The different Celtic 'packages'
Part 1

Packages and Problems
Who are the Celts, and where is their origin?

- much research has been focussed on this question
- Early Antiquarians (16\textsuperscript{th}-mid 19\textsuperscript{th} c. AD)
  - assumed existence of a people/race called 'Celts'
    - based on classical descriptions of late prehistoric Europe
  - tried to describe characteristics of this people/race
    - physical / mental / spiritual
    - cultural / linguistic
  - relying on inductive logic
    - if observation 'X is characterised by feature y' is made repeatedly, the statement 'all X are characterised by feature y' is true
  - used the term 'Celtic' as a generic ethnic/racial descriptor for all of western European prehistory
    - Based largely on biblical chronologies and explanatory models
The Earliest Times

• Already the earliest explanations are linked into the predominant concepts of the times they were created in:
  
  – e.g. medieval Irish texts see Irish as descendants of Noah, specifically via his son Iafeth, whose descendants are said to have settled Europe
  
  – 1703: Breton resident of Paris, Abbé Paul-Yves Pezron, argues the biblical origins of the Bretons:
    
    • at the Fall of the Tower of Babel (linguistic origin), migrating to Western Europe (based on historical and mythological sources)
    
    • packaging up:
      
      – language and linguistic evidence
      – classical sources
      – medieval ‘indigenous’ and biblical myths
      – the predominant chronological framework of his time

→ foundational narrative for ‘modern’ Celtic Studies
Early ‘disciplinary’ scholarship

- Early disciplinary scholars (mid 19th-mid 20th c. AD)
  - tried to define what characterised specific classificatory groups within their respective disciplines
    - linguistics (already starting in early 18th c. with Lhuyd, but fully forming in latest 18th and early 19th c. up to Zeuss)
    - physical anthropology (mainly 19th c.)
    - art history (c. 1850ies – 1900)
    - archaeology (c. 1870ies – 1910s)
  - also relying on inductive logic
  - also assumed existence of a people/race called ‘Celts’
    - based on classical descriptions of late prehistoric Europe
    - reinforced by antiquarian traditions
  - tried to combine their disciplinary classifications with a grand narrative of European (pre)history
The 'standard model’

• The Celts 'from Central Europe’

Facts:

First historical records of 'Celts' in late 6th c. BC

As 'living in the hinterlands of Massalia’

c. 430 BC more detail in Herodot:

Beyond the pillars of Heracles, westernmost in Europe apart from the Kynetes

and: near the sources of the Danube near a city called Pyrene

Celtic origins according to Megaw & Megaw (2001)
The 'standard model’

• The Celts 'from Central Europe’

More facts:
Oldest evidence for 'Celtic languages’

Lepontic, c. 6th c. BC

and possibly:
Tartessian, perhaps from the 8th c. BC onwards?

But how to arrive at the 'standard model’ from these facts?

Celtic origins according to Megaw & Megaw (2001)
A combination of (unrelated?) facts

• The Celts 'from Central Europe' is based on:

• historical sources (mainly 2nd c. BC – 1st c. AD) refer to 'Celts' mainly in:
  • France (Gaul)
  • Northern Italy (including the alps)
  • east Central Europe (including northern Balkans)
  • Anatolia/Asia Minor (Galatians)
  • and Iberian peninsula ('Celtiberians')

• Celtic languages found (partially from at least 6th c. BC onwards) in same geographical area and additionally on:
  • British Isles
  • 'shared' archaeological 'cultures' can be found in some of the same areas:
    • Hallstatt (from c. 12th c. BC in Central Europe)
    • La Tène (from c. 5th c. BC)
Synthetic logic

• various facts were 'packaged' up:
  • 'Celts' historically attested in much of Europe in final c. BC
  • at that time, many seem to have spoken 'Celtic languages'
  • at that time, many seem to be using 'La Tène' culture

  — put into the traditional (but false) formula:

  \[
  \text{ethnicity} = \text{language} = \text{(material) culture}
  \]

  — extended backwards into prehistory (based on Kossinna's theories) as far as (material) culture can be traced

  \[\rightarrow \text{voilà} = \text{the 'standard model'}\]
Inductive reasoning

- The 'old Celticists' (late 19th-21st c. AD)
  - also assumed existence of a people/race called 'Celts'
    - based on classical descriptions of late prehistoric Europe
    - reinforced by antiquarian and disciplinary traditions

- tried to synthetise the disciplinary traditions to arrive at
  (the) 'common Celtic' characteristics
  - benefitted from 'overlap' between disciplinary characteristics
    - (distribution of) 'Celtic languages' ~ 'Celtic art' ~ 'Celtic archaeology'
      ~ 'Celtic' attestations in ancient historical sources
  - also relying on (probabilistic) inductive logic

→ observation of similarities is crucial for identifying
  the characteristics making something 'Celtic'
Theory on speed: PCP

• Core assumption:
  – ‘Language and languages are much more ancient than traditionally thought. ... While traditional linguistics, by reifying language, had made change into a sort of biological, organic law of language development, ... the new, much longer chronologies of language origins and language development impose a reversal of this conception: conservation is the law of language and languages, and change is the exception, being caused ... by major external (ethnic or social) factors, i. e. by language contacts and hybridization ...’

  (http://www.continuitas.org/intro.html, 13/7/2018)

• Thus, it is argued:
  – ‘since the demonstration of continuity ... is "the archaeologists' easiest pursuit" (Mallory 1989, 81), ... it follows:
    • (1) that also for the question of European origin, the easiest working hypothesis is the continuity model, and no other alternative;
    • (2) that consequently the burden of proof now lies on the (Chalcolithic or Neolithic) invasionist's shoulders, and not on the anti-invasionist's;
    • (3) that as long as no alternative theory provides irrefutable counter-evidence, the Paleolithic Continuity can be considered as the winning theory.’

  (http://www.continuitas.org/intro.html, 13/7/2018)

• Thus, it also follows:
  – the 'Celts‘ were here since the Upper Palaeolithic, where their languages were spoken until they become first historically attested.
An exemplary PCP 'proof’

- At 'Swim-two-Rocks’ (adapted from Flann O’Brien)
  - Archaeological theory: boat-transport of megaliths
  - Linguistic evidence:
    - *Ventrecurgo* (Portugal)
      - *ventre* = Portug. for 'belly'
      - *curgo* = not Portug., derivation unknown
        » related to Ir. *currach*, 'hide boat'? Cymr. *corwgl*, 'hide boat'? = Celtic!
        » though: both could be loaned from Lat. *corium*, 'leather, hide'...
    - *Bronbag* (Bretagne)
      - *bron* = Bret. for 'breast'
      - *bag* = Bret. for 'boat'
  - Conclusion: memory of the neolithic transport method for megaliths 'survives' in 'Celtic' placenames

Renfrew’s farming language hypothesis

• Basic assumptions:
  – language change only explicable by 'mass migration' or internal change (n.b.: false)
  – non-Indo-European languages (e.g. Basque) must have been here before Indo-Europeanisation (n.b.: why?)

• Renfrew’s archaeological interpretation
  – only 'mass migration' into Europe clearly traceable by archaeology is the spread of farming in Neolithic

• conclusion
  – IE languages must have been introduced in Neolithic as a 'package' with farming
  – Language development / change since must have been internal, i.e. the languages we find today must have originated roughly where they are attested / spoken

• Again: 'packaging' up archaeology and language
  – based on inductive reasoning
Just discussed by Barry, so I’m leaving this aside
Finding the Celts: assumptions and tasks

• Most current scholarship on ‘the Celts’ uses these core assumptions (primary premises):
  – ‘the Celts’ exist/existed as an ontic entity
    • i.e. are or were something that existed or still exists eo ipso
  – as an ontic entity, they are like physical things
    • i.e. they have a characteristic (unique) form (features that are uniquely characteristic for ‘the thing’) = are ‘uniform’
    • their ontology equals that of physical things, too:
      – they come into being at one specific point in space and time
      – they then exist eo ipso
      – they may change, but maintain their essential uniformity even then
      – they may cease to exist (i.e. ‘die out’)

• The task (of finding ‘the Celtic’) thus becomes:
  – find the features uniquely characteristic for ‘the Celtic’
A (not so?) silly interlude
The Celts: Little Green Men from Mars?

• An utterly absurd (satirical) interlude (or is it?)
• evidence:
  – many ‘Celtic’ figural depictions of humans are small Bronzes
  – Bronze normally develops green patina
• assumption:
  – No one in their right mind would depict themselves in wrong size and colour
• conclusion:
  – ’the Celts‘ were little green men
  – everyone knows that little green men come from Mars; ergo: so must ’the Celts‘
Reasons and Reasoning
Excursus: **Aristotle** (*384 BC, † 322 BC)

- is to blame for much of this:
  - developed the *essentialist* method of *definition*
    - distinguishes *demonstrative* and *intuitive* knowledge
      - *demonstrative* = knowledge that can be proven (premises & logic)
      - *intuitive* = knowledge of the *essence* (unique characteristics) of sthg.
    - *essential features* of sthg.
    - e.g.: 'a foal is a young horse' (but not: 'a foal has four legs')
  - but:
    » we cannot prove all knowledge, since proof is based on premises
    » these would have to be proven in turn, leading to infinite regress
  - we thus have to assume *primary premises*
    » whose truth cannot be questioned and thus need no proof
  - these, we can only conceive *intuitively* (by observing ontic reality)
    » *intuitive* = knowledge of the *essence* (unique characteristics) of sthg.
    - a *definition* describing the *essential features* of sthg.
  - thus, if one's definitions are correct, everything else will automatically fall into place
An example


‘At the beginning of every method stand – especially in the tradition of scholarship in the German language – definitions or explanations of words, which establish the frame for an inquiry.’

What are 'the Celts'? (once again)

• The 'new Celticists' (late 20\textsuperscript{th}-21\textsuperscript{st} c. AD)
  • commonly falsely referred to as Celtosceptics
  – have criticised the 'old' models of 'the Celts'
  • based on the (methodically more rigid and more detailed) observation that 'the Celtic' features do not fully coincide
    – (distribution of) 'Celtic languages' ≠ 'Celtic art' ≠ 'Celtic archaeology' ≠ 'Celtic' attestation in ancient historical sources
    – and even worse,
      » 'Celtic language' ≠ 'other Celtic language'
      » 'Celtic archaeology' ≠ 'other Celtic archaeology'
      » even 'Celtic' attestation ≠ other 'Celtic' attestation in ancient historical sources
  → have demonstrated that there is no 'uniformity' and thus \textit{no essential 'Celtic' features}
Tasks and Conclusions

- The 'new Celticists' logic thus is:
  - Since the task (of finding 'the Celtic') cannot be completed successfully
    - no uniquely characteristic, no essential features of 'the Celtic' can be found due to lack of uniformity
  - but ontic entities must have such essential features
  - 'the Celts' cannot have existed as an ontic entity
- still based on Aristotelian essentialist logic:
  - slightly modified assumptions (primary premises) are
    - for something to exist, it must be an ontic entity
    - ontic entities are like physical things
Still thinking in the same old way

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>X (‘the Celtic’)</th>
<th>Coincidence of features x, y, z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School of thought</td>
<td>Entity exists</td>
<td>Features coincide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘old Celticism’</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘new Celticism’</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- The logical formula has remained the same
- The main difference between ‘old’ and ‘new’ Celtists is the focus on similarity or difference:
  - the ‘old Celtists’ see similar features who to them seem to significantly overlap and thus see coincidence = ‘packages’
  - the ‘new Celtists’ see mostly the differences even within individual features and thus see no coincidence
Raimund Karl: The different Celtic ‘packages’

El Escorial, 16/7/2018

Coincidence as the problem

• The lack of complete coincidence between different features of ‘the Celtic’ is not new
  – thus, most ‘old Celticists’ have usually picked one feature and declared it to be the ‘most essential’ one:

  • e.g. ‘Of the various possible definitions of Celtic, a proven affiliation with the Celtic languages or (for non-linguistic evidence) a demonstrable close connection with them holds the advantages of detailed scientific precision and a remarkable theoretical stability since the Celtic linguistic family was discovered by the Oxford Welshman Edward Lhuyd over 300 years ago.’

Coindidence as the problem

• But the 'new Celticists' are no different: they also pick one feature as the 'most essential' one

  • e.g. 'Self-definition is, when we come to *ethnicity*, the best means of definition; *we are what we think we are*,' though sadly, a more common definition is 'we are what others think we are.'


  • e.g. 'Despite constant repetition by the Megaws, especially verbally, we have never claimed that the Celts, either Ancient or Modern, did not exist. My own simple definition of *ethnicity* is that >people are what they believe they are< and secondly can be >what other people think they are<'

The problem with *intuitive* knowledge

• Both 'old' and 'new Celticists' base their arguments on *intuitive* knowledge
  – e.g., for the 'old' ones:
    • John Koch 'knows' that *language* is essential
    • Vincent Megaw 'knows' that *art* is essential
    • Otto Urban 'knows' that *historical attestation* is essential
  – e.g., for the 'new' ones:
    • John Collis 'knows' that *ethnicity* is essential
  – thus, applying identical logic, but starting from different premises, they – hardly surprisingly – all arrive at different conclusions

→ quite obviously, the problem is that *intuitive* knowledge isn’t particularly reliable!
Excursus: Some thoughts by Karl R. Popper (*1902, †1994)

• The development of thinking since Aristotle can, it seems to me, be summarised like this: every discipline which used the Aristotelian method of definition has remained stuck in a state of empty wordiness and unproductive scholasticism, and the degree to which the different sciences were able to make progress depended on the degree to which they succeeded to free themselves of this essentialist method. (This is the reason why a large part of our „social sciences“ is still stuck in the Middle Ages.)

Excursus: Some thoughts by Karl R. Popper (*1902, †1994)

• On the problem of the ambiguity of definitions
  – e.g. John Collis has argued this is a main problem, already in Antiquity, and that clearer (more precise) definitions are required for scholarship to progress
  – cf. Barry Cunliffe & John Koch’s argument that language has the advantage of scientific precision

• Popper has demonstrated that this also only leads into an infinite regress!

• ‘It follows that in the sciences all truly necessary terms must be undefined terms.’

Towards a solution?
Towards an epistemological Celtoscepticism

• Dump epistemological essentialism and turn to a sceptical epistemology

• First step: let us use *nominalist* definitions:
  – the *definiendum* (e.g. 'Celtic') is an *arbitrary signifier*
    • it does not necessarily refer to anything that exists *eo ipso*
  – it serves only as a *label* to provide a shorter word for
  – the *definiens*, the description of the *signified*
    • e.g. a classificatory summary of data; a concept; an inclusive list of features which may be related to each other (or not)
      – e.g. *chair* I use as the label for *furniture to sit on*; a *University professor*; and the *head of an organisation*‘
      – E.g. *Celtic* I use as the label for a certain *family of languages* and a certain *art style* and a certain *subset of archaeological material culture* and a certain *set of genetic features* and an *ethnic identity in Antiquity* and another *ethnic identity in the present* and etc.’
Excursus: Margaret Thatcher (*1925, †2013)

• Famous for a much criticised catchphrase, usually quoted out of context (so I’ll do it, too):
  – ’And you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women…‘
    • Margaret Thatcher 1987. Interview for Women’s Own magazine, 31/10/1987.
  – While the politics of this catchphrase in my opinion is thoroughly disagreeable, there is some truth to it:
  – society is not ‘a thing’, nothing which exists _eo ipso_
    • it rather „is“ the term we use to label the ephemeral, mostly immaterial associations between individuals (social actors), which are constantly in flux and find expression in emergent patterns of individual and communal behaviour (which may leave material traces, but may as well not)
There is no such thing as 'the Celts'

- I would argue much the same also applies for 'the Celts' and 'the Celtic':
  - there is no such thing as 'the Celts', neither in Antiquity nor today, nor such a thing as 'the Celtic'
  - rather, these terms are labels, used as a shorthand for some (actually or allegedly significant) associations in the evidence we are studying
    - e.g. the association found in the imperfect, but nonetheless significant, partial overlap of the areas of distribution of a certain language family, some art styles, some archaeological evidence, some historical references and perhaps some ethnicities in Antiquity
    - e.g. the association found in the equally imperfect, but equally significant, partial overlap between the areas of distribution of a certain language family, an art style, and an ethnicity in the present
Towards an epistemological Celtoscepticism

• Second step: accept that scholarship will never know 'wie es eigentlch gewesen ist‘, how it essentially was
  
  – knowledge is never based on 'true‘ primary premises, but always only on assumptions
    • whose 'truth’, or rather, 'usefulness’, can only be determined by testing the conclusions based on it against the evidence
    • and never depends on whether they are 'correctly defined‘
  
  – and it is always necessarily what we think, what we make of the evidence, situated in the observer
    • it never 'reflects‘, let alone is 'identical‘ with, the observed entity, ontic reality, 'the thing‘ eo ipso
    • it always only is a classificatory or explanatory construct in our mind, always only demonstrative, never ever self-evident

→ There is no truth, there are only arguments!
Why is this important?

• 'From the time of Pezron, the modern 'Celts' have been defined as speakers or descendants of speakers of Celtic languages. This cannot be applied to the ancient world. Though all people called *Celtae* or *Keltoi* in the ancient world seem to have spoken Celtic languages, there were also other Celtic speakers who were not called Celts: the *Leponti* of northern Italy, the *Ligues* (Ligures) of Provence, the *Vettones* of Spain, the *Belgae* of northern Gaul and southern Britain, the *Britanni* of the British Isles, and some *Germani* like the *Treveri*.'

• John Collis 2010. *Why are the Celtic languages Celtic?* Original English text for the German posters on display during this conference.
Why is this important?

• 'This cannot be applied to the ancient world.'
  – Why, if it can be applied to the 'modern Celts'?
    • the speakers of modern Celtic languages didn’t consider themselves to be Celts at the time of Lhuyd
    • nor do many Bretons, Cornish, Irish, Scots & Welsh today
    • nor have Galicians, many of which now believe they are Celts, spoken Celtic languages since Antiquity
  – Why, if so many people evidently do?
    • e.g. pretty much all our linguist friends
  – only if one has privileged, intuitively true knowledge can this be a true statement
    • but why believe John Collis rather than John Koch?
Unproductive scholasticism

• The current 'Celticity'-debate is necessarily dogmatic
  – it requires to accept somebody’s premises (or rather, assumptions) as incontrovertible truth
    • for the 'new Celticist' creed of John Collis, one has to believe the dogma that ethnicity is the essential criterion
    • for the 'old Celticist' creed of John Koch, one has to believe the dogma that language is the essential criterion

• The outcomes are necessarily incommensurable:
  – no reasoned debate can decide whether ethnicity or language is the essential criterion of Celticity, since this would necessarily lead into infinite regress

→ Thus, there cannot be a productive result: the debate is nothing but unproductive scholasticism
Conclusions

• To get away from such unproductive scholasticism, we have to
  – stop to use Aristotelian definitions as primary premises
  – stop to engage in the meaningless search for the
    'essential features' of what it means to be 'a Celt'
  – stop to believe that 'the Celts' are a self-evident thing
    that just needs to be properly defined to arrive at 'the
    truth' about them
  – stop to 'package' up archaeology, language, etc. as if they
    were necessarily linked features, making it possible to
    trace 'the Celts' back to their 'origin'

• and instead
  – understand the terms 'Celts' and 'Celtic' as labels only
  – and take a sceptical epistemological approach to them!

→ Be real (rather than mislabelled) Celtoskeptics!
Thank you for your attention!