



CELTOGENESIS

In an article for *Carn* (periodical of the Celtic League), I critiqued what I called 'celtophobia'. By this, I meant the efforts made, principally through certain kinds of journalism, to deflate or discredit celticism, particularly in Ireland, by citing recent archaeological and archaeogenetical research. This research seemed to indicate that Gaelic Ireland was not the result of immigration by Celtic people from the continent sometime in the first millennium BCE, contrary to what had been taught up to university level for decades previously.

Instead, it was suggested that Ireland could thus only have become Gaelic-speaking due to trading and cultural contacts rather than population movement between the continent and the island. I expressed caution about relying on some of the research and conclusions derived therefrom. In any event, even if the conclusions were correct, the implication that we cannot therefore be regarded as truly Celtic is a *non sequitur* if one's identity depends on culture rather than blood,

however that culture came about. In other words, is one a culturalist or a racist?

The journalism in question was inspired by an academic tendency which was itself dubbed 'celtoscepticism'. Scepticism, as distinct from cynicism, is a healthy state of mind whereby one doubts and tests everything in the hope of eventually arriving at better judgements. From the 1990s onwards in particular, academics from various disciplines contributed to celtoscepticism, and the debate is ongoing. The archaeologists insisted that there was no serious material evidence of Celtic immigration and the archaeogeneticists informed that the population of Ireland had not changed substantially in its genetic character at least since the Bronze Age.

While there are many journalists who have an admirable sense of balance, there are those who are either tempted by sensationalist exaggeration or motivated by a political agenda. In the latter instance, there are quite a number of an anti-

nationalist bent to be found in both Britain and Ireland. Both of these are the types who drew on celtoscepticism in order to give rise to celtophobia, which was characterized mainly by portrayal of celticism as bogus and baseless. However, it also has to be said that some of the academics, mainly English as it happens, are not altogether untainted at times by celtophobia as well. Moreover, there is the coincidence of celtoscepticism and celtophobia with the resurgence of Celtic nationalism as a threat to the present United Kingdom.

In my *Carn* article, I implied that Ireland may in fact have become Gaelic, not through any massive population movement at one juncture, but consequent on a degree of what the archaeologists call 'elite takeover' and consequent 'elite dominance'. That is to say that, perhaps, only a small number of Celtic warrior chiefs and their bands came to Ireland over a period and gradually achieved ascendancy over the native population in both governance and language.

This could have been due to superior military technology or a more sophisticated culture or both. Also, Ireland was probably sparsely populated at the time and so no great demographic disturbance might have been involved. Elite dominance also often leads to recruitment of already existing local elites and their clients in turn, all of which leads to a new language spread and new language model to be aspired to by everyone.

This would be in contrast to extensive elite dominance owing to actual invasion and pervasive hegemony as with the Romans in Gaul. Incursive rather than invasional elite dominance is what is increasingly held to have happened in Anglo-Saxon Britain where archaeogenetics shows the modern English to have on average only about 10% traces of Germanic or Scandinavian genetic inheritance.

If a similar process occurred in Ireland with incursions of small Celtic bands, no great change in genetic composition would have been involved and archaeological traces of intrusion might be quite slender. But the archaeologists are maintaining that there should still have been some traces of even this limited phenomenon which have not been found either. This point is made by them in view of the fact that dominant elites, being by definition aristocratic, are inclined to leave identifiable and prestigious, even if not numerous, indications of their presence.

(But one must also note here that a recent study by Stephen Oppenheimer argues that what happened in England was not entirely invasional elite dominance by Anglo-Saxons as there was an already not insignificant teutonic presence from previously unattested prehistoric immigrations.)



There is yet another hypothesis that lies between mass migration and elite dominance, and that is phased familial entry. In other words, over a long period, Celtic families may have trickled into Ireland and it is families that are more likely to foster language change through their children, and their influence in turn, rather than change coming from warrior elites. By contrast, we know that Viking and Norman warrior elites, especially when they intermarried with the natives, became 'more Irish than the Irish' and ended up, along with their offspring, speaking Irish rather than Nordic or English.

It could also be postulated that familial intrusions would be less likely to generate distinctive archaeological remains, especially if the families were not of aristocratic status and had no problem in adopting the material culture which was already there in Ireland. But it is still a big ask to have us accept that even that process could have led to Gaelic becoming the exclusive language of Ireland over two millennia ago, especially as linguistic

assimilation rather than language dissemination is more likely to occur in the case of immigrants of a lower social ranking.

It has to be said that, as archaeological work is intensified, still without material traces of any sort of notable Celtic immigration coming to light, and archaeogenetical technique continues to be developed, additionally underlining the assessment of genetical constancy in Ireland since the Bronze Age, further questions have been posed about even incursionary elite dominance or gradual familial entry as possible explanations for the emergence of Gaelic Ireland. And, pace archaeologists, between their approach and that of archaeogenetics, the latter carries more weight. That is because the archaeological case against Celtic immigration rests on negative data, i.e. absence of evidence which does not necessarily mean evidence of absence. Archaeogenetics, on the other hand, has more to do with scientifically establishing continuity or change in population genes, albeit depending upon adequate sampling and comparative criteria.

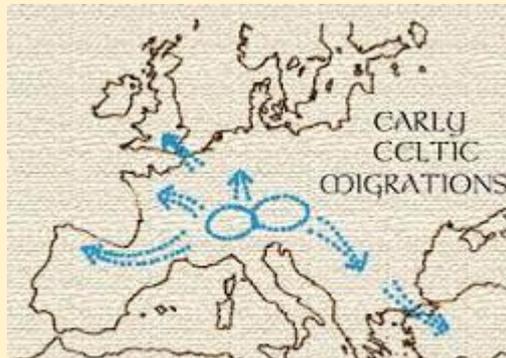
And the argument of language substitution due to imported acculturation by way of maritime contact in a prehistoric context, rather than population movement of any significant kind, continues to have least credibility.

Apart from the hypotheses of imported acculturation, elite dominance and familial entry, there is another one that has been gaining ground over the past decade. And that is what might be termed the 'Atlantoceltic' hypothesis.

This hypothesis is not just about how Ireland came to be Celtic, but also about how the Celts emerged in the first place. In

other words, it is about celtogenesis and is truly revolutionary in that it virtually inverts the traditional hypothesis for this. In place of Celts being held to originate centrally or elsewhere on inland Europe and spreading out from there, it is maintained that they first arose from Indo-European speaking peoples present from the Bronze Age in a western Atlantic zone. That zone, of which Ireland was a part, comprised the coasts and their offshore islands and hinterlands from Scotland to Iberia. And it has been averred that perhaps the seeds of proto-Celtic were sewn in the latter where Q-Celtic persisted until the demise of Celtic languages in the peninsula. The formation of proto-Celtic in the zone is also perceived as possibly having been enhanced through the need for a lingua franca among the peoples in question, given their local Indo-European dialects, and owing to intensive trade and other interactions.

A modification of the hypothesis suggests that proto-Celtic might have not only started in Iberia, and also have developed and matured there, before spreading linguistically up the coasts and out to Ireland and Britain.



Traditional Migration Thesis

However, given the level of maritime interconnection within the zone concerned, a more all-round type of evolution ought to be considered, whatever about a possibly Iberian initial stimulus. John T Koch has

cautioned against a simplistic 'Out of Iberia' theory and, while the originating data so far tends to derive mainly from Iberia, he indicates that proto-Celtic probably involved a general linguistic interaction of western Indo-European with western Palaeo-European on the Atlantic coasts and in their hinterlands and, moreover, there might have been more than one proto-Celtic to begin with. Furthermore, there is now an increasing tendency, when examining the ancient world, to think in some regions not

alone of territory, but also 'maritory', whereby people are seen as bound together not just by land, but decidedly interlinked by sea. Such a maritory, about 2000 years ago, could well have amounted to an Atlantic Celtica, i.e. a socio-cultural area with a basic language of its own. Such a maritory could also have significantly been brought into being by the Bronze Age, taking account of the location of copper and tin deposits within Atlantic Celtica and the corresponding interactive needs for extraction and exchange.

In time, proto-Celtic led on to the language which came to be known as Q-Celtic. According to one theory, this may have then spread from the Atlantic zone eastwards through riverine networks towards central Europe. And, in the course of this, coming into contact with other languages, particularly non-Roman Italic, Q-Celtic was modified in certain areas into P-Celtic. This then gradually spread back westwards, probably inspired to an extent by an influential Hallstatt-LaTène cultural core, and perhaps with some intraceltic demic movement, such as between the continent and Britain. Eventually P-Celtic included most of Britain, but not the more peripheral island of Ireland, while Iberia also remained pristine behind its Aquitanian wall. Another theory is that Celtic morphed into an innovative P bloc in some places, with Q-Celtic simply enduring in peripheral regions in Ireland and Iberia respectively. In fact, both processes may have been taken place, to one extent or another.

Over time, both Q- and P-Celtic further diversified into a number of discrete Celtic languages. (It was Irish Gaelic intrusion later into western Scotland and the Isle of Man in the 6th century CE that finally established Q-Celtic there.)

The Celts also went on to expand in the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE from central Europe, southwards and eastwards, as well documented by the Romans and Greeks, recording events such as the sacking of Rome in 390 BCE and Delphi in 279 BCE. In the subsequent years, they moved on to their furthestmost destination in Anatolia, manifesting themselves there as Galatia.

As for the Hallstatt and La Tène cultures just referred to, these congealed in central Europe from around 700-500 BCE and their craft and artistic influences radiated afar - north, south, east and west. The furthest west was Ireland and, not surprisingly, this phenomenon was least impactful there, given the distance involved and the time it took for it to reach the island. Nonetheless, the effect on Gaelic art became obvious in works such as the Book of Kells.

Finally, it should be said that the Atlantoceltic hypothesis is not just one of default for explaining the gaelicisation of Ireland, as it more and more possesses archaeological, archaeogenetical and linguistical evidence in its own right throughout the Atlant-ic peripheral zone concerned.

The difficulty with any hypothesis for celto-genesis is getting archaeologists, philologists and archaeo-geneticists all to agree on it. This has yet to be achieved, apart from the fact that they often do not even concur within their own disciplines on the origin of the Celts. What is agreed is that Celtic was one of the early offshoots of Indo-European, along with the other main ones then developing as Balto-Slavic, Germanic and Italic. The issue is in what location or zone and among what peoples Celtic emerged. And, if the hibernocentric challenge is to explain how Ireland became Gaelic in the absence of substantial inward



Revised Celts from the West Thesis

migration since the Bronze Age, then the Atlantoceltic hypothesis proves to be probably the most credible of the lot to date.

In other words, the problem up to now in getting the right answer may arise from the classic shortcoming of not asking the right question. Why does it always have to be assumed that Celtic grew out of Indo-European just on the continent and then spread directly, or maybe to some extent indirectly through Britain to Ireland, or alternatively otherwise through Ireland to Britain? Why could it not have grown out of an Atlantic Indo-European bloc inclusive of Ireland and Britain? That is what the Atlantoceltic hypothesis points to. The tendency to think otherwise may be just anachronistic in that we are imposing our modern sense of jurisdictional boundaries on prehistory and failing to identify an ancient cultural bloc consisting of areas interconnected rather than separated by the main means of communication at the time, namely water. Of course, there may have been some demic movement within this bloc, but that is far from the intrusion of a different culture into Ireland as painted by earlier historians.

If the Atlantoceltic hypothesis is upheld in the years to come with further investigation and research, it could be seen as rendering Ireland more Celtic than ever! Because the answer to the question of 'Did the Celts come to Ireland?' would indeed be 'No'. And that is because the Celts would be seen to have come from Ireland - as well as, of course, from elsewhere on and offshore the main west European littoral, thus including the five other Celtic areas in existence today.

However, at the end of all, it does not really matter in principle to modern lay, as distinct from academic, celticists in Ireland which hypothesis is correct or whether none can ever be proved and if we are permanently left with a question mark. What is not

questionable is that Gaelic and Celtic Ireland has existed, to one extent or another, for over two thousand years and that is the historical bedrock on which Irish celticism rests.

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh, May 2021

References

For 'gradual familial entry', refer to Donnchadh Ó Corráin quoted in *In Search of Ancient Ireland*, C McCaffrey & L Eaton (2002). Also refer, relatedly, to Patrick Sims-Williams *An Alternative to 'Celtic from the East' and 'Celtic from the West'* (2020) in 'Cambridge Archaeological Journal 30:3'.

The Atlantoceltic hypothesis was foreshadowed quite early on by Abercromby (1912), subsequently by Crawford, Loth and Hubert, and then more latterly by such as Myles Dillon (in *The Celtic Realms*, 1967) and by Colin Renfrew (*Archaeology and Language*, 1987), albeit different precise junctures were variously cited for its manifestation. The hypothesis has been developed more recently in interdisciplinary detail by John T Koch and Barry Cunliffe (in the *Celtic from the West* book series 2010-21). It has since been accepted by a number of other academics in the relevant fields

Archaeogenetical technique (or aDNA method) and up to date conclusions therefrom can be assessed in: *Multiple Genetic Markers & Celtic Origins of the Atlantic Facade of Europe* (2004), Brian McEvoy et al; *Neolithic & Bronze Age Migration to Ireland* (2015), Lara M Casey et al; and *The Irish DNA Atlas* (2017), Edmund Gilbert et al. Also relevant are: *The Beaker Phenomenon & the Genomic Transformation of N Western Europe* (2018), Iñigo Olalde et al; and David Reich's *Who We Are And How We Got Here* (2018). However, while the DNA approach is located in the 'hard' sciences, its application in archaeo-investigation has neither been a matter of consensus over the years in the genetic field, although the contrast between the earlier and later efforts means that the latter, cited here, should of course be more relied on.

In any event, the Iron Age 'Celts from Central Europe' thesis now seems to have been effectively debunked, whatever alternative explanation is adopted. McEvoy puts it in a nutshell: "What seems clear is that neither the mtDNA pattern nor that of the chromosome markers supports a substantially central European Iron Age origin for most Celtic speakers - or former Celtic speakers - of the Atlantic facade. The affinities of the areas where Celtic languages are spoken - or were formerly spoken - are generally with other regions in the Atlantic zone from northern Spain to northern Britain."