

Essay 2

Few questions in ancient history have generated as much scholarly controversy as the problem of Celtic origins. Who were the ‘Celts’? Where did they come from? How did a cultural and linguistic group come to extend, at the height of its influence, from the Iberian Peninsula and the isles in the west to Galatia in Asia Minor in the east? These questions have occupied historians, archaeologists, and linguists for over centuries, and the answers remain contested. This essay examines the probable originations and early locations of the ancient Celts by drawing on archaeology, linguistics as well as classical Greek and Roman literary sources. The perspectives of modern scholars will also be included.

The picture that emerges is one of complexity, that the Celts were not a single, monolithic ethnicity but rather were connected through cultural and linguistic patterns that spread, transformed, and were perceived uniquely by different observers across the ancient world. When the term Celtic or Celts is used, it is understood as an umbrella term for many varied nations, likely connected through trade and again, subtly shared cultural traditions. It can’t be overstated, they were not homogeneous and many nations were easily sworn enemies. These were ultimately many varied people that were sometimes called Celts, but also Galli, Galatai, Keltoi, Kelts or Celt-Iberians suggesting those of mixed descent.

The Celtic peoples enter the written record through the eyes of Greek geographers and historians writing in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. The earliest mention of a people identifiable as Celtic is attributed to Hecataeus of Miletus, who wrote around 500 BCE. Hecataeus referred to *Massalia*, modern Marseille as a Greek city near *Keltiké*, the land of the *Keltoi*.¹ This brief notice is significant as it locates a Celtic presence immediately behind the Greek colonial fringe of the western Mediterranean, in what is today southern France and possibly northern Iberia. Massalia, founded by Phocaean Greeks around 600 BCE, served as a point of contact and commercial exchange between the Mediterranean world and the peoples of the continental interior.

¹Hecataeus of Miletus, cited in John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, 5 vols (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), I, p. 3.

Herodotus, writing around 450 BCE in his *Histories*, provides a more geographically ambitious account. He places them at the very source of the Danube, asserting that the river rises in the land of the *Keltoi* near the city of Pyrene, and that they dwell beyond the Pillars of Heracles.² The identification of 'Pyrene' remains debated as it may refer to the Pyrenees mountains or to a city of that name but Herodotus's passage is incredible for two reasons. First, it places the Celts simultaneously in the far west, near the Atlantic, and at the headwaters of the Danube, which flows eastward across continental Europe. Second, Herodotus's geography, however imprecise by modern standards, implies an awareness that Celtic-speaking or Celtic-identified groups occupied large tracts of temperate Europe north and west of the Mediterranean fringe.

Strabo, writing in the late first century BCE and early first century CE, describes the Celts of Gaul in moderate detail, noting their division into distinct tribal groupings and their geographical position between the Rhine, the Pyrenees, the Atlantic coast, and the Mediterranean.³ Strabo also records that there were peoples further to the north and east in the regions between the Rhine and the Danube who were often confused with or related to the Celts.⁴ His description broadly corresponds to the distribution of La Tène material culture in the archaeological record, suggesting that the Greek and Roman understanding of 'Celtic' territory was geographically sound, if not always precise.

Of all the classical sources on the Celts, Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, written in the 50's BCE as a record of his campaigns in Gaul, provides the most detailed and operationally precise geographical account. Caesar opens his narrative with the famous tripartite division of Gaul, the Belgae in the north, the Aquitani in the southwest, and the people who called themselves *Celtae* in the center, a group corresponding roughly to the modern regions of Burgundy, the Loire valley, and the Auvergne.⁵ Caesar's identification of 'Celtae' as a self-designating ethnonym is

²Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. by Aubrey de Sélincourt, rev. edn (London: Penguin, 2003), II.33, p. 140.

³Strabo, *Geography*, trans. by Horace Leonard Jones, 8 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), IV.1.1, p. 167.

⁴Strabo, *Geography*, VII.1.2, p. 149.

⁵Caesar, Julius, *The Gallic War*, trans. by Carolyn Hammond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), I.1, p. 3.

historically significant because it suggests that at least some Gaulish peoples in the first century BCE still used the term *Celt* as an internal ethnic marker, not merely a label imposed by outsiders.

Caesar also offers one of the most detailed accounts of the Druidic class, which he treats as central to Gaulish, and by extension British, society. Crucially, he states that the Druids originated in Britain and that the tradition of Druidic learning was still practised there more fully than in Gaul.⁶ Caesar adds that those who wished to study Druidism went to Britain for their training.⁷ This is a remarkable passage for the question of Celtic origins, it implies a close cultural and institutional connection between Britain and Gaul, and hints that Britain may have been an older or more conserving center of broader Celtic religious practices. Whether this represents an accurate oral tradition about the geographical origins of Druidism or simply reflects Caesar's observations and informants' beliefs is impossible to say, but it also may suggest that ancient Celts themselves had a sense of their own geographical origins on an individual tribal level.

Tacitus added another British dimension to the question of origins. In the *Agricola*, he observes that the peoples of southern Britain bear a resemblance to the Gauls in language, religion, and temperament and speculates that they may have crossed to Britain from Gaul at some earlier period.⁸ Plutarch's life of Camillus records the Gaulish sack of Rome around 390 BCE in terms that emphasise the terrifying scale and speed of Celtic migration, portraying the Gauls as a people almost elemental in their ferocity.⁹ While these accounts are often more literary and rhetorical than strictly historical, they collectively contributed to an ancient understanding of the Celts as a people characterised by movement, expansion, and penetration into the heart of the ancient Mediterranean world. What emerges here from these accounts of the close cultural relationship between Britain and Gaul is a sense that there wasn't one simple and straightforward movement of people to one place or the

⁶Caesar, *Gallic War*, VI.13, p. 131.

⁷Caesar, *Gallic War*, VI.14, p. 132.

⁸Tacitus, *Agricola*, trans. by Harold Mattingly, rev. by S. A. Handford (London: Penguin, 1970), XI, p. 61.

⁹Plutarch, *Life of Camillus*, in *Parallel Lives*, trans. by Bernadotte Perrin, 11 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), XV.1–3, pp. 133–135.

other. There was a flow of movement, including people, ideas and cultural traditions that likely went back and forth for many hundreds or even thousands of years.

Diodorus Siculus, a contemporary of Caesar writing in the 40's and 30's BCE, provides a complementary account drawn partly from earlier sources, especially Poseidonius. Diodorus describes the physical appearance of the Gauls, tall, fair-haired, and given to wearing striped cloaks, and their social customs, including feasting, headhunting, and the use of chariots in warfare.¹⁰ He distinguishes between the *Galatai* of the continental interior and the *Keltoi* closer to the Ocean, suggesting that different Greek writers used different names for overlapping or adjacent peoples.¹¹ Posidonius himself, whose writings survive only in fragments quoted by Athenaeus and others, had travelled in Gaul and described Celtic customs with evident cultural and ethnic curiosity, though his accounts are filtered through layers of moral comparison with Roman and Greek practice, likely missing important context and perspective.¹²

Some of the most important evidence regarding Celtic expansion comes from historical accounts of the migrations that brought Celtic peoples into violent conflict with the Mediterranean world in the fourth and third centuries BCE. Polybius, writing in the second century BCE, provides a detailed account of Celtic settlement in the Po valley of northern Italy, which he calls *Gallia Cisalpina* or Gaul on the near side of the Alps. He describes the Celts of this region as having crossed the Alps from transalpine Gaul in successive waves, displacing earlier Etruscan and Umbrian inhabitants of the plain.¹³ Polybius's account is precise about tribal names and geographical locations, making it one of the most reliable sources for the distribution of Celtic peoples in Italy.

¹⁰Siculus, Diodorus, *Library of History*, trans. by C. H. Oldfather, 12 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939), V.32.3, p. 179.

¹¹Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, V.28.1, p. 159.

¹²Poseidonius, fragments in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, cited in J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60 (1960), 189–275 (p. 215).

¹³Polybius, *The Histories*, trans. by W. R. Paton, 6 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922), II.17.3–5, p. 297.

Livy's account of the Celtic migrations in his *History of Rome* is even more descriptive. Livy records a tradition which he appears to have derived partly from Timagenes which is that the Celtic migrations into Italy were triggered by overpopulation in Gaul under the Gaulish king Ambigatus. His nephews Bellovesus and Sigovesus went on to lead separate expeditions, one over the Alps into Italy, the other into the Hercynian Forest of central Europe.¹⁴ Livy identifies the original homeland of these migrating Celts as the regions of Gaul to the north of the Massalian hinterland, broadly the area between the Loire and Rhine rivers from which they expanded outward under demographic pressure.¹⁵ This literary tradition of a Celtic 'heartland' in central Gaul from which expansion radiated outward parallels intriguingly with Caesar's own identification of the Celtae people of central Gaul and with that of the Hallstatt-to-La Tène archaeological settlements.¹⁶

Classical literature, however convincing, can't and shouldn't stand alone. Modern scholarship has also anchored the question of Celtic origins between two main identifiable archaeological cultures, the Hallstatt culture (c. 800–450 BCE) and the La Tène culture (c. 450–1 BCE). Both are named after sites called Hallstatt in the Austrian Salzkammergut and La Tène on Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland and both are associated with material assemblages that include distinctive metalwork, burial practices, and artistic styles found across a broad stretch of temperate Europe. The identification of Hallstatt and La Tène with proto-Celtic or early Celtic communities was a dominant scholarly paradigm throughout much of the twentieth century. Henri Hubert, in his influential 1934 work *The Rise of the Celts*, argued that the Celts had originated in the Rhine-Danube corridor and spread outward from there, carrying with them their distinctive material culture.¹⁷ Gordon Childe similarly envisioned a Celtic heartland in central Europe from which waves of migration carried Celtic languages and culture to the Atlantic fringes.¹⁸ On this

¹⁴Livy, *The History of Rome*, trans. by B. O. Foster, 14 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), V.34.1–2, p. 63.

¹⁵Livy, *History of Rome*, V.34.5–8, pp. 65–67.

¹⁶Barry Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). P. 16.

¹⁷Hubert, Henri, *The Rise of the Celts* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1934), pp. 27–34.

¹⁸V. Gordon Childe, *The Aryans: A Study of Indo-European Origins* (London: Kegan Paul, 1926), pp. 187–193.

model, the Celts of the Isles, Iberia, and Galatia were all ultimately descended from or culturally transformed by expansion from this central European nucleus. This view has since been challenged and substantially revised, but it remains an important starting point.

Modern scholarship has increasingly brought the tools of ancient genomes and Indo-European linguistics to bear on the question of Celtic origins, with significant implications for our reading of the classical sources. The consensus view among historical linguists is that Celtic languages belong to the western branch of the Indo-European family, most closely related to Italic (the language family that includes Latin). The question of when and where Proto-Celtic diverged from Proto-Italic and from Proto-Indo-European before that is directly relevant to the problem of Celtic origins, since language dispersal and population movement are intimately linked.

The dominant model in Indo-European studies since the work of Marija Gimbutas in the 1950s and 1960s holds that Proto-Indo-European originated on the Pontic-Caspian steppe the grasslands north of the Black Sea and the Caspian and spread westward and southward through a series of migrations associated with the Yamnaya and Corded Ware archaeological cultures in the third millennium BCE. Wolfgang Haak and colleagues, in a landmark 2015 genetic study using ancient DNA, provided powerful support for this model, demonstrating a massive influx of steppe ancestry into central and western Europe during the late Neolithic and early Bronze Age.¹⁹ David Reich, whose laboratory conducted much of this research, has argued that the arrival of steppe populations in Europe is the most plausible mechanism for the spread of Indo-European languages, including the ancestral forms of Celtic.²⁰

This genetic evidence broadly supports a model in which Proto-Celtic emerged somewhere in central or western Europe during the late Bronze Age or early Iron

¹⁹Wolfgang Haak and others, 'Massive Migration from the Steppe Was a Source for Indo-European Languages in Europe', *Nature*, 522 (2015), 207–211 (p. 207).

²⁰Reich, David, *Who We Are and How We Got Here: Ancient DNA and the New Science of the Human Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 116–120.

Age perhaps in the Rhine-Danube corridor or in the Atlantic zone as a descendant of earlier Indo-European languages brought westward by steppe migrants. Patrick Sims-Williams, in a careful analysis of ancient Celtic linguistic isoglosses, has argued that the distributed patterns of early Celtic features are consistent with an origin somewhere in the western half of continental Europe, with subsequent spread both eastward (into Galatia) and westward (into Britain and Ireland).²¹ The steppe hypothesis thus provides a deep background for Celtic origins, pushing the ultimate ancestral population back several millennia before the earliest Greek notices, while remaining consistent with the geographical anchoring provided by the Hallstatt and La Tène archaeological cultures.

One of the most influential challenges to the central European origin model has come from the work of Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch, who have proposed what they call the 'Celtic from the West' hypothesis. Cunliffe, in his major synthesis *The Ancient Celts* and in *Facing the Ocean*, argued that the Atlantic coastline stretching from Iberia through France, Britain, and Ireland had been a zone of intense cultural exchange since at least the Neolithic.²² He proposed that Celtic languages may have developed in this Atlantic maritime zone, rather than being introduced to it from the continental interior.²³ Koch's contribution to this hypothesis was primarily linguistic. He proposed that inscriptions from the Tartessian culture of southwestern Iberia dating to around 700–500 BCE represent possibly the earliest attested form of a Celtic language, which he termed 'Tartessian Celtic'.²⁴ If this identification is correct, it would push the Celtic linguistic horizon back earlier and further west than the central European model allows. Cunliffe and Koch explicitly framed their argument against the traditional migration-from-the-east model. Rather than Celtic spreading westward from Hallstatt and La Tène, they suggested that Celtic languages had deep Atlantic roots and spread eastward as La Tène

²¹Sims-Williams, Patrick, 'Ancient Celtic Isoglosses', *Journal of Celtic Linguistics*, 20 (2019), 1–58 (p. 12).

²²Cunliffe, Barry, *The Ancient Celts*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 44–55.

²³Cunliffe, Barry, *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic and Its Peoples, 8000 BC–AD 1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 293.

²⁴ T. Koch, John, 'Paradigm Shift? Interpreting Tartessian as Celtic', in *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature*, ed. by Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), pp. 185–301 (p. 186).

culture diffused across Europe.²⁵ The Celtic from the West hypothesis has not achieved universal acceptance and Koch's reading of Tartessian as Celtic remains contested but it has had the productive effect and positive scholarly impact of forcing a reconsideration of the assumptions underlying the central European model and drawing scholarly attention to the deep history of the Atlantic seaboard in Europe.

Not all modern scholars have accepted the premise that the Celts can be traced to a single point of origin at all. A significant strand of recent scholarship has approached the Celtic question from a more sceptical and constructivist direction, questioning whether 'the Celts' as a coherent ethnic group ever existed in the way that earlier historians assumed. Simon James, in his provocative *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention?*, argued that the idea of a unified Celtic people stretching from Iberia to Anatolia was largely a modern construction, the product of eighteenth and nineteenth-century antiquarianism, romantic nationalism, and philological speculation.²⁶ James pointed out that no ancient Greek or Roman writer ever describes the peoples of Britain and Ireland as Celts and Tacitus, as noted above, uses the word 'Gauls' to describe the probable origins of the Britons, not Celts. This movement became known as 'Celtoscepticism' and hasn't gained significant traction just because the term Indo-European would be far too broad. They were clearly a distinct group of people, albeit diverse but unique insofar as we can compare them to other European cultures, that of the Romans, Greeks and Germanic who also have distinct cultural patterns, languages, gods and goddesses, mythology and folklore that made and continue to make them recognizable.

Scholar Raimund Karl has attempted a more nuanced synthesis, accepting that the linguistic category of Celtic is real and historically significant, while cautioning against conflating linguistic affiliation with cultural or ethnic identity.²⁷ Karl argues that Celtic languages may have spread through elite exchange networks and

²⁵Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch, 'Introduction', in *Celtic from the West*, pp. 1–10 (p. 2).

²⁶James, Simon, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention?* (London: British Museum Press, 1999), pp. 39–43.

²⁷Karl, Raimund, 'The Celts from Everywhere and Nowhere: A Re-evaluation of the Origins of the Celts and the Emergence of Celtic Languages and Cultures', in *Celtic from the West*, pp. 39–64 (p. 40).

prestige diffusion as much as through migration, a model that would account for the wide distribution of Celtic speech without requiring a single large-scale population movement. This phenomenon seems somewhat implausible but there are other examples of this occurrence such as the Bell Beaker culture where cultural ideas were spread widely but the genetic pool wasn't, inferring that people weren't moving, only the ideas.²⁸ This is ultimately, entirely possible.

The constructivist critique has been a valuable corrective to tendencies in earlier scholarship to treat the Celts as a straightforwardly biological or racial category, a tendency that, as scholar Peter Berresford Ellis has noted, was particularly dangerous when deployed in the context of nineteenth and twentieth-century European nationalism.²⁹ This could easily still become an issue today. However, again, the critique can admittedly be taken too far. The linguistic evidence for Celtic as a coherent branch of Indo-European is robust, and the classical texts, whatever their distortions, do suggest that ancient peoples across a large part of Europe shared recognisable cultural traits, modes of dress, social organisation, religious practice, the druids in particular and material culture. As mentioned, these were things that Greek and Roman observers found sufficiently similar to treat as a broad cultural category. John Collis, in his survey of Celtic origins, argues for a middle way, acknowledging the constructed nature of ethnic categories while recognising that the La Tène cultural horizon reflects real patterns of exchange, emulation, and interaction across ancient Europe.³⁰

Any account of Celtic origins must also grapple with the remarkable eastern extension of Celtic culture and language in antiquity. Following the great migrations of the early third century BCE, groups of Celts referred to by Greek sources as *Galatai* swept through Thrace, Macedonia, and Greece, raiding Delphi in 279 BCE and crossing into Asia Minor, where they eventually settled in the region of Phrygia that became known as Galatia.³¹ The Galatians of Asia Minor maintained a Celtic language at least until the fourth century CE, according to

²⁸ Iñigo Olalde and others, 'The Beaker Phenomenon and the Genomic Transformation of Northwest Europe', *Nature*, 555.7695 (2018), 190–196 [University of Glasgow](https://doi.org/10.1038/nature25738) <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature25738>

²⁹ Berresford Ellis, Peter, *The Celtic Empire: The First Millennium of Celtic History, 1000 BC–51 AD* (London: Constable, 1990), p. 12.

³⁰ Collis, John, *The Celts: Origins, Myths and Inventions* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003), pp. 57–64.

Jerome, and their settlement demonstrates that Celtic speech and cultural practices could be transplanted and sustained across enormous distances from any putative homeland.

Strabo describes the Galatians of Asia Minor in terms that closely echo his description of the continental Celts, noting their tribal organisation, their warrior ethos, and their practice of taking the heads of defeated enemies.³² The survival of recognisably Celtic customs in a community geographically remote from the western Celtic world is evidence that Celtic identity in antiquity was not simply a matter of geography but was actively maintained through social and religious practice. Miranda Aldhouse-Green, in her expansive study of the Druids, has argued that the religious specialists of the Celtic world played a crucial role in maintaining cultural coherence across the dispersed Celtic communities of ancient Europe.³³ If Aldhouse-Green is right, then Celtic identity was not merely a passive inheritance of language and material culture but was actively reproduced through purposeful cultural institutions, a finding with important implications for how we think about Celtic origins.

The question of Celtic origins is ultimately not a simple answer, and the evidence of classical antiquity, however indispensable, must be read against the grain of its own cultural limitations without necessary perspective. Greek and Roman writers provide the earliest named references to the *Keltoi* and *Galli*, and their geographical accounts, from Herodotus's placement of the Celts near the source of the Danube to Caesar's precise tripartite division of Gaul, offer a broadly coherent picture of a people distributed across the temperate zone of western and central Europe, with a heartland somewhere in the Loire-Rhine corridor and extensions reaching from Iberia to Galatia.

Archaeological evidence associated with the Hallstatt and La Tène cultures provides anchoring for this broad picture, again suggesting that the Celtic-speaking world of the first millennium BCE was mostly in agreement with classic writer

³²Strabo, *Geography*, IV.4.2, p. 243.

³³Aldhouse-Green, Miranda, *Caesar's Druids: Story of an Ancient Priesthood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 22–30.

accounts. The steppe hypothesis, supported by ancient DNA analysis, pushes the deeper origins of Celtic-speaking populations back to the third millennium BCE and the westward spread of Indo-European-speaking Yamnaya and Corded Ware peoples. Cunliffe and Koch's Celtic from the West hypothesis offers an alternative or complementary model, emphasising the deep Atlantic roots of Celtic linguistic development and the possible early presence of Celtic speech in Iberia.

The constructivist critique offered by James, Chapman, and others is an important reminder that 'the Celts' as a unified category is mostly a scholarly and modern construct, even if meaningful, and that ancient peoples did not necessarily experience or articulate their identities in the terms that later historians have imposed upon them. The danger of retrospective labelling is not merely academic as it carries genuine consequences for how we understand the past, flattening the enormous internal diversity of peoples who lived across centuries and continents into a single, convenient noun. A warrior buried in Hallstatt in 600 BC and a bard composing verse in early medieval Ireland inhabited worlds so different in texture, belief, and social organisation that to bind them under one ethnic banner risks telling us more about the needs of modern identity politics than about the lived realities of either.

The romanticisation of the Celts, which gathered particular force in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through the Celtic Revival and nationalist movements in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Brittany, further complicated the picture, layering sentiment, mythology, and political longing over what had always been a more ambiguous and contested historical terrain. Nevertheless, the reality of Celtic as a linguistic grouping, the coherence of Celtic material culture across much of ancient Europe, and the testimony of classical writers who clearly recognised a culturally distinctive set of peoples across a wide geographical range all suggest that the category of 'the Celts', however imperfect, captures something real about the ancient world.

Language, in particular, is not a trivial bond. The Celtic language family, spanning Gaulish, Celtiberian, Galatian, and the surviving Insular Celtic tongues of Irish, Welsh, Breton, and Scottish Gaelic represents a shared inheritance of extraordinary

depth and resilience, one that persisted through Roman occupation, Germanic migration, and centuries of political fragmentation. That these languages share not merely vocabulary but deep grammatical structures, verbal systems, and poetic conventions speaks to a genuine historical kinship that no amount of constructivist scepticism can entirely dissolve. Similarly, the La Tène artistic tradition, with its characteristic ornamental designs, its transformation of natural forms into something simultaneously abstract and alive, does not feel like a category imposed from outside, but like the signature of a shared aesthetic sensibility moving purposefully across the ancient world.

What emerges, then, is neither the primordial ethnic nation imagined by nineteenth-century romantics nor the entirely fictitious grouping conjured by overzealous scholars, but something more interesting than either, a family of cultures. Cultures that are loosely related by language, artistic practice, and social custom, whose boundaries were always permeable and whose identities were negotiated, and whose vitality lay precisely in their capacity to absorb, adapt, and transmit. The Celts were real, just not in the way that the word 'real' is usually meant. It's a term with important value but missing the context and perspective of the ancient native people it identifies, not coincidentally similarly to so many other references to them.

In summary, the probable origination of the ancient Celts, as best as the current evidence allows us to determine, lies somewhere in the Rhine-Danube-Alpine zone of central Europe, with roots extending back to the steppe migrations of the third millennium BCE and perhaps with simultaneous developments in the Atlantic zone. As mentioned, between Britain and Gaul, there were clear connections both in trade, culture and language. From this broad center, Celtic peoples spread both westward to the Atlantic fringes and eastward as far as Asia Minor, forming a cultural and linguistic phenomenon all its own. At its height in the third century BCE, was the most geographically extensive group of people in the European world outside the great empires of the Mediterranean. Cunliffe has written, with characteristic succinctness, that the Celts were 'a people defined by language rather than by race or politics',³⁴ and it is this linguistic thread stretching from the

³⁴Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, pp. 276–285.

Tartessian inscriptions of Iberia to the hill-forts of Britain and the sanctuaries of Galatia that remains, despite all the uncertainties, the most durable marker of Celtic identity in the ancient world.

The Celts were never a people to be pinned down by the modern hunger for clean origins. They emerge from the European past not as a tribe marching from a single sacred homeland, but as a collectively lived set of cultural patterns. Their identity was transmitted like their culture, not so much typically through conquest by blood, but through the compelling force of likeable cultural patterns and ideas. To ask where the Celts came from is to ask where the wind begins... somewhere over the ocean, or in the mountainous fields where old languages still bend the wheat grass and whisper the names of forgotten gods that persist in the wild rivers and liminal sacred places.

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