

Scrutiny Of The Celts In Comparison To Other Groups

The last few decades have seen arguments regarding interpretations of Celtic peoples and the use of the terms 'Celt' and 'Celtic'. The 1990s saw Celtosceptic scholars such as Malcom Chapman, Simon James and John Collis claim that 'the ancient Celts did not exist'.¹ Following Sims-Willaims work '*Celtomania and Celtoscepticism*' (1998) a debate has endured between those in support of the Celts and their history and those who have attempted to deconstruct the apparent 'myth' of the Celt. Attempts to reach an accurate and agreeable hypothesis of the Celts continues, with the suggestion that past and present scrutiny of Celtic peoples and their terminology may be increased and unfair in comparison to analysis of other historic ethnic groups. This essay, which sits within the context of Celtomania and Celtoscepticism, discusses scrutinization of the Celts and the Celtic labels we attach to their ethnicity, language and material culture. Comparison to the treatment of other historical ethnic groups is also addressed.

Celtsceptics claim the term 'Celtic' is incorrect for Iron Age Britain and Ireland as no-one in these regions called themselves a Celt before 1700.² References to the Celts are found in texts dating back to Hecataeus of Miletus, c.500 BC,³ placing the Celts around the source of the Danube.⁴ The twentieth century AD saw a preference for central Europe as the Celtic homeland.⁵ The origin of the Celts has been called into question with evidence analysed and re-interpreted by both sides. A 'Celtic From The East' hypothesis has not been supported by classical ethnography,⁶ however, Koch and Cunliffe's 'Celtic From The West' theory has gained momentum in recent years. Sims-Williams has suggested 'Celtic From The Centre', with an origin in Gaul.⁷ An agreed location for the Celtic homeland appears to still allude all involved. This is just one undetermined argument which drives the Celtomania and Celtosceptism debate. If Celtic origins are unclear it opens the door for all current interpretations of them to be questioned. But does this have a bearing on the level of scrutiny they receive? We can be more certain of the origin of other

¹ Peter Berresford Ellis, *A Brief History Of The Celts*, revised paperback ed. (London: Robinson, 2003) p. xiv.

² Ibid. p. xvi.

³ John Collis, *The Celts Origins, Myths & Inventions*, first pub. 2003 (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2010) p. 126.

⁴ Peter Berresford Ellis, *A Brief History Of The Celts*, p. 9.

⁵ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'An Alternative To "Celtic From The East" and "Celtic From The West"', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 30 (2020), pp. 511-29 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0959774320000098> [accessed 8th December 2024].

⁶ Ibid. [accessed 8th December 2024].

⁷ Ibid. [accessed 8th December 2024].

groups, such as Germanic peoples, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings. Could it be argued that these groups receive less scrutiny than the Celts?

It could be deemed unfair to not consider all groups with similar levels of impartiality and methodology. Yet, different attitudes and approaches can be noted in regards to different groups. James tells us that 'critique of the Celts by British academics...is...part of a wider trend of post-colonial overhaul of *all* our received historical categories' and that 'scrutiny of Celticity is...just one facet...of similar critiques of other familiar peoples'.⁸ This may be true, but similar critiques can appear more supportive of some familiar peoples over others. A brief analysis of the treatment of three other historical peoples in comparison to the Celts is now considered.

The Vikings have received much examination leading to inaccurate interpretations and celebration within popular culture. As with Celtic society, recent times have seen renewed interest in the Vikings. The term 'Viking', like 'Celtic', is a vague concept, attached to different contexts including marauders, explorers, manufacturers and warriors.⁹ Invading Britain in the eighth century AD, Vikings are often portrayed as 'brutish and barbaric' though most were not the violent sea-raiders that they have all been classed as.¹⁰ It has been suggested they were no more violent than any other group.¹¹ Blair tells us 'Viking raiders...came for captives and booty: murder and destruction were by-products'.¹² This not only illustrates a parallel in war-like representation of both the Celts and Vikings, but we should question that the Celts may also have been no more violent or warlike than any other group. Strategy and organisation may have differed between groups, but increased negativity or scrutiny of one group is possibly unwarranted. Both groups are seen through the eyes of their enemies. For example, the Viking raids on Lindisfarne are seen through the eyes of the victims¹³ and contemporary accounts of the Celts are written by Greeks and Romans. Collis asserts 'all authors wrote for a purpose,

⁸ Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts Ancient People Or Modern Invention* (London: British Museum Press, 1999) p. 142.

⁹ Julian D. Richards, *The Vikings A Very Short History*, first pub. 2005 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) p. 2.

¹⁰ Jorvik Viking Centre, *Who Were The Vikings?* (2012-2024) <https://www.jorvikvikingcentre.co.uk/the-vikings/> [accessed 8th December 2024].

¹¹ Yale University, *The Vikings: Yale Historian Looks At The Myth Vs. The History* (2013). <https://history.yale.edu/news/vikings-yale-historian-looks-myths-vs-history> [accessed 9th December 2024]

¹² John Blair, *The Church In Anglo-Saxon Society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p. 293.

¹³ Yale University, *The Vikings: Yale Historian Looks At The Myth Vs. The History* [accessed 9th December 2024].

and often this was political or philosophical'.¹⁴ Bias or prejudice is seen towards both groups, along with misrepresentation; For example, Vikings did not wear horned helmets and not all Celts were primitive savages.

The Anglo-Saxons are a popular and much studied group. History attests to Anglo-Saxon incomers having driven the existing population of Britons, often recognised as Celts, westwards into modern-day Wales.¹⁵ 'Anglo-Saxon' is another modern term used to label an historic group of peoples. Similarities in their interpretation and that of the Celts are apparent, however they appear to receive less criticism. Higham and Ryan inform us that the Anglo-Saxons still have relevance.¹⁶ They are seen as enabling the formation of England which underlines the impression that they do not receive as rigorous scrutiny as other groups. It can be suggested that Anglo-Saxons are given a higher status than other groups. Jenkins reminds us that Arnold dismissed Celts as "romantic and sentimental...lacking the temperament to form a political entity", but described the Anglo-Saxons as "disciplined and steadily obedient".¹⁷ This view is indicative of much previous interpretation of the two groups, presenting the Celts as inferior, which modern studies are beginning to unpick. Also initially presented as a barbarian warrior race, the use of 'Anglo-Saxon' is also being questioned with new interpretations of their identity and society.

Germanic peoples have also been the focus of academic inspection. This can be expected due to the Germanic ethnicity of Anglo-Saxons, yet, we see comparable treatment of this group to that of the Celts. We know that Classical authors used 'Germanic' to refer to north European tribes,¹⁸ applied as casually as the 'Celtic' label and similarly these people may not have identified as this grouping enforced by outsiders. An important correlation is that the term 'Germanic', like 'Celtic', was initially applied to just language. Renfrew indicates the Germanic languages form a complex group,¹⁹ this parallels the complexity of the Celtic language family. The term has also been applied to categories outside linguistics, with Germanic peoples being subject

¹⁴ John Collis, *The Celts Origins, Myths & Inventions*, first pub. 2003 (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2010) p.14.

¹⁵ David Walker, *Medieval Wales*, first printed 1990 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 2.

¹⁶ Nicholas J. Higham, Martin J. Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015) p. 1.

¹⁷ Simon Jenkins, *The United Kingdom Is Broken. It's Time For A New British Federation*, at The Guardian (2022) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jul/05/united-kingdom-british-federation-celtic> [accessed 9th December 2024].

¹⁸ Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 76.

¹⁹ Colin Renfrew, *Archaeology & Language*, first pub. By Jonathan Cape, 1987 (London: Pimlico, 1998) p. 68.

to questionable migration theories. Vikings and Celts are noted as being seen through the eyes of their enemies. Germanic peoples were enemies of Rome and we find all three groups receiving negative bias, presented as warlike races by their adversaries. Here we see a common problem of bias that must be identified to avoid misinterpretation and unfair scrutiny of historic groups. Interpretations of the Germanic and Celtic groups raise questions over how we label ethnic groups and co-existing societal traits. Sims-Williams posits that 'Celtic' remains 'a convenient label' and 'as valid as most such labels' such as 'Germanic' which is also applied to peoples who 'never regarded themselves as *Germani*'.²⁰

Brief analysis indicates long-established unfair scrutiny of Celtic peoples, however, equivalent treatment in some aspects of other groups can be identified. All three groups analysed have been classified by historical sources as 'barbarians' or 'warlike'. It must be considered that this common view of others is often inaccurate, given that much evidence are from the words of other groups or enemies. A need for an understanding and readiness for military action was likely necessary for all during the first millennium and the early medieval period and should therefore not be overemphasised as an indicative or negative feature of any particular group. Celtic and Viking culture both see popularity in modern society, however both continue to receive a fair amount of inquiry. It can perhaps be suggested that the Celts continue to be the most scrutinised of these groups due to continued existence of Celtic peoples and regions in the modern world therefore giving consideration of this group current relevance.

James appears correct that a wider 'overhaul of *all* our received historical categories' is taking place. New methods and scientific techniques undoubtedly aid this search for new hypotheses and interpretation, yet, even in light of more accurate assessments of data, an importance of impartiality and increased knowledge, the Celts appear to still receive unfair levels of scrutiny. Sims- Williams reminds us that different opinions regarding the use of 'Celtic' may 'reflect the varying nature of disciplines'.²¹ This makes it harder to

²⁰ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'How Are You Finding It Here?', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 21, No. 21 (1999). <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v21/n21/patrick-sims-williams/how-are-you-finding-it-here> [accessed 10th December 2024].

²¹ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Celtomania and Celtoscepticism', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 36, (1998) pp. 1-36 (p. 4).

reach a common view and it must be asked if disciplines can reach a common ground in which the Celts are analysed and labelled with simpler, standard practices for application across disciplines adhered to by all. It is important to remember that terminology currently attached to the identity and descriptions of these groups are all modern inventions. While drastic renaming is not required, a deeper understanding of a peoples' true identities and heritage should perhaps be strived for, and, in time, enable better categorisation of separate ethnic groups, sub-categories and varying shared or differing traits between them. This would reduce scrutiny and arguments around the Celts and the 'Celtic' label. It can be asked, if other groups could also benefit from this strict categorisation. The issues around the use of the Celtic label and continued arguments within Celtomania and Celtoscepticism likely do not lie in the term itself. It is as good as any other term considering its familiarity and should remain in use, but clear guidelines on its use are required.

To conclude, whilst some negativity seems to be attached to many historical groups, the Celts do appear to receive unfair scrutiny in comparison. A number of reasons for this has been suggested. However, for a conclusive assessment a comparison to further historical groups, such as Greeks and Romans, could be carried out. Assessment shows nothing wrong with the use of 'Celtic' as a label, even outside its original intended linguistic use, but as suggested, a strict labelling system is required across all disciplines used by all. Until such a system is implemented an end to the Celtomania and Celtoscepticism debate looks improbable.

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