

The Celts Origins to Modern Era Assignment 1 The Hidden Ones

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The Celts Origins to Modern Era Assignment 1:

Write an essay of approximately 4000 words on ONE of the following:

1. *To what extent are history, philology and archaeology in agreement with regard to the geographical location of the ancient Celts?*

The Hidden Ones

One suggested etymology of the name from which we have obtained the modern Celts, *Keltoi*, derives from Proto-Indo-European *kel, and as cognate with Old Irish *celid*, could have been related to the verb 'hides'.¹ One can certainly encounter much difficulty when looking to find them. I will enumerate what can be known of ancient Celtic geographical locations in each three areas of history, philology and archaeology, before elaborating upon the points where there is disagreement in these different fields, and concluding that more of a focus on what makes us human could make for better cooperation from the people behind them.

Stories

The earliest historical accounts attesting the locations of people called Celts, or whom we can infer to have been such, come down to us from Ancient Greek sources beginning in the mid-1st millennium BC, such as Hecateus of Miletus, Herodotus and Xenophon, and then Ephorus, Pytheas and Polybius, to name the most prominent. It may be lamentable that we have such scant evidence from this period, but it may be just as well, and could be considerably worse, since Hecateus and Herodotus, for instance, are considered by many to have been among the very first of historians. We are fortunate then that they wrote anything at all about the Celts, or Keltoi, a term which may have simply meant 'barbarians' or perhaps hints at some natively-derived ethnonym. That their existence is indeed acknowledged at this early time, considering their distance from the Greeks, must speak volumes therefore as to their importance in the ancient world, that they should not have been ignored by such distant commentators.²

¹ John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture: a historical encyclopedia. 5 vols.* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 361

² J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius' (*Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 60, 1959), pp. 189–275.

The very earliest geographical information on the matter derives from a document recorded to have been in the possession of Avienus Festus Rufus, Roman Proconsul of Africa A.D. 366, itself containing information from what was ostensibly a 6th century BC sailing manual called *Ora Maritima*. This work attests to Celtic tribes living in South West Spain, France and even the North Sea, in the early 6th century BC. J. J. Tierney is relieved to note that at the time, in 1959, this account conformed with archaeological data attesting a Celtic presence in such areas estimated to the 7th century BC.³ Only after this do we begin to see the aforementioned ‘first historians’ enter the fray, though they follow without much time passing in between.

In the latter half of the 5th century, Hecataeus of Miletus (c. 550 BC – c. 476 BC) speaks in the *Europa* half of his *Periodos ges* (World Journey) of two Celtic towns on the Southern coast of what is modern-day France, stating the existence of *hei keltikei* beyond these, implied to be to the North of there. This is similar to the *ek Kelton* of the *Histories* by Herodotus of ^{Halicarnassus} Miletus (c. 484? – c. 425 BC), written only around 50 years later, in circa. 425 BC. Since he places the Celts near the Danube, but there has been some disagreement as to where he means precisely, it is uncertain exactly where this land was located, but there is some consensus it might have been the modern Luso-Hispanic peninsula, therefore in the West of Spain again.⁴ By all accounts, Herodotus weaves as much mythology into his accounts as fact. While other writers may have produced annotated chronologies earlier, Herodotus sets out to undertake ‘inquiry’ (from which we gain the modern ‘history’, from *historia*, ‘to investigate’) into the past, that it might not only be recounted, but understood.⁵ However, this perhaps ‘wholistic’ approach of Herodotus also included local mythology and folklore inserted within and without the context of narrative history (as following on from Homer, to whom his predecessor Hecataeus is noted to have owed much himself), thus he has been called both ‘the father of history’ and ‘the father of lies’, and this is a pertinent reminder to modern commentators to take servings of his wisdom with copious pinches of salt.⁶ All the same, we may stand to gain by following in his example, because native history, as folklore, is more akin to mythology than chronicles.

³ Tierney, 1959, p. 193

⁴ Timothy P. Bridgman, ‘Keltoi, Galatai, Galli: Were They All One People?’ (*Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 24/25, 2004), pp. 155–156

⁵ Paul Demont, ‘Figures of Inquiry in Herodotus’s ‘Inquiries’ (*Mnemosyne*, 62 (2), 2009), pp. 179–205

⁶ Juan Luis Vives (1551), in Foster Watson (Trans.), *Vives, on education: a translation of the De tradendis disciplinis of Juan Luis Vives* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1913), p. 152

This is pertinent to the contemporary descriptions of the (possibly) pseudo-mythical Hyperborea, both because Herodotus is one of the first to mention the place, but situates it in Asia, and since the titular Hyperboreans have been made analogous to Celts on more than one occasion – and this has, again, been debated.⁷ Hyperborea was associated with the Celts by Antimachus (c. 400 BC) and Heraclides Ponticus (c. 390 BC – c. 310 BC), possibly considered to have been located beyond what we might today call Cisalpine Gaul, with the Stoic philosopher Posidonius (who wrote a 1st century BC ethnography of the Celts which is unfortunately lost today but was often quoted in the time periods subsequent to its conception) making of its inhabitants the Celtic tribes of Western Europe, though others suggested more Eastern or far-North locations.⁸

Nevertheless, many others refer to Britain in describing Hyperborea, though this does not necessarily help us to locate the Celts. Hecataeus of Abdera says of it in the 4th century that it is an island ‘*both fertile and productive of every crop, and has an unusually temperate climate*’, but also that it is situated ‘*beyond the lands of the Celts*’, so again Celtica would appear to designate Gaul primarily in this and many other cases.⁹ Similarly, the anonymous 1st century BC author of the *Periodos to Nicomedes*, dubbed Pseudo-Scymnus, gives the location to be beyond Gaulish territory again, which has been suggested to mean France with Britain being the Hyperborea beyond,¹⁰ and elsewhere he names Celts in the Adriatic and again in Spain (even reverentially),¹¹ whilst again Hyperborea is placed in the North Sea, this time called ‘the Hyperborean ocean’, by Marcian of Heraclea in *Periplus*, 2. 42 and Ptolemy in *Geographia*, 2. 21. Many other Greeks associated the Hyperboreans with Celts due to an identification of the legendary Riphean mountains with the Alps, and thus we have Cisalpine Gaul potentially attested in an early Greek geographic imagination.¹²

⁷ Timothy P. Bridgman, *Hyperboreans. Myth and history in Celtic-Hellenic contacts* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 27–31

⁸ Bridgman, 2005, pp. 60–79

⁹ Bridgman, pp. 163–173

¹⁰ Lewis Spence, *The Mysteries of Britain* (Mokelumne Hill: Health Research Books, 1996 [1905]), p. 21

¹¹ Bridgman, pp. 194–197

¹² Bridgman, 91

Straying too far into pseudo history could be dangerous but we would be remiss to not try and incorporate some degree of native Celtic perspectives on history, though mangled they may be. For this we can only turn to the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, 'Book of Invasions', which was itself considered history in Ireland even until the 19th century.¹³ Worth noting is that this 11th century AD collection of earlier ideas and accounts made by an anonymous compiler in Middle Irish also attributes a Gaelic descent from a mysterious and mythical set of northern islands comparable to Hyperborea and from which they set sail, or fly, to land in the Sliabh an Iarainn lands of the Eastern Irish coast, which only faces Britain. The islands could perhaps be in the Scottish Highlands.¹⁴

While we can only make informed estimations about these mythical lands, what is more interesting is that the Irish here may have recorded a belief that their forebears believed they shared common ancestry with many European peoples via the mythological progenitor eponymic mothers who come to Ireland with Cessair; with the Thracians and Goths through Triage and Gothiam (also Europeans but could have Celtic connections), with Germans (some of whom, notably Vandals and perhaps Teutons, were Celts), and the Spanish through Espa (The Celtiberians spoke a Gaelic language). However, and most importantly, even the British are given a shared heritage, through Alba, among other characters named after Irish goddesses for companions.¹⁵ Interestingly, the later Nemedians, the Irish ancestors who go 'into the north' of the Hyborean islands to later become the Tuatha dé Danann, are again connected to Britain and it is relayed that the Irish believed they split off into three groups, one of which became the progenitors of all the British people (the pre-Anglo-Saxon native British, that is).¹⁶ A reverence for islands in the vicinity of Britain being associated with divine knowledge might conform with the statements of Julius Caesar, likely derived from the aforementioned highly influential Posidonius ethnography, that the Gauls looked to Britain for the instruction of their priestly Druid class.¹⁷

¹³ Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend & Romance: An encyclopaedia of the Irish folk tradition* (London: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), pp. 296–297.

¹⁴ John Carey, *A new introduction to Lebor Gabála Éirenn. The Book of the taking of Ireland, edited and translated by R.A. Stewart Macalister Vol 1* (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1993), pp. 4-18

¹⁵ Patricia Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2004), p. 85

¹⁶ Ó hÓgáin, 1991, p. 318

¹⁷ Tierney, p. 224

This could be supported by the etymology of the word Nemed describing a priest, poet, noble or Druid (meaning 'holy' or 'divine').¹⁸ These origin stories have been widely dismissed as the inventions of Irish Christians who wished to create parallels between themselves and the Israelites.¹⁹ Though the approximations to Scythians, Goths and Iberians may have been discredited,²⁰ claims of shared British heritage could merit more attention, as they have never been explained away.

These mysterious islands might have been elucidated by the ancient book *On The Ocean*, a highly significant account of a voyage made by Pytheas of Massalia (310–306 BC) circumnavigating the seas surrounding Europe, but it is again lost and only informs us through the writings of later commentators who reference it.²¹ Pytheas seems to have more or less 'discovered' Britain and Ireland from the Greek perspective, sailing up the Atlantic coast, he confirms Celts in Gaul but, as has been noted often, only designates Celtica as Gaul itself, but does not include Britain as a part of this, instead giving us the first attestation of this name for the island, as *Bretannikē*. However, linguistics inform us that this is indeed a Celtic word, from *Pretannia*, the Greek transliteration having been retroactively Latinised by the very Roman sources who grant us this account.²² In addition, Pytheas describes through Diodorus Siculus an agrarian lifestyle along with thatched cottages²³ conforming with the archaeology of the British Isles and roundhouses.²⁴ Finally, Polybius describes Celts in Gaul but also in the Alps and Northern Italy.²⁵

¹⁸ Ó hÓgáin, p. 318

¹⁹ Monaghan, 2004, p. 331

²⁰ Carey, 1993, pp. 9-15

²¹ Tierney, pp. 195-196

²² John Rhys, 'Certain National Names of the Aborigines of the British Isles: Sixth Rhind Lecture' (*The Scottish Review*, XVIII, 1891), pp. 120–143

²³ Diodori Siculi, 'Book V, Sections 21–22', in Peter Wesseling (ed.). *Bibliothecae Historicae Libri Qui Supersunt: Nova Editio* (Argentorati: Societas Bipontina, 1798), pp. 292–297

²⁴ Anne Crone, et al., 'Nasty, Brutish and Short?; The Life Cycle of an Iron Age Roundhouse at Black Loch of Myrton, SW Scotland' (*Journal of Wetland Archaeology*, 18 (2), 2018), 138-162

²⁵ Rachel Pope, 'Re-approaching Celts: Origins, Society, and Social Change' (*J Archaeol Res*, 2021), pp. 23-25

Thus, up until their Romanisation and passing into the early middle ages, we have only unfortunately disparate historical references about the ancient Celts of questionable reliability, but these place their geographical location in North-western Europe, specifically modern day France and Spain, and possibly Britain Ireland if references to the North Sea can be verified, which would be confirmed in native Celtic historical sources from only a handful of centuries after the fact if the Irish texts can be satisfactorily disentangled from Christian revisionism (the systematic methodology for this being not being established – at present).

Names and Places

Philology is not a simply defined discipline. So misunderstood is the term that Harvard Latinist Jan Ziolkowski was prompted to host a conference on the matter of its ^{definition} definition in 1990, and though all present vehemently disagreed that the term is merely a synonym for *linguistics*, misapprehension seems to persist to the present day. He and his cohorts enumerate that though linguistics may be contained within it, what philology is in truth is a far broader subject.²⁶

In particular, philology is a ‘technical study’, appraisal and criticism of literature, generally classical or otherwise old, from a myriad of perspectives, which would include legal treatments, epigraphy, grammar, linguistics, archaeology and, indeed, history.²⁷ Since it is so broad a term, and so many disagree concerning it, we might ask: ‘To what extent are historians, philologists and archaeologists in agreement with regard to the statement that they are philologists?’. Would the breadth of the term disqualify its usage and make it useless, as has been argued the case for Celtic? If philology is a study of written works themselves, then this is an apt criticism of the problem, this is a philological treatment of the disagreement in cross-departmental conclusions in Celtic Studies as to the location (and implied actual existence) of the Celts.

Within the refined purviews of linguistics, for instance, the primary issue is debating both when and where Proto-Indo-European ends and Proto-Celtic begins. Where, in the languages’ origins, can be demonstrated by phonological diversions from PIE via hypothesised Italo-Celtic, maintaining similar open central a:/a vowels, along with front and back short mid o:/o and close or high vowel i:/i and u:/u, as well as a development of initial stress.²⁸

²⁶ Jan Ziolkowski, ‘“What Is Philology”: Introduction’ (*Comparative Literature Studies*, 27 (1), 1990), pp. 1-12.

²⁷ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Writings in general linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 118

²⁸ Peter Schrijver, ‘17. Ancillary study: Sound Change, the Italo-Celtic Linguistic Unity, and the Italian Homeland of Celtic’, in John T. Koch; Barry Cunliffe (Eds.), *Celtic from the West 3: Atlantic Europe in the Metal Ages – Questions of Shared Language* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016), pp. 489–502

These features exhibit enough changes to observe a new language but keep enough similarities that a relationship of linguistic heritage can be found. Where in location, as in, where the people speaking these languages were situated, can be ascertained through toponymy and philological readings of Celtic tribal ethnonyms. Words which can be retraced to original Celtic names, nouns, verbs and adjectives are found in many place names all over Europe, mainly Western, but some central and Northern. Commonly occurring features are often derived from: *briga* 'hill, high place', Welsh *bri* 'honourable, respected' (possibly Welsh *bryn* 'hill'), Irish *brí* 'hill; strength, vigour, significance'; **dūnon* 'fortress', Welsh *dinas* 'city' & *din* 'fortress', Irish *dún* 'fortress'; **magos* 'field, plain', Welsh *maes* 'field', Irish *magh* 'plain'; **windo-* 'white, fair, blessed', Welsh *gwyn/wyn / gwen/wen* 'white, blessed', Old Irish *find*, Irish *fionn* 'fair' – among others.²⁹

These are found in but are not limited to France, Germany, Italy, Austria and Switzerland but all of Europe retains a great many of them, particularly in Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England and Spain, though Italy and other countries more far afield are not excluded from the very long list, with some even in Asia Minor. This toponymical approach may be the best way of uncovering the geographical locations of ancient Celts through philology, which Sims-Williams (2006) calls 'linguistic geography'.³⁰

For some, however, philology can be presented to be in disagreement with history in regard to the location of the ancient Celts, due to the quarrel over the interchangeability of Celtic ethnonyms *Keltoi*/*Galatai* and the *Celtica* of ancient geography not including Britain.³¹ This is probably because philologists pride themselves on precision, as they depend on it to make deductions about phylogenetically treated questions of language evolution, according to Heggarty (2006).³² All the same, where in time the origin and spread of the Celtic language was situated is not so evidently discovered and proves to be the point of contention with archaeology.

²⁹ Ian M. Matley, 'Elements of Celtic Place-names' (*Names: A Journal of Onomastics*, 13 (1) 1965), 39-54

³⁰ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Ancient Celtic Place-Names in Europe and Asia Minor' (*Publications of the Philological Society*, 39, 2006), pp. 6-400

³¹ Pope, 2021, pp. 49-50

³² Paul Heggarty, 'Interdisciplinary Indiscipline? Can Phylogenetic Methods Meaningfully Be Applied to Language Data — and to Dating Language?', in Peter Forster; Colin Renfrew (eds.), *Phylogenetic Methods and the Prehistory of Languages* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2006), pp. 184

Glottochronology is the attempt to date sound shifts in language evolution and it is used by *Celtic from the West* proponents, but its reliability has been very much questioned and the theory encounters much criticism simply for its association with it. It should nonetheless not be wholly dismissed because of this, especially since *Celtic from the West* lines up the best with knowledge of Celtic geography from history, in comparison with the orthodox view of the *Celtic from the East*, via the older Halstatt-La Tène model.³³

Thus, archaeology is in disagreement with philology. Though archaeology can agree with the descriptions of the ancient world from history with material culture findings, it cannot confirm in isolation that these physical examples are firmly equated to specific cultural trends and confined to ethnic groups with specific language ties.³⁴ This is because the primary goal of archaeology is dating, as without knowing the context for a piece of material culture may just as well be useless to the archaeological record,³⁵ so it is logical and natural that those in this field should encounter disagreements with philology, which can confidently trace logical stages of evolution and genealogy in language, but this area of study lacks the necessary footholds to always place these phases into strictly defined timeframes.³⁶

Therefore, since Celtic has been reduced to functioning merely as a linguistic definition for many, Celtic scholars undergo a crisis of identity because there is reluctance to underpin the philological with the archaeological and historical.³⁷ However, if extant Celtic-language folkloric and mythological material can be considered to constitute a part of the historical sources, then they are also in agreement with archaeology since the names of gods found in these texts are also found in archaeological material. To pursue, since linguistics are necessary to decipher the inscriptions found in this archaeological data, we may see that archaeology will find common ground with philology in the future, by necessity.

³³ Heggarty, 2006, 184

³⁴ Johnnie William Gallacher, 'Celtic origins: Archaeologically speaking', in Joanna Kopaczyk & Robert McColl Millar (Eds.), *Language on the move across domains and communities. Selected papers from the 12th triennial Forum for Research on the Languages of Scotland and Ulster, Glasgow 2018*. Aberdeen: FRLSU, 2020), p. 189

³⁵ Linda E. Patrik, 'Is There an Archaeological Record?' (*Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, 8, 1985), pp. 27–62

³⁶ Eoin MacWhite, 'Problems of Irish Archaeology and Celtic Philology' (*Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 25 (1), 1956), pp. 1–29

³⁷ John R. Collis, 'Celts ancient and modern: recent controversies in Celtic studies' (*Studia Celtica Fennica*, 14, 2017), p. 60

Celtic inscriptions and epigraphy from the Roman period have been shown to indicate power dynamics and structures upon which the Roman Empire depended, and which permeated the entire material reality of the tribes under Roman rule. Be this as it may, there exists no cross-national collection of extant inscriptions, many of which feature matching names with identical etymology. An analysis of these inscriptions would allow for the merging of history, for the context surrounding the finds, along with archaeology, which can date the material culture associated directly with or in the vicinity of the inscriptions, whilst philology disposes of the necessary tools capable not only of deciphering the texts more confidently but also building portfolios around specific localised gods by constituting a tailored background. Since the inscriptions post-date Roman occupation in all cases, it would be necessary to reverse-engineer them, and this could only be possible with cross-disciplinary collaboration with history and archaeology. A compiled database of these identification pieces for specific sites could then allow for cross referencing confirming the exact extent of Celtic peoples known to the Roman world. This would enable an agreement between history, philology and archaeology in regard to the geographical location of the ancient Celts. In this way, we would gain ethnographic insight about the ancient Celts as informed by archaeology built upon their beliefs and fossilising their agency in thoughtforms constructed from their living reality and their day-to-day lives. Too much energy has been spent on discussions of ‘power structures’ vilifying the Romans for their analogue potential in post-Colonial criticisms, when the vestiges they left behind ought to be exploited as a useful set of ethnographic, textual references to a cultural environ about which we are in dire need of more wholistic clarification and less pedantic deconstruction.³⁸

The objective should certainly be to aim for differentiating individual Celtic tribes from one another by concentrated and personalised treatments of localised geographical and philological application of investigative research, but one must construct a bigger picture before being able to focus on the specific details. Rachel Pope also concludes her essay by envisioning a future focus on local studies but fails to understand the practical drawbacks in lacking a larger cultural environ in which situate various sets of interrelated people, as distinct as they may be.

³⁸ Jane Webster, “‘Interpretatio’: Roman Word Power and the Celtic Gods” (*Britannia*, 26, 1995), p. 161

Anthropology is, after all, composed of the study, *logos*, of people, *anthropos*, and not merely stories, names, and places.³⁹

Conclusion

Ultimately, we can find much discourse and discord between the fields of history, philology and archaeology as to the geographical location of the ancient Celts, but this is primarily due to fundamental differences in philosophy and application of specialised methodology from their respective backgrounds. This means that while they do disagree, they do not necessarily have to. Thus, it may be the agendas and biases implicit in these different but often interrelated fields of study which impact upon their ability to cooperate. As one mode of thought alters, it will inevitably cause a chain reaction in the other disciplines so that change will come about, whether easy or no, and whether we may want it or not.

The hope is that where there is a will to cooperate, there will be a way. The ideal undertaking would then be to take a wholistic approach and focus on more cultural, religious and ritual studies, that the *anthropos* be not overlooked in the *logos*.

Words: 4000

³⁹ James Hunt, 'Introductory Address on the Study of Anthropology' (*The Anthropological Review*, 1 (1), 1863), p. 1

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The Celts Origins to Modern Era Assignment 1 The Hidden Ones

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

68/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

Looking firstly at the *content* of the essay. The Irish *celid* (p. 1) is of course cognate with the Welsh *celu* (to hide), which, when the prefix *dat-* is added, reverses the meaning leaving us with *datgelu* (to "unhide"), i.e., *to reveal*.

The section on history produces a detailed account. The point about the inclusion of the *Keltoi* in accounts by classical sources being an indication of their importance is well made, while the references to Herodotus give us fair warning that we should not take Herodotus' word as being factually accurate in the way we might expect from a modern historian. This same caution then, should be used when considering any content from pseudo-histories such as the *Book of Invasions* (p. 4) as noted on page 5.

Pytheas' journey and the origin of *Pretannia* are very relevant to the essay, but the description of France and (particularly) Spain as being in North-western Europe, (p. 6) is something of a stretch geographically.

The point about the definition of philology (p. 6) is a fair one, and so expands the scope of the current assignment (or not if the other disciplines are deemed part of it). However, trying to establish phonological changes using only the written word is always going to be a difficult (if not impossible) task. The section on place-names shows evidence of good research, and their use as a means of establishing the geographical spread of the ancient Celts (p. 7) is sound advice.

As for folklore and mythology, they should of course be considered (p. 8), but only as *historical* sources within the context of the time when they were written and their intended audience (just as should be the case with "Classical" sources). The point about "vilifying the Romans" (p. 9) is

perfectly valid, and the Conclusion (p. 10) offers hope for a more collaborative future.

As for *style and presentation*, all in all, this essay is well-written in language of a standard appropriate for work at this level. It also shows evidence of wider background reading and represents a genuine attempt at undertaking the assignment as set.

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Text Comment. Halicarnassus

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