

BritonsPictsIrish in Medieval times.

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Assignment 2

Under what circumstances can 'Celtic' be considered an appropriate label for the Britons, Gaels and Picts of early medieval Britain and Ireland?

Introduction

The key word in the title of this assignment is 'Celtic'. The four key areas I have identified are: Celtic ethnicity, Celtic language, Celtic art and Celtic spiritualism and Christianity. These areas, I feel are the most relevant and appropriate possible labels for the Britons, Gaels and Picts of the early medieval period in Britain and Ireland.

When researching for this assignment, I found that I did not get very far into a textual source about the late Roman/early medieval periods before the words 'Celt' and 'Celtic' and the complexities often attached to the words, were mentioned. This quote is, I think is a good example of this.

'By the end of the pre-Roman Iron Age, society had evolved forms of organization similar to those encountered by the Romans elsewhere in north-western Europe and had adopted versions of the culture and language we loosely call 'Celtic'. This is a term that it is difficult to avoid completely but it is nowadays heavily overlaid with recent political and cultural nationalisms that are hopelessly confusing when projected back into the ancient world. It is safer to confine the term principally to its conventional uses primarily as labelling a group of languages whose modern descendants include Welsh and Cornish (and in a separate subgroup Gaelic) and to the visual arts and crafts, just as we use 'Gothic' in the context of later medieval architecture and its subsequent stylistic revivals without nowadays suggesting any ethnic connection with the ancient Goths.'¹

Ethnicity

We know that the term Celt was not used by Classical authors or by the people of Britain and Ireland themselves.

'It is a well-known and often repeated, fact that no classical writer whose work survives ever referred to the inhabitants of Britain or Ireland as Celts. It could, of course, be argued that this observation alone cannot be taken to mean that they were not Celtic in some way, but the fact remains that the Classical authors perceived the inhabitants of the islands to differ in significant ways from those of Celtica in Gaul.'²

And 'Classical writers did not describe the inhabitants of Ireland and Britain as Celts. Nor did the Anglo-Normans or English in later centuries.'³

So briefly, what do we know about the ethnic Celts and where did they inhabit? The Celts did not leave any written sources so there is a reliance on accounts from other people of other nationalities rather than the Celts themselves for information. The Celts are first mentioned by Greek and Italian

¹ Peter Salway, *Roman Britain A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, England, O.U.P., P.1, 2015.

² Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, England, O.U.P., P.84, 2003.

³ David Rankin, *The Celts and the Classical World*, Routledge, Abingdon, England P.1/2, 1996.)

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writers including Hecataeus of Miletus who is considered to be the earliest source from the late sixth century BC and we know that Julius Caesar divided Gaul into three regions which were called Celtae, Belgae and Aquitani.

‘Julius Caesar is quite clear, telling us, in the famous opening passage of his *De bello gallico*, that ‘the Celts are separated from Aquitani by the river Garonne, and from the Belgae by the Marne and Seine’. The language spoken across this swathe of Gaul had close similarities to that spoken throughout much of central and western Iberia at the time and is ancestral to the ‘Celtic’ languages spoken in Brittany, Cornwall, Wales, Scotland and Ireland in recent times.’⁴

The latest recorded mention of the Celts is a point, in the fifth century AD and it comes from ‘Sidonius Apollinaris in the fifth century AD the Celts, at least as a contemporary ethnic group, disappear from the literature; Isidore of Seville (AD560-636) already seems to be talking of the Celtiberians in the past sense, and other authors such as Stephanus of Byzantium (c.AD 480-500) in his compendium of peoples even more so. But when the inhabitants of Gaul are discussed the term *Galli* is the favoured expression to refer initially to the indigenous subjects of the newly established Germanic kingdoms, and later as the expression for the French in general used by authors writing in Latin. Sometimes hybrid names such as Celtgalli appear, but where authors wish to be more explicit they refer to the individual tribes as named by Caesar (Latham 1965, 1981). Thus Bede refers to the Gauls, or to the Belgic Gauls, but also to the Morini or the towns where individuals come from (e.g. Germanus of Auxerre); much later we find Geoffrey of Monmouth mentioning the Allobroges.’⁵

In the quote below, David Rankin writes about ‘the Celtic-descended societies’ of Wales, Brittany, Cornwall, Man, Scotland and Ireland -

‘Specifically we have to discuss from Greek and Roman points of view some late Bronze Age and Iron Age peoples of Europe who, as far as we may conjecture, spoke dialects of Indo-European (John Collis, *The Celts Origins Myths & Inventions*, Tempus Publishing, England, P.27, 2011). origin which are now close to what we would now describe as Celtic, and who had a distinctive, but not unique mode of Iron Age culture. Like ourselves when we talk about the Celtic -descended societies of Wales, Brittany, Cornwall, Man, Scotland and Ireland, the Greeks and Romans had a broad and generally coherent understanding of what they meant by Celtae (Keltoi), Galli and Galatai, even though they were occasionally mistaken about the ethnic affiliations of more remote tribes with whom they had not yet made contact.’⁶

How then did the inhabitants of Britain and Ireland acquire the ‘Celt label’ if the ethnic peoples of Britain and Ireland were not Celts. But, could they be ‘Celtic descended’ ?

⁴ Barry Cunliffe, *A Very Short Introduction to the Celts*, Oxford, England, O.U.P., P.18, 2003.

⁵ John Collis, *The Celts Origins Myths & Inventions*, England, Tempus Publishing, P.27, 2011.

⁶ David Rankin, *Celts and the Classical World*, Routledge, Oxford, England, P.1. 1999.

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Language

Is there a link with the words 'Celtic and Celt' and the people of Britain and Ireland through language ?

Edward Lhuyd was a scholar and antiquarian in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He called the group of languages comprising Welsh, Cornish, Irish and Breton, 'Celtic' in his book *Archaeologica Britannica* published in 1707. He established links between the Indo- European based languages of Gaulish, Irish and British in one group and then between Welsh, Cornish and Breton and he called these two groups Q-Celtic and P-Celtic. (He also suggested that Irish Britons moved from Gaul to settle in the British Isles but were then later pushed into northern Britain and Ireland by a second wave of Gauls who settled in the South and West).

There was also another possible factor here and it involves the link between Briton and British and the politics around the chronological time that Edward Lhuyd was writing *Archaeologica Britannica*.

'Lhuyd both advanced interest in the various languages and popularised the term 'Celt'. The Celt or Kelt, began to displace the increasingly confusing term 'Briton', which since the union of the English and Scottish crowns in 1603 had taken on a new life and a new meaning. Briton was in fact becoming confused with the word 'English', for in the new state of Britain, England was the dominant element'.⁷

This led to, during the eighteenth century the terms 'Celt' and 'Briton' becoming interchangeable when applied to the non-English peoples of Britain.

However, John Collis in his book *The Celts Origins Myths & Inventions* adds to this above statement with -

'Thus, the first person to assume that the Celts were a people who speak, or spoke a language called Celtic was the Abbe Perzon in 1705; but this was based on the wrong assumption that Breton was the last survival of the language spoken by the ancient Celts of Gaul, whereas it is now generally accepted that it was introduced from Britain in the fifth century AD. Perzon's definition of a Celt was taken over by Edward Lhuyd, meaning that the Welsh, Scottish and Irish could be labelled as Celtic too. So, when an art style came to be recognised in Britain and Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century by John Kemble and Augustus Franks which was neither Roman, nor Saxon, nor Viking, it was labelled (late) Keltic, a terminology subsequently adopted on the continent.'⁸

Therefore, could the Britons, Gaels and Picts of early medieval Britain and Ireland be considered to have a language that was 'Celtic based' ?

Culture (Art)

The 'art style' mentioned in the above quote from John Collis, 'that came to be recognised in Britain and Ireland' involves an exhibition at the British Museum in 1863. In the catalogue 'Late Keltic' was used to describe items of decorated metalwork from the Iron Age.

⁷ Marcus Tanner, *The Last of the Celts*, Yale University Press, U.S.A., P.15, 2004.

⁸ John Collis, *The Celts Origins Myths & Inventions*, Tempus Publishing, England, P.12, 2011.

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'The phrase was used throughout the first edition of the British Museum Guide to the Antiquities of the Early Iron Age 1905), but by the time of the second edition (1925) the characterization was dropped because, as the preface cautiously noted, " There is some uncertainty as to the existence or date of an earlier Keltic civilisation in these islands" '.⁹

Francis Pryor in his work Britain AD writes –

'The identification of the Celts as a distinct entity was largely based on a wonderful art style that came into existence in early iron age Europe. Celtic art, as it is generally known, did indeed begin in Continental Europe – as, centuries later did Impressionism – but the spread of neither style of art involved the migration of people. Art is after all, about ideas which can be communicated by example and by word of mouth. The term 'Celtic art' has, however, stuck and I do not think it can easily be dislodged. Personally, I would prefer a less culturally loaded term, like 'Iron Age art'. But whatever one calls it, it is superb: it features vigorous, swirling plant and animal figures that possess an extraordinary grace and energy. The standards of design and craftsmanship are outstanding. Some of the finest examples of Celtic art were produced in Britain in the decades prior to the Roman Conquest of AD 43.'¹⁰

If the people of early medieval Britain and Ireland were not ethnically 'Celts', could they be classed as 'Celtic descended'? Their language is certainly Celtic based and then could their culture, especially in terms of art be considered Celtic? If they were producing art of a 'Celtic style'? Who were the peoples of Britain and Ireland during the early medieval period ?

The Britons, Gaels and Picts.

The Britons were mainly a largely tribal society thought to have three roughly social groups. The first being a warrior aristocracy generally with a king/chieftan as leader and then a largely agricultural based population. The third group was the Druids. The Britons had been part of the Roman Empire and their land stretched south from the Forth-Clyde isthmus.

The Picts or Picti were 'the painted people' and this was the name used by the Romans during the third century to refer to those communities living north of the Antonine Wall in the Northern parts of the British Isles. **Cruithni** was the name that these people called themselves they are thought to have ancestry at least from the later Iron Age. Also, they were fierce enemies of the Romans!

The Gaels, were the native inhabitants of Ireland and also developed as time progressed, colonies in Wales, Cornwall, Devon, the Isle of Man and in Scotland. It has long been accepted by linguists that the fifth century emigrants of the Scotti from Dal Riata in Antrim were responsible for the introduction of the Irish form of Celtic, which contributed significantly to Scots Gaelic and Manx.

In 731 the Venerable Bede '**In the introduction to his *Ecclesiastical History of the English Speaking People* writes 'there is a laconic discussion of the origin of the pre-Roman inhabitants of Britain. The Britons, he says, came from Brittany, while the Picts came from 'Scythia', that is Scandinavia, and he contrasts them with the rest of the Britons in that he does relate that the Scots assisted the Picts to settle when the latter first arrived in Ireland. His description of the post-Roman population**

⁹ Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, England, O.U.P., 2003

¹⁰ Francis Pryor, *Britain AD*, London, England, Harper Perennial, P.6, 2005

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movements in Britain still forms the basis for the origin myths of the modern British Isles: the invasions of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes from north western continental Europe, and the colonisation of western Scotland by the Scoti from Ireland. He talks of the five languages spoken in Britain: Anglican (English), Scottish, British and Pictish, with the fifth, Latin, being that of the educated religious elite.’¹¹

We also have more information about languages spoken by the peoples of Britain - ‘In 500 that part of Britain which would become Wales contained speakers of three languages: British, Irish and Latin. By 700 the descendants of the Irish and Latin speakers of 500 probably all spoke British, now well on its way towards Welsh.’¹²

The Medieval period and some background

The early medieval period is generally regarded by historians as being from the late 5th/early 6th century CE to the Norman Conquest in 1066. The Roman military presence began reducing in Britain in 409 when Constantine the third needed the legions to protect other parts of the Roman Empire and by the following year this ‘military presence’ had virtually disappeared, leaving an ‘administrative presence’ for the next six or seven decades until about 476AD. The Romans had never established any ‘presence’ in Ireland though there has been evidence of Roman materials found, which could indicate possible trading links. The Roman materials are from two periods, the first and second centuries and then from the fourth and fifth centuries. During that time a range of ‘Barbarians’ had been attacking Britain. During the sixth and seventh centuries there is the breaking up of the tribal Briton territories with the areas that are now Cornwall, Wales and Cumbria retaining their Briton populations while two other groups of Britons crossed the Celtic Sea and settled in what is now Brittany and the north-west of Spain in the area that is now Galicia. They took with them their languages and their culture and though the Cumbrian ‘Britons’ did not survive as a distinct group into modern times, the other four areas have survived, three of them still with native languages and even though Galicia has not had a Celtic language since the ninth century it is still recognised as having a Celtic culture.

In terms of the movement of the people who were known as Gaels, Britons and Picts, in The Oxford History of Ireland we hear about the -

‘mixed racial and linguistic background of the rulers of Ireland-Britain and Ireland share languages, dominant aristocracies, and whole local populations such as the Cruithin of Ireland and Scotland (where they are known to Latin writers as Picti). This racial mixture is well borne out by later Irish records. For example, the Dumnonii (who were settled in Devon and Cornwall, and in Scotland about Dumbarton) occur in Ireland in the Irish form Domnainn. Their name survives in Inber Domnann (Malahide Bay, Co.Dublin). Early genealogical tradition locates them in Leinster, and later in Connacht where their name survives in Tirechan’s seventh-century *campus Domnon* ‘plain of the Dumnonii’, to the west of Killala Bay, Co. Mayo, and *Irrus Domnann*, Erris, in the west of Co. Mayo.’¹³

¹¹ John Collis, *The Celts Origins Myths & Inventions*, Tempus Publishing, England, P.29, 2011.

¹² Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Nations and Kingdoms: A View from Above, After Rome*, Edited by Thomas Charles-Edwards, Oxford, England, O.U.P., P.30, 2010.

¹³ R.F.Foster, *The Oxford History of Ireland*, Oxford, England, O.U.P., P.5, 2001.

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We are also told that the colony of Dal Riata in Scotland was the most successful and it eventually laid the basis for the kingdom of Scotland. When and why the Dal Riata crossed over to Scotland is not known.

‘Medieval Irish legends which tell that this began in the third or fourth century – or indeed before -are most likely to be historical. Other traditions state that Fergus Mor mac Eirc and his brothers established Dal Riata in Scotland and scholars have argued (on the basis of very flimsy evidence, mainly genealogy which is no earlier than the seventh century) that this event took place about the middle or late fifth century. Whatever its beginnings, the Scottish kingdom of Dal Dal Riata was a great success and by the time Columba came on his mission to Iona in 563 the king of Dal Riata was extending his authority over the Picts to the east. In the middle of the ninth century Dal Riata took control of all Pictland, and Scotland became a united country under Kenneth mac Alpine’.¹⁴

Alfred the Great

Then in Wantage in 849AD a boy child was born to King Ethelwulf of Wessex and Osburh, his wife who was really going to create history. When Alfred was born this was the current state of the British Isles -

‘England in 849 comprised four small kingdoms. Northumbria, which included all the north of England, had been formed by an amalgamation of the two older kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia, each of which had taken over British and Saxon chiefdoms and petty kingdoms. In the east, East Anglia comprised the two counties of Norfolk and Suffolk, and may never have grown much. In the Midlands, Mercia had absorbed or conquered the principedoms of Lindsey in Lincolnshire and the Hwicce of the Cotswolds and the lower Severn valley, as well as several others. Wessex in the South had expanded, if legends hold a grain of truth, from two early nuclei, one in Hampshire and Wiltshire, and the other in the upper Thames valley, to include Somerset and Dorset by the 650s and Devon in c.680-730. In 815 Alfred’s grandfather, king Egbert, had ravaged Cornwall in the far south-west ‘from east to west’ and reduced the Cornish to submission. In 825, or soon after he conquered the former south-eastern kingdoms of Kent, Sussex and Essex, reduced to dependencies of Mercia long before. He had greatly increased the size of the realm before Alfred’s birth.’ David Sturdy, P.3, Alfred the Great, 1995. ‘Wales was divided into a number of small principedoms, most of them under the overlordship of Mercia, Scotland into three or four small Pictish kingdoms, and Ireland too into several warring Celtic kingdoms. By the time Alfred was born, Norse traders and adventurers had explored and settled Orkney and Shetland, the Hebrides and, more recently, the eastern and southern coasts of Ireland.’¹⁵

During his lifetime Alfred the Great as he is known managed to make a peace agreement with the Vikings after the battle of Edington in 878 and this became the Danelaw. He became the dominant leader in England and improved both the legal system and military structure as well as being a pious

¹⁴ R.F. Foster, Oxford History of Ireland, Oxford, England, O.U.P., P.7,2001.

¹⁵ , David Sturdy, Alfred the Great, London, England, Constable and Co. Ltd., P.3/4,1995,

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and fair-minded king. He encouraged education and particularly championed the delivery of teaching and learning in old English rather than Latin. Bishop Asser was his friend and supporter.

Celtic Spirituality and Christianity

The title of this assignment is not about spirituality or Christianity. However, I feel that there is in terms of 'Celtic' being an appropriate label for the Britons, Gaels and Picts of early medieval Britain and Ireland room for a brief mention of 'Celtic spirituality' and 'Celtic Christianity'. The fifth and sixth centuries AD produced some of the most famed and possibly the strongest and influential saints and missionaries of the Celtic church in St. Patrick, St. Columba, St. Petroc, St. Bridgit, St. Samson and St. David to name just a few. Their stories are still important and meaningful in modern times and not just in the 'Celtic countries'. Spirituality is a word often linked with 'Celtic' and it is often linked with the 'wild places' often coastal and with nature. However, the Celtic Christian church was also known for a more 'ascetic' approach which is not often acknowledged, though it is often considered to be the basis of later religious faiths and so in this way we can see a link from the early middle ages through to more modern times.

'Celtic' Christianity emphasised asceticism and it is no accident that John Calvin's harsh doctrines conquered much of what we know call the Celtic lands during the Reformation. The real inheritors of the Celtic spiritual tradition, I discovered were the Methodists in Cornwall, the Calvinist Methodists in Wales and the Free Church in Scotland, none of them known for mysticism, an interest in herbal remedies, tolerance of pagan traditions or liberal attitudes to sex. The puritanical strain is equally evident in Ireland, in both the Catholic tradition and in Presbyterian north-east Ulster¹⁶

Conclusion

The circumstances under which 'Celtic' can be considered an appropriate label for the Britons, Gaels and Picts of early medieval Britain and Ireland are in the areas of ethnicity, language, culture (particularly art work) and Spirituality/Christianity. I do not consider the early medieval Britons, Gaels and Picts to be ethnically purely Celtic, but there is possibly a case that could be made for them to be 'Celtic descended'. There is for me no question regarding the language issue and the effects of the Roman occupation of Britain.

'The Roman frontier shaped the political geography of the British Isles, even after the Roman rule had come to an end. By the eight century the Picts had there own separate form of Celtic. Yet, if one examines the list of features by which eight-century Pictish had come to differ from British(the language of the Britons, ancestor of Welsh, Cornish and Breton), it soon becomes apparent that all these distinctive features date from the period after the formation of the Pictish federation. The Roman frontier thus created a new linguistic divide : between Pictish, derived from the form of British spoken beyond the Antonine Wall , and late British spoken by those Britons under Roman rule. The whole process was a notable example of the way in which a new people could emerge from : from a military federation via

¹⁶ Marcus Tanner, *The Last of the Celts*, U.S.A., Yale University Press, P.7, 2004.

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subsequent separate linguistic development beyond the frontier and, at the same time, an emerging distinct material culture.’¹⁷

‘It is also clearly the case that from the sixteenth century onwards, the English language arrived in many lands across the globe by population movements both large and small. Yet another example is provided by the archaeological, linguistic and literary evidence of Belgic Celtic movements between Gaul and Britain for some centuries prior to the arrival of the Romans. The main point is that, although we cannot say for sure how these languages reached the British Isles, what remains certain is that these languages were Celtic. And from the inception of Celtic scholarship, the definition of ‘Celt’ is a people who speak or were known to have spoken within modern historical times, one of the languages classified as the Celtic branch of Indo-European’.¹⁸

On the matter of Celtic culture, and particularly art and the rich history of art and artifacts there is certainly for me a clear tradition of Celtic style. I also consider that Celtic spirituality and Christianity is a factor here and it is another reason why as the early medieval years progressed that in this area the term ‘Celtic’ is appropriate.

What is also clear is that this is an area where many people and certainly many learned academic people have strong opinions. I however, have found this is to have been a fascinating and interesting subject.

¹⁷ Thomas Charles-Edwards, Introduction, *After Rome*, Edited by Thomas Charles-Edwards, Oxford, England, O.U.P., P.4., 2010.

¹⁸ Peter Beresford Ellis *A Brief History of The Celts*, , Robinson, London, England, Introduction P.xvi/xvii, 2003.

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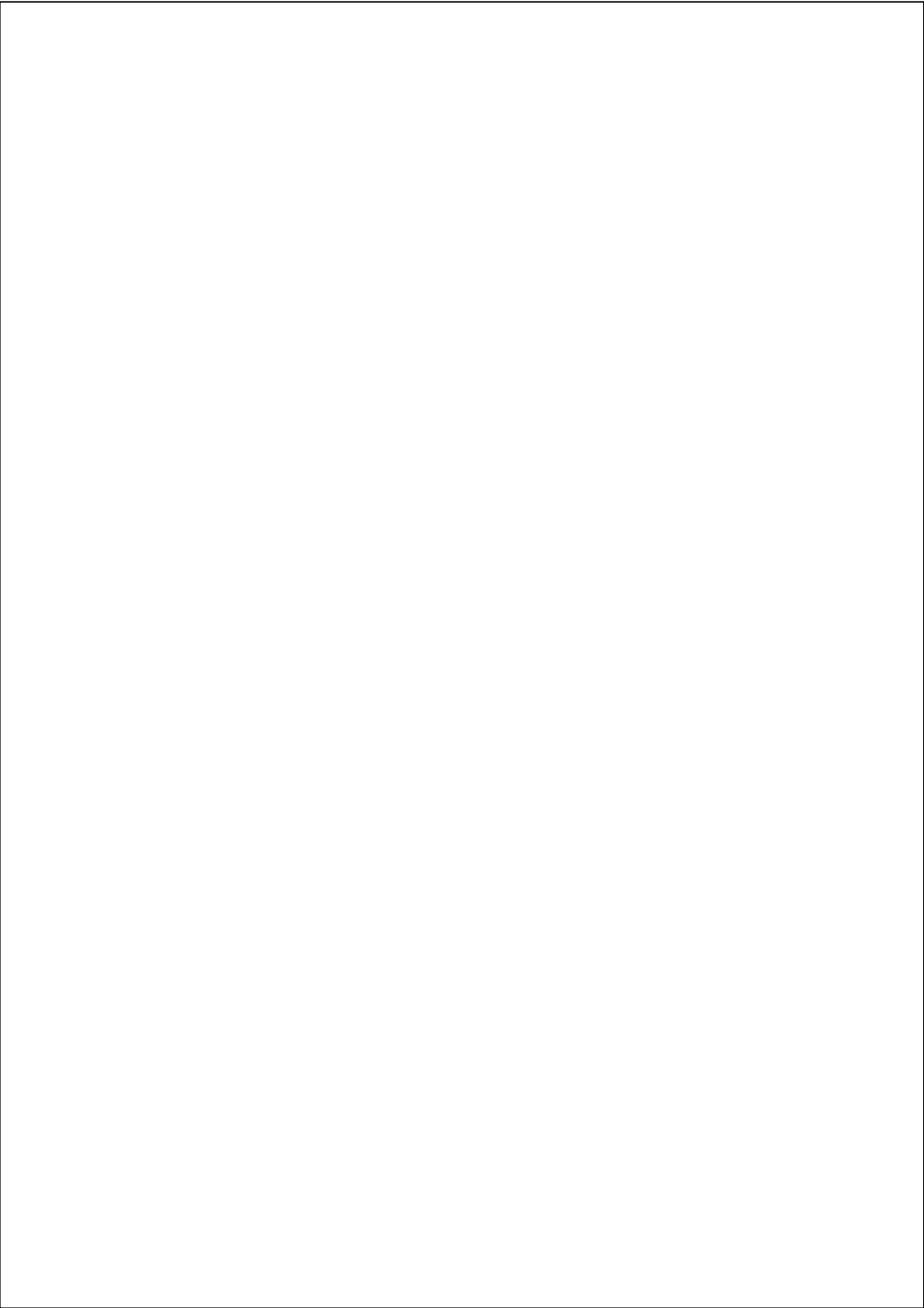
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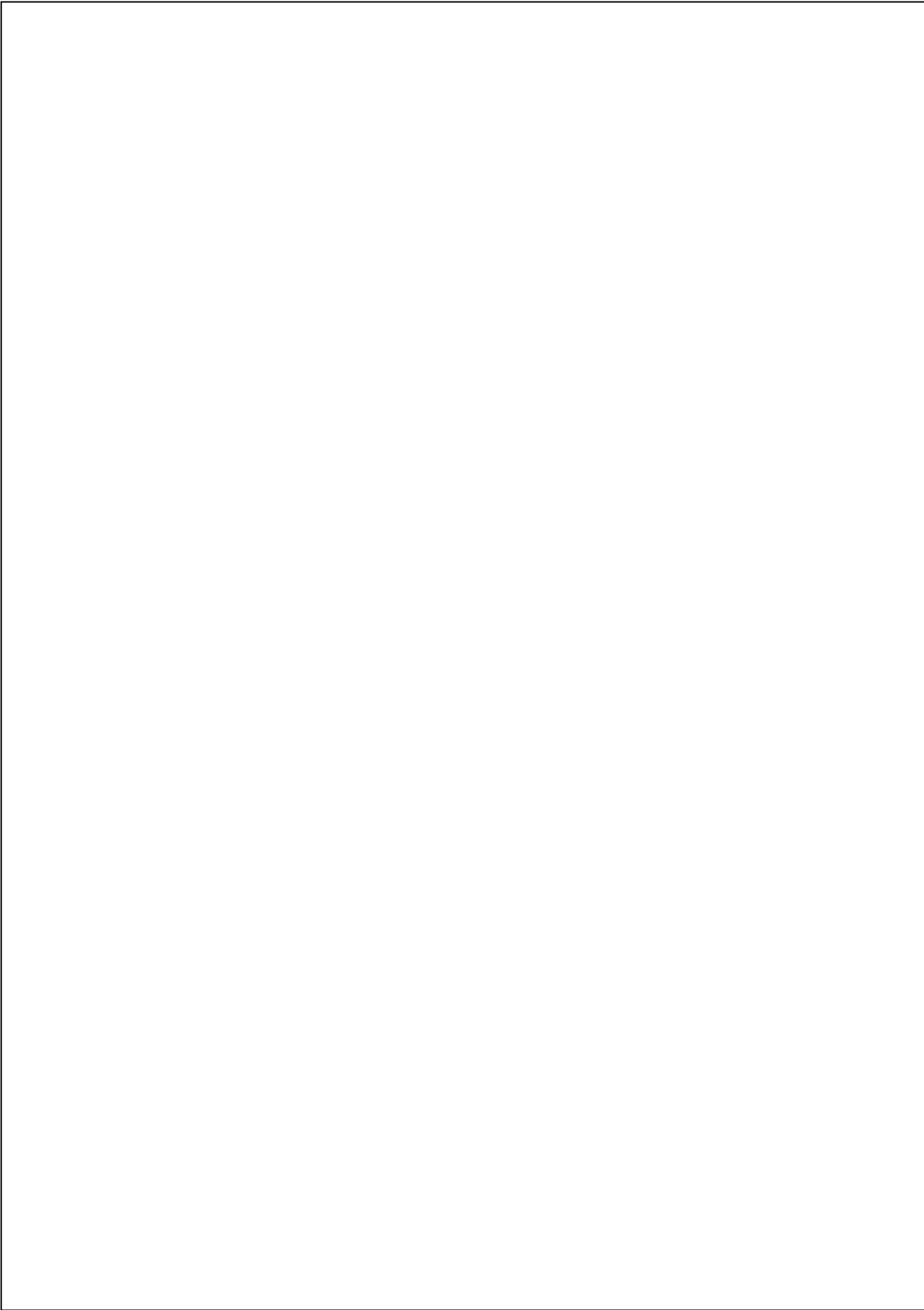
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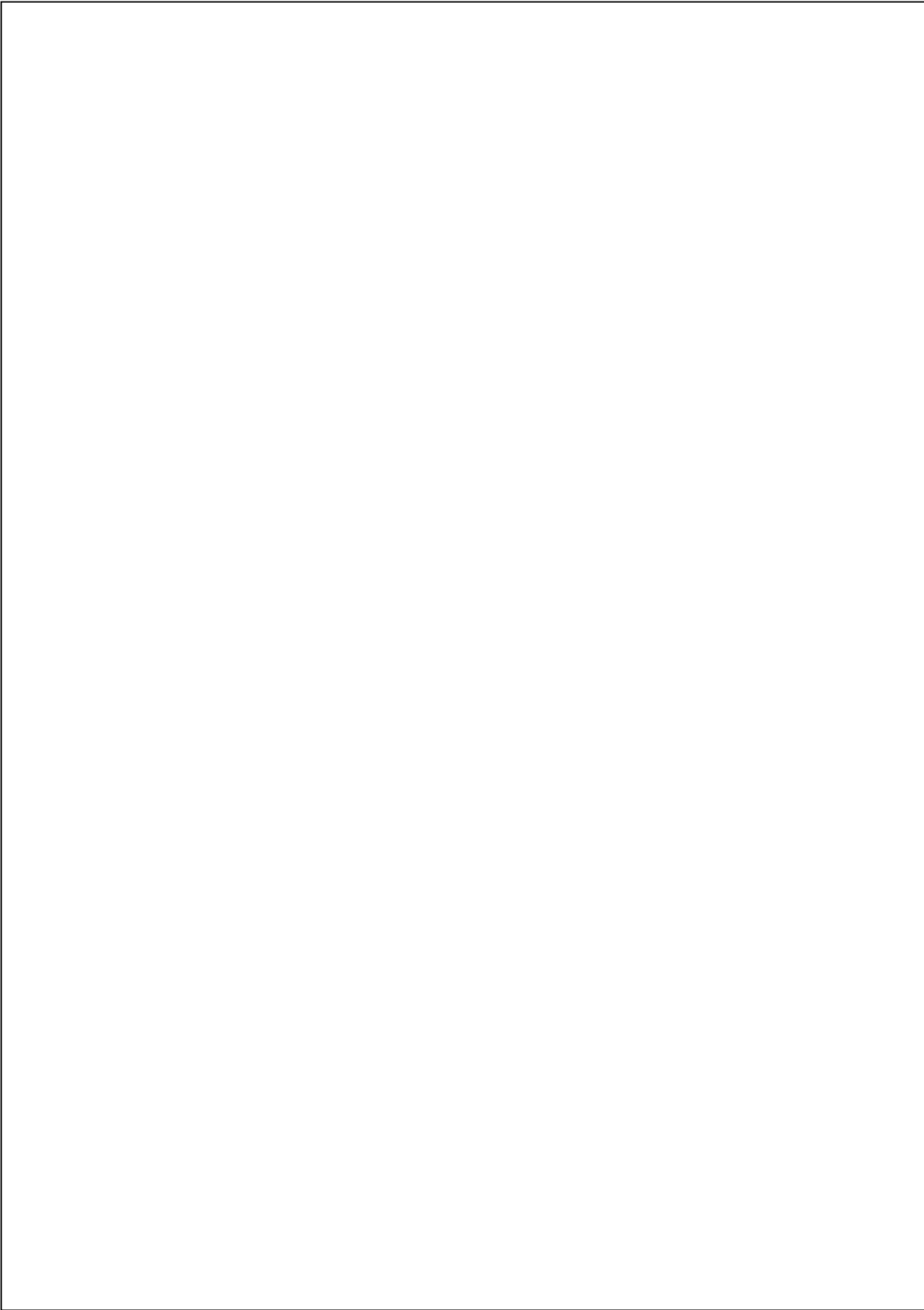
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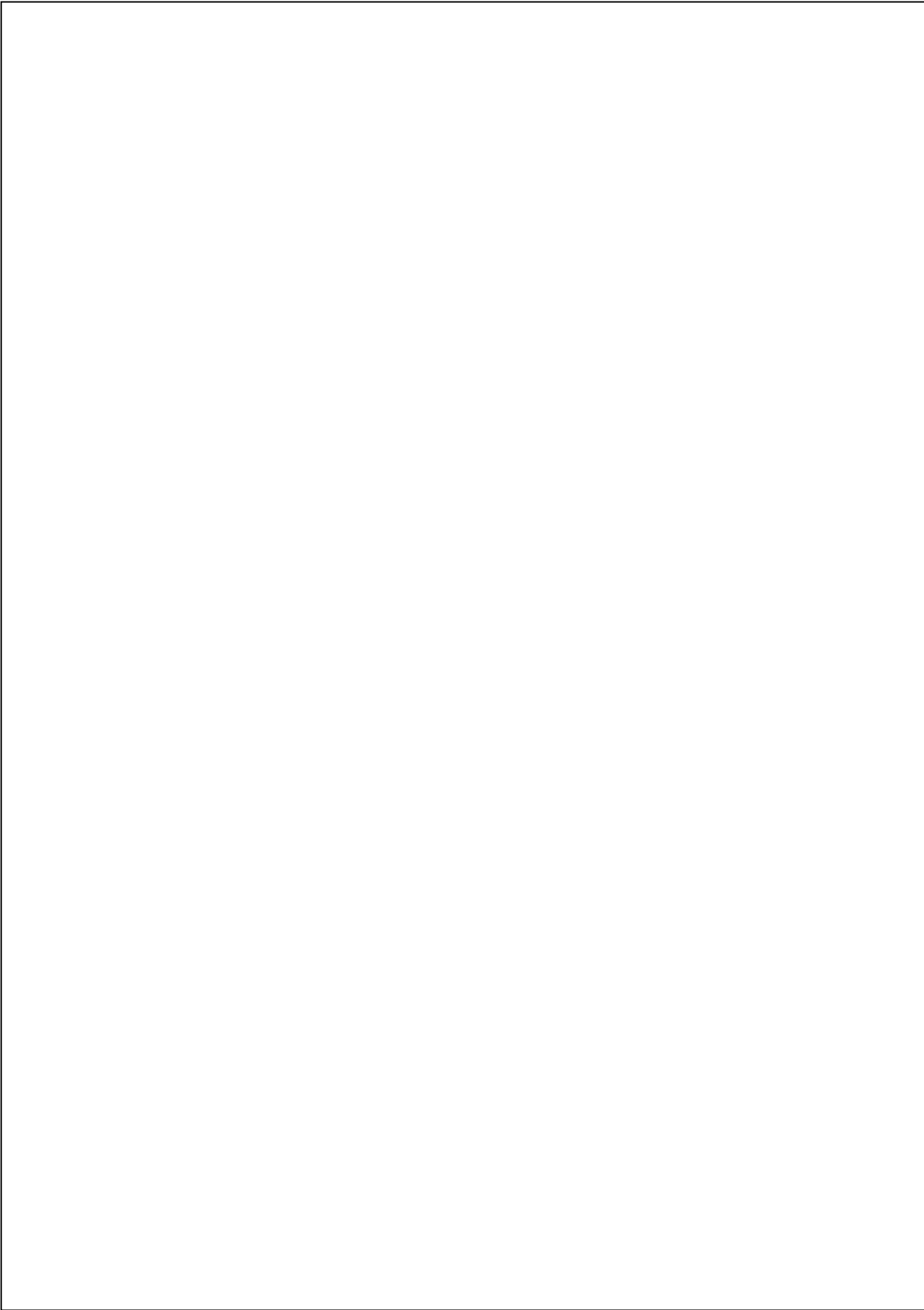
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BritonsPictsIrish in Medieval times.

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

56/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

Turning first of all to the essay content, the key words in Peter Salway's quote (p. 1) are "*the culture and language **we** loosely call Celtic*" (emphasis added). One of the key aims of this assignment is to try to establish whether **they** loosely considered **themselves** to be in any way Celtic at the time. As far as the labelling of peoples by Classical sources is concerned, these may simply have been based on geography, i.e., naming the people after the place (rather than the reverse).

The taxonomy of the languages on page 3 is not quite right. Welsh, Cornish and Breton **are** British, and grew out of the Brittonic language. These and Gaulish are P-Celtic. Irish and the other Gaelic languages are Q-Celtic. Therefore, there is very little doubt that the Britons, Gaels and Picts spoke languages that were "*Celtic based*" (p. 3). More important here is whether or not they knew it and felt any sense of shared identity.

On page 4, *Cruithni* is *not* the name of the Picts for themselves. It is the Irish equivalent of *Priteni* (Britons) and also an example of Q-Celtic (*Cruithni*) versus P-Celtic (*Priteni*). Rather interesting, also, is the idea that the Britons *came from* Brittany, whereas they in fact *went to* Brittany in the sub-Roman period (which is how Brittany got its name)

The section on Alfred the Great, (p. 6) although interesting in its own right, is not directly relevant to this assignment. His role was in the formation of the kingdom of England, which is a separate story.

In many ways, despite the reservations expressed in the essay itself, the section on Celtic Spirituality and Christianity (p. 7) helps to illustrate why this

assignment was set. The "*Celtic Church*" is a controversial label given in modern times, and the illustrious list of saints named on that page would never have heard of it.

The Conclusion (p. 7) makes the valid point that there is no question about the linguistic descent of the various languages. However, the point of the assignment has perhaps been misunderstood a little. The Britons, Gaels and (to a lesser extent) Picts are all labelled as Celts in *today's world*. However, the term was never used to describe a contemporary people throughout the medieval period, and so, to what extent can it be considered an appropriate label for peoples who would never have used it for themselves? This was the essence of the assignment.

On matters of style and presentation, there are rather too many long quotes in the essay and an unnecessary use of bold type. Also, at times, the work strays into areas and periods which are not directly relevant. Nevertheless, the work does show signs of a great interest in the topic and evidence of wide background reading.

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