

CELTIC IRELAND: PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE, HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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It is with pleasure that I offer this short paper to Miklós Szabó, not only for his outstanding contribution to the field of Celtic archaeology, but also with sincere thanks for my many years of friendship with him.

Seventy years ago R. A. S. Macalister, the first occupant of the Chair of Celtic Archaeology in University College Dublin, wrote of “that nightmare of ethnology, archaeology and, we may add, politics, the Celtic problem”.¹ Three quarters of a century have passed yet still the Celtic problem remains, still there are many aspects of the Celtic conundrum which remain unresolved.

The subject of this paper concerns Ireland. Historically, nobody doubts that around the middle of the first millennium A.D. Ireland throughout, in its language, its place names, its personal names indeed, in the manners and customs of its inhabitants, may legitimately be termed Celtic. Indeed, even before this, in the early second century A.D., using sources from the preceding century, the well-known map of the Greek ethnographer Ptolemy includes names which can undoubtedly be regarded as Celtic in the truest sense of the word.² It was before the period of the written word, however, that the critical changes took place, changes which ultimately made the country what it is today. Thus our knowledge of Irish Celtic beginnings can only be found in the archaeological record.

The supposed celticity of Ireland is all-pervading, beginning with language, for the official language of the State is labelled “Celtic”. For that country, too, all are familiar with that creature known as the Celtic Tiger still, thankfully, holding its own in a world of increasing political and financial tension. To the south-east of Ireland is the Celtic Sea, as yet, alas, without the hoped for oil. In rugby there is a Celtic Cup between Scotland, Wales and Ireland and in the Scottish city of Glasgow emigrants from Ireland formed the famous soccer team Glasgow Celtic, the same Celtic, even though the “C” is soft. In the Dublin telephone directory there are 84 entries with Celtic prefixes, entries such as Celtic Beauty Salon, Celtic Bedding, Celtic Bookmakers, Celtic Business Systems, Celtic Concepts Ltd., Celtic Global Procurement, Celtic Logistics, Celtic Road Sweepers, even Celtic Helicopters. Random glances at directories for other parts of the country show the “Celts” to be equally ubiquitous. Thus, to pick a few examples, we have Celtic Bookmakers in Athlone, Celtic Internet Services in Bunbeg, Celtic Seaweed Baths in Sligo, Celtic Weave China in Ballyshannon and even a Celtic Futon Store in Galway. And with the foundation of University College Dublin in 1908, the head of Archaeology was, and remains, the Professor of Celtic Archaeology even though Celtic studies formed, as it does today, only a very small part of the teaching curriculum.

¹ MACALISTER 1935, 76.

² BYRNE 1984; WADDELL 1998, 373–4.

Many more examples can be given but the picture is clear. Deeply embedded in the national psyche is the assumption that the Irish are Celts, descendants of groups who invaded the country en masse at some time in prehistory. This assumption applies not only to the general population en masse. In the academic world too, there is little, if any, uncertainty on this among philologists and historians. The only questions at issue are when and whence did the Celtic invaders come.

The view is encapsulated by Gearóid MacEoin, the distinguished, now emeritus, Professor of Early Irish at the National University of Ireland, Galway, who was able to write, in 1986: "When a language is known to have been transplanted over a long distance or over the sea some considerable amount of population movement must be assumed... To effect a change of language a migration must be of families or communities".

Philologists and historians of Early Ireland, with a few exceptions, had surprisingly little contact with archaeologists and, in their writings, even those who did (MacEoin, in fact, was one), all too often displayed an astonishing ignorance of the archaeological arguments. For philologists it was the problems of lost labials, phonemes, lenition and the palatalisation of consonants which were important. Indeed, at times scholars of the written word could be scathing in their criticism of their archaeological colleagues who dared to venture into areas of Early Irish History. The renowned historian T. F. O'Rahilly, for example, a man renowned for the frequently venomous quality of his pen, wrote³: "As an old-fashioned believer in the principal of the shoemaker sticking to his last, I have... deliberately refrained from trespassing on the domain of archaeology. When, on the other hand, archaeologists choose to stray into matters which lie outside their province, it is not only legitimate but desirable that non-archaeologists should call attention to their aberrations..." And he went on "...archaeologists have an unhappy knack of coming to grief whenever they are rash enough to correlate culture with language or otherwise to meddle with linguistic problems". It must be repeated again, however, that it is only archaeology which can ultimately shed light on the origins of celticity in Ireland.

On the European mainland the matter is less problematical in this regard than is the situation on the islands to the west. The many inhumation burials across Europe, especially numerous from the fourth to the second centuries B.C., clearly represent major migrations of population groups and few will today reject the notion that among them were groupings which may legitimately be described as Celts. These are extraordinarily well represented in the surviving archaeological record in so many aspects of their material culture. Most especially is the new, dynamic art form, often of breathtaking power and originality, which occurs in all areas of Celtic Europe. In addition, there is no small quantity of surviving literary evidence which embellishes the wider picture.

Of course, the picture of Celtic migrations is not without its problems and must, of course, be considered with extreme caution. To name but one example, sixth century B.C. Celtic inscriptions of the Italian Golasecca north of the Po are neither Hallstatt nor La Tène in material culture. Thus, as Sims-Williams states: "It must follow that the presence or absence of Hallstatt or La Tène material in undocumented areas of temperate Europe (such as Britain and Ireland) should no longer be used to determine the presence, absence, or arrival of ethnic or linguistic Celts".⁴ Similarly, few would deny that people we may legitimately describe as "Celts" spread, in large numbers, into Greece and Asia Minor in the third century B.C. surviving as recognisable cultural entities, especially in Asia Minor, for centuries after their arrival. Yet the surviving archaeological record in this is all but silent. A few scattered brooches (usually of decidedly local character), occasional metal trinkets, some possible potsherds and, in Turkey, a single inhumation burial which seems to be the tomb of a Celtic leader (it bears an inscription to a Galatian King Deiotarus⁵), are all that survives of the vast Celtic hordes (not merely fighting men, but also their families) which unquestionably settled in these areas for centuries. This, undoubtedly, is a conundrum but one of considerable importance when considering the "Celtic" problems of the western islands.

It must be clearly stated, however, that the former existence in Europe of population groups who may legitimately be referred to as Celts is not in question. Moreover, it is clearly evident that, to a significant extent, these are represented by the La Tène archaeological horizon.

³ O'RAHILLY 1946, 430.

⁵ CUNLIFFE 1997, 179.

⁴ SIMS-WILLIAMS 1998, 31–2.

This is, perhaps, most dramatically shown by the inscription on the blade of a sword probably from the river Thiele in Switzerland.⁶ Dating in all probability to the 2nd century B.C. it bears on its blade, in Greek letters, the Celtic name KORISIOS which is accompanied by a well-known eastern motif, the Tree of Life, widely favoured by the Celtic peoples at this time. Thus, together, on an obviously La Tène sword, is an eastern design, and a Celtic name in Greek letters. It matters not whether the name is that of the maker or the owner. Here, in Switzerland, is incontrovertible proof of a warrior who, in every sense of the word, was both La Tène and Celtic.

But in the islands to the west – in Britain and Ireland – the matter, as has already been hinted at above, is immeasurably more complex. Appositely, Stuart Piggott in 1983 wrote of “...a world where the polemics associated with the loaded terminology of ‘invasions’ and ‘immigrations’ can engender more heat than light, and where misunderstandings may well have arisen from the projection of the irrelevant concepts of modern nation-states into prehistoric archaeology”.⁷

For Britain, largescale colonisation, held to be unequivocally “Celtic”, was invoked by Christopher Hawkes as early as 1931 in a classic paper simply entitled “Hillforts”.⁸ More than a quarter century later he modified and expanded this,⁹ proposing a threefold immigration, first Hallstatt, then La Tène and finally, in the last century or so B.C., Belgic. For more than 30 years this was the received, unchallenged wisdom. The great man had spoken! In the early 1960s, however, a number of scholars, notably Roy Hodson, questioned this orthodoxy, convincingly demonstrating its inherent weaknesses.¹⁰ Others followed¹¹ and, with surprising speed, the system collapsed. Increasingly it was the insular nature of the material which came to be stressed, a point for Ireland later cogently outlined by Waddell.¹²

Now the magnificent bronze shields from Britain, the decorated scabbards, the horse trappings, most of the personal ornaments and so much of the material horizon – these are now clearly shown as of obviously indigenous fabrication, even if, at times, displaying influence from the Celtic world outside. The great hillforts too, a dramatic feature of the southern British Iron Age landscape, and so critical in Hawkes’s original invasion paradigm, are now decisively shown to be wholly indigenous in concept and design.

But the large inhumation cemeteries in Yorkshire, containing elaborate chariot graves, continued longer to be regarded as clear evidence of incoming Celts, and on a significant scale. Harding, for example, wrote with confidence in 1974: “Even opponents of the ‘invasion hypothesis’ have recognised that the combination of the distinctive cart-burials and square-ditched enclosures of the Arras culture, with their accompanying gravegoods of vehicle fittings and horse-gear, must signify an intrusive population whose origins lay somewhere in the vicinity of the Champagne”.¹³

Detailed and exhaustive studies of the Yorkshire material, however, notably by Stead,¹⁴ have demonstrated the almost totally indigenous character of the Yorkshire burials. Leaving aside a few rings and brooches there is virtually nothing that is not entirely native – especially the crude, handmade pottery which could not be further from the magnificent, often decorated, wheel-turned wares of the Marne and of other regions of the European La Tène world. Even the Yorkshire chariot burials which so dominated discussion are, in fact, quite different from their Continental counterparts. The dismantled chariots, with wheels on the floor of the burial pit with the crouched skeletons lying upon them, are wholly insular in concept and design.

Even though these burials are thus so obviously an entirely new development in Britain it is nonetheless strange to understand how they were so readily accepted by Iron Age scholars as the graves of intruding groups. Stead, in his most recent consideration of the problem¹⁵ has wondered – possibly-tongue-in-cheek – if there might not have been a single, well-connected evangelist who, in the fourth or third century B.C., was responsible for the changes in burial rite!

In Ireland too, indeed even more so than is the case in Britain, archaeological evidence for a “Celtic” presence in the centuries before the birth of Christ is problematical. Nonetheless, as Hawkes did for Britain, so

⁶ WYSS 1954.

⁷ PIGGOTT 1983, 221.

⁸ HAWKES 1931.

⁹ HAWKES 1958.

¹⁰ HODSON 1962, 1964.

¹¹ E.g. CLARK 1968.

¹² WADDELL 1978.

¹³ HARDING 1974, 174.

¹⁴ STEAD 1965; STEAD 1979; STEAD 1991.

¹⁵ STEAD 1991, 184.

too for Ireland the notion of Celtic intrusions was confidently proposed. This was, at times, dramatically phrased. In 1935, for example, Macalister, in ringing tones, wrote of how the Bronze Age Sword People in Ireland “expressed their resignation, as they fell before the flashing iron blades of the tall, fair-haired newcomers, who landed one fateful day in or about the fourth century B.C.”.¹⁶

Britain, however, was inevitably seen as the background to Celtic Ireland. Piggott, for example, writing in 1950 spoke with confidence of “the plantation of Ulster by Yorkshire charioteers”.¹⁷ More than thirty years later he was still able to write of Ireland as “the insular province of an already insular Britain” stressing that he could “only see the whole Irish phenomenon as derived from Britain”.¹⁸

But archaeology has as yet failed to reveal the settlements of the people – whether Celts or otherwise – who inhabited, or indeed invaded, the country in the last half millennium or so B.C. Astonishingly, the massive amount of rescue excavation in recent years, in all areas of the country, has still failed to fill this gap. Crannogs, for example, are known earlier (in the Bronze Age) and later (in the Early Historic Period) but are singularly lacking during the period of the Iron Age. The ubiquitous Irish ringforts are now seen to date well into the Christian era, indeed the most recent work on the subject places them firmly between A.D. 600 and 900.¹⁹ Hillforts, in earlier studies, were taken to be unequivocally Celtic. Now, as excavation of selected sites continues, it is increasingly apparent that these are a Late Bronze Age phenomenon.²⁰

Burials are, however, important. Apart from the very occasional exotic interments, it is becoming increasingly evident that the standard burials of the Iron Age are the so-called ringbarrows – a very low central mound with enclosing fosse and external bank. The interments are always simple cremations in unelaborate pits, and grave goods, if at all present, consist at best of a few glass beads, bone pins and, very occasionally, brooches of La Tène character.²¹ These items were imported trinkets the sort which could readily have been acquired through passing trade by the native Irish. Clearly, such burials have nothing to do with outside influences. They are of wholly indigenous character their roots reaching back to the Bronze Age at least. There is nothing here that demonstrates the intrusion foreigners.

A few recently discovered burials of intrusive character – Ballydavis, Co. Laois²² and Fore, Co. Westmeath²³ are especially important examples – do, of course, indicate some movement into the country from abroad shortly before the birth of Christ. But again these sites do nothing to disturb the overall picture.

In the country there is, of course, a significant body of high status metalwork obviously of La Tène character and obviously dating to the last centuries before, and shortly after, the birth of Christ. Included are some items clearly of foreign manufacture, such as the magnificent gold torc from Knock, Co. Roscommon, almost certainly an import from the middle Rhine, dating to around 300 B.C.²⁴ The object is a bog deposit and, indeed, it is noticeable how many of the La Tène artefacts from Ireland are from bogs, rivers and other wet places. There can be little doubt that for the most part these were deliberately deposited and almost certainly with ritual intent.

The torc mentioned above stands out but there are other magnificent items of metalwork dating to the last centuries before Christ. These include finely decorated scabbards, horse trappings, magnificently fabricated sheet-bronze trumpets and, especially, the technically impressive and stunningly beautiful gold collar of the first century B.C. from Brough, near Limavaddy, in Co. Derry.²⁵

These items are, in every sense, new in the land. They are not in any way linked with the splendid metalwork of the Later Bronze Age. The latter material, both of bronze and, in enormous quantities, of gold, has ceased production completely by about 600 B.C. There followed what is often called an Irish Dark Age, lasting at least 300 years, for which no satisfactory explanation has ever been offered. The latest phases of the Hallstatt period and the first stages of the European La Tène civilization are entirely absent in the Irish archaeological record. The developing La Tène horizon in Ireland shows no links whatsoever with anything which has gone before.

¹⁶ MACALISTER 1935, 75.

¹⁷ PIGGOTT 1950, 16.

¹⁸ PIGGOTT 1983, 147.

¹⁹ STOUT 1997.

²⁰ MALLORY 1991, 10–26; MALLORY 1995, 73–86; MALLORY *et al.* 1996, 5–20; WADDELL 1998, 205–221; 269–273; RAFTERY 1976.

²¹ RAFTERY 1981.

²² KEELEY 1995.

²³ WALLACE 1989, 19; RAFTERY 1994, 196, Pl. 78, Fig. 123.

²⁴ RAFTERY 1984, 175–181; WADDELL 1997, 290; IRELAND 1992.

²⁵ EVANS 1897; RAFTERY 1984, 181–192; WARNER 1982, 29–38; WADDELL 1997, 294–6.

Can we not thus take this new metalwork horizon as indicative of the illusive invading Celts? The suggestion is obviously attractive. But immediately there are problems. The quantities of surviving material are embarrassingly small. For example, we only have for the period a few dozen brooches, scarcely forty swords and, astonishingly, no more than eight scabbards. There are the two exceptional gold neck ornaments already referred to above – one dating to the early third century B.C., the other several centuries later – and only four surviving bronze trumpets. Only the bridle bits are of more frequent occurrence. Most significantly, however, with a very few exceptions, the Irish La Tène metalwork horizon comprises material of indigenous manufacture and cannot in any sense be seen as the trappings of intrusive groups.

Furthermore, as well as the extreme scarcity of relevant material in the country, the total absence of so much that is typical of the Iron Age abroad is glaringly obvious. Most especially the complete absence of even a single sherd of La Tène pottery from Ireland is as startling as it is inexplicable. The coarse, bucket-shaped pottery of the Later Bronze Age was clearly of no great quality. But it was, at least, functional. Every single settlement of the period contains these wares, often in considerable numbers. Then it is abandoned, never to return and, astonishingly, there is no evidence of native wares in Ireland for more than a millennium. Clearly, the continued use of clay crucibles throughout the historic period in Ireland indicates that the relevant technique was known. But for whatever reason containers of wood, and perhaps also metal, must have been favoured.

Thus it is clearly evident that viewed from an archaeological perspective the question of Irish “Celtic” origins is immensely complex. This has led, in recent years, to an intensive debate on the whole question of the meaning of Celticity, especially so among British colleagues. Indeed, for a few years in the mid-1990s the matter became quite heated between the Megaws on the one hand and Collis and James on the other.²⁶ James, for example, felt that for Britain (and by implication, for Ireland too) “...the existing Celtic Iron Age paradigm (was) inadequate, and fundamentally flawed”.²⁷ He admitted, however, that there was “no consensus yet on what may replace it” but “the least unsatisfactory shorthand label for this trend is the unlovely term ‘post-Celticism’”.²⁸ In a later work,²⁹ his views are more fully outlined. Ireland receives more attention and, early in the book, somewhat remarkably, he writes that “The pagan Celtic past is still powerful in Ireland. Indeed, the idea of an ancient Celtic origin for Irishness was of growing importance to Irish nationalists during the nineteenth century, and has continued to be part of the ideological foundations of the nation ever since – so much so that senior Irish archaeologists who now doubt the validity of the idea still find it too sensitive to discuss openly”.³⁰ Irish archaeologists, it must be admitted, have difficulty in understanding what is here meant.

The problem of what these non-existent insular Celts should be called is further addressed in this book, concluding: “To the question, ‘what, then, should we call the peoples of early Britain and Ireland?’ the answer must be, exactly that: ‘the peoples of Britain and Ireland’”.³¹ The rationale behind this thinking is, of course, clear and, to an extent, understandable. It is, however, unlikely to receive much favour among those grappling with the problems of insular celticity.

Similarly, in a lengthy critique of the use of the Celtic label, Chapman³² wrote of *Keltoi* as no more than a term of vulgar abuse, coined by the Greeks to denote foreigners, and later taken over by the ‘Celts’ themselves. He saw the use of the term as the imposition by an alleged central body on a peripheral group as representing a form of social exclusion. This suggestion may, however, be questioned as Caesar, for example, tells us quite specifically that the Celts of central and southern Gaul referred to themselves by this name. Pausanias too, says that the term *Galatai* was recent and that they were originally called *Keltoi*, “both by themselves and by all other peoples”.³³ Of interest, too, is the statement, as late as the fifth century A.D., by the writer Sidonius Apollinaris, that the provincial Latin of Clermont Ferrand was disfigured by “a scurf of Celtic speech”.

²⁶ MEGAW–MEGAW 1995; MEGAW–MEGAW 1996; MEGAW–MEGAW 1998; COLLIS 1995; COLLIS 1997; JAMES 1997; JAMES 1998.

²⁷ JAMES 1998, 207.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ JAMES–RIGBY 1999.

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, 25.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, 137.

³² CHAPMAN 1992.

³³ SIMS–WILLIAMS 1998, 22, fn. 83.

Collis, though strongly critical of the concept of the insular Celts,³⁴ is similarly cautious in his use of the term “Celtic”. He rightly criticises “the imposition of ethnic labels on archaeological data where they are unjustified”,³⁵ and continues “The ancient Celts did exist but we do not know by what criteria they were defined – language? geographical location? Self-definition? – or what their boundaries were”.³⁶

One of the problems regarding our discussion of insular “Celticity” is that the term “Celt” was never used, either by, or about, the inhabitants of Britain or Ireland. In fact the first time the term was used in an insular context was probably by the Scotsman George Buchanan in his work *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* in 1582, the year of his death.³⁷ It was not, however, until 1707, in *Archaeologia Britannica*, written by the Welsh scholar Edward Lhuyd, that comparative Celtic philology commenced.³⁸ It was not, indeed, till 1854, in Renan’s essay *La Poésie des Races Celtique*, as Sims-Williams reminded us,³⁹ that generalisations about Celtic literature began. It must be stressed, however, that first and foremost “Celtic” was seen as a linguistic term.

With the growth of Irish nationalism in the course of the nineteenth century Celts and Celticity became an important vehicle in the revival of Irish national consciousness. But, clearly, these Celts have nothing to do with those of the ancient past.

Is there a solution to the Irish conundrum? Certainly, the language is there, as it has been for at least two millennia and it is this, more than anything else, which has underpinned Ireland’s celticity. But where are the material remains of those who spoke it? There is the kernel of the problem for, in the cold face of the surviving archaeological remains, there is simply no evidence of invading Celts. Can we invoke the case of the invisible Galatians? This seems, however, hardly to provide the answer. It is not simply the scarcity of surviving material which is problematic, but also, as earlier noted, its manifestly indigenous character.

Should we, perhaps, seek for the Celtic language in Ireland an origin far older than is assumed by linguists and philologists? Or could the language have been transmitted through females taken in foreign raids by indigenous males? It is, after all, true to say that the baby learns from its mother’s knee. But this is speculation. The conundrum as yet remains.

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³⁴ Most recently COLLIS 2003.

³⁵ COLLIS 1997, 196.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ COLLIS 2003, 34–44.

³⁸ COLLIS *op. cit.*, 49–52.

³⁹ SIMS-WILLIAMS 1998, 8.

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