

What is 'Celtic'?

The 'Celts' are a people of the ancient world frequently referred to by classical authors. The peoples of the British Isles – Britons and Irish – were not classified as Celts by ancient writers. Probably they did not think of themselves as Celts either. Nevertheless, they spoke very closely related languages to those of the Continental Celts. When languages were classified in the 18th century, the label 'Celtic' was chosen for the group that included both the languages of the Continental Celts (such as Gaulish) and Welsh and Irish.

This was a reasonable decision just from the point of view of *language*, but it begs a very important question: to what extent did the Continental Celts and the ancient Britons and Irish share a common Celtic culture and identity? For most of the 20th century the answer to this has been a positive one. Traditional Celtic studies emphasizes similarities and continuities between the ancient Celts, Britons and Irish, and also argues that much of that cultural inheritance was passed on to the medieval Irish and Welsh and can be seen in their literature. Thus we can talk of 'Celtic culture', 'Celtic heritage', the 'Celtic realms' (the last two are the titles of famous books that follow this paradigm). Such approaches depend on picking out scattered pieces of evidence from different places and different times and stitching them together to make one 'seamless garment' of Celticity.

Celtic revisionism and Celtoscepticism

Recent decades have seen great changes in traditional Celtic scholarship. The impetus for this has partly come from the outside, as archaeologists and ancient historians have questioned the validity of putting all the ancient testimony together in order to speak of 'Celts' as a single, monolithic cultural entity, and even more so have questioned the validity of applying ancient Continental evidence to the study of the medieval Irish and Welsh, who never refer to themselves as Celts or even show any knowledge of the name or awareness of any common cultural inheritance shared between them. In response Celtic scholars have become far more critical of their own inherited ideas: the seamless garment has been shredded.

A Celtic Otherworld?

The Celtic Otherworld forms an important part of the traditional picture of a common Celtic identity. Widely dispersed fragments of evidence are culled from ancient writers and medieval ones to show that the 'Celts' believed in a single Otherworld realm beyond our own. Discrepancies between these sources are smoothed over: for instance, was this Celtic Otherworld seen as being underground, or in mounds (the Irish *síde*), or overseas on an island? Was there just one Otherworld? Why do Irish and Welsh use different words for 'otherworld'?

Reading

First off, here are two chapters which offer classic ‘seamless garment’ accounts by well-regarded scholars who do show an awareness of the difficulties in stitching the material together. There is no need to read both; just choose whichever is available to you. Any popular book on the Celts will provide you with far more uncritical versions of this way of doing scholarship.

Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms* (London, 1967), Chapter 7: ‘Celtic Religion and Mythology and the Literature of the Otherworld’, pp. 134–58.

Nora Chadwick, *The Celts* (Harmondsworth, 1970), Chapter 6: ‘Religion and Mythology’, pp. 141–85.

The next article is a judicious survey of the Celtosceptical debate. It will tell you pretty much what you need to know, but you can use the references in it to read more widely about the arguments if you wish.

Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘Celtomania and Celtoscepticism’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 36 (Winter 1988), 1–35.

Finally, here is an exceptionally important, though not easy, essay, which rethinks the Celtic otherworld in the light of recent trends in scholarship.

Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘*Kaer Sidi* and Other Celtic Otherworld Terms’, in Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 53–78.

We will return to this essay later on in the module.

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