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The idea of the Celt

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If, as Oliver Davies claims, it would seem difficult to be a Christian today without encountering the notion of 'Celtic Christianity',¹ it seems equally, if not more, difficult, to be interested in any aspect of Celtic studies without at some point attracting critical comment for use of the term 'Celt'. Since the early 1980s the idea of the 'Celt' has been subjected to a multi-disciplinary assault, an assault which would seem to cast doubt upon the use of this name even to describe the ancient peoples to whom it was first attached, let alone to describe the early and medieval 'insular' (that is, British and Irish) Celtic peoples for whom are claimed a Celtic Christianity, Celtic spirituality or a Celtic Church. We might ask 'what's in a name?'; but John Collis, for example, would contend that the term 'Celt' has 'dangerous archaeological and political implications'.² If this seems a trifle apocalyptic, Patrick Sims-Williams would reflect a more widely shared concern in seeing in the introductions to some recent books on the Celts, 'disturbing and unsubstantiated claims which seem to undermine their whole purpose', thus identifying a tendency to a now self-conscious use of the term, as *both* a contingent reality and a popular myth.³ The contingency might be overstated. Simon James has created a minor sensation by revealing the somewhat unsurprising fact that 'Celtic', like all stereotypes, is one to which few persons exactly conform.⁴ Barry Cunliffe sees the mythic element as a palliative myth, a 'New Celtomania, which provides a vision of a European past to comfort us at a time when ethnic divisions are becoming a painful and disturbing reality'.⁵ The cumulative weight of all this 'Celtoscepticism' is considerable; its engagement with figures singled out by modern cultural studies, in particular Ernest

Renan, has also led to the 'definitions debate' generating its own, self-sustaining, energy.⁶ For those whose starting-point in this matter is an interest in the emergence, in late antiquity, of a specifically 'Celtic' Christianity, theology or Church, it may be important to observe that the negative reassessment of the 'Celtic' quantum in these religious conceptions has formed at best a sideshow to a larger epistemological circus.⁷ What then are the implications of the epistemological debate for the user of 'Celt' and 'Celtic' in the British or Irish *Christian* context? Ellis Evans has observed that 'perceptions of the Celts . . . vary greatly, according to the primary disciplines of the scholars concerned'.⁸ This is very much the case and – lest the cumulative weight of such cross-disciplinary scepticism stifle constructive debate – we can establish, by extension, that these discipline-specific critiques impact upon debates in 'Celtic' religious studies in very different ways.

The classical Celt

Celts are found in the earliest historical records of Northern and Western Europe; their seemingly wide distribution and distinct civilization, at least as described in classical sources, form the basis for populist claims that the Celts were the first 'pan-European' civilization.⁹

The term 'Celt' comes to us via the Greeks, to whom the *Κελτοί* or *Γαλάται* were people who lived to the north and west.¹⁰ The Greeks spelled the word 'Celt' with an initial /k/ (kappa), but the controversy continues as to whether the modern derivatives of this word, 'Celt' and 'Celtic', should be pronounced with a 'hard' or a 'soft' /c/ – especially over the Scottish border, where more strict observance of the Anglo-Norman pronunciation of /c/ before /e/ is maintained.

The Romans described the *Κελτοί* as 'Celtae', but more often as 'Galli' or 'Galatae' (cf. Greek *Γαλάται*), names which have left their legacy in such extant regional names as Galatia (Asia Minor), Galicia (Spain and Central Europe), as well as the name of the ancient province, Gallia (Gaul). There is no question that the Romans saw all these terms as synonymous. Pausanias understood *Κελτοί* to be an indigenous name and Galli a Latin derivation from *Κελτοί*.¹¹ This is not really susceptible to proof,

but it is worth observing that the philological objections to the two words being related in origin are few. Whether or not Celt is a 'native' word will probably remain debated.¹²

As with most proper nouns, the range of reference of *Κελτοί* expanded across time as the Greek colonies moved further west and as the Greeks speculated more widely upon the origins of the races of the earth.¹³ We cannot expect to see any greater consistency in the antique use of the term than we may expect to find between, for example, the medieval and modern uses of terms such as 'French' or 'English'. It goes without saying that this, by itself, is only the most basic of caveats on the use of the term.

The Celts were already a widespread people when first encountered by the Greeks. Hecataeus of Miletus, in his now lost *Peregesis* of the sixth century BC, described the Celts as living in Narbonne and near Marseilles.¹⁴ Herodotus, in the fifth century BC, possibly using the work of Hecataeus, saw them as one of the westernmost of the European peoples, living west of the Pillars of Hercules and stated that the Danube rose in their territory.¹⁵ Over the next two centuries the Celts would be recorded as moving south into northern Italy and through Greece to Asia Minor. The sack of Delphi by the Celts (279 BC), along with that of Rome by the Gauls living in northern Italy (390 BC), would become – in the same way as did the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in AD 411 – symbolic events in the Graeco-Roman psyche.¹⁶

The Graeco-Roman world saw a natural potential for expansion at the expense of these neighbours. Anthropologists such as Posidonius (*fl.* c. early first century BC), or intelligence officers such as Pytheas (*fl.* c. 325 BC), both operating out of bases in the Greek colonies in the south of France, documented the Celts, the latter almost certainly with a direct eye to conquest.¹⁷ From such early Greek writers via the many later writers who used their now no longer extant works, we obtain our cliché of the ancient Celt. The Celts as encountered by the Greeks exhibited a range of 'national' characteristics. Many of these parallel modern clichés of the Irish, the Scots, and even the Welsh as depicted in the 'Blue Books': a fondness for alcohol, for colourful dress, for violent and trivial dispute.¹⁸

These romantic qualities, as observed in their neighbours by more urbane trading partners and future colonists, though they are quoted fondly in the social gatherings of Celtic studies conferences,

have also been subjected to necessary scholarly deconstruction. In this process of ethnographic discovery, the Celts tended to become invested with Graeco-Roman desires to see them as a wild and expressive counterpart to classical civilization. The Celts became fairly typical 'noble savages'; the druids, the intellectual class of the Celts, were at times seen as 'perfect' natural philosophers and cosmologists.¹⁹ Individual details, quoted and requested often without attribution – even in works by supposed 'eye-witnesses', such as Caesar – created at times a suspiciously seamless garment of Celticity.

In this way the Graeco-Roman world was proactively engaged with its 'Celtic fringe'. The wine which activated much of this romantic Celtic sensibility was fed to these neighbouring peoples by Roman traders. The tacit investment of desired 'noble savagery' in their Celtic neighbours lent itself to propaganda – especially as dictators, such as Sulla and Caesar, used campaigns on the Celtic frontier to enhance their status. Caesar defined ethnic distinctions between Celtic and Germanic groups so as to legitimate their conquest. To Caesar the Germani, living beyond the Celtic Galli and Belgae, were truly different from the Romans, living a martial and healthy existence; the Celts, by contrast, he represented as disempowered by creeping urbanism and ripe to be absorbed into the Roman polity.²⁰ Colin Wells has argued that Caesar labelled peoples as 'Celtic' or 'Germanic' at will. Caesar's elevation of the druids as a defining element of Celtic culture led later to their propagandistic demonization and subsequent destruction as a stage in the subjugation of Britain.²¹

The homogeneous cultural profile of the Celts as described by ancient writers thus may reflect no more than repeated citation of the same lost sources. At times it may also represent overt propaganda. These facts are caveats on the use of the 'unified' Celtic identity of prehistory to validate hypotheses of a Celtic civilization which would amount, in effect, to a 'Celtic Empire' (a term coined by Peter Berresford Ellis),²² effectively united by its priesthood. Nevertheless, this possibly false unity does not present a prima-facie case that the concept of the 'Celt' is itself entirely an invention by outsiders. Champion has claimed that 'names such as Celt, Gaul or Gael were given by outsiders . . . never shared by the so-called Celts themselves'.²³ Caesar directly contradicts this statement: 'Gaul is whole, divided into three parts, one inhabited

by the Belgae, another by the Aquitani, the third by people called, in their own tongue, *Celtae*, in our own [Latin] named *Galli*.²⁴ We might argue over the point that Caesar here limits the self-styled *Celtae* to a part of Gaul, but he, as well as Pausanias, is unequivocal on the point that the *Galli* themselves owned the description 'Celt'.

The archaeological Celt

In archaeological terms the Celts are normally identified with the unified cultural impulses named, after the sites at which they were first identified in the modern era, the 'Hallstatt' (*fl.* c. 750–600 BC) and 'La Tène' (*fl.* c. 500–100 BC) cultures.²⁵ These cultures are identified through the spread of elite burial fashions and art images, probably arising from bases in the rich settlements of south central Europe; they spread their motifs as far north as Germany and Britain – where some out of their gallery of art motifs would survive into the artistic vocabulary of 'insular' Christian art.

It was in view of this homogeneity of the La Tène culture in particular, and its seeming correspondence with the area which was, on the basis of classical and onomastic sources, defined as speaking Celtic languages, that, in 1958, Terence Powell was moved to claim:

The term Celts is therefore justifiable in a proper ethnological sense, and should not necessarily be restricted to mean Celtic-speaking which is a concept of academic thought of quite modern times deriving from the pioneer linguistic studies of George Buchanan and Edward Lhuyd.²⁶

It has to be said, in the light of subsequent developments, that this now seems to have been a somewhat overly confident statement – if not in terms of its reasonableness, at least in terms of its likely acceptance. Powell's belief was that the sustained use of a distinct vocabulary of art-images over a large area of Celtic-speaking Europe in antiquity allowed us to speak of a relatively distinct culture-group called the *Κελτοί* or *Galli*, identifiable in terms both of material culture and language, corresponding to the geographical distribution of the peoples whom the ancient writers called 'Celts'.

There can be little doubt that the La Tène culture flourished

early in Celtic-speaking areas and spread to many areas which also spoke Celtic languages. On this basis it has continued to be assumed that use of La Tène motifs is a likely indicator of Celtic identity.²⁷ This sort of association will inevitably be circumstantial, only arguable on the balance of probabilities. Even if La Tène art was ubiquitous within the area of Celtic speaking and not ubiquitous outside that area, the link will not be universal. A person who drives a Japanese car is not necessarily Japanese; *mutatis mutandis* a user of a La Tène sword is not necessarily always a Celt. Nor is the study of one aspect of elite material culture necessarily to be assumed to be a defining feature of an ethnic identity. The study of wealthy elite groups and their unities may mask actual and possible differences between groups. These are normal caveats in comparisons between material and historical ethnic patterns – these must be argued on the basis of probability, not simply assumed on the basis of association. It is indeed probable that La Tène impulses, like much of modern culture, spread outside the local political unit most easily to other cultures which shared a common language with it. So, while we find that the La Tène imagery is mostly used by ancient peoples whom we regard as ‘Celtic’, it is also found in areas such as Denmark, which we do not.²⁸ Champion and Collis would hold that the use by non-Celtic-speaking peoples of La Tène motifs invalidates the hypothesis that the La Tène culture broadly corresponds to the area of Celtic language use. We may admit that the association is at the moment a circumstantial assumption, though not – contra Collis – an ‘illogical’ one.²⁹

The consensus of critique, or at least the most vocal criticism, in archaeology would now appear to be against this assumption. In comprehending this departure from the model of the ‘archaeological Celt’ we need to consider the critique of Powell’s methodology in its place in the evolution of archaeological thought. Powell’s method was essentially focused on defining a proto-historic people; archaeology was in this instance brought to ‘push back the limits’ of early documentary sources. This was typical of pre-war archaeology. Sir Mortimer Wheeler, for example, moved from early work on Roman sites to trying to identify the Celtic centres visited by Caesar and the *oppida* which were built by the Veneti and Belgae, whom Caesar described as recently having migrated to Britain in the first century BC.³⁰

Such archaeology was focused on trying to push historic identities back into the nameless mists of prehistory and paralleled what was being done in comparative philology (see below). Models for the slow diffusion of language from a 'proto-Indo-European' singularity in the distant past had led to a theory that the Celts were an offshoot, perhaps in a couple of millennia BC, from the expansion of the Indo-European ancestral language or dialect group from a hypothesized Eastern European homeland. Common words in Indo-European languages were singled out as indicating the likely earliest stratum of the common language and hence in some cases being geographically specific indicators of this 'homeland'.³¹

In this environment of 'backward-looking' prehistory, Powell attempted to take the Celtic identity as far back into prehistory as it could be taken. The Hallstatt art and burial styles were transmitted from a probable origin point in southern Germany or Austria to peoples who lived to the north as far as Britain and west as far as southern Gaul and northern Spain. The initial activity began around 750 BC and continued through to c.600 BC. We have no certainty that this transmission involved any actual movement of personnel, as opposed to a cultural idea or impulse. As we can trace little or no population change throughout this region in the transition from the Hallstatt to the La Tène culture we can regard them, in personnel, as more or less co-terminous. Powell was willing to take the Celts back even further. The 'Urnfield' culture, occupying a smaller area than the latter two cultures but giving way to the Hallstatt with no evident change in settlement pattern, suggested to Powell that they must have been an ancestral group, probably also speaking a Celtic language. Though the distinctive 'urn-field' cemeteries of this group were not found over as wide an area as were accessed by the Hallstatt or La Tène impulses, the urn-field idea did spread into southern France and Germany: this Powell took as something of a precursor of the later pattern or diffusion of La Tène and Hallstatt impulses.³² This was probably pushing the evidence beyond its limits, though it was argued systematically and cannot be lightly dismissed.

We should consider Powell's book – almost a manifesto for the archaeological definition of a Celt – in its context. It was written in the midst of the post-war backlash against diffusionist models which equated language and material culture – acceptable before

the war, when even left-leaning archaeologists such as Gordon Childe had written concerning 'Aryan' migrations, now become disreputable through the political use of 'invasion' models of Gustav Kossina.³³ This backlash took the form of a retreat into an environment in which terms such as 'Celtic' and 'Germanic' became held to be defensibly used only to describe language groups. This was overly politically correct. As Ellis Evans, a linguist, has rightly stressed, it is improper to ignore the fact that 'Celt' was coined as an ethnic label;³⁴ Powell's work was an attempt to define a case-study in which a material criterion could be defensibly used to define an ethnicity.

The failure of Powell's book to carry conviction on this point was perhaps less on account of the specific merits of his case than it was due to the changing of the guard in archaeology in the 1960s. The 'New Archaeologists' explicitly opposed the 'proto-historical' identifications which had characterized the work of dominant figures such as Gordon Childe and Mortimer Wheeler, in favour of a 'text-free' vision of archaeology. It is arguable that this revolution had its roots in different issues to the one under discussion. Archaeology in the 1960s was still a relatively new discipline and its place in knowledge poorly defined. On one level the revolution sought to end a dependent relationship which was seen to hamper the potential of archaeology to explain economic and social questions. A second aim was to disassociate archaeology from disreputable pseudo-historical associations, such as invasion hypotheses and Arthurianism. The positions adopted were often relative and *ad hominem*.³⁵ There was a tendency to avoid 'historical' terminology, as if it were itself compromising. There was an undoubted benefit to be gained from this jockeying for intellectual position, which led to rapid advances in our understanding of social organization and production in prehistory. The 'baby with the bathwater' character of the model is also, however, self-evident.

It is in this light that we must view statements such as the following by John Collis, the most persistent of critics of the term 'Celtic' amongst the New Archaeology generation:

'Die Kelten kommen!' proclaimed the posters on the motorway at Rosenheim Bavaria, 200,000 of them . . . but would they have done so had the exhibition *Die Kelten* been called the 'Iron Age in Southern

Germany'? . . . Ancient Celts have become modern Celts . . . the illogicality of this process and the tacit theories which lie behind the methodology employed, . . . have unfortunate and dangerous archaeological and political implications.³⁶

We will not dwell on the irrefutable logic of the claim that 'Die Kelten' would attract more visitors than the 'Iron Age in Southern Germany'; it does not follow that this proves the latter a more 'responsible' title than the former. One cannot help thinking that calling a people 'Iron Age' – essentially defining them by their weapons technology – also has unfortunate implications.

Collis has recently sought to distance himself from the extreme form of Celtoscepticism which would regard the term Celt as entirely invalid for antiquarian studies.³⁷ He, along with Simon James, continues, however, to debate the congruence of the linguistic definition of 'Celtic' with the ancient distribution of Celtic peoples – arguing that it is invalid to regard any of the early occupants of Britain or Ireland as 'Celts', simply on the basis that they speak languages of what has come to be known as the 'Celtic' family. This is the 'definitions' debate which impacts most directly upon any definition of 'Celtic' Christianity; the question of how 'Celtic' early Christianity in Britain was really comes down to an assessment of the validity of the term Celtic when used to describe the society of Roman Britain, sub-Roman western Britain, Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Man.

The linguistic Celt

The modern definition of Celtic languages began with George Buchanan in the sixteenth century. Buchanan (1506–82), who included amongst his attainments the status of tutor to Mary, Queen of Scots and later to her son James, late in life wrote a history of his native Scotland, *Rerum Scoticarum historia* (1582), which eschewed the conventional British origin legends in favour of speculation upon the relationship of the Gaelic Scots to the ancient Celts.³⁸ In particular his theorizing was informed by comparison of personal names as well as place names in ancient sources with ancient and modern Scottish onomastics. He rightly seems to have seen the Gaelic (Irish, Scots Gaelic and Manx) and British (Welsh, Cornish and Breton) branches of Celtic as

ultimately, if distantly, related, describing the former as 'Keltic' and the latter as 'British'.³⁹ The terminology is used slightly differently from the present use, but the distinctions are the same as are now made.

It was Edward Lhuyd (1660–1709), however, in his *Archaeologia Britannica* of 1707, who made thoroughly clear the familial relations between the 'insular' Celtic languages. Lhuyd, Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum and an extraordinary pioneer in scientific studies of both etymology and, originally, botany, brought the principles of fieldwork and ordered classification to the study of the Celtic languages. He travelled extensively in all the nations in which Celtic was spoken, except for Man, for which he appears to have relied on correspondents, and Brittany, from where he was deported on suspicion of being a spy. His records of Cornish, which was soon to become extinct, are of especial importance. Lhuyd virtually invented modern comparative philology – though it remained for Sir William Jones to show the link between Celtic and the other Indo-European languages. It is tempting to speculate that if Lhuyd had not died suddenly at the early age of 49, just prior to writing the second, antiquarian, volume of his projected *Archaeologia*, archaeological method might have progressed by a comparable leap to that undergone by philology.

Celtic was then, in the eighteenth century, one of the most intensely studied of language groups in philological terms. Johann Kasper Zeuss's remarkable *Grammatica Celtica* of 1853 ensured that, in the nineteenth century, it remained in the forefront of comparative research. Zeuss's pioneering research on Old Irish, mostly using the glosses left by Irish *peregrini* on Latin manuscripts in continental libraries, created a wave of interest in Irish studies in Germany, especially by Sanskrit scholars such as Windisch and Zimmer, leading to the teaching of *Celtische Philologie* in several centres and the establishment of a chair of Celtic in Berlin.⁴⁰ Whole generations of scholars from insular 'Celtic' countries studied in this external environment in Germany, in which the notion of 'Celtic', philologically established, obtained. This undoubtedly encouraged an influential vision of the 'Celts' as both a general ancient unity and an insular identity. This academic enthusiasm for 'pan-Celticism' also spilled over into more populist displays, such as the Celtic Congresses of the early 1900s and the bardic gatherings (*gorseddau*) which came

to be held in various Celtic nations, irrespective of any actual early historic precedent. The Celtic languages in the early 1900s held a central place in the regional nationalism of the United Kingdom and where regions saw common cause this was in part expressed by such reinventions of Celticity. Not all Celtic nations saw value in the exercise – especially those, such as Ireland, who were already in possession of a rich heritage which did not need to be reappropriated from the tradition of its neighbours.⁴¹

The insular Celt

Celtic speaking evidently outlasted Roman rule on the Continent, but only in Ireland and the remoter parts of Britain did it persist on a sufficient scale to survive beyond the end of the first millennium AD.⁴² The more copious records of Celtic languages in Britain and Ireland render the term at its least controversial there in linguistic terms. In Britain and Ireland, on the other hand, the use of the term as an ethnic label is at its most questionable. In antiquity, the people of Britain were always Britanni and never Celtae. Indeed Pytheas and Strabo describe Britain as lying to the north of Celtica. For this reason Collis regards as illogical the tendency to see the early Britons as 'Celts'. Strictly speaking, such use of the term may be inaccurate. Caesar described at least part of the population of Britain – that closer to the coast – as an extension of the population of Gaul. He was in no way ambiguous as to their common language.⁴³ He noted that druids would travel to Britain for further study.⁴⁴ Unless we are to understand the druids as an ethnically neutral priesthood – which they were clearly not – it is evident that Caesar was describing Britain as ethnically related to Gaul. As Caesar regarded the Galli as Celtae it can hardly be, as Collis claims, 'illogical' to regard Britain as 'Celtic' in antiquity – even if it is not literally correct. The central point made by Collis and James – stripped of their preoccupation with the word 'Celt' – is nonetheless a valid one. Britain was no more a central element in the Celtic world in the pre-Roman Iron Age than it was to be in the Roman Empire. The influence of the Hallstatt and La Tène impulses upon Britain, let alone Ireland, are late and comparatively superficial.⁴⁵ There is indeed no reason to expect one of the more remote regions touched by the central impulses of Hallstatt and La Tène to reflect a microcosm of Celtic

culture; Britain's 'survival' as a Celtic-speaking region out of the general Roman assimilation of the Celts elsewhere carries no implication that it would, as a 'rump' of the ancient Celtic civilization, necessary reassert any characteristics of the Celtic Iron Age.

What we come back to in these debates is a simple problem of the evolution of scholarly method, namely the tendency to concentrate first on that which we can identify and classify. Celtic words and images of an 'international' type lend themselves to comparative study and to dating through wide comparisons. In this sort of process, the local content of a language or a material record will be downplayed and elements highlighted which give a false impression of the whole.

That insular Celts might somehow reflect a larger Celtic paradigm in the sub-Roman period was nonetheless entertained in 1963, when Kenneth Jackson identified parallels between the material and social culture as depicted in the Irish Ulster Cycle tales with the descriptions of the Celts in Posidonius. If the parallels of warriors squabbling over the champion's cut of meat are sometimes striking, Jim Mallory has brought a measure of sobriety to such speculations in observing that the material culture of these tales is more compatible with the archaeology of the later first millennium AD – the period of writing of the tales.⁴⁶ To some extent Jackson's speculations flowed naturally from a tendency to cast the study of Celtic linguistic evolution in terms of disseminations from the Continent to Britain. That British Celtic languages, apparently along with what was known of Continental Celtic, pronounced Indo-European /k^w/ as /p/, in contrast to Irish – hence the well-known tendency to speak of 'P' (British) as opposed to 'Q' (Gaelic) Celtic languages – inspired the thought that British was the legacy of more recent 'waves' of Celtic arrival: this is the so-called 'Gallo-Brittonic' hypothesis.⁴⁷ Whatever the likelihood or otherwise of this model there can be no doubt that such thinking downplayed the local characteristics of insular culture in favour of representing it as representative of a larger Celtic civilization.

It is, nonetheless, hard to go entirely past the 'Celtic' symbolism of the sub-Roman era in Britain. Sub-Roman potentates – to borrow a term from Leslie Alcock – in Somerset reoccupied, not simply ancient fortifications, but the giant *oppida* of the Durotriges – one of the more 'internationally Celtic' legacies of Iron Age Britain.⁴⁸ The artwork of insular Christianity embraced

La Tène motifs – though in Ireland and parts of northern Britain this would be more or less the first time the La Tène image had achieved any real currency.⁴⁹ Undoubtedly this is a ‘Celtic revival’ of sorts, however unconscious, but how much any users of these central symbols of Celtic antiquity had any sense of their being ‘Celtic’ remains an unanswerable question. Likely enough the idea would have been no more relevant to them than the ‘cultural’ distinction between an iron- or bronze-driven technology would have been to the early medieval Irish kings who chose to be inaugurated at Tara.

It is easy to be critical of the vision of culture which seeks to isolate one element and trace it from a remote antiquity to the present, divorcing it from its wider context. For most of the twentieth century Oxford undergraduates were encouraged to believe that they would learn more about ‘English’ literature from reading the Old English works of King Alfred than they would reading French or Russian novels. Similarly the study of continuities from ancient continental culture through into insular Celtic – at times tacitly downplaying Roman and Latin Christian influences on language and culture – is easily criticized. But the paradigms for study being offered as alternatives are not necessarily themselves without their own blind-spots.

The religious Celt

While speculation on the common distinctiveness of the Irish and British churches goes back to the time of Bede, the term ‘Celtic’ in relation to this putative commonality of practice only emerged in the 1880s.⁵⁰ The term itself derives very much from the philologist’s vision of post-Roman nations united by Christianity and two inherited, if mutually unintelligible, dialects. Like the term ‘insular art’,⁵¹ ‘Celtic Church’ thus served principally as a term of convenience to describe circumstantial developments which are otherwise difficult to label and often nationally sensitive. Early users of this concept, such as F. E. Warren, were concerned principally to explain regional differences in the practices of the early Church in Britain and Ireland, not any ‘native’ contribution which would render this Christianity ‘Celtic’ in a broader geographical sense. Much subsequent academic study of this topic has, likewise, been chiefly concerned with attributing the basis for

similarity between some British and Irish Churches to the influence of one over the other, or to entirely external factors.⁵² In this context, 'Celtic Church', a term which obviously evokes very different images in Protestant and Catholic audiences, led a fairly inoffensive existence until it was demolished by, first, Kathleen Hughes, then Wendy Davies, on the irrefutable basis that it downplayed dissimilarities and implied the existence of a non-existent ecclesiastical hierarchy.⁵³

This 'Celtic' label, as applied to the concept of common liturgical practice, is in some ways only tenuously related to the notion of 'Celtic' spirituality which has emerged in more recent times. This has coincided with the identification, by anthropological and cultural studies, of a shared modern, literary, vision of the Romantic 'Celt'.⁵⁴ A desire to seek the distinctiveness of Celtic Christianity in a primarily indigenous context is a dimension of such discourse. Yet the relationship of such a quest for a 'native' dimension to the distinctive elements of Celtic Christianity – whether really distinctive or otherwise⁵⁵ – arguably owes as much to the prior adoption of the term 'Celtic Church', and a subsequent proactive influence of the name 'Celtic' in its 'nativist' sense, as it does to a genuinely independent Romantic discourse concerning the Celts.⁵⁶ Perhaps one of the paradoxes of popular writing upon Celtic Christianity is the fact that it has moved towards a 'nativist' model at precisely the time that academic investigators have begun more and more to seek explanations for literary motifs and language change in Latin and Christian sources. In this context, some of the strictures against incautious use of the term 'Celtic' might be justified.

Attempts to move the term outside the insular Christian context are not likely to meet with success. It may be fascinating to recall that one of the audiences to whom Paul preached earliest, the Galatians, was no doubt in part by preference a Celtic-speaking one – a fact which Jerome was to record as still true three centuries later;⁵⁷ but to attempt to see in Paul's condemnation of the Galatians' failings, such as the tendency to follow variant gospels (Galatians 1: 9) or to 'observe days, and months, and seasons, and years!' (4: 9–10), any distinctive parallels with the controversies of insular Christian practice is fruitless. The Greek cosmological vision and the Celtic as described in classical sources are more or less indivisible. Likewise the condemnation by

Irenaeus of Lyon (early third century) of the manners of his 'Celtic' charges are far too universal and generalized to have the capacity to correlate with insular 'Celtic' religious preferences.⁵⁸

In conclusion, the idea of the Celt is, in antiquity, a complex one. In insular usage it is a term of convenience for circumstantial similarities between different regions around the shores of the Irish Sea which spoke related, often by the early Middle Ages no longer mutually intelligible, languages.⁵⁹ If the Celticity of the region is largely a circumstantial matter, so too, however, are most of the objections to the use of the term 'Celtic' to describe it. As Sims-Williams observes, 'at times the term "Celtic" seems to be expected to pass stricter tests of validity than would normally be applied to, say, "Germanic" or "Slavic"'.⁶⁰ The Romanticism which at times pervaded classical and early medieval images of Celts presents a 'straw man' for those who wish to pursue a separatist agenda in archaeology; as the most colonized of peoples in this archipelago, the Celts also formed a natural subject for Ardener's revolutionary application of an anthropology, previously targeted at the Third World, to European subjects. If at times this looks disturbingly like the singling out of a minority population, as well as of a minority subject area, the student of Celtic studies should rest assured in the knowledge that Celtic studies continues to be right in the forefront of important intellectual debates.

Notes

- ¹ See previous chapter.
- ² John Collis, 'The origin and spread of the Celts', *Studia Celtica*, 30 (1996), 17–34, at 17.
- ³ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Celts and Celtoscepticism', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 36 (Winter 1998), 1–35, at 1–2. Sims-Williams's target here is, in particular, the hypersceptical statements by Sara and Timothy Champion in the book *The Celtic World*, ed. Miranda J. Green (London, 1995), esp. p. 88 (Timothy Champion), 'There is no evidence to suggest that anyone in prehistoric or early historic times thought of him or herself as a Celt'; and p. 411 (Sara Champion), 'It is not currently possible to prove that any of the Iron Age peoples who lived in central or western Europe in the first millennium BC definitely spoke a Celtic language'. It need hardly be said that these statements sit uneasily in a book entitled 'The Celtic World'.
- ⁴ Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention?*

(London, 1998). James's monograph sits in a now well-established genre of works which have managed to achieve surprising notoriety in deconstructing rather obvious artificialities – see, for example: Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (London, 1994), and Christopher Tyerman, *The Invention of the Crusades* (Toronto, 1998).

- ⁵ Barry Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts* (Oxford, 1997), 19.
- ⁶ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The visionary Celt', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 11 (1986), 71–96; Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (Basingstoke and New York, 1992), *passim*. Donald E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh, 2000), 231, suggests that 'Celtic Christianity' is a construct which can, in some considerable measure, be 'traced to Renan and Arnold'. Also see I. Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh, 1999), 120–1. Renan's theories in general were singled out for critique by Edward Said, in *Orientalism* (London and Henley, 1978), esp. 130–48, one of the most influential texts in modern 'cultural studies'. A full study of Renan's actual impact upon the development of Celtic Christianity, if any, outside of his use by Matthew Arnold, would be a *desideratum*.
- ⁷ See Meek, *Quest for Celtic Christianity*, esp. 5–22; Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, esp. 226–9; Sims-Williams, 'Celts and Celtoscepticism', 10. For balanced and sustained critique of the notion of a 'Celtic Church' see Wendy Davies, 'The myth of the Celtic Church', in N. Edwards and A. Lane (eds.), *The Early Church in Wales and the West* (Oxford, 1992), 12–21.
- ⁸ D. Ellis Evans, 'Linguistics and Celtic ethnogenesis', in R. Black, W. Gillies and R. Ó Maolalaigh (eds.), *Celtic Connections: Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Celtic Studies* (East Linton, 1999), 1–18, at 2–3.
- ⁹ See Ruth and Vincent Megaw, 'The Celts, the first Europeans?', *Antiquity* 66 (1992), 254–60; Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Celtic Empire* (London, 1993).
- ¹⁰ See most conveniently the texts in translation in: J. Koch and J. Carey (eds.), *The Celtic Heroic Age* (Andover, MA, 1995), 5–40.
- ¹¹ Caesar, *De bello Gallico* 1. 1 and Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1. 4. 1.
- ¹² See most recently, Sims-Williams, 'Celts and Celtoscepticism', 22. The combination of velar stop with /l/ /t/ is a notable similarity between the two words, though Sims-Williams notes the expected form in Gaulish should be *kli-* not *kel-* and suggests the not unlikely possibility of reborrowing through Latin into Gaulish. There is no particular reason why the name 'Celt' need have originally been of indigenous origin for it to have been used by the Celts of themselves: there are numerous historic examples of peoples who have used a

general term for themselves from a foreign language, in lieu of the alternative of a collective noun of indigenous origin, which would need to be divorced from its more specific meaning. An example from the early insular world is the kingdom of the 'Picts': from Latin *pictus* (painted), it was originally an epithet used by the Romans of the tribes north of Hadrian's Wall – but by the early Middle Ages it probably would have become, in any event, obscure as to whether it was of Pictish or Roman origin.

¹³ P. Freeman, 'The earliest Greek sources on the Celts', *Études celtiques*, 32 (1996), 11–45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁵ Herodotus, *Historia* 2. 33; 4. 49.

¹⁶ David Rankin, 'The Celts through classical eyes', in Green, *Celtic World*, 21–38; also *idem*, *Celts and the Classical World* (London, 1987).

¹⁷ See J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 60C (1960), 189–275; C. H. Roseman, *Pytheas of Massalia, On the Ocean* (Chicago, 1994). Also C. F. C. Hawkes, *Pytheas: Europe and the Greek Explorers* (Oxford, 1977).

¹⁸ On Celtic drunkenness: Diodorus Siculus, *Historical Library*, 5.26; Plato, *Laws*, 1. 637; Polybius, *History*, 2. 19. On the tendency to dispute: Diodorus Siculus, *Historical Library*, 5. 31. The costume of the Celts became a consistent image in Graeco-Roman art: T. G. E. Powell, *The Celts* (London, 1955), 65.

¹⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, 1. 15; Hippolytus, *Philosophumena*, 1. 25.

²⁰ Caesar, *De bello Gallico* 6. 11–20.

²¹ On the demonization of druids: Tacitus, *Annales*, 3. 30, 14. 29. On Caesar's definition of Germans: C. Wells, *The German Policy of Augustus* (Oxford, 1972); *idem*, 'Celts and Germans in the Rhineland', in Green, *Celtic World*, 603–20.

²² P. Berresford Ellis, *The Celtic Empire* (London, 1992).

²³ T. Champion, 'Power, politics and status', in Green, *Celtic World*, 85–94, at 88.

²⁴ 'Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres, quarum unam incolunt Belgae, aliam Aquitani, tertiam qui ipsorum lingua Celtae, nostra Galli appellantur', *De bello Gallico* 1, ed. and trans. H. J. Edwards, *Caesar, Gallic War* (Cambridge, MA, 1917), 2–3.

²⁵ Hallstatt in Austria and La Tène in Switzerland are 'type-sites' – not necessarily the earliest or most important centres in their respective cultures.

²⁶ Powell, *The Celts*, 15.

²⁷ Ruth and Vincent Megaw, 'Do the ancient Celts still live?', *Studia Celtica*, 31 (1997), 107–123; *idem*, 'Celtic connections past and present: Celtic ethnicity ancient and modern', in Black et al., *Celtic*

- Connections*, 19–81 and especially the bibliography to the latter. For a specifically opposed view see T. Champion, 'The Celt in archaeology', in T. Brown (ed.), *Celticism* (= *Studia Imagologica* 8 (1996)), 61–78; T. Taylor, 'Celtic art', *Scottish Archaeological Review*, 8 (1991), 129–32 replies in *Scottish Archaeological Review*, 9–10 (1995), 248–52 (Megaw) and 252–3 (Taylor).
- ²⁸ This fact has been at times been variously understood as indicating possible Celtic political influence over parts of Germania – a politically 'loaded' notion – or the activities of traders.
- ²⁹ Javier de Hoz outlines an argument for a spread of the dialect which we identify as 'Gaulish' as an accompaniment to the La Tène into areas which were already Celtic-speaking: see 'Lepontic, Celt-Iberian, Gaulish and the archaeological evidence', *Études celtiques*, 29 (1992), 223–40, at 230–3.
- ³⁰ See especially R. E. M. Wheeler and K. Richardson, *The Hillforts of Northern France* (London, 1950); general account in Jacquetta Hawkes, *Mortimer Wheeler* (London, 1984). Caesar's own theories as to the northern and western migrations of the Celts arguably contributed to the 'invasion hypothesis' so prevalent in pre-war archaeology.
- ³¹ J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* (London, 1989), esp. 9–23, 144–64. For an explicit critique of the entire assumption, which would argue against the diffusion from a singularity, see C. Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language* (Harmondsworth, 1987), *passim*. Renfrew's model, mostly an interpretation on the basis of archaeological evidence, has not really yet found much support from philologists. See also P. Sims-Williams, 'Genetics, linguistics and prehistory', *Antiquity*, 72 (1998), 505–27, at 510. Shippey appositely terms this linguistic search for past homelands 'asterisk reality', after the linguistic symbol used to mark a hypothetical form of a word: T. Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth* (London, 1982), 17–25.
- ³² Powell, *The Celts*, 35–45; for a contrary view see de Hoz, 'Lepontic, Celt-Iberian', 224.
- ³³ See B. Arnold, 'The past as propaganda', *Archaeology*, 45 (1992), 30–7; Sims-Williams, 'Genetics, linguistics', 507.
- ³⁴ D. Ellis Evans, 'The earliest Celts – the evidence of language', in Green, *Celtic World*, 8–20, at 9.
- ³⁵ Two decades earlier, for example, archaeologists of the 'Wheeler school' had been assaulted by younger colleagues for 'selective excavation' of sites, with neglect of socio-economic evidence obtainable through 'total' excavation of sites. By the 1960s, ironically, selective excavation became politically correct, as it preserved sites rather than destroyed them.
- ³⁶ Collis, 'The origin and spread of the Celts', 17. *Idem*, *The European*

- Iron Age (London, 1984); *idem*, 'Celtic Myths', *Antiquity*, 71 (1997), 195–200.
- ³⁷ John Collis, 'George Buchanan and the Celts in Britain', in Black et al., *Celtic Connections*, 91–107.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 91–2.
- ³⁹ These groupings are variously named. I will eschew the pseudo-archaic terms 'Goidelic' and 'Brythonic', which principally reflect discomfort with the modern implications of the terms 'Gaelic' and 'British'. The corresponding terms 'Q' and 'P' Celtic are also avoided as they highlight only one point of difference. The 'Gaelic' languages here are Irish and its two early medieval derivatives Scots Gaelic and Manx. The 'British' languages are Welsh and Cornish, along with the overseas offshoot Breton – a product of migration in the sub-Roman period. The Gaelic and British groups have not been mutually intelligible at any time in the historic period.
- ⁴⁰ S. Ó Lúing, 'Celtic scholars of Germany', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 46 (1994), 249–71.
- ⁴¹ See Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Cornish Language and its Literature* (London, 1974), 148–52; for a modern critique of the use of medievalist imagery see Amy Hale and Philip Payton (eds.), *New Directions in Celtic Studies* (Exeter, 2000), 11.
- ⁴² It remains controversial whether we see a previous stratum of Armorican Celtic language as contributing to the speaking of Breton, the language of British migrants, in Brittany.
- ⁴³ Caesar, *De bello Gallico*, 4. 20, 5. 12.
- ⁴⁴ Caesar, *De bello Gallico*, 6. 13.
- ⁴⁵ Seamus Caulfield, 'Some Celtic problems in the Irish Iron Age', in D. Ó Corráin (ed.), *Irish Antiquity* (Cork, 1981), 205–15; Barry Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland* (London, 1994).
- ⁴⁶ K. Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age* (Edinburgh, 1963); J. P. Mallory, 'Silver in the Ulster Cycle of Tales', in D. Ellis Evans (ed.), *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies* (Oxford, 1987), 33–65.
- ⁴⁷ See J. Koch, "'Gallo-Brittonic" vs "Insular Celtic"', in G. le Menn (ed.), *Bretagne et les pays celtiques* (Rennes, 1992), 471–95.
- ⁴⁸ L. Alcock, 'The activities of potentates in Celtic Britain AD 500–800: a positivist approach', in S. Driscoll and M. Níeke (eds.), *Power and Politics in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1988), 22–39.
- ⁴⁹ Ruth and Vincent Megaw, *Celtic Art* (London, 1989), 206–10; 247–56.
- ⁵⁰ The earliest uses of the term include: F. E. Warren, *Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church* (London, 1881); G. T. Stokes, *Ireland and the Celtic Church* (Dublin, 1888).

- ⁵¹ See esp. D. Ó Cróinín, 'Rath Melsigi, Willibrord and the earliest Echternach manuscripts', *Peritia*, 3 (1984/5), 17–42.
- ⁵² Across the century this model has moved generally from one in which the British churches were seen to owe their distinctive character, such as it was, to either direct influence emanating from Ireland, or from an external group such as 'desert fathers' – cf. E. G. Bowen, *Saints, Seaways and Settlements* (Cardiff, 1969), esp. 141 – to being now seen as essentially all part of a subset of the late Roman church in Britain: see e.g. D. N. Dumville, 'Some British aspects of the earliest Irish Christianity', in P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter (eds.), *Irland und Europa: Die Kirche im Frühmittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1984), 16–24; *idem*, 'British missionary activity in Ireland', in D. Dumville et al., *Saint Patrick, A.D. 493–1993* (Woodbridge, 1993), 133–45; R. Sharpe, 'Gildas as a father of the Church', in Michael Lapidge and David N. Dumville (eds.), *Gildas: New Approaches* (Woodbridge, 1984), 193–205 – though an explicit rebuttal of this model is P. Ó Riain, 'Finnio and Winniau: a return to the subject', in J. Carey, J. T. Koch and P.-Y. Lambert (eds.), *Ildánach Ildírech: A Festschrift for Proinsias Mac Cana* (Andover, MA, and Aberystwyth, 1999), 187–202, esp. 188–9. The similarities between the churches in archaeological terms were clearly overstated by early scholars, such as Radford, who made misidentifications of sites in British zones such as Tintagel and Birsay as 'monasteries' of distinctively Irish type. See I. Burrow, 'Tintagel – some problems', *Scottish Archaeological Forum*, 5 (1973), 88–103; C. Morris, *Church and Monastery in the Far North: An Archaeological Assessment* (Jarrow Lecture, 1989).
- ⁵³ See Davies, 'Myth of the Celtic Church'.
- ⁵⁴ Particularly under the influence of Edwin Ardener, see Chapman, *The Celts*. Patrick Sims-Williams, however, has also explored a similar discourse in Celtic literature, see 'The visionary Celt'.
- ⁵⁵ See, most recently, Thomas O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology* (London, 2000), 1–24.
- ⁵⁶ For a summary of the polemic see K. McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth, 1990). This is usefully read in conjunction with the comments by Donnchadh Ó Corráin in *Bulletin of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies* (1994). On language see T. Charles-Edwards, 'Language and society among the insular Celts', in Green, *Celtic World*, 703–36, esp. 714 and 734–6. The over-emphasis on vernacular sources is a product both of the greater enthusiasm amongst modern Irish and Welsh students for studying the classical form of the language, as well as the tendency of early scholars, such as Stokes and Plummer, not to translate Latin texts, on the assumption of a classical education on the part of the reader.

- 57 *Commentary on Galatians*, Preface to Book 2. That such an isolated group might have remained Celtic-speaking is not without parallel: for example, a Gothic 'pocket' in the Crimea was still speaking Gothic in the later Middle Ages, having been in isolation for over a millennium.
- 58 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haerases*, 1. 3. Irenaeus uses the term, probably only as an affectation, in Caesar's specific sense as describing the population of Lugdunensis.
- 59 One alternative which was mooted in the 1960s was 'Irish Sea Culture-province', a notion which foundered on hostility to its general currency, but which in some ways was a successful enough notion in the early medieval context: L. Alcock, 'Was there an Irish Sea Culture Province in the Dark Ages?', in D. Moore (ed.), *The Irish Sea Province in Archaeology and History* (Cardiff, 1969), 55-64.
- 60 Sims-Williams, 'Celts and Celtoscepticism', 3.