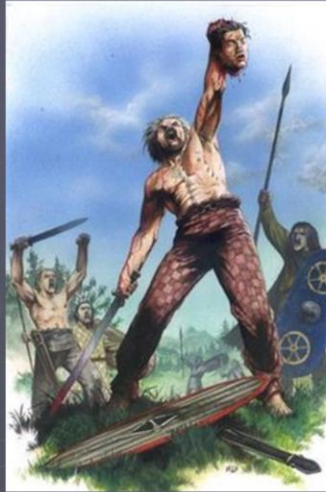


Beware of the Celts

(and those who study them!)



What is a 'Celt'?

It is difficult to imagine such a seemingly innocent question causing a furore – 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 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 'Celtae/Galli/Galatae' 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 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 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 their first permanent settlements in what would become Scotland.

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 features do not mean that a given language has been spoken in its current homeland for longer than languages with newer features 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 – language is not transmitted through genes
- ▶ The existence of a given material culture in a particular location does not tell you what language was spoken there – language is 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. Numerous 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. The following slides offer some information on the Celts from the differing perspectives of history, language and archaeology.

The 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, Gaelic and ancient Gaulish languages
- ▶ Archaeological Celts: a label given in the nineteenth century to the Hallstatt and La Tène material cultures

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 BC. 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 Gaelic languages of Britain, Brittany, and Ireland, and to the related ancient languages of Gaul, as well as parts of Iberia, northern Italy, and Anatolia.

The archaeological name Celtic 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.

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.

The Historical Celts

Hecataeus of Miletus (c.515 BC) made the first known references to Celts and where they lived:

- ▶ Massalia:(modern day Marseilles) in the land of the Ligurians close to lands occupied by Celts
- ▶ Narbon: (modern day Narbonne) a market town of the Celts in southern Gaul
- ▶ Nyrax: Noreia in what is now Austria, or Nyons in southern Gaul?

Hecataeus of Miletus in his work *Europe* makes the earliest known reference in history to the Celts (*Keltoi*) sometime before 500 BC. Three towns are mentioned in connection with them.

He notes that Massalia (modern day Marseilles) is located in Ligurian territory close to Celtic lands, and that Narbo is a Celtic trading centre. There is little argument as to the location of these two. It is Nyrax that has caused the headache. Many academics, probably based on later archaeological links to Celts, believe that Nyrax is Noreia in what would now be Austria. The inhabitants of Nyons in the Rhone-Alps region of what is now France, however, seem to think that Hecataeus was referring to their town. Narbonne is 146 miles from Nyons, and 867 miles from Graz, in Styria, Austria, where Noreia is believed by some to be located.

The Historical Celts

A quote from Herodotus, c. 450 BC:

- ▶ 'The Nile flows out of Libya, cutting through the middle of that country. And as I reason, calculating unknown things from known, it begins at the same distance as the Ister (the Danube). For the Ister, beginning in the land of the Celts and the city of Pyrene, flows through the middle of Europe. **The Celts live beyond the Pillars of Hercules (straits of Gibraltar) and border on the Cynetes, who are the westernmost inhabitants of Europe.** The Ister then flows through all of Europe and empties into the Euxine Sea (Black Sea) at Istria, which Milesian colonists inhabit'.

▶ Translation from: Koch, J.T. (ed), 1995, *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales*, Malden, Massachusetts, Celtic Studies Publications.

Although Herodotus 'The Father of History' is quite wrong about the source of the Danube, his location of the Celts is very specific – beyond the straits of Gibraltar and bordering the westernmost inhabitants of Europe. Another Greek, Ephorus, in the fourth century BC states that Celtica is so large that it includes most of Iberia as far as Cadiz (Cadiz being very close to the straits of Gibraltar).

Some commentators use this extract to imply that the Celts were present in both Iberia and at the correct source of the Danube in southern Germany, but this may well be wishful thinking. Herodotus was not particularly interested in the Celts as such, but was trying to compare the length of the Danube with that of the Nile, a task made much easier if he believed, quite incorrectly, that the Danube had its source in the extreme west of Europe.

This quote may be responsible for the association between the Celts and the Danube, such as locating Noreia in Austria rather than southern Gaul (see previous slide).

The Historical Celts

A quote from Julius Caesar, c. 55 BC:

- ▶ *'Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres, quarum unam incolunt Belgae, aliam Aquitani, tertiam qui ipsorum lingua Celtae, nostra Galli appellantur'.*
- ▶ *'Hi omnes lingua, institutis, legibus inter se differunt. Gallos ab Aquitanis Garumna flumen, a Belgis Matrona et Sequana dividit'.*

And a translation:

- ▶ 'Gaul is a whole divided into three parts, one of which is inhabited by the Belgae, another by the Aquitani, and a third by a people called in their own tongue Celtae, in the Latin Galli'.
- ▶ 'All of these are different one from another in language, institutions, and laws. The Galli are separated from the Aquitani by the river Garonne, from the Belgae by the Marne and the Seine'.

▶ Translation from: Edwards, H.J. 1986, *Caesar: The Gallic War, An English Translation*, London, Heinemann.

The Aquitani, given their location, are likely to be Basques. However, the rest of Gaul is occupied by two large groups, one in the south and the other in the north, both containing numerous tribes. The Celts occupy only the south and speak a different language to their northern neighbours.

Diodorus Siculus, also in the first century BC, informs us that:

'It is useful now to point out a distinction unknown by most. Those tribes that live inland from Massalia (Marseilles) as well as those around the Alps and on the eastern side of the Pyrenees are called Celts. But those tribes in the northern area near the ocean, those near the Hercynian mountain (probably in today's Czech republic) and those beyond as far as Scythia are called Galatae. The Romans, however, group all these tribes together as Galatae'.

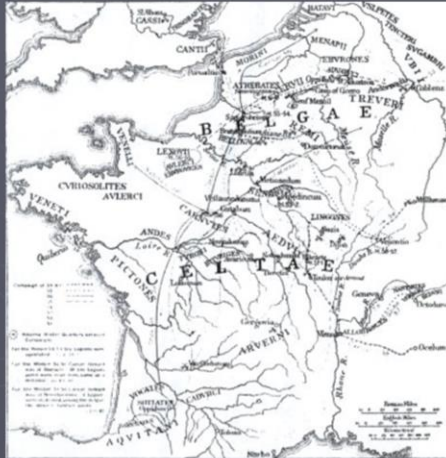
(Translation taken from: Koch, J.T. (ed), 1995, *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales*, Malden, Massachusetts, Celtic Studies Publications).

Despite Diodorus' distinction, it is no great leap to link the words 'Celtae' and 'Galatae'. If so, then that would seem to contradict Caesar. We may simply then have a case here of 'not the same but similar'.

The Historical Celts

Map from: Edwards, H.J. 1986, *Caesar: The Gallic War, An English Translation*, London, Heinemann.

► Caesar's Gaul



The Greek geographer Strabo, writing slightly later in the first century BC has the Belgae living all along the ocean between the Rhine and the Loire, in a similar location to the Galatae of Diodorus Siculus (see notes from the previous slide).

It's worth noting, incidentally, that as far as Britain and Ireland are concerned, no historical source ever called the inhabitants of either island Celts.

How is it then, that some people in these islands ever came to be called Celts at all?

We need to look to the linguistic world for the answer to that.

The Linguistic Celts

- ▶ Brittonic is the earliest known language from the island of Britain
- ▶ Goidelic (Gaelic) is the earliest known language from the island of Ireland
- ▶ Celtic was not used as a label to link Brittonic, Gaelic and the ancient languages of Gaul until the eighteenth century

The linguistic Celts, unlike the historical ones, are centred around the ancient languages of Britain and Ireland. Brittonic is the earliest known language from the island of Britain, and Gaelic (or Goidelic) is the earliest known language from the island of Ireland.

Both of these have since split into modern languages, in much the same way that Latin split into the Romance languages of Italian, Spanish, Romanian, French, and so on. Brittonic gave rise to Cymraeg (Welsh), Kernuak (Cornish) and Brezhoneg (Breton), while the original Gaelic language divided into Irish, Manx and Scottish Gaelic.

But if no historical source ever called these people Celts, where did this label come from?

The Linguistic Celts

- ▶ George Buchanan, in the 16th century, was the first to use the Celtic name for inhabitants of Britain and Ireland when he linked Gaelic (but not Brittonic) to Gaulish
- ▶ Paul-Yves Pezron extended this in the eighteenth century by linking Brittonic to Gaulish (Brittonic is actually closer to Gaulish than Gaelic is)
- ▶ Edward Lhuyd linked Gaulish to both Brittonic and Gaelic - and Brittonic and Gaelic to each other
- ▶ Earlier speakers of Gaelic and Brittonic languages appeared unaware of any common origin
- ▶ They did not refer to themselves as Celts (but that doesn't mean that the theory of common origin was incorrect)

The name Celts was first used in this way in the 16th century by the Scottish scholar George Buchanan. However, he only applied it to Gaelic speakers, thinking that the historical Celts had introduced that language into Ireland from southern Gaul. Brittonic, he thought, had been brought to Britain across the channel from northern Gaul, in keeping with the distinction mentioned in The Historical Celts above.

Following on from Buchanan, at the beginning of the 18th century, the scholar Edward Lhuyd noticed similarities between the Welsh and Irish languages. It had long been known that the modern Brittonic languages were from the same source, and likewise the Gaelic languages, but the link between the Brittonic group and the Gaelic group was a revelation. In addition, Lhuyd asserted that both these groups also shared links with the languages of ancient Gaul. This new wider grouping needed a name, and, possibly because Brittonic would have been linked to the United Kingdom of the day, and Gaulish similarly linked with the French state, the Celtic label was the one that became established.

We have no evidence to suggest that Brittonic or Gaelic speakers prior to these discoveries ever called themselves Celts or were aware of any shared origin. Although this does indicate a lack of a common identity during the historical era, it does not mean that the scholars referred to above were wrong in their assumptions of a common source. We can be fairly certain that no-one in historical times ever referred to themselves as an Indo-European (see below) but that in itself does not invalidate all the work done on linking languages from India to Iberia, Ireland and Iceland into a connected family.

The Linguistic Celts

Common Celtic ancestor reconstructed from:

- ▶ Brittonic, spoken predominantly in Britain
- ▶ Goidelic, spoken predominantly in Ireland
- ▶ Gaulish, spoken predominantly in Gaul (and through migration, as Galatian, in Anatolia)
- ▶ Celtiberian, spoken predominantly in Iberia
- ▶ Lepontic, spoken predominantly in northern Italy and southern Switzerland

It is important to remember that the Celtic label refers to a branch of languages believed to have sprung from a common source, and not to any one single language of the time. There is not one single word of evidence from a language called Celtic, what we have are various ancient languages believed to have their origins in this hypothetical tongue. The most important of these are shown above.

These individual languages are real enough, having left evidence of their existence in inscriptions, place names, personal names, coinage and so on. However, due to differences already in existence between them, they have themselves been sub-divided into 'P-Celtic' and 'Q-Celtic', labels which were chosen because many words containing a P or B sound in the one group, have an equivalent word with a Q or C/K sound in the other.

Brittonic, Lepontic and most evidence from Gaul is 'P-Celtic' (Gaulish is usually classified as a P-Celtic language), while Gaelic, Celtiberian and a small amount from Gaul is 'Q-Celtic'.

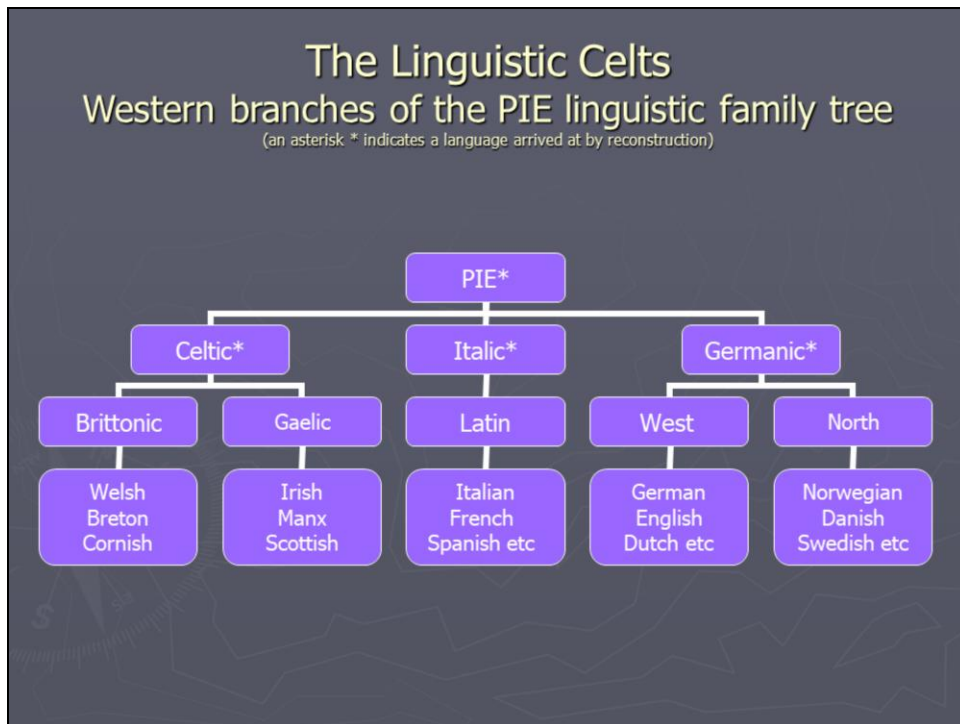
Many linguists believe that the 'Q-Celtic' languages, particularly the Gaelic ones, show more archaic features than the others, although, ironically, Goidelic is the latest language of them all to be attested, with no actual evidence prior to about the fourth century AD. In any event, the oldest actual attestations in any of these languages are inscriptions in Lepontic, and date from the sixth century BC. What this means, of course, is that from the time of the earliest ever historical reference to the Celts, the linguists' Celtic language had already undergone the P/Q split, and was therefore at least two different languages. Whatever language the historical Celts were speaking, it was not the linguists' Common Celtic.

The thought-provoking suggestion made in 2008 by Professor John. T. Koch (see <http://www.wales.ac.uk/Resources/Documents/Research/ODonnell.pdf>) that the Tartessian language of south-west Spain and southern Portugal should be classified as belonging to the Celtic group would push back the earliest attested date of a Celtic language by up to two centuries, and would also neatly coincide with the earliest historical locations of the Celts. It would not, however, alter the fact that both P and Q-Celtic languages were in existence from the time of their earliest mention in the historical record.

The Linguistic Celts: Minding your Ps and Qs

English	Brittonic (Welsh)	Gaelic (Scottish)
Four	P edwar	C eithir
Head	P en	C eann
Son	Mab	Mac

As the 'Continental Celtic' languages were all dead by the sixth century at the latest, it is best to show examples from Brittonic and Gaelic languages (above). Many words with a P/B in the P-Celtic examples have a Q-Celtic equivalent in C (or possibly K or Q – depending on the orthography of the individual language). The relevant letters have been highlighted in bold in the examples above.



The link between Brittonic and Gaelic, although remarkable for the time, was part of an era of discovery which later claimed even more links between other languages of Europe, Asia Minor and the Indian sub-continent. In 1786, Sir William Jones claimed stronger affinities between Latin, Greek and Sanskrit ‘than could possibly have been produced by accident’, which would eventually result in a hypothetical ancestor to them all, known today as Proto-Indo-European (or PIE), usually represented in the form of a family tree.

None of the languages on the top two levels of the above tree (i.e. neither PIE nor Celtic, Italic and Germanic) is an attested language. They have all being arrived at by a process known as linguistic reconstruction, that is, using actual attested languages as a basis for speculating their likely parent. Not until we reach the third level of the list above do we find any languages which have provided actual physical proof of their existence. The lowest level gives us the languages still spoken in modern times.

There are many more branches to PIE than those shown above, including many languages of Eastern Europe and the Indian sub-continent.

The Linguistic Celts

- ▶ A strong case for believing that Brittonic and Gaelic **do** share a common origin, however:
- ▶ Both groups have been separate since their first ever mention in the historical record
- ▶ Shared origin often used anachronistically, where this is not the case with other groups
- ▶ At one level further back on the family tree, both groups share a common origin with groups stretching from Iceland to India

The case for Brittonic and Gaelic sharing a common ancestor cannot seriously be questioned, nor can their links with Gaulish and other Continental Celtic languages, and many of the controversies surrounding the Celts today are based, not upon their linguistic origins, but on excessive, superfluous or anachronistic use of the term 'Celt' or 'Celtic'.

We know, for example, without a shadow of doubt, that both French and Spanish are derived from Latin, the language of the Romans, yet no historian argues that England was conquered by the Romans in 1066 or South America by Roman conquistadors. Conversely though, scholars of early medieval history, who would never lump the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings together under the name 'Germans' will often refer collectively to the Britons and Gaels as Celts, at a time when they were clearly at least as separate as these two Germanic peoples.

The Archaeological Celts

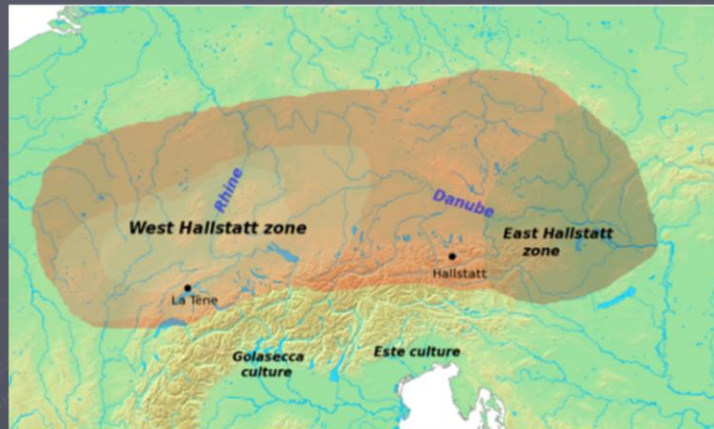
- ▶ Two archaeological cultures associated with the Celts
- ▶ Both discovered in the nineteenth century
- ▶ Western Hallstatt stage D, dated to the sixth and fifth centuries BC
- ▶ La Tène, from the fifth to first centuries BC
- ▶ Both originated in temperate Europe north of the Alps

The Archaeological Celts, unlike both the historical and linguistic ones, are traditionally centred around temperate Europe north of the Alps, in modern day Switzerland, Austria, Bohemia, parts of Germany and parts of northern France; an area now commonly referred to as the 'Celtic homeland'.

Archaeologists have associated two periods with the Celts, firstly the Hallstatt period, particularly Hallstatt D1 and D2-3 dating from c.600 - 450BC, followed by the even more closely associated La Tène period lasting from the fifth century BC until the Roman conquest. Hallstatt and La Tène are both sites discovered in the nineteenth century.

The Archaeological Celts

► The Hallstatt 'Homeland': (image courtesy of Dbachmann)



Hallstatt is named after a remote site in Austria's Salzkammergut, south west of Salzburg, which contained a huge cemetery consisting of over 1000 burials. The material culture associated with it is usually credited with marking the beginning of the European Iron Age. The Hallstatt area is normally geographically split into an Eastern zone comprising parts of Austria, Moravia, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia, and a Western zone including other parts of Austria, Switzerland, Bohemia, Germany, and eastern France. Hallstatt itself is on the border between these two. The Western zone is held to be Celtic. The west Hallstatt area is famous for its fortresses, such as the Heuneburg, which overlooks the Danube, and its princely burial tombs like the ones at Hochdorf, near modern day Stuttgart, and Vix, at Mont Lassois overlooking the River Seine. The burial tombs are believed to be the graves of high-ranking members of society, often associated with a nearby fortress. The prince or princess would be buried alongside grave goods, including, most distinctively, a four wheeled wagon, probably provided for the deceased's journey into the next world. The finds at these sites date from the fifth and sixth centuries BC, and show evidence of links with the Mediterranean world, with both the Etruscans, and the Greeks. As these sites are contemporary with the first historical records of Celts made by the Greeks (see Historical Celts above), it would seem fair to wonder why there aren't sites such as these inland from Marseilles, or beyond the pillars of Hercules, or in most of Iberia as far as Cadiz.

Herodotus' statement that the Danube rises in the land of the Celts may be significant here, as if he has incorrectly placed the source of the Danube in Iberia, then alternative evidence is required to firmly place Hallstatt as a Celtic 'homeland'. We do have evidence of a Celtic presence this far east. The name of the Boii tribe, for instance, can still be seen in the name of Bohemia, and the name of the ancient Hercynian forest is believed by some to be Proto-Celtic. However, there is a difference between being *the home of (some) Celts* and *the homeland of the Celts*, whence all other Celts originate, and there may have been very different material cultures in the different Celtic speaking areas.

The Archaeological Celts

► The La Tène 'Homeland': (image courtesy of wiglaf)



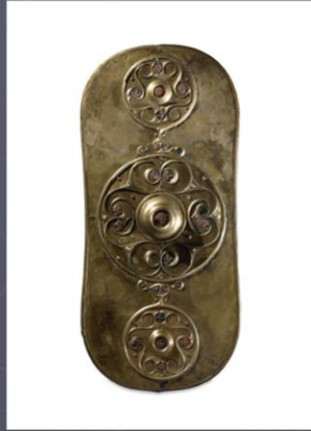
La Tène is named after a site at Lake Neuchatel in Switzerland, where over 2500 objects, mostly metal, have been found. The area central to the La Tène culture, despite the location of the site itself, is immediately above the west Hallstatt zone from Champagne to Bohemia. Britain first starts to show evidence of La Tène influence in the fourth or third centuries BC, later than mainland Europe. The characteristic patterns of the La Tène style are what most people recognise as Celtic art forms today.

Interestingly, the two Celtic areas noted for their significant lack of La Tène material are Iberia and Ireland, both of which produced 'Q-Celtic' languages. A large part of southern Gaul is also lacking.

This brings us to the very interesting question as to whether or not we can equate ethnic groups with archaeological remains in the first place. If we cannot, then there is no justification for labelling materials as Celtic anyway, but if we can, then we must have two groups, one with La Tène archaeology, and the other without.

The Archaeological Celts: An example of La Tène

► The Battersea Shield: (image and notes courtesy of BM images)



Iron Age, 350-50 BC. Found in the River Thames at Battersea Bridge.

The Battersea shield was not made for serious warfare. It is too short to provide sensible protection. The thin metal sheet and the complicated decoration would be easily destroyed if the shield was hit by a sword or spear. Instead, it was probably made for flamboyant display. The highly polished bronze and glinting red glass would have made for a great spectacle. It was finally thrown or placed in the River Thames, where many weapons were offered as sacrifices in the Bronze Age and Iron Age.

Iron Age shields are not commonly found. Those shields excavated from Iron Age burials were made of wood, sometimes covered with leather. They have very few metal parts. The Battersea shield is not in fact a complete shield, but only the facing, a metal cover that was attached to the front of wooden shield. It is made from different parts of sheet bronze, held together with bronze rivets and enclosed in a binding strip. All the rivets are hidden by overlaps between different components where the panels and roundels were originally attached to the organic backing.

All of the decoration is concentrated in the three roundels. A high domed boss in the middle of the central roundel is over where the handle was underneath. The La Tène-style decoration is made using the repoussé technique, emphasized with engraving and stippling. The overall design is highlighted with twenty-seven framed studs of red enamel (opaque red glass) in four different sizes, the largest set at the centre of the boss.

The Archaeological Celts

- Map of beehive quern stone distribution in Ireland, from: Raftery, B. 1994, *Pagan Celtic Ireland*, London, Thames & Hudson



Ireland does have some evidence of La Tène, but it arrived late, spreading in the second and first centuries BC, and may well have been introduced from northern Britain. Ireland in fact has a striking divide between north and south, with La Tène material evident in the north and absent from the south. Nothing illustrates this division better than the distribution of beehive quern stones shown above.

What conclusions should be drawn from distributions such as these? – that the northern half of the island was home to a different ethnic group to the south, or that the people in the northern half of Ireland spoke a different language to those in the southern half, or perhaps that there is no direct link between the ways in which language and material culture spread, and that you cannot tell what language a people spoke from the technology that they used?