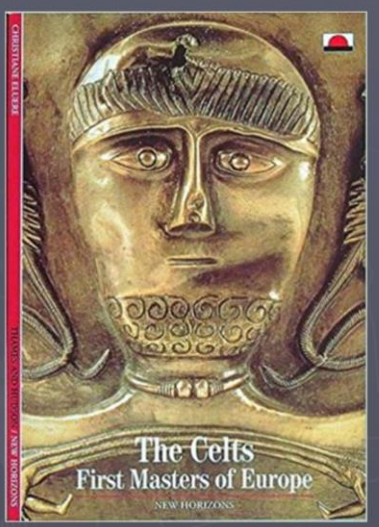
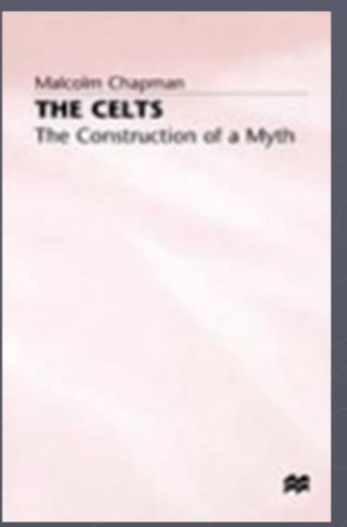
Celtomania and Celtoscepticism





In 1998, Patrick Sims-Williams, Professor of Celtic Studies at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, produced an article for the Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies journal entitled *Celtomania and Celtoscepticism*. In it he refers to the 'battleground' surrounding the use of the labels 'Celt' and 'Celtic'. Despite the fact that the article was written over twenty years ago, the debate has not moved on very far in the meantime, and many of the principal works on the subject from that time are still amongst the most influential today. For example, Barry Cunliffe's *'The Ancient Celts'* first published in 1997, received a makeover in a second edition of 2018, in which the author notes that as far as the ancient Celts and their origins are concerned, *'the debate is still continuing'* (p.2). The introduction to the first book in the *Celtic from the West* series (2012), which is edited by Cunliffe and John T. Koch, notes the *'repeated debunking of all things Celtic over the last twenty years'* .

The breadth of opinion on display between the one pole and the other can be illustrated by the two books pictured above. The synopsis of the book *The Celts: First Masters of Europe*, first published in 1993 describes them as '*a sophisticated people who dominated Europe for 500 years.'* On the other hand, Malcolm Chapman's book *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth*, published in the previous year, sets out its stall in the title and suggests that to the ancient Greeks, the Celts were nothing more than *'the wogs in the north'* (p.33).

These differences in attitudes towards the Celts were (and in many ways still are) significant enough for Sims-Williams to describe the situation as urgent because *'schizophrenic signals are forever being sent out to the general public'* (p. 1). Given Cunliffe's comment above, a synthesis may yet be some way off.

It would perhaps be a little unfair to describe either Barry Cunliffe or Miranda Green as 'Celtomaniacs', given that they readily acknowledge the holes in the Celtic synthesis. Nevertheless, they are generally supportive of the enterprise, and it is precisely books such as the ones above which provide examples of the *'new period of Celtomania with two or three books appearing each year'* described by John Collis and quoted by Patrick Sims-Williams on the first page of his article. Indeed, it is rather ironic that sceptics who take exception to publications with 'Celts' or 'Celtic' in the title nevertheless contribute articles to these very same publications, and additionally produce publications of their own where the word 'Celts' takes centre stage (according to those of a more cynical bent, this might be because books with 'Celts' in the title sell! p.2). Collis is himself a contributor to *The Celtic World*, which was published in 1996.

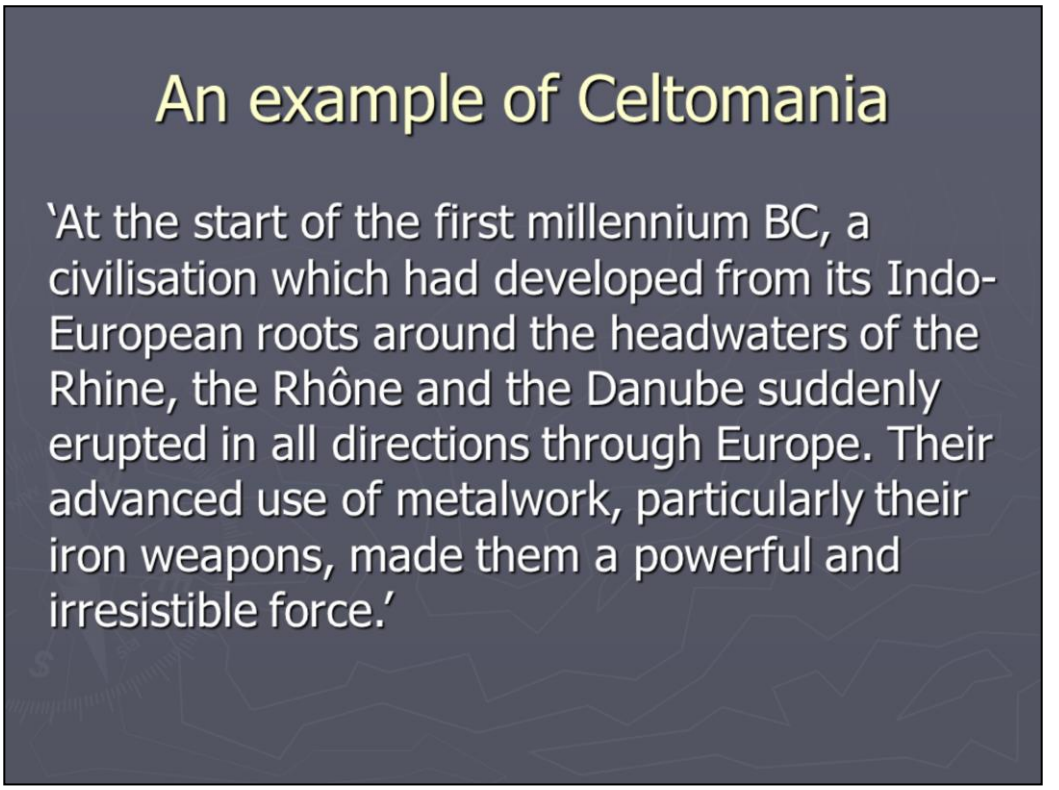
In her introductory chapter to this book entitled *'Who were the Celts?'* Miranda Green, the editor, notes the following (p.3):

'The decision to produce an international exploration of the Celtic world between 600 BC and 600 AD rests on the premiss that the Celts existed in some manner'.

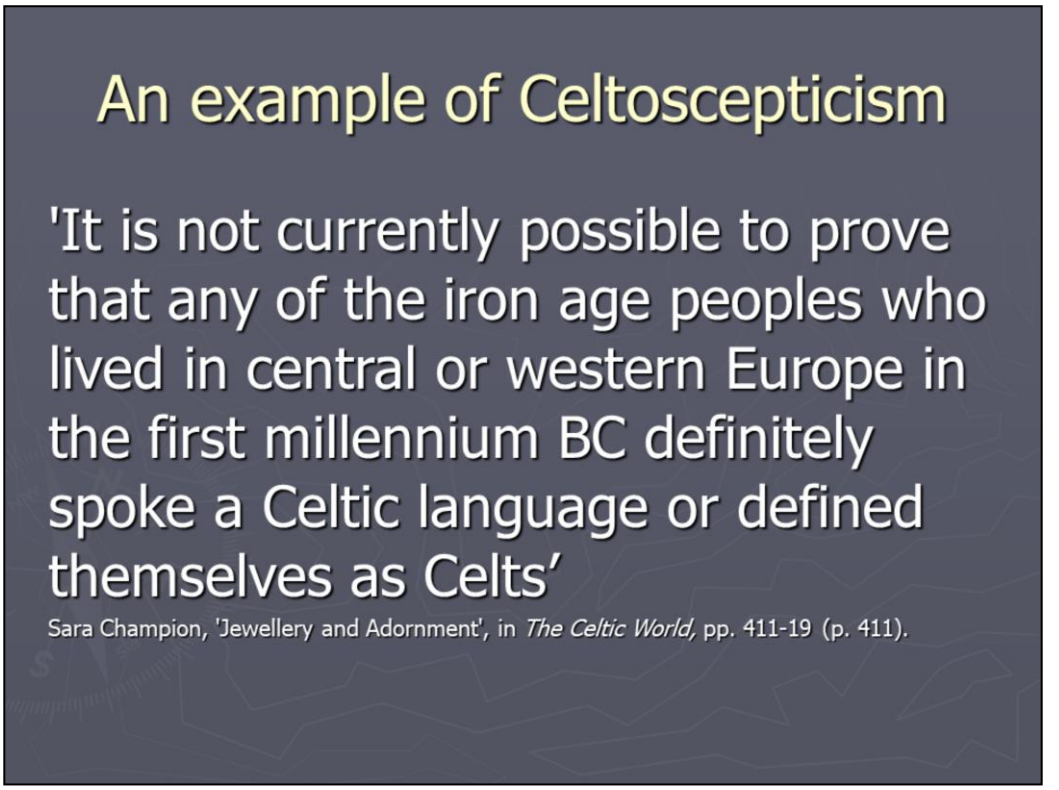
That this point needed to be stressed was considered necessary because: *'many prehistorians (including some contributors to this volume) argue that it is spurious to identify iron age Europeans as Celts. Other investigators are more comfortable with this nomenclature, as long as its meaning is specifically defined. On the opposite pole to the sceptics are the committed Celticists who perceive a genuine continuity of tradition between the ancient peoples of northern Europe and the modern inhabitants of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, the Isle of Man and Brittany….No attempt has been made on the part of the editor to 'iron out' controversy or to present a unidirectional approach.'*

On page 6 of his article, Patrick Sims-Williams points out that the concept of 'Celticity' has been questioned for decades, including by speakers of Celtic languages. These, however, were more inclined to be critical of the logic behind pan-Celtic, pan-Germanic or pan-Slavic movements, rather than questioning the existence of such groups in the first place. It was during the last decade of the previous millennium and the first decade of this one, that the topic became the 'battleground' which in some cases went so far as to question whether the Celts had actually ever existed at all. The first wave of this new advance was led by Chapman's *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth*, published in 1992.

Simon James is known to have been influenced by Chapman's book and his own, *the Atlantic Celts: ancient people or modern invention*, was published in 1999, which was, incidentally, the year when devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland assumed their responsibilities for the first time. The essence of his argument is that nobody in either Britain or Ireland called themselves a Celt before 1700. The use of this label is therefore a 'modern invention'. James treats Edward Lhuyd's *Archaeologia Britannica* with some suspicion, noting that it was published in 1707, the same year as the Act of Union of Great Britain, adding: *'I believe that Lhuyd was not simply a scholar who fortuitously came up with the right idea at the right time: to a large extent, he knew what he was doing, and had a political agenda clearly in mind'* (p.49). The words 'invention' or 'myth' appear twice each between the titles of Chapman's book and the two shown above, so there can certainly be no accusations of the agenda being hidden in this case. John Collis' assertion that the Celts are an 'invented concept' is quoted on page 3 of Sims-Williams' article: *'Descriptions, or rather caricatures, of societies cannot be transposed in time and space under an invented concept of the 'Celts'; indeed, the whole use of the terms Celt and Celtic is something which should be avoided as it distorts our understanding of the archaeological record.'* Collis' book shown in the slide above was first published in 2003. He begins by claiming that it is *'about European ethnicity'* (a word to which we shall return later) and continues by noting that *'it is mainly aimed at archaeologists, to demonstrate how we ourselves fall into the trap of illogicality and false interpretation…'* (p.9). There certainly seems to be some justification for his choice of target audience, as archaeologists are disproportionately prominent in the Celtomania vs Celtoscepticism debate.



The above words come from the preface of Peter Berresford Ellis' book *A Brief History of the Celts* published by Constable and Robinson in 2003. The preface then goes on to note the following: *"Greek merchants, first encountering them in the sixth century BC, called them Keltoi and Galatai. Later, the Romans would echo these names in Celtae, Galatae and Galli. Today we generally identify them as Celts. The ancient Celts have been described as 'the first Europeans', the first Transalpine civilisation to emerge into recorded history."* This is precisely the kind of language that Celtosceptics object to. Rarely, however, are we treated to such a personal (but publicly expressed) opinion as the one in the review of Ellis' book placed on Amazon in 2014 by John Collis himself: *"I read this out of curiosity as it is now somewhat dated, and it has some useful information in it, but the author did not understand what has been going on in the field of Celtic Studies, especially archaeology. I am not aware that he has attended any of the major conferences on the Celts in recent years. I am one of the people he mentions in his criticism of the new approaches pioneered by archaeologists, but he really does not understand the archaeology, e.g. thinking that storage pits in places like Wessex are the same as Cornish fougous. He suggests there is an ideal 'Celtic Society' of kings, druids etc., which he then tries to impose on the archaeological record - it just does not work, and there are many different types of 'Celtic Society' from the urbanised coin-using societies of central Spain or temperate Europe to the more simple societies of western Britain and Ireland. He criticises someone anonymously (in fact me) on comments on the Gundestrup cauldron, and whether it can be called Celtic or not, and saying that I am not able to judge because I never had training in Celtic Studies! He clearly misunderstood what I was saying in my book on 'The European Iron Age'. In ethnic terms the cauldron is very mixed in the iconography on it - for many elements the best parallels lie in areas such as Gaul (some of which was Celtic), but other aspects come from elsewhere - the slaying of the bull, the boy on the dolphin, etc. as well as the art style, so simplistic ethnic interpretations just don't work. My views on the Celts are now available in my book on 'The Celts: origins, myths and inventions' which is gradually being accepted in the field of Celtic Studies, and which will hopefully update the theory and methodology of the subject which was still stuck in 19th and early 20th century with concepts like race, Culture Groups, etc.. So Celtic Studies is an interesting area of study at the moment, but for discussion, not sticking one's head in the sand and hoping that criticism will go way!"*

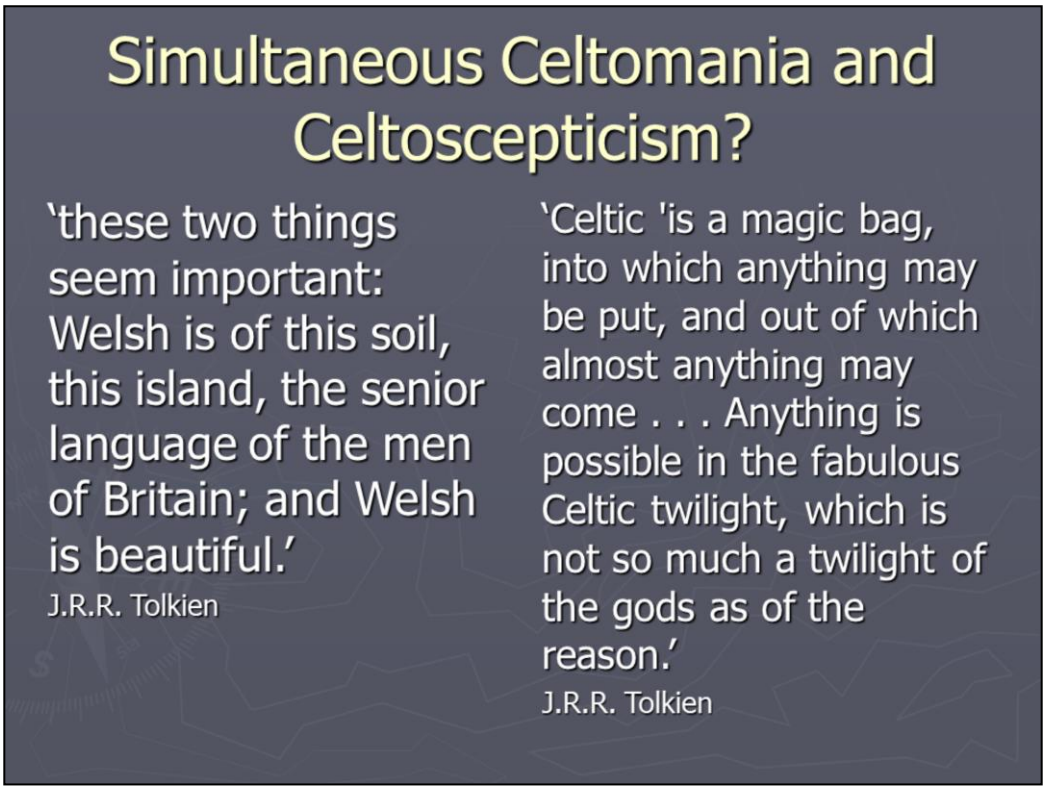


Just as the Celtomania camp can be inclined towards claiming things existed when they did not, so the Celtosceptic camp can be inclined towards denying things existed when we know that they did. As Patrick Sims-Williams notes, both the claims in the above slide '*can be disproved from inscriptions and the testimony of Caesar and Pausanias'* (p.2).

In the case of inscriptions, the earliest ones all come from southern Europe, i.e. southern Gaul and the Lepontic and Celtiberian areas, as opposed to the 'central or western Europe' noted above. However, they *'reach northern Gaul in about the first century AD'* (p. 19). It could be argued, of course, that inscriptions do not necessarily originate in the place where they are found, in which case we could use the distribution of Gaulish place-names as supporting evidence for a Celtic language being spoken in central or western Europe, as well as tribal names or personal names such as Vercingetorix.

With regard to the second claim that no-one defined themselves as Celts, we have already seen in the units on the Historical Celts that Caesar states that the *Galli* called themselves *Celtae*, and Pausanias, in his *Description of Greece*, 1.4.1, says that the term *Galatai* was recent and that they were originally called *Keltoi 'both by themselves and by all other peoples'* (p. 22).

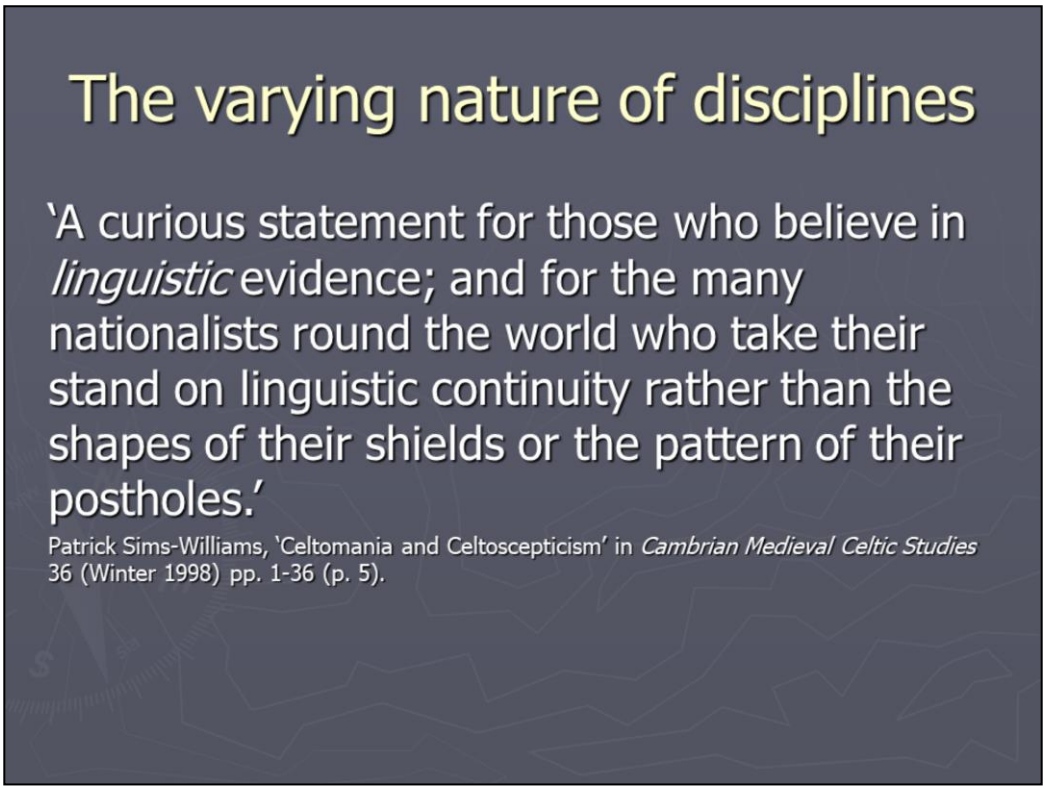
It is worth noting that the quote in the above slide is also from Miranda Green's *The Celtic World*.



An example of Celtomania and Celtoscepticism in the same person? Perhaps not. In the example on the right, Tolkien was referring to the excessive use of 'Celtic' by philologists to describe the etymology of words, particularly those of uncertain origin. It was not, as some would have us believe, a comment on the controversies surrounding the use of the term in interdisciplinary Celtic Studies. The quote is nevertheless used in that context by some as an example of Celtoscepticism. Malcolm Chapman uses it in such a way in the preface to his book *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (p. xiii). Interestingly, both of these quotes come not only from the same person, but also from the same lecture, namely his presentation entitled 'English and Welsh' for the O'Donnell lecture at Cardiff in 1963.

The lecture content is available via the link below. The quote on the left hand side of the above slide can be found on page 189 and the one on the left on page 186.

http://faculty.smu.edu/bwheeler/tolkien/online_reader/T-English&Welsh.PDF



The content of the above slide is responding to a comment in the *Daily Telegraph* that the use of the Celtic label was *'inspired by the obvious similarity of the group of languages, rather than being based on evidence'*. There is no such thing as linguistic evidence it would seem.

It is interesting however to see the use of the word *'nationalists'* here for those *'who take their stand on linguistic continuity'.* This may unintentionally reveal an implicit realisation, not only by many in the world of academia, but also by the public at large, that languages are far more closely linked to 'ethnic' identity than are 'shields' or 'postholes' or any other from of shared technology.

Virtually every 'nationalist' movement in Europe, for instance, is home to a people that either did or still do possess a language of their own, such as the Basques, Bretons, Catalans, Welsh and so on. None spring to mind which claim a separate ethnicity based on differences in 'material culture', although 'lifestyle' and other components like traditional dress may play a significant factor for some, such as, for example, the Sami of northern Scandinavia and Finland.

Sims-Williams nevertheless goes on to add (p. 33) that:

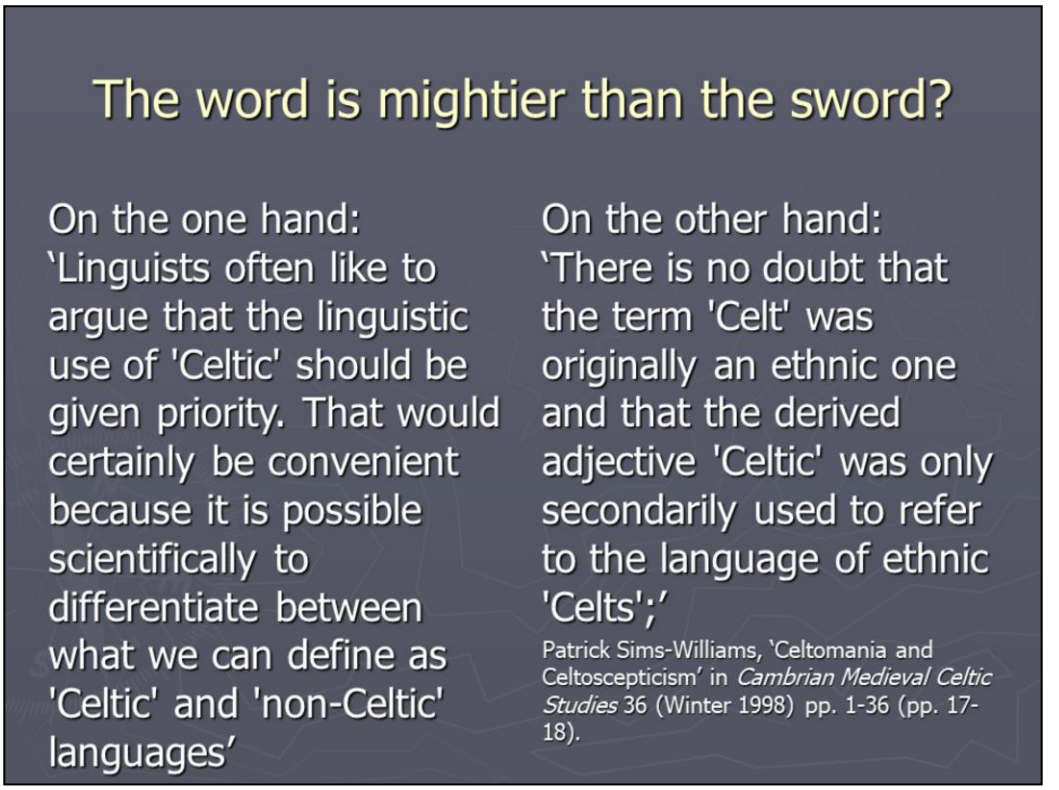
'We have Celtic language and Celtic ethnicity, which, I have argued, often go together, and also Celtic archaeology and Celtic art, which must be placed further off.'

This is rather ironic given that ethnicity seems to be of the utmost importance to the Celtosceptics, most of whom are archaeologists.

Simon James, however, (p. 81) notes the following:

'language is a common, but not an inevitably determining, component of a particular sense of identity'

Different emphases in different disciplines are clearly a factor here.



John Collis in *The Celts: origins, myths and inventions* (p. 12) notes that *'...anyone dealing with the Celts has to range over a number of different disciplines….and inevitably no one is a master of all of them.'*

For reasons such as these, some disciplines may feel that their field should carry more weight than the others. In this regard, linguists may argue that theirs is the 'primary' discipline in Celtic Studies. The others are just there to provide supporting evidence. After all, the continued existence of a Celtic language is the determining factor of contemporary 'Celticity'. Germany, for all its hillforts and princely burial sites, is not one of today's 'Celtic nations' because it lacks a Celtic language. Galicia's request to join the Celtic League was rejected for the same reason. Not only this, but the criteria for defining whether a language is Celtic are more tangible than proving whether a sword is Celtic or not.

Regardless of this, it is worth remembering that the Celtic label has its origin in classical historical sources, not philology. As Collis once again points out *'If it were not for the classical texts….we would never have heard of the Celts'* (p. 13). It is also the case that it was used initially as an ethnic label, not a linguistic one, and so, despite Sims-Williams' belief that language and ethnicity *'often go together'* the concerns of the archaeologists regarding the accurate use of Celtic as an ethnic label must also be taken into account. Simon James takes particular exception to philologists' 'insistence' on language taking priority and notes (p.81) that:

'Celt' was originally a group name applied to one or more peoples, not a linguistic description…..Celtic identity is not dependent on speaking a Celtic language, otherwise millions of people today who regard themselves as culturally or ethnically Celtic are disqualified…'