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Celtic Cauldron

Were the Celtic speakers of the Continent related genetically, as well as culturally, to those in the British Isles? **Jean Manco** sheds light on a people who, some say, did not exist but who are about to be celebrated in a major exhibition at the British Museum

Who were the Celts? Readers could be forgiven any amount of confusion. For decades British archaeologists ridiculed the notion that any inhabitants of the British Isles at any time could be Celts. There have even been spirited attempts to shatter the whole concept of Celts in the real world, to portray it as fantasy. The word 'Celt' became taboo in many a university archaeology department. Meanwhile scholars of Celtic studies have calmly continued publishing on the Celts. If you are looking

1. This panel of the Gundestrup Cauldron shows a bearded god, wearing a torc, with smaller figures.

2. The Gundestrup Cauldron has seven external panels, each portraying a deity in different postures, 100 BC-1 AD, silver. D. 69cm. H. 42cm. Gundestrup, northern Denmark. © The National Museum of Denmark.

for a history, encyclopaedia or historical atlas of the Celts, you will have no problem in finding one. So, what is going on? How can people like myself write books about a supposedly non-existent people?

The simple answer is that there is plenty to say about them. If we define a Celt as someone speaking a Celtic language, then we are treading on solid ground.

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Britain are sometimes colourfully dramatised. The Scottish folk hero and outlaw Robert Roy MacGregor (1671-1734), popularly known as Rob Roy, has generated a novel, an operetta and three films. Yet this falls far short of the dozens of ballads, novels, plays, films and television series based around the possibly historical English folk hero and outlaw Robin Hood. Does this make the English non-existent? I don't think so. What we have here is proof that everyone loves a bold tale with a stalwart hero.

The second truth is that the term

p 2 - 24



Celtic Conundrum

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‘Celt’ was not used in Classical sources in the way that we use it today. A modern history of the Celts will make frequent use of the familiar ethnic label. If other names crop up, such as ‘Picts’ or ‘Gauls’, it will be made clear that these refer to particular Celts. The plethora of tribal names will be slotted under the Celtic umbrella. It is all plain for the reader.

By contrast, ancient authors can be bewildering at first encounter. The same ancient people can be called different names in different languages, or at different periods. A people could have their own name for themselves, meaning ‘us’, while their neighbours in the hills to the west called them ‘the valley people’ and their neighbours in the towns to the east called them ‘the farmers’. Yet all three groups might recognise a commonality when faced with strangers. In that context a more inclusive ‘us’ name would be in order. Today we impose similar layers of identification. The same person could regard himself as a Glaswegian, a Scot, British and European, according to the context.

For the beginner hoping to research his or her ancestors in early sources, the instinct is to check the index for the ethnic name familiar today. It may come as a shock that neither Julius Caesar nor Tacitus, who had plenty to say about the people of Britain, used the word Celts to describe them.

Until Caesar came to Britain in 55 BC and 54 BC, its people could very seldom have encountered anyone who did not speak a Celtic language. So there was no need for a collective name meaning ‘us’ versus non-Celts. A person was identified by parentage and tribe, for example Mandubracios, a prince of the Trinovantes, who sought Caesar’s protection. Their collective names were geographical, meaning British or Irish. By contrast, on the Continent the Gauls had come in contact with Greeks trading along the Mediterranean, who called them Keltroi (‘the tall ones’).

Once linguists began to compare Gaulish with Welsh, Gaelic, Breton and Cornish, it was clear that they all belonged to the same language family, which acquired the label Celtic. Linguists recognised the Germanic family of languages in a similar way. They found a relationship between, for example, Danish, English and the now dead Crimean Gothic. Danes, Goths, Angles and



3. Map showing the areas where the Celtic languages were widespread, before most Celtic-speakers were enveloped by the Roman Empire. Roman rule led Continental Celts to switch to Latin, followed by languages derived from it, such as French. Celtic languages survived only in north-west France and in the British Isles.

Saxons were not much addicted to calling themselves Germani. This was the collective noun used by the Romans for the inhabitants of ‘Greater Germania’, which included Scandinavia.

The term ‘Celtic art’ has remained geographically elastic regardless of archaeological fashion, for this aesthetic is recognisable wherever it is found. Fluid, curvilinear design characterises the La Tène culture of Iron Age central Europe. This culture has long been identified as

Celtic. It was at the right place and time to correspond to the people called Celts by Greek authors of the 5th century BC. La Tène objects also appear in Britain and Ireland. In fact the style continued longest in Ireland and northern Britain, for elsewhere the Celts were swallowed up by the Roman empire. Irish art blossomed in masterpieces of the early Christian era in such craftsmanship as the Tully Lough Cross.

The burning issue is what all this means for ethnicity. Were the Celtic



speakers of the Continent related genetically, as well as culturally, to those in the British Isles? In the days before modern communications, any language had to be spoken face to face, with the people you met day to day. So we would expect languages to move with people.

Here we run up against an archaeological taboo far deeper than Celtoscepticism, but which does much to explain it. From the 1970s onwards archaeologists began to revolt against the vision of prehistory as one invasion after another. In the post-imperial age, colonialism was unappealing.

There was a greater pride in indigenous development. 'Continuity' became the buzzword. By the end of the century, anti-migrationism was orthodoxy. In this framework Celtic-speakers in the British Isles were descended from hunter-gatherers who had arrived in these islands as the glaciers retreated in the Mesolithic period. Yet the Celtic languages are not of such great age.

Fortunately for those struggling to explain this contradiction, the tide is turning in this new millennium. Migration has returned to the menu of archaeological

4. The Battersea or Wandsworth Shield, 350-50 BC, bronze and glass, found in the River Thames at Battersea Bridge, London. H. 77.7cm. W. 35.7cm. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

5. Detail from the Tully Lough Cross, showing a figure intertwined with two gaping sinuous creatures, AD 700-900, wood and bronze, found in Tully Lough, north-west Ireland. H. 1.28cm. © National Museum of Ireland.

6. and 7. Hunterston brooch (back and front), silver, gold and amber, AD 700-800, found at Hunterston, south-west Scotland. D 12.2cm. © National Museums Scotland.



5

explanation. The new thinking is partly a consequence of the wealth of scientific techniques that have become available to archaeologists, to supplement the trusty trowel and notebook. Looming large in this change of direction is ancient DNA.

Extracting DNA from the bones and teeth of people who walked the earth thousands of years ago is no easy task. Early attempts were bedevilled with technical problems. Now a new generation of sequencing techniques has made it possible to obtain far more DNA

from ancient samples and avoid contamination with the DNA of people handling bones. Getting it right is an expensive business. Yet there is no other way of solidly linking a genetic signature to a specific time and place. Many a study has tested the DNA of living people and attempted to work out how present genetic patterns arose.

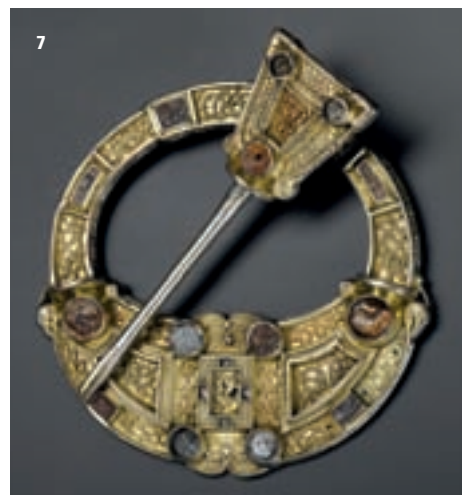
These analyses generally rest on the assumption that a modern population descends from people who lived in the same place long ago. DNA from the long dead has



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DNA test: are you a Celt?

dramatically overturned such now outdated notions.

One recent study after another has made headlines. We now know that Europeans are not overwhelmingly descended from the hunter-gatherers who roamed its territory in the distant past. Farmers who arrived later from the Near East made a massive contribution to the modern European gene pool. However, the discovery of another wave across the continent in the Copper Age is more important for our understanding of the Celts.

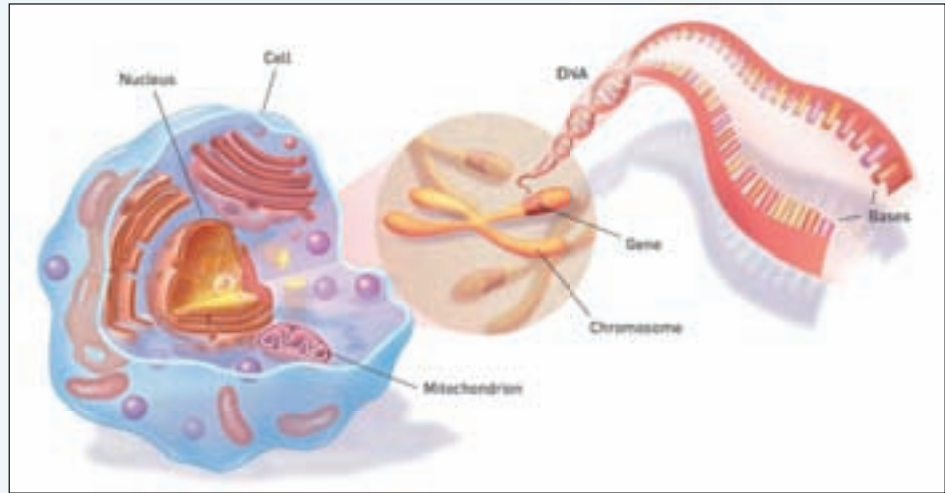
Celtic, like Germanic, is a branch of a broader linguistic family known as Indo-European. It has long been supposed that the homeland of the family was the European steppe. Now we have ancient DNA which shows the arrival on the eastern fringe of Europe of a genetic signature from central Asia. Although it was brought by hunter-gatherers before 5000 BC, it travelled across Europe in the Copper Age.

Crucially it has been found in the mobile, horse-loving, wagon-driving Yamnaya culture of the European steppe, and in two successor cultures, Bell Beaker and Corded Ware, which between them stretched across Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals. It has long been suspected that these cultures carried the European branches of Indo-European.

The genetic signature of the newcomers can be seen across the full genome. Its most straightforward manifestation though is in the Y-chromosome carried only by men. A Y-DNA haplogroup known as R1 dominates Europe today. R1a is most common in the east and R1b in the west (*see diagram, right*). When modern DNA was all that geneticists had available, most assumed that this pattern must be ancient in Europe.

So, for example, when they found the British Isles full of Y-DNA R1b, they thought this had arrived from Iberia as the glaciers shrank about 11,600 years ago. Now that we have ancient DNA, we can see that R1b is much younger in Europe. The earliest sample of it found so far comes from a man who died around 5600 BC in the Sok River region in Russia.

While R1a dominates Corded Ware samples, R1b seems to be the signature of Bell Beaker. So far all the published Bell Beaker DNA results are from Central Europe. One Bell Beaker man buried at Quedlinburg



Inside the nucleus of each cell in your body lies the code that made you. Within the nucleus are 23 pairs of chromosomes, each formed of long spirals of DNA. The code is written in the sequence of just four nitrogenous bases. Also inside the cell, but outside the nucleus are mitochondria, which have their own DNA.

A growing number of people want to trace their ancestry through DNA. They are often enticed by claims that a test will show whether they are Celtic or Viking, Saxon or Roman. These may be offered in good faith, but human population genetics is a young and fast-moving science and it is hard for firms to keep pace with sometimes radical changes in thinking. Discoveries in recent years from ancient DNA have overturned many assumptions based solely on the DNA in living people.

What can we really find out from a DNA test? The potential is enormous. In the nucleus of each cell in your body are 23 pairs of chromosomes, which house the DNA code for the creation of you; 22 of them are gender neutral. They are formed from a mixture of the DNA of your parents. Unless you have an identical sibling, that mixture will be unique. Yet you will have enough in common even with distant cousins for relationships to be detected. Some DNA testing companies capitalise on this potential by offering genome-wide tests, which enable customers to find matches within their database. That depends on distant relatives of yours having tested with the same firm. So the larger their customer database, the more likely you are to be lucky.

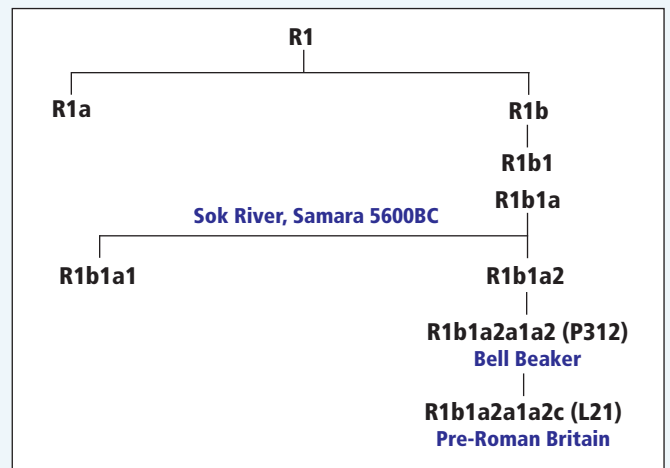
Even if you do not find matches, all is not lost. Such firms may also offer to compare

your genome-wide DNA to that of sample populations from across the world. One of the largest of such companies is 23andMe, with over a million customers. Their world samples include one from the British Isles. The accompanying text tells their customers that '*Today the people of the islands of Great Britain and Ireland descend from Celtic, Saxon, and Viking ancestors.*' This approach is honest and realistic. No modern nation can be 100 per cent Celtic.

However, there is a specific test for males that could be revealing. The 23rd pair of chromosomes determine whether you are male or female: two X chromosomes make a female, while X and Y make a male. The Y chromosome is passed down from father to son. So males carry within them evidence of

their direct male line through the ages from their father to paternal grandfather and so on to the common male ancestor of all humankind.

If the replication process were flawless, the Y-DNA of modern men would be exactly the same as that so distant ancestor. Fortunately for tracking ancestry, replication errors occur. If a mutation happened in your grandfather, then his sons and his son's sons will carry it. Your grandfather would also carry mutations that occurred in his ancestors in the direct male line. Put together, all these mutations are called a haplogroup. By comparing many haplogroups, geneticists can determine the sequence of mutations, and fit together a Y-DNA 'family tree' or phylogeny. Naturally this only provides clues to one out of the huge number of a man's ancestors.



A selective Y-DNA phylogeny, showing the relationship of the European haplogroups mentioned in the text.

in Germany belonged to haplogroup R1b1a2a1a2 (P312). This is the direct ancestor of the R1b1a2a1a2c (L21) carried by two pre-Roman men from Hinxton in Cambridgeshire. Indeed R1b1a2a1a2 is ancestral to all the most common varieties of R1b found today in territories formerly Celtic speaking.

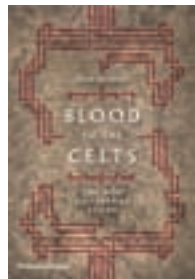
These discoveries strengthen the hand of those archaeologists who favour the Bell Beaker culture as the vector for Celtic languages. This is not a new notion. It was proposed by the Celticist Henri Hubert in 1934. It was eclipsed by the clamour to see the Celts as an Iron Age phenomenon, and then sunk by the tide of immobilism.

Its revival seems timely. Yet is it really that simple? Bell Beaker and R1b1a2a1a2 appear across the whole territorial range where we later find Celtic spoken, but also in places in Italy where the Italic languages appear in historic times. Early Bell Beaker people could have spoken an ancestor to both language families.

Nor should we imagine people arriving in the British Isles with their bell-shaped pots, followed by a stagnant gene pool until the Roman conquest. Wessex Archaeology found migrants at the Bronze Age site of Cliffs End, Thanet, Kent. Isotope evidence revealed that some buried there had come from the western Mediterranean or Scandinavia.

The flow of objects and styles from Gaul to Britain in the Iron Age seems reflected in linguistic changes. Criss-crossing between Ireland and Britain adds another layer of complications. The story of the Celts is rich and complex. ■

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Blood of the Celts by Jean Manco is published by Thames & Hudson (rrp £18.95) but readers of *Minerva* can buy it at the

special price of £14.95 including UK mainland delivery (cost of overseas delivery available on request). Please call our distributor Littlehampton Book Services on 01903 828503, quoting 'TH267'. This offer is subject to availability and runs until 31 March 2016.



CELTS: Art and Identity

Opening at the British Museum on 24 September is a major exhibition entitled *Celts: Art and Identity*. A collaboration between the British Museum and the National Museums Scotland, this is the first show to tell this story for 40 years. But exactly who the Celts were and where they came from is still open to debate. One thing is sure though: they are not a single people who can be traced through time till today. The idea of being a Celt, or Celtic, has become embellished by myths and legends and obscured by romantic notions.

Nevertheless the rare beauty of the artworks on show, lent from 16 UK and 10 international institutions and collections, show that whoever the Celts were their metalworking skills are of the highest order. Visitors will be stunned by their intricately wrought jewellery, such as the Hunterston brooch from Scotland, their decorated weapons, like the Battersea or Wandsworth Shield, dredged from the River Thames in 1849, and highly stylised religious objects, such as

the Tully Cross from Ireland – all of which display a high degree of technological skill and sophistication of design.

Some of the works, such as the magnificent decorated silver Gundestrup Cauldron on loan from the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, will be familiar to visitors but other exhibits will be less well-known. These include a hoard of stunning gold torcs found at Blair Drummond in Stirling in 2009 by a metal detectorist on his first outing.

The name 'Celts' fell out of use after the Roman period only to be rediscovered during the Renaissance. From the 16th century onwards it became a catch-all phrase used when referring to practically any of the pre-Roman peoples of Western Europe. In the early 18th century the languages of Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Cornwall, Brittany and the Isle of Man were all labelled Celtic, a

word that went on to be adopted by many minority groups seeking political or cultural autonomy. First used by the ancient Greeks as a way of referring to outsiders, the word 'Celtic' was now proudly embraced when expressing a sense of shared ancestry and heritage.

Interwoven with this, during the 19th and 20th centuries, the Celtic Revival movement re-imagined, reinvented and romanticised the Celts, their culture and religion. The best-known manifestation of this was the Irish Literary Revival, known as the Celtic Twilight, in which WB Yeats, Lady Gregory and AE Russell featured. In art and design interwoven, snaking patterns and spiral motifs evoked the Celtic mood and Druids clutching bunches of mistletoe emerged from groves of oak trees. But this is a long way from who the Celts really were.

• *Celts: Art and Identity* is on show at the British Museum (+44 (0) 20 7323 8181; britishmuseum.org/celts) from 24 September until

31 January 2016. Booking is strongly recommended. After that *Celts: Art and Identity* will move to the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh (www.nms.ac.uk) where it will be on show from 10 March to 25 September 2016. The accompanying catalogue, edited by Julia Farley and Fraser Hunter, is published by British Museum Press at £40 (hardback), £25 (paperback).

1. Detail from the Gundestrup Cauldron, silver, 100 BC-AD 1, Gundestrup, northern Denmark. © The National Museum of Denmark.

2. The Desborough mirror, bronze, 50 BC-AD 50, Desborough, Northamptonshire, England. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

