them as such. People trace their ancestry back and find comfort and community in a shared cultural heritage. It makes them who they are. However, in more recent years, heated discourse has evolved over this assumption, and the question begs to be asked: Is this endowment of Celticity true? Can we draw a direct line between the historical Celts and today's Celtic Nations? And if not, should we take away the Celtic label in which so many people find their identity? Such discourse has been used for political purposes, both to assist the goals of the so-called 'Celtic nations' and to dismantle them. In this paper, I aim to address both sides of the argument, evaluate the evidence, and hopefully find some clarity on what has been and will continue to be a very contentious and fascinating conversation.

Firstly, we must determine what the classical authors meant when they referred to the ancient Celts. Since, as Malcom Chapman argues, the Celts were not a united people, but disparate tribes with different languages and customs, the Greek and Roman classical writers could have used the label more as a derogatory term for those who were different than them and less so as an ethnicity.¹ He claims that it does not, 'provide such accurate ethnological information as is commonly supposed.'² Classical authors had their own agendas and prejudices; they tended to paint anyone who was not like them as uncivilized and barbaric. Is it such a stretch to believe the term 'Celt' was used as a swath of color to paint anyone outside the border of classical civilization in a homogenous group of barbarianisms regardless of ethnicity? However, this argument, while good for stepping back and evaluating the bias inherent in all historical writing, is unconvincing considering Caesar, amongst others, differentiated the Celts from other invaders or peoples. Caesar in his *De Bello Gallico* wrote,

Since I have reached this point, it would seem to be not out of place to relate the customs of the Gauls and Germans and how these peoples differ between themselves.³

Hecataeus mentions Massalia as being a Ligurian city next to Celtica; Herodotus mentions the Cynetes as being distinct from the Celts even though they live near one another. While there is a thread of prejudice which runs through historical sources, the classical authors seem to differentiate between people whether ethnically or geographically. When these authors use the term Celt, we can be confident that they are referring to a specific people—not the Ligurians, not the Scythians, not the Cynetes—but the Celtic people.

Beyond that, the question of whether the Belgae were a Celtic tribe is pertinent because they were said to have crossed the channel and settled along the coast of Britain; Belgic coinage was discovered on the island with the image of the Belgic ruler, Diviciacus who Caesar said controlled portions of Gaul and of Britain. However, the geographical location of the Celts is

¹ Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1992) pp. 24-40.

² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³ Julius Caesar, 'De Bello Gallico 6.11-20', (trans.) Anne Lea, in *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales*, ed. By John T. Koch (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2018) p. 20.

disputed and even amongst the classical authors, it differs greatly. Caesar distinguishes the Belgae from the Celtae and the Aquitani, all of whom occupied different sections of Gaul, and he emphasizes how they were linguistically and culturally distinct from one another. It could be that the Belgae were a Germanic tribe who moved across the Rhine as the mounting wave of Germans slowly pushed southwards. Yet Strabo claims the Belgae lived in the area between the Rhine and the Loire. In describing the Gallic tribes, he says the Belgae are ‘the best...(for) they alone withstood the incursion of the Germani.’⁴ Another type of distinction, presented by Diodorus Siculus, is that the people living on the eastern side of the Pyrenees are Celts, but those up north by the ocean are Galatae. He proceeds to say that to the Romans, the Celts and the Galatae are all one people.⁵ Ian Stewart in his *The Celts: A Modern History*, remarks that while Camden thought the Briton/Welsh descended from the Cimbri who were separate from the Germans, many disagreed and thought they were all just German tribes.⁶ This shows how flexible the boundary was between Germania and Gaul as many Germanic tribes crossed over the Rhine and settled in the north. According to Barry Cunliffe, the Southern Belgic territory belongs to the La Tene Culture zone and isn’t easily distinguishable from the nearby Celts. His theory is that the territory between the Seine and the Rhine was more of a gradient where language, trade, and culture mixed and was not the strict boundary Caesar claimed. With a word of warning on generalization, he says it could be considered a ‘Celtic territory undergoing progressive Germanization.’⁷ If the Belgae were Celtic as Strabo seemed to think then that would provide a direct line to follow as the Ancient Celts settled in Britain. Patrick Sims-Williams points out that the tribal names—*Parisii* and *Atrebates*—were used both on the continent and the islands.⁸ He goes on to theorize that the distinction between Celtica and the British Isles was more a geographical than ethnological distinction.

Another point to make is the documented similarities between the coastal tribes of Britain and the Gauls. In battle, they both rode on chariots, launching spears at their enemies, before jumping into the melee and fighting on foot. In their closely packed homes, Caesar mentions the Britons as being alike to the Gauls, particularly in the land of Cantium.⁹

Besides having such similarities, the Celtic Druids travelled to Britain for learning as it was thought to be where druidism originated. It seems unlikely that the center of knowledge for the elite class would be situated in Britain if there were not strong cultural ties between that country and Gaul. This connection also leads one to believe there was a common tongue in which the Gauls and the Britons could communicate. This brings us firmly into the realm of linguistics.

⁴ John T Koch, (ed.) *The Celtic Heroic Age*.

⁵ Ibid., Diodorus Siculus, trans. Philip Freeman, p. 14.

⁶ Ian Stewart, *The Celts: A Modern History* (Princeton University Press, 2025), p.55.

⁷ Barry Cunliffe, ‘The Celts: A Very Short Introduction’ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 75-77 (kindle).

⁸ Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘Celtomania and Celtoscepticism’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* (Aberystwyth: Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies Publications, 1998), p. 26.

⁹ Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, trans. Philip Freeman, p. 24.

Ian Stewart says, ‘proving linguistic kinship was tantamount to proving ethnic kinship and common descent.’¹⁰ Culture, characteristics, and belief systems are all carried through language and formed alongside it. One of the major hurdles of connecting the Celtic languages was the very limited source material in their ancient counterparts and Gaulish, long extinct, exists now only in fragments and place names. As a people, the ancient Celts jealously guarded their wisdom, especially among the druidic class, and refused to write their knowledge down as it would impede their ability to memorize it and know it by heart. This is unfortunate for present-day students of the Celts and leaves more room for doubt and differing arguments. However, in Edward Lhuyd’s 1707 renowned ‘*Archaeologia Britannica*,’ the Goidelic languages were linked to the Brittonic, cementing them as coming from the same family with a scientific methodology based upon observable changes in sound. This created the linguistic labels known as P-Celtic and Q-Celtic as Lhuyd trace the analogous sounds between Welsh and Gaelic. Welsh had been tied to Gaulish but now Gaelic was being brought in as a descendant too. Knitting together the Celtic languages was only the first step and they were subsequently accepted into the Indo-European family, where Stewart says,

The Celts established their status as a distinct race and one of the oldest Indo-European populations, with discernable characteristics that helped to distinguish them from the rest of the family.¹¹

While one can argue that the disparate languages underneath the umbrella of ‘Celtic’ which even in ancient history would have been unintelligible to each other, do not link the Nations together in any meaningful or racial way, it is undeniable that the languages *are* linked. Through the movement of the Gaulish language, modern languages were birthed in the British Isles. Yet if you move further back, all the Indo-European Languages are connected. On this more ancient level, Brittonic is tied to Latin and to Germanic and to many others, not just Goidelic.

Lastly, I would like to speak briefly about Pan-Celticism. Ian Stewart splits the term into two parts, a lower-case pan-celticism and an upper-case Pan-Celticism. Where the latter is a political movement, the former is an acknowledgement of shared kinship.¹² With this sentiment on the rise in the 19th century, bridges between Wales and Brittany were constructed in hopes of bringing together a sort of Celtic brotherhood, however the split between their Protestant-Catholic nations was prominent and marked a religious division deeper than the ethnic one. Thomas Price, one of the first pan-celts, while recognizing the same Celtic ancestor for the Welsh and the Bretons, still saw them as two very different nations.¹³ Invented traditions impinged on the more authentic ancestral ties of language and culture as a fervor for Celticism took advantage of the gullible. When the Land Question rose to the forefront, Pan-Celticism became an ideological base for the argument of who the land belonged to. When racist

¹⁰ Ian Stewart, *The Celts*, p. 190.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 215.

¹² Ibid., p. 292

¹³ Ibid., p. 296.

statements about the inferiority and laziness of the Celts were made, it is understandable why Celtic leagues fought hard to adopt a more positive image of the Celts. By uniting their shared missions under the rallying cry of Celtic ancestry, the nation's strengthened their case for land reform. However, there were mixed emotions amongst the inheritors of this Celticity, and many did not want to be chained into an identity based upon a common ancestry from thousands of years ago.

Exemplified in the long, historic battle of Celtic sentimentality, the range of opinions is vast, passionate, and controversial. The feelings towards Pan-Celticism are anything but homogenous. Even during ancient times, the Celts functioned as tribes rather than a unified state and it is difficult to trace a direct lineage of an ancient people into the modern era. Yet, it is not an illogical train of thought as many modern people claim to be descendants of their ancient counterparts.¹⁴ A heritage of language, culture, and history tie the Goidelic and the Brittonic together. The inhabitants of Britain and Ireland developed much like their spoken tongues did; through the outgrowth from one shared branch into unique and interesting peoples with similarities and dissimilarities alike. Such claims as the lack of ancient Celtic people are baseless considering the evidence of classical sources and linguistic inscriptions. We have touched on the similarities of the Gauls and the Britons from Caesar, the education of the Druidic class in Britain, the lingua franca necessary for such an exchange of knowledge to exist, and the potential of the Belgae being a Celtic tribe while they were most certainly considered geographical Gauls and shared, at least in the southern Belgic territory, an archaeological similarity to the neighboring Celtae. The term Celtic should be understood in each of its contexts but especially regarding linguistics; it has a strong base in its usage. Many yearn to share in the traditions of those early people, and it has fueled the good as well as the bad aspects of Pan-Celticism, yet it is undeniable that while early Celtic warriors are not transposed into modern times, their historical and cultural shadow looms large.

¹⁴ Patrick Sims-Williams, *Celtomania and Celtoscepticism*, p. 27.

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