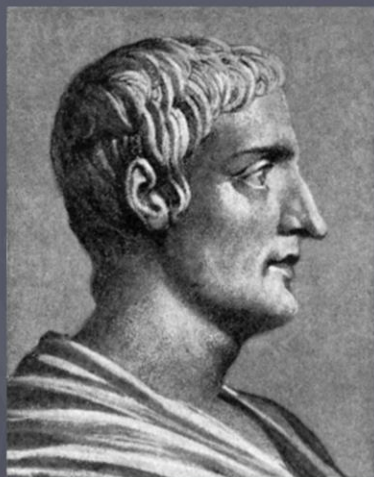


The Linguistic Celts: Tracing Family Trees



- In the year 98 CE, Tacitus recorded that between Britain and Gaul *"the language differs but little"* (*Agricola* 11).

The following slides offer a general introductory overview of ‘the linguistic Celts’ so that these aspects can be considered in context alongside the ‘historical Celts’ and the ‘archaeological Celts’. More specialised treatment of the Celtic languages in their own right will be provided in other modules.

Comments by classical sources on language are not numerous, but they do exist. According to John Collis “...it is clear from both Caesar himself and other sources that the *Belgae* and *Celtae*, and indeed the *Britanni*, spoke dialects of the same language, or closely related languages” (JC 45).

This idea is strengthened by his remark in *De Bello Gallico* (6.14) about Druids from Gaul being trained in Britain: “*They are said to commit to memory a great number of verses. And they remain some 20 years in training*”. This must have required a common language, possibly, but not necessarily, a *lingua franca*, or alternatively a language close enough to be understood by all concerned.

In the following century, Tacitus notes in his *Agricola* (11) that “*the language differs but little*” between Britain and Gaul, although he may of course have based this on Caesar, as he never came to Britain himself. In the fourth century, St Jerome states that Galatian reminded him of the Gaulish dialect of the Treveri, around modern day Trier (Fife, 4). This is one of the last comments made about a Continental Celtic language when it was still alive.

After this, we have virtually no mention of the Celts or their language for over a thousand years. Belief in the existence of a Celtic family of languages largely began to grow in the early modern period when scholars worked backwards from living languages, and compared the available evidence with that of their supposed relatives, including their ancestors. Particularly important in the Celtic case is Gaulish, the language of the ‘Ancient Gauls’.

Tracing Family Trees Gaulish Compared

Gaulish	Old Irish	Modern Welsh	Modern English
Carros	Carr	Car	Car, Wagon
Cattos	Cat	Cath	Cat
Dunon	Dun	Din	Fortress
Maros	Mar	Mawr	Great
Nertomaros	Nertmar	Nerthfawr	Powerful
Uxellos	Uasal	Uchel	High, Noble
Sextemetos	Sechtmad	Seithfed	Seventh
Vindos	Find	Gwynn	Fair

Brittonic is the earliest known language from the island of Britain, and Goidelic is the earliest known language from the island of Ireland. Both of these have since split into modern languages. Brittonic gave rise to Welsh, Cornish and Breton, while the original Goidelic language divided into Irish, Manx and Scottish Gaelic.

The examples above should give some idea as to why Gaulish was felt to be related to the Brittonic and Goidelic languages in the first place, and how the concept of the 'Celtic' language family was born. It is worth noting that the examples above are taken from three different eras, the Gaulish from the ancient, the Irish from the (early) medieval and the Welsh from the modern. The similarities are nevertheless still obvious. We can only speculate as to how Gaulish would have developed, but if, for instance, it had lost final syllables (*os/on* above) in a similar way to Brittonic, then the similarities would be even more striking.

It should be mentioned of course that the above have been chosen to illustrate similarities. However, as we shall see later with other examples of the Celtic languages, it is just as important to highlight the differences.

The above examples taken from Martin O Murchu 'The Irish Language' p.7 Bord na Gaeilge, Dublin, 1985.

George Buchanan (1506-1582)



- ▶ *Rerum Scotticarum Historia* published in 1582, the year of his death
- ▶ Located the Celts in those areas noted by Classical authors
- ▶ Believed they migrated from Spain to Ireland and thence Scotland

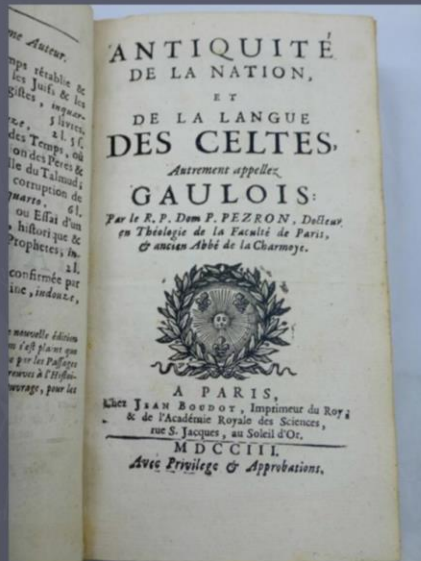
After a 'long sleep' throughout the medieval era, the Celts were 'resurrected' in the early modern period by a series of authors, all of whom were themselves speakers of a modern 'Celtic' language. The first of these was the Scot, and (almost certainly) Gaelic speaker, George Buchanan in his 'history' of Scotland, *Rerum Scotticarum Historia*. He seems to have based his location of the Celts on Classical sources, placing them in northern Italy, southern Gaul and western Iberia. From the last of these he has them migrating to Ireland. (BC L1648-1652) This, however, may be nothing more than his trying to match historical sources with the mythological story of the Sons of Mil from the Irish *Book of Invasions* who are said to have brought the Goidelic language with them from Spain and introduced it to Ireland.

Buchanan did not refer to the Ancient Britons as Celts, only the Goidelic languages of Irish and Scottish Gaelic were labelled Celtic by him. 'Belgic' was, according to him, a related language spoken in northern Gaul and the south east of Britain (very reminiscent of Caesar's distinction between the Belgae and the inland Britons) and 'Britannic' was his name for the indigenous inland language which was the parent of Welsh. 'Gallic' was the overarching label used for all three (JC 37)

It should be remembered that at this time 'pseudo-history' was much more commonplace than it is today, with peoples trying to trace their origins back to legendary or biblical figures, their languages back to the Tower of Babel and so on.

The image is from the Buchanan memorial in Greyfriars Kirkyard in Edinburgh, where he is buried. The photo was taken by Kim Traynor

Paul-Yves Pezron (1639-1706)



► *Antiquité de la nation et de la langue des Celtes, autrement appelée Gaulois. Paris, Jean Boudot, 1703.*

Pezron was a 17th century Cistercian from Hennebont in the Morbihan area of Brittany. He believed that Breton and Welsh shared a common origin (which is not so difficult to establish) but also that these in turn originated from the language of the Celts, ‘otherwise called Gauls’. The Oxford scholar Edward Lhuyd tried to contact Pezron in the 1690s, but failed.

Pezron’s work seems to be a mixture of good philology on the one hand combined with ideas heavily influenced by the Bible on the other, including the Tower of Babel. His work was labelled in the 18th century as a ‘Mixture of Truth and Fable’ by David Malcolme in his *An Essay on the Antiquities of Great Britain & Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1738), p.46. One of Pezron’s beliefs was that the Breton language was in effect the only ‘Continental Celtic’ language still in existence, and a remnant of Gaulish. This belief, which will be briefly examined later, is most unlikely to be true, but has been repeated in more recent times by Francois Falc’hun, albeit for very different reasons. Pezron believed that the Celts took their language to Britain, but makes no mention of the Breton language being taken to Brittany from Britain between the fourth and seventh centuries CE.

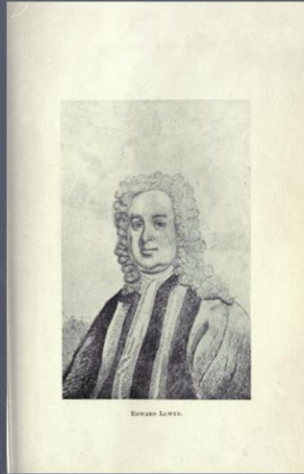
Edward Lhuyd had this to say on the matter: “*the Armoric Britans...do not pretend to be Gauls, but call the neighbouring provinces such, and their language Galek (i.e. French) whereas they term their own Brezonek, as indeed it is,*” (AB p. 267)

An English translation of Pezron’s work by David Jones was published in London in 1706 (at Lhuyd’s request) with the title *The Antiquities of Nations, More Particularly of the Celtæ Or Gauls, Taken to be Originally the Same People as Our Ancient Britains containing great variety of historical, chronological and etymological discoveries many of them unknown to both the Greeks and the Romans.* ... Jones’ translation was reprinted until as late as 1812.

Much as Buchanan had done with the Scots, Pezron went in search of a suitable pedigree for his Celts, claiming that they were “*descended from Noah....spread across Europe, conquering Romans and Greeks, and eventually ended up in Armorica (where, it will be remembered, he was born).*” (BC L1663-1670)

Similarly, just as Buchanan had linked the Gaels, but not the Britons, to the Celts, Pezron's work did the opposite, and concentrated solely on the Brittonic languages and their links to Gaulish. It did not include Irish or Gaelic. Indeed, it would take a scholar working at an altogether different level to link all of these together.

Edward Lhuyd (1660-1709)



"What I aim'd at therein, was the shewing by a collection of examples methodized, that etymology is not....a speculation merely groundless or conjectural."

So says Edward Lhuyd in the preface of his *Archaeologia Britannica*, an exceptional piece of work in the fields of philology and etymology. Although born in the border county of Shropshire, Lhuyd was of Welsh parentage, and a fluent speaker of both Welsh and English, who also had an academic mastery of, amongst other languages, Latin and Greek. In addition to his work on languages he was an accomplished naturalist and a friend of Sir Isaac Newton. He was keeper of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford between 1690 and his death in 1709.

Between 1697 and 1701, Lhuyd embarked on a tour of Wales, Cornwall, the Scottish Highlands, Ireland and Brittany, seeking out information on what we would now call the Celtic languages. He took with him three assistants, David Parry, Robin Wyn and William Jones, all of whom had been trained by him. Although the *Archaeologia* was initially intended to comprise three volumes which would include the history, geology and natural history of the Celtic countries, Lhuyd only managed to complete the first Volume, the *Glossography*, which is entirely linguistic in nature, before his untimely demise.

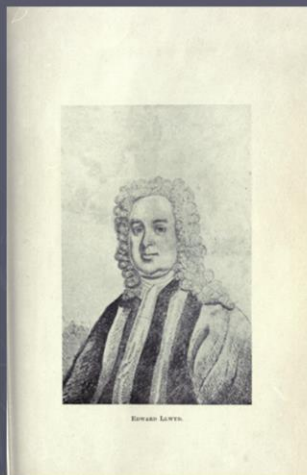
Some of the terminology used by him is different to what would be used today. He uses 'British' as the name for the ancient language of the Britons, more usually labelled now as 'Brittonic' or 'Brythonic' – i.e. the parent language of Welsh, Cornish and Breton, and 'Armoric' for the Breton language itself.

He unfortunately does follow the pattern of Buchanan and Pezron in linking the coming of the Celtic languages to these islands with migrations from Gaul to Britain and from Spain to Ireland. However, in doing so he was no doubt taking that stance at face value, and this aspect should in no way detract from the methodology he used to identify links between languages which, on the surface, can appear to be very different. This is his true legacy and where his work stands apart.

It must be remembered that, at least as far back as the early medieval period, we have no evidence to suggest that speakers of the Brittonic languages had any idea that their languages shared a common ancestry with the Goidelic ones. Lhuyd used a scientific methodology to prove otherwise, not only in the case of the 'Celtic' languages, but also further afield.

According to Barry Cunliffe, “*Lhuyd’s work was a philological study of outstanding value, quite unlike the rambling speculations of Buchanan and Pezron.*” (CFTW 15). However, work of this kind is clearly dangerous, as all three of them had died within three years of their works being published!

Edward Lhuyd: Calling things 'Celtic'



"His monumental Archaeologia Britannica was eventually published in 1707. In it he demonstrates the close relationship of 'the original languages of Britain and Ireland' and of Brittany, calling them collectively 'Celtic!'"

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction* (Very Short Introductions) (Kindle Location 1684)

He certainly did demonstrate the close relationship between the original languages of Britain and Ireland and is often 'accused' of 'calling them collectively Celtic' but it is difficult to see where he unequivocally does this. He does imply that Celts/Gauls moving to the isles led to the 'British' and 'Irish' languages, but *"it is clear from his preface that he felt the term Celtic should properly only be used on the continent for the ancient inhabitants of Gaul..."* (JC 49). Probably the closest he comes to using Celtic as an overarching label is where he refers to the Comparative Vocabulary of Latin, Welsh, Cornish, Breton and Irish words as *'a sort of Latin-Celtic Dictionary'* – ironically without any Gaulish content. Below are the examples of Lhuyd's use of the word 'Celtic' in *Archaeologia Britannica*:

From the Preface:

"....others have long since taken notice of the affinity of our British with the Celtic; but there being no vocabulary extant of the Irish (or Ancient Scottish) they could not collate that language therewith, which the curious in these studies will now find to agree rather more than ours, with the Gaulish.....we are further to consider, that as the Gauls were a people that consisted of three several nations, of so many different languages, some of those words attributed to them in general, might have been Celtic properly so called, some Aquitanian and others Belgic." "Pontanus's Celtic Glossary" "....these most considerable remains of the Ancient Celtic" "the Latin-Celtic or Comparative Vocabulary" "an account of British and Celtic proper names"

From p. 26: *"the Roman authors themselves deriv'd divers of their Latin words from the old Gaulish or Celtic, and that several of the greatest philologists of England and France have maintained that to be the chief remains of the Celtique, which is spoken in Wales, Cornwall and Bass Bretagne"*

From p.35: *"it must also be allow'd that the Celtic....has been best preserv'd by such of their colonies....as have been the least subject to foreign invasions"*

From *At y Cymry*: *"o'r cenhedloedd a alwai'r Rhufeinwyr Galli neu Celtae oedd yr hen Wyddelod hynny;" "Celtae, Gwyr Gallia" "Ac nid allai'r Rhufeiniaid ysgrifennu'r gair hwnnw ond naill ai*

Ceilte neu Celtae". "*Gan ein bod yn gwybod....wrth hen iaith y Celtae....mai o'r Ffrainc y daeth y Gwyddelod*" "*...heblaw y Celtae a ddaethant yma*"

In any event, Celtic did become used as the collective label for these languages after his death.

Identifying Patterns: Minding your Ps and Qs

Welsh	Irish	English
Pa?	Cé?	Which?
Pasg	Cáisc	Easter
Peswch	Casacht	Cough
Pair	Coire	Cauldron
Pedwar	Ceithre	Four
Mab	Mac	Son
Pump	Cúig	Five
Pen	Ceann	Head

As part of his process of identifying patterns, Lhuyd noted the following:

"It's very remarkable, that there are scarce any words in the Irish (besides what are borrow'd from the Latin or some other language) that begin with P, in so much that in an ancient alphabetical vocabulary, I have by me, that letter is omitted; and no less observable that a considerable number of those words whose initial letter it is, in the British; begin in that language with a K, or (as they constantly write) C." (AB p.20)

What Lhuyd is referring to above would eventually become known as P-Celtic and Q-Celtic. Brittonic is P-Celtic and Goidelic is Q-Celtic. As can be seen, many words with a P/B in the P-Celtic examples have a Q-Celtic equivalent in C (or possibly K or Q – depending on the orthography of the individual language).

In addition to the above we can also mention 'Kintyre' in Scotland which is cognate with the word 'Pentir' in Welsh, meaning, quite literally, 'Headland', and the word 'Clan' which although meaning 'family' in Gaelic is cognate with the word 'Plant' in Welsh, meaning 'children'.

Lhuyd noted numerous other patterns of change between Brittonic (here called British) and Welsh on the one hand, and Irish on the other:

C (or K) in the British is chang'd into F in the Irish

C (or K) in the British is chang'd into G in the Irish

F initial in the British, chang'd into S by the Irish

L in Welsh chang'd into R in the Irish (AB p.35)

Identifying Patterns: Minding your Ps and Qs and Hs and Ss

Welsh	Greek	Latin	English
Pedwar	Petora	Quatuor	Four
Pumed	Pemptos	Quintus	Fifth
Pwy	Pis	Qui	Who
Pan	Penika	Quando	When
Pobi	Pepto	Coquo	Cook
Haul	Helios	Sol	Sun
Halen	Halon	Sal	Salt
Hafal	Homalos	Similis	Similar
Helygen	Heliken	Salix	Willow

Despite giving prominence to the Celtic languages, Lhuyd incorporated these into a wider European context. In the slide above we see some of his examples of Welsh words which are closer to Greek than they are to Latin. Once again we can see a P/Q split between Greek (e.g. Petora) and Latin (Quatuor) and also between H and S, e.g. Welsh 'halen' and Latin 'sal'. Other examples not shown above include Greek 'hemi' and Latin 'semi' – both of which mean 'half'.

Here are some of the patterns he noted in *Archaeologia Britannica* which include languages other than Celtic ones (AB p.35):

B in the old English and German is chang'd into F in the modern English and Dutch

C or K in the Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, British and Irish, is changed into H in the Teutonic languages

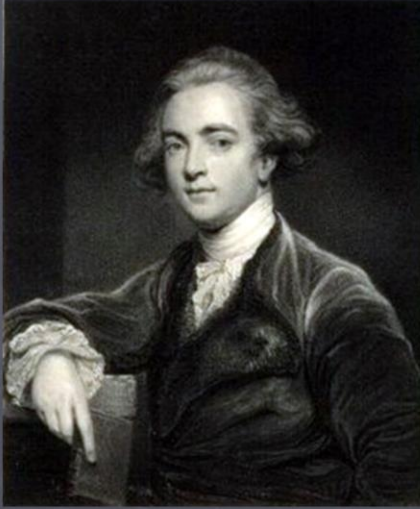
F in the beginning of words in the Latin and Irish is chang'd into H in the Spanish and British

M in the Greek, Latin and Teutonic equivalent to V consonant in the British

To which he added this note:

"It is a very common error in etymology, to endeavour the deriving all the radical words of our Western European languages from the Latin or Greek; or indeed to derive constantly the primitives of any one language, from any particular tongue. When we doe this; we seem to forget that all have been subject to alterations; and that the greater and more polite any nation is, the more subject they are (partly for improvement and partly out of a luxurious wantonness) to new model their language." (AB p.35)

Sir William Jones (1746 – 1794)



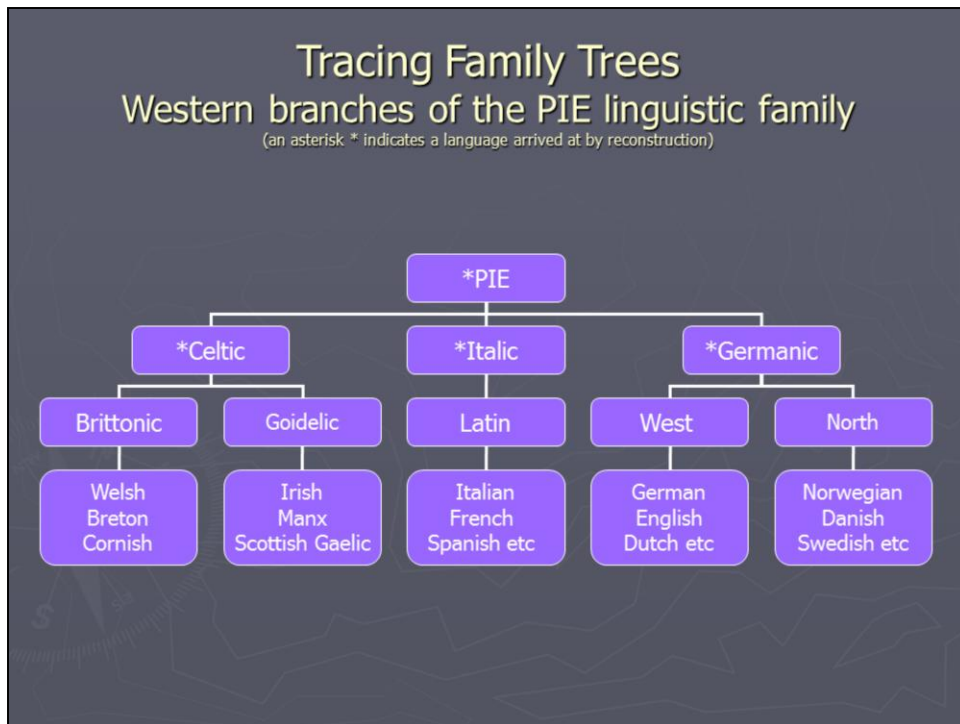
- ▶ Jones saw a link between the Indo-European languages. He said:
- ▶ "The *Sanscrit* language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin*, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source"...

Like Edward Lhuyd, Sir William Jones was born in England to Welsh parents. Also like Lhuyd, Jones was fluent in both English and Welsh in childhood, and went on to master numerous other languages, including in his case Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and Persian. He is best known for proposing the links between what would later become known as the Indo-European languages, with his most famous quote shown above, from a lecture given to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in 1786. Following on from the above he goes on to say:

"there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and the Celtic, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanscrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family."

And so, the Celtic 'family tree' established by Lhuyd had by this time been incorporated into an even wider Indo-European family tree with Celtic as one of its (eventually dozen or so) branches. So although the link between Brittonic and Goidelic was a remarkable achievement for its time, it was part of an era of discovery which later claimed even more links between other languages of Europe, Asia Minor and the Indian sub-continent. known today as Proto-Indo-European (or PIE), usually represented in the form of a family tree (next slide).

Although Jones is usually credited as the 'founder' of Indo-European studies, he was not the first to suggest a relationship between these widely spread languages. The previous slides on Lhuyd's identifying patterns suggest that he would have responded favourably to such an idea, but Lhuyd himself refers in his preface to Boxbornius (Marcus Zuerius van Boxborn), a 17th century Dutch philologist who believed that Greek and the Germanic, Romance, Iranian, Celtic, Slavic and Baltic languages were all descended from a common ancestor.



The philology and etymology of the early modern period grew into the historical linguistics of more recent centuries, which, in addition to identifying patterns and relationships between languages, developed methods of ‘linguistic reconstruction’ based on established ‘laws’ of language change. Reconstructed forms are indicated by an asterisk. The methods of historical linguistics of course apply to all language families, not just the Celtic.

None of the languages on the top two levels of the above tree (i.e. neither PIE nor Celtic, Italic and Germanic) is an attested language. Their existence has been postulated by using actual attested languages as a basis for speculating their likely parent. Not until we reach the third level of the list do we find any languages which have provided actual physical proof of their existence. The lowest level gives us the languages still spoken in modern times.

There are many more branches to PIE than those shown above, including many languages of Eastern Europe and the Indian sub-continent. These include:

Albanian, Armenian, Baltic, Hellenic and Indo-Iranian as well as the completely dead branches of Anatolian and Tocharian.

A criticism sometimes levelled against the use of the Celtic label is that speakers of today’s Celtic languages never called themselves Celts before 1700. In response, we can be fairly certain that no-one in historical times ever referred to themselves as an Indo-European either, but that in itself does not invalidate all the work done on linking languages from India to Iberia, Ireland and Iceland into a connected family.

According to Malcolm Chapman *“The adjective ‘Celtic’ has its most respectable and formal use within linguistics. The idea of Indo-European languages is a result of the increasingly scholarly and scientific study of language in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”* (MC p.14) This is quite a statement from the man who wrote a book entitled *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth*.

It is also worth mentioning that ‘Celtic Art’, ‘Celtic Church’, ‘Celtic Music’, ‘Celtic material culture’ and many of the other more controversial names were all introduced much later than the linguistic label, which was originally intended to mark a group of related languages and nothing else.