

Paper III
Irish and German: some linguistic Connections
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Similarities between the modern Irish and German languages raise the question of the origins of these. There are Celtic names and place-names in France, Germany and farther east. Gaelic folklore, too, deals with events on the European mainland. Such evidence indicates that important cultural influences in Ireland came originally from an historic homeland, shared with other peoples to the north and east of the Alps.

[I] Early Migrations

When tribes broke away from the great Indo-European family, the languages they spoke had gradually differentiated from the original Proto-Indo-European. They have been classified according to the initial letter for the word 'hundred'. Those languages with the s/sh-sound are classified as *satem* languages (after the word 'hundred' in Avestan) and those which have a k-sound are *centum* languages (after the Latin word).

In Western Europe the Centum languages developed - Celtic, Germanic, Italic and Hellenic languages. In Eastern Europe and in Asia, the Satem languages developed - Slavonic, Baltic, Armenian, Albanian and Indo-Iranian (which comprised Avestan, spoke by the Parsees and the related Sanskrit, from which modern Hindi derives). There are differing views about how closely related some of these languages are.



Brünhilde Leads Her Horse
by Arthur Rackham, 1910

The Anatolian languages are a group of extinct [Indo-European](#) languages, which were spoken in [Asia Minor](#), the best attested of them being the [Hittite language](#). Smaller migrations always occurred against the general trend. As recorded in Indian scripts from the 7th and 8th centuries, an Indo-European people, the Tocharians, went as far as the Tarim Basin in China. Archaeological discoveries have shown that these people had red hair: the mark of the Celt.

Within subgroups, languages which have developed separately over some hundreds of years - sister languages - are only mutually comprehensible with some effort. Two close Celtic languages are Irish and Scots Gaelic. When separated for a greater length of time, languages are termed cousin languages - for example Irish and Welsh.

In the population of Indo-Europeans which came to Temperate Europe, Germans and Celts were predominant. The two peoples were the most westerly of the migration. They maintained settlements in close proximity up to the Roman period. In consequence, there was on-going interchange – with consequential effects on political and cultural development.

The ancients used strong names for their tribes. Those, which Caesar encountered in Gaul, used the general name ‘Celt’. ‘Gaul’ may be the word ‘*ceilt*’, without the final ‘t’. Gerhard Herrm said that perhaps they saw themselves as “the people who came from the darkness” (*ceilt* – concealment). However, in the Danube Basin around 1000 BC, the warlike Celts were not hiding away. Their name more probably derives from the Indo-European ‘kel’, meaning ‘to strike’. The Greek writer, Pausanius, records that these tribes used the name ‘Celtói’ - as did ‘all other peoples’.

The name ‘German’ is itself Celtic. The Irish root *gair* (near), to mean ‘neighbours’, has been suggested. However the Old Irish root *gaé* (spear), to mean ‘spear-carrier’ or ‘sharp-witted’, is stronger. In Modern Irish, ‘*géal*’ means ‘sharp’. The Roman word *germanus* (‘real’ or ‘authentic’) takes up the latter meaning.

Celtic migration westwards moved on from Bohemia and southern Germany to Gaul and from thence to Spain. Other groups went south into the Balkans and Italy. Yet others went back east, through Greece, to Galatia. This last Celtic settlement lay to the south of Scythia, which is now in the Ukraine. It was from Scythia that the Celts had originally come.

[II] Celts and Germans: historical Accounts

Historians like Strabo, the Greek, took the view that the Germans were the ‘real (or authentic) Celts’. Both the origins of and Germanic-Celtic interrelations of early northern European tribes, such as the Celtic Cotoni, are unclear.

At the Battle of Aqua Sextiae, the Romans and their Celtic Ligurian allies were ranged against the Cimbri, Ambrones and Teutones. These latter tribes came from Jutland, not Gaul, and have been regarded as Germanic.

The name of the Cimbri is related to the Brythonic *cymri* ('companions') from which the names 'Cymru' and 'Cumbria' derive. The name of their king is also indisputably Celtic. He was called Boiorix – 'King of the Boii' (a tribe of cattle-herders, which gave its name to Bohemia). Plutarch describes how, in Celtic style, the Ligurians heard the Ambrones rallying each other, by calling out their individual and clan names, during the fighting. The Ligurians then followed suit "for the Ligurians are known after their origins as Ambrones". Linking with the Teutones, 'Teutates' was the Celtic god of the Northern Reaches.

These Celtic tribes were either mistaken for early Germans or were indeed linguistically close to them. They were hardly utter strangers to the rest of their northern neighbours: a degree of mutual comprehension may have existed through dialect continua.

Tacitus' description of Celtic physical traits is similar to some descriptions of Germans: nobody can now confirm whether he thought that they were different. The confusion in classical texts might be taken to reflect the final stages of differentiation between Celts and Germans.

[III] The golden Age of Gaelic Civilisation

Celtic adventurers continued to leave their settlements, new and old, in Scythia, Spain and central Europe. From 500 BC to 500 AD, various groups reached Ireland, where they mixed with the existing population of Norse, Basque and North African origins. They called themselves the Gael.

The Gael built a new civilisation, which extended to Scotland and the Isle of Man. The territory was called the Gaeltacht - the Realm of the Gael. This is a mediaeval term like Frankreich - the Realm of the Franks. The Gael formed a society in which highly qualified judges, poets and bards maintained legal, cultural and linguistic cohesion. The legal system in Gaelic times comprised the Brehon Laws. These comprised a great body of civil, criminal and military law. It outlined five main classes of people, together with their rights, duties and privileges.

While the history of Irish law between the 8th and 17th centuries is very sketchy due to the lack of surviving historical materials, occasional references indicate that women continued to enjoy an exceptional standing in law with regard to their property rights, down to the end of native Irish culture.

It is thought that the Gael imported the Germanic legal practice of imposing fines for crimes of personal injury. A pecuniary fine was imposed on the criminal, and sometimes on his tribe, called the Eric fine. This was comparable with the Wehr Geld of the Germans. Connections between the Celtic and Germanic peoples are set out in Irish mythology.

The forces of history sundered the Gaeltacht, as the golden age of its civilization reached its zenith. This brought to a virtual end one of the great European cultures of the Middle Ages, with its refined outlook and scholarship. Procuring arms in a country without a steel industry was always difficult. Soldiers often went to battle unarmed, hoping to prise

weapons from the invader. The Celtic trait of choosing personal honour and glory, over coordinated military strategy, told against the bravery of the Gaelic armies.

Connections with continental Europe faltered, as the Gaelic Order was dismantled in the 1600-1700s. It has been said that the kings of Munster continued to visit the mainland later than their northern counterparts.

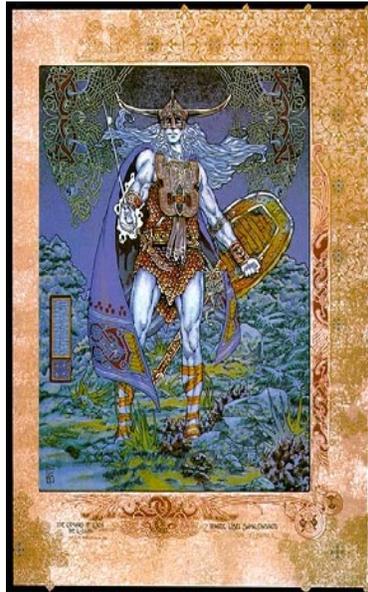
[IV] Routes to Ireland

The main routes by which the Celts migrated to Ireland and how the Celtic culture took root have been debated. If our forebears were true to form, they came here by every means and route available. Examples from different historical records bear this out. (The Latin names for countries are used, to mark the period.)

1) From Germania via Belgica/Gallia Herodotus wrote that Celtic people, including the Druids, migrated directly from the Danube basin to Gaul, from which a journey to the British Isles would have been a logical next step. The Druids were an ancient caste, said to have derived their philosophies from Pythagoras (c500 BC). Druidic training took twenty years. Memory, not the written word, was used in schools. Written knowledge could have been lost during migration. Important subjects included the influence of the gods, astronomy (they did not postulate a 'flat Earth') and moral philosophy.

2) From a settlement in Hispania Míl, or Miles Hispaniae (the Soldier of Spain), is said by Macalister (RAS, Ancient Ireland, London, 1935) to have invaded from the sea c500 BC. His wife was called Scota, indicating her people originally came from Scythia. Migrations from there to Spain undoubtedly occurred both via the sea and overland, possibly through Turkmen territories. The Irish word *turcach* means 'a rough character'.

3) Direct Route Nemed Mac Agnomain is said by Macalister (RAS, Lebor Gabála, Dublin, 1938) to have come to Ireland directly from Scythia. He sailed from the northern shores of the Black Sea in thirty-four ships, each carrying thirty people. From there, he sailed through the Bosphorous, across the Mediterranean, by the Straits of Gilbralter and then north to Ireland. In northern Libya, there is an oil town called Marsa el Brega. This may echo the name of the Celtic goddess Brigid (linked to the Sanskrit 'brahati' – 'exalted'). She was the goddess of fire, poetry and wisdom. In Portugal, the names of the northern Portuguese towns of Braga and Bragança (this latter to the south of Vigo) may also mark a Celtic passage. Brigid is linked to placenames farther afield too. The 'Algarve' can be taken to mean 'aill gharbh' - 'inhospitable cliff'.



The Coming of Lugh the Il-Dana, 1979
 © With the kind permission of Jim Fitzpatrick

[V] Names, other Placenames and Mythology

By which route did those Celts come, who had most influence on Ireland's culture?

1] Names and placenames of Celtic relevance persist in numbers across Temperate Europe. *This would indicate that the route to Ireland from Germania, through Gallia, was probably the most important.*

Art, meaning 'champion' in Old Irish is a man's name both in Irish and German. Oskar (meaning deer-lover in Old Irish, according to the Austrian scholar, Julius Pokorny) is a common German personal name. Oscar was the grandson of Fionn Mac Cumhail, one of the great warriors of Gaelic mythology. [Ósgur is also Pashtun and a Turkish name.]

Referring again to Brigid, the Austrian city of Bregenz (formerly Brigantium) was the capital of a tribe which culted this Celtic goddess. In Irish *folklore*, she was the daughter of the god Dagda. He was the leader of the mystical tribe, the Tuatha Dé Danann, and god of the Earth and Treaties. To the northeast, there is the city of Brno in the Czech Republic and the town of Brzeg in Poland.

Fionn's name is embedded in Wien. Lyons (formerly Lugdunum) was named after the Celtic god Lugh, in Ireland the sun god. The name incorporates 'dún', the Irish for 'fort'. Lugh may also be cognate with Luxovius, the god of healing at the ancient Celtic healing centre of Luxeuil (Mac Neill, p.276).

The Galatians are famed as the recipients of Paul's Epistle, and as late as the 4th century AD, St Jerome wrote that they spoke the same language as the natives of an area of the German Rhineland. 'Rhein', or 'Rih' in Schwyzertütsch (Baden), means the 'flowing' (*rith* in Irish – PIE *reie, to flow). A Celtic name 'Rhenos' was recorded. The name of that other great river, the 'Donau', echoes the goddess Danu. And 'die Alpen' means the 'high mountains' (*ailp* in Irish).

There is the story of Nuada, King and Champion of the Irish tribes called the Tuatha Dé Danann, in an epic battle with Streng of the Fir Bolg. The word 'streng' is pure Germanic and means 'the disciplined [champion]'. The Fir Bolg were a sub-set of the Belgae, perhaps ultimately of Norse descent. In Belgium, an annual '[Folkfestival Na Fir Bolg](#)' is held. Bulga was the God of Lightning. The name appears again in Bulgaria. The Tuatha Dé Danann were the 'Teutons (Northerners) of Danu', Mother of the Gods. Tribal names would tend to be linked to deities or to prowess, both important in the battle for survival.

The saga of the Táin Bó Froích (the Cattle Raid of Froích) describes how a hero goes on expedition to the Alps to recover his stolen wife and stolen cattle. There, he meets the Lombards (Long-Beards – *Lang-Bärte*). There is also the tale of Labraid Loingsech (Labraid the Mariner), the forebear of Leinstermen, in his bid to overthrow Cobhthach Coel. In one version, Labraid receives help from the Franks and, returning to Wexford, he overcomes Cobhthach, in 307 BC.

2] Sail to Ireland via Hispania. In the first option, would have required less resources. However, it was not a method for any great numbers. Furthermore, although very colourful leaders came from Hispania and all the kings of Ireland claimed descent from them, the folklore does not provide much information on the country itself. Galicia housed a community of modest reach, which was well positioned as a port-of-call for Mediterranean traders bound northwards. Migration from Celtic Hispania is unlikely to have been extensive enough to dominate Irish cultural identity.

3] Sail to Ireland from Scythia. To sail from the northern shores of the Black Sea was not a route for large or continual migrations to occur. The story more likely serves the purpose of linking the Gael to their old homeland in Scythia, a name which they kept and gave to Scotland in later years. The folklore concerning the arrival in Ireland of the Celts is much intertwined with other strands of ancient history. This, of course, needs a scholarly unravelling. Certain authors fall quite short of this and attempt a fundamentalist interpretation of the manuscripts, such as in the article **Ireland's Cleopatra**, referenced below.

[VI] Linguistic Evidence: common Features in both German and Irish

There is no good information on Celtic and Germanic languages spoken during Roman times. *It is likely that a straightforward pattern of differentiation between Celtic and German would not have occurred, since both groups lived in proximity for a long period.*

Both languages still possess grammatical forms and vocabularies, which indicate that there must have been substantial links even two thousand years ago. These links are outlined below and further examined in Paper IV. *Again, it may be inferred that the route to Hibernia from Germania, through Gallia, was the most important.*

Some examples both of modern Celtic languages - Gaelic (Irish and Scots), Welsh and Breton - and of German will demonstrate the considerable linguistic divergence which has occurred between these languages. The following are translations of: "I see her. My brother saw you."

Irish Gaelic: Feicim í. Chonaic mo dheartháir/bhráthair thú.

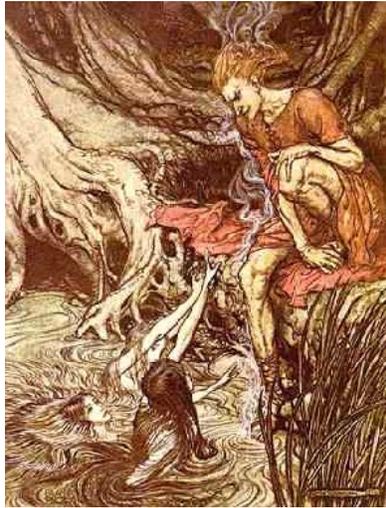
Scots Gaelic: Faic mi i. Chunnaic mo bhráthair thù.

Welsh: Rwyf yn gweld hi. Gwelodd fy mrawd ti.

Breton: Me he gwel. Va breur az' kwelas.

German: Ich sehe ihr. Mein Bruder hat Ihnen gesehen.

Scots prefer another idiom for the first sentence, saying “tha mi ga faicinn”. Irish Gaelic also has this structure: “tá mé á [ag a] feiceáil” - literally “I am at her seeing”. It might be asked if any real links, in fact, do persist between Gaelic and the other languages. The answer is yes, most certainly, but they need specially to be demonstrated.



**Loki and the Rhinemaidens
by Arthur Rackham, 1910**

[VII] Basic grammatical Structure

Irish is a pure language and the best-preserved dialect of ancient Celtic. Celts were numerous and widespread throughout Europe until about the 4th century. Irish is an important reservoir of Indo-European linguistic and wider cultural features.

Irish and German are synthetic, inflecting languages. Maintenance of good grammar is important in both cultures. This probably had more to do with keeping linguistic nuances distinct than some undefined linguistic conservatism, often suggested. The use of correct Irish, throughout the Gaeltacht, was a matter of considerable effort and pride.

Both languages have article-noun-adjective declensions. Irish uses five/six cases and German four/five. The Vocative Case is inflected in Irish but not in German. Irish too has a Locative Case for placenames, evident in the following: Muileann gCearr (Mullingar) and Loch gCarmáin (Wexford – now spelled Loc Garmáin). Indo-European had up to eight cases. German uses the three genders (m, f, and n). Modern Irish has lost the neuter gender, used in Old Irish.

Irish and German conjugate verbs in Past, Present, Future and Conditional Tenses in the Active Voice. Both languages have a Present and Past Tense in the Subjunctive Mood. Both languages use auxiliary verbs. Both use the Infinitive as a verbal noun. German, unlike Irish, has kept the Passive Voice. “Der Reiter ist vom Dichter beobachtet worden” means: “the horseman was observed by the poet”. Both languages can express the Passive Voice, however, using special constructions in the Active Voice.

Vowel sounds in both languages, as is often noted in Ireland, are pure rather than diphthongal. In Gaelic, vowels can be long (*lá*) or short (*sa*). In German, long (*loben*), half long (*militär*), and short (*kalt*) vowels have been described. However, only long and short vowels tend to be distinguished in today’s German grammars. Pronunciation of written Irish and German are in many ways comparable, with eg the ‘*ch*’ sound being identical and vowel sounds being kept pure. The pronunciation of ‘*r*’ usually varies from one European language to another. In Irish, there is a broad and slender (velar and palatal) ‘*r*’ sound. In German, the ‘*r*’ is pronounced quite like it is in French.

Irish puts a helping or epenthetic vowel between consonant pairs, usually where one of the consonants is *l*, *r* or *n*. ‘*dorcha*’ (dark) has a vowel sound between the ‘*r*’ and ‘*ch*’. ‘*Film*’, in Hiberno-English, has a vowel between the ‘*l*’ and the ‘*m*’. German syllables end in a vowel when possible - syllabication. Consonants within a word go to the next syllable, whether open (ending in *h* or in a vowel) or closed (ending in a consonant). Note the German - *adelig/adlig* (noble). The ‘*e*’ is written in Süddeutschland.

In Irish word pairs, the words which begin with ‘*s*’ denote good things and those which begin with ‘*d*’ denote bad things. Thus: *sona* (happy) - *dona* (bad), *suairc* (agreeable) - *duairc* (cheerless), *subh* (f, jam) - *dubh* (black, malevolent. m, something of greatest evil, potato blight), *sochar* (benefit) – *dochar* (damage). The German *Sonne* (f, sun) and *Donner* (m, thunder) may represent a corresponding Indo-European characteristic.

Scripts

Ogham was the original, ancient form of writing in Ireland, with limited applications. The modern morphemic system of writing originated in Greece: Egyptian hieroglyphs and Phoenician symbols were modified. The Greek alphabet was then used by the Etruscans, followed by the Romans, with adaptations to express voiced plosive sounds.

Roman script was used in Ireland following the arrival of Christianity. A Gaelic alphabet was also devised better to cater for phonology. Certain elements were imported from the runic (derived from ancient Greek) and Arabic alphabets. Germanic peoples adopted the runic alphabet (also called the futhork). The widely used Roman script has to a large extent now replaced the national alphabets.

Useful Reading

1. The Celtic Heritage of Continental Europeans - <http://www.americeltic.net/continentalcelts.html>
2. Centum and satem Languages, Deborah Anderson, Department of Linguistics, University of California, Berkeley
<http://popgen.well.ox.ac.uk/eurasia/htdocs/anderson.html>
3. Kingdoms of the Celts by John King, Blandford, Cassel & Co 1998
4. Anatolian Languages http://www.enotes.com/topic/Anatolian_languages
5. The Celts, a History by Daithí Ó hÓgáin, The Collins Press, 2002
6. Property Rights in Celtic Irish Law, Joseph R. Peden, Department of History, Baruch College of the City University of New York,
http://mises.org/journals/jls/1_2/1_2_1.pdf
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8. OpenLearn LabSpace, <http://labspace.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=446744§ion=2.3>
9. The Birth of Irish Law, Vincent Salafia, http://ua_tuathal.tripod.com/lllaw.htm
10. A Guide to early Irish Law by Fergus Kelly, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Dundalغان Press Ltd, 2001
11. Ireland's Cleopatra, Saudi Aramco World, November/December 1985,
<http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/198506/ireland.s.cleopatra.htm>
12. Irish Laws by Mary Dowling Daley - Chronicle Books, 275 Fifth Street , San Francisco , California 94103 , 1989
13. Deutschland und Irland, 1000 Jahre gemeinsamer Geschichte, von Martin Elsasser - Brookside, Dublin 14, 1998. ISBN 1 873748 04 3