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Northern Indo-European pre-Christian religions

A critical humanities perspective on Celtic, Germanic, and Baltic traditions



Jan Reichstäter

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VOL. 8

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Masaryk University Press
Brno 2025

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The book was supported by the "Scientia est potentia" Masaryk University fund.

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ISBN 978-80-280-0602-0
ISBN 978-80-280-0601-3 (hardback)

https://doi.org/10.5817/CZ.MUNI.M280-0602-2025

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Chapter 1
Prologue

This book sets out to offer critical insights into the problem of studying the pre-Christian religions of the northern Indo-Europeans, specifically the Celts, Germans and Balts. The use of the adjective "northern" to cover the ethnic groups in question is not based on the word's linguistic connotations. Despite their long-term neighbourhood and mutual interactions of varying intensity, over varying periods of time, and in different geographical contact zones,[1] the Celtic, Germanic, and Baltic languages do not form a common linguistic branch within the Indo-European ecumene, nor do they belong to the same group within the basic classification of Indo-European languages according to the satem-centum dichotomy.[2] The speakers of these languages are categorised together here mainly for reasons of geography because they constitute the northernmost Indo-European branches in terms of ethnogenesis (see Map No. 1) and for reasons of cultural history closely related to the factor of geography.

The ethnogenetic and cultural development of these Indo-European groups was taking place to the north of the Alpine-Carpathian mountain chain in part of the area traditionally designated in ancient sources of Greek and Italian provenience as *barbaricum* (Greek *barbarikon* > Latin *barbaricum*). In a certain respect, this pejorative term reflects the cultural conservatism of the northern Indo-Europeans, whose traditions evidently developed less turbulently during antiquity than the traditions of their linguistic relatives in the Mediterranean region, which were subjected to

1 From the perspective of a cultural history, during the period between the Iron Age and the high Middle Ages, one can detect particularly adstrate influences of (1) the Rhine-Danubian and Insular Celts on the western part of continental and Scandinavian Germania, (2) the central European Celts on the West Balts (especially in the vicinity of the "Amber Road", a transportation road connecting the Alpine-Hercynian and Baltic regions), (3) the Scandinavian Germans on the West Balts (especially the coastal tribes of the Prussians and Curonians). It should be added that evidence of these contacts is based mainly on the comparative study of archaeological and linguistic documentation because of the lack of contemporaneous ethnographic information about this from written sources. From the perspective of religious studies dealing with a specific part of spiritual culture, traces of mutual interaction between these non-literate ethnic groups in the pre-Christian period are all the more difficult to study, and conclusions of any kind are usually merely hypothetical.

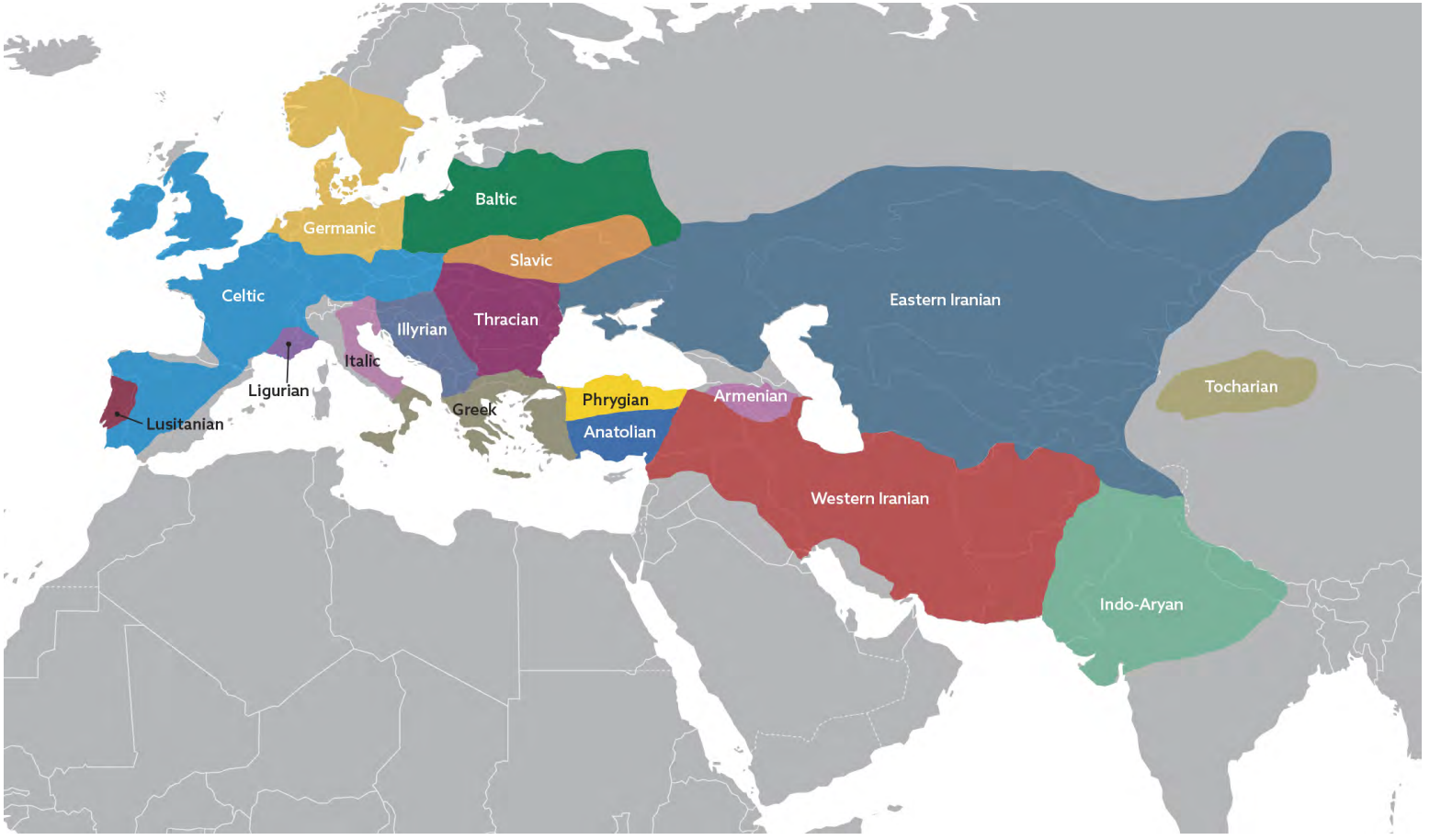
2 Satem features predominate in the phonological system of the Baltic languages, while the Celtic languages clearly belong to the centum type, and the Germanic languages basically represent the transition between the two macro-areas, although with a strong predominance of centum features; see e.g. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language*, 345–346.

inspirational influences of local civilisations whose representatives belonged to Afro-Asiatic ethnic groups (especially the Semitic peoples) or to other old ethnic groups of the northern Mediterranean (such as the Hattians, Hurrians, Minoans, Etruscans, or Iberians) that later underwent Indo-Europeanisation.[3] After all, literary sources from antiquity and from the Middle Ages record numerous common, archaic-looking features[4] in their descriptions of the pagan cultures of the Celtic, Germanic, and Baltic peoples. They are connected to practically all important aspects of cultural expression:

- manner of urbanisation (a system of village settlements and isolated homesteads, sometimes with hillforts with various functions, all usually based on wooden architecture);
- economic fundamentals (combination of agriculture and livestock raising, the tradition of legitimacy of plundering raids beyond a group's political territory);
- political arrangements (tribal organisation with strong family ties and an established social hierarchy);
- gender relations (a rigid patriarchal order with traditions of patrilineality and patrilocality);
- "heroic" ethics (bravery, generosity, faithful keeping of oaths, and unwavering acceptance of one's fate as basic aspects of personal honour and positive social reputation, through which exceptional individuals achieve a kind of "immortality");

3 In terms of this cultural dichotomy between the "northern" and "southern" Indo-Europeans, it would be possible to include to the former group not only the three ethnic groups being studied here, but also undoubtedly the Slavs, and possibly even the Indo-Europeans from the inland area of the Balkan Peninsula (the Pannonians and the Dacians) or from the steppes of Eurasia (the Scythians and the Sarmatians). However, in comparison with our knowledge of Celtic, Germanic, and Baltic religious traditions, about the traditions of these other "barbarians" we know far less (Slavs, Scythians) or nothing at all (Pannonians, Dacians, Sarmatians). Concerning the close interdependence of the dimensions of language, culture, and geography in the histories of the individual branches of the Indo-Europeans, see e.g. Puhvel, *Srovnávací mytologie*, 47–57. On the question of the influence of ethnic substrata on mutual cultural differences of individual Indo-European groups, see e.g. Lincoln, *Death, War, and Sacrifice*, 1–5.

4 Reconstructions of the cultural prehistory of the Indo-Europeans, including the characteristic features of their religions, are generally based on comparisons and syntheses of archaeological and written sources. Here, as in the questions of the chronology and geography of the spread of the Indo-European languages, the theses of the Lithuanian-American archaeologist Marija Gimbutas basically remain valid. According to her, the main Proto-Indo-European epicentrum was located in the steppes between the lower reaches of the Volga and the Dnieper, and the spread of the subgroups occurred from the end of the Neolithic period in various directions, mostly through militant means; see especially Gimbutas, *The Kurgan Culture and the Indo-Europeanization of Europe*. For criticism of these theses and an alternative model, see Renfrew, *Archaeology and language*. For a revision of Gimbutas's model and criticism of Renfrew's model, see e.g. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language*. For current results of genetic studies based on ca. 70 samples of European DNA from the period between the Mesolithic and the Bronze Age that seem (at least for now) to confirm Gimbutas' "steppe" model, see Haak et al., "Massive Migration from the Steppe was a Source for Indo-European Languages in Europe", 207–211.



Map No. 1: Approximate distribution of Indo-European languages at the time of the first ethnographic reports about their northern groups (ca. 500 BCE)

- importance of alcoholic beverages (as traditional means of reaching extasy) in the spheres of the profane and the sacred;
- absence of literature (or tenacious oral transmission of socially important narratives despite knowledge or availability of writing);
- religious importance of the horse (in the spheres of ritual, mythology, and the arts);
- practice of human sacrifice (usually of convicts or captives, carried out as part of certain rituals connected with the cults of gods or with divination);
- religious particularism (or a spatially and temporally variable system of local, tribal, and transregional cults of gods, spirits, and ancestors);
- popularity of triadic concepts (as matrices of classification or organisation in the spheres of the sacred and the secular).[5]

Despite the conservatism discussed above, it is clear from historical documents, supplemented by linguistic and archaeological analyses, that cultural developments of similar complexity to those in the Mediterranean were also taking place during antiquity north of the Alps and the Carpathians. Local non-Indo-European substrata or adstrata, of which only the Basques, the Sami, and the Baltic Finns have survived down to the present (in terms of their languages), undoubtedly played an important role in the cultural genesis of northern Indo-European groups. However, reconstructing these processes of assimilation – as well as the spiritual cultures of the local ethnic groups before Christianisation – is an extremely difficult task, primarily because we have relatively little reliable information about the history and everyday life in this large geographical area.

Literary sources referencing areas populated by pagan Celtic, Germanic, and Baltic peoples rather rarely contain more comprehensive passages dealing with ethnography both because of the genre orientation of the sources and because of frequent lack of interest, the language barrier, ideological prejudices, or the cultural alienation of the authors. For scholars interested in the traditions of the northern Indo-Europeans, these sources are undoubtedly valuable because they offer an exclusive "live" look

5 An enumeration of mutual differences between the northern Indo-European groups and of their specific features would undoubtedly be just as extensive. Some of the features in question can also be documented for southern Indo-Europeans (between the Apennine Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent) or outside of the Indo-European ecumene (e.g. in Semitic, North Caucasian, Altaic, or Finno-Ugric milieus). However, these facts do not by any means reduce the value of information about the discussed set of features common to the cultures of the northern Indo-Europeans, because the set of features in question is not apparently found elsewhere in such a complete form (and if so, in exceptional cases, then usually as a result of intensive influences from this cultural milieu). It should be added that this set of features may surely be broader and more detailed, but as a basic sample of shared cultural features in the area in question, it may be regarded as sufficient. Concerning documentation from late antiquity and the Middle Ages of parallels between the pagan cultures of the northern Indo-Europeans, see e.g. Modzelewski, *Barbarská Evropa*. Concerning archaic features of the religions of the Indo-Europeans, see especially Lincoln, *Death, War, and Sacrifice*; Gimbutas, *The Kurgan Culture and the Indo-Europeanization of Europe*.

at local paganism, and they may also make reference to cultural contrasts and to mutual relations between these ethnic groups and their neighbours. At the same time, however, these sources are usually insufficient for a more detailed reconstruction of a religion. Moreover, the sources are usually tied only to a particular location or region, so the information covers only a small part of the ethnic area in question.[6]

6 Reflections on the Celts in written sources date back to before 500 BCE in the now lost writings of Hecataeus of Miletus, and they are continued by Herodotus and by the classical philosophers Plato and Aristotle. The most extensive mentions of the culture and religion of the Celts were written during the period from 100 BCE to 100 CE by Posidonius of Apameia, Caesar, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Pliny the Elder, and Tacitus. These writings mainly focus on the southern territories of Gaul and Britain, while they almost completely overlook areas where a wealth of archaeological material is found (the Rhine and the Danube valleys) as well as territories with mythological literature produced later during the Middle Ages (Ireland and Wales). For an overview of ethnographic sources on the old Celts, see Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, 288. The beginnings of historical references to the ancient Germanic peoples are connected to the now lost work of Posidonius of Apameia from the end of the second century BCE, probably dating from the time of the attacks of the Cimbri and the Teutons on Italy's northern border. Ethnographic information from Caesar and Tacitus that is of greater wealth (and is frequently cited) primarily concerns the territories of the westernmost Germanic groups along the Rhine, although the latter also refers briefly to areas farther to the northeast, including Scandinavia. More extensive references to the practice of religion of the North Germanic peoples do not appear until during the Viking Age, with reports by Rimbert, Ahmad ibn Fadlan, and Adam of Bremen (9th–11th centuries) that date from just before the period of Christianisation of the Nordic region. The most detailed description of Norse polytheism was presented by Snorri Sturluson (13th century), an Icelandic Christian deeply interested in his country's archaic traditions. By his day, however, the public practice of paganism had already been banned for over two centuries, and there is no evidence that it continued to be maintained in private. Moreover, the degree to which the Icelandic polytheism he described corresponds to pre-Christian traditions elsewhere in Scandinavia is unclear. For an overview of sources on the religiosity of pagan Germanic peoples, see Ström – Biezais, *Germanische und Baltische Religion*, 282–286. At the end of the first century CE, Tacitus already reports on the cultural customs of the Baltic peoples living to the east of their Germanic neighbours. Then, however, come eight "dark" centuries until the reports of the Anglo-Saxon sailor Wulfstan and of the German church chroniclers Adam of Bremen and Helmold of Bosau (9th–12th centuries). These sources, however, concern almost exclusively the territory of the Old Prussians, which also applies to later chronicles by Peter of Duisburg, Simon Grunau, and Marcin Murinius (14th–16th centuries), which present the most detailed information about the characteristic features of Baltic paganism. A 13th century chronicle by Henry of Latvia reports on the cultural customs of the old Latgalians (the eponymous ancestors of the Latvians), but much more information there is devoted to the Finno-Ugric Livonians and Estonians living farther to the west, whose religious customs apparently did not differ fundamentally from those of the Baltic peoples. More extensive and detailed information on the original religious practices of the Latvians does not appear until in the writings of authors of the modern era, most of whom were Christian priests of non-Baltic origin like Joannis Stribingius or Paul Einhorn (17th century), who reflect upon the persisting birituality of natives of the area. More concrete information about the cults of the old Lithuanians is found in the Russian-language *Galician–Volhynian Chronicle* (13th century) and later in works written in Latin by historians of the late Middle Ages such as Jan Długosz or Enea Silvio Piccolomini (15th century), who record the process of the depaganisation of Lithuania after the conversion of the local elites to Christianity. The persistence of birituality in the rural interior of Lithuania (as well as neighbouring Prussia) for many generations after official

The process of "Mediterraneanisation", which influenced southern Indo-European groups in particular from prehistoric times, ultimately played a major role in the development of culture and religion in the north of Europe as well. By the influence of the successful spread of monotheistic traditions that originated in Semitic cultural epicentres, traditional polytheisms were first discarded at the end of antiquity within the territory of the Roman Empire, and then gradually during the Middle Ages beyond the empire's former northern borders. Thanks to several hundred years of literary tradition and to a far richer iconography, the religions of the Indo-Europeans of the Mediterranean are now far easier to reconstruct than the traditions of their distant kinsmen in the northern half of Europe. Those traditions were destroyed during the Middle Ages by the processes of Christianisation without any comprehensive documentation of them in written sources, and without leaving behind tangible artefacts of adequate evidentiary value. The fragmentary nature of preserved material, the superficiality of descriptions by the ethnographers of antiquity and of the Middle Ages, mythology reinterpreted by Christian censorship, and the truncating or ideological relabelling of ritual customs are the main circumstances that have always made the study of the traditions of the northern Indo-Europeans exceptionally problematic.

The timing of the beginnings of scholarly research into these religions overlaps (not coincidentally) with the period of rising nationalism between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Through the influence of motivational impulses connected with the search for the cultural roots of "ancient ancestors", there was, on the one hand, intensive engagement in heuristics in various countries involving information from the fields of historical literature, archaeology, and ethnography, but on the other hand, there were also highly tendentious interpretations of the knowledge thus acquired. Ideas about the cultures of these ethnic groups have gradually changed over time, under the influence not only of a variety of academic disciplines (such as philology, anthropology, sociology, or psychology), but also of cultural trends, ideologies, or paradigms (like Romanticism, evolutionism, Marxism, xenophobic nationalism, pacifistic internationalism, feminism, environmentalism, and counterculture movements), to which the academic milieu has usually failed to remain immune. From about the end of the 1980s, the influence of deconstructionist criticism in religious studies has led to a significantly deeper reflection on methodological problems, including in connection with the study of ancient Indo-European polytheisms. In practice, this change has primarily led to the more intensive study of the nature of sources of information, especially with regard to the ideological and cultural roots of their authors. This has also forced scholars to deal not only with those aspects of the traditions in question that are *known* to us thanks to preserved factual information, but also with those aspects that are *unknown*, and to admit that lack of knowledge

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Christianisation is documented in relative detail by the reports of modern-era church historians, foremost amongst whom were Maciej Stryjkowski, Jan Łasicki, and Matthäus Prätorius (16th–17th centuries). For an overview of sources on the paganism of the Baltic peoples, see Běťáková – Blažek, *Encyklopedie baltské mytologie*, 232–248.

openly, without arbitrary attempts to fill in the gaps in information through intuitive or fanciful "reconstructions".

Nonetheless, this change from "creative" to "critical" hermeneutics has not affected the specialists in these fields of study in a more general way. Given the inertia of various ideologies or other tendencies leading to misinterpretations, the main goal of this book is to carry out a systematic revision of our existing knowledge. In doing so, the attempt will be to abide as much as possible by a manner of critical discourse based on three basic attributes of scholarly objectivity: empiricism, logical coherence, and verifiability.

The topics of the individual chapters of this book reflect the findings of the main branches of the humanities that generally take part in the study of the pre-Christian religions of the northern Indo-Europeans (and of archaic religions in general): archaeology, philology, and ethnology. The goal of each chapter will be to summarise the results so far achieved in reconstructing pre-Christian religious practices in a selected northern Indo-European area and to familiarise the reader with interpretational possibilities and limitations for dealing with the problems central to the given topic. The choice of a concrete ethnic group, the religious traditions of which will be used to demonstrate the problems of study through the perspective of one of the disciplines of the humanities, will be based on the local exclusivity of preserved data in terms of quantity, quality, or both at the same time.

In individual chapters, attention will therefore be devoted (1) to the problem of the study of the religions of the ancient Celts on the basis of archaeological findings, (2) to the analysis of old Germanic mythologies on the basis of literary documents of various provenience, genre, dating, and circumstances of creation, and (3) to the possibilities and limitations associated with the use of the modern-era folklore of the Baltic countries as a source for the reconstruction of the pre-Christian traditions of the Baltic peoples.

Ideally, for those interested in studying these religions, this book should offer illustrative insights into the problems at the core of research and their interpretational possibilities or limitations. Given the relatively sufficient quantity of published overviews, I have not usually regarded as necessary a presentation of the basic factual background of the topics presented. I have done so only when desirable for demonstrating some analytical problem or in order to draw attention to an ingrained interpretational stereotype. Otherwise, in this book I have mainly attempted to present those facts and contexts that usually tend to be overlooked or neglected in published overviews. In dealing with problems of interpretation, I have generally based my work on a multidisciplinary analysis of findings with special emphasis on the ideological backgrounds of the sources of information from which the findings were obtained (i.e., historical sources or scholarly literature). On that basis, in the individual chapters I have tried to offer such approaches as would avoid, if possible, the extremes of "enthusiastic constructivism", which is often closer to the approaches of theology rather than of religious studies, as well as "hypercritical scepticism", the positivistic rigidity of which tempts one to give up on solving more complex problems characterised by incomplete chains of factual information.

Chapter 2
How to "read" the material relics of extinct cultures: the religions of the ancient Celts from an archaeological perspective

The ethnonym "Celts" evokes certain intellectual or emotional associations in probably all present-day Europeans (including Americans, Canadians, Australians, or New Zealanders of European descent) regardless of their education or interests. The languages that linguists call "Celtic" began dying with the expansion of Latin in late antiquity, and the remaining ones are teetering on the brink of extinction because as of the early 21st century, they are spoken fluently by barely a few percent of the members of the nationalities that claim Celtic origins. A paradoxical parallel to the decline of the living languages is the phenomenon of "Celtic Romanticism", which appears as one of the manifestations of modern-era transalpine humanism, one outgrowth of which over the last two or three centuries has been the gradual growth of Celtic neopaganism. In modern times, not only neopagans, but also artists of many genres and various kinds of political activists (nationalists, environmentalists, feminists etc.) refer to the cultures of the Celts as a source of inspiration on the basis of their descriptions in sources from antiquity or pre-Renaissance Insular literature.

For nations living to the north of Greek and Roman populations, the history of literature, practically speaking, did not begin until after the adoption of Christianity. As we learn from Caesar's references,[7] the intellectual authorities in ancient Gaul took a highly reserved stance towards the written word, and if things were different in surrounding areas of northern Europe, the result in practice was the same: our knowledge about the cultures of those nations is limited almost exclusively to information from Latin and Greek sources. However, more extensive writings about these cultures appear only after 200 BCE, and even the region called *Keltiké*/*Celtica* in those writings is defined vaguely and inconsistently, apparently in part as a result of unsettled criteria and on the basis of rather vague knowledge of the area.[8] The territorial extent of the Celtic languages during antiquity is, in fact, largely a matter of speculation. We likewise do not know how widespread ethnonyms like *Keltoi*/*Celtae* and *Galatai*/*Galli* were among speakers of these languages, what those words originally meant (there are quite a few possible etymologies), or whether the words were endonyms or exonyms.[9] In any case, it can be inferred on the basis of late antique and early medieval sources that after 400 CE, the names in question more or

7 Caesar, *Commentarii de bello Gallico* VI, 14.
8 See e.g. Collis, *The Celts*, 99–113; Harding, *The Archaeology of Celtic Art*, 3–5.
9 See Blažek, "Keltové – Germáni – Slované", 10–11.

less disappear from the memories of Europeans, probably soon after the loss of the traditional group identities of those to whom the names were applied.

The return of the Celts to European consciousness arrives with the Renaissance and the discovery and reading of sources from antiquity. Paradoxically, it was amongst the Germans of the Rhineland in ca. 1500 where the trend first appeared of calling themselves the spiritual descendants of Gallic druids (who, as they imagined, had fled into Germania to escape the Romans). At the time, this mainly amounted to a form of intellectual defiance against the haughty behaviour of Italians and French at a time when economic dominance in Europe had already begun to shift into the Germanic world, which was still viewed as "barbarian" in Romance-speaking areas.[10] Descriptions of brave Gauls and wise druids also impressed the French but the problem was Caesar's mention of druidic teachings having originated in Britain,[11] France's traditional rival. The Scots, continually rebelling against English hegemony, tended to lay claim to a Celtic identity during the early modern era more as a consequence of political sympathy for France than because of contemplation of ethnic genealogies. However, patriotic feelings were awakened, for example, by the phonetic similarity of the name of the Isle of Man (which the Scots regarded as part of their cultural territory despite it having been an English possession since the 14th century) to the name of the druidic island refuge *Mona* (Anglesey) that Tacitus wrote about.[12] It is none too surprising that the English usually reacted with annoyance to any mention of the Celts and druids in those days. This finally changed around the time of the Glorious Revolution in 1688. Amongst the anti-Stuart rebels, the concept of an "Anglo-Saxon" collective identity (as the opposite of the "Anglo-Norman" identity with which the traditional monarchy was associated) found resonance,[13] but by that time the concept of "Britishness" was also spreading in intellectual circles, inspired by the reading of ancient sources referencing the island's original pre-Roman population, whose druids were understood as representatives of resistance to external domination. These two ethnic identities of the English in the early modern period coexisted in a kind of tense symbiosis, irritated on the one hand by opposition to the royal dynasty and on the other by antagonism towards the Scots and Welsh.[14] The position of English Celtophilia was strengthened significantly during the 18th century, especially after the publication of Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian*.[15] Megalithic landmarks in Britain, formerly regarded as the work of giants, the Romans, or the Vikings, were now being called druidic altars, temples, or tombs.[16] Even before 1800, the first neo-druid

10 Hutton, *The Druids*, 6–8.
11 Caesar, *Commentarii de bello Gallico* VI, 13.
12 Tacitus, *Annales* XIV, 29–30.
13 Budil, *Úsvit rasismu*, 564–567.
14 Ibid., 575–577.
15 Concerning the history and Europe-wide importance of *The Poems of Ossian*, a forgery claimed by its "discoverer", the Scottish teacher and poet James Macpherson (1736–1796), to be a relic of a Gaelic cycle of ballads from the Iron Age, see e.g. Hemprich, "Druhý život", 204–205; MacKillop, *Keltské bájesloví*, 8–10.
16 Collis, *The Celts*, 71–72; also see Sklenář, *Tanec obrů*, 7–13.

groups (organised based on the model of the Freemasons)[17] had begun gathering around them in white robes, and, if possible, wearing long (often false) beards based on a period stereotype with roots in the 16th century.[18] While around the year 1700, speakers of the Celtic languages were still living in isolation and poverty, disdained by the intellectuals, a century later interest in Celtic literature of the Middle Ages was flourishing, and Welsh origins (real or fabricated) had become fashionable amongst the higher strata of English-speaking Britain.[19] England experienced a second wave of Celtophilia after the Second World War as a consequence of the conflict with Nazi Germany, although the British prime minister Winston Churchill, for example, had already been a member of the Ancient Order of Druids since 1908.[20] In France, the phrase "our ancestors the Gauls" appeared not long after 1700, when the language of the rural inhabitants of Brittany was identified as a descendant of the Old Gaulish language, although it was actually Insular Celtic spoken by immigrants from western Britain who arrived in Brittany in the early Middle Ages. The concept of "Gallic France" assumed particular importance during the uprising against the Bourbons around the year 1789. In the years following the revolution, there were even passionate proposals in favour of banishing the traditional aristocracy "back to the forests of Franconia", getting rid of the name "France", and adopting Breton as an official language. These radical steps were ultimately never taken, and the French spoken in the Île-de-France region was adopted as the country's official language. Those facts then had exactly the opposite impact on the Breton language because of the cultural and linguistic centralisation of the period.[21]

The word "Celtic" began to be used for the group of related languages of northwestern Europe soon after 1700, although as late as the 19th century, the rural folk of western Ireland and Scotland apparently had little idea that they were speaking "Celtic".[22] It is likewise paradoxical that the idea of "Celticness" was fuelling Breton, Welsh, and later Irish and Scottish separatism while also nurturing the ethnic identities of their oppressors, the French and the English.[23] The first *Congrès celtique*, intended to unite the nations speaking Celtic languages on both sides of the English Channel, took place in 1867 in Brittany, and it has been held continuously (with interruptions during both world wars) to this day as the *International Celtic Congress*.[24]

A second wave of Celtophilia emerged in a number of European countries during the latter half of the 20th century. Since the fall of Franco's dictatorship in 1975, regional nationalism has been on the rise in Spain. Foremost amongst those in Spain claiming Celtic roots have been the Galicians and Asturians, and with lesser intensity the Cantabrians, although no text in a Celtic language has been preserved in any of

17 See Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, 12.
18 Hutton, *The Druids*, 48–51.
19 MacKillop, *Keltské bájesloví*, 20–21; Green, *Exploring the World of the Druids*, 152.
20 Hutton, *The Druids*, 146.
21 Hutton, *The Druids*, 8–9; Dietler, "Our Ancestors Gauls", 587.
22 Rieckhoff – Biel, *Die Kelten in Deutschland*, 18–19.
23 See especially Dietler, "Our Ancestors Gauls", 594.
24 Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, 16.

those regions, and pre-Roman local toponyms are the only evidence of the former use of Celtic languages. In southern Germany and Austria after the Second World War, "Celticness" substituted to some extent for the Pan-Germanism that had preceded it, but that has now vanished almost without a trace. For example, even today, the archaeological exhibits devoted to the Germanic peoples that are on display in the museums of German-speaking countries still make a rather sloppy impression. During the last quarter century, a considerable number of "Celtic" open-air museums and educational trails have also sprung up in Czechia. Starting in the 19th century (and ending quite abruptly in 1968), the Czech national identity was nurtured by Slavophilia. However, the knowledge that the first identifiable inhabitants of the local valleys and plains seem to have been Celts could already be found in the scholarly literature of the 19th century.[25] Czech Celtophila, which erupted in full force with the political reorientation towards western Europe after 1989, was especially intensified in the western part of the country by pride over the name *Bohemia*, derived from the tribal name Boii, although the toponym in question was first mentioned by Strabo[26] (*Bouiaimon*) in connection with Germanic settlements,[27] and the Czechs themselves have not used the name historically. In a manner similar to the way the inhabitants of Britain have been attributing all of the country's mysterious sites and artefacts to the Celts since the end of the 18th century, many Czechs have taken a liking during the past quarter century to attributing pre-Slavic place names to the Celts, although those names are in fact in the great majority of cases of older Indo-European or, to the contrary, of more recent Germanic origin. Attention is also often drawn to studies on the statistics of mutations associated with cystic fibrosis, which supposedly document that Czechs (and Austrians) are related to the inhabitants of "Celtic" northwestern Europe,[28] despite the fact that current genetic research shows no hint of any exclusive connection.[29] Since the 1970s, the "Celtic idea" has also been encouraging northern

25 See Drda – Rybová, *Keltové a Čechy*, 17–27; Rieckhoff, "'Böhmische Dörfer'", 364–365.

26 Strabo, *Geōgraphiká* VII, 1, 3.

27 Blažek, "Bohemia", 169–170.

28 See Macek et al., "Relativně vysoký výskyt mutací G551D a CTFRdel21KB CTFR genu v České republice u pacientů s cystickou fibrosou objektivně prokazuje, že naše populace je slovanského a keltského původu ["The relatively high occurrence of the mutations G551D and CTFRdel21KB of the CTFR gene in the Czech Republic in patients with cystic fibrosis proves that our population is of Slavic and Celtic origin"]. This popular treatment of the topic summarises results published in Bobadilla et al., "Cystic Fibrosis", 575–606. The assumption being made here is that the mutation G551D (constituting 2.2% of cases of cystic fibrosis worldwide and 3.8% of Czech cases) is of "Celtic" origin, but such a conclusion would demand at the least an explanation of why this mutation has a higher occurrence with Czechs than, for example, with the Welsh, and why its occurrence is higher in the Ukraine than in any Alpine countries.

29 For current tables from worldwide databases and studies, see www.eupedia.com/genetics. For data from the regions of Bohemia and Moravia, see Luca et al., "Y-Chromosomal Variation in the Czech Republic", 1–8. The results of genetic studies tend to document the interposition of the Czech population between the neighbouring Slavs and Germans; see especially Zastera et al., "Assembly of a large Y-STR haplotype database for the Czech population and investigation of its substructure", 75–78.

Italian separatism focusing on the political vision of *Padania* as a state integrating the regions around the Po River, where the Celtic language apparently dominated for a certain period. Since the 1980s, the topic of the ancient Celts has also represented one of the unifying ideological bonds of the European Union, the geographical extent of which largely corresponded at the time to the geography of what is called the La Tène artistic style of Iron Age. Under the auspices of the EU, major archaeological exhibitions have taken place, notably in Steyr (1980) and Venice (1991), with titles invoking the Celts as the "first unifiers of Europe".[30]

Because fashionable cultural impulses always also affect the intellectuals of the day in some way, for more than two centuries, the Celts have been studied tenaciously by amateur and professional scholars in various fields of the humanities, especially in archaeology, philology, and ethnology. It can probably be asserted that in the post-war period, there is no other ethnic group of antiquity that has been so often discussed in the humanities of the West. Delicate questions that are highly controversial among specialists include particularly (1) the geographic location of the original Celtic territory, (2) the age of the Celtic language, (3) the ties of the Celtic languages to the cultural areas of antiquity, (4) the historical connection of language and material culture to DNA haplogroups, and finally (5) the reconstruction of the spiritual culture of the pagan Celts.

Arguing the points in question basically constitutes (to put it a bit facetiously) a kind of "rite of passage" for every Celtologist. Despite the breadth and depth of these issues, they shall necessarily be discussed in this chapter, the goal of which is to provide a basic overview of the interpretive problems associated with the archaeological study of Celtic religious practice. There is good reason to use the prism of this discipline to examine material from areas where Celtic languages were spoken in the pre-Roman period: beginning especially in the late Iron Age, one of the most expressive artistic styles of ancient Europe emerges in this area, characterised by peculiar ornamentation combined with figural and vegetal motifs, often tend to be viewed as "the plastic expression of religious ideology". In view of the geographical position of the Celts in the broader area of western and central Europe, where we find at least a few cultural areas without more marked unifying elements, it will first be necessary to deal with the questions of the extent to which (if at all) the factors of material culture and ethnicity are interrelated, how the "Celticness" of archaeological material can be identified, and how the sphere of religion can be identified in that material.

2.1 The "Celts" from an archaeological perspective

The geography of the ancient Celts is a significant topic for European archaeology, and not merely because of nationalistic motivations or romanticisation of the subject

30 Dietler, "Our Ancestors Gauls", 596.

matter. Intensive research into this field[31] has also been stimulated by the finding that during the Iron Age, we find no continuous cultural area in the territory of west-central Europe that overlaps satisfactorily with the extent of the Celtic languages. The pre-war "Central-European" hypothesis of Celtic genesis, based on "classical" models of migration, has suffered upheavals because of the arguments of both archaeologists and linguists in the last half century. In areas near the Atlantic Ocean (from Gibraltar to Scotland), continuity of culture – and therefore obviously of population as well – can be documented at the latest since the process of Neolithisation (ca. 4000–3500 BCE), while archaeological finds do not document at all clearly any greater migration of population in this direction from the area around the Alps during either the Bronze Age or the Iron Age.[32] In recent decades, the opinion has also become significantly widespread among linguists that the Tartessian language in southwestern Iberia, which has written documentation that may go back as far as the 8th century BCE and was formerly considered non-Indo-European, could in reality represent the most archaic documented version of Celtic.[33] Clearly, this discovery (although it is not universally accepted among Celtologists) would definitively refute the "classical" hypothesis of the Celtic immigration into that region, which supposedly took place during the Iron Age. New linguistic models have likewise been attracting attention. These models, obtained on the basis of computer technology, assert a much older dating both for the emergence of the Indo-European languages and for the splitting off of the Proto-Celtic language as a separate branch, which is claimed to have already occurred during the Neolithic Age (ca. 4100 BCE).[34] These calculations more or less correspond to the Anatolian hypothesis of the origin of the Indo-European languages postulated a few decades ago by the British archaeologist Colin Renfrew.[35]

Indeed, since the 1970s, some Celtologists have been inclined towards the hypothesis that the spread of Celtic languages around Europe may have occurred not only much earlier than claimed by "classical" models, but also rather in the direction from the Atlantic towards central Europe than the other way around. The archaeological reflection of such expansion has been linked hypothetically with the spread of the

31 There are even three recent volumes devoted directly to questions concerning the original epicenter and spread of Celtic languages: Koch – Cunliffe (eds.), *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature* (2010); Koch – Cunliffe (eds.), *Celtic from the West 2: Rethinking the Bronze Age and the Arrival of Indo-European in Atlantic Europe* (2013); Koch – Cunliffe (eds.), *Celtic from the West 3: Atlantic Europe in the Metal Ages: Questions of Shared Language* (2016).

32 See Cunliffe, *Europe between the Oceans*, 159–167; Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language*, 174–175.

33 Koch, "Paradigm Shift? Interpreting Tartessian as Celtic", 185–302; Koch, "Out of the Flow and Ebb of the European Bronze Age", 101–146. Before the identification of Tartessian inscriptions as recording a Celtic language, the Lepontic inscriptions from the region of Lago di Como, Lago Lugano, and Lago Maggiore in northern Italy, dated to the 6th century BCE, had traditionally been regarded as the oldest documentation of the Celtic language. See Urbanová – Blažek, *Národy starověké Itálie, jejich jazyky a písma*, 181–182.

34 Gray – Atkinson, "Language-tree divergence times support the Anatolian theory of Indo-European origin", 435–439.

35 See Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language*, 148–175, 212–249.

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