

Celtic Ethnicity In Today's Celtic Nations

The authenticity of Celtic identity for today's Celtic nations has been questioned in recent decades. Whilst popular media and some scholarship supports the classification of the inhabitants of Britain as Celtic,¹ some scholars now argue that 'Britons should not be classed as Celts'.² Given that no Classical authors 'refer to the peoples of Britain and Ireland as Celts'³ and that those recognised as ancient Celts no longer identify as Celtic we should give this argument examination. Celtic identity has become a genuine source of pride and patriotism. Today's Celtic nations unite in a shared 'Celticness' of 'deeply ancient and highly characteristic cultural inheritance'.⁴ But how correct is this identification of these modern-day regions? This question is addressed here, recognising supporting and opposing arguments within relevant scholarship.

The eighteenth century AD saw the term 'Celtic' employed as a linguistic term by Edward Lhuyd for identification of similarities between Welsh, Irish, Cornish and Breton, and their close relationship with Gaulish.⁵ Originally used 'strictly [for] continental people',⁶ the term was intended only for linguistics. However, the term 'Celtic' became increasingly applied to ethnicity and traditions in Britain and Brittany. Ancient sources recognised Gallic tribes within Breton which, with linguistic evidence, supports Celtic ethnicity for modern Brittany. These same sources are utilised in support or opposition of Celtic identity in Britain, yet, we have little to no contemporary evidence from Britain itself. The ancient Celts oral tradition which continued 'until the start of the Christian era',⁷ complicates matters. No written records exist until the medieval period with Irish literature emerging from the sixth century AD and Welsh literature by the eighth century AD.⁸ The only contemporary textual evidence surviving contains no mention of Britons and does not recognise them as Celts. This is

¹ Caleb Howells, 'Were The Ancient Britons Really Celts?', *The Collector*, 2023 <https://www.thecollector.com/were-the-britons-celts/> [Accessed 2nd December 2024].

² *ibid.*

³ Amgueddfa Cymru, *Who Were The Celts?* (2021) <https://museum.wales/articles/1341/Who-were-the-Celts/> [Accessed 5th December 2024].

⁴ Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention?* (London, England: British Museum Press, 1999) p. 17.

⁵ Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 5.

⁶ Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts*, p. 17.

⁷ Peter Berresford Ellis, *A Brief History Of The Celts*, revised paperback ed. (Great Britain: Robinson, 2003) p. 22.

⁸ *ibid.* p. 24.

problematic in support of today's use of the label and the textual sources should be interpreted with caution. Works by Greek and Roman authors likely feature bias or incorrect details. The earliest surviving works, such as Strabo's *Geographica* from the first century AD, rely on earlier sources of which few survive.⁹ In the first century BC Diodorus Siculus wrote one of the earliest surviving texts mentioning 'Brittania',¹⁰ but it is widely accepted that Diodorus, as well as Pliny and Caesar, drew heavily on Pytheas' earlier work from the fourth century BC.¹¹ Pytheas himself places 'Britain as lying north of Celtica',¹² therefore identifying Britain as outside Celtic regions. Caesar had visited Britain and notes similarities between the Britons and the Gauls, yet, he appears to view them as different peoples.

The interior portion of Britain is inhabited by those of
whom they say that it is handed down by tradition that
they were born in the island itself.¹³

Historical sources identify Britain's inhabitants as a separate group to the Celts. Therefore, we can assume that at the end of the first millennium Britons were largely not regarded by others as Celtic. Davies tells us early medieval kings of Wales were known as the 'kings of the Britons' and 'descendants of the Trojans'.¹⁴ In the twelfth century AD, Geoffrey of Monmouth mentions Welsh propaganda defending apparent Trojan heritage.¹⁵ This assumes the medieval Welsh did not view themselves as Celtic. Davies also informs us that The Scots promoted ancestral heritage from Scota,¹⁶ an ancestor of the Gaels. This supports genuine Celtic ancestry for Scotland, but not Wales. Use of Trojan or Gaelic heritage, however, point to legends being realised and conveniently utilised for political gain rather than historical accuracy. We see that the manipulation of cultural labels has occurred throughout history, often linked to politics or nationalism.

⁹ John Collis, *The Celts Origins, Myths & Inventions* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2011) pp. 22-23.

¹⁰ Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts A Very Short Introduction*, p. 86.

¹¹ *ibid*, p 86.

¹² Jonathan M. Wooding, *The Idea Of The Celt, Celts and Christians: new approaches to the religious traditions of Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Mark Atherton (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, c.2002) p. 49, chapter 2.

¹³ Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War: Historical Account of Julius Caesar's Military Campaign in Celtic Gaul*, trans. By W. A. McDevitte and W. Bohn, (Good Press, 2023), p. 87, Format of eBook.

¹⁴ Sean Davies, *Edward I's Conquest of Wales* (Great Britain: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2017) p. 4.

¹⁵ *ibid*. p. 4.

¹⁶ *ibid*. p. 10.

Insular Iron Age Britain provides sparse archaeological evidence to support Celtic ethnicity, however, artefacts found do show influence from and similarities to continental Celtic finds. East Yorkshire has produced similar burial rites with funeral practices similar to those in Gaul.¹⁷ The nineteenth century AD saw the Battersea shield and the horned helmet discovered in the Thames, also linked to Gaul and the La Tene art style.¹⁸ This type of evidence is used to support ancestral Celticity in Britain, but it must be remembered that similar cultural traits do not always equate to shared ethnicity. These examples are also not found in today's Celtic regions, yet are used for proof of Celticity in Britain. It can be said that material archaeology is not reliable within this debate, yet, it continues to be used to prove or disprove Insular Celts. Much archaeology has been interpreted alongside the old migration hypothesis and should now be re-interpreted in light of new theories. Rather than mass movement of people, customs and language may have gradually entered Britain through connectivity with continental groups; trade being a key factor. Green confirms traditions may have entered the British Isles by material culture and customs being adopted as there is 'very little evidence for any kind of migration to Britain'.¹⁹ However, 'Britons were thoroughly Celticised' by the first century AD,²⁰ with the indigenous population gradually acculturating Celtic identity. Here, we can question the definition of ethnicity. Britons can be seen to become Celtic, but with a briefer heritage than those on the continent.

Whilst no historical source extends the Celtic identifier to the British Isles, it is understood that these writers knew less about Britain than the European mainland. Therefore, information regarding Britain's ethnicity may have been misunderstood or not recorded. 'Celtic' is attributed to a vast number of tribes across a vast area, we cannot know if this allocation is accurate; a tribe labelled as 'Celts' by ancient sources may not have considered themselves as such. We can argue, then that it is not impossible that a peoples not labelled as 'Celts' by ancient authors (such as Britons) could have perceived themselves akin to continental Celtic tribes.

¹⁷ Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention?* (London, England: British Museum Press, 1999) p. 38

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 58

¹⁹ Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, paperback edition (London: British Museum Press, 1997) p. 10.

²⁰ *ibid.* p. 10.

Linguistic evidence appears to provide one of the strongest arguments in support of today's Celtic nations, however, Collis advises that whilst language was considered a defining characteristic of ethnicity, it was not the deciding factor.²¹ Shared linguist traits with continental Celtic regions have lead some academics to conclude a shared ethnicity. However, relying too heavily on this interpretation may be unhelpful. Distinctions between the Welsh and Scottish languages, both part of the Celtic language family are recognised. Scottish belongs to the Q-Celtic Goidelic language group, with Irish and Manx, whilst Welsh belongs to the P-Celtic Brythonic language group, with Breton and, until c.1800, Cornish.²² This is representative of related sub-languages within the Celtic language family, itself part of the Indo-European language family, showing similar linguistic traits with local variations. This should be expected given the vast area allocated to the Celts. As stated, it is now presumed connectivity rather than movement of people caused the spread of language. As the Celtic language became widely used different local dialects would have been incorporated. Some Celtic language regions may have varied more from the parent language than others. Given Britain's position in the far north west of Europe, it would be logical to consider languages in this area having contained more local traits and less parent traits than some continental areas. Substantial and unrecognised variations could have led to Britons not being considered Celts by others. We cannot know how Britain's inhabitants viewed their own ethnicity, but language similarities suggest their ancestors took on and passed down Celtic characteristics, habituated from peoples they came into contact with. It is, however, questionable as to whether we can use language alone to define ethnicity. A Pan-European Celtic identity which included many sub-ethnicities is plausible. As is the case with modern European identity; the British and Italians are both European, but identify as different ethnicities. The English and Scottish are both British, but identify ethnically on a smaller regional scale. People may have viewed themselves as members of smaller tribes, additionally belonging to wider local regions within larger ethnic nationalities. People identify as both Irish and Celtic, for example. Ethnicity and identity can be seen to be layered and complex.

The modern Celtic world is different from the ancient one. The geographical location of the Celts has changed. Ireland, Scotland and Wales, unrecognised

²¹ John Collis, *The Celts Origins, Myths & Inventions* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2011) p. 45.

²² Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 50.

as Celtic in historical sources, now claim a strong heritage. While central and eastern France and southern Germany, regions once recognised as Celtic territories,²³ no longer call themselves Celts. Cultural characteristics feature in today's Celtic regions assumed to be the inheritance of their ancestors. However, much could be attributed to a 'politicised utilisation of the concept of "Celts"'²⁴ since the eighteenth century AD, rather than a genuine continuation of ancient Celtic traditions. As James points out, 'the notion of insular Celts, past and present, then is a modern interpretation and an adopted "ethnonym"'.²⁵ James is partly correct; the terms 'Celt' and 'Celtic' in regards to the British Isles are modern ones, originally intended for language and appropriated as political or modern cultural labels. Llyud's work on linguistics was published the same year as the Treaty of Union was signed.²⁶ Celtic identity provided legitimate ancestry for Scotland and Wales asserting freedom from Anglicization. This political use of Celtic ethnicity was also employed in Ireland and Brittany. The identification of modern nations as Celtic could be viewed as a popularised one rather than genuine heritage, however Celtic traits in these regions histories can be identified.

Genetics have not been addressed here. No scientific evidence supports groups we call "races/ethnicities" having a distinct, unifying biological or genetic basis.²⁷ Therefore, genetics is irrelevant in this argument, whether utilised or not.

In conclusion, analysis shows a continuing indefiniteness of any valid conclusion, perhaps aiding the Celtic label being utilised politically or less traditionally. Conflicting and scant evidence, along with the manipulation of Celtic identity throughout the last three hundred years makes a conclusion difficult to reach. Further work is required for a solid conclusion regarding today's Celtic identity, however, without indisputable evidence the question will doubtlessly remain unanswered.

²³ Amgueddfa Cymru, *Who Were The Celts?* (2021) <https://museum.wales/articles/1341/Who-were-the-Celts/> [accessed 7th December 2024]

²⁴ Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 4.

²⁵ *ibid.* p. 5.

²⁶ *ibid.* pp-114-116.

²⁷ T.B. Mersha., A.F. Beck., The social, economic, political, and genetic value of race and ethnicity in 2020. *Hum Genomics* 14, 37 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40246-020-00284-2> [7th December 2024].

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