

Tracing Celtic Origins

Colin Temple
University of Ottawa

ctemple@uottawa.ca
<http://colintemple.com/>

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The notion of 'Celtic culture' encompasses a wide range of ancient and modern cultures, including the Irish, Scottish Gaels, Welsh, Bretons, Gauls, Britons, Cornish, Manx and Picts. Although some cultural features may occur in a variety of Celtic groups, the ultimate defining characteristic of the modern concept of the Celt is language. Thus, tracing Celtic origins can primarily be done by tracing the development of Celtic languages out of prehistoric language in Europe. Then, cultural considerations as well as the migrations and successions of ethnic groups within Europe can be examined to consider whether or not the idea of a Celtic people is consistent in any realm other than language. Such an examination, however, can only lead to the conclusion that using the blanketing term 'Celtic' for all these groups results in ignorance to a wide range of important anthropological distinctions.

Celtic languages evolved from Proto-Celtic, or Common Celtic, an Indo-European language that broke from Proto-Indo-European. Fully-Celtic languages appeared in Europe by around 700 BCE, in connection with the Hallstatt culture in central Europe (Koch 887).

Among the difficulties in directly attributing languages to archaeological finds and dating the development of Proto-Celtic comes from the fact that little of the evidence consists of substantial amounts of Celtic writing. Like most cultures of the time, Celtic societies were

largely oral and did not include a literary tradition. As a result, the earliest accounts that describe what are likely the Celtic people come from the Mediterranean civilizations of Greece and Rome. Early writers such as Herodotus, Plato and Aristotle, explorers such as Pytheas and conquerors such as Caesar describe the Celts as a wide-reaching people covering a wide range of territory to the north. However, it should also be noted that those called Celts by Mediterranean peoples may have included Germanic tribes, as “the Romans were not always careful to differentiate between [Celts and Germans]” (Gregor 5). Without writings from the Celts themselves during the same period, it is often difficult to determine whether certain references truly refer to Celtic-speakers or to other peoples inhabiting shared or neighbouring territories.

Partly responsible for the lack of literary sources is the fact that the Celts and others in central and northern Europe did not build civilizations, at least not in the sense of Mediterranean cultures. Even when Celtic languages had matured among the Gauls, the culture was primarily tribal and did not involve large urbanized centres as sophisticated as those of Greece and Rome. When the Romans moved into Gaul, “they conquered tribes, not city-states; and like the Britons in the next century, the Gauls then had civilization thrust upon them” (Cook 240). This conquest saw Gaul develop a new Gallo-Roman culture, and their language was ultimately replaced by Latin, with the last of its influence appearing in a few loan words in French.

As a result of these difficulties, the best sources of information about the development of Celtic language includes the known names of places in Europe, of which many are Celtic (Dillon and Chadwick 2), references from other cultures, and archaeological evidence which links known Celtic-speaking cultures with those that preceded or founded them. As a result, tracing Celtic origins is a matter of beginning from the earliest known Celtic-speakers and following the development of their society backwards. Unfortunately, such a journey becomes more

speculative the further it regresses back in time.

The Hallstatt culture, formed in what is now Austria, is the first commonly-accepted culture that likely had a proper Celtic language, rather than a Proto-Celtic one. The Hallstatt 'C' and 'D' periods, which span from eastern France to Austria, correspond to what is known as the Hallstatt culture, which gets its name from a town in Austria where for which the archaeological sites are also named (Koch 885). Although the evidence from these finds does not clearly demonstrate a Celtic-speaking people, it does correspond to a time when the Celts would have had to be spreading throughout Europe in order to be as widespread as the Greek and Roman writers claim, and the connection between Hallstatt and the later La Tène culture further this idea. Archaeological evidence from the Hallstatt 'A' and 'B' sites (Koch 887) correspond to an earlier culture known as the Urnfield, which was the predecessor to the Hallstatt culture.

The Urnfield bronze-age culture was formed by about 1200 BCE in central Europe, ranging across the alps, with its influence spreading into the Iberian peninsula and the British isles (Koch 887). Its name comes from the burial practices of its society, in which the dead are cremated and buried in urns. The time of the Urnfield culture places it as a candidate for a Proto-Celtic—speaking culture.

Even earlier than the Urnfield, the Bell-Beaker culture was building in Europe by 2500 BCE, replacing megalithic cultures as they moved westward (Faux 34). The Beaker culture presents a candidate for the development of Proto-Celtic. The Beakers spread into the Iberian Peninsula and into Great Britain and Ireland by about 2000 BCE (Dillon and Chadwick 4). If this was a pre-Proto-Celtic culture, it provides a reasonable model for the success of later Celtic languages which spread from central Europe. If the Beaker culture had a pre-Proto-Celtic Indo-European dialect, it would have been passed on to the Unetice culture, which emerged out of the

Beakers by 1700 BCE and Tumulus culture, which began to take hold around 1600 BCE (Faux 35). The language may have then developed in the Urnfield culture into Proto-Celtic, the last common ancestor of the Celtic languages, by 700 BCE when it was succeeded by the Hallstatt culture.

The successor to the Hallstatt culture is the La Tène culture, forming in the 5th century BCE, which had its centre in what is now Switzerland. The La Tène culture was most likely Celtic-speaking and a predecessor to various Celtic-speaking groups (Cunliffe 45-46).

At some point, the Proto-Celtic language saw split within it. Among the features distinguishing Proto-Celtic from Proto-Indo-European is the “complete loss of the [Indo-European] **p*” (Sims-Willaims 1) sound in Celtic languages. The sound later returns among some Celtic languages as the 'qu' sound is softened into a 'p' sound, bringing back the 'p' sound after a long absence (Cunliffe 50). Thus, Celtic languages with a 'p' sound are called P-Celtic, and include Gaulish, Leptonic, Pictish, Welsh, Breton and Cornish. Languages that maintained the harder 'k' sound for 'qu' words include the Goidelic languages of Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Manx, as well as Celtiberian (Lockwood 75-80). It may be theorized that P-Celtic and Q-Celtic represent earlier versions of Celtic languages that descended from Proto-Celtic, though this is uncertain. However, if P-Celtic and Q-Celtic differences represent a true division in the history of Celtic languages, they may be taken to support the hypothesis that Proto-Celtic entered Ireland and Great Britain early, perhaps with the Beaker culture, and prompted the development of the Q-Celtic Goidelic languages beginning with Old Irish in Ireland, while the 'p' sound was reclaimed amongst continental European Celts, and transmitted to Great Britain later among the Brythonic languages. Tribes retaining Q-Celtic characteristics would then have either remained on the continent as the Celtiberians did, or migrated back from the islands. Among these tribes

are the Sequani, a tribe in Gaul whose name alone demonstrates a Q-Celtic language (Gregor 22).

Proto-Celtic and Proto-Italic languages also seem to be more closely related than other Indo-European languages. Italic languages, which include Latin and Romance languages, such as French and Spanish, which descend from it, share a number of common features that also occur in Celtic languages, but not in other Indo-European languages. This led some scholars to believe that Italic and Celtic languages may have a common ancestor since Proto-Indo-European, namely Proto-Italo-Celtic which came before Proto-Celtic and Proto-Italic. This may also suggest a Celtic origin in closer proximity to Italy, potentially with a common cultural ancestry in this area.

Recent genetic evidence also suggests that the Alpine Celts were closely related to the Italian people, at least since the La Tène era. The R1b-S28/U152 subclade, a mutation on the Y chromosome of certain males found in Celtic sites and detailed in a 2007 study by Sims et al., links these two peoples and connects them to the Celtic La Tène culture (Faux 39). According to Faux, “all males today who have the U152 marker are descendants of one man, who ultimately became the progenitor of a large percentage of the people who would be known as La Tène Celts (successors to the earlier Hallstatt peoples)” (Faux 2). Although this evidence requires only that the Celts in the area intermarry with the Italic people at some point before the La Tène era, together with the linguistic evidence it may even suggest an earlier connection between the Italic peoples and Alpine Celts, and thus a potential Alpine origin for the Celtic languages. In modern distributions, the La Tène-area variant maintains a strong presence in the areas of France, Switzerland and Italy (Cruciani et al. 2). Similar variations can be found on the Iberian peninsula, in Great Britain and in Ireland, though in much lower concentrations (Pontikos, “R1b Founder Effect”) which may also support a model which sees Q-Celtic groups depart from what

would become P-Celtic groups at an earlier date, forming Goidelic and Celtiberian populations. The estimated dates for the first occurrence of the U152 mutation range from 2,500 to, most recently, over 11,000 years ago, though “it is likely that the earliest estimates are for the origin of U152, and the more recent ones reflect the expansion of U152” (Faux 16). If Faux is correct, the expansion of the U152 gene may coincide with the expansion of the Beakers and provide evidence for their classification as a Proto-Celtic or pre-Proto-Celtic culture, at least ethnically. However, the fact that some areas normally considered Celtic have lower rates of U152 suggests that though these groups share Celtic languages, they are more diverse than was once thought.

One element that may serve to give a united impression of the Celts is their mythology. Although there are many names of Celtic deities that occur infrequently, a god by the name of 'Lug' or 'Lugus' seems to be the most prevalent, and seems to have been a pan-Celtic deity. Lugus, known as 'Llew' in Welsh, 'Lugoues' among Celts in Spain and 'Lugnasad' in Ireland (Dillon and Chadwick 13). The characteristics of Lugus are not clear, but the tradition of a deity named 'Lug' is common to many Celtic cultures and must have developed early. Another common motif in Celtic myths is the presence of mother deities, such as “Mother Earth as a source of fertility, worshipped in triple form under the title *matres* or *matronae*” (Dillon and Chadwick 13). The Celts also seem to have had less interest in a sky father god. Many Indo-European cultures continue the tradition of *Dyeus Pater*, the chief god of Proto-Indo-Europeans and the predecessor to the Greek *Zeus*, Roman *Jupiter*, Germanic *Odin* and *Tyr* and the Hindu *Dyaus Pitār* (Leeming 147). Among the Celts, sky father gods seem to have been less frequent and of lesser importance to Lugus or to the mother goddesses. These shared mythological characteristics lend some credibility to the idea that the Celts had a common cultural origin, beyond the transmission of language.

This leads to a prudent question: whether or not the term ‘Celt’ is an accurate one to describe speakers of Celtic languages. The name itself first appears in the historical record among the Greeks, with Hecataeus of Miletus who, in the sixth century BCE, “mentions Marseilles as being near Celtic territory” (Dillon and Chadwick 1). Herodotus refers to the people north of Hellas as the Κελτοί, ‘Keltoi’, in the fifth century BCE (Wells 363). Julius Caesar uses the name, claiming that although the Romans used the name Galli, “in their own language, they are called Celts” (Cunliffe 9). Indeed, ‘Keltoi’ seems to have Celtic origins linguistically, and it may be the case that ‘Keltoi’ or something similar was the name of a Celtic tribe, perhaps among the earliest to come into contact with writers from Greece and Rome, thus creating the assumption that all of the Gauls were called ‘Celts’ (Dillon and Chadwick 2).

This assumption may have been picked up again in 1707. The term “Celtic” was revived in its modern form by Edward Lhuyd, a Welsh linguist who noticed the similarities, and differences, between what would become known as Goidelic and Brythonic languages, the difference later being identified as the split between P-Celtic and Q-Celtic (Cunliffe 48-49).

There is a long-standing tradition of Celtic people being referred to by exonyms, and even modern names for many Celtic groups are also exonyms. The Romans used the name ‘Galli’ to refer to the Celtic people of what is now France. In English, this becomes Gaul, though the origin of this term seems to be the Germanic word ‘Wal’, or ‘walha-’; the “similarity between *Galli* and *Gaul* is superficial and accidental” (Kristinsson, 107). The same word in Anglo-Saxon, ‘waelisc’, gave the Welsh their name, as they refer to themselves as ‘Cymry’. The Latin name ‘Scoti’, referring to the Irish and Scottish Gaelic people, eventually became a predominant name for the Scottish, whose Celtic-language—speakers call themselves ‘Gàidheal’. However, since there is no other universal name for speakers of Celtic languages, it does make sense to use this

traditional name to refer to them as a group, at least for the purposes of tracing the development of a language.

Aside from the language, another question is whether or not the Celts can be tracked as a continuous culture by means other than language. The answer is less certain. Although a continuous cultural development can be seen from the Tumulus culture, through the Urnfield to the Hallstatt and La Tène cultures, it is not clear whether the whole of Celtic-speaking nations can be considered to have a related culture outside of language. Other groups “speaking a Germanic dialect may have been taken for Celts on account of their dress or customs, or because they were subject to Celtic overlords” (Dillon and Chadwick 3). The already-mentioned failure to distinguish between Germans and Celts in some Roman writings would have added to this confusion, even when language is considered.

A final challenge in identifying the true origins of the Celts comes from the growing amount of research and disagreement between scholars. As Dillon and Chadwick remark, the developments of recent years make it “difficult for an outsider to form a personal judgement. It becomes a matter of choosing one's authority” (4). As the research into the history of Celtic cultures began relatively recently, especially when compared to the histories of other western cultures, it may be some time before a complete and well-accepted account of Celtic origins becomes known.

The difficulties in attesting Celtic languages, trusting ancient sources and accounting for different interpretations of the data has resulted in difficulties in determining the origins of Celtic languages and of Celtic cultures. With more research into the archaeological finds surrounding the pre-Hallstatt candidates for Proto-Celtic—speaking cultures, a picture of the linguistic origins of the Celtic cultures may yet become available. However, with emerging evidence of the

varieties of European cultures during prehistoric and classical periods, coupled with the genetic evidence, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the term 'Celtic' may only apply to language, and although all Celtic cultures may share an ancient ethnic origin, their relationship to their last common ancestral group may be so distant as to make their grouping tedious. It may make as much sense to call the English, or historically English immigrants in North America, 'Germanic', or even 'Indo-European', than to assign the name 'Celtic' to those descendants of Proto-Celtic speakers. Although sharing linguistic origins, the term applies to a diverse group, ethnically and geographically, and to consider their existence under a single banner of 'Celts' is perhaps to risk becoming ignorant of the diverse features of their cultural and ethnic origins.

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