

The Precursors of Celtic and Germanic

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It is well known that Germanic has quite a few Celtic loanwords (see, e.g., Birkhan 1970, Rùbekeil 2002, Schumacher 2007). However, Celtic and Germanic also share lexical material exclusive to these branches that predates most of the sound laws defining them.

It is often hard to determine whether a given form is borrowed or inherited from PIE: thus, Casaretto (2004: page num. fn. 1051) on PGmc. **rū-nō-* ‘secret’ vs. PCelt. **rū-nā-* ‘magic spell; secret’: “Ob diese Parallellität Lehnbeziehungen oder ein gemeinsames Erbe reflektiert, ist unsicher”; Olsen (1988: 13) on PGmc. **gīslō-* ‘hostage’ vs. PCelt. **geistlo-* id.: “It is not certain whether the Gmc. examples are inherited or Celtic loanwords”; Karsten (1927: 126) on PGmc. **arbja-* vs. PCelt. **orbios* ‘heir’ and PGmc. **aiþa-* vs. PCelt. **oito-* ‘oath’: “... kan likaså vara antingen urbesläktat med eller lån ...”; and Ringe (2006: 296): “There are also quite a few words shared only by Celtic and Germanic, which might or might not be loanwords ...”.

As already noted by Lane (1933), Krahe (1954) and Polomé (1954, 1983), such “Celto-Germanicisms” pertain to certain semantic spheres. On closer inspection, it turns out that these spheres may generally be boiled down to:

- a) religion, superstition and illnesses
- b) warfare and equestrian terminology

(many of those associated with hostility or evilness can be placed in either category)

Only 10 of the about 80 Celto-Germanic lexemes cannot be placed in the above-mentioned categories, and, with a couple of exceptions, even these are typical culture-words. Such a distribution militates against the possibility of a Celto-Germanic genetic subgroup (and the existence of Italo-Celtic need not be refuted on this basis); instead, it seems to reflect a cultural unity between speakers of the early IE dialects in Northern Europe that later evolved into Proto-Celtic and Proto-Germanic.

Most of the items in question look old and probably represent regional IE innovations (the most famous example being **uōt-i/o-* in derivatives meaning ‘prophet’, ‘shamanic wisdom’ etc.; Meid 1991: 25-26; Watkins 1995: 118), while others may have been taken over from the same third source (Polomé 1983: 284). Remarkably, about 25 of them are shared with Balto-Fennic languages, suggesting a larger Pre-Celtic/Pre-Germanic/Balto-Fennic continuum.

Linking reconstructed prehistoric languages to archaeological findings is always risky business, but we may tentatively fix this cultural unity in time and space in Eastern Central Europe around 2000 BCE, when the pre-Celtic Únětice culture in the present-day Czech Republic bordered late, possibly pre-Germanic, varieties of the Corded Ware culture. This scenario is compatible with the conclusions reached by Kristiansen & Larsson 2005 (Kristian Kristiansen p.c.).

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