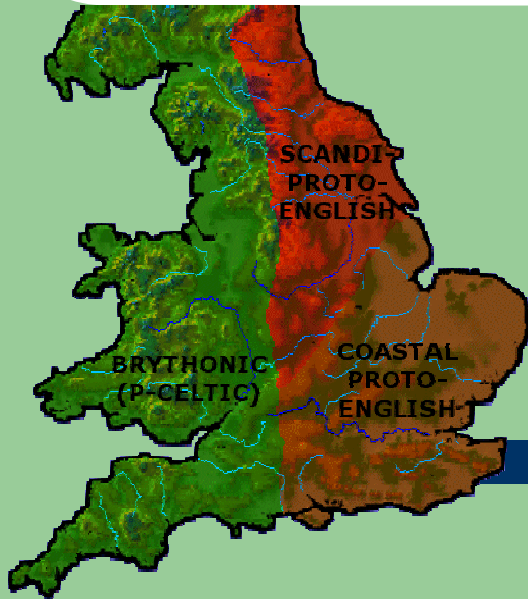


Celtic, Germanic or Unknown?

A Study of Place-Names in Ancient Britain



Place-names can reveal how language evolved over time.

This study uses place-names to suggest English may be far older than generally assumed.

Left: Potential language areas in ancient Britain
(Map by the author derived from various sources).

Traditional theory claims English is a relatively new language. Apparently, it did not exist before the Anglo-Saxon “invasion” around AD 450. Prior to the Roman conquest in AD 43, all Britons supposedly spoke some form of Celtic (e.g. Smith 1997; Coates 1998; Price 2000).

There are several problems with this assumption, and in a larger context, the theory of the spread of Indo-European languages. The traditional views require massive invasions to validate widespread linguistic change. There is little evidence for such full-scale genocides.

A newer idea called the “Continuity Theory” (e.g. Ballester 2005) presents an alternative to traditional views. This presentation analyzes evidence for a long-term English by looking at specific place-names. The map here reflects the possible languages spoken in southern Britain before the Romans—a landscape not too different from that after the Roman conquest.

Methodology

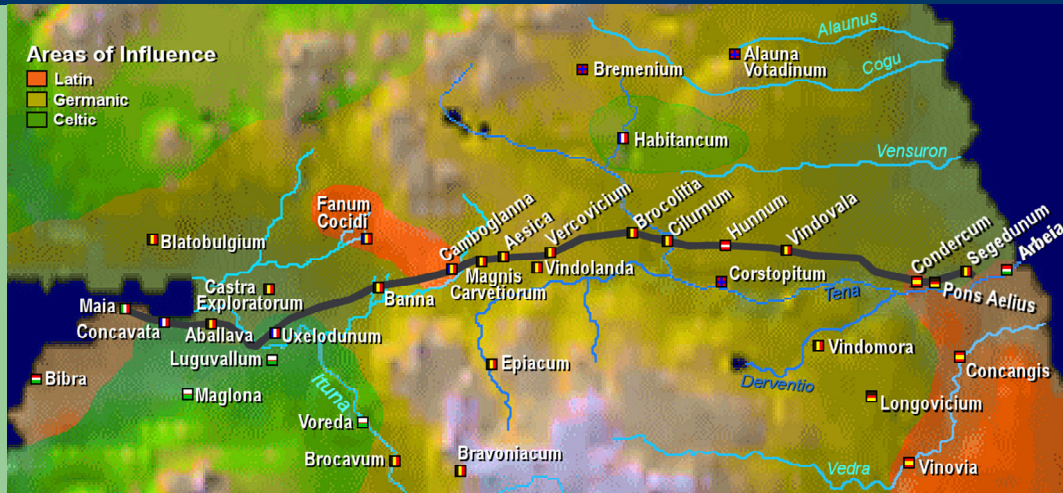
1. Does the place-name have a solid (morphological) etymology in the language branch claimed for it (such as Celtic)?
2. Does it have a solid etymology in another related language branch?
3. Does it make sense geographically in the place-name's landscape?
4. Are there cognates or similar place-names in other areas where the proposed language branch is spoken?

The salient method this study will use is a four-part test. This will determine a proposed etymology's validity in a particular language branch. Linguists have used similar tests in other studies (e.g. Sims-Williams 2006).

If the place-name passed #1 and failed #2, it would be “demonstrably Celtic.” If it passed both #1 and #2, all we could say without further assessment is that it is probably Indo-European. Failing both tests returns an “unknown” result—possibly from a non-Indo-European language. However, this study will be critical of any etymologies claimed from hypothetical prehistoric languages (cf. Coates 1998; Sims-Williams 1998). It will assess such etymologies using reconstructive and comparative methods from historical linguistics.

If the test returns what appears to be a solid etymology (either #1 or #2) we can refine it further by asking additional questions (#3 and #4).
















Germanic Tribes in Roman Britain



Hadrian's Wall c. AD 130-410. Areas of possible linguistic influence based on ethnicity of garrisons. (Map by the author derived from various sources)

Based on inscriptions (Collingwood and Wright 1995), the map above shows how few of the legions were Roman and how many were Germanic, just in the area of Hadrian's Wall. Without question, these men by the thousands were not idle genetically or linguistically for the hundreds of years they served in Britain. The soldiers in the ranks must have spoken their ancestral tongues. Certainly, Latin did not become the universal lingua franca so soon after the induction of people like Frisians into the empire. It may never have achieved this status in the north, as we can deduce from the lack of significant Latin influence on languages like Dutch and Frisian. Moreover, the presence of so many Germanic troops in Britain must have meant some of these men could communicate with some of the natives, as undoubtedly they did during negotiations and other interactions.

Germano-Roman Fort Names

<i>Site</i>	<i>Germanic etymology</i>	<i>Resident origins</i>
Brocavum	Brook-Home “Brougham”	 Belgica  Gaul  Asia Minor
Vindolanda	Windy-Land	 Belgica (Tungria, Nervia)  Gaul
Vercovicium	Fortified-Home	 Belgica (Tungria, Frisia)
Bremenium	Noble-Home	 Wotadin  Gaul  Nervia
Vindovala	Windy-Hillock	 Frisia
Vindomora	Windy-Moor	 Frisia  Pannonia
Longovicium	Long-Fort-Home	 Suebia  Aquitania  Gaul

This table lists several Hadrian's Wall settlements. Inscriptions provide information on resident origins. While most settlements in the area have conjectural etymologies, these show a plausible Germanic source with little mutation.

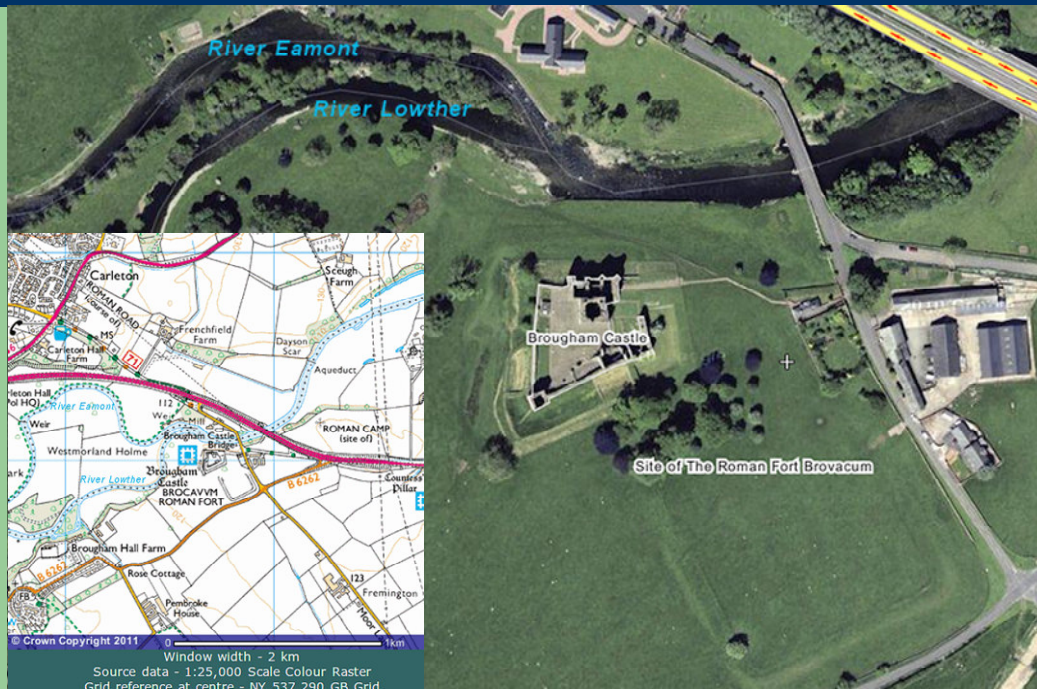
An altar stone at the fort of *Longovicium* bears the following inscription:

DEAE GARMANGABI ET N GORDIANI AVG N PRO SAL VEX SVEBORVM LON GOR
VOTUM SOLVERVNT M

One translation of this is: “To the goddess Garmangabi and to the deity of our Emperor Gordian for the welfare of the detachment of Suebians of *Longovicium*, styled Gordiana, the soldiers deservedly fulfilled their vow” (Collingwood and Wright 1995:358).

Perhaps these Suebians (Germans) were Langobards (Lombards), whose descendants made the inscription to Garmangabi and gave their name to *Longovicium*. This would be something like “Longwickham” in Old English, possibly “fort-home of the Lang(obards)” or simply “long fort-home.” In any case, the fort’s name looks decidedly more Germanic than Latin or Celtic.

Brocavum: “Brook Home”

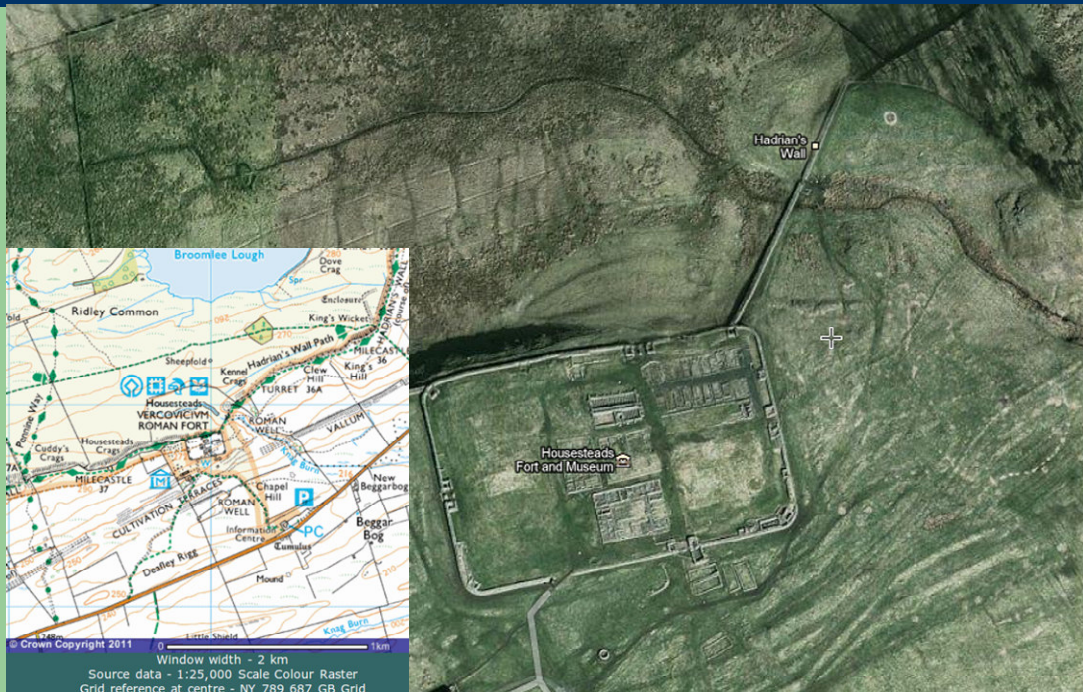


Above: Brocavum landscape (Satellite image by Digital Globe, GeoEye, Infoterra Ltd and Bluesky [2011])
Left inset: Brocavum topography (Map by Ordnance Survey [2011]).

The Roman fort *Brocavum* in Cumbria can serve as an example of the four-part test. This name occurs in the third-century Antonine Itinerary long before the alleged Anglo-Saxon invasion. As for test #1, there is no solid Welsh or Cumbrian derivation for the name. Celticists have suggested an etymology from a Celtic **broc(c)o* “badger” (Isaac 2004). However, this does not yield a plausible place-name. There are no Welsh place-names with such an element; in fact, names like Broughton and Sudbrook in Wales derive from Old English *brōc* (Owen and Morgan 2008:xxix, 50).

Test #2 yields an easy OE *brōc* + *hām* “brook-home.” For #3, it is located at the confluence of two brooks (the Eamont and the Lowther). As for #4, the place is Brougham to this day. Names with the *brōc* or “brook” element are quite common in English (Cole 1991). Names with the “brook” element include Broughton and Brooklyn; a cognate Bachheim also exists in Germany.

Vercovicium: “Fortified Town”

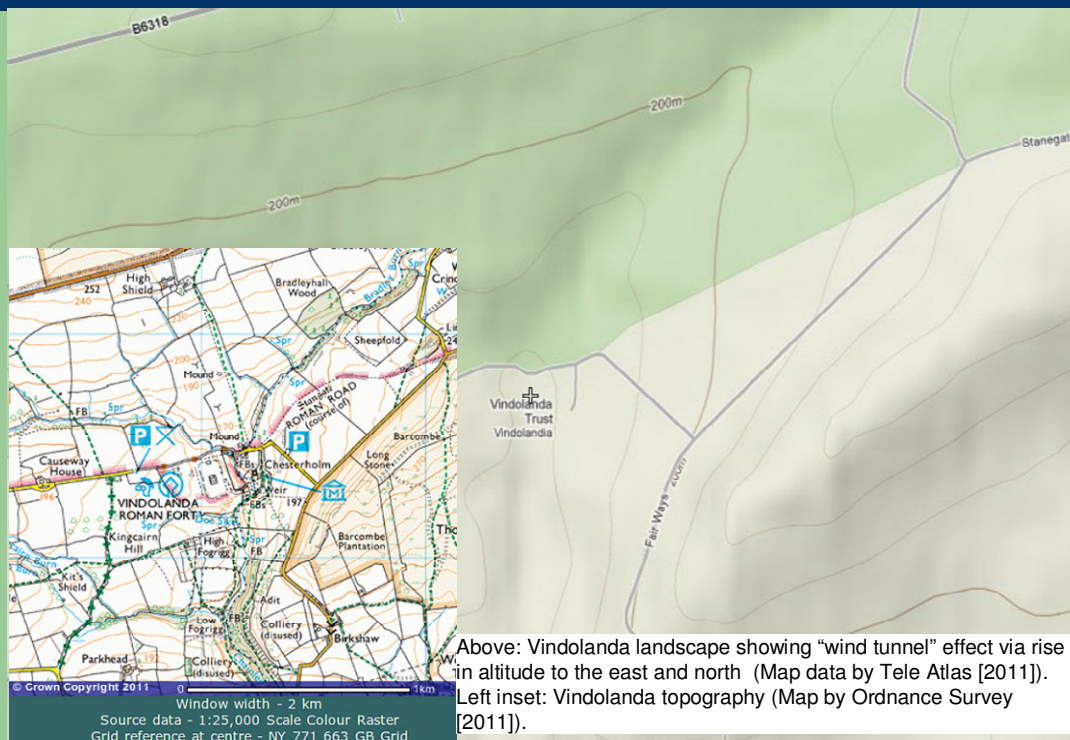


Above: Vercovicium landscape (Satellite image by Digital Globe, GeoEye, Infoterra Ltd and Bluesky [2011])
Left inset: Vercovicium topography (Map by Ordnance Survey [2011]).

The Roman fort *Vercovicium* (Housesteads) in Northumberland has a supposed etymology of “place of the Vercovices.” This is an obvious circular reference to an unknown people, though some scholars derive the name from hypothetical Celtic words **uercō-* “work” and **uic-* “fight.” However, inscriptions from the site show a Germanic, Frisian presence here (Watts 2004:641).

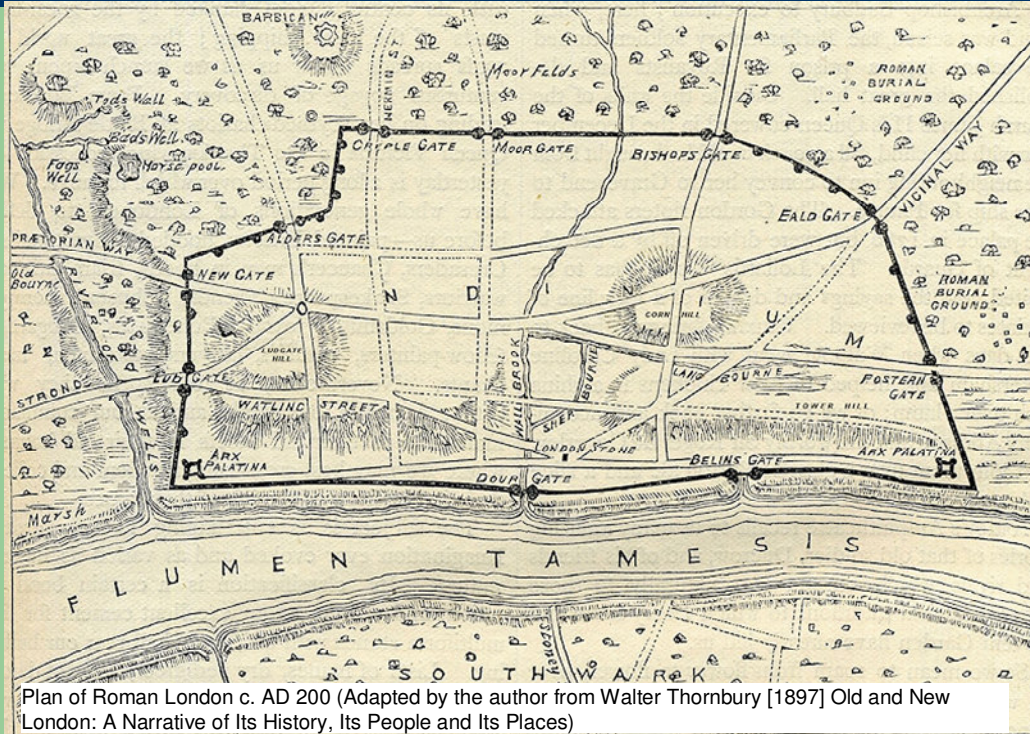
Thus, it makes more sense to derive the name from known Germanic elements rather than hypothetical Celtic ones. Old English would provide *weorc* “fortification” + *wīc* “settlement.” The final ending could be a “suffixal complex *-ium*” from an “inherited Indo-European type quite productive in Latin word-formation” (Solopov 2005:6-7). Or the entire ending *-viciūm* could be formed from *wīc* + *hām* “Wickham” which is common to Romano-British settlements (Gelling 2000:323).

Vindolanda: “Windy Land”



G. R. Isaac derives a “Celtic” etymology for **uindo-* meaning “white, bright, open.” Apparently in Isaac’s view, this root somehow derives from other Indo-European words for “to know.” One problem with this etymology is that none of the known Celtic languages have a dental consonant for this word (Old Breton *guinn*, Middle Cornish *gwyn*, Middle Welsh *gwynn*) with the exception of Old Irish, which has *find* “white, bright” (Isaac 2004:CE.132). Another problem is the element could also be Germanic (such as Old English *wind* “wind”). Further problems occur with the element **uino-*. Isaac states its meaning and origin are unknown, yet “all uncertainty notwithstanding, the existence of the element and its Celticity cannot be doubted” (CE.133). We certainly can doubt the linguistic affiliation of a place-name element if we know neither its meaning nor origin. In any case, *Vindolanda* can have a clear Old English etymology *wind* “wind” + *land* “land” with epenthetic vowels after the elements, as seems common from observing Latin phonological and orthographic rules.

Londinium: “Long Downs”



A recent etymology for the name London (Roman *Londinium*) proposes “a probably Celtic place-name derived from a Celticized river-name originally forming a part of the Old European stratum of European toponymy” (Coates 1998:203). Apart from a very tentative and circuitous explanation there, we have no solid evidence for an “Old European,” presumably some pre-Indo European or early IE language for which there is little evidence.

Old English might offer a more sensible etymology, such as *long* “long” + *dūna* “downs” (or *dȳnig* “hilly”) + *hām* “home.” The common suffix *-ium* mentioned above is also a possibility for the ending. A process of allophony can cause a mutation of consonants such as /ng/ to /n/ (Cox 2009:20).

London’s topography may not be evident today, but as the map above shows, in Roman times and earlier, the settlement stood on long hills or downs. In the west was Ludgate Hill. A stream called the *Langbourne* flowed from between Tower Hill in the east and Cornhill in the center.

Conclusion

Several names from Roman times throughout England appear to have English etymologies:

- Longovicium: OE *long* + *wīc* + *hām* “long town”
- Brocavum: OE *brōc* + *hām* “brook-home.”
- Vercovicium: OE *weorc* + *wīc* + *hām* “fortified town”
- Vindolanda: OE *wind* + *land* “windy-land”
- Londinium: OE *lon(g)* + *dȳni(g)* + *hām* “long hilly home”

English may be older than we think. This study analyzed the names of some forts on or near Hadrian’s Wall and the city of London. As inscriptions show (Collingwood and Wright 1995), many Germanic peoples were present in Roman Britain, possibly even earlier. All of the Roman forts above had garrisons or other inhabitants from regions like Frisia or Suebia, where Germanic languages were spoken.

For these place-names, a "most plausible" approach finds them to be Germanic and closely related to English. This study analyzed the places in their geographical contexts to determine whether the etymologies made sense. The received orthodox etymologies (if they exist) fail to explain the place-names plausibly in their settings, whereas English etymologies serve better. This contradicts conventional notions about an alleged “Anglo-Saxon invasion” of Britain that several centuries of assumptions have established as canonical.

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Additional information

Apart from ancient place-names, this study also makes use of:

1. Linguistic theory
2. Archaeological data
3. Genetic data

This study takes an interdisciplinary approach that ties together data from linguistics, archaeology, history, genetics and other related fields.

Linguistics

The preceding linguistic analysis concerned a sample of ancient British place-names. Several of these include Roman forts along and close to Hadrian's Wall (such as *Brocavum*, *Longovicium* and *Vindolanda*). There are larger theories about the age and formation of the Indo-European languages discussed hereafter that shape this analysis.

Archaeology

Archaeological data (supported by genetic evidence) can demonstrate the Anglo-Saxon "invasion" had much less of an impact than hitherto assumed. Various categories of archaeological data can help analyze human geography in conjunction with data from linguistics and genetics.

Genetics

A large part of this study deals with mapping archaeological data and cross-referencing it with population movements deduced from genetic data. The subsequent maps show such population movements in Europe stretching back thousands of years.

Theories

The spread of Indo-European languages:

1. Kurgan hypothesis

- Copper Age conquest theory
- Marija Gimbutas (1963)

2. Anatolian hypothesis

- Neolithic spread of farming
- Colin Renfrew (1987)

3. Continuity hypothesis

- Evolution of languages since Paleolithic
- Mario Alinei (2011)

Little archaeological evidence exists for the traditional models of proto-Indo European (PIE) language spread (Alinei 1998). No invasion of horse-riding “Indo-European” nomads in the Copper Age displaced an older non-PIE-speaking population, as proposed by Marija Gimbutas (1963:85). Archaeologist Colin Renfrew asserts the domestication of the horse occurred long after the PIE split (1987:418).

Renfrew’s own hypothesis runs into its own problems. There is no linguistic evidence for a massive influx of “Indo-European” Neolithic farmers from the Middle East (Ballester 2006). Such “invasions” may well have occurred in some form, but likely they involved non-Indo-Europeans such as Uralic or Turkic speakers (Alinei 2003a). Likewise, there is little evidence to sustain the traditional notion that vast waves of Anglo-Saxon invaders colonized post-Roman Britain in numbers large enough to cause widespread (and sudden) linguistic change. These mercenaries spoke a language very similar to that spoken in eastern Britain since time immemorial (Ballester 2005).

Arguments for continuity

1. Common words for death but not burial suggest a very early split.
2. Words for Mesolithic inventions (such as bows and fishing tools) are quite different in most IE languages.
3. Virtually no common “farming terminology” exists to support Renfrew’s “Neolithic discontinuity” theory.
4. There are very few Celtic loanwords in English or even definite “Celtic” place-names in eastern England.

Proponents of continuity (such as Alinei 2011) offer several points to support a Paleolithic differentiation of proto-Indo European languages. In addition, Indo-European continuity coincides with “Uralic Continuity Theory” now widely accepted by Finno-Ugric scholars.

Renfrew himself points out Neolithic terms shared by many Indo-European languages could easily be loanwords, imported along with the devices they represent (1987). Alinei reports this is a common phenomenon and has “collected a lot of evidence that indicates that by far the largest part of the Neolithic vocabulary is differentiated in all or most IE languages” (1998:33).

Traditional views

1. Indo-European appeared and diversified relatively recently (in the Neolithic or Copper Age).
2. The Celts appeared in central Europe relatively recently (in the Bronze or Iron Age) and spread westward from there.
3. All Britons spoke a Celtic language before the arrival of the Romans.
4. The Germanic people did not extend their linguistic sphere of influence to Britain until after the Romans left.

Paleolithic continuity aims to dispel some received notions about the formation of language in Europe on the grounds of insufficient evidence (e.g. Ballester 2005, Alinei 2011). These received notions all lack sufficient evidence to justify them. Moreover, there are alternate theories both simpler and more plausible.

The continuity paradigm lets us roll back the artificial compression imposed by the theories that seek to squeeze widespread language diversification into a mere handful of millennia (Alinei 2011). Once we do this, we can dispel the myths that have prevailed for centuries. One is that the Celts arose quite recently from central Europe and suddenly fanned out from there (e.g. Haywood 2001:28), despite all historical, archaeological and genetic evidence to the contrary. The other is that the Anglo-Saxons, even more recently and suddenly, annihilated all traces of a “Celtic” language spoken throughout all of England (e.g. Bede 14-15; Henson 2006:49), despite overwhelming proof this is an oversimplification of the real picture.

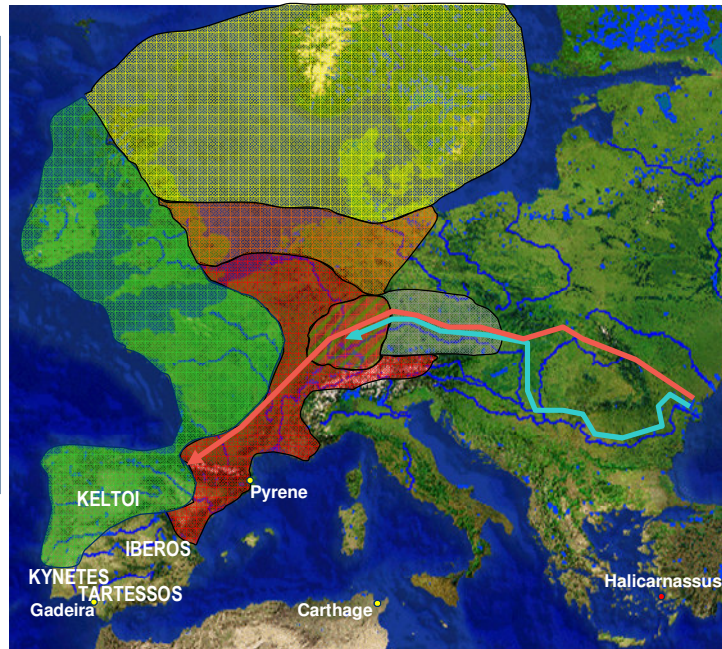
The proposed study will focus on points 3 and 4 above, formulating them in terms of research questions. The study should gather enough evidence to dispel these myths.

Traditions for a Celtic homeland

Danube River	
■	Herodotus' estimate
■	Actual course
Bronze/Iron Age Cultures	
■	Nordic 1800-500 BC
■	Atlantic 1300-700 BC
■	Urnfield 1300-750 BC
■	Hallstatt 1200-500 BC
■	La Tène 450-50 BC

- = Herodotus' home
- = other city

IBEROS = tribe described by Herodotus



Adherents of a recent “Celts-skeptic” trend seem to doubt whether the Celts were a coherent people at all. This likely stems from a number of myths perpetuated about the Celts since ancient times.






One myth puts the Celts’ homeland in central Europe and has them “appear” there in relatively recent (Bronze/Iron Age) times. Herodotus is probably the main source of this myth. Writing around 430 BC in what is now Turkey, he was familiar with the mouth of the Danube in the Black Sea, fairly close to him. However, by his own admission, he relied on second-hand accounts for descriptions of lands further west. Thus, he placed the source of the Danube in the Pyrenees in southern France rather than in southern Germany where we know it to be. Scholars have misinterpreted this over the millennia and have put the homeland of the Celts in central Europe despite all archaeological and historical evidence that places them in southwest Europe. If there was a spread of culture it was from west to east rather than vice-versa.



Archaeology: Data categories

Artifact type	Significance
Human remains	Possible ethnic traits (especially via ancient DNA); evidence of war and disease
Ancient fields	Possible farming or herding indicators
Tombs, dolmens, cromlechs	Possible religious belief systems (mortuary practices)
Henges, alignments, menhirs	Possible astronomic or religious beliefs (often differentiated geographically)
Housing structures	Possible ethnic traits (architectural styles) and settlement patterns
Portable artifacts (pottery, tools, weapons, coins, etc.)	Various indicators depending on context, but often suggesting migration and trade patterns

Three general categories of archaeological data can help with the analysis of human geography: settlements, artifact styles and belief systems. The latter, when apparent, is most indicative of social coherence or separation between groups (Cunliffe 2005:73). Such a category has no clear definition, however, and may include artifacts from other categories. Furthermore, ethnic groups may not necessarily correspond or differ based on these categories. Yet historical and modern ethnic groups tend to share features along these lines. Moreover, ethnic groups, particularly in Europe, tend to speak distinct ethnic languages preserved over long periods. The table above breaks down these data categories into subsets. This allows a deeper analysis of what each type of artifact may tell us. Analysis will focus on cataloguing dates and locations of these data using mapping methods as described below.

Last Glacial Maximum 16,000 BC

Vegetation	
	Ice
	Polar desert
	Steppe-tundra
	Dry steppe
	Woodland
	Semi-desert

Cultures	
	Solutrean
	Epigravettian

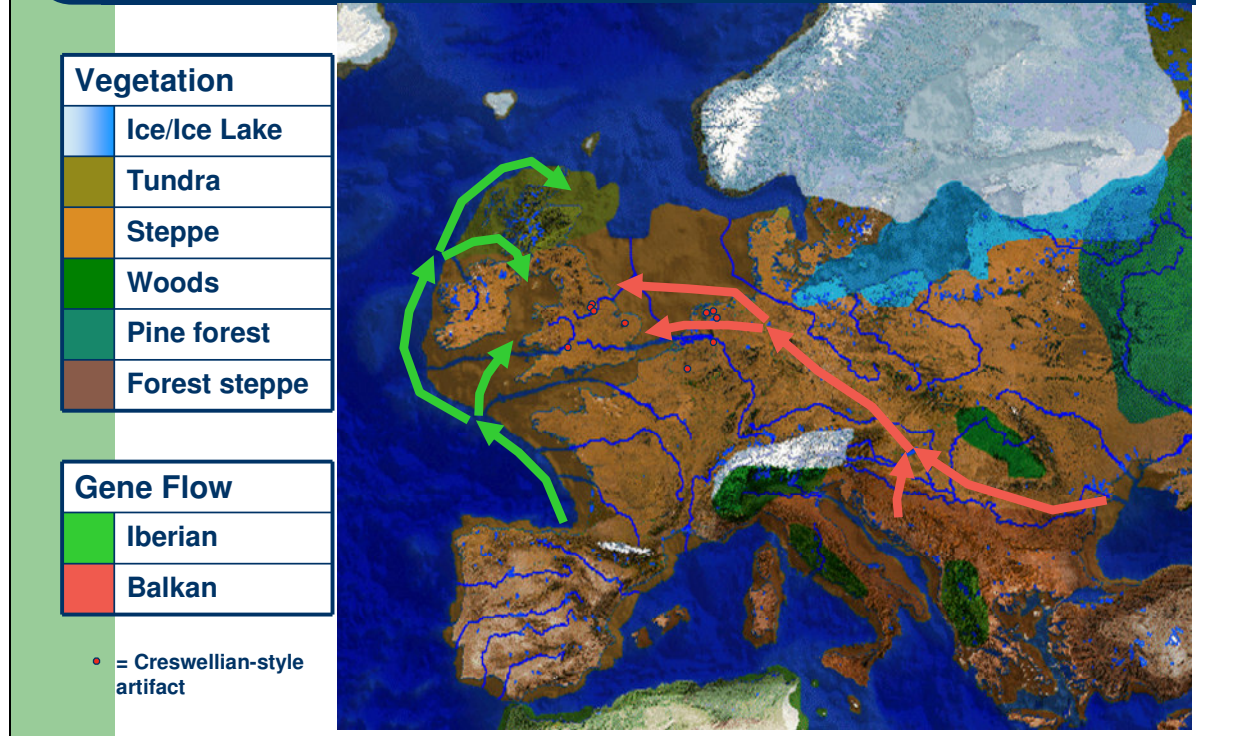


A large part of this study will deal with mapping archaeological data and cross-referencing it with population movements deduced from genetic data. Geographic information system (GIS) software can help produce these maps.

At the height of the last ice age, glaciers covered Scandinavia, the Baltic and most of Britain and Ireland. Most of northern Europe was tundra or polar desert. This was largely uninhabitable, but home to species such as the woolly mammoth, which disappeared from Europe around 10,000 BC.

Southern Europe was more fertile steppe country. These regions were home to ice age refuges such as the Solutrean culture of France and Spain (17-13,000 BC) and the Epigravettian of the Balkans and Eastern Europe (18-10,000 BC).

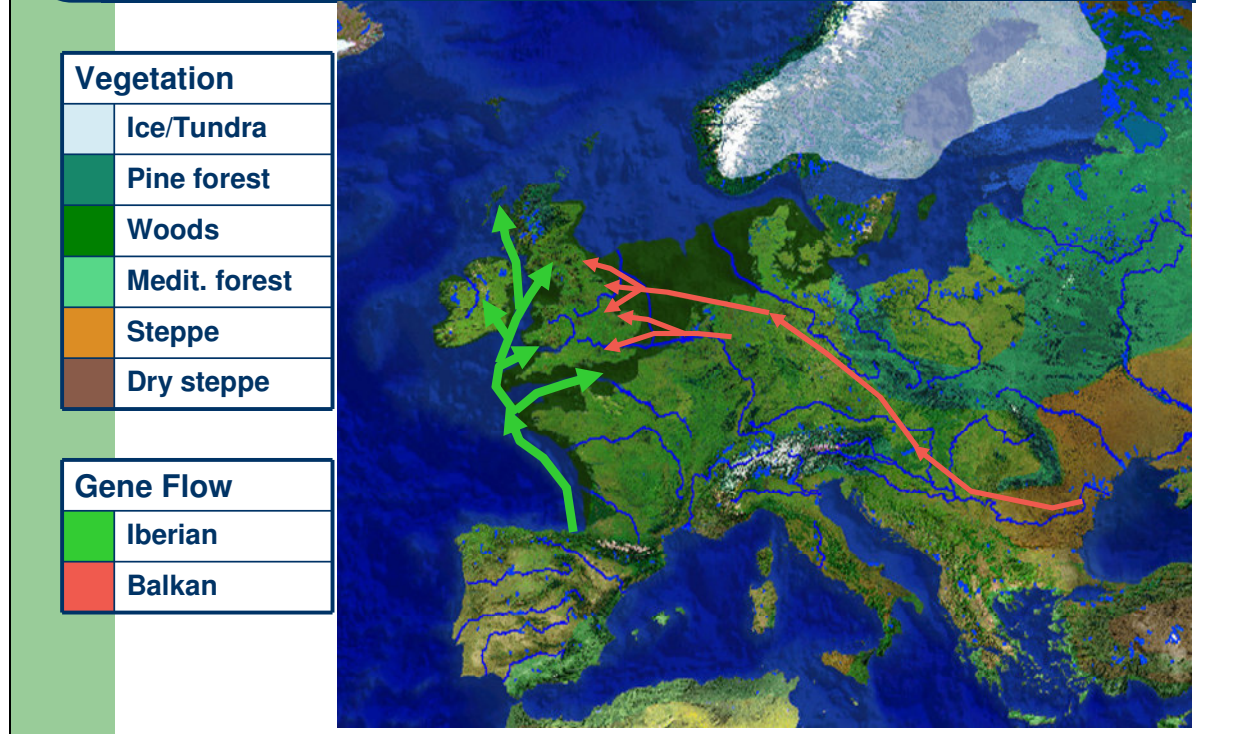
Post-Glacial Expansion 13,000 BC



A sudden warming allowed humans to expand northward into areas previously covered by ice and polar desert. A large proportion of maternal genes from western Britain and Ireland date to this period (40-60% of mtDNA haplogroups H1-H5 and V). The mutations that define these genes originated in northern Spain and southwest France. Likewise, a large proportion of male genes originate from the same period and region (Y-DNA R1b and subgroups).

Another large migration dates to the late Paleolithic. Settlers from refuges in the Balkans and Ukraine moved first to northern Germany and southern Scandinavia, then westward to Frisia and England (Y-DNA haplogroup I). The earliest gene flow from the Ukraine (I1c) seems to connect with Creswellian-style artifacts found on both sides of the North Sea. The center of the northern I1c gene distribution would be in the middle of the North Sea plain if it still existed today.

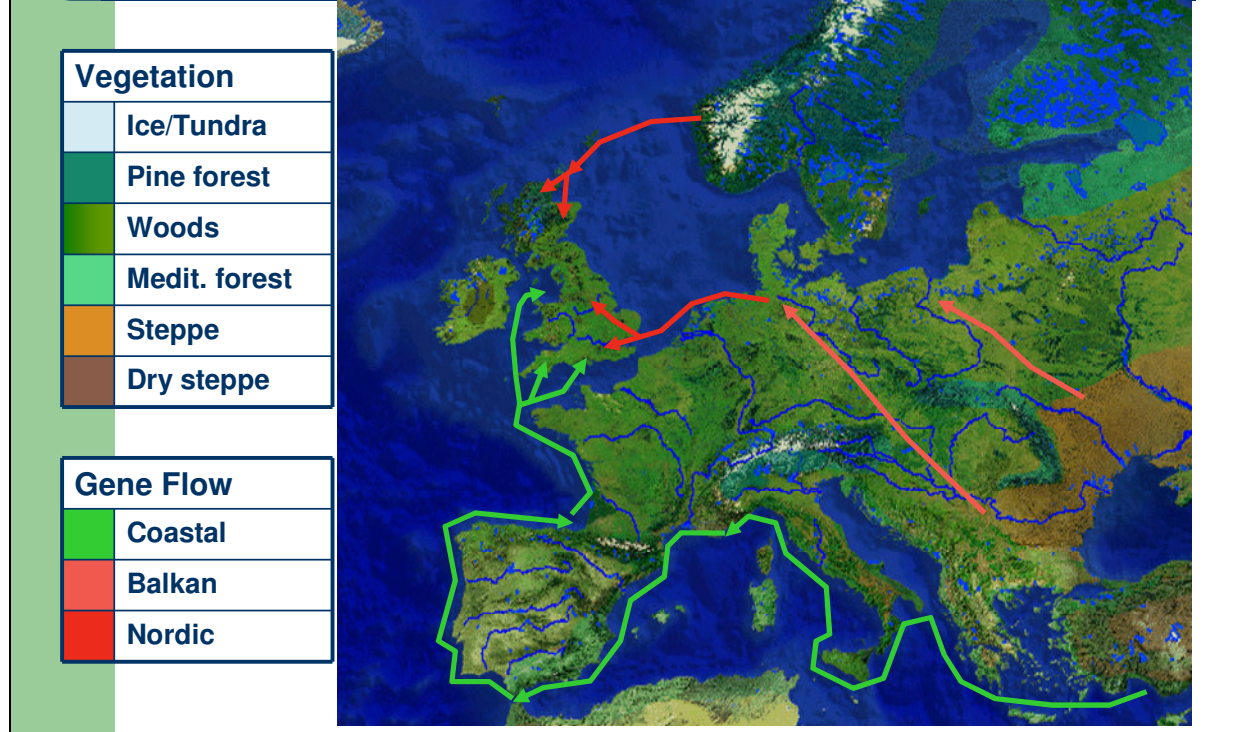
Mesolithic Expansion 9000 BC



A cold period known as the Younger Dryas (c. 11,000-9500 BC) limited population growth. Afterward, another warming allowed a re-expansion from the same Iberian and Balkan refuges. The latter gene group resettled also from existing territory in Frisia and northwestern continental Europe. Around this time, Ireland separated from Britain, which was still joined to the continent along with a large territory in the North Sea.

Artifacts point to a division between the western and eastern groups. Western settlements are largely coastal and river-based, with similarities in artifacts such as harpoon points from Spain to western Scotland. Star Carr in Yorkshire belongs to the Maglemosian culture that spans across forests and wetlands in England, Denmark, Sweden and northern France. Sea levels did not rise to flood the North Sea and English Channel until around 6000 BC. Only after many thousands of years was Britain separated from the Continent.

Neolithic Movements 5000 BC



In the Neolithic, genes followed the same paths previously established with a couple new trends. One is the introduction of genes further southeast, from Italy and ultimately the Middle East, following the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts. The spread of farming and Cardial Impressed Ware corresponds with this flow. The second new trend is the introduction of genes from Norway to northern Scotland and its islands, thus beginning a pattern that will last for millennia. This includes significant maternal genes, suggesting complete settlement rather than invasion by males only.

The two Balkan paths east of the Alps and the Carpathians continued to spread genes in this period, as shown by the spread of the Starčevo culture and Linear Bandkeramik pottery.

The genetic impact to Britain in the Neolithic was less than in previous periods, measuring mostly in single rather than double percentage points.