

HPCS4003

The Early Celts: Introduction

Croeso, Fáilte, Degemer mat, Fàilte, Welcome

- ▶ What's in store?
- ▶ An overview of *Keltoi*, *Celtae*, *Galatae*, *Galli*
- ▶ Groups related to the above
- ▶ Continuity from Ancient Celt to Modern Celt?
- ▶ Covering about 1000 years from their first mention until the fall of Rome in the West

The aim of this module is to offer students an introductory overview of those peoples referred to variously as *Keltoi*, *Celtae*, *Galatae* or *Galli* by classical sources. For simplification, these peoples will collectively be described here as the Early (or Ancient) Celts, and in essence the module will be examining the question 'Who were the Celts?'. However, it will also look at other groups believed to be closely related to them, and this is essential as otherwise we would be studying the ancient Celts in isolation from the modern ones, given that no classical source ever called the inhabitants of either Britain or Ireland Celts.

Because continuity, or the lack of it, from Ancient Celt to Modern Celt is a necessary topic of discussion, descriptions of the natives of these islands will also be examined, especially as they are home to five of the six peoples labelled thus today. The period under consideration lasts for about a thousand years, from the earliest known references to Celts in the 6th century BCE until the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the late 5th century CE, by which time the Celts of mainland Europe had all but disappeared. The last contemporary reference to them is usually credited to Sidonius Apollinaris in the fifth century CE (JC 27). ****

The Interdisciplinary Celts

- ▶ Historical Celts: first mentioned by Greek sources c. 2500 years ago
- ▶ Linguistic Celts: a label given in the eighteenth century to speakers of the Brittonic, Goidelic and ancient Gaulish languages
- ▶ Archaeological Celts: a label given in the nineteenth century to the Hallstatt and La Tène material cultures
- ▶ But first, some words of warning!

There is no doubt that a people called the Celts existed. They are an historically attested people first recorded in the land 'behind Marseilles' in southern Gaul about 2500 years ago. All the earliest historical references to them were made by Greeks between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. There are no historical references at all to Celts before this time.

In linguistic terms, Celtic is a name used today to refer to the Brittonic and Goidelic languages of Britain, Brittany, and Ireland, and to the related ancient languages of Gaul, as well as parts of Iberia, northern Italy, and Anatolia. For the benefit of clarity, it should be noted that Brittonic is the parent language of Welsh, Cornish and Breton, and Goidelic the parent of Irish, Manx and Scottish Gaelic.

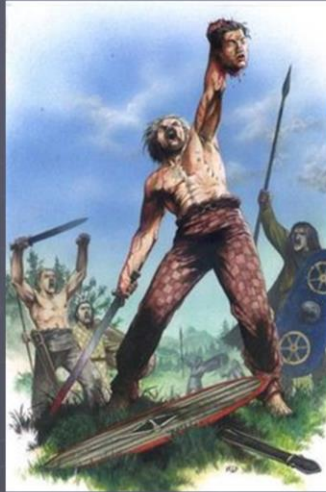
The archaeological name Celtic traditionally refers to the material cultures known as Hallstatt and La Tène, both of which were discovered in the nineteenth century. Hallstatt is in modern day Austria and La Tène in modern day Switzerland. These, as well as the more recent *Celtic from the West* hypothesis will be introduced later.

The Celts, therefore, mean different things to scholars in different disciplines, and in the linguistic and archaeological cases, were chosen retrospectively as a label for discoveries found in the modern era. This module will examine the Celts from the point of view of each of the above perspectives as well as some of the difficulties involved in trying to connect them all together.

Given the extremely broad scope of the subject, this module can only offer an introduction to the Celts, hopefully in a simple and easy to understand way. More specialised treatment on various individual aspects of the field will be found in other modules. ****

Beware of the Celts

(and those who study them!)



What is a 'Celt'?

It is difficult to imagine such a seemingly innocent question causing a controversy – but it can.

An historian might say 'those who were labelled as such by historical sources'. This, after all, is where the term originated. It would however exclude those not labelled as such by historical sources, even if they shared the same characteristics.

An archaeologist might offer the following definition: 'those responsible for the Hallstatt or La Tène material cultures'. This could also be valid but presumably only if the people concerned were also linked in some way to those labelled as Celts by historical sources.

A linguist might suggest: 'someone who does, or did, speak a language belonging to the Celtic branch of the Indo-European family of languages, either extant or extinct'.

As far as this module on the Celts is concerned, our definition will incorporate aspects of all of the above, but be closest to the last, given that much of the effort put into linguistic research in the modern era is aimed precisely at proving that the modern 'Celtic' languages are related to the languages spoken by those called 'Keltoi/Celtae/Galatae/Galli/' in the ancient world. Today's 'Celtic Nations' are so called, after all, because of the existence there of a Celtic language in modern times. Proving continuity from past to present should therefore be a major objective. *****

Beware of the Celts

(and those who study them!)

- ▶ Celtic Studies is an interdisciplinary (and interesting) field
- ▶ Constituent disciplines include (historical) linguistics, history, archaeology, genetics, ethnology, and many others which study social aspects of Celtic peoples
- ▶ Different opinions on sometimes scant evidence can lead to controversy and disagreement within and between disciplines

There may be many reasons why scholars disagree. These may include coming from an academic background with a different tradition, or using terminology from various disciplines which gets 'lost in translation' or simply arriving at a different conclusion based on personal opinion. Elements of all of these may be found in Celtic Studies to such an extent that even the topic of study itself may be questioned. Historians, linguists and archaeologists may disagree on what makes someone a 'Celt'. Scholars within the same discipline may likewise disagree or (consciously or subconsciously) be biased towards a particular conclusion or fear that it may be used for political purposes. Such considerations were so notable at the end of the last century that in 1998 Patrick Sims-Williams used the title 'Celtomania and Celtoscepticism' (*Cambrian Medieval Studies* 36, 1 – 36) in an article describing some of the more entrenched positions.

The major problems associated with the Celts are these:

- Sparse or unclear evidence from prehistory or from classical sources to enable accurate identification of who should and who should not be considered Celtic
- Whether Celtic is the right choice of label anyway
- The virtual disappearance of those labelled Celts from mainland Europe by the early medieval period (with the exception of those who ended up in Brittany but came from Britain – and there's even disagreement in some quarters about that!)
- The complete absence of the term as a contemporary label throughout the medieval period (lasting over 1000 years from the 5th century to the 16th) from the early middle ages through to the late.
- Whether continuity can be proven from those labelled Celts in the ancient period to those labelled thus in the modern

It is of course right to question uncertainties, however, the same criteria should be applied to the Celts as to everyone else, neither taking their existence or continuity for granted on the one hand, nor putting them under the microscope to a far greater extent than any other group on the other. ****

Beware of Hidden Agendas

The following have all been claimed:

- ▶ There were Anglo-Saxon settlements in southern Britain during the Iron Age
- ▶ There were Gaelic settlements in northern Britain during the Iron Age
- ▶ The Breton language is descended from Gaulish

Academic opinion is often sought as a means of justifying political objectives

The fifth century CE saw the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west and huge movements of people. Traditionally, this is when the Anglo-Saxons established their first permanent settlements in what would become England, and the Gaels made their first permanent settlements in what would become Scotland. The 'Iron Age' can cover different timescales depending upon the location, but in the areas of concern to us, it will broadly cover the period from roughly the eighth century BCE until the first century CE.

The idea that 'we were here first so this land belongs to us' has a long and sometimes not very distinguished tradition, with groups on all sides wishing to stake a claim. The suggestion that there were Germanic speakers in the east of England even before the arrival of the Romans comes from an interpretation of part of Stephen Oppenheimer's book *The Origins of the British*.

The proposal that Gaelic speakers were in Britain during the Iron Age comes from a paper by Ewan Campbell which can be found here: <http://www.electricscotland.com/history/articles/scotsirish.htm>

The idea that Breton is descended from Gaulish rather than Brittonic was put forward by Francois Falc'hun in his 1981 book *Perspectives nouvelles sur l'histoire de la langue bretonne*. If correct, it would mean that Breton developed within the territory of what is now France. This would please French nationalists but annoy Breton nationalists, keen to assert that they are not French.

Caution should therefore be exercised when interpreting works which challenge established events. Although none of these claims are beyond the realms of *possibility*, they are inclined to assume the movement of peoples in the direction that best suits their argument (but not the reverse) or hold that genetic or archaeological evidence can be used to trace a given language. Also prevalent is the criticism of an established belief which supposedly has no evidence to support it, only to be replaced by a counterargument which likewise has no evidence to support it. All have been referenced here so that students can access them if desired and make up their own minds. It's worth adding that classical and other historical sources may also be subject to a specific agenda or play to a particular audience. ****

Beware Common Assumptions

- ▶ Archaic linguistic features do not necessarily mean that a given language has been spoken in its current homeland for longer than languages with more recent innovations have been spoken in theirs
- ▶ The existence of specific genes within a human population does not tell you how long a given language has been spoken there – languages are not transmitted through genes
- ▶ The existence of a given material culture in a particular location does not tell you what language was spoken there – languages are not transmitted through pots either

With regard to the first point, in the particular case of Celtic Studies, it is often noted that the Irish language retains archaic features which may have been lost or modified in, say, Welsh. It should not be inferred from this that Irish has therefore been spoken for longer in Ireland than Welsh or Brittonic has in Britain. In many cases the *reverse* can be shown to be true. For instance, of the North Germanic (Scandinavian) languages, the living languages which have diverged least from Old Norse are Icelandic and Faroese, compared to Norwegian, Swedish and Danish, yet we know without question that these islands were settled later, and that Old Norse was spoken in mainland Scandinavia before this. A similar case with the Romance languages can be argued for Romanian, which received Latin later than Western Europe, but which has likewise maintained more archaic features. Various archaisms have also been retained in American English but lost in British English.

On the second point, there are again numerous examples of where language change takes place with no corresponding population change – a process known as language shift. The Irish language became a minority language in Ireland throughout the course of the nineteenth century, switching to English with no significant inward movement of English speakers from outside (albeit with plenty of movement out from within).

The third point warns against arguments of the ‘pots equal people’ type. An example can be seen in this extract from the Encyclopaedia Britannica website at <https://www.britannica.com/art/Celtic-literature>:

The introduction of Celtic (i.e. language) into Ireland has not been authoritatively dated, but it cannot be later than the arrival there of the first settlers of the La Tène culture in the 3rd century BC.

This quote, it should be remembered, comes from the website of a distinguished encyclopaedia, and so presumably should carry some authority. It is a victim of the belief that the ‘culture’ of a group is a ‘whole comprising of constituent parts’, the whole in question consisting of language, technology, social practices, religious beliefs and so on, functioning like the connected systems of an organism. The concept of ‘cultures’ is still extremely pervasive. However, a cursory glance at the world today (or yesterday) will show that these different components are, unlike an organism, not in fact connected to

each other, and that a given society may keep its language while changing its religion, or change its language while keeping its religion, change its technology while keeping its social traditions (or vice versa) and so on. Trying to dismantle the 'culture as organism' concept can, however, be hard work, and many controversies in Celtic Studies result from it. In this module we will look at information on the Celts from the differing perspectives of history, language and archaeology. ****