Interpreting Iron Age Societies

A response to John Collis

Collis vs. Karl: background

- **2011** *'Reconstructing Iron Age Society' Revisited*
  - criticises ‚my methodology' as wrong
    - allegedly rooted in long-abandoned **culture-history**
  - sees as reason for difference academic ‚upbringing'
    - he in **British New Archaeology** and **Anthropology**
    - I in **Continental culture-historical Archaeology** and **Celtic Studies**
- yet actually
  - he: 1st year in **Archaeology** and **Anthropology** at Cambridge
  - I: Mag.phil. in **Prehistory** and **‚combined subjects'** at Vienna
    - the latter including Classical Archaeology, general History, Ancient History, Egyptology, Numismatics, German Language and Literature, Irish, general Linguistics, Philosophy, and
    - **Social Anthropology**
    - also: my Habilitation not (as Collis believes) in Archaeology and Celtic Studies, but in **Celtic Archaeology** (whatever that is)
    - also: **Collis himself taught me** during a term 1995/6 in Vienna and had profound influence on my thinking (more than he knows!)
- differences in background not as profound as they may seem!

The Celtic: epistemology and definitions

- Collis' **,New Celticists'**: essentialist approach
  - **,Celtic' = ethnic term**, and ethnic term only!
    - Collis about ,ethnicity':
      - *'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'**.'* (Collis 2003, 228)
    - and about the Iron Age British:
      - *'… we have **no evidence that either** of these societies **considered themselves, or were thought by anyone** else at the time, **as being 'Celtic'**'* (Collis 2011, 230)
    - giving the definition of ,Celt':
      - **A Celt is someone who either considers himself a Celt or is considered to be a Celt by others**
      - formula: **X = a, b, c, …** (a, b, c, … = characteristic features of X)

→ leads to numerous logical problems, e.g.:

Collis, Wittgenstein, and Popper

- Collis insists on ‚clear' definitions
  - *'… unless [we] rectify our nomenclature confusions such as those of which I accuse … Karl will continue.'* (Collis 2012, 72)
- This follows the logic set out in the **Tractatus**:
  - *'Die im Satze angewandten einfachen Zeichen heißen Namen. Der Name bedeutet den Gegenstand. Der Gegenstand ist seine Bedeutung. (»A« ist dasselbe Zeichen wie »A«)'* (Wittgenstein 1963, 22)
- Yet, Popper has long shown:
  - *‚… in science, all truly important terms must be **undefined** terms.'* (Popper 1980, 26)
- Why that?
  - if the definition of X = a, b, c, …
    - then a, b, and c must themselves be defined
  - If the definition of a = 1, 2, 3, …
    - then 1, 2, and 3 must themselves be defined, etc.
  - → results in an **infinite regress** = pointless!

The Celtic: the *essentialist* approach

- some formal logic:
  - if X = a, b, c, …
  - and N = ~~a~~, b, c, …, N = a, ~~b~~, c, …, or N = a, b, ~~c~~, …
  - then N ≠ X
- for „Celts"
  - if „Celt" = self- & foreign-identified as such
  - and N = **no evidence for (either or) both**
  - then N ≠ „Celt"
- essentialist approach requires
  - uniformity of ***definiens***
    - to be part of X, N must have **attested** features a, b, c
  - exclusivity of ***definiens***
    - if N is part of X, it cannot also be part of Y = ~~a~~, b, c, … (etc.)
  - existence of ***definiens***
    - must be *'real'*, since abstraca don't have ‚features'

Chairs and a *nominalist* approach

- **‚I have a chair at Bangor University…'**
  - essentialist confusion:
    - chair = a piece of furniture?
    - chair = a professorship?
  - nominalist definition:
    - *‚I use the word chair (=signifier) to indicate a particular piece of furniture and/or a professorship at a University (and/or a number of other things)'*
    - Note:
      - piece of furniture ≠ professorship
      - still, both referred to by same word (signifier)
      - what I actually mean is established by context of use:
        - » *‚I have a chair at Bangor University to sit on.'*
        - » *‚I have a chair at Bangor University in archaeology.'*

Celts and a *nominalist* approach

- *I refer to anyone* **who actively uses certain kinds of languages** *and/or* **produces** *and/or* **uses certain kinds of art** *and/or* **material culture** *and/or* **has referred to himself** *and/or* **been referred to as a Celt in historical sources** *and/or* **has identified himself** *and/or* **been identified as such by others (etc.), without implying or assuming any specific interrelations or connections between any of these elements,** *by using the term Celt*.

- Note:
  - language ≠ art ≠ material culture ≠ self-identification ≠ foreign identification ≠ etc.
  - word (signifier) **Celt = shorthand** for a long explanation
 - **meaningful only in its context**, not in itself

Interpreting IA Societies: analogies

- main means for interpreting prehistory
- a short simplified explanation
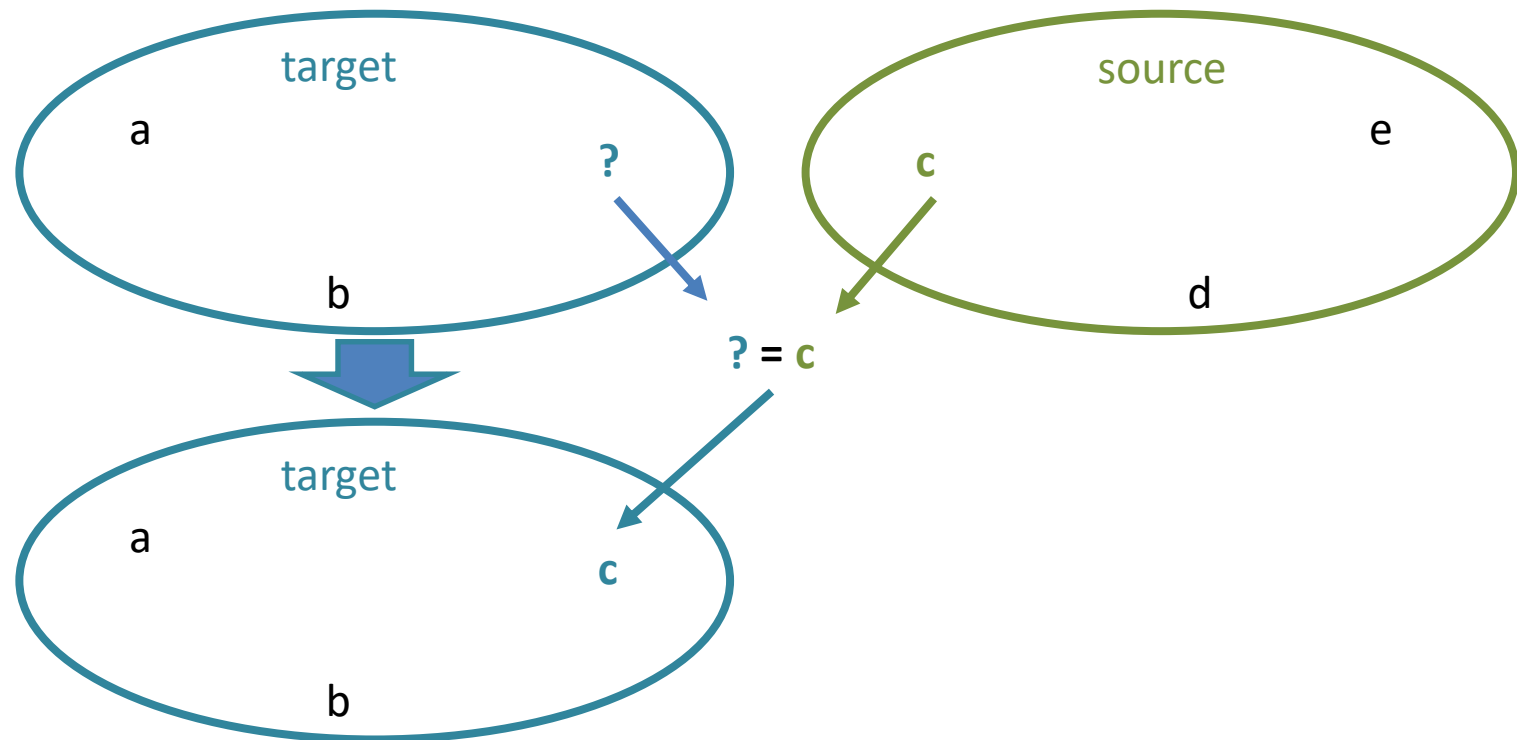
- this raises 2 crucial questions:
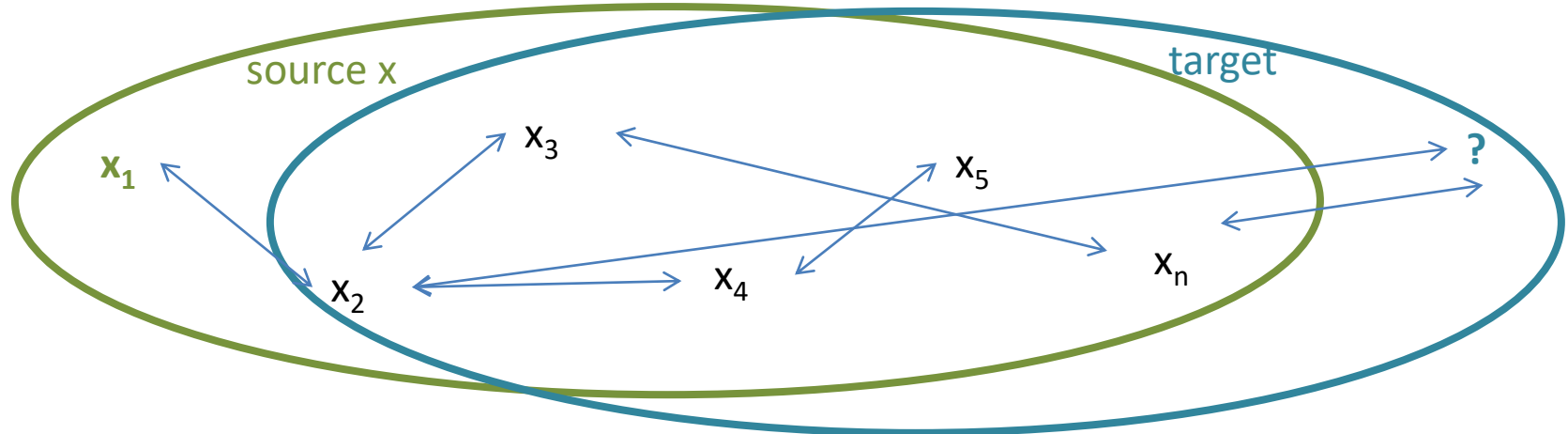 – why should unknown feature **?** be like known feature **c**?
  – why should any particular source be chosen?

Analogies and probability

source 1
source 2

e

c

h

f

d

g

target

a

?

b

source 3

source n

k

i

n₃

n₁

j

n₂
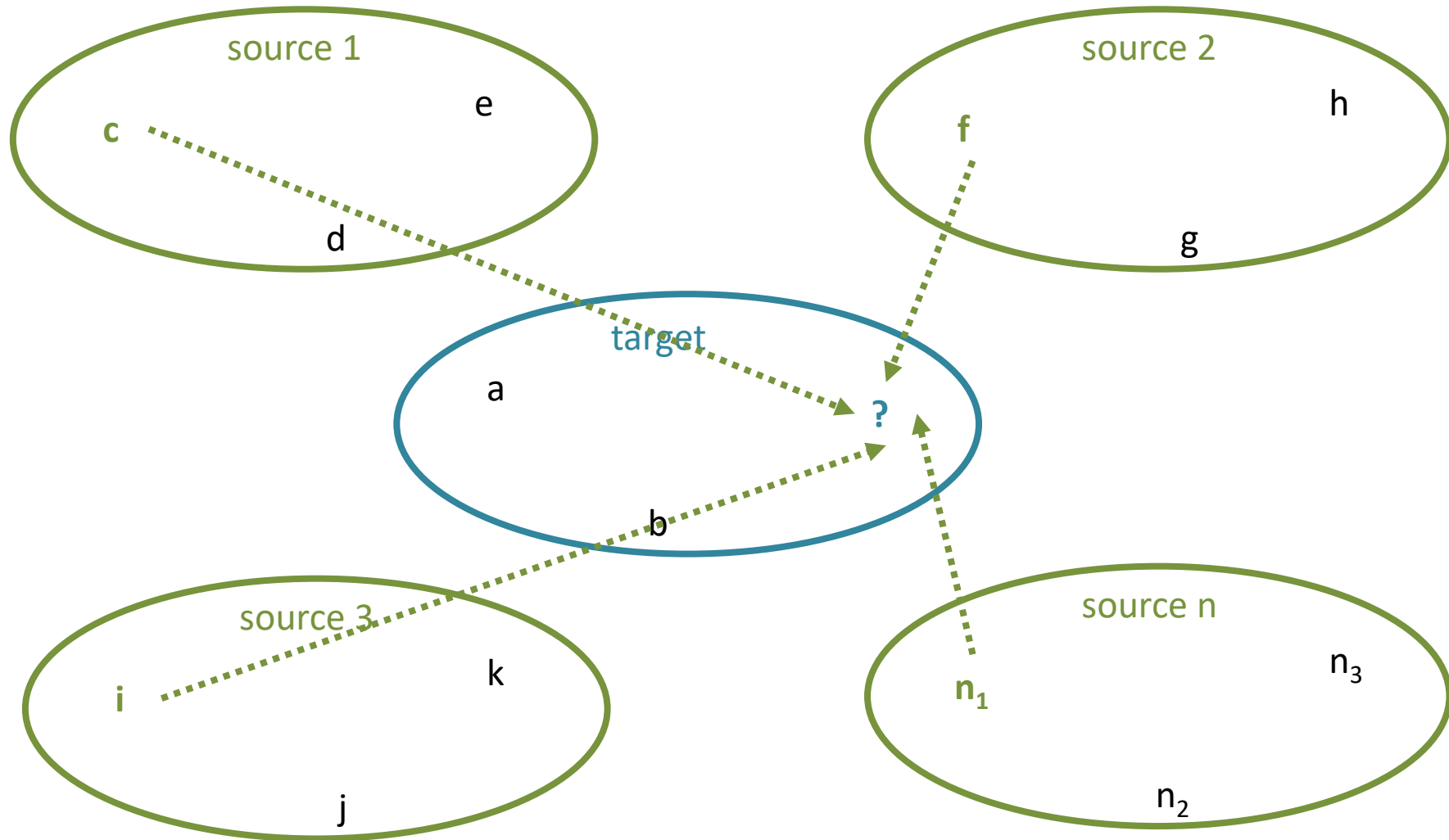
- **probability** that feature **?** is like a known feature in any source = **1/number of** (at least known, possibly more) **possible features**

Increasing probability

- if features x_2-x_n ‚identical' in source & target
  - probability of **?** = x_1 still =1/no. of possible features
  - though we will wonder why x_2-x_n ‚identical' in s&t?
    - unlikely to be product of randomly similar evolution!
- but if features x_2-n_x ‚identical' & interconnected
  - and x_1 and **?** also interconnected with x_2-x_n
  - probability that **?** = x_1 considerably increased

Random, parallel and co-evolution

- ## Differences in probability exist for a reason

time	random evolution	time	parallel evolution	time	co-evolution
	g, h, i 7, 8, 9		**n**, h, **9** **n**, 8, **9**		**n.1**, **5.1**, **3.1**$_a$ **n.2**, **e**$_b$, **3.2**$_c$
			general rule 2		
	d, e, f 4, 5, 6		**N**, e, f **N**, 5, 6		**N.1**, e, **3.1** **N.2**, 5, **3.2**
			general rule 1		
	a, b, c 1, 2, 3		a, b, c 1, 2, 3		a, b, c 1, 2, 3

society 1   society 2   society 1   society 2   society 1   society 2

since any (a, b, c, …) and any (1, 2, 3, …) can change to any state

since some (a, b, c, …) and (1, 2, 3, …) change according to rules

since change in (a, b, c, …) and (1, 2, 3, …) influences each other

→ probablility that any **?** = **x** (a, b, c, …, 1, 2, 3, …) ≈ 0

→ probablility that any **?** = **x** (a, b, c, …, 1, 2, 3, …) ≥ 0

→ probablility that any **?** = **x** (a, b, c, …, 1, 2, 3, …) > 0
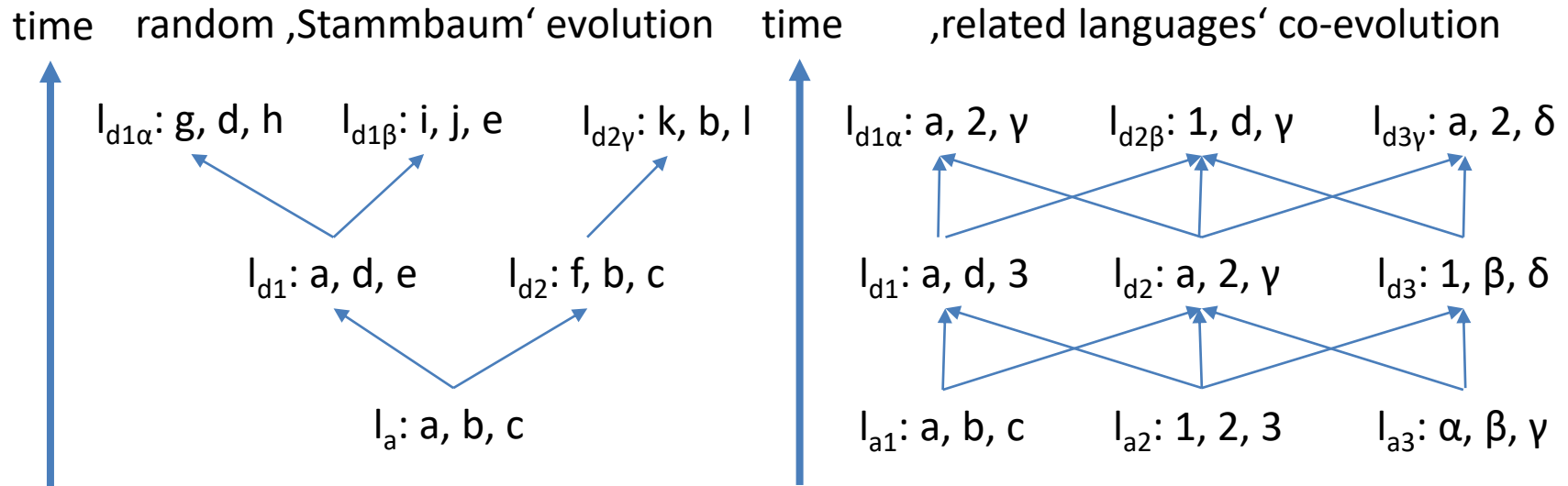
Different sources for analogies

- both **Collis** and **I** argue that
  - all sources for analogies should be treated equally
    - as any ethnographic analogy should be treated
  - i.e. primacy of interpretation lies with attested evidence
    - analogous features conflicting with it must be disregarded
- but argue for different preferences of choice
  - **(well-documented?) ethnographic sources (e.g. African)**
    - advantages: many sources to chose from,
    - many different possible features to chose from for any **?**
    - but: probability that any **x** = **?** relatively low,
    - analogous comparability generally somewhat questionable
  - **(well-documented?) ‚Celtic' sources**
    - advantage: probability that any **x** = **?** relatively high
    - analogous comparability relatively sound
    - but: only few sources to chose from,
    - limited range of possible features to chose from for any **?**

Why language relations are relevant

- ‚separate' languages evolve along random paths
  - whether ‚descendants' of one ‚original' language
  - or ‚descendants' of ‚originally separate' ones

time   random ‚Stammbaum' evolution   time   ‚related languages' co-evolution

$l_{d1\alpha}$: g, d, h $l_{d1\beta}$: i, j, e $l_{d2\gamma}$: k, b, l

l_{d1}: a, d, e l_{d2}: f, b, c

l_a: a, b, c

$l_{d1\alpha}$: a, 2, γ $l_{d2\beta}$: 1, d, γ $l_{d3\gamma}$: a, 2, δ

l_{d1}: a, d, 3 l_{d2}: a, 2, γ l_{d3}: 1, β, δ

l_{a1}: a, b, c l_{a2}: 1, 2, 3 l_{a3}: α, β, γ

- ‚related' languages always result of co-evolution
  - whether ‚Stammbaum'-like ‚descendants' of one
  - or ‚pidginization' of ‚originally separate' ones

Meaning matters

- language: main human means to explicate meaning
  - meaning essential in all human social interaction
    - see Bourdieu, Giddens, Habermas, Luhmann etc.
- lingustic co-evolution indicates social co-evolution
  - e.g.: Celt. *rīχ, ‚king, head/chief/ruler of a polity'
    - cf. Lat. *rex*; Osk. *rega*; Got. *reiks*; ONord. *ríkr*; OHG. *rīh*; Frk. *–ricus*; OInd. *rāj*; all meaning ‚king, head/chief/ruler of a polity'
    - probability that PIE *rēĝ[1] ‚right, just, to make right; ruler/king' just randomly evolve to mean ‚king' in all these languages ≈ 0
  - of course Celt. *riχ ≠ Lat. *rex*, but likely Celt. *riχ ≈ Lat. *rex*
  - of course not necessarily ‚Stammbaum'-like development
    - need not be: PIE → West.IE → Lat-Celt → ProtoCelt → Celt
    - can have been: PIE → … → ProtoLat *–loaned→* ProtoCelt
  → probability that word for and social role of ‚king/ruler' co-evolved in these language communities ≤ 1

Practicalities of analogous interpretation

- Large numbers of possible sources available
  - the whole ‚recent' ethnographic record
    - HRAF – records of c. 400 ‚cultures', SCCS – 186
    - actually: many thousands of ‚societies' even today
  - the whole ‚historical' record
    - several 10,000 attested ‚societies' world-wide
  - archaeological, social and thought-experiments
    - nearly infinite numbers of possibilities for analogies
- In theory: **great!** In practice: **impossible!**
  - thus, in practice:
    - **Collis hardly ever uses analogies!**
      - and never uses them as he claims they should be used:
        - never examines all possibilities and choses best fitting evidence
        - rather: picks *ad hoc* from what he just happens to come across
        - analogous comparability never established: pure assumption
    - and hardly anyone does any different: because it can't be done

The prince's Cinderella problem

- The practical problem with analogies:
  - finding analogies which fit the (IA) evidence
    - requires detailed analyses of source and target
    - → is time-consuming
  - large number of sources for potential analogies
    - cannot all be examined in detail by individual researcher
    - → requires selection strategy
    - selection strategy needs to be justified:
      - why look at these sources first, rather than others?
      - why concentrate ressources on some rather than others?
- does the prince start with randomly picked girls?
- or does he start with those whose feet are about the right size for the glass slipper?

- no sources for analogies should be privileged:
  - neither the ‚Celtic' sources
    - analogies from ‚Celtic' are not ‚more fitting' because they are from ‚Celtic' sources than any other analogies
      - logical fallacy to believe that because two things are labelled with the same word, they must be ‚uniform'
  - nor the ethnographic record
    - analogies from the ethnographic record are not inherently superior because they have not been subject to ‚change'
      - logical fallacy to believe that unknown difference is less significant than known change
        » random evolution unlikely to produce similar results, and parallel less likely to produce similar results than co-evolution
  - rather, consider all and chose best fitting
    - regardless of their origins
    - if an analogy doesn't fit, it must be disregarded!

Interpreting IA societies: strategy

- not *one prince, one shoe, many girls* **approach**
  - good on disciplinary level
  - but practically impossible for individual scholars!
- but *many princes, one shoe, one girl for each*
  - strategic selection of first points of call
    - every individual scholar to select according to their preferences and for their own reason
      - but: ‚Celtic' sources preferable in my opinion
        » known to have co-evolved
        → increased probability for providing useful analogies
        = reasonable justification for looking at them first
        » if they don't fit, disregard → elimination of prime suspects
      - but even if they fit
        » look at other analogies too, since they may fit better

Thank you for your attention!