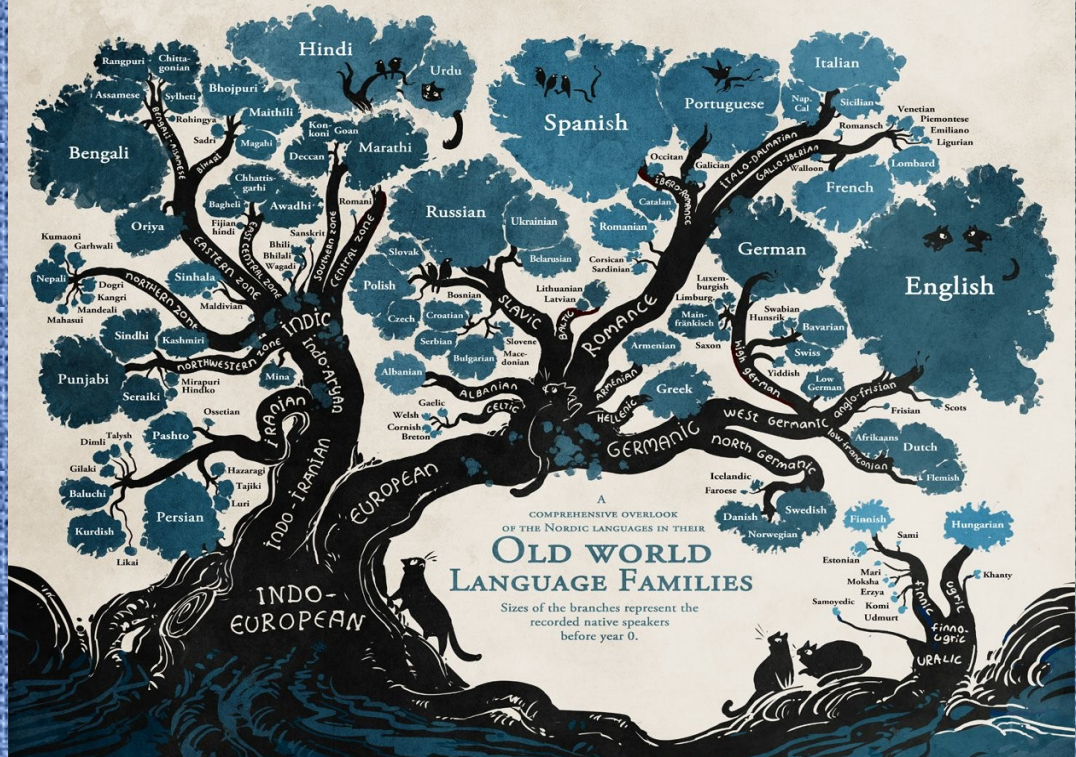


# The Celts and their languages 2

Classification of Celtic languages

Lucie Vinšová  
Masarykova univerzita 2017





A

COMPREHENSIVE OVERLOOK  
OF THE NORDIC LANGUAGES IN THEIR




## **History of the Classification of the Celtic Languages**

The Celtic languages hold a special place in the early history of Indo-European linguistics, because they presented the first real challenge to the nascent science.

The demonstration that Irish and its relatives are related to Greek, Latin and Sanskrit was a genuine triumph, for these languages at the first sight seem to be very different.

(Fortson, *Indo-European Linguistics*, 2010, p. 309)

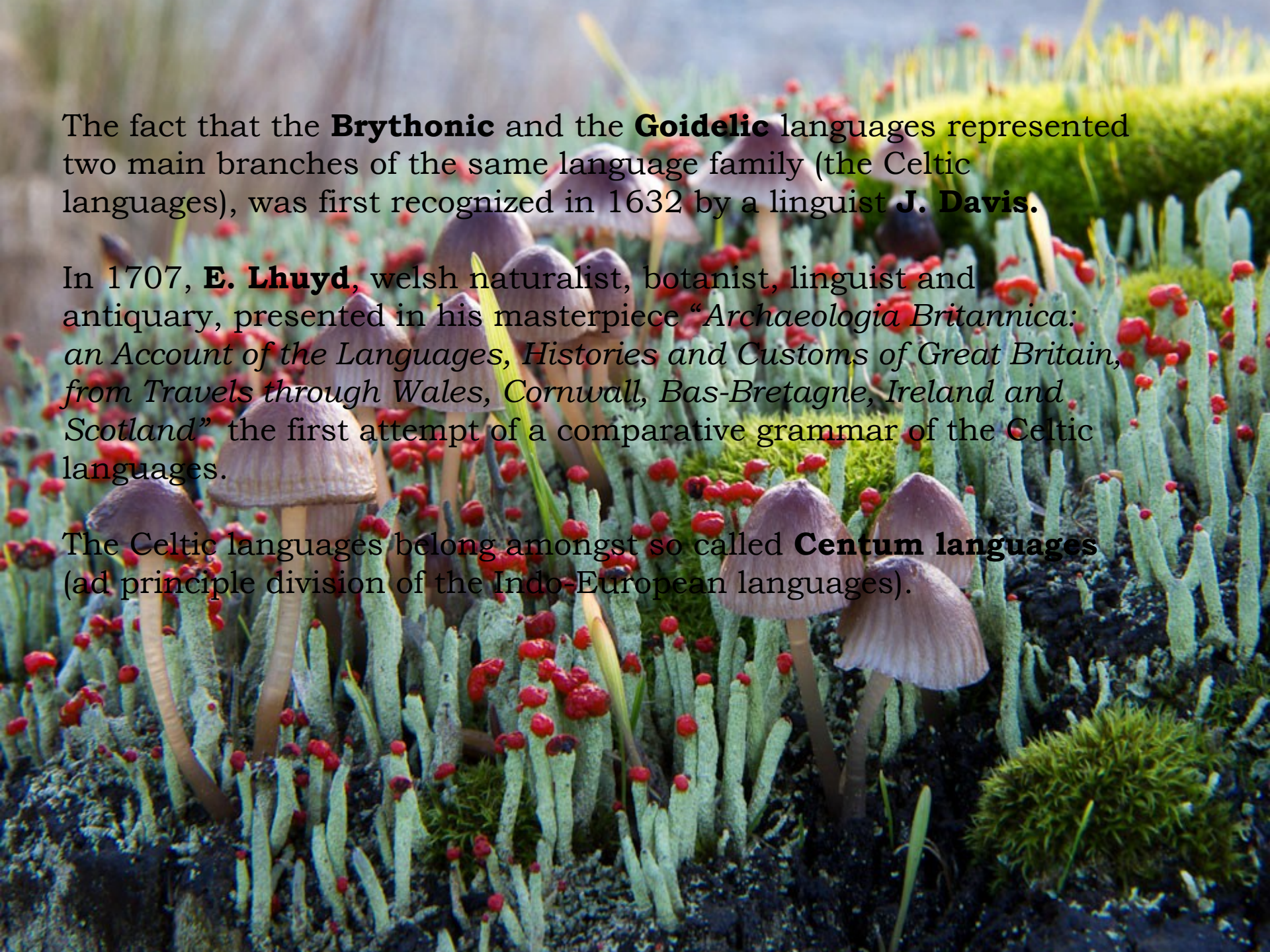
A close-up photograph of a forest floor. In the foreground, several purple mushrooms with smooth caps and thin stems are scattered among vibrant red berries and patches of bright green moss. The background is softly blurred, showing more of the same natural elements under a bright, slightly hazy sky.

The relationship between Welsh and Latin and Greek was recognized earlier than the relationship within the family of the Celtic languages (ex. the relationship between Welsh and Irish).

This first comparison was suggested by a Welsh historian **Gerald of Wales** (lat. Giraldus Cambrensis). In his “Description of Wales” (*Descriptio Cambriae*), he managed to compare a few Welsh words with their Latin and Greek equivalents. In a few cases, the words he listed were indeed the words derived from the common Proto-Indo-European language (ex. W. **haul** “sun”: Lat. *sōl*, Gr. *hélios*, **halein** “salt”: Lat. *sal*, Gr. *hals*, **enou** “name”: Lat. *nómen*, Gr. *ónoma* [*Ónoma*]).

During the 16. and 17. centuries, more similarities were recognized between the insular Celtic languages and the continental languages of ancient, medieval and modern Europe (Irish with Greek, Welsh with the classical European languages, Irish with the Germanic languages).

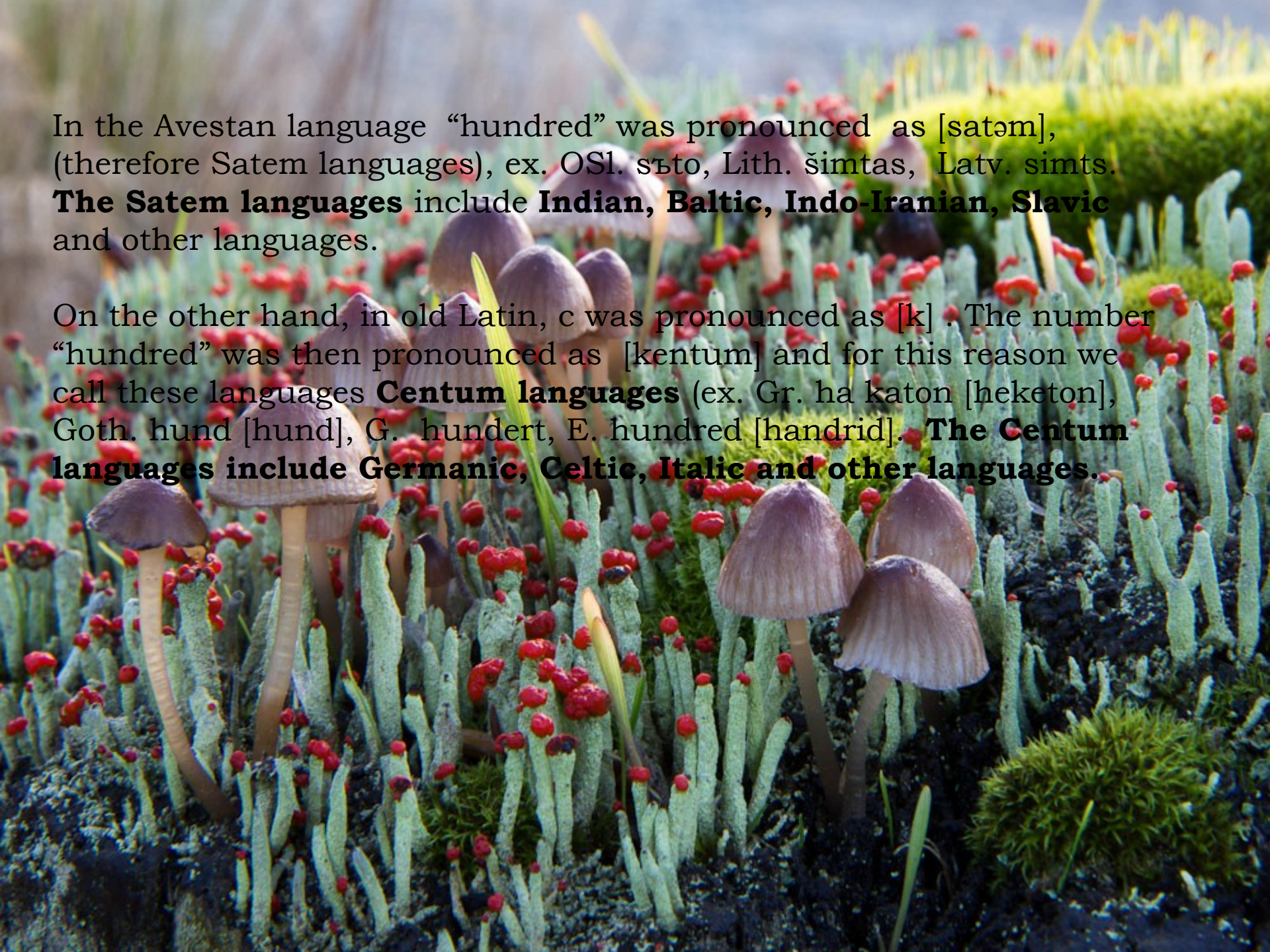
Translated from *Keltské jazyky*, Václav Blažek



The fact that the **Brythonic** and the **Goidelic** languages represented two main branches of the same language family (the Celtic languages), was first recognized in 1632 by a linguist **J. Davis**.

In 1707, **E. Lhuyd**, welsh naturalist, botanist, linguist and antiquary, presented in his masterpiece “*Archaeologia Britannica: an Account of the Languages, Histories and Customs of Great Britain, from Travels through Wales, Cornwall, Bas-Bretagne, Ireland and Scotland*” the first attempt of a comparative grammar of the Celtic languages.

The Celtic languages belong amongst so called **Centum languages** (ad principle division of the Indo-European languages).

A close-up photograph of a forest floor. In the foreground, several purple mushrooms with light-colored stems are scattered among green moss and small red berries. The background is softly blurred, showing more of the forest floor and some green foliage.

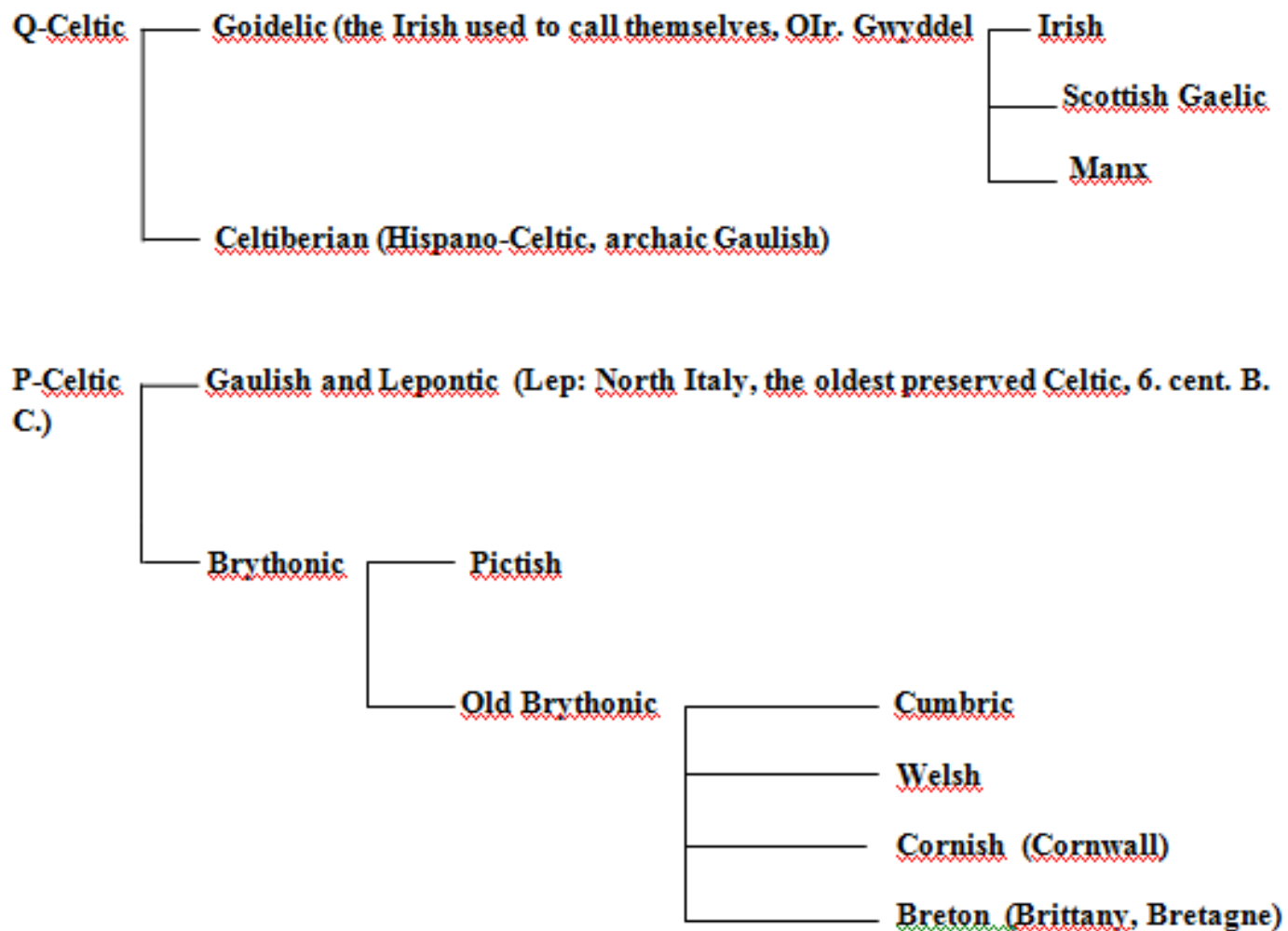
In the Avestan language “hundred” was pronounced as [satəm], (therefore Satem languages), ex. OSl. sьto, Lith. šimtas, Latv. simts. **The Satem languages include Indian, Baltic, Indo-Iranian, Slavic and other languages.**

On the other hand, in old Latin, c was pronounced as [k] . The number “hundred” was then pronounced as [kentum] and for this reason we call these languages **Centum languages** (ex. Gr. ha katon [heketon], Goth. hund [hund], G. hundert, E. hundred [handrid]). **The Centum languages include Germanic, Celtic, Italic and other languages.**



Map showing the approximate extent of the **centum** (blue) and **satem** (red) language areas.





This classification is based on the different development of IE. **\*k<sup>w</sup>**, which was kept amongst the **Q-Celtic** languages and changed to **p** amongst the **P-Celtic** languages. This traditional model of Celtic languages classification is supported by H. Pedersen and K.H. Schmidt.

*IE. \*k<sup>w</sup>* appears in the Celtiberian (Hispano-Celtic) language, as well as in some early dialects of the Gaulish language (where it is taken for an archaic variation) and in the Ogham script (where it is traditionally transcribed as Lat. Q) as **/k<sup>w</sup>/**, which later develops into **/k/** in the Goidelic languages (Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Manx).

On the other hand, in the Gaulish, Lepontic and Brythonic languages, it changes into **/p/**.

Ex. OGaul. *cenn*, W. *pen(n)*, "head"; OGaul.. *mac(c)*, W. *map*, "son".

# LANGUAGES IN BRITAIN CIRCA 55BC

Pictish, spoken north of the Clyde and Forth was a Brythonic language or at least a close relative.

These areas would not begin speaking Goidelic languages until around 360AD as a result of Irish colonisation.

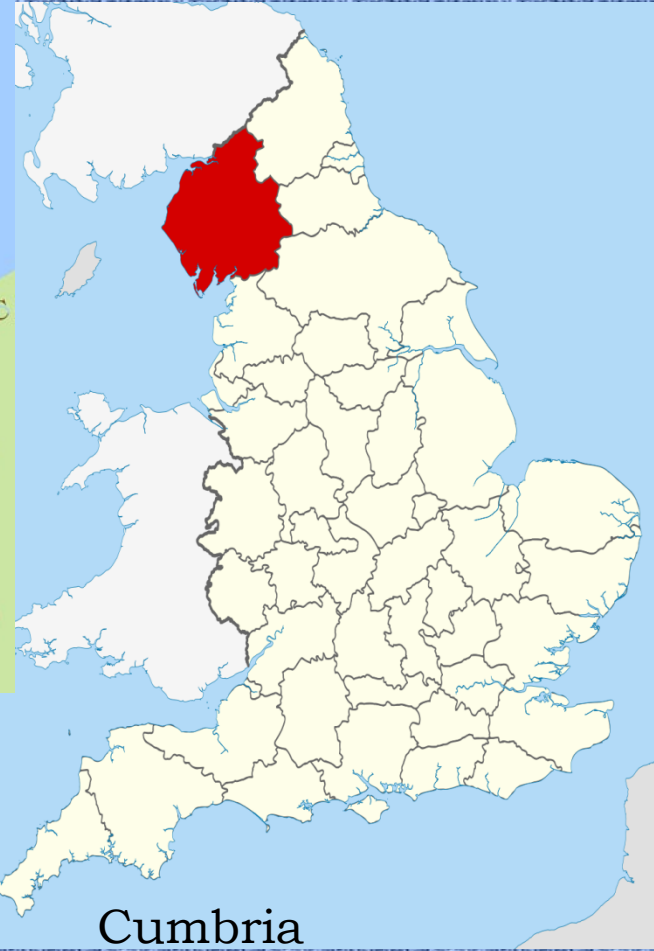
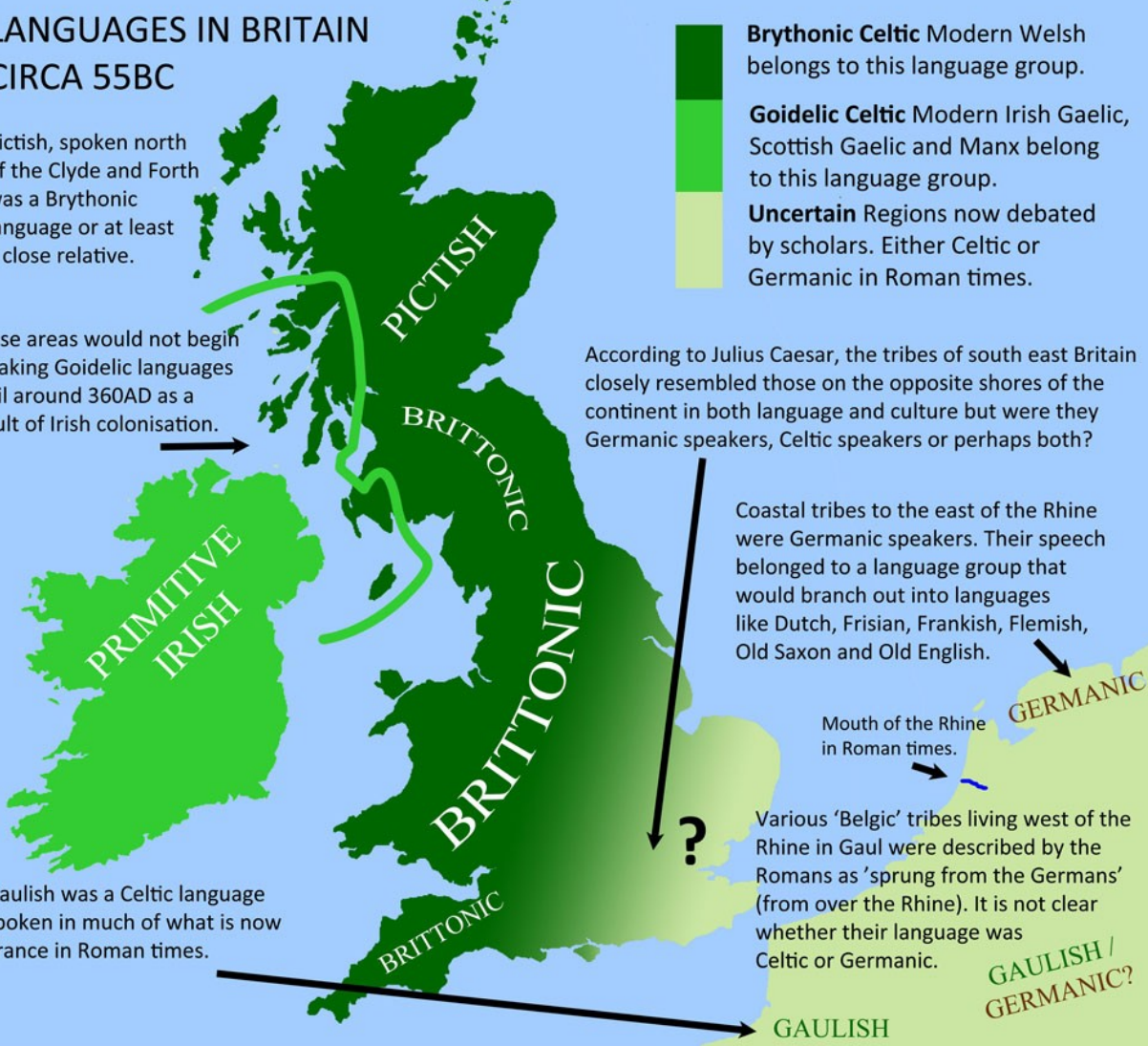
According to Julius Caesar, the tribes of south east Britain closely resembled those on the opposite shores of the continent in both language and culture but were they Germanic speakers, Celtic speakers or perhaps both?

Coastal tribes to the east of the Rhine were Germanic speakers. Their speech belonged to a language group that would branch out into languages like Dutch, Frisian, Frankish, Flemish, Old Saxon and Old English.

Various 'Belgic' tribes living west of the Rhine in Gaul were described by the Romans as 'sprung from the Germans' (from over the Rhine). It is not clear whether their language was Celtic or Germanic.

Gaulish was a Celtic language spoken in much of what is now France in Roman times.

- Brythonic Celtic** Modern Welsh belongs to this language group.
- Goidelic Celtic** Modern Irish Gaelic, Scottish Gaelic and Manx belong to this language group.
- Uncertain** Regions now debated by scholars. Either Celtic or Germanic in Roman times.



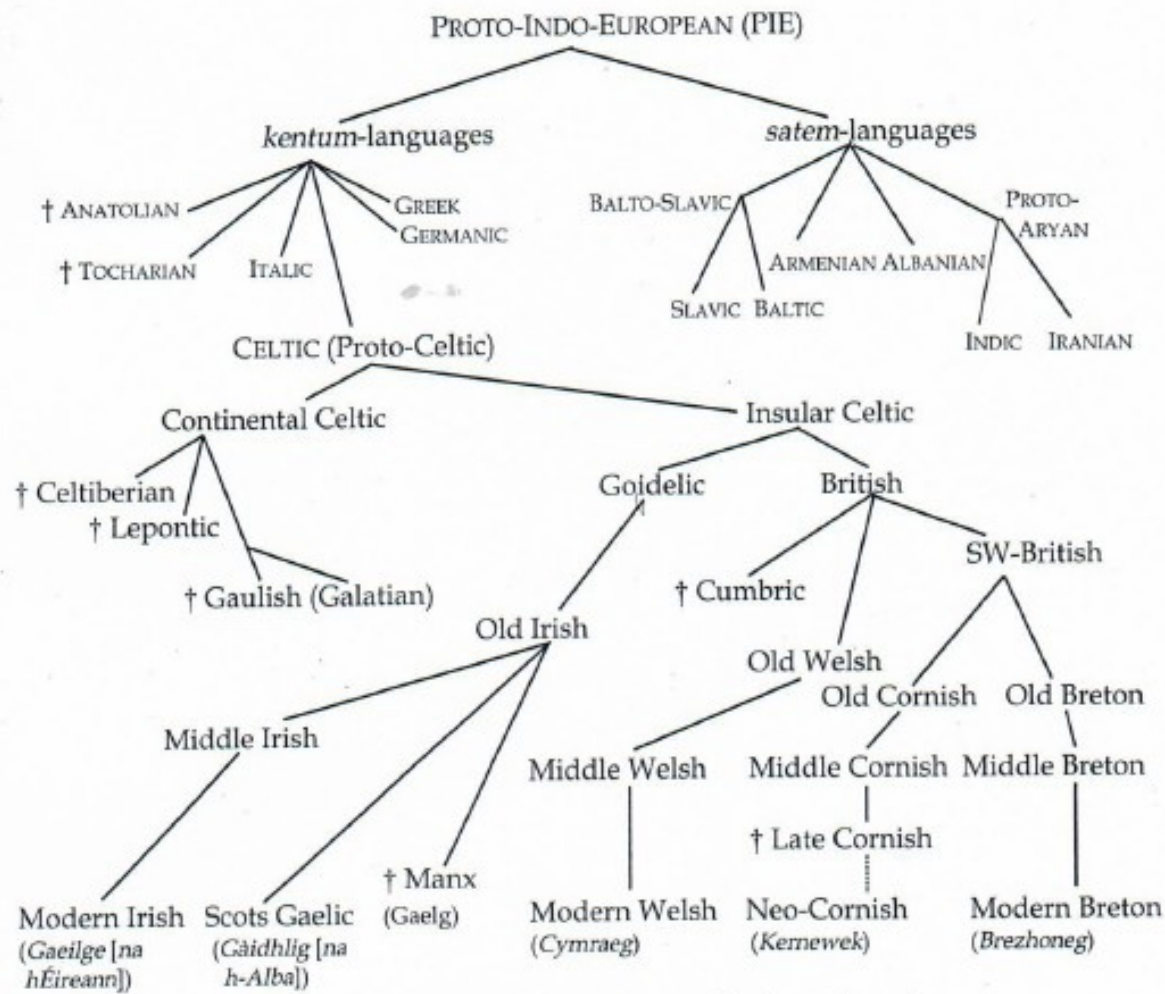


Illustration 1.1: The Celtic languages and the Indo-European family tree; † = extinct

# Insular Celtic

## Communities using the Celtic languages today include:

**Wales:** cca 500 000 speakers (about 20% of population, esp. in North Wales)

**Bretagne:** about 210 000 speakers

**Scotland:** about 58 000 speakers

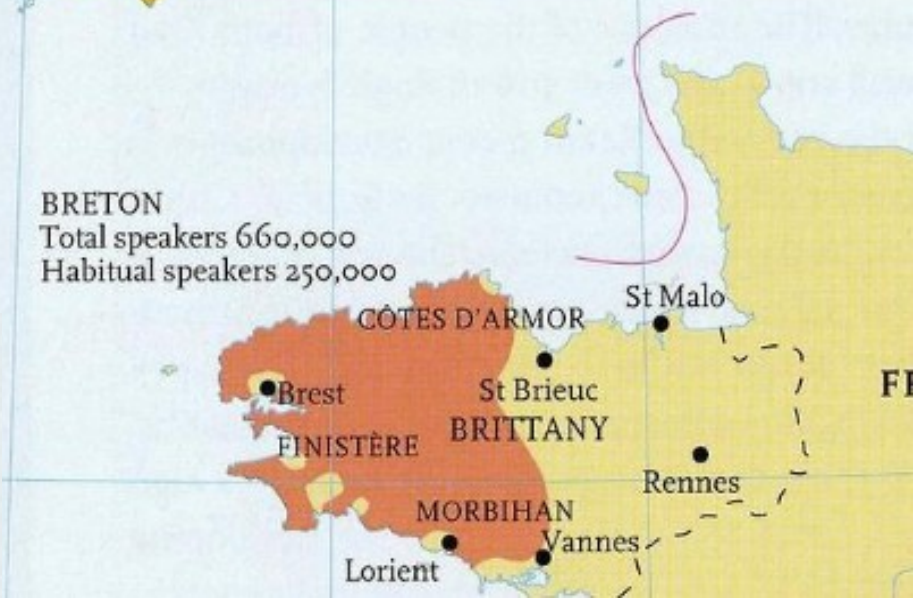
**Ireland:** only 75 000 speakers, but about one million speaks Irish as L2 in the Republic of Ireland.


**Cornwall:** only a few hundreds of speakers, new attempts of revival of the language presently continue .


**Manx:** the last native died in 1974, attempts of a revival, today about 2000 speakers, but only about 100 report that they would use Cornish in everyday conversation.

■ Gaelic Celtic  
■ Brythonic Celtic

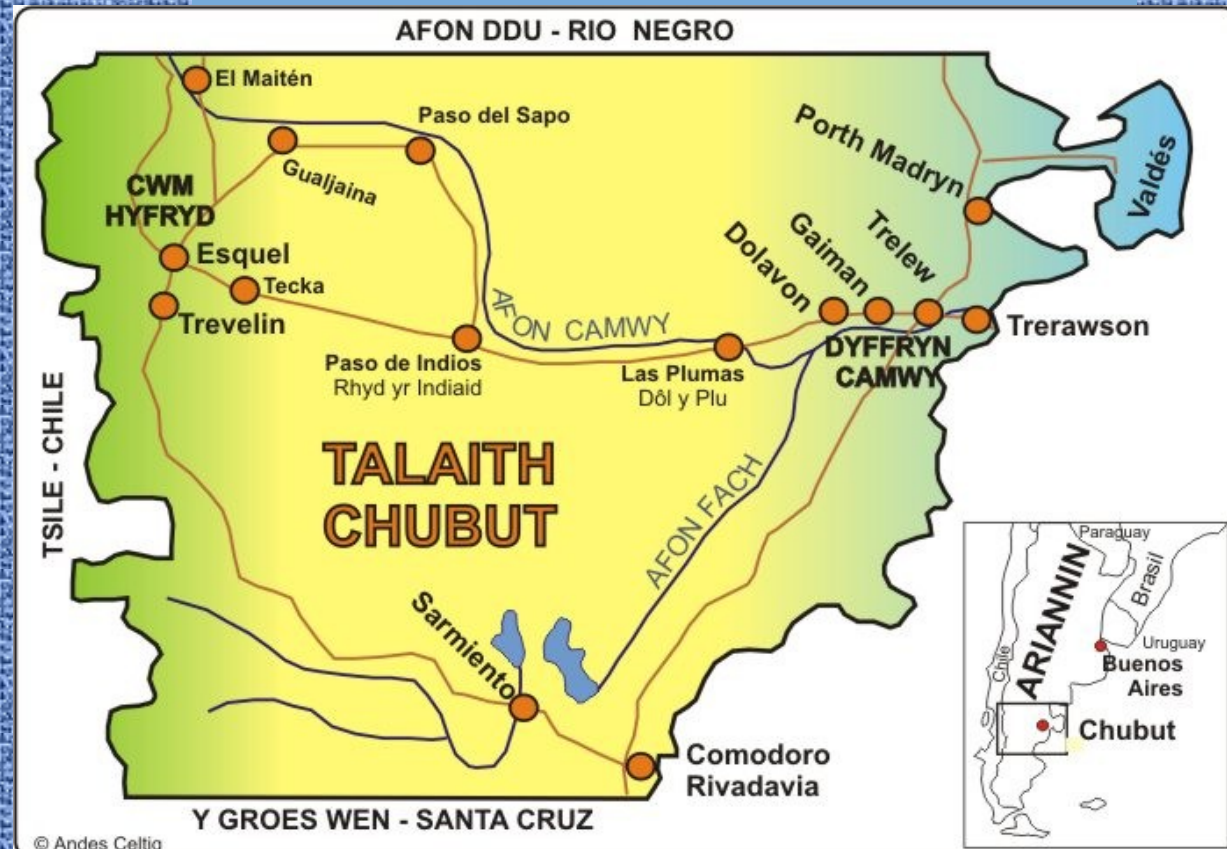




 Areas where Celtic languages are spoken by more than 50% of the population (1991)

 Areas where extinct Celtic languages are being revived

About 1500 descendants of the Welsh colony from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have kept their original **Welsh language** until the present day. **Y Wladfa**, W. “*colony*” lies in province Chubut in **Argentina** and includes a few Welsh speaking settlements.



## Some typological features of modern Celtic languages

The most distinctive phonological innovation is the loss of **Indo-European \*p**, which occurred initially and medially.

Eg: Gl. *éan*, W. *edn*, *ader*, compare with L. *penna*, Gr. *pterón*, E. *feather*

Celtic languages are regarded as having a few archaic features: the lack of a verb “*have*” and the differentiation of gender in the numbers 3 and 4 (still surviving in Welsh).

**VSO** sentence structure in most modern Celtic languages

Scot. Gael: I am at the door. *Tha mi aig an dorus.*  
(Is I at the door.)

**Consonant mutations:** The Celtic languages mutate some of the initial consonants of some nouns. The number of mutations depends on the language. The Welsh and Breton have three different mutations. The mutations are preserved vestiges of final syllables in prehistoric Celtic.

From Fortson, *Indo-European Linguistics*, 2010, p. 317 and Donald MacAulay, *The Celtic Languages*, 2008, p. 6-7.



Skt.	<i>asya</i> 'his' <i>eṣām</i> 'their' <i>asyāb</i> 'her'	Olr.	<i>a guth</i> [ɣʊθ] 'his voice' <i>a nguth</i> 'their voice' <i>a guth</i> 'her voice' (no mutation)
Lat.	<i>quīnque</i> 'five' <i>septem</i> 'seven' <i>sex</i> 'six'	Olr.	<i>cóic gotha</i> [ɣoθə] 'five voices' <i>secht ngotha</i> 'seven voices' <i>sé gotha</i> 'six voices' (no mutation)

Fortson, Indo-European languages, 2010

Initial		Soft ( <i>meddal</i> )		Nasal ( <i>twynol</i> )		Aspirate ( <i>llaes</i> )	
c	[k]	g	[g]	ngh	[ŋ̊]	ch	[χ]
p	[p]	b	[b]	mh	[m̊]	ph	[f]
t	[t]	d	[d]	nh	[n̊]	th	[θ]
g	[g]	(disappears)		ng	[ŋ]		
b	[b]	f	[v]	m	[m]		
d	[d]	dd	[ð]	n	[n]		
ll	[l̥]	l	[l]				
m	[m]	f	[v]				
rh	[r̥]	r	[r]				

Modern Welsh  
mutations

Initial		Soft ( <i>meddal</i> )		Nasal ( <i>trwynol</i> )		Aspirate ( <i>llaes</i> )	
c	[k]	g	[g]	ngh	[ŋ]	ch	[ç]
p	[p]	b	[b]	mh	[m̥]	ph	[f]
t	[t]	d	[d]	nh	[n̥]	th	[θ]
g	[g]	(disappears)		ng	[ŋ]		
b	[b]	f	[v]	m	[m]		
d	[d]	dd	[ð]	n	[n]		
ll	[l̪]	l	[l]				
m	[m]	f	[v]				
rh	[r̥]	r	[r]				

### Possessive Paradigm (car)

my	Fy (NM) i	fy nhar i	our	Ein (0) ni	ein car ni
your	Dy (SM) di	dy gar di	your	Eich (0) chi	eich car chi
his	Ei (SM) e/o	ei gar e/o	their	Eu (0) nhw	eu car nhw
her	Ei (AM) hi	ei char hi			

Welsh	English	base form of mutated word
<b>am</b> flynyddoedd	for years	blynyddoedd
<b>ar</b> daith	on a journey	taith
<b>at</b> gost o £15	at a cost of £15	cost
<b>dan</b> reolaeth	under control	rheolaeth
<b>dros</b> ddwy awr	over two hours	dwy
<b>drwy</b> ddull electronig	by electronic means	dull
<b>gan</b> Lywodraeth Cymru	by the Welsh Government	llywodraeth
<b>heb</b> rybydd	without warning	rhybydd
<b>hyd</b> gopa'r bryn	to the top of the hill	copa
<b>i</b> blant	for children	plant
<b>o</b> orsaf yr heddlu	from the police station	gorsaf
<b>wrth</b> greu swyddi	by creating jobs	creu

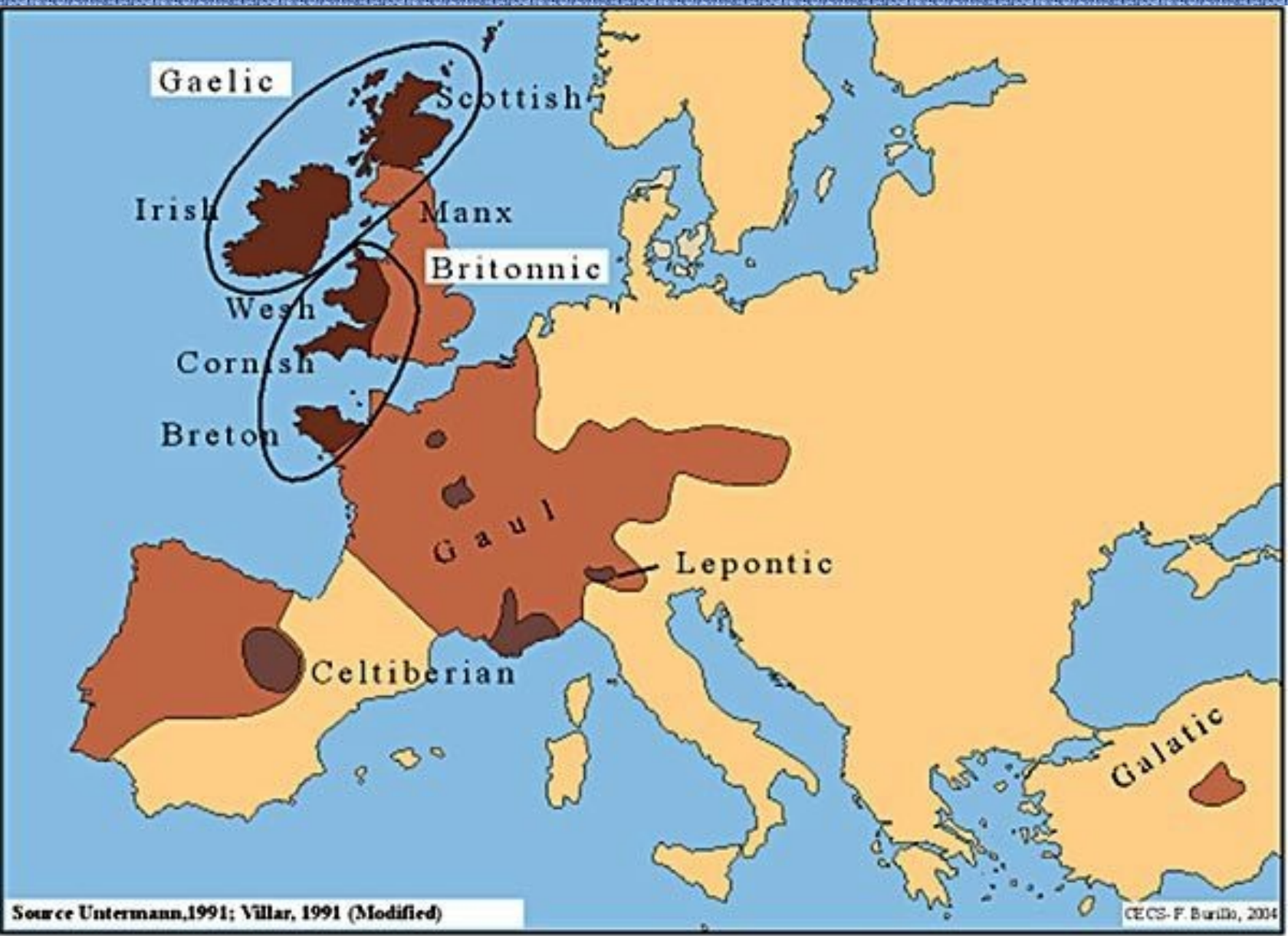
## Continental Celtic Languages

Celtic languages were spoken on the European continent until the first half of the first millennium A. D.

**Gaulish:** the biggest of the Continental European languages was spoken in most of ancient **Gaul** and also in **Northern Italy**. Gauls were a huge ethnic group which consisted of a few hundred tribes living in the Western and Central Europe. One of the main tribes even settled (**3<sup>rd</sup> century B. C**) in **Asia Minor (Galatians)**. The Gauls are known in the classical history for their raids on Rome in the 4<sup>th</sup> cent. B. C. They were, however, later assimilated into Roman culture. Most discovered samples of the Gaulish language are written in the Roman and Greek alphabet.

**Lepontic language:** a language used by the Celtic tribes in the northern part of Italy. It's not certain whether this language was not merely one of Gaulish dialects. Most of the found inscriptions are grave stones. The texts are written in the North Italian, so-called Lugano alphabet (taken over from the Etruscans). **The oldest examples of the Lepontic language are the oldest examples of Celtic languages ever found (6<sup>th</sup> cent. B. C).**

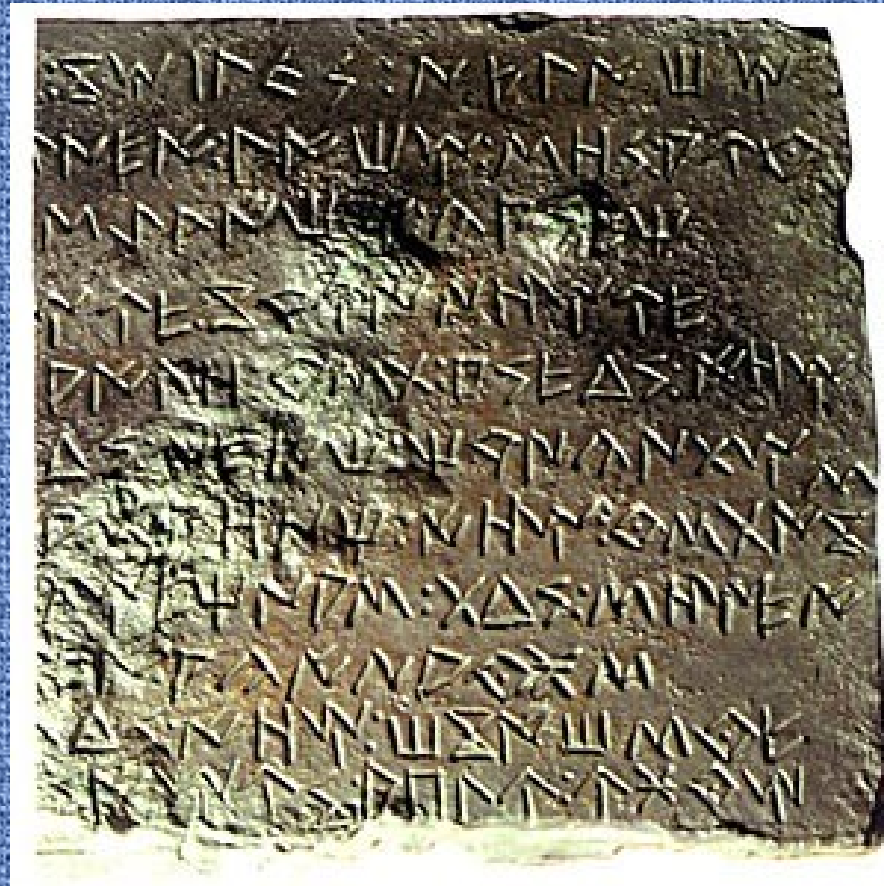




Source Untermann, 1991; Villar, 1991 (Modified)

CECS-F. Burillo, 2004

**Celtiberian (Hispano-Celtic)** language was spoken by the Celtic tribes which migrated in the 1<sup>st</sup> mil. B. C into the areas of the North-East of Spain. Celtiberian seems to be a very different to Gaulish and Lepontic, phonetically and morphologically. From this we can say that it separated from other Celtic languages at an early stage. Most of the inscriptions are dated into the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> cent. B. C, and are written in the Iberian script.



Iberia before Carthaginian conquests  
c. 300 B.C.



**Linguistic groups:**

- Turdetanian
- Tartessian (residual)
- Celtic
- Iberian
- Aquitanian (Proto-Basque)
- Indo-european (pre-Celtic)

**Ethno-geographic groups:**

**Turdetani Major groups**

- ANTESANI Secondary communities

**Main colonial foundings:**

- Phoenician / Carthaginian
- Greek



# Ireland **ULSTER**



4  
**Ancient  
Provinces**

