

THE ARRIVAL OF THE CELTS IN IRELAND

Archaeology and Linguistics

HOLLY BURTON

When did the Celts arrive in Ireland? The question has plagued linguists and archaeologists alike for a century. By the 5th century A.D., the beginning of Irish historical records, all of Ireland was Celtic speaking; but when had it become so? Theories have ranged widely, from as early as 5000 to as late as 100 B.C. This article will summarize the present theories, and suggest a resolution. But before these various theories can be examined, the meaning of the term "Celt" must be clarified.

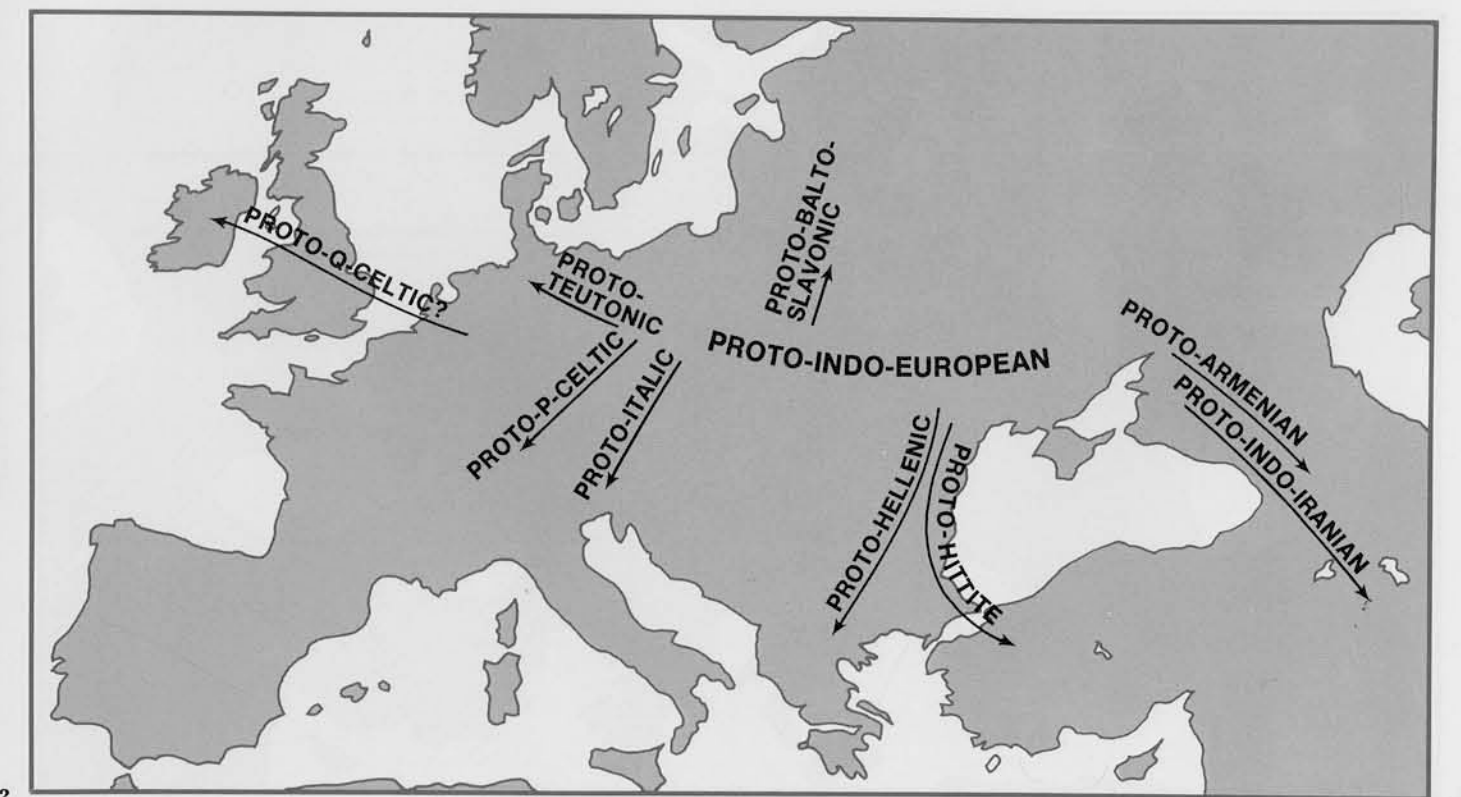
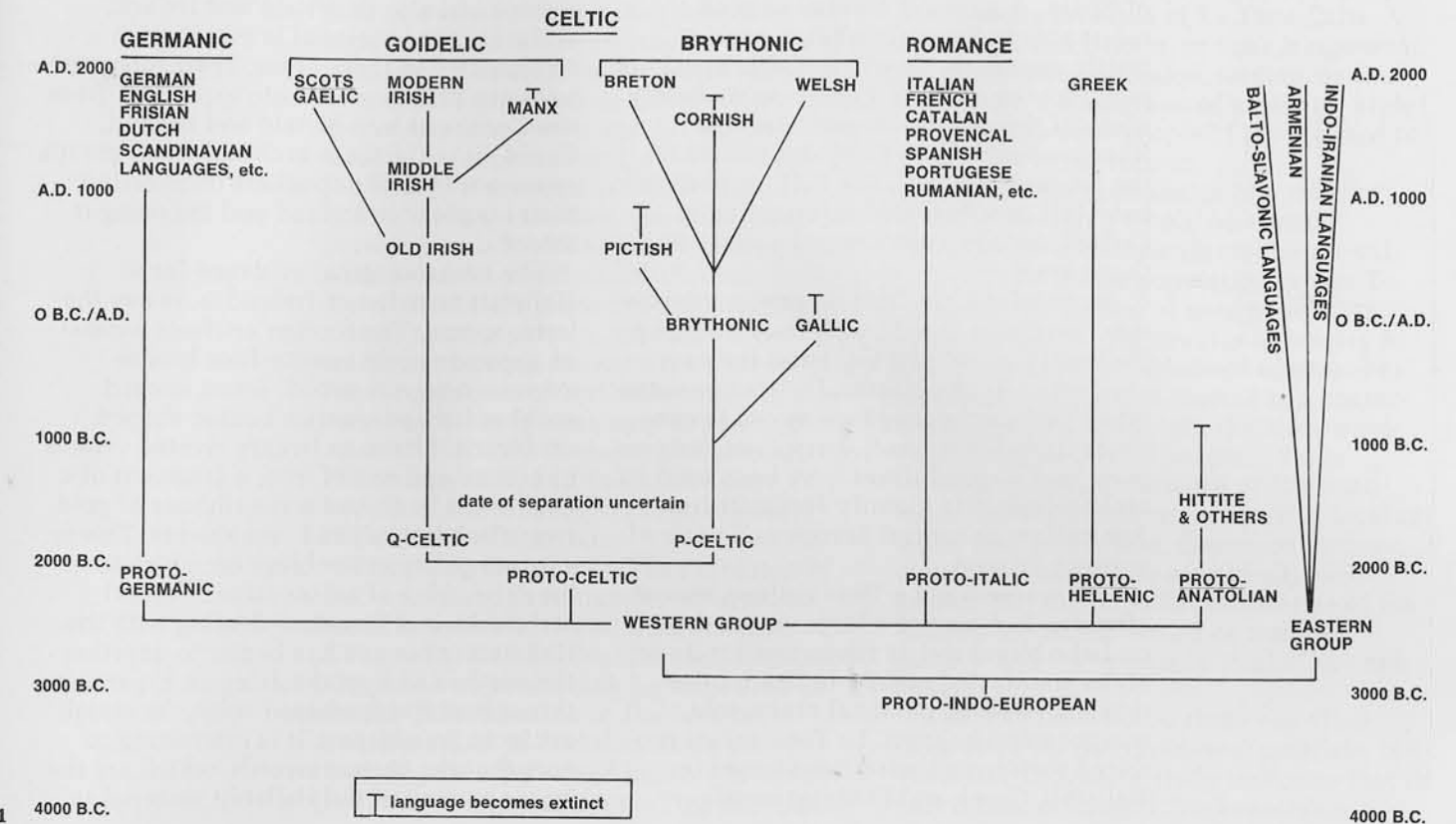
"Celtic" was initially a linguistic concept, used solely to refer to the Celtic languages. The earliest recorded versions of Celtic are Gallic and Brythonic, spoken in Gaul and Britain respectively at the time of the Roman conquest, and Goidelic, the language of Ireland by the 5th century A.D. The Medieval and Modern Celtic languages are Welsh, Cornish and Breton, all derived from the early Brythonic spoken in Britain, and Irish, Scots Gaelic and Manx, which are all derived from Old Irish Goidelic. Gallic appears to have become extinct during the Roman occupation of Gaul—at all events, there is no trace of it by the 5th century A.D. when the Western Roman Empire collapsed.

Celtic is a branch of the great Indo-European language family, as are the Teutonic, Romance and Balto-Slavonic languages of Europe, classical Greek and Latin, and many others. Indo-European languages, in fact, are found across a huge swath of the Old World, from northwestern Europe to the Indian sub-continent. Many of these languages, of course, are known from many centuries of written sources, and from place-names of considerable antiquity, as well as from their modern versions where these survive. Linguistic analysis has sorted this multiplicity of languages into closer groups and into more distant and disparate relationships, and named the whole huge 'family' Indo-European, from its distribution. From the earliest forms of the languages, which are linguistically closer to each other than their later descendants, it has proved

possible to reconstruct the 'skeleton,' as it were, of the original language from which all were derived: this reconstruction is known as Proto-Indo-European, or *IE (the * indicating a language not known from any written sources, but reconstructed from its surviving descendants).

Celtic is divided into two main groups. Gallic and Brythonic (and probably the very poorly-known and long-extinct Pictish, so Professor Jackson argues) are P-Celtic, while Goidelic is Q-Celtic. This linguistic terminology identifies the shift from the original kw in *IE to qu in Goidelic and to p in Gallic and Brythonic. Old Irish is the only original Q-Celtic language known, Scots Gaelic and Manx resulting from historical Irish settlement in Scotland and the Isle of Man. Thus our problem in searching for the origins of a Celtic language in Ireland is compounded: Irish is the only native language recorded there, and there is no linguistic clue as to its origin, other than the general one that it is Celtic, and that Celtic is Indo-European. Moreover, Q-Celtic is usually considered to be linguistically more archaic and conservative than P-Celtic.

Here we introduce the archaeological problem. As in all parts of the world, one concern of archaeologists in Europe has been the attempted correlation of identifiable archaeological cultures and traditions with the languages, language groups and language families identified by linguistics. In turn, linguistics has turned to archaeology (when and where no documents exist) for assistance. In our specific case the problem for both archaeologists and linguists is this: since the *IE language is generally agreed to have originated in central and/or eastern Europe during the 4th/3rd millennia B.C., how and when did Q-Celtic find its way to Ireland? Did it once exist on the continent as well, but survived only in Ireland? Or did it develop in Ireland from some earlier introduced Indo-European language? In either case, the time limit is wide: as we have noted already, theories range from 5000 to 100 B.C. for this event—and we must remember



that this linguistic 'event' may well have been a protracted process.

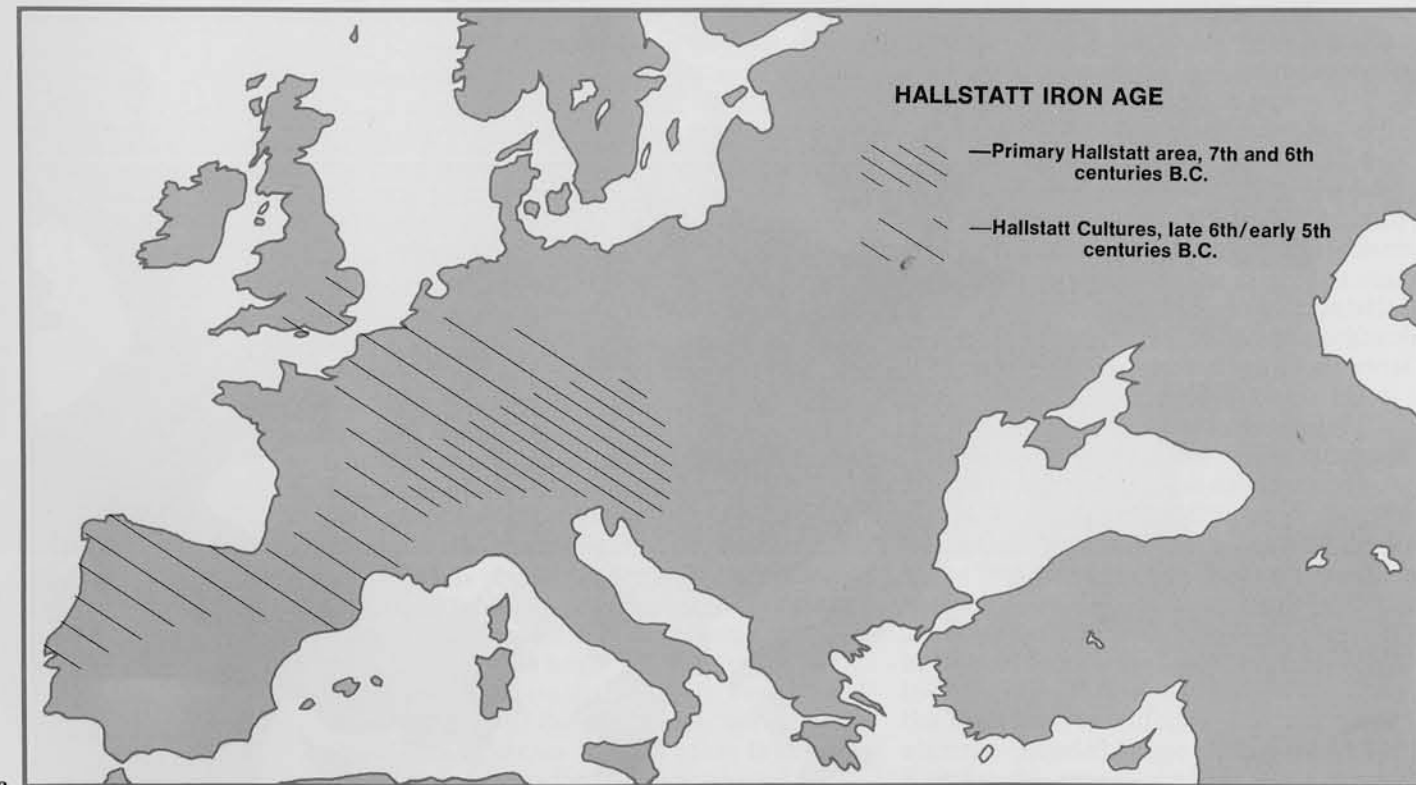
Our earliest references to the Celts come from Greek sources of the 6th and 5th centuries B.C. These identify 'Keltoi' in central Europe, France, and at least parts of Spain. A growing number of such references in the succeeding centuries testify ever more clearly to Celtic-speaking peoples over much of Europe immediately north of the classical world. And the Roman conquests of Gaul and Britain, in the 1st centuries B.C. and A.D. respectively, have left us substantial information of Celtic language, customs and society in those areas.

Archaeologically, this linguistic information correlates closely with the iron-using Hallstatt (ca. 700-500 B.C.) and the succeeding La Tène cultures. Distinctive metal types such as the long iron sword (sometimes copied in bronze), horse-bits, harness parts and wagon fittings have been used by archaeologists to identify Hallstatt Iron Age culture in central Europe and parts of western Europe.

The succeeding La Tène culture, named after the find-spot of a large votive deposit on Lake Neuchatel, is renowned for its art style, manifested mainly in fine bronze drinking vessels, personal ornaments, weapons and helmets. La Tène artists produced their own abstractions based on Hallstatt, Greek and Oriental motifs—

acanthus leaves, running scrolls, palmettes and peltas. This was a totally new amalgamation of the art styles of three cultures and resulted in a distinctive, non-representational style. Hallstatt material is found not only in central and western Europe but also in Britain and Ireland, while La Tène material is even better represented in these areas. Their presence has been presumed to note expansion from the Continent into Britain and Ireland. Could either of these archaeological groups represent Q-Celtic speakers introducing their language to Ireland and imposing it there?

The archaeological evidence for a Hallstatt invasion of Ireland is, to say the least, sparse. The foreign artifacts consist of approximately twenty-four bronze swords, one iron sword, seven winged scabbard chapes, seven bucket-shaped cauldrons, fifteen to twenty riveted vessels of bronze and one of iron, a fragment of a gold cup, a band and some ribbons of gold, two "flesh hooks" and two shields. This is a rather paltry assemblage on which to base the claim of an invasion. Current archaeological literature dealing with the Hallstatt invasions has begun to question the wisdom of hypothesizing an expansion throughout Europe based solely on metal artifacts. In addition, it is interesting to note that the bronze swords, which are the major portion of the Hallstatt material in



Ireland, are insular copies of Continental prototypes.

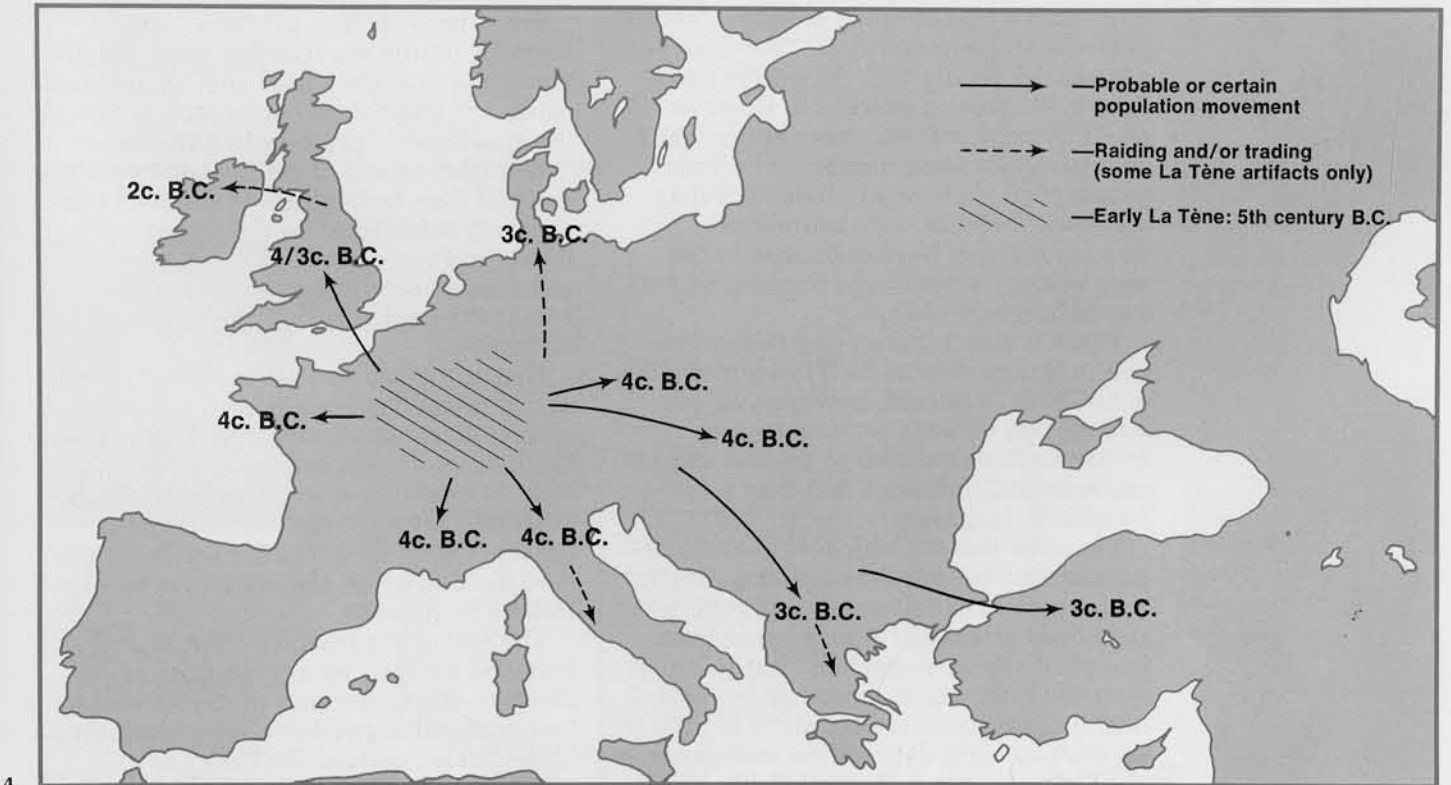
It has been postulated that the earliest appearances of the Hallstatt swords in the British Isles were attributable to trade, to travelling sword-smiths, or to princely gifts or exchanges; and that thereafter the imported varieties were quickly copied by local sword-smiths, sometimes with their own modifications so as to develop eventually into purely insular varieties. An alternative explanation for the presence of the Hallstatt material is that it might be due to raiding activities, since the largest portion consists of warrior-type equipment with a coastal-riverine distribution. Such distributions are argued as constituting a classic raiding pattern. Whether it be trading or raiding adventurers who account for the presence of Hallstatt material, it is now becoming increasingly apparent that a massive Hallstatt invasion of Ireland in the 7th century B.C. and the subsequent hypothesized language change are very difficult to substantiate.

The evidence for a La Tène invasion of Ireland, although in number of artifacts more formidable, is still questionable. Etienne Rynne has identified and discussed fifty or so objects which he attributed to the La Tène invasion in the 2nd/1st centuries B.C. In addition, there are swords, spear butts and horse-bits which he omitted from his paper. Together this

material constitutes a considerable corpus of La Tène decorated artifacts in Ireland, and undoubtedly suggests the influence of the continental La Tène culture. The question arises as to precisely what form this influence took; was it, as Rynne proposes, a two-prong invasion of La Tène Celts from Gaul and Britain, or does it represent, as others have suggested, raiding, or trading, or just the adoption of a new art style by the indigenous people? I am inclined to accept the latter version.

In short, the appearance of a new art style, or even of a whole new metal industry, need not constitute the arrival, *en masse*, of a new population group. To ascertain the arrival of new population groups into any country it is necessary to substantiate the introduction of a number of indicative material objects and characteristics which constitute the known culture of the "invading people." Yet in Ireland, the characteristics of the continental La Tène Celts are noticeably lacking: a few fibulae, swords, decorated torques, stones and horse-bits are already well known, but the large flat cemeteries of the Marne, the wheel-turned or stamped pottery and the "princely tombs" are not evident.

The art of the Turoe stone has often been cited for its continental parallels, but Professor Duignan's study indicates that its curvilinear ornament "represents an





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Turoe Stone (Co. Galway). Made of granite. About 1 meter high.

advanced stage of *insular La Tène art*" (my emphasis). Barry Raftery has described the Irish La Tène material as undoubtedly *insular* rather than continental in origin, and goes on to say that the limited burial and settlement evidence available "gives more than a hint of broad cultural stability in the last millennium B.C." This does not necessarily signify that there were no La Tène Celts present in Ireland. However, it could be interpreted to mean either that a comparatively small number of La Tène people made their way to Ireland or that the new art motifs were introduced through trading. Neither interpretation seems likely to have been responsible for a total language change.

There is also a critical linguistic objection to this postulated La Tène introduction of Q-Celtic to Ireland, however: all our information on both continental and British La Tène cultures of the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. indicates that they were P-Celtic in language.

The view that Q-Celtic was a late introduction into Ireland thus can be seriously questioned. What alternative hypotheses have been proposed? A number of Indo-European scholars conclude that an archaic form of Celtic was in existence by circa 2000 B.C. Linguists are not alone in proposing such an early date for the emergence of a Celtic language. Several Celtic

specialists have postulated that the Celts emerge as a separate people about 2000 B.C., Goidelic being the earlier form of Celtic, and Gallic (along with Brythonic) a later development. If this theory is tenable then the archaeological evidence should attest to a major population incursion into Ireland at about that time.

In the later third millennium B.C. the appearance of foreign pottery in considerable quantity strongly suggests the arrival of continental migrants in Britain. These people have been given the makeshift label, the Beaker Folk, due to their distinctive beaker-shaped pottery. Their presence is well attested in Britain, but what of Ireland?

Few actual Beaker vessels have been found in Ireland. However, in the last twenty years the "Irish Bowl," of which there are several hundred known examples, has been recognized as a locally derivative form of Beaker pottery. Thus a Beaker invasion of Ireland can be argued. But from where did this invasion take place?

The exact location of the Beaker Folk's homeland is yet to be pinpointed, but the controversies of archaeologists need not concern us here as on two points there is general agreement: that the British and Irish beakers mainly derive from the Low Countries, and that the beaker series of the Low Countries includes a strong component derived from central and eastern European "corded beakers." These "corded beakers" are part of a cultural complex (Battle-axe/Corded ware/Single grave) that is widely held both by archaeologists and linguists to correspond to that of the speakers of "proto-Indo-European."

A further aspect of the Beaker-Battle-axe group is their technology. It has been conclusively established by the recent work of Butler and van der Waals that tin-bronze and copper metallurgy were practiced among the Beaker Folk in the Low Countries.

Hence, the Beaker Folk immediate continental origin has been located as well as several diagnostic features of their culture. Furthermore, it has been established that there is a definite correlation between the accepted culture of the Indo-European speakers and that of the Beaker Folk in the Low Countries. Can their presence in Ireland be proven?

The end of the Irish Neolithic is heralded not only by a technological change—the appearance of copper and tin-bronze metallurgy—but also by the arrival of the Beaker culture. Dr. Case has shown that the Beaker Folk were the

first metallurgists in Ireland.

In spite of the growing number of Beaker finds recorded in Ireland, the classic Beaker burial (i.e. single grave inhumation) with "true" beaker pottery is rare. The only representative group in Ireland which appears to have practiced this burial rite with any frequency was the makers of the Irish Bowl (mentioned above). Although this classic Beaker burial rite occurs infrequently, nonetheless, intrusive cultural elements can be discerned from the presence of the Irish Bowl and from the inclusion of "true Beaker" pottery within Late Neolithic Passage-graves.

In short, it is possible to conclude that the joint appearance of various types of Beaker pottery and of innovations such as single inhumations and metalworking may be accepted as evidence of the movement of Beaker communities from the Low Countries to Britain and thence to Ireland.

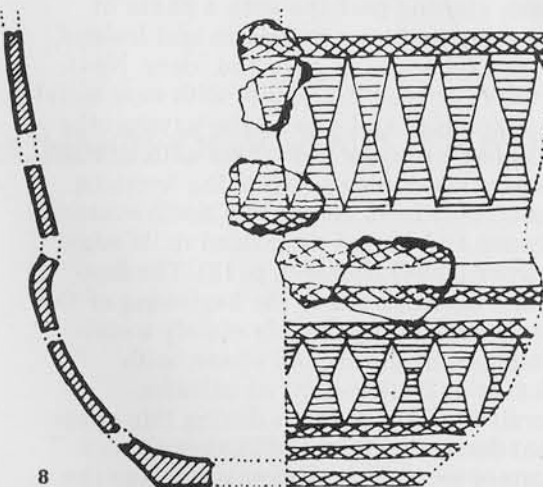
The effect that the firm establishment of the Beaker Folk in Ireland had on the country must be discussed. Beaker migrations extended over a long period of

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Pottery 'Necked' Beaker from Dalkey (Co. Dublin). Height 9.7 cm.

9
Pottery 'Necked' Beaker from Grange (Co. Limerick). Height: 11.8 cm.

10
Pottery 'Bell' Beaker from Dalkey (Co. Dublin). Height: 7.5 cm.

Figs. 8, 9, 10 are from M. Herity and G. Eogan, *Ireland in Prehistory*, Fig. 47, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1977.



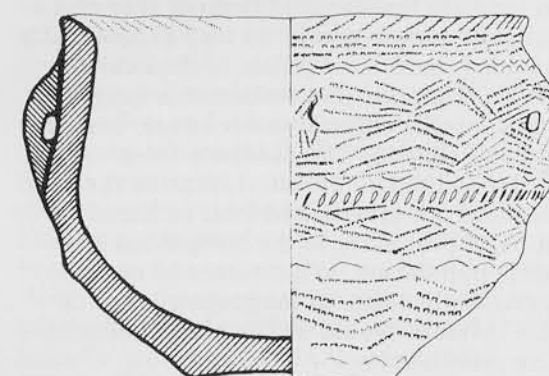
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'Irish Bowl.' Pottery food vessel from Carrickinab (Co. Down). Height: 12.2 cm.

7
'Irish Bowl.' Pottery food vessel from Corky (Co. Antrim). Height: 9.5 cm.

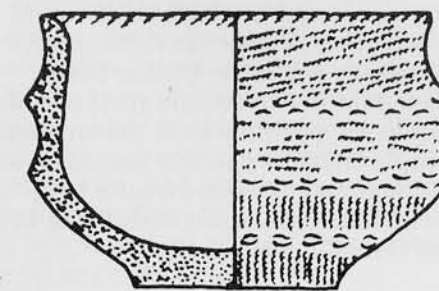
Figs. 6 and 7 are from C. Renfrew (ed.) *British Prehistory*, Fig. 30, Noyes Press, 1974.



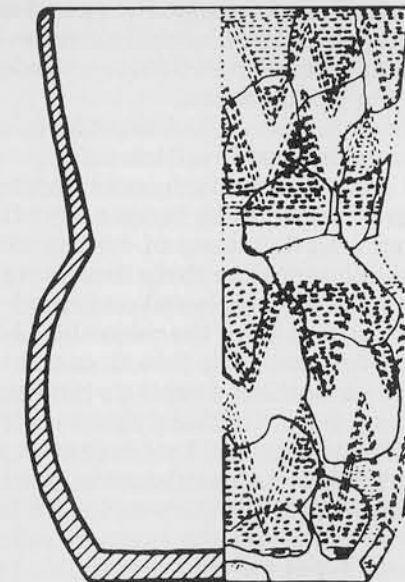
Holly Burton received her B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania and is now a graduate student at the University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland, specializing in the archaeology of Celtic Britain and Ireland.



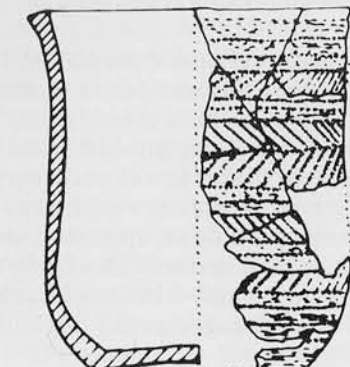
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time, starting perhaps with a phase of movements between Britain and Ireland, with exchanges of gifts and ideas. Next, settlers arrived in Ireland, with new metal technologies and new pottery types: the 'eastern' group has affinities with British Beaker assemblages, while the 'western' group may have come from northwestern France and buried their dead in 'Wedge-graves' (see Ó Nualláin, p. 15). The final phase corresponds to the beginning of the Early Bronze Age, and is mainly a continuation of the second phase, with Beaker or Beaker-derived cultures persisting. It is perhaps during this phase that derivative forms of Beaker pottery came into existence, such as the Irish Bowl, Food Vessels, and Collared Urns.

It is apparent that the Beaker migrations to Ireland were not rapid and all-pervasive. Instead, they spanned hundreds of years and were characterized not only by the introduction of metallurgy and new pottery types but also by cultural interchange and assimilation between "foreign" and "native" populations.

The final question which must be raised in regard to the Beaker settlement of Ireland is important—is there continuity of tradition throughout the Bronze Age? It has been noted that many of the features which characterize the Early Bronze Age, such as pottery types, burial and ritual monuments, and all of the major metallurgical products of this period, can be traced down to about 1400 B.C., but then disappear from the archaeological record.

From the Middle and Late Bronze Age we have pitifully few settlements, pottery manufacture becomes more and more infrequent, and we become increasingly reliant upon metal types for our knowledge of the period. New metal types do indeed occur but, as noted above, are not the safest basis for promoting the notion of large-scale population movements. In other words, there is no good archaeological reason to propose that any major language change occurred in Ireland through this time.

Several archaeologists, perplexed by this, have sought the answer in a change of climate, for which there is evidence. This is a possible solution. Again, historical analogy shows that it is not necessary to conjure up new migrations each time there is some innovation or an apparent break in the archaeological record. The Early Christian period in Ireland witnessed such major cultural changes as the beginning of

written records, the emergence of a new art style, and the foundation of many monastic sites. These changes are quite dramatic, but cannot be attributed to invasion. They reflect external influence and internal social development.

Thus it can be argued both linguistically and archaeologically that the Beaker Folk appear to have brought an early form of Q-Celtic to Ireland. At this point a question arises which cannot at present be satisfactorily answered; under what circumstances will an indigenous population adopt the language of an incoming group? Too few studies have dealt with this important aspect of culture change for us to reach any valid conclusions. However, the two most probable causes I have been able to discern are: 1) a massive influx of people and a subsequent take-over of the controls of power (i.e. an invasion) and 2) the indigenous population being "forced" to learn the language of a new dominant group in order to protect their economic, social and legal rights.

At present I am not prepared to support a massive influx and take-over of Ireland by the Beaker Folk. What little evidence is known of their presence in Ireland tends to indicate that their settlement was of a peaceful nature and in no way suggests any hostile intentions. Studies of the Beaker Folk's migration and settlements suggest considerable cultural interchange, borrowing and sharing. The evidence from Ballynagilly, Co. Tyrone, indicates that the Beaker Folk established their settlements in close proximity to the indigenous Neolithic population. What seems to me the more likely cause of language change in this instance would be the second alternative cited above.

Although there existed peaceful interchange between the immigrants and the natives, the Beaker Folk were "socially preminent." They appear to have brought metallurgy to Ireland and therefore most likely controlled its production and distribution. This would certainly make them economically "superior." If economically powerful, the Beaker Folk perhaps also held the upper hand in matters of legal priority and social interaction. It would therefore be advantageous to the native population to adopt the Beaker Folk's language in order to sustain their social and economic position. I am not envisioning a rapid transition to this language, but instead one that extended over a long period of time, eventually stabilizing in the unique Goidelic language.

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