

The landscape of Celtic studies appears to have long been one of both tension and collaboration between the fields that comprise this complex corner of academia. Fervent debate is to be expected in a multi-disciplinary field consisting of several different methodologies including archaeology, philology, history, ethnology and genetics. Barry Cunliffe observes that ‘the concept of the Celts has many realities born of different disciplines’¹ with several theories existing as to who the Celts were and from where they originate. Ian Stewart also states that ‘ideas of the Celts have shapeshifted through time and continue to do so’² showing how theories develop or are even discarded in favour of new thoughts.

With regards to the geographical location of the ancient Celts, ideas of where the people of the British Isles and Ireland and their continental counterparts originated have abounded for centuries. In the 12th Century, Geoffrey of Monmouth (109?-1155) wrote of Britain as descending from Brutus of Troy.³ In the late 17th Century, Paul-Yves Pezron (1639-1706) proposed the origins of Brittany to be traceable back to Biblical Noah⁴ emulating other genealogies of the time that sought to elevate a particular region by religious association.⁵ At a similar time in Britain, Edward Lhuyd (1660-1709), was planting the seeds of the Celtic invasion model and continental European origins that would evolve to become the commonly termed the ‘Celtic from the East’ theory,⁶ and the traditional academic model. Challenging this, in the 21st Century, the ‘Celtic from the West’ theory has been put forward by Barry Cunliffe and John Koch in 2001⁷ and then expanded upon in 2010.⁸ Most recently, a ‘Celtic from the Centre’ model has been proposed by Patrick Sims-Williams in 2020⁹. There are varying

¹ Barry Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, (Oxford University Press, 1997). p. 20.

² Ian Stewart, ‘Introduction’ in *The Celts: A Modern History*, (Princeton University Press, 2025), p. 23.

³ In Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, a faux history of Britain is proposed wherein Brutus of Troy landed on Albion (Britain) which was inhabited by giants and founded a long lineage including an explanation for the origins of Arthur and King Lear. For further analysis of *Historia Regum Britanniae* see *A Companion to Geoffrey of Monmouth* ed. by Henley, Georgia, and Joshua Byron Smith, (Brill, 2020).

⁴ For further discussion of Pezron see Stewart, I. ‘Celtic Linguistic Antiquarianism: Paul-Yves Pezron, Edward Lhwyd, G. W. Leibniz, and Their Legacies’ *The Celts: A Modern History*, (Princeton University Press, 2025), pp. 59–91

⁵ For more on the importance of Noah across several cultures see Lewis, Jack P. ‘Noah and the Flood: In Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Tradition’, *The Biblical Archaeologist*, vol. 47, no. 4, (1984), pp. 224–39.

⁶ Edward Lhuyd published in *Glossography in Archaeologia Britannica* in 1707, for further discussion see Stewart, I. ‘Celtic Linguistic Antiquarianism: Paul-Yves Pezron, Edward Lhwyd, G. W. Leibniz, and Their Legacies’ *The Celts: A Modern History*, (Princeton University Press, 2025), pp. 59–91

⁷ The beginnings of the ‘Celtic from the West’ theory were first mentioned in 2001 by in Barry Cunliffe first put forward the idea in his work *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic and Its Peoples 8000 Bc-Ad 1500* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁸ Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch, editors. *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature*. Oxbow Books, 2010.

⁹ Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘An Alternative to Celtic from the East and Celtic from the West’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, (2020), pp. 511- 529.

combinations of all three also offered yet, here, it is these main theories that we shall focus upon in determining to what extent scholars within the different fields of Celtic Studies are in agreement. We will examine both traditional thought and current academic debate to gain an insight into whether the differing disciplines of history, philology and archaeology and the proponents of the primary theories are in agreement with one another regarding the geographical location of the ancient Celts.

Before proceeding, it may be useful to classify how the term ‘Celts’ and ‘Celtic’ will be used here, as there is as much discussion surrounding the usage of these terms as there is the geographical location of these ancient peoples and the term has evolved since Herodotus wrote upon the ‘Keltoi’ in the 5th Century BCE.¹⁰ John Collis states that ‘the truth is that we do not know what the definition of a Celt was in the ancient world’¹¹ and the word has the potential to mean distinct things within differing disciplines. Interestingly, the term also has wide ranging non-academic connotations where, as a descriptive word, ‘Celtic’ is used in many spheres from musical genres to sports teams, illustrating the pervasiveness of the concept within modern society. The principle academic consensus of ‘Celtic’ is the people defined by the common languages termed Celtic, both ancient and modern, and the study of the movement of these people and their culture and that is the context in which we shall be using the terms here.¹²

The botanist and philologist, Edward Lhuyd is often regarded, as Ian Stewart says, as ‘the founder of Celtic studies’¹³ and although deserving of scholarly reverence for his early work in this field during the late 17th and early 18th Centuries, his theories are now open to challenge. One of the legacies of Lhuyd’s work is the long standing ‘Celtic from the East’ theory, whereby proponents assert that the Celts originate with the Hallstatt and La Tène cultures, respectively in the Austrian and Switzerland areas of Europe and extended outwards through a series of invasions. In his *Glossography*, Lhuyd set out the thought that Britain was invaded by Gaul yet as Cunliffe notes ‘Lhuyd had been writing at a time when little was known of the archaeology

¹⁰ Herodotus *Histories*, 2.33. For further discussion see Bridgman, T. P. ‘Keltoi, Galatai, Galli: Were They All One People?’ *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 24/25, (2004), pp. 155–62.

¹¹ John Collis, ‘The Sheffield Origins of Celtic Art’, *Celtic Art in Europe: Making Connections*, ed. by Christopher Gosden et al., (Oxbow Books, 2014), p. 20.

¹² For a detailed discussion on definitions of Celts see Collis, J., ‘Celts Ancient and Modern: Recent Controversies in Celtic Studies’ *Studia Celtica Fennica*, (2017), pp. 58–71.

¹³ Ian Stewart, ‘Celtic Linguistic Antiquarianism: Paul-Yves Pezron, Edward Lhwyd, G. W. Leibniz, and Their Legacies.’ *The Celts: A Modern History*, (Princeton University Press, 2025), p. 59.

of western Europe'¹⁴ demonstrating the lack of other evidence at the time to corroborate Lhuyd's hypothesis. For Cunliffe, then, the building of the 'Celtic from the East' theory developed from Lhuyd's linguistic model with support through archaeological study following this view, rather than challenging it. Scholars have long posited that the ancient Celts were synonymous with the subsequent findings of Hallstatt and La Tène culture.¹⁵ Koch proposes that 'the field has never completely outgrown the limitations of Lhuyd's original frame-work comparing Brythonic, Gaelic, and the Ancient Celtic of Gaul'¹⁶ showing how entrenched views can become and how difficult it can be to challenge accepted theories. It also demonstrates how accepted ideas do progress and change over time and when new evidence comes to light. John Koch surmises that 'the traditional view foregrounds evidence about groups called Keltoi/Celtae by Greek and Roman authors and groups with La Tène- and Hallstatt-style accoutrements. These categories overlap as the Celts *par excellence*' showing that this then led to scholars being confident with accepted theories and a stagnation of further hypotheses for many decades.

With the establishment of the 'Celtic from the East' theory, early archaeology surrounding the Celts favoured this invasion model whereas current thought is of a gradual migratory intermixing of cultures. Writing in 1939, O. D states that 'most archaeologists agree that the first Celtic invaders reached South East England from the lower Rhineland about 1000 BC'¹⁷ showing both the belief of frequent invasion and the idea that the Celts originated in the area of the Rhine. On this idea, Cunliffe tells us that 'simple invasionist theories of this kind were in common use until the 1960s'¹⁸ demonstrating how thought changes over time. In 1966, Grahame Clark gave his seminal essay, 'Invasion hypothesis in British archaeology' which challenged this long held view.¹⁹ Clark opens by telling us that even the most high ranking political leaders were keen to ascribe to the view that all historic achievements had been the

¹⁴ Cunliffe, 'Celticization from the West' in Cunliffe, B. and Koch, J. T. ed. *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature*, (Oxbow Books, 2010), p. 15.

¹⁵ For further discussion on the establishment and continued theory of 'Celtic from the East' see Terrence Powell's *The Celts* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958) and Wolfgang Meid's *Die Kelten* (Innsbruck: Archaeolingua Foundation, 2007).

¹⁶ John T. Koch 'Celtic From The West Meets Linguistics and Genetics' *Exploring Celtic Origins*, ed. by John T. Koch and Barry Cunliffe, (Oxbow Books, 2019), p. 32.

¹⁷ O. D., et al. 'The Celts in Archaeology' *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 2, (1939), p. 140.

¹⁸ Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts* p. 17.

¹⁹ For further discussion on Clark's paper, see Cunliffe, B., 'Continent Cut off by Fog: Just How Insular Is Britain?' *Scottish Archaeological Journal*, vol. 29, no. 2, (2007), pp. 99–112

product of foreign conquests, even terming it an ‘invasion neurosis’²⁰ apparent within the collective consciousness of the time. Cunliffe continues with ‘since 1970 there has been a subtle change in the vision of the Celt’²¹ which he equates to economic change and being a ‘reflection of modern European politics’²² displaying the change from the view of the Celts as ferocious invaders (or defenders with regards to Britain) to a more holistic view of people operating in sophisticated cultural exchange. The scholars of the 19th and 20th Centuries based their theories on their own contemporary experiences of empire and the prevalence of interest within the historical Roman empire, suggesting that this was the model for all movement during this time in history. Similarly, John Davies notes that the ‘invasion theory was an offspring of imperialist mentality’²³ showing that history is often imagined through the limitations of a current ideology.

Turning now to historical sources, the earliest writing we have regarding the geographical location of ancient Celts are found within the classical sources. These historical accounts offer several locations regarding the position of the ancient Celts²⁴ with Hecataeus of Miletus (560-480 BCE) the first to mention the Celts in the 6th Century BCE and the apparent Celtic cities of Narbon, Nyrax and a place close to Massalia.²⁵ Timothy Bridgman determines from Hecataeus’ writings that ‘the Celts had two cities on the coast on what is now known as modern-day southern France.’²⁶ The first two locations, however, are disputed by Sims-Williams who says that they ‘cannot be identified with any certainty’²⁷ also concluding that, alongside Herodotus’ mention of the Danube,²⁸ these were used as ‘meagre justification’²⁹ for the Celticity of Hallstatt and La Tène cultures. He further states that ‘we cannot locate Herodotus’

²⁰ Grahame Clark, ‘The Invasion Hypothesis in British Archaeology’, *Antiquity*, (1966) p. 172.

²¹ Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, p. 18.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²³ John Davies, p. 13.

²⁴ It is not the intent nor within the scope of this essay to list the full mentions of the Celts within the classical sources, here a brief overview is provided and for a fuller discussion see Bridgman, T. P. ‘Keltoi, Galatai, Galli: Were They All One People?’ *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 24/25, (2004), pp. 155–62.

²⁵ There are no original writings from Hecataeus of Miletus extant, what survives are fragments reproduced by Stephanus of Byzantium in the 6th Century. For discussion on ancient classical source fragments see Pearson, L., ‘Lost Greek Historians Judged by Their Fragments’ *Greece & Rome*, vol. 12, no. 35/36, (1943), pp. 43-56.

²⁶ Timothy P. Bridgman, ‘Keltoi, Galatai, Galli: Were They All One People?’ *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 24/25, (2004), p. 156.

²⁷ Sims-Williams, ‘The Location of the Celts According to Hecataeus, Herodotus, and Other Greek Writers’ *Études celtiques*, (2016), p. 9.

²⁸ Herodotus *Histories*, 2.33.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

‘Danubian’ Celts with certainty’³⁰ thus calling into question the basis for calling the Hallstatt culture Celtic. Sims-Williams surmises that this was a link made in error by earlier scholars leading to the area being ‘wrongly labelled’³¹ as Celtic. On the other hand, Sims-Williams does agree with the possibility of place mentioned near Massalia being linked to present day Marseille, on the Southern French coast.³² David Rankin points out that ‘Hecataeus would not have been in a position, nor would his sources, to know that the Celts did not construct cities in the sense of city-states’³³ showing the potential for misinterpretation of information when seeing it only through the eyes of the Classical authors. Herodotus also mentions other locations including an area commonly believed to be the Iberian Peninsular³⁴ and again, Sims-Williams believes this cannot be verified, stating the source is ‘too ambiguous’³⁵ to be used. Alonso-Núñez also states that ‘it is evident that Herodotus had never been’³⁶ to the areas of where his words are used to position the Celts. This determination certainly destabilizes the ‘Celtic from the East’ theory that has so long associated Hallstatt and La Tène with being the prime location for the ancient Celts. Further, archaeologist John Collis believes that ‘the term ‘Celtic’ should never be used as a synonym for La Tène.’³⁷ Similarly, Sims-Williams states that “‘Celtic’ is rightly regarded as a misleading label for the central European Hallstatt and La Tène material ‘cultures’ of the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age’³⁸ showing the agreement here regarding the origins of the ancient Celts that thought is progressing from the ‘Celtic from the East’ theory to a search elsewhere.

Accounts from classical authors have long been used to support the theories of the geographical movement of ancient Celtic people yet as Philip Freeman posits, ‘can we trust these classical sources to give us a true picture of the ancient Celts?’³⁹ querying the veracity of the writers of this time. There are a number of reasons why these sources may be not be fully trustworthy, including an unconscious bias through the lens of their own geographical location and culture

³⁰ Sims-Williams, ‘The Location of the Celts According to Hecataeus, Herodotus, and Other Greek Writers’, p.24

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23

³² *Ibid.*, p 10.

³³ David Rankin, ‘The Celts Through Classical Eyes’ in Ed. Aldhouse-Green, M. *The Celtic World* (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 1996), p. 23.

³⁴ Bridgman, ‘Keltoi, Galatai, Galli: Were They All One People?’ p.157.

³⁵ Sims-Williams, ‘The Location of the Celts According to Hecataeus, Herodotus, and Other Greek Writers’, p.23.

³⁶ J.M Alonso-Núñez, ‘Herodotus on the Far West’ *L’Antiquité Classique*, vol. 56, (1987), p. 248.

³⁷ John Collis, ‘The Origin and Spread of the Celts’ *Studia Celtica*, Vol 30, (1996), p. 27.

³⁸ Patrick Sims-Williams ‘An Alternative to Celtic from the East and Celtic from the West’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, (2020), p. 512.

³⁹ Philip Freeman ‘Classical Ethnography and the Celts: Can We Trust the Sources?’ *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 20/21, (2000), p. 22.

or a genuine lack of comprehension. Whilst the classical writers were at the forefront of expanding knowledge, it is critical to remember the time in which they were studying. Therefore, as Freeman warns ‘the background, motives, and sources of each author should be examined and weighed separately.’⁴⁰ This is also the case for studying the work of those writing upon the classical sources. Writing in 1906, Eleanor Hull proposed that ‘the habits and ideas of the wide-spread Celtic race seem to have been singularly homogeneous’⁴¹ from her reading of classical sources from Caesar (100 BC-44 BC), Diodorus (fl. 60-30 BC) and Strabo (64/63 BC-24 AD). Though Hull is speaking upon the idea of the Celts as a consistent culture and not the geography, here we can see the established acceptance of Celts as a singular people. In her conclusion, Hull praises the classical sources by describing ‘impartial testimony given by the Roman writers, commenting on the ways of nations but imperfectly known to them’⁴² whereas now we can see the evident bias in these writings such as Caesar’s *De Bello Gallico*⁴³ which were utilised as military propaganda. Similarly to Hull, Rankin finds that there is ‘a noteworthy consistency in the evidences we have for Greco-Roman attitudes to the Celts’⁴⁴ yet consistency does not equate to truth. There can be multiple reasons for a continuous documentation. We know, for example, that Posidonius of Apamea (135-50 BCE) was used as a source for several other writers⁴⁵ and the stereotypes put forward by Strabo remain entrenched and circulated by others.⁴⁶ As Sims-Williams states, the sources have been ‘exploited to support quite contradictory opinions about the locations of the Celts’⁴⁷ and it is important to consider the reasoning behind proposed theories. The term ‘Celtic’ has also often been misappropriated for political reasons, with geographical origins playing a large part. Speaking upon this Michael Dietler implores that;

⁴⁰ Freeman, ‘Classical Ethnography and the Celts: Can We Trust the Sources?’, p. 28.

⁴¹ Eleanor Hull, ‘Observations of Classical Writers on the Habits of the Celtic Nations, as Illustrated from Irish Records (Concluded)’ *The Celtic Review*, vol. 3, no. 10, (1906), p. 143.

⁴² Hull, ‘Observations of Classical Writers on the Habits of the Celtic Nations, as Illustrated from Irish Records (Concluded)’, p. 154.

⁴³ For more discussion on Caesar’s ethnographical writings see Schadee, H, ‘Caesar’s Construction of Northern Europe: Inquiry, Contact and Corruption in ‘De Bello Gallico,’ *The Classical Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 1, (2008), pp. 158–80.

⁴⁴ David Rankin, ‘The Celts Through Classical Eyes’ in ed. Aldhouse-Green, M. *The Celtic World* (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 1996), p. 32.

⁴⁵ For further discussion on Posidonius see J.J. Tierney, ‘The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius’ *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, vol. 60, (1959), pp. 189-275.

⁴⁶ For discussion on stereotypes within the classical sources see Isaac, Benjamin. ‘Proto-Racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity’, *World Archaeology*, vol. 38, no. 1, (2006), pp. 32–47.

⁴⁷ Sims-Williams, ‘The Location of the Celts According to Hecataeus, Herodotus, and Other Greek Writers’ *Études celtiques*, (2016), p. 15.

‘An exploration of the relationship between archaeology and the construction of identity in modern communities is of considerable importance in Europe today, where attempts to establish a new supranational community are matched by a resurgence of xenophobic nationalism’⁴⁸

This demonstrates the way in which fields within Celtic studies can be misappropriated when examined singularly. Factual, or indeed non-factual, information can be presented to suit a desired narrative, particularly sinister ones.

If only the classical sources are reviewed, it does not allow for areas and times of Celtic migration that were unknown to classical writers to be examined. Rankin does acknowledge that our perspective on the classical writers must be distanced by seeing the sources as ‘literature written by an educated class whose understanding was in many ways shielded from the input of factual information by the influence of rhetorical training’⁴⁹ showing that the other fields are needed to gain a more rounded picture. However, writing in support of consulting the classical sources, albeit cautiously, Cunliffe notes that ‘to reject such a vein would be defeatist: it would admit an inability to treat the sources critically’⁵⁰ showing that there is value to be found within the classical sources as long as they are viewed with discernment and placed within the wider context we now have. Here we see then that the other fields of Celtic studies are both indebted to the early historians and yet conscious of their limitations, leading to a partial agreement of their accuracy regarding the location of the ancient Celts.

In terms of art history, there is disagreement on whether objects found relating to Hallstatt, Le Tène or other cultures should be considered Celtic art and or even be as art at all. John Collis favours the term as ‘in its craft-like character it is no different from Baroque Art, or Art Nouveau, or Art Deco’⁵¹ whereas the Megaws in their book *Rethinking Celtic Art* term it ‘a definitional problem’⁵² showing the conflict in regards to archaeological finds. With respect to

⁴⁸ Michael Dietler “‘Our Ancestors the Gauls’: Archaeology, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Manipulation of Celtic Identity in Modern Europe.” *American Anthropologist*, vol. 96, no. 3, (1994), p. 584.

⁴⁹ Rankin, ‘The Celts Through Classical Eyes’, p. 32.

⁵⁰ Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts* p. 2.

⁵¹ Collis, ‘The Sheffield Origins of Celtic Art’, *Celtic Art in Europe: Making Connections*, p. 20.

⁵² J. V. S. Megaw, and M. Ruth Megaw, ‘A Celtic Mystery: Some Thoughts on the Genesis of Insular Celtic Art.’ *Rethinking Celtic Art*, ed. by Duncan Garrow et al., (Oxbow Books, 2008), p. 40.

location, for the Megaws ‘the genesis of Continental early Celtic art must now be regarded as having taken place in a number of disparate regions albeit all ultimately inspired by contact in varying degrees with the Italo-Greek world’⁵³ imparting the belief that Celtic art, and therefore Celtic culture, evolved in several locations, rather than following the established trajectory. This also perhaps shows the decreased attachment to the orthodox view of ‘Celtic from the East’ as being the only possible origin for the ancient Celts.

More recently then, this detachment from the classical sources and the ‘Celtic from the East’ premise has made space for new theories to emerge. The development of the ‘Celtic from the West’⁵⁴ theory in the 21st Century by Barry Cunliffe and John Koch was at first a controversial one due to the long standing tradition and acceptance of ‘Celtic from the East.’ Coming to their conclusions in parallel before joining together, they have altered their ideas on the traditional Celtic trajectory to focus on the Atlantic Façade⁵⁵ as the geographical location of ancient Celts. The theory sees a union between archaeology, philology and genetics, with Koch stating that ‘it is incorrect to assume that Celtic speech did not exist before Hallstatt and La Tène material came into use’⁵⁶ displaying the theory that the Celtic languages did not necessarily originate with these cultures. The ‘Celtic from the West’ model shifts the origins of the Celts and Celtic languages to the Atlantic coastal region of Western Europe to include areas of Britain, France, Spain and Portugal. It also fundamentally changes the timeline, offering an earlier picture of movement during the Bronze Age. Sims-Williams challenges this theory though by finding a weakness in the desire to match ‘linguistic data from the first millennium BC and later with archaeological data from the third millennium BC’⁵⁷ upon which he goes on to say ‘the chronological disparity is so vast that the hypothesis is impossible to confirm’⁵⁸ displaying that the theory is convincing but perhaps yet to be fully proven. For John Koch, ‘language is

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵⁴ For full discussion of ‘Celtic from the West’ see Cunliffe, B, and Koch, J. T. ed. *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature*. (Oxbow Books, 2010).

⁵⁵ Barry Cunliffe first put forward the initial idea in his work *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic and Its Peoples 8000 Bc-Ad 1500* (Oxford University Press, 2001) with Koch proposing ‘Celtic from the West’ at a conference in 2008, followed by their publication in 2010, for the full publication see Cunliffe, B, and Koch, J. T. ed. *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature*. (Oxbow Books, 2010).

⁵⁶ John T. Koch ‘Celtic From The West Meets Linguistics and Genetics’ *Exploring Celtic Origins*, ed. by John T. Koch and Barry Cunliffe, (Oxbow Books, 2019), p. 21.

⁵⁷ Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘An Alternative to Celtic from the East and Celtic from the West’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, (2020), p. 524.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 524.

arguably the most scientific, measurable, and generally tractable index of Celticity'⁵⁹ and language and place names provide an invaluable source of information regarding ancient people with his analysis of inscriptions supporting the theory.⁶⁰ Sims-Williams states that “philology and archaeology have had a difficult relationship”⁶¹ showing the sometimes challenging nature of aligning two fields towards a common goal. On the other hand, as Koch notes ‘it is common for a hypothesis based in one discipline to fail immediately on contact with a second, where it can be easily invalidated or will lack explanatory power’⁶² showing the need for relationships between scholars across several fields. This collaboration between Koch and Cunliffe, then, shows that even scholars who may not agree on all aspects of a theoretical perspective are able to join forces to advance the field of study.

Following on from the emergence of ‘Celtic from the West’, the most recent theory to emerge in academia is that of ‘Celtic from the Centre’, put forward by Patrick Sims-Williams in 2020,⁶³ described by Sims-Williams as ‘a more economical view of the origin of the Celtic languages.’⁶⁴ The ‘Celtic from the Centre’ theory places Gaul as the site of emergence from which the Celtic languages grew and spread. One of Sims-Williams reasonings for this being ‘it is central, obviating the need to suppose that Celtic was spoken over a vast area for a very long time’⁶⁵ thus offering an explanation for the survival of the Celtic languages, the geographical spread being reduced. Sims-Williams supposes that as these people settled and their language superseded any previously spoken languages, they also adapted to the various material surroundings they encountered, becoming ‘archaeologically indistinguishable’⁶⁶ from the current inhabitants of an area. This theory underscores that the majority of the Celtic studies field place the area of Gaul as a point wherein the Celtic language flourished, even if not all believe it to be a point of origin. The classical sources of Caesar, Livy (59 BC- 17AD), Tacitus

⁵⁹ John T. Koch ‘Celtic From The West Meets Linguistics and Genetics’ *Exploring Celtic Origins*, ed. by John T. Koch and Barry Cunliffe, (Oxbow Books, 2019), p. 19.

⁶⁰ John T. Koch ‘Paradigm Shift?: Interpreting Tartessian as Celtic’ *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature*, ed. by John T. Koch and Barry Cunliffe, vol. 15, (Oxbow Books, 2010), pp. 185–302.

⁶¹ Patrick Sims-Williams ‘An Alternative to Celtic from the East and Celtic from the West’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, (2020), p. 511.

⁶² John T. Koch ‘Celtic From The West Meets Linguistics and Genetics’ *Exploring Celtic Origins*, ed. by John T. Koch and Barry Cunliffe, (Oxbow Books, 2019), p. 19.

⁶³ For Sims-Williams’ full discussion see Sims-Williams, P., ‘An Alternative to Celtic from the East and Celtic from the West’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, (2020), pp. 511- 529 .

⁶⁴ Sims-Williams, ‘An Alternative to Celtic from the East and Celtic from the West’, p. 523.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 523

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 524.

(56-120 AD) and others place Gaul as a key site of Celtic activity, though we are still reminded to proceed cautiously with Ronald Syme saying of Tacitus ‘it looks as though Tacitus recorded what he had read in books, not what he had seen and observed’⁶⁷ and the hyperbole of all the Roman writers is agreed upon.⁶⁸ They do point to the overlap with Gaul as a key location of ancient Celtic people at least, as is attested to by philology and archaeological findings, with Rachel Pope stating that ‘Celtic language studies now consider Celtic to have developed originally in Bronze Age France’⁶⁹ showing this change in perception.

Further to this, just as with continental Europe, there has been ferocious debate surrounding the origin of the insular Celts, the people of the British Isles and Ireland. Patrick Sims-Williams first introduced the term ‘Celtosceptic’ in 1998 to differentiate between scholars who do not believe ancient Britons should be termed Celts. Collis’ view is that ‘the linguistic definition of the ‘Modern Celts’ is correct, for the Scots, Irish, Welsh, Bretons, Manx and Cornish, but it is not true of the ancient world’⁷⁰ suggesting that even if a theory is applicable to one era, it may not be appropriate for all of history. However in his most recent work, Sims-Williams has shed light upon a classical source long discounted and now considers it possible to call the Iron Age people of Britain Celts. This has been a long avoided term with Collis stating that ‘no ancient author ever refers to the inhabitants of Britain as being Gauls or Celts’⁷¹ suggesting that Iron Age Britons should not be referred to as Celtic. Simon James takes this further to say that ‘no one in Britain or Ireland called themselves a ‘Celt’ or ‘Celtic’ before 1700’,⁷² again demonstrating the scepticism for British Celts. Having changed his position, Sims-Williams writes that ‘Celtic Britain’ can be reinstated because *Keltoi* in Britain were mentioned c.320 BC by Pytheas of Marseille.’⁷³ Even so, Sims-Williams is clear to state that;

⁶⁷ Ronald Syme, ‘Tacitus on Gaul’ *Latomus*, vol. 12, no. 1, (1953), p. 25.

⁶⁸ See Balsdon, J. P. V. D., ‘The Veracity of Caesar’, *Greece & Rome*, vol. 4, no. 1, (1957), pp. 19–28 and Schadee, H., ‘Caesar’s Construction of Northern Europe: Inquiry, Contact and Corruption in ‘De Bello Gallico,’ *The Classical Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 1, (2008), pp. 158–80.

⁶⁹ Rachel Pope, ‘Re-Approaching Celts: Origins, Society, and Social Change’, *Journal of Archaeological Research*, vol. 30, no. 1, (2022), p. 23.

⁷⁰ John Collis, ‘The Sheffield Origins of Celtic Art’, *Celtic Art in Europe: Making Connections*, ed. by Christopher Gosden et al., (Oxbow Books, 2014), p. 20.

⁷¹ Collis, ‘The Origin and Spread of the Celts’, p. 18.

⁷² James, S., *The Atlantic Celts : ancient people or modern invention?* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), p. 17.

⁷³ Sims-Williams, P. “‘Celtic Britain’” In *Pre-Roman Archaeology, Reconsidered*, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 44, (2025), p. 447.

Needless to say, reinstating fourth-century BC ‘ancient Britons’ as Keltoi does not signify that they were indistinguishable from the first-century BC Gauls on the other side of the English Channel, who ‘called themselves Celtae’ according to Caesar⁷⁴

Demonstrating that there is still a significant gap in the current knowledge surrounding the geographical location of ancient Celts.

Moving forward, this is where the field of genetics is proving to be illuminating. Genetics is the most recent addition to Celtic studies for obvious technological reasons and both the proponents of the ‘Celtic from the West’ and ‘Celtic from the Centre’ models are seeking to advance their respective theories through the study of ancient DNA. Initially seeming very dissimilar from the other disciplines, perhaps it is not so different after all, if we consider that all have hypotheses, methodologies, investigations and conclusions that can lead to further understanding of the location of the ancient Celts. Therefore, the work of geneticists add a valuable new dimension to Celtic studies. Richards et. al discuss these developments and suggest ‘shared ancestral heritage among the human populations of Atlantic Europe’⁷⁵ documenting the link between several places on the Atlantic Façade, supporting the ‘Celtic from the West’ idea. Genetics, however, cannot offer a full picture alone as it does not tell us the length of time a language may have been spoken in a region, if indeed at all by the time an area is populated.

In more recent research by Cassidy et. al, a study of ancient genomes have found that ‘patterns of haplotype sharing reveal that British Iron Age populations form fine-grained geographical clusters with southern links extending across the channel to the continent’⁷⁶ potentially showing the movement of people during this time. Sims-Williams, referring to this work, says ‘recent linguistic and aDNA research shows that large numbers of plausibly Celtic-speaking people were crossing the Channel to Britain from c.1000 BC onwards’⁷⁷ illustrating that genetic

⁷⁴ Sims-Williams, P. “‘Celtic Britain’” In *Pre-Roman Archaeology, Reconsidered*, p. 457.

⁷⁵ Richards et al., ‘The Longue Durée of Genetic Ancestry: Multiple Genetic Marker Systems and Celtic Origins on the Atlantic Facade of Europe’, *The American Journal of Human Genetics*, (2004), p. 694.

⁷⁶ Cassidy, L.M., Russell, M., Smith, M. *et al.* ‘Continental influx and pervasive matrilocality in Iron Age Britain’. *Nature* 637, (2025) p.1136.

⁷⁷ Sims-Williams, P. “‘Celtic Britain’” In *Pre-Roman Archaeology, Reconsidered*, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 44, (2025), p. 457.

research is potentially proving theories of movement. Sims-Williams also states that it ‘is a serious possibility in view of what is now known about Iron Age immigration from Gaul’⁷⁸ showing the advent of new knowledge and agreement in location of the Celts and the possible validation of the ‘Celtic from the Centre’ theory. Earlier scholars also noted this link, with Ifor Williams telling us that ‘the same tribal and personal names occur on both sides of the English Channel’⁷⁹ showing that linguistic analysis supports this theory and that even in the decades since Williams was writing certain discoveries are still being proved correct, whilst others are evolving.

There is acknowledgement of the current limitations of study with ‘the characterization of gene flow into Britain requires further refinement through haplotypic analysis and regional dissection’⁸⁰ showing that this is not a holy grail of answers for Celticists, not just yet anyhow. There is still a gap in scholarly research here, mostly due to the availability of samples. Soil acidity in certain locations, notably Brittany, makes extracting samples a challenge. Also the differing burial practices of several Celtic cultures makes DNA extraction more difficult or in the case of cremation, impossible.⁸¹ However, as technology progresses, these may become less of a barrier.

Conclusion

As with many proposed theories on the historical origins of people and culture, there is no definitive answer here. The theories proposed by scholars in the fields of archaeology, history and philology vary considerably and so make for an interesting and everchanging landscape of debate within Celtic studies. The three primary theories surrounding the geographical location of the ancient Celts situate their origins and timelines differently. ‘Celtic from the East’ suggests Austria and Switzerland for the emergence of Celtic culture whereas ‘Celtic from the West’ supposes the Atlantic Façade. Gaul is the epicentre for the ‘Celtic from the Centre’ theory and

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 458.

⁷⁹ Ifor Williams, ‘When Did British Become Welsh?’ in *The Beginnings of Welsh Poetry* ed. by Bromwich, R. (University Press Cambridge, 1980), p.1.

⁸⁰ Cassidy *et al.* p. 1136-1137.

⁸¹ For discussion on Celtic burial practices in various locations see Cunliffe, B., ‘Celtic Death Rituals’ *Archaeology*, vol. 41, no. 2, (1988), pp. 39-43 and Cleary, K., ‘Skeletons in the Closet: The Dead among the Living on Irish Bronze Age Settlements’, *The Journal of Irish Archaeology*, vol. 14, (2005), pp. 23-42.

there are many thoughts in between regarding where the Celts may have been at any one point in time, leading to numerous possibilities. There is no singular official consensus between the differing disciplines or indeed within each faction of study, though there are agreements between scholars from different fields when working together, as in the case of Koch and Cunliffe. There is also some agreement as to certain locations, for example with all disciplines agreeing that Gaul was a site of importance for Celtic language development.

As we have seen, there are many areas where the differing disciplines do coalesce and work together to bring about pioneering work. Showing that a collaborative approach often works to progress new ideas. It will be intriguing to follow the added dimension that genetics brings to the field and how this will work with or against the various theories we have discussed here. However, this is a debate which seems certain to rage on for decades to come unless stark new evidence comes to light. Even still, it may be that those connected with longer established theories stay beholden to these even as current thought progresses. What is clear, is that it is unlikely to be the work of one particular field that answers the question of the geographical location of the ancient Celts. A multi-disciplinary approach is vital in examining several strands of data and this topic will provide much discussion for years to come.

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