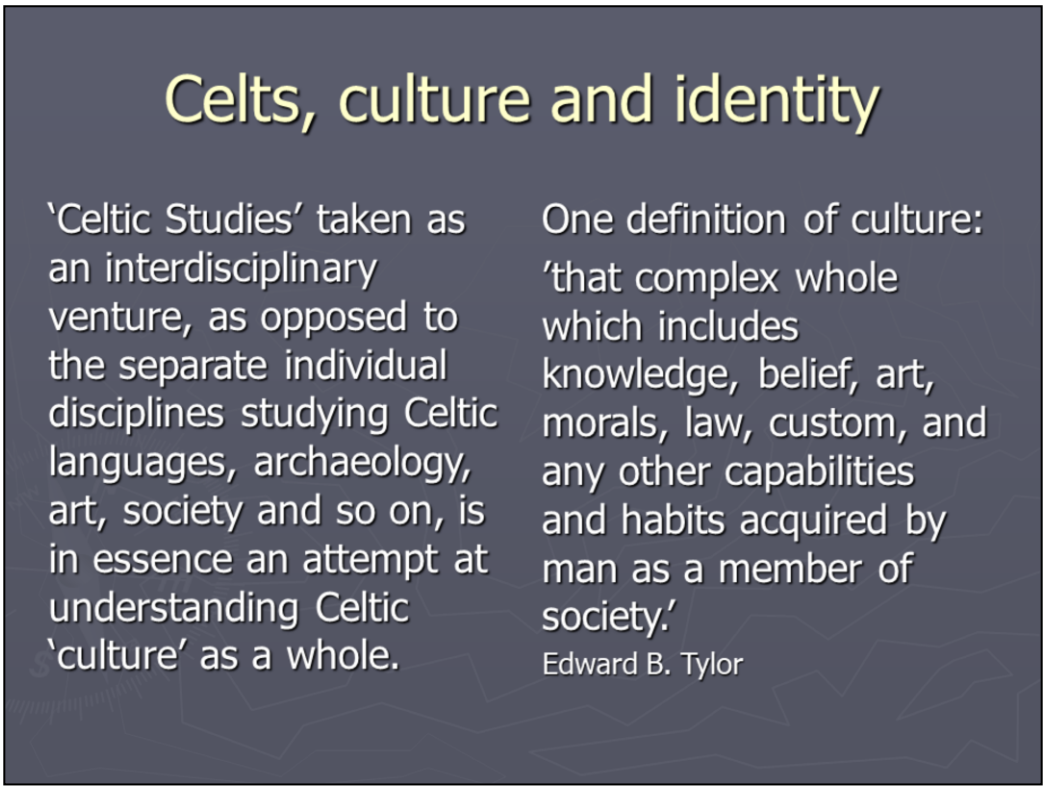


The definition of culture quoted above was originally made by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor in 1871. It is an often-used, but far from definitive, attempt at defining what 'culture' is. Indeed, culture is so difficult a word to define that *'despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature.'* Tylor's definition above is one of 164 listed by American anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn as far back as 1952. A compilation of quotations, including the above references, was produced by Professor Helen Spencer-Oatey of the University of Warwick in 2012 and has been added to the 'additional resources' of unit 9.

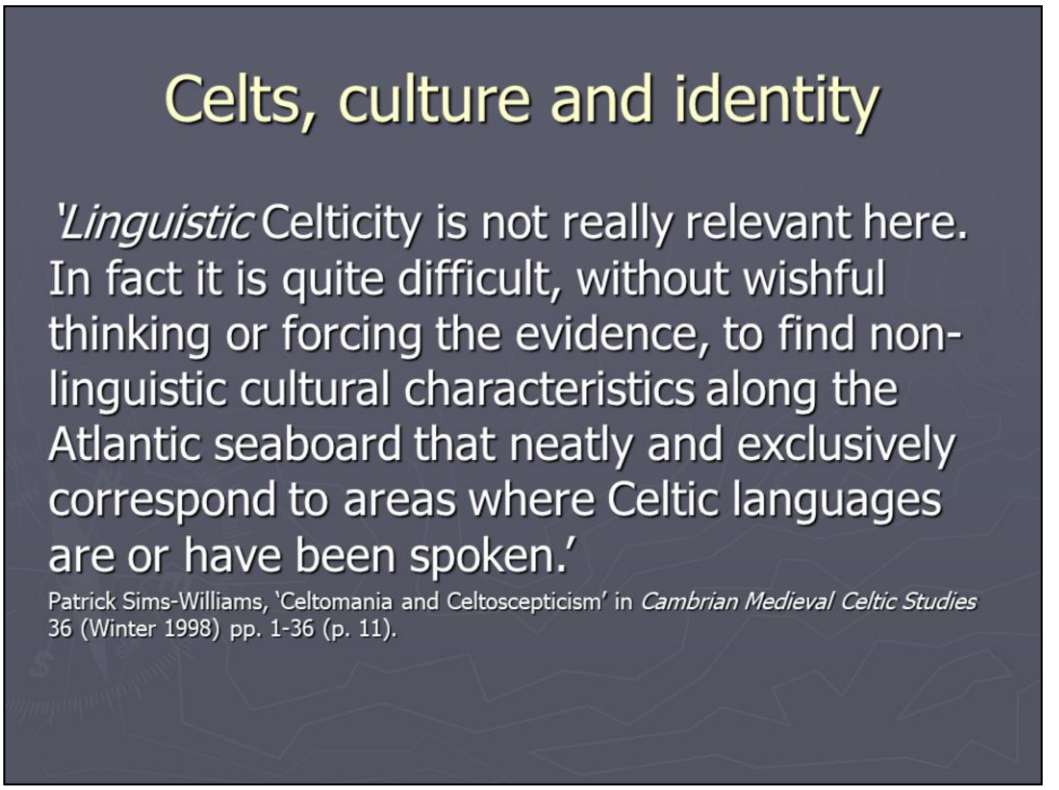
(Spencer-Oatey, H. (2012) *What is culture? A compilation of quotations*. GlobalPAD Core Concepts).

This compilation includes references to ethnicity and identity (pp. 19-20). However, for the moment we shall concentrate on the concept of 'culture' itself. Page 1 notes that *'the greatest legacy of Tylor's definition lay in his "complex whole" formulation.'* taken to mean *'that cultures were wholes – integrated systems'*. Although not universally accepted, this belief in 'cultures as wholes', has been extremely influential, not only in culture's core discipline of anthropology (and it is worth remembering that in the four-field tradition of anthropology both linguistics and archaeology comprise two of these fields) but also in 'area studies' subjects such as 'African Studies' 'Slavonic Studies' and of course 'Celtic Studies'. The 'cultures as wholes' perspective implies that we should expect to find connections between, for example, the languages, customs and artefacts of particular groups (and it should be noted that the subject matter of archaeology is often referred to as 'material culture'). Here is a quote from the Spencer-Oatey compilation (pp. 14-15):

11. The various parts of a culture are all, to some degree, interrelated

'Cultures should be thought of as integrated wholes – that is, cultures are coherent and logical systems, the parts of which to a degree are interrelated. ...When we say that a culture is integrated we are saying that its components are more than a random assortment of customs. It is, rather, an organized system in which particular components may be related to other components.'

We shall now briefly examine this assertion in the particular context of Celtic Studies.



The above quote uses religion, folklore and music as examples of cultural elements which we should **not** expect to be similar in, say Wales and Brittany, just because the Welsh and Breton languages are related to each other. Some cultural characteristics may be the result of areal features or geographical proximity, and be influenced by 'environmental' factors as opposed to 'genetic' ones (i.e. cultural factors based on regional groupings as opposed to 'shared evolutionary descent').

This, of course, is not a scenario which solely applies to the Celtic world. As one might imagine, attempts to trace cultural components of Indo-European culture have led to even greater difficulties.

On page 17 of *Celtomania and Celtoscepticism*, Sims-Williams notes the following: *'the comparative reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European society, culture, and literature also seems to lack the logical foundations of purely linguistic reconstruction; one critic has even dismissed it as a 'dream world'.'*

The critic in question is Colin Renfrew, author of *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins.* The interplay between archaeology and language can sometimes be the cause of friction within Celtic Studies.

Barry Cunliffe, for example, notes the following:

'As a result, elements of the La Tène 'culture' can be found across much of middle Europe from Ireland to the Black Sea. It is understandable, therefore, that some writers have accepted the assumption that La Tène culture, archaeologically defined, and Celts, as portrayed by Classical writers, are synonymous.' (BC L1071-1073).

It may be understandable why this has happened, but it is nevertheless a stance open to much criticism.

There are numerous examples of linguists and archaeologists attempting to map evidence from the one discipline onto the other with little or no success. Simon James (p. 82) notes that:

'there is no solid reason at all to link the appearance of languages now called Celtic with the spread of any particular archaeological 'culture'…' This of course would be true of any group of languages, not just the Celtic ones.

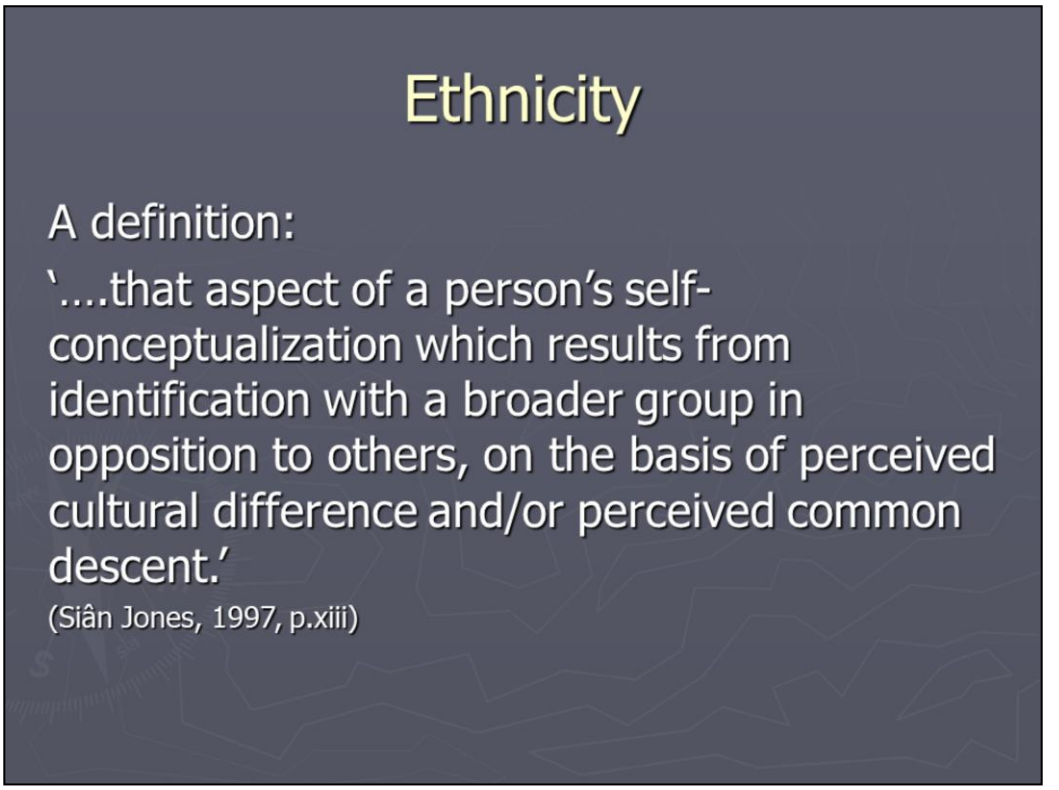
In similar fashion, but from a very different perspective, the introduction to *Celtic from the West* states the following: *'….it is by now overwhelmingly obvious that language groups and archaeological cultures are not equivalent phenomena from different perspectives (i.e. parallel reflections of 'peoples') nor can they be adequate proxies for one another.'* This, though, is a rather ironic statement from a book with the subheading *'Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature'*, and a seeming attempt at trying to marry together data from all these disciplines

According to John Collis, the archaeological culture is a flawed concept in its own right. Adding data from additional disciplines just serves to make a yet wider 'culture' even more flawed. '*the concept of the archaeological culture is something which 'New Archaeologists' in the 1970s were rejecting as a useful heuristic device, but that this had not generally been taken up by Iron Age specialists on the continent, and by more traditional archaeologists in Britain. It has taken even longer to start to impact on those outside the discipline such as historians and linguists, and this has led to a long survival of flawed methodological approaches in general books on the Celts'.* (JC 159-160)

Siân Jones had this to say about cultures in her book *The Archaeology of Ethnicity*:

'….the idea of a bounded, monolithic cultural cum ethnic unit is also a modern classificatory myth projected onto all of human history' (Siân Jones, 1997, p. 104)

This, however, does not seem to have halted the tide of efforts to try and forge a new synthesis, and possible attempts at squaring a circle.



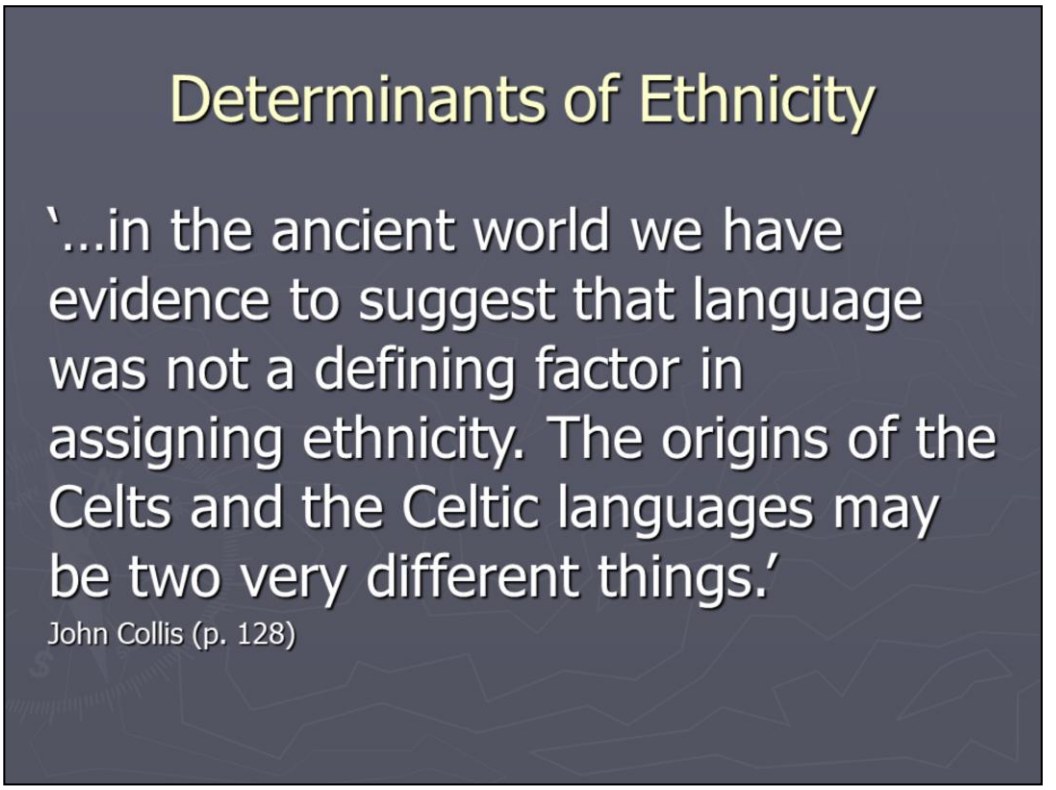
The above definition is from Siân Jones' book *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present* (Routledge, London and New York). The reference to 'identification with a broader group in opposition to others' does indeed capture the essence of the ethnic group but also leaves room to wonder whether 'bikers' 'goths' (the modern ones, that is, not speakers of the now defunct East Germanic language) 'skinheads' and various others of a similar nature would qualify.

Simon James (p. 72) claims that *'....language similarities and differences are no simple determinant of one's sense of identity'.* This was said in the context of his often feeling closer to Europe than America, despite the latter being English speaking. (p.72)

This point, that ethnic identity is not determined by language, is shared by John Collis, who concedes (p. 214) that Celtic languages would have been spoken over a wide geographical area and for long periods of time. As a result of this,…. *'it was not their language which places them in an ethnic group which then dictates their social constructions, but their technology, their relationship to core-periphery structures, their settlement patterns, power structures and ideology:"*

It would appear from this view, then, that everything but language contributes to a group's ethnicity. We have already mentioned the relative contributions of language versus technology towards the creation of ethnic identities, however, Collis' statement above seems to contradict the following one from the same book:

'Also, contrary to what some recent authors have suggested, there is likely to have been some feeling of common identity across Europe, at the level of a shared language, difficult though mutual comprehension may have been…., and probably other aspects of culture may have been shared in common (e.g. religious practices).' (JC 195-196)

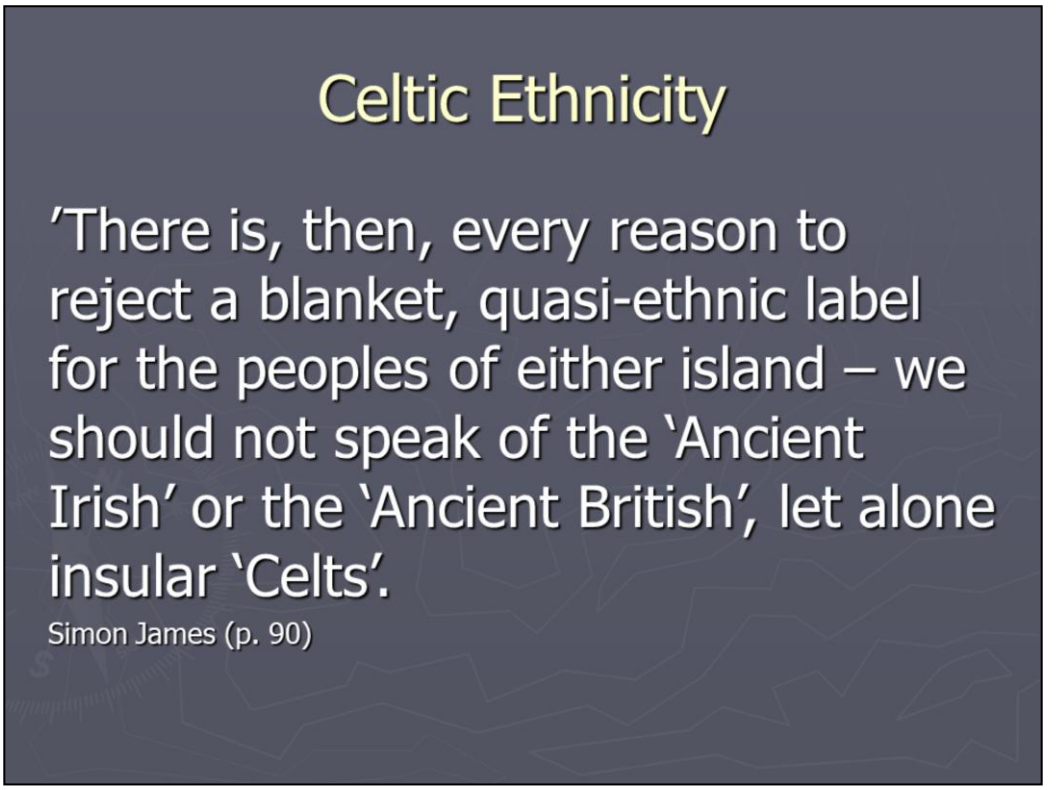


As mentioned above, John Collis and Simon James share certain views about ethnicity, one of these being that language does not determine it (often going to great lengths to emphasise everything else).

In this regard they appear to be at odds with the editors of the *Celtic from the West* series, Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (the latter in particular). The first two pages of the first book in this series note that they both independently arrived at the conclusion that *'Celtic probably evolved in the Atlantic Zone in the Bronze Age….'Celtic' is used here primarily in the linguistic sense….Of the various possible definitions of Celtic a proven affiliation with the Celtic languages or (for non-linguistic evidence) a demonstrable close connection with them holds the advantages of detailed scientific precision….'*

Simon James does acknowledge that language is one factor (of many), however, identities were more likely to be created by power relationships than cultural ones. Tribal names were political entities not ethnic ones, i.e. *'kings created 'peoples' in the later Iron Age, not the other way round:'* (p. 98)

So-called 'Celtic art' therefore *is not a marker of ethnic identity, but of status, wealth and power'* (p. 92) i.e. an indication of class difference not ethnic difference. Furthermore, *'….until the rise of the four historic nations in the medieval period, and even long after, a clear sense of large-scale ethnic or national identity…..was usually weakly developed among the mass of the people'* (SJ p. 133). This view emphasises the local but ignores wider factors. Whether in small polities or not, people still communicated with each other, and we can be fairly certain that their languages covered a greater area than their polities. There would have been hundreds of tribal or dynastic states across Britain and Ireland even in the pre-Roman period, but not hundreds of languages, so some cultural aspects must have existed at a wider level.



James (p. 88) is keen to emphasise the diversity of settlement patterns in prehistory across Britain and Ireland. He concludes from this that *'neither of the two major islands, then, was a distinctive monolithic cultural, political or ethnic entity at any time in the past….'.* Having criticised linguists for equating languages with ethnicity, he nonetheless notes that due to a lack of written sources *we are forced to rely on archaeology* to try and find out how the prehistoric inhabitants of the isles saw themselves, thus implying that material culture can be used to determine ethnic boundaries. In addition, he makes the following, rather surprising claim:

*'We have no direct data, but there is no reason to doubt that most, perhaps all, of the populations of the isles were already speaking dialects (probably not all mutually comprehensible) that we now classify as members of the Celtic family' (*p. 88)

The above scenario is painted for the Late Bronze Age, and given that this is over 1000 years before the first native written sources in these islands, it is difficult to see any basis on which such a claim could be supported, other than that we can use archaeology to inform us of linguistic practices, whereas we cannot do the reverse (in all probability we cannot do either).

The idea of a dialect continuum, whether of the Celtic languages or others, is however, an eminently sensible suggestion as dialect continua were the norm – at least in Europe – up until the advent of the modern nation-state and its insistence on standardisation. The German language historically was a series of connected dialects and even Latin was much the same, eventually resulting in the different Romance languages. Hopefully, he is not implying that every settlement pattern had its own linguistic dialect. The conclusion that *'human life and sense of identity were overwhelmingly small-scale, local and short-range'* in the Bronze Age (p. 89) nevertheless falls into difficulties when considering the rather impressive Atlantic Bronze Age trade routes of the same era. Clearly not all aspects of life were local. For the following Iron Age, he notes that *'the archetype of 'Celtic' social structure as often conceived does not fit the archaeology of Britain or Ireland for most of the Iron Age,'.*

Levels of Ethnicity

'their sense of identity would have been based on their lineage groups and upon larger social constructs, which for convenience we can call tribes, and some of the tribes might have come together in allegiances and confederations to which names might have been given, but in no sense would they have thought of themselves as part of a 'Celtic nation'.'

Barry Cunliffe (*The Celts: A very short introduction* p. 66)

Barry Cunliffe's interpretation shown above overlaps with that of James' in some, but not all, aspects.

John Collis, however, agrees with James that identities were held on a small-scale, local level:

'In northern and western France especially it is the tribal name which became attached to the administrative centre, and which survives to the modern day: Paris (Parisii); Arras (Atrebates); Trier (Treveri); Bourges (Bituriges Cubi).'.... 'Though the precise boundaries may be argued in detail, there is an assumption that the pre-Roman ones (as far as these may have existed) continued into the Roman period as administrative boundaries, and these themselves evolved into the post-Roman and medieval bishoprics.' (JC p. 105)

This leads them to emphasise 'tribal' identities at the expense of anything wider. Where wider identities are acknowledged, James, for example, prefers to emphasise religion, rather than language:

A major focus of perceived differences between the British peoples and their enemies was religion as much as wider ethnic traits: the Britons were largely Christian, the Anglo-Saxons and initially the Scotti were pagans.' (SJ p. 114)

The Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity largely during the course of the seventh century, and certain points need to be made here about James' view. For example, there is an implication in the above quote that lack of religious differences would result in a lack of animosity. This is not the case. The Anglo-Saxons, after their conversion, did not suddenly get on with the Welsh as a result. Also, James' emphasis plays down ethnicity and plays up political dynasties and religion. He claims that Viking activity (from 793 on) was responsible for the creation of English, Welsh and Scottish identity, yet Bede in the 730s wrote of the four nations of Britain (Britons, English, Scots and Picts) and used language as the distinguishing feature, while Offa, king of Mercia, before the Viking threat, constructed a 150 mile ditch between his kingdom and the Welsh. There are no equivalent ditches between his kingdom and Northumbria or Wessex

The statement above unfortunately does not give any named examples of who exactly is seeing the Celts as 'in essence a single people'. However, in James' view, the archaeological evidence is *'….irreconcilable with the idea of one unified ethnic identity we can call 'Celtic'* (p.78)

Despite the fact that, by his own admission *'today no national or ethnic group calls itself 'the Celts' as its primary name,* the idea of 'one unified ethnic identity we can call Celtic' is clearly a major issue for him, because *….in the eyes of many, 'Celticness' is the shared, deeply ancient and highly characteristic inheritance of several modern nations or peoples'* (p. 17). Again, sadly, no examples are given of the 'many' who see things in this way.

It is perfectly possible (if not the norm) for people to hold multiple identities, such as Houstonian, Texan and American, or Glaswegian, Scottish, British and European. Indeed, in a fascinating insight, James lists his own personal group identities (from smallest to largest) as Londoner, Southerner, Englishman, Briton, European and Westerner – a total of six different categories. It is hard to imagine him regarding 'European' and 'Westerner' as 'unified ethnic identities' and also difficult to understand why he would deny the possibility of multi-layered identities in the past.

The fact that various classical sources note that both the Belgae and the Celtae comprised numerous tribes (in the order of 15-20 if not more) as well as the fact that Caesar's tripartite division of Gaul included a people who called themselves Celtae **in their own tongue** (implying self-identification with this label) should be sufficient to acknowledge that at least two levels of identity were in existence over 2000 years ago, and there may have ben yet more, at a level smaller than 'tribe' and larger than Belgae or Celtae.