The Grand 'Celtic' Story?

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Greta Anthoons & Herman Clerinx (eds)

With contributions by

Simon James
Raimund Karl
Lauran Toorians
Claude Sterckx
Nico Roymans

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Introduction – The Grand Celtic Story

- Greta Anthoons

Department of History & Welsh History, University of Wales, Bangor

The splendours of Hallstatt, the princess of Vix, the Waldalgesheim style, Ambiorix and Vercingetorix, the oppidum of the Titelberg, the Battersea shield, Lindow Man, the stories of the Mabinogion, the hill of Tara, Cuchulainn, the Brehon Laws, the Book of Kells … Separated in time and place, can they all be placed within the framework of one "Celtic" metanarrative ? Are they all part of the same grand, all-encompassing story ?

Metanarratives have not been very popular lately. In postmodern times, the tendency has been to replace them by small-scale, local narratives. In this context the rise of Celtoscepticism in the nineties probably came as no surprise and it resulted in a heated debate. One of the advocates of Celtoscepticism was Simon James : "The Celts – it was all just a myth" the Financial Times headlined on 14/15 June 1997 (based on an article by Simon James in *The British Museum Magazine* 28, Summer 1997). James and other British archaeologists protested against the blanket use of the name Celts for people of different periods and from different regions, as this would wrongly suggest that "The Celts" were one coherent people who covered a large part of Europe and whose culture remained static and unchanged from Hallstatt to Tara. Several other archaeologists participated in the debate, but Simon James was one of the few to express his views outside his normal academic habitat. With *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention ?* (1999) he reached a fairly wide public.

In academia the debate was often uneven, as many archaeologists and Celticists were not familiar with the theoretical background on which the Celtosceptics based their arguments. This problem was also recognised by Raimund Karl, who - at the XII. International Congress of Celtic Studies in Aberystwyth (2003) - pleaded for a theoretical foundation of Celtic Studies (*Scale, self-similarity, strange attractors and cultural identities: some more thoughts on a theory for Celtic Studies*). He explained, based on theoretical arguments, why in his opinion there was no reason to abandon the term "Celtic". Later that year he argued that where time and place do matter at the local level, they do much less so at the level of the grand narrative (TAG 2003 – Lampeter : *Does time matter? Similar Iron and Middle Ages and the grand 'Celtic' narrative*).

Time was now ready for a different type of debate, one between two scholars talking the same language and fighting with the same weapons. The idea for *The Grand Celtic Story* was born. To our great delight, both Simon James and Raimund Karl kindly accepted our invitation to come to Brussels. The next step was to involve some local specialists in the debate and to ask them their views on the *Grand Celtic Story*, but this proved to be a much tougher job. Lauran Toorians immediately expressed his interest to participate, but our chairman, Claude Sterckx, needed some more pursuading; his bravery is much appreciated ! The greatest reluctancy, however, came from the side of the archaeologists, who most of them feared that they could not offer any valuable contribution to the discussion. Also Nico Roymans preferred not to enter the debate on the legitimacy of a Celtic metanarrative as such, but the topic that he

suggested was an interesting case study that deserved its place within the wider context of the discussion and was therefore considered a welcome contribution to the success of the conference.

All speakers submitted a paper for this publication. Their paper is not necessarily a verbatim repeat of the paper presented at the conference, but may rather include later thoughts on ideas proposed by other speakers or on issues raised during the discussion.

Simon James starts his paper by explaining how the deconstruction of the Celts came about in Britain. He does not see the need for a metanarrative in Iron Age studies and finds the current situation of several theoretical schools competing with each other much healthier than having one single dominant paradigm. He describes how research was focused on regional studies for a while but how attention is now again turned to the larger scale. The new method of looking for wider patterns across Britain and Ireland and across Europe, meets his approval, because it is built upwards from the primary data and not top-down having to fit a predefined framework, like the "Celtic" metanarrative. For the same reason, he sees no academic need for a new metanarrative. As far as the general public is concerned, the situation is different, because without existing frameworks (like for example the "Grand Celtic Story"), it is difficult for people to know what to do with new pieces of information, to know where new knowledge fits in the picture. He proposes to place such a metanarrative in a larger European setting.

In his paper Simon James also reflects on certain issues that have been raised during the conference, either by another speaker or during the final discussion. In appendix 3, he discusses the movements between 'elite' groups in the La Tène world which led to a "trans-ethnic cultural *koine*, marking not common 'Celticness' but a system of interaction between societies which were in other ways culturally diverse".

Raimund Karl recognises the merits of the Celtosceptics for their share in deconstructing the so-called cultural-historical concept of the Celts, but for him this is no reason to do away with the term "Celtic" altogether. He elaborates on certain points put forward by Simon James, mainly in *The Atlantic Celts*, like the role of self-identity in the definition of "Celtic", and he proposes an alternative for the term "ethnic". Before moving on to the discussion of the metanarrative itself, he presents some general theories on the constitution of societies and the importance of language in this constitution, followed by a case study.

The aim of the case study is to develop a social metanarrative for Iron Age Wales, based on elements from different disciplines which are usually not studied together. The study starts from the evolution of the Welsh settlement pattern, from the early Late Bronze Age onwards. This evolution of the settlement pattern reflects an evolution in social complexity. By combining this evolution with social terminology known from Welsh medieval texts, Raimund Karl aims to construct a metanarrative, where terms like for example the Welsh for "head of a kin" and "king" are used to illustrate an evolution from a kin-based to an early feudal society.

He argues that, seeing that for all the social functions used in his study there are corresponding terms in other "Celtic" languages, a more general version of 'Celtic' social evolution can be developed, which could then be compared with similar trajectories of other western European Indo-European societies or even with anthropological models of social evolution in general. Instead of applying 'top down' models, they could be tested by developing bottom up models starting from the available evidence.

Both speakers agree on the importance of the (archaeological) evidence as a basic starting point, but where Simon James feels that looking for wider patterns is as far as we should go, Raimund Karl thinks that the ultimate purpose should be to develop a metanarrative. In his paper, he mentions multiple reasons why he feels that metanarratives are useful, or even indispensable, not only for the general public but also for academics.

Lauran Toorians focuses on Celtic languages. He explains how the study of Celtic languages developed and he strongly contests the idea living among certain archaeologists that the name "Celtic" when applied to languages was the result of a haphazard choice. In archaeology, however, the label "Celtic" has both an art-historical and an ethnic connotation, this last one connected with the language group to which the object of study is supposed to belong. In his opinion, this is what causes the dispair of the Celtosceptics: the languages spoken in Britain were undeniably Celtic, but the art-historical La Tène picture does not fit. Language and material culture did not stand in a one to one relationship in Iron Age Europe, which would be another reason to stick to the definition of Celts as 'people who speak a Celtic language'.

The paper continues with a discussion of what Celtic Studies can do for archaeologists. The rate of change in languages is connected with political, social and economic developments and as such a two-way traffic between historical linguistics and archaeology should be promoted. Toorians is surprised how little archaeologists are interested in the language that was spoken by the people they are studying, a question that Simon James elaborated in Appendix 2 of his paper. On the other hand, Toorians has strong doubts about the relevance of medieval Celtic literature to Iron Age archaeologists. In his view, the influence of Christianity makes the use of these sources to reconstruct pre-Christian religious belief, ritual practice or social structures rather dangerous. The paper ends with some comments on Celtic identity, both today and in the past.

Claude Sterckx looks at the different meanings of the words "Celt" and "Celtic". In his opinion, Patrick Sims-Williams has given the best analysis of "the Celtic war", which in Sterckx's opinion is conducted on three fronts : the use of the label "Celtic" when referring to material culture, the validity of the terms "Celt" and "Celtic" as such, and the question whether the common features are sufficient to extend the linguistic label to later people speaking a Celtic language. He draws a parallel with the term "Greek" which does not exclusively refers to classical Greece. In the same way we should accept that "Celtic" may have several meanings, implying that as long as we are all aware of this, the terminology need not be problematic.

Without entering the debate as such, the paper of Nico Roymans still touches on the theme of the discussion. With his case-study of the Batavians, he wants to show that there must have been considerable regional diversity in the ethnic dynamics of frontier zones. He compares the ethnic development of the Batavians with that of the Ubii and illustrates that the different nature of their relationship with Rome was essential in the evolution of their self-image. More comparative regional studies into ethnic identities in the Roman frontier zone should lead to a better understanding of this diversity.

The conference was concluded with a discussion between the speakers and the participants, but unfortunately reflecting this discussion in the present publication was not feasible. However, some of the issues that were raised have been incorporated in the current papers, especially in the one of Simon James.

I wish to use this opportunity to thank all the speakers for all the effort they have put in the preparation of their paper, for coming all the way to Brussels and for the ardour and devotion with which they have demonstrated their points of view. I hope that the experience was equally fulfilling for them as it was for the rest of us. I would also like to say a big thank you to everyone else who contributed to the success of the event : our chairman Claude Sterckx for giving the project his blessing, Claude Misercque and the *Ecole Supérieure d'Informatique* for their hospitality and for the splendid accommodation, and my co-editor Herman Clerinx, for his various kinds of support, both for the organisation of the conference and for this publication. I

am also very grateful to all the participants : your enthusiasm and your active participation in the final discussion were very much appreciated. Finally, I want to thank Shaun Thornley, who took on the task to trace and remove all errors against the English language, both in this introduction and in some of the papers. A warm and heartfelt "thank you" to all of you.

Iron Age Paradigms and the Celtic Metanarrative:
A Case Study in Conceptualising the Past, and Writing Histories

- Simon James

University of Leicester, UK

Introduction

Insofar as Western Europeans are aware of their late prehistoric, pre-Roman Iron Age past (comprising most of the last millennium BC), they are likely to think of it in terms of Ancient Germans or, especially west of the Rhine and in the Atlantic archipelago of Britain and Ireland, of Ancient Celts. But what if such ancient 'peoples' are more modern artefacts than ancient realities? What if the 'Ancient Celts', our particular focus here, can be shown to be largely an artificial construct, a Greco-Roman reification, in recent centuries further elaborated and greatly extended (especially with respect to the isles) by pioneering scholars, romantics and nationalists? What then are the implications for our understandings of ourselves, our origins, our ancestors and our histories?

The following is about the ways in which we think, and write, about the later prehistory of western Europe and the consequences of all this for wider understandings of European history—which, for many, is considered to start with a Celtic Iron Age. It arises from the 2005 seminar on 'The Grand Celtic Story' or 'Celtic metanarrative', Held on Saturday 19 November 2005, under the auspices of the Belgian Society for Celtic Studies, in the École Supérieure d'Informatique, Brussels. This was a broad gathering of those with a interest in Celtic languages and Iron Age archaeology. I was invited to open the debate with an explication and explanation of the general abandonment of the traditional Celtic conception of the Western European Iron Age by British (and, increasingly, Irish) archaeologists.

The specified subject of the seminar prompted me to think afresh about these issues, in the light of several years of further research in Iron Age archaeology, of reactions to my book *Atlantic Celts* (James 1999), and of further publications on the origins of the idea of a Celtic Iron Age, both for Britain and for continental Europe. In this paper, I attempt firstly to outline why 'Celts' have effectively disappeared from academic accounts of the Iron Age of Britain in particular. Then I will look at this in relation to 'the Grand Celtic Story' or 'Celtic metanarrative'. In the process, I will also consider what seemed to me to be the lessons of other presentations at the seminar, offer some responses to particular questions raised during the event, and make

Thoughts on the Evolution of Celtic Societies and Grand Celtic Narratives

- Raimund Karl

Department of History & Welsh History, University of Wales, Bangor

In the past 15 years, the concept of 'the Celts' has come under sustained attack (Chapman 1992; Collis 1994; 1996; 1997; 2003; James 1998; 1999), and deservedly so. Many of the old assumptions that were taken for granted by generations of scholarship are no longer sustainable. However, while some of the old concepts associated with 'the Celts' should undoubtedly be abandoned, a number of scholars have pointed out that there are important similarities in the evidence of such societies we used to call 'Celtic', which might justify our continued use of the label (Fitzpatrick 1996; Megaw & Megaw 1996; 1998; Sims-Williams 1998; Karl 2004a; 2004b; 2004c). Does the fact that the idea of a unified 'Celtic' ethnic identity (James 1999, 78; see Pauli 1980, 22-3), the idea of a monolithic, genetically related, essentially 'Celtic' culture has been rightfully discarded (Karl 2004a; 2004b; 2004d) require us to abandon all mention of the term 'Celtic' in late prehistory, and abstain from telling any 'Celtic' metanarratives at all? In the following, it will be argued that, rather than abandoning the term and abstaining from 'Celtic' metanarratives, it is essential to keep both the term and construct metanarratives associated with it, even though both are – if looked upon in detail – incorrect.

The 'Celtic paradigm'?

In his contribution, Simon James has argued that we should abandon what he chooses to refer to not as a 'Celtic metanarrative', but rather as 'the Celtic paradigm'. As such, we first have to consider whether there actually is anything like 'the Celtic paradigm'.

A paradigm, according to Thomas S. Kuhn (1962), is similar to a legal precedent (Kuhn 1967, 37). It is an exemplary solution to a problem seen as particularly typical or characteristic for an academic discipline, which is deemed to be particularly promising (Kuhn 1967, 37-8). A paradigm allows scholars to repeat the exemplary solution, although in a modified application, to further articulate or specify the results of the original solution, or to solve other, similarly situated problems (Kuhn 1967, 37-56). It is, in a sense, a scientific or scholarly world view, determining not only ways of problem solving, but also which problems are deemed worthy or necessary of solving, determining not only how questions can be answered, but also which questions are worth asking in the first place (Kuhn 1967).

'The Celtic paradigm' according to Simon James, describes 'the Celts' as a heroic warrior society, originating in central Europe in Hallstatt D, and spreading (mostly by migration) across Europe from the start of the La Tène period onwards (James 1999, 16-42). At the time of their largest expanse, roughly between the late 4th and early 3rd century BC, the 'Celtic territories' would then stretch from Ireland in the Northwest to Galatia in Asia Minor in the Southeast.

How Prehistoric Are the Celts and What Can Celtic Studies Do for Archaeologists?

- Lauran Toorians

Loon-op-Zand, Netherlands

The question has been asked who needs the Celts. Well, Celtic studies, and scholars in this corner of the academic world do need Celts. What would an astronomer do without stars, or an anglicist without English?

The core business of Celtic studies consists of linguistics and the philology of the Celtic languages. This implies that celticists concern themselves with texts and with language as their prime source or 'raw material'. As the earliest inscriptions in a Celtic language date from as early as the sixth or possibly even seventh century BC this takes us back to the early Iron Age in Western Europe. What celticists have to say about even earlier times is based on reconstructions which are firmly based in historical linguistics in general and more specifically in Indo-European studies. Before going further in this matter, it is useful to take a closer look at what Celtic languages are and what their position is amongst the languages in Europe past and present.

The Celtic languages constitute a subgroup of the large family of languages which are known as Indo-European languages. 'Language family' is of course a metaphor, but not a meaningless one. Over two centuries of academic research has proven beyond reasonable doubt that all Indo-European languages derive from a single prehistoric language, a kind of Mother of all Indo-European languages which scholars have called Proto-Indo-European (PIE).[1] When and where exactly this language was spoken is still a debated matter which need not concern us here, but about the linguistic features of Proto-Indo-European a great deal has become known through linguistic reconstruction, a complex and sometimes tedious process following strict methodological rules.[2]

Essential to the methodology of linguistic reconstruction is the awareness that languages are ever changing and developing and that this change and development is not a random process. Looking backward – and this is an important proviso – we can formulate rules to describe the development of speech-sounds within a specific language or group of languages. These rules are often known as 'sound-laws'. Sound-laws formulate 'afterwards predictions', or 'backward looking predictions' of changes which have taken place in a specific language. In this

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[1] The question of the 'Proto-Indo-European homeland' is nearly as old as the study of PIE itself. Two books by Renfrew 1987 and by Mallory 1989 have recently giving the academic debate about this homeland a new impulse and triggered a lot of new publications.

[2] A good introduction is given by Beekes 1995 or – more in general – Bynon 1977.

Meanings of the Word 'Celtic'

- Claude Sterckx

Institut des Hautes Etudes de Belgique, Bruxelles

As has been noted by Patrick Șimms-Williams – who has given, I believe, the most exact diagnosis about the "Celtic War"[1] – most Celticists, besides pure linguists, do not much care about that war. Few among them are involved in a general approach of the "Celtic world" and the huge majority of them study specific aspects of one of the Celtic speaking peoples. So, they very seldom need the terms "Celts" and "Celtic" at all. They use them only for the titles of their periodicals – *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies, Celtica, Etudes Celtiques, Studia Celtica…* or at times when they have to mention some linguistic feature.

Because of my position at the Institut des Hautes Etudes de Belgique, that has been specifically labelled "Celtic languages and civilisation", and my own inclination towards comparative mythology, I belong to the minority doomed to a general approach. And if there are no problems either when lecturing successively and specifically about the stories of each Celtic speaking people nor when pointing to the similarities and affiliations of the different Celtic languages, comparative mythology implies gathering the material, textual and legendary remains about homonym or apparently analogous mythical figures from any Celtic speaking people. As there are many such figures, we, comparatists, feel fully authorized to dedicate ourselves to that task, and so we too don't much care about the above said Celtic War.

For what I understand of it, it seems to me that the war is waged on three fronts.

The first front is the archaeologists' battle about the validity of the term "Celtic" when dealing with the material facts that they dig up from the past. Several of them are here to explain the ins and outs of that battle, or even to wage it further.

Besides written texts, no material object ever speaks. The debate is thus about their labelling: may one label an artefact "Celtic"?

Nobody may deny that there were peoples speaking Celtic languages, and their geographical localization is more or less recognized. I will certainly not decide when a correlation may be drawn between the localization of an artefact and the probable linguistic affiliation of the people who produced or used it. But even if I am very poorly qualified for uttering anything about it, I do feel that the truth probably lies somewhere between general acceptance and total rejection.

All other ancient linguistic groups show translinguistic usages and social, regional and chronological particularities, but they also show several common tints and flavours. As the ancient Celtic speaking people were probably not extraterrestrial aliens, I would hardly believe that they were the only ones not to show analogous variations and specificities…

The second front is then open about the very legitimacy of the terms "Celts" and "Celtic".

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[1] Simms-Williams 1998. Cf. also Ford 1992 ; Dumville 1996 ; Edel 1996 ; Hikida 2004 ; Clerinx 2005 :16-23 and many other essays mentioned in the present collection.

Ethnic Dynamics in the Lower Rhine Area. The Case of the Batavians

- Nico Roymans

Archeologisch Centrum Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Ethnicity refers to 'aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive'.[1] Ethnic identity can be expressed in many ways: in language, material culture, oral tradition and ritual acts. European archaeology has a long tradition of using ethnic concepts to explain regional patterns and changes in material culture. For a long time, however, this practice was based on false assumptions. In keeping with a normative concept of culture, ethnic groups were depicted as homogeneous, rather static units, whose specific identity was reflected in material culture. This view of ethnicity, which has its origins in the 19th century, has been heavily criticised by archaeologists. Combining insights from the fields of anthropology, sociology and history, students have redefined the subject of ethnicity. The main insights can be summarised as follows:

1. the identity of ethnic groups is to a large extent based on the notion of a communal past, hence the importance of origin myths.
2. ethnic categories only acquire form and meaning through interaction with outside groups and cannot therefore be studied in isolation.
3. ethnic formations are less homogeneous than is often asserted; their assumed unity is generally an ideological construct.
4. ethnic identities are essentially subjective categories and often appear contradictory. Individuals belong to numerous identity groups, to which they refer as circumstances require; the identity that a person assumes or is assigned by others is therefore a 'situational construct'.
5. ethnic formations are not static units; they have always been dynamic over time.
6. the relationship between ethnic formations and material culture is anything but unequivocal.

In the light of the above, we can define ethnic identity as the temporary resultant of a process of developing collective self-images, attitudes and conduct that takes place in a context of interaction between those directly involved and outsiders. Ethnic identities are by definition subjective, dynamic and situational constructs, which renders their relationship to material culture problematical. In contrast to many other kinds of cultural identity, they are – I think - in principle archaeologically intangible, unless combined with contextual historical data.

For our discussion it is important to distinguish different levels of scale within ethnic categories. At the highest level there are large, macro-ethnic entities such as Germans and Gauls. Research has shown that such *Grossgruppen* were to a large extent Roman or Graeco-Roman constructs that had little significance for local groups and individuals and that bore no

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[1] Cf. Eriksen 1993, 4.