

The modern concept of Celts, with diverse modern cultures adopting a common ancestral identity, derives from a scholarly construct of the 18th century. At present scholars are in the contentious process of deconstructing the 18th century view. How this will affect modern national identities is, however, uncertain; the Celtic construct may be too useful to jettison.

There are references to the Celts in the classical sources from the fifth century BC to the fifth century AD, varying from a general expression covering all of the people living in western Europe, to the very specific use by Caesar in Gaul where they are confined to the central area between the Garonne, the Atlantic, Seine, Marne and Rhine. Other sources mention them in central and western Iberia, in central Europe, and, as the Galatians, in central Asia Minor, but never in Britain and Ireland. It is unclear what the definition of a Celt was in the ancient world, and the cognate terms such as Galli or Galatai are used in different ways by different authors (equivalences, contrasts, etc.).

The term “Celts” disappears for about a thousand years until the Renaissance, when they were “rediscovered”, especially in the discussions of the origins of the peoples of western Europe. Various authors linked them with biblical sources and with other historic groups. The “Druids” and “Bards” also excited discussion, both in religious debate and romantic reconstructions of the past.

The first author to suggest the presence of Celts in Britain was the Scottish scholar George Buchanan in 1582. In a brilliant analysis of historical, linguistic, and place-name evidence, he suggested the original colonisers of Britain and Ireland consisted of three groups: the Picts from the Baltic; Gauls or Belgae from Gaul (Britons, Welsh); and the Gaelic speaking Irish and Scots whom he derived from the Celts of Spain. He also suggested that all three groups shared a common “Gallic” language.

It was not, however, until the 18th century that the term “Celtic” came into common use for the inhabitants of Britain, Ireland and Brittany, first under the influence of Paul-Yves Pezron, a Breton monk, who correlated “Celts” with speakers of “Celtic languages”; in this he was followed by Edward Lhuyd who produced a comparative dictionary of what are now called the Celtic languages. Thus for the first time, the majority of the pre-Roman population of Britain and their “Celtic-speaking” descendants were seen as Celtic. This was accompanied by a period of “Celtomania”, fuelled by developments in Britain and France of concepts of nationalism, of religious debate, and Romanticism. It was at this time that antiquarians such as William Stukeley used “Celtic” to describe stone circles and other prehistoric monuments. In the mid 19th century John Kemble and Augustus Wollaston Franks defined an Art Style which Franks termed “Late Keltic Art” as the art of the indigenous population of Britain and Ireland; it was not until the early 20th century that this term was employed for similar art on the continent by Joseph Déchelette who also defined a “La Tène Culture” which has been assigned to the ancient Celts by the majority of 20th century archaeologists.

The last twenty years has seen an increasing debate about the correlations between the “Ancient Celts”, the Celtic languages, and La Tène Art (and Culture, if that can be defined), with the publication of three books by “Celtosceptics” (Simon James, John Collis, Michael Morse) attacking the more traditional books on the Celts. Though none of the Celtosceptics expect a radical change of nomenclature for the modern population of Britain, it may affect how modern-day “Celts” view themselves, and how we use such terms as “race”, and understand archaeological sources and European ethnicity.