

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

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HPCS7003 The Celts: Origins to the Modern Era

Assignment 1

To what extent are History, Philology, and Archaeology in agreement with regard to the geographical location of the Celts?

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The legacy of the people we call the 'Celts' has been the subject of much energetic debate amongst academics from antiquity to the modern day. Contemporary use of the term 'Celt' and 'Celtic' has extended beyond describing a people of late Bronze Age Europe, to also denote a modern cultural and nationality identity. Detangling the term's present significance is a fascinating if intimidating task, and foundational in understanding the cultural, social, and political landscape of north west Europe. However, the focus of this work will be to examine the 'Celts' in the original classical sources, and to compare how historical definitions interact with subsequent use of 'Celt' and 'Celtic' in the disciplines of philology and archaeology.

Historians and Classicists use 'Celt' to refer to the people recorded by Greek and Roman authors^{as} living in north and western Europe that shared a similar language, culture, and societal structure. Philologists use the term to refer to the linguistic group that contains the Brittonic and Goidelic living languages of Brittany, Britain, and Ireland, as well as the extinct but related languages of Gaul, parts of Iberia, northern Italy and Anatolia.¹ In archaeology, the label "Celtic" is traditionally^{Del.} applied to the material culture Hallstatt and La Tène impulses comprising an area covering modern day southern Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, dated between 700-500 BCE. Problems arise as the nature of Celtic Studies necessitates a great deal of inter-disciplinary dialog. Therefore, a great deal of thought is required when the term Celt is employed, as without clear and thorough signposting, misunderstandings may arise. The consequences of these misunderstandings need to be taken seriously as misinterpreted or misappropriated^{hypotheses} Hypotheses and theories may be generated in the exchange of information from one discipline to another causing new theories to be created which are not questioned by members of other disciplines, only to have their hypotheses appropriated back by the originating discipline, thus creating a self-supporting cycle of falsehoods.² This of course has the potential to hold back advancements in the field of Celtic Studies unnecessarily, wasting time and good academic talent in the process.

One of the most contentious areas of investigation when studying the Celts of the Iron Age is the question of their location – the so called 'Celtic homeland'. As there are differences in the meaning of the term Celt between historians, linguists, and archaeologists, so too are there disputes over where the location of this homeland might be, with very few (if any) locations and ancient peoples that satisfy all groups at once. To highlight and aid with this essay, how these disciplines agree or diverge will be examined using the two main hypotheses for Celtic origin and expansion across Europe, the so-called *Celtic from the East*, and the *Celtic from the West* hypotheses. The main discussion will aim to show how the three disciplines are generally at odds, rather than in agreement with each other, illustrated by exploring selected limitations of the *Celtic from the East* and *Celtic from the West* hypotheses from Patrick Sims-Williams most recent analysis. Finally, this essay will end by advocating for better dialog between the three disciplines on the matter in order to eliminate circular arguments built on cross-disciplinary miscommunication and interpretation.

Classical Celt

'Celt' was first applied to people living in^{Del.} North Western Europe by Hecataeus c. 550 BCE in his work *Periodos ges* – of which we only have fragments in a secondary source written over one thousand years later. Here he describes *Massalia* as in the land of the Ligurians which is near *Celtica* (the land of the Celts), and names Narbon and Nyrax as two Celtic cities. The locations of *Massalia*

¹ J. Wooding, 'The Idea of the Celt', in *Celts and Christians*, ed. by M. Atherton (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), pp. 47-49.

² P. Sims-Williams, 'An Alternative to "Celtic from the East" and "Celtic from the West"', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 30.3 (2020), p. 511.

are *Narbon* are considered to be modern day Marseille and Narbonne respectively, in southern France, however, there remains some dispute over Nyrax, and it has been suggested that Nyrax is the lost centre of the 'Celtic' kingdom of Noricum.³ This would locate Nyrax six hundred miles east of Marseille and Narbonne in modern day Austria, a distance that would include crossing the Alps and contrasts with the other candidate for the location – Nyons which lies ninety miles north of Marseille. Naturally, it might assume that the locating Nyrax in Austria would be the least logical option. However, Herodotus wrote in his famous history of the ancient Mediterranean that the Celts were a people that lived at the head waters of the Danube, beyond the pillars of Heracles and border the Cynetes people who are the westernmost people in Europe.⁴ For all these things to be true, then the Danube, which Herodotus tells us is as long as the Nile, a fact we know to be false, would have to run from the very west of Europe, starting in the Iberian Peninsula, across the entire continent to the Black sea.⁵ It seems quite obvious therefore that Herodotus was not in possession of an accurate geographical map of Europe. This, however, has implications for later claims that the Celts *did* live at the source of the Danube, in the southern German Alps, and is why Noria is favoured by archaeologists as the second city Hecataeus described. This has led to the identification of Hallstatt and the later La Tène material cultures as being 'Celtic' by archaeologists and is a key part of the argument for the *Celtic from the East* hypothesis. For the next two centuries the Celts were recorded as moving South into Northern Italy and through Greece to Asia minor causing the sack of Delphi in 279BCE and Rome in 390BCE⁶

Although Hecataeus and Herodotus are perhaps the most cited ancient sources when locating the Celts, they are not the only ones. Here we encounter another problem with the classical authors, that being that accounts differ in what name they give the same people. Words 'Celtae', 'Gallii'/'Galatae' seemingly to describe the same groups which increases the confusion of placing them.⁷ Diodorus, in his *Biblioteca historia* states that the tribes from *Massalia* to the Pyrenees (southern France/ eastern Spain) are called the Celts, but those in the northern area and near the Hercynian mountain (modern Czechia) as far as Sythia are known as the Galatae.⁸ But Strabo contradicts Diodorus by equating certain areas with the Belgae – not the Galatae, and Caesar also maintains this distinction.⁹ Whether the Belgae and the Galatae are in fact referencing the same people or not, varies from author to author. Caesar is quite clear about their being a distinction between the two, Strabo conflates them by stating that the Belgae comprised of some of the best warriors of the Galli. Caesar uses three distinct names for the different populations of Gaul, only one of which being 'Galli' and the other two being the 'Aquitani' and the 'Belgae'. Here the term 'Galli' is used to denote the entire population of Gaul (modern France) and thus can be said to be employing the term as a geographical descriptor of all the peoples living in the territory. The ^{Britanni} Britanni of Britain are considered not Celts living beyond Celica according to Pytheas, and yet Caesar and Tacitus refer to the linguistic, cultural, and political links between Britain and the continent citing evidence for tribal names such as *Parisii* on both sides of the channel¹⁰.

³ Sims-Williams, 'An Alternative', pp. 514-515.

⁴ J. Wooding, 'The Idea of the Celt', in *Celts and Christians*, ed. by M. Atherton (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), p. 41.

⁵ Sims-Williams, 'An Alternative', p 515.

⁶ Wooding, 'The Idea', p. 41.

⁷ Ibid. p. 40.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ P. Sims-Williams, 'Celtomania and Celtoscepticism', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 36 (1998), p. 26.

What should be obvious from the above summary is how inconsistent the classical sources were regarding not only *where* the Celts were, but also *who* in fact they were. Various groups are lumped together under the same name by some or are distinguished as discrete populations by others. Similarly, the question as to whether 'Celtae', 'Galatae' etc. constitutes an ethnic or a geographical term seems to vary across the sources.¹¹

In summary, though the historical sources are confused, they overlap in citing the Celts in southern Gaul with a possible territory stretching between the source of the Danube in southern Germany to the straits of Gibraltar in southern Spain. However, the conflicting nature of the accounts, compounded by the fact that many of the original manuscripts have been lost to us, compromises their objectivity and accuracy.

The linguistic, and the archaeological Celt

'Celtic' in philological circles signifies the Indo-European languages spoken by people called Celts (Gauls, Galatians etc) in the classical sources, that have been identified from inscriptions in areas they were known to inhabited.¹² It also refers to the extant descendants of those languages still spoken in the west of the British Isles and north west France (Breton, Irish, Scots Gaelic, and Welsh). All of the Celtic languages fall into one of two groups, those being P-Celtic (languages that adopted the P/B sound, such as Lepontic and modern Welsh) and those described as Q-Celtic (Languages that kept a Q or C/K sound, i.e., Celtiberian and Modern Irish). The distribution of finds of inscriptions with Celtic and proto- Celtic languages on broadly agree with the classical records, and thus linguists can agree with historians locating the ancient Celts in southern Gaul, the Iberian Peninsula, with expansions into northern Italy (Lepontic culture) and Anatolia (Galatians). S

Importantly, however, while philologists can infer a great deal about lost proto-languages by working backwards from their descendants, their tools for localizing them in space and time are inadequate¹³. Therefore, it relies heavily on historical and archaeological models to track movements of Celtic populations through time to explain their modern distribution in the British Isles. The modern distribution of Celtic languages in north-west Europe provides a 'fly in the ointment' for this agreement between the historical and philological perspectives, as Britain was noted by Caesar and Tacitus amongst others, as being populated by a people who were *not Celts*.¹⁴

Philology therefore deviates from history by also including the modern Celtic nations of northern France and the British Isles in its geography of Celtic territory. That is not to say that these nations are regarded as a 'homeland', but debates as to how the Celtic languages ended up occupying their current spread have been complicated by the equating of Celtic languages with archaeological, ethnic, and biological homogeneity.¹⁵

For archaeologists, 'Celts' are associated with the Hallstatt and La Tène material cultures of the southern alps, covering an area that was known to the Romans and Greeks as the Celtic Kingdom of Noricum. The main reason for their label as the site of a 'Celtic homeland' is due to Herodotus citing the area at the source of the Danube in 450BCE, though as we have seen, the geographical accuracy of this citation is questionable.

¹¹ Sims-Williams, 'Celtomania', p. 25.

¹² Sims-Williams, 'An Alternative', pp. 511.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Sims-Williams, 'Celtomania', p. 26.

¹⁵ Sims-Williams, 'An Alternative', pp. 511.

The Hallstatt area (fl.c.750-600BC) is split into an eastern Zone which includes parts of Austria, Slovenia, Hungary and Croatia, and a western zone encompassing areas of western Austria, southern Germany, Switzerland, and eastern France. It is this western zone containing the later C and D phases which is traditionally held by archaeologist to be the Celtic area. The La Tène cultural event lies immediately north of the west Hallstatt zone between north east France and Bohemia, with sites dating from the mid Iron age between 500-100BCE, directly preceding the Roman Imperial period. It has been argued that the closeness of the two cultural events geographically covering areas where Herodotus placed the Celts and where evidence of proto-Celtic languages has been discovered, represents a succession from Hallstatt culture to La Tène. In other words, that this area of central Europe is where pre-Roman Celtic peoples developed a distinct material culture and language from existing Proto-Indo-European language and represents a 'Celtic homeland' from which subsequent migration events occurred.¹⁶

Celtic from the East vs Celtic from the West

The association between the Hallstatt and La Tène and the Celts has been prominent in European archaeological scholarship for over a century. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century French scholars beginning with Bertrand and Reinach¹⁷ laid the foundation by employing somewhat contested interpretations of Hecataeus and Herodotus, as outlined above, to argue that the Celts spread from Noricum at the true source of the Danube in southern Germany westward into France and Italy.¹⁸ This selectively ignored Herodotus's reference to the Iberian Peninsula, the city of Pyrene (thought to be in the Pyrenees), the reference to the pillars of Hercules and that the Celts were the second most western people in Europe after the Cynetes. The *Celtic from the East* hypothesis that came out of this school of archaeological thought proposed that from this area of central Europe, the Celts radiated both east to Anatolia and west to Britain. This was argued to be supported by the discovery of archaeological remains characteristic of La Tène artistic styles, found in north Germany and Britain.

Reflecting on the *Celtic for the East* hypothesis and definitions of the archaeological Celt we see how the two are tightly intertwined. Both selectively ignore definitions of the historical Celt (somewhat confused though it may be) by maintaining that despite what else Herodotus said that the Celt's homeland was at the true source of the Danube. This could potentially be feasible if we were to entertain the idea that the Celts occupied an area that stretched from the Iberian Peninsula to the southern German Alps, or lived in two populations, one in southern Spain, the other in the Alps.¹⁹ However, the lack of La Tène style remains across the territory disputes the notion of a homogeneous culture in these areas and weakens robustness of *Celtic from the East* and the notion of the archaeological Celt. Similarly, areas that speak and have spoken Celtic languages, again including Iberia, but also Ireland, are completely devoid of any Hallstatt or La Tène relics.²⁰ This does not of course mean that such artefacts did not make their way to these areas, but it does underline the discrepancy between the archaeological Celt and the philological Celt as the latter includes these areas in its definition. This draws attention to how the archaeological definition of Celt fails to acknowledge that the material culture of any one group can be transmitted to out groups with whom they do not share any cultural, biological, ethnic or linguistic affinity. This could be achieved by means of trade, increased proximity due to expansion, etc. without replacement of the native population by

¹⁶ Wooding, 'The Idea', pp. 43-45.

¹⁷ A. Bertrand and S. Reinach, *Les Celtes Dans Les Vallées Du Pô et Du Danube*. (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1894), p. 133

¹⁸ Sims-Williams 'An Alternative', p. 513.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 515

²⁰ Sims-Williams, 'Celtomania', p. 30.

the Del. Celtic colonisers.²¹ As Renfrew points out, whether Hallstatt or La Tène chiefs spoke Celtic at all is not proven as archaeology and language do not have to coincide,²² and in the same vein Collis wrote “I am highly sceptical how much archaeology can contribute to the debate. We cannot measure a skull and say what language the man spoke, or usually what language the blacksmith spoke who made a sword, or the warrior who wielded it, unless we have independent information.”²³

How material unity and exchange between elite groups masks actual cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences between populations is overlooked when the definition of the archaeological Celt is employed too liberally. As Wooding states “comparison between material and historical ethnic patterns ... must be argued on the basis of probability, not assumed by association”.²⁴ This and the lack of geographical awareness in Herodotus are regarded as highly problematic by modern Celtic scholars and have contributed to the fall from favour of the Celtic from the East hypothesis as a means of locating the Celts.

But what if Herodotus had been wrong in his assertion that the Celtic homeland was located at the source of the Danube? Looking at his other remarks that the Celts were to be found beyond the pillars of Hercules and were neighbours to the Cynetes in the far west, has provided initial inspiration for the *Celtic from the West* hypothesis as proposed by Cunliffe and Koch.²⁵ Whereas *Celtic from the East* employed the archaeological Celt, *Celtic from the West* instead seeks to use linguist techniques in combination with historical sources to explain perceived concentrations of Celtic speakers along the Atlantic fringe of Europe.²⁶ Cunliffe outlines three pieces of philological evidence to support a Celtic homeland on the Atlantic fringe of Europe, arguing for the use and spread of a Proto-Celtic language as a lingua franca amongst Atlantic populations in contact via trade²⁷. These pieces of evidence are i) the use of glottochronological work – computerized analysis of Celtic Word lists – to establish chronology; ii) ancient Celtic looking place names taken from data from a 2006 Sims-Williams study; iii) Inscriptions found in south western Iberia written in ‘Tartessian’ which Koch has asserted to be a Celtic language.²⁸

Both the evidence provided by glottochronology and the use^{of} ancient looking place names to illuminate ‘Celtic hot spots’ used by Cunliffe to reveal an Atlantic fringe concentration has been heavily criticized, most comprehensively by Patrick Sims-Williams.²⁹ Here Sims Williams deconstructs the conclusions drawn by Cunliffe by demonstrating how glottochronology is an unreliable technique which can produce two very different conclusions from the same data set, referencing studies by Gray et al. and Chang et al which do just that³⁰. Following which he also emphasizes how Celtic seeming names may mislead, for example, as in bilingual communities hybrid names do not necessarily indicate a truly Celtic population but rather “an awareness of the prestige of Celtic

²¹ Wooding, ‘The Idea’, p. 43

²² C. Renfrew, ‘Early Celtic in the West: The Indo-European Context’, in *Celtic from the West 2*, ed. by J.T. Koch and B. Cunliffe (Oxford: Oxbow, 2013), p. 216.

²³ J. Collis, *The Celts: Origins, Myths & Inventions* (Tempus, 2003), p. 209.

²⁴ Wooding, ‘The Idea’, p. 44.

²⁵ B. Cunliffe and J. Koch, *Exploring Celtic Origins: New Ways Forward in Archaeology, Linguistics, and Genetics*. (Oxford: Oxbow, 2019).

²⁶

²⁷ B. Cunliffe, *On the Ocean: The Mediterranean and the Atlantic from Prehistory to AD 1500*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 254.

²⁸ Cunliffe and Koch, ‘Exploring Celtic Origins’.

²⁹ Sims-Williams ‘An Alternative’, pp 516-523.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 518.

Culture”³¹. Next, he contests Koch’s assertion that the ‘Tartessian’ language of south west Iberia is Celtic, pointing out that he is in the small minority of philologists who maintain this perspective³². Finally, Sims-Williams criticises Cunliffe’s suggestion that the Bell Beaker culture from the third millennium BCE can be correlated with supposedly Celtic linguistic data from the first millennium to show a Celtic spread eastward towards central Europe³³.

Apart from being a fairly forceful technical rebuttal of the hypothesis, Sims-Williams’ analysis also provides a case study for the limitations of the linguistic techniques for locating the Celts. By highlighting the pitfalls, he demonstrates the constraints of using language to signify culture or ethnicity, especially when seeking to match linguistic and archaeological data.³⁴

The weaknesses of from both the *Celtic from the East* and the *Celtic from the West* hypotheses illuminate the difficulties that exist when trying to combine evidence from the three disciplines in question.

Discussion

In light of the above study, it seems obvious that few firm conclusions locating the Celts and their “homeland” can be formed outright. Two main issues stand out.

To begin with, the question of where the line is drawn between what is accepted as fact in the historical sources and what can be considered misrepresentation, propaganda or authorial error is a question that has deep ramifications for the quest for a Celtic homeland. Hecataeus is quite clear that the Celts lived north beyond Massalia, a fact that is corroborated by linguistic evidence, though there is no evidence of La Tène archaeology. Similarly, philology and history agree over the Celtiberians, again in the absence of distinctive ‘Celtic material culture’ associated with the southern Alps. However, the only historical reference to the Celts at the source of the Danube is made by Herodotus, whose equation that the river is as long as the Nile stretching across the entirety of the continent is obviously untrue and leads us to wonder how accurate his other assertions are. There is evidence of Celtic languages of course being spoken in the area, but we must again question whether this is an indicator of a Celtic population or of a population that spoke a Celtic language.

The second issue is the disparate objective of each of the three disciplines above. Whereas history is arguably the most insular in its investigations, keeping its discussions within the parameters of what has been written or inscribed by the human hand, both philology and archaeology seek to use it to support their own theories and ~~hypotheses~~ ^{comes}. The issue here is that both disciplines are using the same historical information and applying it to answer very different questions. Philologists main aim is to reconstruct proto languages using comparative methods as we have seen. However, their methods are not able to accurately match these languages with a specific group or ethnicity as much as they can deduce the geographical location of said group at any given point in history. Archaeology, as we have seen is limited to associations that can be inferred between material culture and language, ethnicity and culture. The fact of the matter is, is that a tendency to equate La Tène culture in particular with the Celts still exists in academia.

So, is there a place where the Venn diagram of history, archaeology, and philology ^{comes} together in rare alignment? Actually yes, the Lepontic culture of northern Italy dated around the sixth century

³¹ Sims-Williams ‘An Alternative’, p. 521.

³² Ibid. p. 522.

³³ Ibid. p. 523.

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 516-523.

^{was} BC were a people from northern Europe noted in the historical record, and that have a material culture that has strong parallels with the La Tène and Hallstatt and are known from inscriptions that they left behind to have spoken a P-Celtic language similar to Brittonic and Gaulish. This represents the oldest evidence of a Celtic Language. Furthermore, the inclusion of the P sound signifies that the split between P and Q – Celtic languages had already occurred. However, the historical and material evidence points to a migration event into northern Italy between 550 – 100 BCE from an unknown location, signifying that much is yet to be learned through study of the Lepontic language and  1 archaeology.

As an antidote to some of the issues, Sims-Williams proposes his so-called *Celtic from the Centre* hypothesis which he claims provides a more 'economical view'.³⁵ Here, he advocates for a central European homeland origin fitting in with the historical records of the Galli and Celtae in the second millennium BCE. From here populations spread both east into the alpine region and northern Italy, west into Iberia, and north into Britain gradually supplanting other languages such as eastern Alpine, Tartessian and Pictish.³⁶ Gaul as a homeland is a good candidate as it negates the need to argue that homogenous Celtic languages cover a large territory without dialectic splits. The various expansion events into Iberia, Britain, Italy and Anatolia were characterised by the adoption of local material culture but the retaining of the Celtic language which Sims-Williams maintains is the most likely outcome and would explain why the archaeology in those regions is indistinguishable from non-Celtic peoples.³⁷

Gaul would fit the current facts well in light of new findings. It also allows a more balanced interaction between the three main disciplines where none is taken as gospel to the detriment of the others. This goes a long way in helping minimise the limitations of each definition without forsaking the value each brings to the academic pursuit of the enigmatic Celtic quarry.

Conclusion

^{sources}
What is clear is that one must be discerning deciding which source are the most accurate and relevant to locating the Celts. Classical sources may be a good starting point but are limited by human error and motivation, as well as general lack of accurate information to be working from. The archaeological Celt may have originally been applied in what by today's standards would be considered flawed logic equating ethnic groups with archaeological remains. However, the finding of La Tène archaeology in Celtic eastern areas suggests that there may have been Celtic populations that shared this material culture but that it was not spread across the entire population. Similarly, it cannot be questioned that the Celtic languages of north west Europe were related to those found on the continent that are now extinct. The wisest course for the modern scholar of Celtic studies ^{is} to not accept theories uncritically. ^{Misreadings} of classical texts in the nineteenth century led to the Celts being located in southern Germany, from which the name became attached to the Hallstatt culture. Philologists then used the Hallstatt culture in their own theories on linguistic geography, thus creating a circular argument that builds upon itself³⁸. Sims-Williams proposes the most cautious approach by using the earliest known philological data and classical sources to propose the most economical approach and locating the Celts in and around Gaul, that is until new evidence comes to light³⁹. Whatever circular arguments may be at risk of being created however, the only way to avert this is

³⁵ Sims-Williams 'An Alternative', pp. 523-524.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 523.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 524.

³⁹ Ibid.

by better cross discipline sharing of information and ideas whilst always being critical of the nature and validity of the evidence provided.

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

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

66/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

This essay is in the main written in language of a standard wholly appropriate for work at this level. That said, it does contain a number of typographical or grammatical errors, and so further proofreading before submission is recommended. For future reference, work should be submitted in 1.5 or 2.0 spacing so that comments may be inserted in the exact location if required.

With regard to the essay content, the "*self-supporting cycle of falsehoods*" on page 2 is a neat analysis of the situation, and the point on page 4 about the inconsistency of the classical sources is well made, as is (perhaps even more so) the "*homogeneity*" expected in searches for the Celtic homeland.

The analysis of the *Celtic from the East* hypothesis on page 5 contains some astute observations, particularly on the relationships between language, material culture and ethnicity. Failings in the *Celtic from the West* hypothesis are given similar treatment on pages 6 and 7.

On page 7, the distinction between "*a Celtic population*" and "*a population that spoke a Celtic language*" needs to be further clarified by a definition as to what, if not the latter, determines the former. No doubt, *Celtic from the Centre* will attract its own detractors in the near future

All in all, this is a comprehensive summary of the current scenario which represents a solid attempt at undertaking the assignment as set.

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Comment 1

Livy's *History of Rome* has them in northern Italy in the 7th century BCE.

Text Comment. sources

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Text Comment. Misreadings

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