

1 Prehistoric Britain

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Britain and Ireland have existed as such, i.e. as islands, for perhaps no more than 8,000 years. Before that, they formed part of the north-west European land mass. But traces of habitation by humans go back much further, and the first Stone Age humans may have visited these parts a quarter of a million years ago.

During the Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) and Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) periods, the population of the area that was to become the British Isles may well have been numbered in hundreds rather than in thousands. And, of course, nothing is known of their language or languages. Human society at this time was characterized by a subsistence economy based on hunting and fishing but, some five or six thousand years ago, communities characterized by a farming economy arrived from the Continent. We have now reached the Neolithic period or New Stone Age which, in these islands, probably lasted from about 3500 BC or a little earlier to a little after 2000 BC.

We know no more about the languages of the Neolithic people than about those of their predecessors. Two eminent Celtic scholars, John Morris-Jones and Julius Pokorny, argued vigorously (Jones 1900; Pokorny 1926–30) that Welsh and Irish respectively have many syntactical features that are not generally characteristic of the Indo-European languages¹ but which do have striking parallels in the Hamitic languages of North Africa, and in particular in ancient Egyptian and its descendant, Coptic, and in Berber.² They point out that anthropological evidence is consistent with the view that some pre-Celtic stratum in the population could have migrated to Britain from North Africa via Spain and France and are therefore led to the view that the features in question are derived from a pre-Celtic and probably Hamitic substratum. What this implies is that, when the incoming Celts interbred with the pre-Celtic population, a mixed language resulted which was basically Celtic but which contained syntactical features carried over into it from the other languages. This is at best an intriguing hypothesis that is likely to remain an unproven one.

The first Bronze Age people probably arrived from the Continent around the middle of the third millennium BC. In some parts of the world, evidence for the languages of Bronze Age populations survives, such as, for example, the language of the inscribed tablets (dating from c.1500–1100 BC) in the so-called ‘Linear B’ script of the Bronze Age civilization of Minos and Mycenae, which has been shown to be an early form of Greek. But nothing is known of the Bronze Age languages of these islands (or, indeed, of western Europe generally).³

If any pre-Celtic elements remain anywhere in the place-names of Britain, the most likely place to find them would be in names of rivers and streams which, generally

speaking, seem more likely than hills or human settlements to retain their original names when an area is occupied by a community speaking a different language. But such elements are not easily identified. Ekwall (1928, lv), while not excluding the possibility that some unexplained English river-names *may* be pre-Celtic, regards this as a ‘rather remote contingency’ and comments that he cannot point to any definite name that strikes him as ‘probably pre-Celtic’. On the other hand, William Nicolaisen argues persuasively (1976, 173–91) that various Scottish river-names (including *(Black)adder, Ale, Ayr, Farrar, Naver, Shiel*) are Indo-European but not Celtic, and so are presumably pre-Celtic. If so, then ‘when the Celts first arrived in Scotland, there were already people present who, as immigrants from Europe centuries before them, had introduced an Indo-European language to the British Isles’ (*ibid.*, 191).

Who the earliest inhabitants of these islands were and what their languages were is, then, very much of a mystery. The earliest arrivals to have any kind of recognizable identity were Celtic-speakers. The Celtic languages can be divided into two main groups, known respectively as Goidelic (or Gaelic or Q-Celtic) and Brittonic (or Brythonic or P-Celtic). The terms Q-Celtic and P-Celtic are based on an important difference in the phonetic development of the two groups. Indo-European had a consonant that can be represented as [k^w]. In Goidelic (which survives as Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Manx) this at first remained, represented in the ogam script (see figure 1, p. 12) as *q*, but was later simplified to [k] (written as *c*), but in Brittonic (i.e., principally, Welsh, Cornish and Breton – but see also the chapters on British, Cumbric and Pictish below), it became [p].⁴ The point is illustrated by such pairs as Irish *ceathair*, Welsh *pedwar* ‘four’, Irish *ceann*, Welsh *pen* ‘head’.

It is far from clear when the first Celtic-speakers arrived, how many waves of them there were, or what were the ethnic and linguistic relationships between the various waves. Nor is there agreement among scholars as to whether the earliest Celts to reach Ireland passed through Britain or whether (as the most widely held view has it) they made their way there directly from the Continent. And did the distinction between Q-Celtic and P-Celtic arise before the Celts left the mainland of Europe, or after they had settled in these islands? ‘The fact’, says Patrick Sims-Williams (1998, 21), ‘is that we simply do not know whether Celtic was brought over as late as the second half of the first millennium BC, as some distinguished Irish scholars have supposed, or whether it had gradually evolved *in situ* from late western Indo-European over many millennia, from 4500 BC, as argued by Colin Renfrew.’⁵

I shall not attempt to enter further into these questions where even specialists find it impossible to arrive at a consensus. What is certain is that, whatever may have been the factors that brought this about, before the beginning of the Christian era Ireland was mainly Goidelic-speaking and Britain predominantly Brittonic-speaking, but that there was much traffic in both directions.

Notes

- 1 The Indo-European languages include nearly all the languages now spoken in Europe, and a number of extinct and extant Asian languages, including Sanskrit, Persian, Hindi, and various other languages of the Indian sub-continent.

- 2 Some of the features quoted by Jones are quite striking – e.g. the fact that the verb takes a 3rd person singular form when the subject is a plural noun (e.g. Welsh *daeth* ‘he came’, *daethant* ‘they came’, *daeth y dynion* ‘the men came’), but many are trivial, or easily paralleled elsewhere, or far-fetched.
- 3 Some scholars maintain that those who brought the Bronze Age to these islands were Celts. But, even if they were, no epigraphic evidence for their language or languages remains.
- 4 The explanation for this is that [k^v] has two ‘points of articulation’: the tongue is raised until it touches the velum or soft palate (as for the *k*-sound in *calm*) but at the same time the lips are drawn together until they almost, but not quite, touch. In languages where this sound occurs, it frequently changes to a [p], i.e., instead of the flow of air being stopped at the velum, it is stopped at the other point of articulation, the lips – one can compare, for example, Greek *hippos* ‘horse’, where this has occurred, with Latin *equus*, where it has not.
- 5 *Archaeology and Language. The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*, London, 1987, p. 242.

References

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