

A Rudder in the Storm
The Value of Celtic-Place Names in England
An Essay Prepared For
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Introduction

Surrounded by Celts - Couching Celtic Controversies

The study of place-names in modern England, the only Germanic people on a set of islands amongst the decedents of those called 'Celts' may help guide and answer several longstanding controversies in the field of Celtic Studies. Celtic Toponymy, or the study of Celtic place-names, is a vital subset within the complex, controversial and intriguing field. Because it possesses rules, methods, structure, and types, and is executed independently of historical narratives or external biases, toponymy serves as an anchor to check and balance research, test hypotheses, moderate discourse and allow for some reliable reconstruction of history.

This essay briefly summarizes the major positions and challenges concerning Celtic origins facing scholars. Next, it focuses on the characteristics of place-names in England, a Germanic People compassed by Celtic neighbors whose rivers, hillforts, forests, and village names serve as the perfect use-case, or *sandbox* for analysis on what Celtic place-names can, and of equal importance, cannot prove or establish with respect to the great questions at the heart of Celtic Studies.

Celt – An Operating Definition

In his article *An Alternative to 'Celtic from the East'*, Emeritus Professor of Celtic Studies at Aberystwyth University, Patrick Sims-Williams, provides a basic, operating definition of the contested word *Celt (ic)*, describing them as 'both to the peoples whom Greek and Latin writers called variously Celts, Galatians, Gauls and Celtiberians and to their related languages, as known from inscriptions or inferred from place- and personal names'¹. Additionally, a lay definition that provides a simple frame of reference is to describe the Celts through the window of their modern descendants in Wales, Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, the Isle of Mann, and Galicia.

No Such Thing as a Celt in Britain Mania and Skepticism

At the dawn of the 18th century, a convergence of factors contributed to a movement of passionate research and interest in the ancestors living in what are currently known as 'The Celtic Nations'. The Protestant Reformation, with its focus on the individual study and interpretation of Scripture, begat a great work to preserve language and literature. A

¹ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'An Alternative To 'Celtic From The East And 'Celtic From the West', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, p.1.
<<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/cambridge-archaeological-journal/article/an-alternative-to-celtic-from-the-east-and-celtic-from-the-west/4F186F087DD3BE66D535102484F8E8C3>> [accessed 8 November, 2023]

nationalistic spirit arose to combat the rise of English Imperialism and lastly, there was a romantic, introspective, and spiritual countermovement against the drab and perceived emptiness of the Industrial Revolution. These were the ingredients that, when blended, created several Celtic Revivals over the past two and a half centuries.

But the mania was not absolute, nor universal. Wales, who is the strongest example, was very much enjoying a cultural and literary revival of its own, and many objected to the notion that they were part of a unified stock from the Continent. John Collins, who is the Professor of Archeology at the University of Sheffield, summarizes Celtoscepticism in his article, *Celts Ancient and Modern: Recent Controversies in Celtic Studies*:

Celtoscepticism comes from a Welsh term *celtisceptig* invented by the poet and novelist Robin Llywelin, and translated into English and applied to Celtic Studies by Patrick Sims-Williams (1998); it is used for people who do not consider that the ancient people of Britain should be called Celts as they had never been so-called in the Ancient World. Indeed, Strabo said that another Greek author, Hipparchus, had got confused between Celts and Britons. At most the ancient authors say that the Britons were 'like' the Celts, but even that implies that the Britons were not Celts.²

Both factions enamored with mania or entrenched in skepticism would benefit from a place-name centric approach to accompany or in some cases improve upon the use of literature or manuscript 'only' to support their views.

Eastern or Western Origins..Or Something In Between The Next Celtic Controversy.

From the fundamental question of "where there Celts?" to the natural follow up question "where did they come from?" Professor Sims-Williams, who writes from a *Celtic from the Middle* perspective, provides a thorough survey of the prevalent Celtic origin and migration theories. He states:

Thus there have been three main stages of scholarship: (1) the Celts are identified with the Hallstatt and La Tène 'cultures' of the first millennium BC; (2) then the discovery of contemporary Celtic language inscriptions (Lepontic and Celtiberian) in the 'wrong' areas casts doubt on whether the 'ethnolinguistic' Celts can be identified archaeologically; (3) most recently, however, they are associated with the archaeological cultures of the Atlantic zone of c. 3000 BC or even earlier. In this paper, I argue that both the new 'Atlantic' model and the older 'central European' one, though alluringly exotic, are unsupported by any

² John R. Collins, 'Celts Ancient and Modern: Recent Controversies in Celtic Studies', *Studia Celtica Fennica* Vol XIV (2017), p.1.

solid evidence and are inherently implausible. I shall conclude by suggesting a realistic, if less romantic, scenario: 'Celtic from the centre'.³

Sims-Williams's research uses the power of analytics, and place-name distribution to guide his more balanced view. After documenting the key tenets of the former stages, he writes:

'I do not agree with these deductions. My 2006 study was based on the database underlying the Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World and its Map-by-Map Directory (Talbert 2000). This includes over 20,000 places, rivers, peoples, etc. (some with more than one name), about a third of them labelled 'unlocated', since they could not be pinpointed on the maps. ⁴

In addition to distribution and place-name heat maps, Professor Sims-Williams also used toponymy as an objective method for understanding the timing and layering of place-names. Of one of his findings using this method he states, '*We cannot be sure that the names are ancient, and obviously place-names with Latin Augusto-, Caesaro-, Flavio-, or Iulio- + a Celtic element cannot be*'.⁵ Place-names that memorialize the Caesars cannot have been named prior to the existence of their namesakes or by extension, the Roman Period. This observation becomes a critical principle and help-aide when studying the 'layering' or strata of place-names in England.

Cooling the Debate

The Underutilized Discipline of Using Place-Names

In a separate work called *Ancient Celtic Placenames in Europe and Asia Minor*, Professor Sims-Williams writes of placenames (they) '*Potentially they have as much to tell us about human history as the DNA we carry in our bodies- in both cases if only we knew how to interrogate them. And, unlike DNA, which has wandered from country to country, place-names are fixed in space.*'⁶

Whereas parchments and scrolls can be altered, inscriptions destroyed, or libraries leveled by invaders and subjugators, rivers, streams, hills, trails, and trade routes have much longer staying power, forming a kind of lasting 'fingerprint' upon the land. The organized study and appreciation of place-names, is vital. In a general sense, the place-names in the regions where the Celts dwelt (and dwell today) provide an encryption for decoding, and appreciating:

- A military base or marker of some great battle or calamity.
- Wildlife and nature.

³ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'An Alternative To 'Celtic From The East And 'Celtic From the West', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, p.2. <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/cambridge-archaeological-journal/article/an-alternative-to-celtic-from-the-east-and-celtic-from-the-west/4F186F087DD3BE66D535102484F8E8C3> > [accessed 8 November, 2023]

⁴ Ibid. P. 9.

⁵ Ibid. P.9.

⁶ Patrick Sims-Williams, *Ancient Celtic Placenames in Europe and Asia Minor*, Number 39, Edition 1, (Hoboken New Jersey, USA : 2006), p.1.

- Clues about spirituality and worship
- Keys on '*where to locate something of importance.*'

In this regard, some of the strongest scholarship comes from the analysis of old maps and isolating simple references in written works (ancient and modern) that note and give the name of a 'place'. Out of that discipline a structure can be observed, and objective rules of scholarship applied. Sims-Williams codifies the methodology as:

From the point of view of modern philology, place-names can be identified as Celtic, with varying degrees of probability, to the extent to which they include elements which show:

- (i) typically Celtic sound changes vis-à-vis the other Indo-European languages,
or
- (ii) typically Celtic suffixes, inflexions or other morphological features, or
- (iii) correspondences with words attested in ancient or modern Celtic languages.⁷

In addition to rules of engagement, a structure emerges from coalescence of Celtic place-names as well. Whether on the Continent or the British Isles a repeated word order emerges that, when noted, increases the readability, enjoyment, and deciphering of place-names. These are:

- An Adjective combined with a noun.
- Noun combined with another noun.
- A deity followed by a noun or adjective.
- Personal name followed by a suffix.

Having a set of objective, independent rules, methods and clues, the anchor of toponymy can help guide and moderate the extreme positions, allowing for greater science amongst the art of determining "who and were the Celts?"

Onto Modern England

A Use Case For Determining What Probably Happened on the Continent

England, though modern, is potentially a better case subject for ancient Celtic studies than the Hallstatt region, Continental Europe, or Turkey. Uniquely, both the top and bottom layers of a *linguistic sandwich* are still observable today, allowing for triangulation of the 'near beginning' and ending of the story. The top layer of place-name strata being Modern English, the bottom layers; Brythonic and Goidelic originating languages, still spoken and used today. That there was a language preceding Celtic and with it some undecipherable place-names notwithstanding, the benefit of looking to England; which started as Celtic and ended as

⁷ Ibid, p. 8

Germanic, and with a clear strata, going backwards from the latter to Norman French, Old Norse, Old English, Latin to Brythonic and Goidelic, over a span of fifteen hundred years, can be extrapolated to understand what might have become of the Celts over a period of three thousand or more years in Europe and Asia. A.D Mills, who collated '*A History of British Placenames*' agrees with this, stating 'The various strata of English place names reflect all the great historical migrations, conquests, and settlements of the past and the different languages spoken by successive waves of inhabitants.'⁸

Using the observable premise that Celtic was "first" (following a parent Indo-European language), the forensic place-name evidence in England still exists, can be seen in near original, or similar modern iterations, and even placed into distinct categories, examples include:

- **Names of Celtic tribes, as found in Devon and Leeds.**

Leeds, as an example sources from the Brythonic word for "hot or boiling" joined to the Latin suffix for "People" and is a direct survivor back to at least the Roman Period, named for "The people or tribe of the violently flowing river."⁹. Leeds follows the 'adjective plus noun' method as found on the Continent, in Wales and wherever Celtic place-names occur.

- **Important towns or cities, like Carlisle, York, or Dover.**

Carlisle, another direct surviving Celtic place-name, coming from the Celtic *Lugowalus*. the strength of Lugus. It follows the 'deity plus suffix' method.

- **Hills and forests such as Mellor and Penge.**

Hills will be highlighted and referenced later in this work.

- **And most frequently, rivers such as Frome, Exe, and Avon.¹⁰**

Avon is an English rendering of the Brythonic *afon* or *river* and is common throughout England.

Rivers

Distribution in England and That Might Help with Origin and Migration Controversies.

From a distribution standpoint, Professor David Parsons of University of Wales Trinity Saint David points out 'In essence, the further west you go in Britain, the more Celtic the surviving nomenclature. Take away our historical narrative and there are still enough clues here, I would have thought, to generate a story along the same lines.'¹¹. The overarching narrative concerning England being that it was inhabited by Celtic tribes who were then replaced by Anglo-Saxon or Germanic tribes in the 6th century.

⁸ David Mills, *A Dictionary of British Place Names* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.1

⁹ , Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, 'On the name 'Leeds'', *Antiquity. A Quarterly Review Of Archaeology*, Vol. 20 (1946) pp. 209–210

¹⁰ David Mills, *A Dictionary of British Place Names* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.3

¹¹ David N. Parsons, 'Tracking The Course Of The Savage Tongue Place-Names And Linguistic Diffusion In Early Britain', in *Celtic From The West Alternative Perspectives From Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature*, edited by Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (Oxford : Oxbow Books, 2012), p. 172.

Rivers, which as place-names have perhaps the longest staying power, are strongly Celtic in the West and North of the British Isles, then fade to a trickle in what is modern day England. From a '*Celtic from the East* mindset, the distributional analysis could be interpreted as the Anglo-Saxon language coming from east, and pushing the native speakers west towards Wales, and north towards and into Scotland.

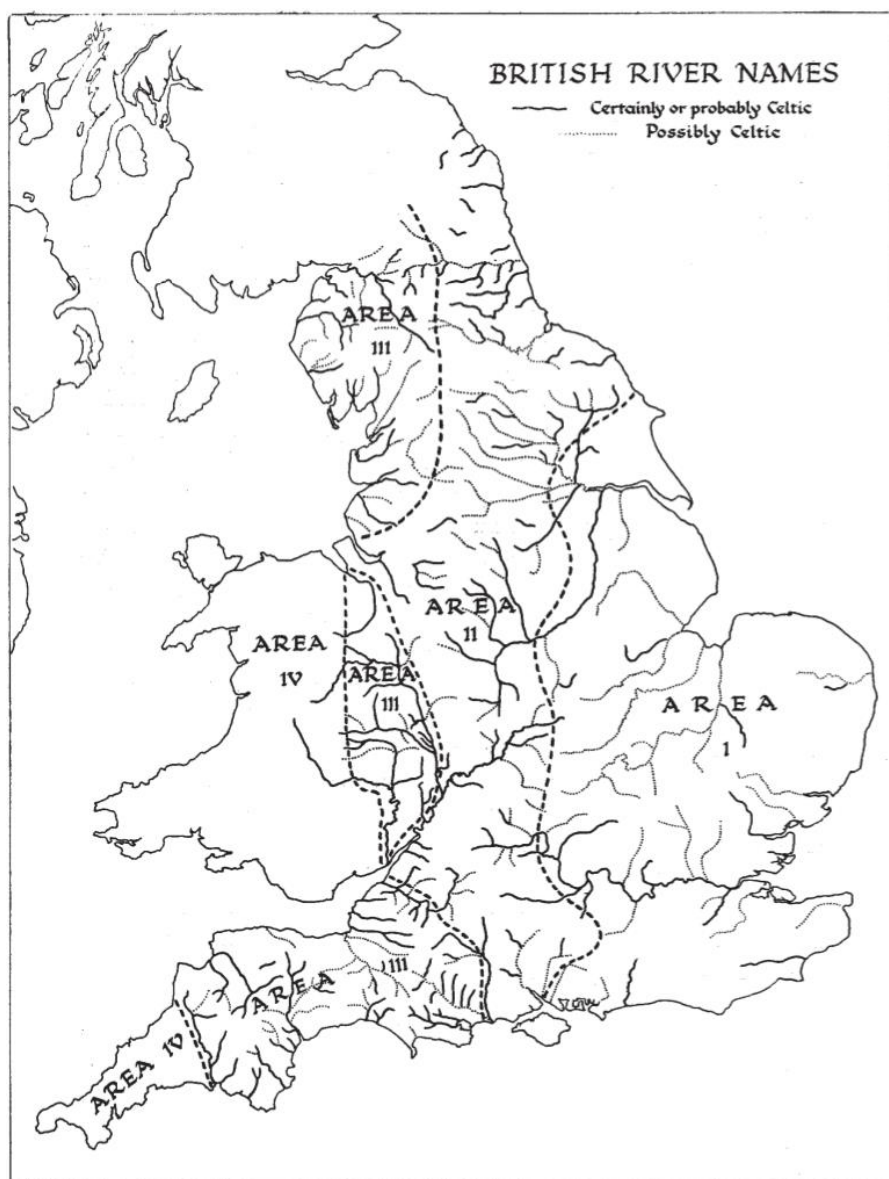
However, that is an exegetic approach. What the place-name data shows is that the Celts were all over the British Isles, then "not there" very much at all in what is now called England. Reading a migration or 'pushing' of a people west or east is as assumption, whether reasonable or unreasonable.

Instead, Professor Sims-Williams uses name distribution to suggest that where a high percentage concentration of place-names remains denotes where the Celts longest endured, where lowest or fading, where they were wiped out. Secondly, where they longest endured is most probably where they originated (though he treads lightly here). If the data model of what happened in the British Isles is applied to continental Europe, Sims-Williams's suggested view that the Celts originated in the Gallic region and then suffered loss, annihilation or assimilation emanating in one direction (Europe) and survival in another direction (the British Isles) holds the most credulity. In Chapter 8 of *Celtic From the West, Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature*, Professor Parsons summarizes the improving method:

'Patrick Sims-Williams' Ancient Celtic Place-Names in Europe and Asia Minor (2006) have provided authoritative modern guides to a subject that was previously reliant on ancient and misleading reference works, like Holder's *Alt-celtischer sprachschatz*, and innumerable and very variable regional studies, published in many different lands and languages. The groundwork is at least now in place to begin to look: the questions are how to look, and what to look for.¹²

With respect to the British Isles, whether by calamity (comet or volcano), brutal invasion, a long series of wars or by assimilation, the place-name evidence in England indicates a region inhabited by Celts, then somewhat abruptly not inhabited, followed by layers (other than the Latin influence which was minor and out of scope for this essay) of place-name strata that settle into the composite "English" of today.

¹² Ibid, p. 175.



8.1. Kenneth Jackson's river-name map
from *Language and History in Early Britain*

Figure 1 – A map of British river names demonstrating a concentration in central and west of England.¹³

¹³ Ibid. P. 173

Hills

Placenames in England that Might Moderate the “CeltoMania vs Celtoscepticism” Debate

A basic entry point for beginners studying Celtic place-names is to *look to the hills*. As with rivers, hills tend to have staying power, long remembering former distant occupants and how they described their lands. The word “hill” is likely ‘brig’ in proto-Celtic, the earliest form of Celtic developing from its Indo-European parent word. A similar word appears, within proximate form amongst all languages that are described as Celtic:

Proto-Celtic : Brig

Gaulish : Brigna

Goidelic : Bri

Middle Irish: Bri

Scottish Gaelic: Bre

Welsh: Bre

Cornish: Bre

Breton: Bre

The Latin word *Brigna* (rocky terrain) seems to be a loanword from the same source, showing the strength or popularity of *Brig*.

In modern England the Celtic place-name survives, often directly, such as in Brean, a parish near Somerset or Brewood, which is a mashup of “hill” in Brythonic with the Old English *wuduw*, becoming ‘Brewood’ in its modern iteration (Brewood is an example of a ‘Noun-Noun’ type).

Although objection can be raised to the word ‘*Celt*’ given its association with barbarism or primitivism, the Celtosceptic who asserts that the tribes and people described as Celts have no relation to those on the British Isles is quickly disproven by overwhelming place-name evidence that proves a common parent language and repetitive similarity of word usage in Gaul, parts of Europe and the British Isles (to include Ireland).

Conclusion

Celtic Toponymy, focused on England guides the researcher towards a position that the use of the descriptor *Celt* is reasonable because place-names in England align with those in the British Isles, and on the Continent, and that the “Celtic from the Middle” position is the best, weightiest position on Celtic origins and migrations to-date.

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