

The problematic use of celt and celtic labels in the last decade

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



The labels Celt and Celtic have become increasingly problematic and controversial throughout the years. Many scholars argue that it has become the exploitation of ancient history due to many forms of art and jewelry have become known as 'Celtic', although inspired by artifacts which were found with distinct styles, the creators of this artwork may not have referred to themselves as Celts. Linguistically the labels are problematic as many scholars and writers tend to disagree about what a 'Celtic' language is, and many argue about where the languages originated. Ancient writers also set up the foundation for the Celtic stereotype of savage barbarians who fought naked and were animalistic which is a stereotype that has remained to this day. Archaeologists often refer to the Hallstatt artifacts and La Tène artifacts as distinctly Celtic however we cannot assume all participants during these eras were ethnically or linguistically Celtic (Hunter et al. 2015). For these reasons and more the labels Celt and Celtic have become increasingly problematic.

The linguistic term of 'Celt' was developed by later scholars following the discovery that Gaulish, Breton, Welsh and Irish were connected. In 1703 Paul-Yves Perzon, a Breton monk figured out the similarities between the languages associated with Celts as they were mentioned by Julius Caesar (Hunter et al. , 2015, p25) Caesar provided an account of his conquest of Gaul and described Gaul as having 3 types of people, Galli, who called themselves Celtae being one of them. During antiquity Greek and Roman writers wrote about the Celts however 'Celt' was not a Greek or Latin term they used the words Keltoi, Celtae or Gaul to describe these people they were encountering, one example of this is Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484-

c425 BC.) In the fifth century Herodotus makes the Keltoi the last in a series of people in western Europe, living past the pillars of Hercules and he also states that the Danube rises in their territory near the city of Pyrene (Sims-Williams, 1998. P22/23) here we see of an ancient Greek writer referring to Keltoi who lived in the middle of Europe. Ancient writers such as Herodotus gave a foundation for later linguists to develop a knowledge of where the Celtic languages may have formed and originated from. However, this does not explain how Irish became known as a Celtic language as neither Britain or Ireland were labeled as Celtic in Antiquity. Many argue that the Celtic languages developed in central Europe and moved west with migrating Celts (Hunter et al. 2015. P27) Barry Cunliffes' and John Koch's' theory of 'Celticization from the west' proposes that the 'Celtic languages' emerged along the Atlantic coasts of Europe and spread east from there (Karl, 2010. P41). However, this theory of the languages originating along the Atlantic fringe has been criticized as it does not explain how the languages spread to the east. As there are various classical sources depicting where the Celts inhabited such as the writings of Herodotus and Julius Caesar, as they mentioned Gaul and the Danube, archaeologists had a general and vague idea of where to search for their evidence of these people.

One of the main sources of 'Celtic' material is Hallstatt in Austria.

Archaeologists made the connection of the written sources of the Celts and the material found at Hallstatt. Many princely graves and extravagant ornaments were found in Hallstatt and surrounding areas. 'Hallstatt' became an archaeological period in time (c. 750- c. 475 BC) as many similar artifacts

and graves were found in the continent and not just in Hallstatt. The following era which is associated with the Celts is the La Tène period (c. 475- c. 0 BC) which had very distinctive and varying art styles as the era went on. However, as I have shown, most of our archaeological evidence of the Celtic people has been found on the continent predominantly, in central Europe. However, the main dissimilarity which causes many questions to be raised is between the archaeological evidence and linguistic evidence. Linguists have referred to Irish as a Celtic language although as Professor Barry Raftery writes “ the latest phases of the Hallstatt period and the first stage of the European La Tène civilization are entirely absent in the Irish archaeological record. ” if this is correct this contradicts the assumption that Ireland was invaded by Celts and that is how the Celtic language got here.

Therefore, if there was no invasion in Ireland how could Ireland be ‘ Celtic’ this lack of archaeological evidence of Celtic material in Ireland compared to the linguistic assumption that Irish is a Celtic language is extremely problematic. because how could the language of Irish and the island of Ireland be associated with the Celts if there is little to no archaeological evidence of them being on the island? Another essential topic which has resulted in the labels Celt/Celtic being problematic is the Celtic stereotype. For this, we rely on writings from antiquity as they experienced the Celts first hand and documented what they looked like, how they acted and their traits. However, we cannot rely entirely on these accounts as there is a clear use of exaggeration and bias to create an uncivilized perception of the ancient Celts. Most manuscripts are of medieval date and had been copied by

scribes who often did not understand what they were copying (Collis, 2003. P13) Writers such as Caesar, Polybius, Strabo and notably Posidonius wrote and documented about the Celts with what can be presumed is extreme exaggeration. Also, what we must keep in mind about the classical writings detailing the Celts is that even the classical writers had multiple uses for the word Celt. There was no single consistent meaning of Celt (Hunter et al. , 2015 P24) Posidonius is well known to Celtic scholars as the main source of our information on the ancient Gauls (Freeman, 1999. P24).

To Posidonius Celts are passionate, volatile, brave and clever. We can trust Posidonius' accounts as he did first hand research. Many writers mention the Celtic drinking habits one example is Diodorus Siculus " the Gauls are exceedingly addicted to the use of wine and fill themselves with wine. . . when they are drunken they fall into a stupor or a state of madness" (Porucznik, 2013. P712) Greek writer Strabo provides a greatly negative view of the ancient Irish people. " The inhabitants are even more uncivilized than those of Britain. The Irish are both cannibals and gluttons" (Freeman, 1999. P25) This shows that his view of the Irish was quite negative. He describes the Irish in a barbaric and animalistic way. However, in the same account Strabo admits that he does not have reliable reports of cannibalistic behavior so therefore we cannot rely on this source. The writings of ancient classical writers have impacted the thoughts on the Celts and have impacted many peoples impression of them. These stereotypes about the Celts which came from the early writings make the labels Celt and Celtic problematic as it can be perceived as a highly negative label and a bad thing to be ' Celtic' despite

the clear evidence that these writings cannot be relied on. In modern day the word Celt/ Celtic has become a global term and has been entirely exploited. As Fraser Hunter describes “ tourists crowd round the display cases full of items advertised as Celtic: jewellery, scarves, jumpers, mugs, keyrings” (Hunter et al. 2015 P23) This is a common sight in countries which are labeled as ‘ Celtic’, people exploit the Celtic history and culture for their own gain. Barry Raftery also notes this issue, of the word Celtic being used in the modern day for different business such as; bookmakers, beauty salons, logistics etc. (Raftery, 2006. P273) this modern day exploitation has made the labels Celt and Celtic problematic as they are used for financial gain in the modern day although many people do not understand the history of the celts. This modern day use is also problematic as it is not representative of who the celts were and what celtic is.

To summarise, the labels celt and celtic have been used for centuries in many different ways but have become increasingly problematic as new evidence emerges and research develops. Celt/Celtic is a very complex term to define as many scholars have tried to do in their various different fields but ultimately are met with arguments and contradictions. Celt/Celtic has become a world known term but for possibly the wrong reasons as there has never been a single consistent use of the word Celt. Arguments appear frequently discrediting theories made by later scholars such as Koch and Cunliffe and as research techniques improve we develop new understandings of who the celts were, where they came from, what language they spoke, how they acted etc. Ultimately the labels celt/celtic are historical labels

despite being used to define different aspects of culture they are historical and should remain as such. For the reasons outlined above and many other grounds the labels Celt/celtic have become progressively problematic throughout the centurys.