

The Ancient Celtic Languages in Context

- ▶ Brittonic, spoken predominantly in Britain
- ▶ Goidelic, spoken predominantly in Ireland
- ▶ Gaulish, spoken predominantly in Gaul
- ▶ Celtiberian, spoken predominantly in Iberia
- ▶ Lepontic, spoken predominantly in northern Italy and southern Switzerland
- ▶ Galatian, spoken predominantly in Anatolia (following historical migration from Gaul)

The languages shown above are the ones traditionally included in the Celtic family during the period covered by this module. Lepontic is the earliest attested from about the sixth century BCE and Goidelic the latest attested from more or less a millennium later. Despite all being identifiable as Celtic languages, there is some disagreement as to their relationship to each other. Some academics favour a subdivision into 'P-Celtic' and 'Q-Celtic' (labels which were chosen because many words containing a P or B sound in the one group, have an equivalent word with a Q or C/K sound in the other). This places, in particular, Gaulish and Brittonic in a close relationship with each other, although Lepontic and Galatian would also fall within this group, with Goidelic and Celtiberian in the Q-Celtic category. Others argue for a split between 'Insular' (Brittonic and Goidelic) and 'Continental' (all the others).

Many linguists believe that the Q-Celtic languages, particularly the Goidelic ones, show more archaic features than the rest. It should be noted, though, that whereas some think that Gaulish and Brittonic were to all intents and purposes one language, often labelled Gallo-Brittonic, the same is not true of Celtiberian and Goidelic. Rather, the suggestion is that an innovative linguistic change spread through Gaul and Britain, leaving Celtiberian and Goidelic separated from each other on either side of it. The archaic nature of Lepontic, despite its P-Celtic classification, strengthens the case for an innovative Gallo-Brittonic core which isolated the languages surrounding it.

The case for an Insular versus Continental split is based on the number of core features of the surviving Celtic languages, such as initial consonant mutations, VSO word order and conjugated prepositions, for which little or no evidence can be found in the Continental corpus (Fife pp 9-14). It is worth remembering, though, that the differences between the Continental and Insular languages are at least as much chronological as geographical, i.e. they are from different periods as well as different locations.

The 'traditional' Celtic family above may already have a new member following research by John. T. Koch (see <http://www.wales.ac.uk/Resources/Documents/Research/ODonnell.pdf>) which suggests that the Tartessian language of south-west Spain and southern Portugal should be classified as Celtic. This would push back the earliest attested date of a Celtic language by up to two centuries, and would also

neatly coincide with the earliest historical locations of the Celts. He notes that *“Probably or possibly Celtic forms are of sufficient density to support the conclusion that Tartessian is simply a Celtic language, the oldest attested one.”* (CFTW 185)

Evidence of Gaulish: The Coligny Calendar



The most important examples of Gaulish are:

The Coligny Calendar: (image above) - a lunar calendar on engraved bronze plates dated to the late second century CE (Eská & Evans, p. 37). It was discovered in November 1897. It covers a five year period and importantly includes the names of the different months. When it was found it was literally in pieces and has since been reassembled as fully as possible.

According to Peter Berresford Ellis “*Against the months are subscribed either the letters MAT or ANM. One does not need to be an expert linguist to recognise these as the equivalent of maith (Irish) or mad (Welsh) meaning ‘good’, and of an maith (Irish) or anfad (Welsh) meaning ‘not good’..*” (PBE L2078) Not everyone would agree with this interpretation however.

The Chamalières tablet: discovered in 1971 at Chamalières near Clermont-Ferrand. This is a lead tablet dated to the mid first century CE – close in date, coincidentally, to the time of the Roman conquest of Britain, and written in Roman cursive script. It contains 336 characters, most of which are taken up with personal names. The most interesting part is the invocation to the god *Maponos* and the oath that the named persons must swear - “*the small shall become great, the crooked become straight, and, though blind, I shall see*” (Translation from Philip Freeman, *War, Women and Druids*, p.88)

The Larzac tablet: discovered in 1983 at Larzac near Aveyron, which is also a lead tablet, dated to the late first century CE. It is about three times as long as the Chamalières tablet, and again contains an invocation followed by lots of personal names. The names on the Larzac tablet, unlike Chamalières, are of women. The words *Geneta imi daga uimpi* (I am a girl who is good and beautiful) suggest that these were confident women. In terms of relationships between ancient and modern Celtic languages, it is difficult for anyone with an understanding of modern Welsh to not see the link between the modern Welsh word ‘*geneth*’ (girl) and the Gaulish *geneta*.

Most evidence of Gaulish is P-Celtic, although there are a small number of Q-Celtic examples such as *Equos* (‘Horse Month’) from the Coligny calendar. Compare this to *Epona* (the goddess of horses),

with the expected 'p' instead of 'qu'. Q-Celtic examples in Gaulish are thought to be archaisms.

Evidence of Celtiberian: The Botorrita Tablet (I)



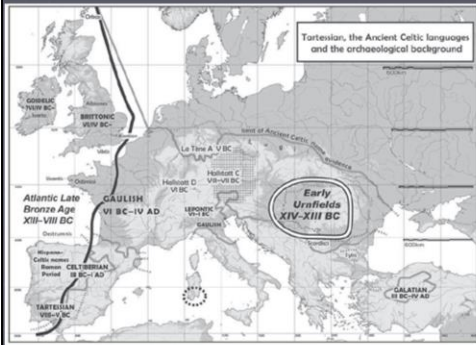
There are four Botorrita tablets, made of bronze and dated to the first century BCE. Tablet II is in Latin, but tablets I, III and IV are in Celtiberian. Tablet I, shown above, has 11 lines on Side A and 9 on Side B. The Celtiberian script is very difficult to decipher and requires the attention of a specialist. However, when rendered into Roman script, the content looks something like this:

- A.1. tirikantam berkunetakam tokoitoskue sarnikio kue sua kombalkez nelitom
- A.2. nekue [u]jertaunei litom nekue taunei litom nekue masnai tizaunei litom soz auku
- A.3. arestaio tamai uta oskues stena uerzoniti silabur sleitom konskilitom kabizeti
- A.4. kantom sankilistara otanaum tokoitei eni: uta oskuez boustomue koruinomue
- A.5. makasiamue ailamue ambitiseti kamanom usabituz ozas sues sailo kusta bizetuz iom
- A.6. asekatu ambitinkounei stena es uertai entara tiris matus tinbituz neito tirikantam
- A.7. eni onsatzu iomui listas titas zizonti somui iom arznas bionti iom kustaikos
- A.8. arznas kuati ias ozias uertatosue temeiu robiseti saum tekametas tatzu somei
- A.9. enitouzei iste ankios iste esankios uze areitena sarnikiei akainakubos
- A.10. nebintor tokoitei ios ur antiomue auzeti aratimue tekametas tatzu iom tokoitoskue
- A.11. sarnikiokue aiuizas kombalkores aleites iste ikues ruzimuz abulu ubokum
- B.1. lubos kounesikum melnunos bintis letontu litokum
- B.2. abulos bintis melmu barauzanko lesunos bintis
- B.3. letontu ubokum turo bintis lubinaz aiu berkantikum
- B.4. abulos bintis tirtu aiankum abulos bintis abulu louzokum
- B.5. uzeisunos bintis akainaz letontu uikanokum suostuno/s
- B.6. bintis tirtanos statulikum lesunos bintis nouantutaz
- B.7. letontu aiankum melmunos bintis useizu aiankum tauro [bin]/tis
- B.8. abulu aiankum tauro bintis letontu letikum abulos bintis
- B.9. [Jukontaz letontu esokum abulos bintis

Side A is most frequently interpreted by experts as being a law, either against desecrating sacred places,

or else a more general law for a local community. (Eska & Evans, 31)

The case for Tartessian



"Having studied the inscriptions for about a year now, I think that the Tartessian language should be added to this list. It is therefore the first attested of the Celtic Languages".

John T. Koch, O'Donnell Lecture, 2008.

The suggestion that the Tartessian language of the south-western Iberian peninsula should be classified as a Celtic language (and the oldest attested one at that) has been championed in the linguistic sphere by John T. Koch and in the archaeological one by Barry Cunliffe. Together this represents the 'Celtic from the West' hypothesis, which argues that the Celtic languages emerged from Indo-European in the Atlantic Zone in the Late Bronze Age, as opposed to a central European Hallstatt/La Tène zone in the Iron Age. The Celtic from the West series of books has now run to three volumes of over 1100 pages with contributions by linguists, archaeologists, geneticists and others, and represents a paradigm shift in our understanding of Celtic origins. That said, it is not completely incompatible with the previous paradigm. It is the origin and direction of flow that is being re-evaluated, not the entire body of evidence

Here we see the reasoning applied to the attested name *Argantonios*. *"This name, or title, is clearly Celtic, consisting of the word for silver and money arganto- (attested in all the Celtic languages) then the divine or mythological suffix found in Celtic divine names like Maonos and Epona, and then the agent suffix -ios. So 'agent of divine silver' which is closely comparable to the title ARGANTODANNOS found on Gaulish silver coinage."* (CFTW 189). And with regard to place-names: *"When we come down to records of the Roman Period, there are Celtic names from the south-west of the Peninsula including names in Celtic -briga meaning 'hillfort', also sego- 'strong', and eburo- 'yew tree'.* (CFTW 189)

There are always questions to be answered with any hypothesis however, and so the following, by G.R. Isaac in the first Celtic from the West book, is worth remembering: *"....despite the western location of Celtic in historical time, it shares no significant innovative features with the other prominent languages of the Indo-European west, Italic and Germanic."* (CFTW 157). Isaac's essential point is that Celtic shares grammatical features with Greek, Indo-Iranian, Baltic and Slavic which place its linguistic origins in eastern Europe in the fourth to third millennium BCE (160). The following summarises his view succinctly: *"It makes no sense to think of Celtic becoming what it is on the late Neolithic and*

early Bronze Age Atlantic seaboard while sharing striking innovations with Indo-Iranian, Baltic, Slavic, Greek, Tocharian and Albanian.” (165) Koch’s response is to suggest that Celtic may well have originated in eastern Europe but that its speakers *sailed* west across the Mediterranean and established themselves there (192).

Celtic Personal Names

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------|
| ▶ Argantonios | ▶ Ambicatus |
| ▶ Boudicca | ▶ Bellovesus |
| ▶ Epona | ▶ Segovesus |
| ▶ Maponos | ▶ Viridomarus |
| ▶ Lugus | ▶ Dumnorix |
| ▶ Deiotaros | ▶ Eporedorix |
| ▶ Cunobelinus | ▶ Cingetorix |
| ▶ Cassivellaunus | ▶ Vercingetorix |

We have already seen an interpretation of *Argantonios*' name as meaning 'Agent of Divine Silver'.

Boudicca is equivalent to the female name *Victoria*. Indeed, her modern Welsh name is *Buddug*, with *buddugoliaeth* being the Welsh word for 'victory'. *Epona*, as mentioned previously, is the goddess of horses. This is a P-Celtic word, as also is *Maponos* (the Divine Son). Their links with the modern Welsh words *ebol* (foal) and *map* or *mab* (son) can still be seen. *Lugus* was a deity found across the Celtic world. His name can be found in place-names from Scotland to Silesia and inscriptions from Galicia to Switzerland. *Lugdunum* (Lyon) and *Luguvalium* (Carlisle) are examples of place-names, while the lead tablet of Chamalières contains *Lugus*' name in writing. He is particularly common in inscriptions found in Iberia. The medieval literature of Ireland and Wales show the name in the cognates of *Lugh Lámfhada* and *Lleu Llaw Gyffes* respectively.

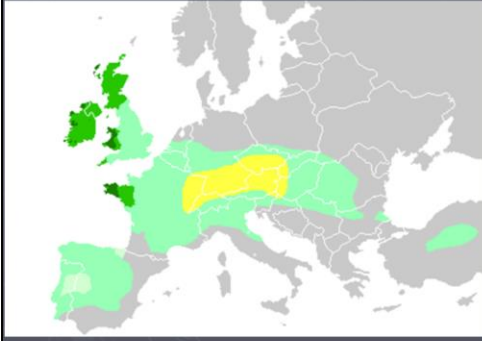
Deiotaros of Galatia's name means 'The Divine Bull'. The modern Welsh and Irish words for 'god' and 'bull', namely *duw* and *tarw* and *dia* and *tarbh* can be made out in the name. The name of Belenus (the 'Sun God' or 'Shining God') can be seen in the names of both *Cunobelinus* ('The Hound of Belenus' - with the modern Welsh word *cŵn* 'dogs' or Irish *cú* 'hound' clearly visible in the first element) and *Cassivellaunus* ('Lover of Belenus' where the 'b' of Belenus has 'mutated' to a 'v'). *Cunobelinus* is Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and *Cassivellaunus* is the first native of Britain known to history. As they were both Britons, their names have passed into Welsh, as *Cynfelin* and *Caswallawn* respectively. *Ambicatus* ('he who gives battle all round') was the uncle of both *Bellovesus* (he who can kill) and *Segovesus* (he who can conquer) who sent the two of them to look for new lands from their overcrowded homeland north of the Alps. The modern Welsh word for battle - '*cad*' - can be seen in *Ambicatus*' name. *Viridomarus* means 'Great Man' from *viro* (man) and *marus* (great). Several examples of this name are recorded. The modern Welsh word for 'great' is *mawr* and in Irish is *mór*. *Viro* is cognate with the Old English '*were*' as in 'werewolf' (i.e. man-wolf).

The names ending in *rix* all refer to kings (cf. Latin *rex*) *Dumnorix* was 'King of the World' with *Eporedorix* the 'King of Horsemen' (the same *epo* as in *Epona*). *Cingetorix* (King of Heroes) was one

of four kings of Kent who met Caesar, and *Vercingetorix* (Great King of Heroes) was the leader of the Gauls in their fight against him. The similarity of these two names also indicates the similarity of language on both sides of the Channel.

Translations of the above names and others can be found in PBE *A Brief History of the Celts* (1944-980)

Celtic Place Names



- ▶ Arganto-
- ▶ Brigā-
- ▶ Dūno-
- ▶ Duro-
- ▶ Mag-
- ▶ Sego-
- ▶ Mediolanum
- ▶ Noviodunum

According to John Collis, “*the distribution of place names extends the area of Celtic languages much further, throughout Britain and Ireland, northern Gaul, southern Germany and much of central Europe*”. (JC 131) Given that Collis is a ‘Celtosceptic’ this should be taken as confirmation that there is little doubt as to the ‘Celticity’ of these place-names.

Arganto- means ‘silver’ or ‘shining’ and, as we have seen, is attested in all the Celtic languages. In terms of its use in place-names it can be found in the names of rivers and lakes across Gaul and Iberia, usually spelt ‘*argent-*’ today.

Brigā- ‘high’ or ‘hill’ is a particularly common place-name element in Iberia but there are numerous examples in Gaul and it is found, in decreasing proportions, as far east as Romania (not to mention in the musical *Brigadoon*). The related element *brigant-* often used as an ethnic or tribal label can be seen in the name of the *Brigantes* of northern Britain and their territory *Brigantia*.

Dūno- ‘fort’ or ‘enclosure’ examples can be found from Iberia and Ireland in the west as far as Romania in the east. They are particularly well-represented in Gaul and Britain. This place name element can be seen in the combination *Noviodunum* (new fort) from Gaul to Dacia (Romania)

Duro- ‘walled fort’ is found in a wide, but less extensive area than the above elements. It is most common in southern Britain, eastern Gaul and around the Alps.

Mag- ‘field’ or ‘plain’ is distributed across a similar area to *duro*, with no examples in Iberia or eastern Europe. However there are nine instances of *Mediolanum* (the middle plain) extending from Shropshire in Britain to Milan in northern Italy.

Parsons (CFTW176) notes that “*Such names, together with many other elements, appear in identical form in diffuse distributions encompassing huge distances. The closeness of correspondence is remarkable.*” Indeed, he suggests that this phenomenon may be a bit too remarkable, i.e. having used a name once, that usage may then have been copied in other areas by Roman administrators as per Rivet’s ‘*Roman places with Celtic names*’ (Falileyev, Introduction p.1).

The image above originally comes from: *Atlas of the Celtic World*, by John Haywood; London Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001, pp.30-37 and shows an approximation of the distribution of Celtic place-names in Europe and Anatolia. The darker the colour the more recent the existence of a Celtic language. The yellow section in the middle is meant to represent the Hallstatt 'homeland' but given the current debate about this very issue, it would be more realistic to view that area as being light green like the area surrounding it.

The Modern Celtic Languages

Irish	Scottish Gaelic	Welsh
Ár n-Athair atá ar neamh, Go naofar d'ainim, Go dtagfadh do ríocht, Go ndéantar do thoil ar an talamh mar a dhéantar ar neamh Ár n-arán laethúil tabhair dúinn inniu, agus maith dúinn ár bhfiacha mar a mhaithimidne dár bhféichiúna féin;	Ar n-Athair a tha air nèamh, Gu naomhaichear d'ainm. Thigeadh do rìoghachd. Dèanar do thoil air an talamh,mar a nithear air nèamh Tabhair dhuinn an-diugh ar n-aran làitheil, agus maith dhuinn ar fiachan, amhail a mhaitheas sinne dar luchd- fiach;	Ein Tad yn y nefoedd, sancteiddier dy enw; deled dy deyrnas; gwneler dy ewyllys, ar y ddaear fel yn y nef. Dyro inni heddiw ein bara beunyddiol, a maddau inni ein troseddau, fel yr ym ni wedi maddau i'r rhai a droseddodd yn ein herbyn;

The slide above contains an example of the same content written in three of the modern Celtic languages. The piece in question is part of The Lord's Prayer. A cursory glance at these three languages instantly shows that the first two have much more in common with each other than they do with the third. Irish and Scottish Gaelic are Goidelic (Q-Celtic) languages whereas Welsh is Brittonic (P-Celtic).

Below is the same piece from the Lord's Prayer in Cornish (another Brittonic language), although this dates from the 18th century and so is an older version than the ones in the slide:

*Agan Taz leb ez en nêv,
benigas beth de hanno,
gurra de gulasketh deaz,
de voth beth gwrêz en' oar pokar en nêv.
Ro dony hiithow agan pyb dyth bara;
Ha gava do ny agan cabmow,
pokara ny gava an gy leb es cam ma war bidn ny:*

The orthographic tradition of this version is also different, but we can tell from *Taz/Tad, nêv/nef(oedd), hanno/enw, ny/ni, de/dy, hiithow/heddiw, bara/bara* etc that we are looking at related languages. The Goidelic languages, though, are closer to each other than are the Brittonic ones.

It is worth mentioning here that although the P/Q distinction is a handy label to refer to these two branches of the Celtic tree, it is far from the only difference between them, and may not even be the most significant. Other differences between them include the positioning of stress. In the Goidelic languages, stress is usually placed on the first syllable of a word and so remains in the same place even if, for instance, a plural suffix is added, whereas the Brittonic languages favour stress on the penultimate syllable and so stress will move to a new syllable if a word is lengthened (Fife, 8). Also, the Goidelic languages still maintain a case system, which has long since been lost in the Brittonic ones (Russell, *An Introduction to the Celtic Languages*, p.14). All the modern Celtic languages share a number of grammatical features, such as VSO word order, initial mutations and conjugated

prepositions, but the two branches do not sound very much like each other when spoken. As noted by Patrick Sims-Williams “*The two are very distinct and may have been mutually unintelligible for as long as two millennia.*” from ‘The Celtic Languages’ in *The Indo-European Languages* (Routledge, 2nd edition 2017) p.352.

The Modern Celtic Languages In Context

- ▶ Solid evidence to support Brittonic and Goidelic (and the Continental languages) sharing a common origin, however:
- ▶ Both groups have been separate since their first ever mention in the historical record
- ▶ Shared origin often used anachronistically, where this is not the case with other groups
- ▶ At one level further back on the family tree, both groups share a common origin with groups stretching from Iceland to India

The similarities between the different Celtic languages shown on the previous slides will hopefully give some idea of the basis on which Lhuyd and others proposed a relationship and continuity between the languages of ancient Gaul and those languages called ‘Celtic’ today. Of these, only the daughter languages of Brittonic and Goidelic still survive, in the form of Welsh, Breton and Cornish on the one hand, and Irish, Manx and Scottish Gaelic on the other, with Cornish and Manx having to be revived in the twentieth century.

At the same time, examples of the modern Celtic languages may also explain why no-one in the medieval era had linked the Brittonic languages to the Goidelic ones. They are quite distinct, and although the case for their sharing a common ancestor cannot seriously be questioned, nor their links with Gaulish and other Continental Celtic languages, they should nevertheless be put into context, as many of the controversies surrounding the Celts today are based, not upon their linguistic origins, but on excessive, superfluous or anachronistic use of the term ‘Celt’ or ‘Celtic’.

As the name for a discrete branch of the Indo-European family of languages, and the features that these languages share, the Celtic label is firmly established and as good as any other, and given that *“the scientific reality of the Celtic family of languages has never been seriously in doubt since Lhuyd first propounded his discovery in 1707”* (CFTW 7) then its use in this context should be (and usually is) unchallenged.

However, its use in other circumstances is often superfluous. That ‘Welsh is a Celtic language’ can be considered a statement of fact, but before it is a Celtic language it is a Brittonic language, and at one stage beyond being a Celtic language it is an Indo-European language, with links to other Indo-European languages from Iceland to India. Each one of these levels should be considered in their appropriate context.

It is outside of the linguistic sphere, however, where the Celtic label is at its most controversial, particularly in archaeology, and it is to the archaeological Celts that we now turn.