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"Celts" and "Celtic" as valid as labels for the British and Continental Iron Ages?

"Celtas" como um rótulo válido para as Idades do Ferro Britânica e Continental?

Abstract:
This study aims at making some consideration on the validity of using the terms Celts and Celtic to discuss, think and work with the people that inhabited continental Europe and the British Isles during the Iron Age. We shall give special attention to the production regarding the matter during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and classical sources from the first century b.C.E.

Keywords:
Celts; Iron Age; Identity.

Resumo:
Este estudo propõe realizar uma reflexão acerca da utilização do termo Celta enquanto um rótulo válido para discutirmos, pensarmos e trabalharmos com os povos que habitavam a Europa continental e as ilhas Britânicas durante a Idade do Ferro. Daremos atenção em especial para a produção dos séculos XIX e XX acerca do assunto e as fontes documentais do século I a.E.C.

Palavras-Chave:
Celtas; Idade do Ferro; Identidade.

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Since the nineteenth century, it has been generally established that the terms "Celts" and "Celtic" described a group of people that lived in Central Europe in the period between the eighth century b.C.E. and the Roman conquest, with especial emphasis on the La Tène period (c. 450 BC onwards). Those people – The Celts – had their own way of understanding the world – both physical and spiritual – that surrounded them and expressed themselves both artistic and linguistically in a particular manner or, to simply put, the "Celts" had a "Celtic" culture, religion and language – elements all intrinsically related and constituting of an ethnic group. This perception has dominated much of the following academic studies until the late twentieth century being, still, a very vivid image in popular culture.

As many authors have demonstrated – and which we shall discuss in this study –, behind the basic idea presented there lay some very important issues that will be assessed in an effort to, first, de-construct the (mis)conceptions of who were the Celts and in what consists being "Celtic" and, secondly, to present a valid framework for using the terms. Our aim here is then, to make a brief assessment of various ways throughout Celts and Celtic have been thought and propose a different approach to the problem.

1. De-constructing the Celtic Past

A discussion relating to definition of a "Celtic" ethnic group is particularly complex for three separate categories of sources need to be considered: the classical literature, the material culture and the linguistic evidence. Each one of them represents specific problems that can be easily illustrated: on the one hand, the only written accounts we have about the Celts were produced by observers[2] from a different culture – Greeks and Romans – and thus, it may suggest, in fact, not much more than the biased attitudes of classical writers towards the "barbaric others" instead of any description based on specific knowledge of these peoples (Piggott, 1975). On the other hand, archaeological studies of material culture reveal not to be an easy operation to attribute artifacts to determined people, and the limits while interpreting archaeological findings are also put into question (Morwood 1975; Gowlett 1997). Through this section we shall focus more in
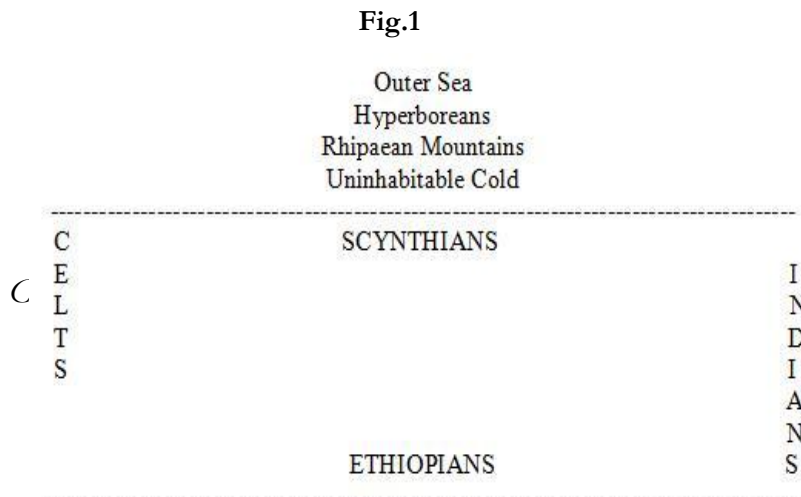
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[2] Though not necessarily in the literal sense, since great part of authors didn't have first hand contact with the peoples they describe.

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depth in the problems presented by these categories, specifically relating them to the Celts and the nineteenth/twentieth century views on the subject.

1.1. Under the Classical Eye: (work on this)

As Patrick J. Geary (2005: 177) has demonstrated, to the ancient authors of the classical world, people were understood better as territorial units, geopolitical organizations and not social and cultural groups. On this subject, we find Canon Rawlinson's (1877) study which shows that, for instance, to Strabo, Pliny and Tacitus the division made between Germans and Gauls is made following the course of the river Rhine, determining that all the people on the east side are Germanic. Even in Caesar's classical division of the three Gauls we can observe the physical boundaries for each people: "Gauls are separated from the Aquitanians through the river Garonne, from the Belgae through the rivers Marne and Seine" (*De Bello Gallico*, 1,1; Trans. Edwards 2004), and the same division can be found in the work of Strabo (*Geografia,* 4, I.1; Trans. Jones 2006).

It has also been agued by Geary (2005: 65) a characteristic of the roman writers that, always preferring order to ambiguity, desired that different people were clearly delimited. Taking Pliny, the elder as an example, we can show how he was especially interested in classifying people according to the territory: to Pliny, all of those who lived above the Danube were Scythians, independently if those people called themselves in that manner (*Hist. Nat.* VI. 19.1). In fact, Malcolm Chapman (1992: 35-36) points exactly to the problem of considering people geographically, when he elaborates on the "quadripartite ethnic structure of the world beyond Greece", in which the space is constructed through a very symbolical orientation to the degree in which spatial symmetry leads to ethnic differentiation rather than any other element. According to this model (**Fig.1**), we would find an ethnic label to each of the four quadrants: north-west (Celts), north-east (Scythians), south-west (Ethiopians) and south-east (Persians).

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Fig.1

Outer Sea
Hyperboreans
Rhipaean Mountains
Uninhabitable Cold

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         -----------------------------------------------------
C    |                    SCYNTHIANS                        |   I
E    |                                                      |   N
L  C |                                                      |   D
T    |                                                      |   I
S    |                                                      |   A
     |                                                      |   N
     |                    ETHIOPIANS                        |   S
         -----------------------------------------------------
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(Image taken from CHAPMAN, M. 1992.)

The word "Celt" in itself is also very problematic, as Chapman (1992:129-139) shows that it first appeared in its greek form *Keltoi*, in the fifth century b.C.E, and would denote nothing more than "barbarians living to the north and west of the known and … civilized world" hence, at that time, completely lacking any kind ethnographical meaning.

1. 2. La Tène Material Culture

La Tène is an archaeological site located in the north-west region of the Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland, identified in 1857 and explored until 1917. The objects found in this site, which gave its name to the whole artistic style and motif that is found through great parts of Europe, has been connected to the Celts, although many studies have now come to revise this conception that was one of the most solid pillars of "Celtic ethnicity".

The association between Celts and the La Tène Art is argued (Collis, 2003; Cunliffe, 1997; James, 1999) to be founded over linguists and archaeologists misconceptions of the relation between peoples and material culture. In the British Isles, Augustus Frank proposed that the La Tène objects found in rivers Thames and Witham could only be Celtic since they were not Roman, Saxon or Viking – despite this dubious process of exclusion, it is also important to notice

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that this Celtic conclusion was only possible due to fact that the Celts had been identified as insular inhabitants (among Saxons and Vikings) solely due to the now quite discredited "craniology"[3] studies. Although Craniology has no longer taken any serious part on scientific studies, its conclusions are still cornerstones of some of the theories on Celtic identity.

On the continent, around the same time, and specially due to French and Swiss academics Gabriel de Mortillet and Émile Desor, it was forged the link between La Tène and Celts by concluding that the La Tène style of artifacts found at an archeological site (Marzabotto), could only be the result of Celtic craftsman. This conclusion whoever was fruit of another misconception, this time instigated by the recent power of Indo-European linguistic theory now applied to the formation of ethnicity, that is, a conclusion that was derived from the idea that spreading of culture, artistic style – as well as language - could only be explained through migration of peoples, not considering other methods, such as economic trade.

Consequently, through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries we can observe that several academics basing themselves in the work of others, without truly reassessing their premises, ended up by perpetuating myths that, by being said innumerous times, gained the strength of becoming *facts*.

Most recently, Simon James (1999) and Collis (2003) sustained, however, that even more specifically to the British Isles the connection between La Tène and Celtic was fragile: a study of the insular "La Tène" artistic style actually points towards local/ regional reinterpretation and inspiration drawn from the continent. This means that far from being a simple copy of continental motifs, or even as sign of a shared identity, it is, actually more indicative of the importance of local identity over any type of cross-channel connection. Further in this matter James (1999: 92) proposes the possibility that instead of being a symbol of a ethnicity, the inspiration on continental La Tène style was, in fact, stressing a social differentiation between an ascending élite and the other classes, being then a matter of status rather than identity.

Notwithstanding these critics, it is not on our behalf to deny the relation between the Celts and La Tène material culture, but what is actually being

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[3] Studies of skulls that led, during the nineteenth century, to the belief that a change in their shape configured in a change of races inhabiting determined area.

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criticized is the idea that it is an artistic style which had its origins and is only related to the Celts.

1. 3. Language as Ethnic Signifier

By the end of the eighteenth century, Sir William Jones, following a tradition of linguistic studies that dated from the sixteenth century – with the important contributions of Paul Yves-Pezron and Edward Lhuyd – suggested that languages as Celtic, Goth, Sanskrit and Ancient Persian could all be part of the same family and, from this idea, Augustus Scheilecher, in the XIX century developed the theory about the existence of an Indo-European idiom, from which great part of European languages had evolved (Collis, 2003).

The forms through which these languages came to differentiate themselves will not be addressed in this study, what is important is that, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was thought that at the same time in which was occurring this language differentiation, a similar ethnic process was taking place, in such way that, each nation/ethnic group could be defined by the language its peoples spoke so, for instance, Greeks were the ones that spoke Greek language (Collis, 2003: 48).

The issues towards nationalism and the birth of the State-Nation, as background to the development of linguistic theories, cannot be dismissed. Erick Hobsbawm (1990: 34) points out that the adoption of determined idiom ended up being the condition for plain citizenship in countries such France and USA and, as shows the author, in 1860, the German philologist Richard Böck would argue that "the language was the only adequate indicator of nationality".

Hence, due to these concepts, we believe that analysis on the Celts and the Celtic past of Europe suffered from an anachronism: that is trying to find in Antiquity ideas that were essentially modern.

There is still, at least, one major problem in considering the equivalence of an ethnic group to a linguistic group as Collis (2003) argues, that as we mention before, is to see the diffusion of a language in the molds of migrating movements of people, when, at least in what concerns the Celts, explains Chadwick (1997: 28):

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"…the 'celticization' of the west does not need the mechanisms of invasion or migration, beloved of nineteenth-century archeologists, to explain it: the processes of cultural interaction accompanying the imperative of trade were far more subtle".

It should also be considered the idea that, in the regions with dominance of Celtic language, it is quite possible that other people could adopt it and start to use as their own without it necessarily interfering with others elements of social life or even with their own ethnic identity. In fact, from the hypothesis that have been suggested, we believe that the one sustained by Chadwick (1997) and also by Cunliffe (1997) to be quite plausible: as archaeological evidence shows, an intense commerce of goods circulated throughout Europe converging and also spreading privilegedly through the space occupied by the Hallstatt Chiefdoms, where the Celtic language was crystallizing itself. Therefore is a reasonable assumption that the Celtic idiom may have been used as "*lingua franca*" (Chadwick, 1997: 27) accompanying the flux of products and technology in central Europe. It is also interesting to observe that, when we try to put together these different evidences, such as considering the La Tène style relation to the idea of language as ethnic signifier, we find a problem, "Why do Germanic speakers in Denmark, and Iberian speakers in the Languedoc and Catalonia, adopt La Tène art and artefacts types when Celtic-speaking Celtiberians did not?" (Collis, 2003: 218)

This question certainly illustrates the incoherencies that appear when a critical analysis of the traditional idea of the Celts is taken to task and which the conclusion is not, at all, reassuring of its premises.

From all the problems that I have raised until this point, it is possible to see that the three elements that are traditionally used to define the Celts: language, material culture and classical sources, are far from being peaceful concepts to be adopted, that can be used to corroborate an idea of Celtic identity, but are rather problematic and imprecise. As we can see in **table 1**, some examples of the problem occurring when we try to put all the different available "sources" for Celtic identity:

Table 1: Organizing Evidences for Celtic Identity

Classical Literature	Language/Linguistic Evidence	La Tène Style	Examples:
X	X	X	Gaul (Modern France)

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			Iberian Peninsula
X	X		Iberian Peninsula
	X	X	Ireland
	X	X	Britain
		X	Denmark/Germany/Ukraine
X	X		Turkey

As we have seen, in the classical literature we find Romans and Greeks authors pointing specifically for Celts in Gaul and the Iberian Peninsula but they are never found in description of the people that lived in Ireland or in Britain. The linguistic evidence, either that of toponyms or presence of language being spoken, is much more spread – perhaps due to cultural contact and economic trade –, whereas the La Tène Style is a bit lacking where, at least according to traditional thinking, it should be abundant at the same time it is present where certainly, it should not – such as Denmark and Germany.

In this point of view, the terms Celt and Celtic cannot be, as we see, of any aid to understand Iron Age, either in the continent or in the British Isles for, the premise of an art style that would be first and foremost Celtic does not sustain itself and can be arguably said that Celtic-Speakers may not be necessarily Celtic – or simply there are no Celts, for no ethnic group as thought by the nineteenth century scholars was coherently presented. There are two conclusions expressed by Collis (2003: 224) with which we concur and summarize much of the ideas presented so far and with which we shall end the first part of this study:

> "In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century it was assumed that archaeological "cultures" or "culture groups" can be defined in terms of styles of dress, art, burial rites, house types, pottery, etc., and that these cultures can be correlated with ancient peoples; however, these definitions are often arbitrary, and a correlation with ancient ethnic group cannot be assumed, indeed it is very often wrong."

> "… Races were thought to have characteristic features such as religion, social structure, language, etc. This leads to racial stereotyping and the idea that different sources from different times can be collated to define a 'Celtic Culture' the concept of the 'timeless Celt', an idea that still pervades most general books on the Celts."

2. In Search of the Celts

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We believe now is the moment to contribute with some alternatives concerning the problem of Celtic ethnicity and suggest a framework in which Celts could be a valid term to refer to a group of people during the Late Iron Age.

Currently, it is argued (Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart 1998) that ethnicity is better understood not through static aspects – as such those being shown until the moment – but, on the contrary, on its dynamic ones: the endogenous and exogenous groups identification, the problem of boundaries which is the base for the dichotomization between "Us" and "Them", as well as the usage of identity symbols that found the belief in a common origin and the emphasis of these characteristics in social interaction.

With this perspective in mind, it is possible to understand Chapman (1992) and Woodward (Da Silva *et al.* 2007) positions on saying that social relations are organized in a binary opposition – "us" and "them". Hence, when we read about the Celts in classical literature, we are reading about a human grouping that is opposed – as being distinguished from – to being classical, or so to say, being Celt is, first and foremost, being not-Greek and not-Roman. This is important because as historians we need to take positions that begin with examination of our sources and, as we mentioned before, the only written sources we have on Celts are those from Romans and Greeks.

Silva (2007: 76) explains that identities have to be actively produced for they are creatures of the social and cultural world, and concurring with this view, it is possible to see that the classical world is always the active producer and, therefore, as Chapman (1992: 26) states, we have only "half of the terminology", when defining those identities.

The power to define is of extreme significance for it gives, to the classical authors, the privilege of attributing different values to the different social groups, and thus, such fact cannot be left unattended and, as in Silva (2007: 81) words "the power to define the identity and to stress the difference cannot be separated from power's more ample relations. Identity and difference are never innocent."

It is possible to ask then, if being Celt in the classical view is, first and foremost, about not being Greek or Roman, how valid or generalist is the assumption that at any given time there were actually a self-called/self-perceived Celtic people?

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We may start answering that question, again, with the passage made by Caesar in the very beginning of his Commentaries: "Gaul is a whole divided into three parts, one of which is inhabited by the Belgae, another by the Aquitani, and a third by a people called in their own tongue Celtae, in the Latin Galli." (*De Bello Gallico,* 1.1; Trans. Edwards 2007)

Certainly, as referred in the first part of this essay, the boundaries were much more oriented through geographical facts rather than any other aspect, but it is important to notice that boundaries not only existed but were being stressed. In this way, we separate our views from those of Chapman (1992), because, at least, at the time of Caesar, real or imagined, the Celts were being *highly differentiated* from their other "barbaric" neighbors – and not simply being generic labeled.

This fact leads to pondering on the imposing power of exogenous definitions – those being elaborated exteriorly to the group being defined – over an ethnic group and its consequences, as shows the example given by Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart (1998: 144):"The fact of being collectively named, ended up by producing real solidarity between the people that in such way were designated maybe because, as a result of this common denomination, they were collectively the object of a specific treatment".

Although the example given above relates to a twentieth century problem in the USA, we believe the theoretical propositions might be used without great danger to another situation, even though it will always remain solely as a theory.

Based on these concepts, we would argue that, perhaps, it is not wrong to imagine that those human groupings denominated as Celt early in the fifth century BC by Hecateus of Miletus, even if by that time didn't correspond to only one ethnic group, could have become one, in such a manner that, in the first century BC, Julius Caesar and other writers could point them out and, if we dwell deeper in Caesar comments, its also possible to find hints of a Celtic myth of origin, as when he says that it is a druid teaching that all Gauls descend from *Dis Pater*[4] (*Bel. Gal.* VI).

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[4] I will not enter into a extended discussion over *Interpretatio Romana* for it is not the aim of this essay, resting however noted that, certainly the view of a myth based on roman gods and goddess in Celtic society could be misleading, but perhaps, it could be just a sign of what Chapman (1992) and Piggott (1975) refers as bringing to the roman framework concepts that

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It is clear by now, that, through this exposition, we are seconding the usage of the terms Celt and Celtic to describe a very specific group of people in continental Europe, to be more specific in Gaul. In the British Isles, however, the case seems to be very different.

We shall start, as James (1993) states, that there is no mention on the works of the classical world available to us, to the usage of the ethnonym Celt to describe the peoples beyond the channel. In fact, we find the very opposite of it, as in their works, for instance, Julius Caesar (*De Bello Gallico.* 5, 12-15) and Diodorus Siculus (*Library of History.* 5, 20-23) let quite clear that when speaking of the people living in the isles they are not talking about the same people that live in the continent. We may infer from these writings that there were, indeed, much contact between both sides of the channel, but this, by no means, reveals traces of ethnic identity.

James (1999) also comes to the conclusion, which we abide, that the people in the British Isles were not Celts, and in the lack of a better term, should be thought exactly as that: The Peoples from the British Isles. The reasons why James comes to this are many, and some have been addressed in other parts of this study, but there is still a very particular problem that I think should be truly reflected upon: the fact that until the eighteenth century not one insular inhabitant has ever called himself "Celt" and the Celtic past of the British Isles has been constructed ever since that period – either as the search of an ancient pedigree or even as a political or ideological position –, the Celts in Britain only entered the stage much later than the ones described by the classical world (James, 1999: 17).

It may be argued that in the view here presented, classical literature would be seen as the only answer for the problem, discarding other sources of evidence. We disagree. For better or worse, the only source that actually gives any indication of existence of an ethnic group, for this case at least, is the classical literature. While archaeology can present us with various different artifacts and sites, and even glimpses into cultural views of the world of the people that inhabited Europe during Iron Age, it cannot give us the identity of these peoples and, considering specifically La Tène art, it is related to the Celts as much as other

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looked similar to the classical writers – So instead of *Dis Pater* we might think of other God Celtic in nature.

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"yet-to-be-named" groups that expressed their own regional styles through La Tène motifs.

We don't mean to say with this, however, that the classical literature is capable of "giving us the identity" of the Celts by itself, but only that it enables us with much more possibilities to try to disentangle this problem since it allows us to also make a more in depth assessment of the conditions within which the information was elaborated as well as its intended uses which is, on its way, more than archeology or linguistic evidence can afford us.

Conclusion

Through this study we tried to show how problematic it is to assert over ethnic identity, especially in Antiquity, and deconstruct basic ideas on what represented it. An ethnic group is not a timeless, unchangeable, closed, isolated group of people with similar material culture and language; language and artistic motifs could be transported, adopted, changed or even recreated without necessarily representing an adoption of an identity by the peoples who have done it.

Identity rather, is a dynamic construction to which the boundaries are ever changing, according to relation of the "Self" and the "Other" and how it is perceived through the inside and outside of the societies.

Malcolm Chapman elaborates the following question in his work: "Why would the Greeks and Romans Speak about the Celts so frequently, if the Celts were not really there?" (1992: 31), the answer we provide is simple: because they *were* there. Not perhaps, as it is imagined, of a coherent and timeless ethnic group, but as a mass of different people that through the centuries of being object of a common treatment, and through their own endogenous systems of assimilations and differentiation, would appear in late first millennium b.C.E, in Gaul, as a relatively uniform group, to which we may very well use the name Celt, in as much it is possible to classify any group as Roman or Greek.

If we consider the classical sources available on the subject, it is possible to observe that for the ancient writers, the Celts existed in a very easily identifiable manner to the extent that they influenced, in fundamental ways, political, military

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and economical decisions of the Greeks and, specially, the Romans. For instance, even during the first century b.C.E, it was still being told and constituting an integral part of political and military speeches on the Senate, the Celtic attack on Rome and Delphi, that supposedly occurred two centuries before.

To which extent Celt and Celtic are valid labels for the Iron Age Continental Europe and Britain? The terms might be of great aid in understanding the last centuries of the first millennium in Gaul but of less contribution – and probably causing more misconceptions – when used to refer to the British Islands that, instead of trying to be fitted into what became an "umbrella-term", should pay attention for its own regional identities developing there at the period.

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