

'Within the context of the Celtomania and Celtoscepticism debate, analyse whether the Celts are subject to unfair scrutiny when compared to, for example, the Germanic or Anglo-Saxon peoples.'

Celtic studies has become a controversial and hotly disputed topic. As an interdisciplinary field, the opinions surrounding who the Celts were and if they even existed at all, vary immensely. Two extreme positions have emerged with little to no middle ground between them. These extremes are called 'Celtomania' and 'Celtoscepticism.' But are these positions justified? Are the 'Celts' forced to undergo unfair scrutiny in comparison to other cultures? To understand the aspects of this discourse, which often circles around the use of labels rather than historical evidence, this paper will start by evaluating the term 'Celtic' in all its interdisciplinary usage. It will confront the common criticisms of those fields as well, before analyzing the shifting nature of culture and the question of whether the inhabitants of the British Isles can logically be called Celts. Finally, we will discuss the synthesis of the disciplines in an effort to define 'Celtic Identity.' While Celtomania vs Celtoscepticism is an ongoing debate, an understanding of the differing aspects of the argument helps to distinguish the concrete evidence from the biases inherent in such a contentious matter.

The term 'Celt' was first used by classical authors in reference to the ancient people located in northern and western Europe. Multiple labels were used by the classical authors including 'Celtae,' 'Galatae,' 'Keltoi,' and 'Galli.'¹ These names were seen by the Romans to be synonymous² and referenced those people who lived in Gaul, the Iberian Peninsula, and later migrated/raided into Italy near the Po valley and into Asia Minor. While it seems like a broad swath of geography, centuries, and people, it is important to note that the term Celt should not be expected to have more consistency in its antique usage than the term 'English' or 'French' does between medieval and modern usage.³ One of the common criticisms of the 'classical Celts' is the bias inherent in historical works written by those outside of the culture. When the Greeks and the Romans fought with the barbarians impinging on their borders, one cannot expect them to describe those barbarians without a heavy dose of prejudice. Malcolm Chapman even goes so far as to claim that the label 'Celt' was, in fact, nothing more than a derogatory term applied to those who were 'other.'⁴ However, other than Ephorus, who was 'making a broad geographical point

¹ John T. Koch, 'Celts, Britons, and Gaels—Names, Peoples, and Identity,' *Academia.edu*, [n.d.] <https://www.academia.edu/7142081/Celts_Britons_and_Gaels_Names_Peoples_and_Identities> [accessed 13 December 2025], p. 3.

² Jonathan M. Wooding, 'The Idea of the Celt,' *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland*, ed. Mark Atherton (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), p. 40.

³ *ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴ Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1992), pp. 24-40.

rather than a precise ethnographical one,’⁵ the classical authors do differentiate between the Celts and the Cynetes of western Iberia and the Ligurians.⁶ And though the origin of the racial and stereotypical ‘Celt’ can be found in these historical sources, creating ‘at times a suspiciously seamless garment of Celticity,’⁷ it does not follow to discard those historical sources, entirely. All documents of a historical nature must be evaluated appropriately as they all reflect the biases of their age.⁸ This is not true *only* for the Celts. Another criticism levied on the Celts is in regard to their label. Chapman says that ‘modern writers treat the Celts of early Europe as if the Celts themselves knew who they were—knew, that is, that they were Celts.’⁹ The insinuation of this argument is that if the Celts didn’t call themselves Celts, what makes them a ‘people’ other than the title given retrospectively by modern scholars?

Koch, in response to a very similar argument regarding the Insular Celts, says ‘I know of no linguist who is very impressed by this point, the Greeks did not call themselves Greeks, nor the Hittites, Hittites, nor the Germans, Germans.’¹⁰ Peter Berresford Ellis says, ‘no one called themselves Anglo-Saxons in the time everyone accepts Anglo-Saxons existed.’¹¹ If we were to only allow for ethnic and cultural groups to arise out of self-defined labels given in contemporary times, classification of all peoples would be called into question. And beyond that, Caesar attests that,

Gaul is 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.¹²

Further, the poet Martial, born c. 40 A.D, claimed a Celtic and Iberian heritage.¹³ This shows that at least some of those early European people considered themselves Celts.

In its linguistic sense, the Celtic label is ‘at its least controversial and most securely established aspect of the overall continuity.’¹⁴ In 1707, Edward Lhuyd’s *Archaeologia Britannica* was published, arguing that Goidelic and Brythonic languages were connected i.e through showing that certain sounds in Gaelic corresponded with certain sounds in Welsh, notably leading to the

⁵ Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘Celtomania and Celtoscepticism,’ *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 36, (1998), p. 25.

⁶ Philip Freeman, trans., ‘The Classical Authors on the Ancient Celts,’ *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales*, ed. John T. Koch (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003), p. 5.

⁷ Wooding, ‘The Idea of the Celt,’ p. 42.

⁸ Ruth Megaw, Vincent Megaw, ‘Do the Celts Still Live? An Essay on Identity and Contextuality,’ *Studia Celtica*, 31, (University of Wales Press, 1997), pp. 107-123.

⁹ Chapman, *The Celts*, p. 30

¹⁰ John T. Koch, ‘Celts, Britons, and Gaels,’ p. 4.

¹¹ Peter Berresford Ellis, *A Brief History of the Celts* (London: Constable & Robinson Ltd., 1998), p. 18.

¹² Julius Caesar, trans. H.J. Edwards, *The Gallic War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 3.

¹³ D.W Harding, ‘The Celtic Debate: History, Linguistics, and Archaeology,’ *Rewriting History: Changing Perspectives on Archaeology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019),

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198817734.002.0003>>, {accessed 13 December 2025}, p. 187.

¹⁴ Chapman, *The Celts*, p. 70.

P-Celtic and Q-Celtic distinction.¹⁵ Both languages, he believed, descended from Gaulish. Through the work of other scholars, after Lhuyd, we have now come to accept these modern languages as part of the Celtic branch of Indo-European. Linguistics has the added benefit of using scientific methods to distinguish whether a language is Celtic or not.¹⁶ Patrick Sims-Williams when evaluating historical sources explains that 'language *was* a factor in the process of ethnographical classification.'¹⁷ Tacitus connected the southern Gauls with the Britons due to racial factors and to similar languages, but both he and Caesar differentiated the Celts from the Germans because they did *not* speak the same language.¹⁸ It is also helpful that the historical Celts, 'those who were *called* Celts,'¹⁹ spoke a Celtic language, despite insistence that the term Celtic for the Celtic branch of languages is arbitrary.²⁰ This cohesion is not total, however. Due to the discovery of the Lepontic inscriptions dating to 600 B.C, long before the movement of the *Galli* into northern Italy, we know Celtic-speakers who were not called Celts by the ancient authors inhabited that area. This also applies to Britain.²¹ As such, while Celtic languages are a good marker for tracing Celticity through history to the modern era, it cannot follow that all Celtic speakers were ethnically Celtic. As exhibited by classical sources, 'Celt' was originally an ethnonym, not a linguistic designation. Beyond this, Celtosceptics argue that even in antiquity, the languages the Celts spoke would have been unintelligible to each other. They have undergone a process of change not only amongst themselves, but they have also been influenced by contact with other languages. What binds them together to be more Celtic than say English or French, if they have had such intrusions?²² However, English diverged from the Germanic languages and has been greatly influenced by French because of the Norman conquest.²³ Yet the categorization of English as a Germanic language is not under such scrutiny.

The final discipline in which the Celtic label is used is Archaeology. It is used in reference to the Hallstatt and La Tène material cultures of central Europe. It was the seeming overlap between these material cultures and the historical Celts that led to them being called Celtic.²⁴ However, this homogeneity began to unravel once Lepontic and Celtiberian inscriptions were discovered in areas where no Hallstatt or La Tène culture was found. This discrepancy of continuity between the disciplines and their conflicting locations has led to much debate but is it realistic to expect a

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁶ Sims-Williams, 'Celtomania and Celtoscepticism,' p. 17.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁰ Chapman, 'Calling People Names,' *The Celts*, pp. 24-40, and John Collis, 'Celtic Myths,' *Antiquity*, 71, 127 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 195-201.

²¹ Sims-Williams, 'Celtomania and Celtoscepticism,' p. 27.

²² Chapman, *The Celts*, pp. 70-75.

²³ Mariia T. Akchurina, Irina V. Balashova, Svetlana V. Leviceva, Tatiana E. Tsoy, 'Modern Germanic Languages: The Place of English in the Germanic Language Group,' *International Journal of Society, Culture, & Language*, 9, 2 (2021), <<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2609428690?accountid=130472&pq-origsite=primo&searchKeywords=english%20as%20a%20germanic%20language&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>> [accessed 13 December 2025], p. 14.

²⁴ Wooding, 'The Idea of the Celt,' p. 43-44.

homogenous and unified culture that extends from pre-history all the way to modern times with no interference or breakage? Even within the archaeological record, the material cultures are broken into groups and sub-groups and are so varied it is difficult to trust in any claim of coherence.²⁵ Raimund Karl argues:

Archaeological reality thus does not lend itself to drawing lines: both spatial and chronological boundaries are always and necessarily unclear, fuzzy, and by no means clean cut.²⁶

For example, the Hallstatt culture is broken into sub-categories: western Hallstatt, eastern Hallstatt, and middle Hallstatt. This is because some of the characteristically 'Hallstatt' features are not found consistently throughout Hallstatt locations. While the features partially overlap, they never 'precisely overlap.'²⁷ Thus, we have only two Hallstatt swords found in Britain and Ireland and a sparse number of wagon burials. Another case of archaeological discrepancy is near the Pyrenees where Celtic place names abound as well as historical documentation of Celts. Yet there is no trace of Hallstatt or La Tène. This does not equate to a lack of Celts in the Iberian Peninsula or to say that the La Tène culture did not belong to Celts. It is only to argue that Celtiberians developed a distinct culture from those in central Europe. With this evidence, it is appropriate to call into question the certainty of Hallstatt/La Tène = Celticity.

Culture is a multi-layered and complex notion. It changes as time progresses, as people exchange artefacts and adopt technologies from the different groups they interact with, while abandoning their own technologies which are no longer useful. Cultural environments are always evolving.²⁸ Archaeological continuity or the lack of it is not a scientific method for determining ethnicity as it is possible for a single ethnic group to belong to different cultures. For example, ethnic Jews belong to various cultures and nations.²⁹ Another example is that of the Native Americans who spoke different languages, had different cultural traditions and lifestyles. Through a history of exchange and trade, they underwent major social, linguistic, and cultural restructuring. The 'native communities known today are modern developments.'³⁰ This feels particularly relevant for the Celtic tribes who often didn't present a singular nation or culture. Celtosceptics argue the fact that the Celts were split into multiple tribes who would not have recognized the ancient solidarity conveyed in the modern term 'Celtic.'³¹ On the other hand, this

²⁵ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'An Alternative to 'Celtic from the East' and 'Celtic from the West,' *Cambridge Archaeological Society*, 30, 3 (2020), p. 512.

²⁶ Raimund Karl, 'The Celts from Everywhere and Nowhere: A Re-evaluation of the Origins of the Celts and the Emergence of Celtic Culture,' *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature*, ed. Barry Cunliffe, John T. Koch (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2012), p. 52.

²⁷ Karl, 'The Celts from Everywhere and Nowhere,' p. 50.

²⁸ Helen Spencer-Oatey, 'What is Culture? A Compilation of Quotations,' *GlobalPAD Core Concepts* (2012), p. 14.
²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁰ Loretta Fowler, *The Columbia Guide to American Indians of the Great Plains* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 14.

³¹ Chapman, *The Celts*, p. 238.

situation is reflected in the tribal organization of the Native Americans. While Ireland and Wales are separate nations and have been for some time, the Anglo-Saxons also formed their own separate kingdoms of Wessex, Northumbria, Mercia, and East Anglia. They are still considered to all be Anglo-Saxons and to have shared an ancient history and culture.

Despite the messy boundaries and classifications, minority groups are often required to pass tests which prove a unified culture and identity all the way into the shadowy eras of pre-history.

Many will inevitably fail such a requirement given that this discourse incorporates rigid

continuous and bounded nature of culture and identity and fails to accommodate the social and historical processes involved in the construction of ethnicity.³²

The early Celts who were documented to have raided Delphi and then settled in Anatolia, adopted the eastern culture at which point they became indistinguishable archaeologically.³³ Yet their language remained in 'obviously Celtic ethnic, place- and personal names of Galatia.'³⁴ They were still considered Galatians even after losing their material signifiers. Artefacts, beliefs, and cultural practices travel and evolve over time, and the presence or absence of them cannot prove or disprove the existence of an ethnic/linguistic group.

One valid critique of many Celtosceptics is that no classical source referred to the inhabitants of Britain or Ireland as Celts. While this is true, there are still many pieces of evidence connecting the British Isles to Gaul. Historical and archeological evidence reveals that Belgic tribes from Gaul migrated to Britain. Caesar compares the Briton's way of life to that of the Gauls, relating many similarities in culture, language, and customs. They both fought with chariots and foot soldiers, their homes were packed closely together like that of the Gauls, and those who lived along the coast in the land of Cantium, differed 'little from the Gauls.'³⁵ The druidical order was said to have originated in Britain and many traveled from Gaul to Britain for learning. Sims-Williams suspects that the distinction between the Islands and the Continent had more to do with geography than with ethnicity.

Compare the way in which Europeans have always distinguished Scandinavia from

Germany, or Ceylon from India, despite their respective linguistic and cultural interconnections.³⁶

³² Spencer-Oatey, 'What is Culture?', p. 142.

³³ Sims-Williams, 'An Alternative,' p. 523.

³⁴ Sims-Williams, 'An Alternative,' p. 513.

³⁵ Julius Caesar, 'De Bello Gallico 5.12-17,' trans. Philip Freeman, *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales*, ed. John T. Koch (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003), p. 24.

³⁶ Sims-Williams, 'Celtomania and Celtoscepticism,' p. 27.

Despite the argument against calling them the 'Insular Celts,' there is plenty of evidence for a kinship and relation between the inhabitants of the British Isles and Gaul.

With the details of the different disciplines laid out, is it possible to synthesize them into a united picture of Celticity? Barry Cunliffe tries to do so in his 'Celtic from the West' theory. However, in an effort to marry material culture with the spread of language and peoples, Cunliffe lines up linguistic evidence from the first millennium B.C with archaeological evidence (the spread of the Bell-Beaker culture) from the third millennium B.C. The gap in the chronological periods is so vast 'the hypothesis is impossible to confirm.'³⁷ While it is an interesting argument, he does admit that it might be too much to expect 'a single consistent narrative to emerge.'³⁸ This desire for a unified definition of the Celts, their culture, and their origin allows for exaggerated claims and gaps of oversight in methodology, leading to so called 'Celtomania.' This unified vision is where the trouble arises for many Celtosceptics, and fairly so. Linguistic, ethnological, and archaeological Celticity are not precise equations that systematically coincide. While Celtic language and Celtic ethnicity often overlap, archaeology does not predictably do so as exhibited by the Anatolian settlement and the Celtiberian culture.³⁹ Yet the disciplines do have some historical evidence in their favor. We should not then dispense with the label Celt simply because we cannot unify a complex and multi-disciplinary subject. Nor should we write off a historically, linguistically, and culturally attested people as a myth or an invention because we can't define their attributes in 'a coffee-table book or television documentary.'⁴⁰ Most of the discourse arises from disagreements about which attributes are the most important for ethnic identification. Raimund Karl presents an interesting commentary on the issues latent in the essentialist view of Celticism where universal characteristics must be present for someone to *truly* be a Celt. This only works if the features we have chosen to be essential perfectly overlap in time and space.

i.e. everyone who speaks a 'Celtic' language also necessarily uses 'Celtic' art, archaeology, is necessarily referred to as a Celt in written sources and by others and identifies himself as such.⁴¹

This is a rigorous inventory. Very few cultures or people fit into such strict boundaries. It is important to view the term Celtic as it has come to be used in each of its disciplines with an understanding of the context.

Celtomania and Celtoscepticism are both extreme positions which should be guarded against if we wish to approach the reality of Celtic studies and discover the truth beneath all the

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 523.

³⁸ Barry Cunliffe, 'Celticization from the West: The Contribution of Archaeology,' *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature*, ed. Barry Cunliffe, John T. Koch (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2012), p. 35.

³⁹ Sims-Williams, 'Celtomania and Celtoscepticism,' p. 33.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴¹ Karl, 'The Celts from Everywhere and Nowhere,' p. 46.

speculation. By evaluating each Celtic discipline and the validity of their criticisms in comparison to other accepted ethnicities and cultures, we were able to see that Chapman's critique of the lack of self-identifying Celts is not a convincing argument. Neither, however, is the La Tène = Celts equation. Linguistics seems to have stability because it coincides well with the historical celts who coincide somewhat with the archaeological Celts. Finally, we touched on the possibility—or the impossibility—of synthesizing the disciplines into one unified definition. As this is a debate surrounding labels and interpretations more so than evidence, we can only hope that extreme prejudices and opinions can be released in favor of understanding the complexities inherent in human societies, behaviors, and cultures. Even, and especially amongst the Celts.

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