

Contra 'Celtic Britain': No, the Strabo Passage Does Not Show That Britons Were Called Celts

A short note on Strabo 2.1.18, ὑπολαμβάνει, and the limits of Sims-Williams's argument

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British antiquarianism has a long habit of looking away from plain Britishness toward some grander, older, and more flattering external pedigree. In the Middle Ages, Geoffrey of Monmouth made the Britons descendants of the Trojan Brutus.¹ In the early modern period, British and especially Welsh antiquarian writing oscillated not only between Trojan origins but also Gomerian, Cimmerian, and Scythian ones.² Aylett Sammes's 1676 *Britannia antiqua illustrata* derived ancient Britain from the Phoenicians.³ William Stukeley gave the Druids a similarly easternized, Phoenician frame.⁴ Elsewhere, English writers such as John Hare gloried in descent from the "Teutonick nation",⁵ while British Israelism later promoted the still more ambitious claim that the British were heirs of the Lost Tribes of Israel.⁶ These theories were not identical, and not all were equally influential. But they share a recognizable habit: when British antiquarianism grows restless with Britishness, it repeatedly seeks dignity in some larger imported antiquity.

That history is important here. Patrick Sims-Williams's 2025 paper is not merely a narrow philological note. It is written in the rhetoric of reinstatement. The old Celtosceptic obstacle, we are told, has been removed; a mistaken argument "has to be abandoned"; the Kelttoi of Britain are now "shown"; there remains no reason for British archaeologists to recoil from "Celtic". The paper is therefore best read not only as an argument about Strabo 2.1.18, but as an attempted coronation: Britain is to be restored to Celtdom at last.⁷ That is precisely why the passage on which this triumph depends must be read with unusual strictness.

Patrick Sims-Williams's 2025 paper aims at a very specific target: the old Celtosceptic claim that no ancient source ever calls insular people "Celts". He argues⁷ that this claim must now be abandoned, because Hipparchus, quoting Pytheas, referred to people in Britain as Kelttoi, and Strabo preserves that fact.

That conclusion goes too far.

The problem is not merely that Pytheas is lost, or that Hipparchus is lost, or that Strabo is late and hostile. All of that already makes the chain fragile. The deeper problem is simpler and more damaging: the surviving passage does not directly say that anyone called Britons "Celts". It says that Hipparchus supposed them to be "Celts"⁸. That is a very different thing.

The key passage in Strabo 2.1.18 runs as follows:

ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἀπέχουσι τῆς Μασσαλίας ἑξακισχιλίοις καὶ τριακοσίοις
(οὓς ἐκεῖνος μὲν ἔτι Κελτοὺς ὑπολαμβάνει, ἐγὼ δ' οἶμαι Βρεττανοὺς
εἶναι)⁹

"among those who are 6300 stadia from Massilia
(whom he still supposes to be Celts, but I think are Britons)"⁸

This verb is key: ὑπολαμβάνει.

It does not mean "calls", "names", or "reports as self-designated". Standard lexicographical definitions include "assume", "suppose", and "take up a notion", even "frequently of an ill-grounded opinion"¹⁰. In plain English: Hipparchus is not here presented as transmitting a tribal self-name; he is presented as making a supposition.

That point alone is enough to puncture the paper's headline ambition. If the best surviving text says only that Hipparchus supposed certain people to be Keltoi, then we do not possess an ancient source that straightforwardly calls insular people Celts. We possess an ancient source reporting an ancient supposition. That is weaker by an entire category.

This is not pedantry. It goes to the core of the argument. Sims-Williams wants to move from "there is a reference to Keltoi in Britain" to "the old claim that no ancient source calls insular people Celts must be abandoned". But the surviving text is not of the form: "these people are called Keltoi", much less "they call themselves Keltoi". It is of the form: Hipparchus assumes them to be Keltoi; Strabo disagrees and says they are Britanni. That is not a direct ethnic designation. It is a contested classification.

The context makes the problem worse, not better. This is not an ethnographic chapter in which Strabo or Hipparchus is carefully listing peoples and their self-names. It is an astronomical and geographical discussion: sun heights in cubits, distances from Massilia, latitude bands, and the placement of inhabited zones on the map. Right after the parenthesis, Strabo says Hipparchus, "trusting Pytheas", places this inhabited region in

relation to Britain. In other words, the passage belongs to map-making and climatic geography, not to careful ethnic reportage.

That gives us a stronger anti-Sims-Williams reading than discussions over whether the passage refers to all Britons, or only some Britons, or perhaps one group among them. The issue is more fundamental: "Keltoi" here may be a cartographic or classificatory label inferred by Hipparchus from where he thought the people belonged, not a direct ethnographic label taken from Pytheas's observation of their identity. The text itself pushes us in that direction, because it gives us the language of supposition rather than direct naming.

Sims-Williams's own paper⁷, in fact, repeatedly adds hypotheses that the passage itself does not contain. He argues that Pytheas's 6-cubit observation cannot have reached Hipparchus by itself, but must have been accompanied by ethnographic information about the people there, and that this is how Hipparchus came to classify them as Keltoi; he says the old slogan that no ancient source ever calls insular people Celts "has to be abandoned"; and later he even entertains the possibility that Pytheas labelled the Britons as such because of their language, or that "they, or a group of them", may actually have identified themselves as Celts. Those are all possible conjectures. But they are still conjectures. The one thing the surviving Greek unquestionably gives us is much narrower: Hipparchus supposed something, and Strabo rejected it.

One should also notice what Strabo does not say. He does not say that Hipparchus "reported that they were called Keltoi". He does not say that they "were known as Keltoi". He does not say that they "called themselves Keltoi". He says Hipparchus ὑπολαμβάνει them to be Keltoi. If one stripped away the paper's scaffolding and read the Greek cold, the natural impression would be:

Hipparchus is conjecturing or inferring a label; Strabo is correcting him.

At this point, it is no longer enough merely to point out that the word Keltoi appears in the passage. Of course it does. What matters is how it appears. It appears inside a report of Hipparchus's assumption, immediately followed by Strabo's correction to Bretannoi. So the passage is actually very poor evidence for the thesis that "an ancient source calls Britons Celts". It is, rather, evidence that one ancient geographer's inference could later be disputed by another ancient geographer.

This does not prove the opposite thesis, namely that no one before Strabo ever used Keltoi of people in Britain. Pytheas is lost; Hipparchus is lost; certainty is impossible. But that is precisely the point. The fragility of the chain is not repaired by overreading the surviving verb. Once one takes

ὕπολαμβάνει seriously, Sims-Williams's desired conclusion collapses from "here is an ancient source calling insular people Celts" to something much weaker: here is a late report that Hipparchus supposed some people at a British latitude to be Celts, and Strabo disagreed. That is not nothing. But it is not the victory the paper claims.

And that is why the paper's tone matters. A modest article would have said: here is a difficult, mediated, late-preserved report that may complicate one over-strong slogan. Instead, Sims-Williams writes as though a coronation has occurred. The obstacle is gone; the label is reinstated; British archaeology may stop recoiling. But a disputed supposition under immediate correction is not a coronation charter. It is not a warrant for triumph. It is certainly not a license to revive "Celtic Britain" as though one philological crux had settled a terminological controversy that has lasted for generations.

The older antiquarian pattern should make us more cautious here, not less. Britain has repeatedly been offered flattering ancestries from elsewhere: Troy, Gomer, Scythia, Phoenicia, Teutonia, Israel.¹⁻⁶ The fact that "Celtic" is academically more sophisticated than some of those fantasies does not exempt it from scrutiny. On the contrary, the more respectable the modern label, the more careful one must be not to mistake a conjecture for a charter.

So the sober conclusion is this:

Strabo 2.1.18 does not preserve a direct ancient identification of Britons as Celts. It preserves only a disputed ancient supposition to that effect. Until a stronger text is produced, the claim that ancient sources straightforwardly called insular people "Celts" remains unproved, and the old Celtosceptic claim that no ancient source ever calls insular people "Celts" remains valid.

If that conclusion sounds severe, it is only because the claim it answers was made so confidently. A conjecture may be worth discussing. A disputed conjecture may even be worth revisiting. But neither is enough to declare a new era, much less to tell British archaeologists that there remains no reason to resist the term "Celtic". If the name of the Celts is to be transferred to the Britons, let it be transferred on conclusive evidence, not on a guess preserved by a hostile intermediary and corrected in the very sentence that preserves it.

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