
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

www.trac.org.uk

Paper Information:

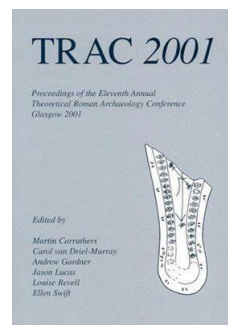
Title: Celts, Romans and the Coligny Calendar

Author: Cathy Swift

Pages: 83–95

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC2001_83_95

Publication Date: 05 April 2002



Volume Information:

Carruthers, M., van Driel-Murray, C., Gardner, A., Lucas, J., Revell, L., and Swift, E. (eds.) (2002) *TRAC 2001: Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Glasgow 2001*. Oxford: Oxbow Books

Copyright and Hardcopy Editions:

The following paper was originally published in print format by Oxbow Books for TRAC. Hard copy editions of this volume may still be available, and can be purchased direct from Oxbow at <http://www.oxbowbooks.com>.

TRAC has now made this paper available as Open Access through an agreement with the publisher. Copyright remains with TRAC and the individual author(s), and all use or quotation of this paper and/or its contents must be acknowledged. This paper was released in digital Open Access format in April 2013.

Celts, Romans and the Coligny Calendar

Cathy Swift

Introduction

It is hard for those who have them to admire the rapidly developing system of short-term academic contracts but one advantage for the scholar in such a situation is that they can facilitate the development of a wider overview of a number of cognate fields. Through an analysis of the dating and language of the Coligny calendar, I seek to explore the theoretical question of the value or otherwise of using sources which are both chronologically and geographically unrelated. This is a practice which, while not unknown in Roman archaeology, has been endemic in Celtic studies. It is an approach for which Celtic archaeology has been criticised by many – people do, after all, occasionally feast, boast, drink, fight and chop off heads without necessarily being ethnically or even culturally related.

This fundamental reality, allied perhaps to the almost complete omission of the word 'Celt' from Barry Cunliffe's formative text-book on the insular iron age (1974), has led to the situation that, in the early years of the third millennium, a climate of opinion which is antagonistic to the notion of a pan-European Celtic culture appears dominant in British and Irish archaeology. With increasing vehemence, scholars such as Timothy Champion (1982, 1996), Malcolm Chapman (1992), John Waddell (1991, 1995), John Collis (1996), Simon James (1999) and Barra Ó Donnabháin (2000) have argued that the concept of 'Celticity' is one formed in academic circles from the eighteenth century on; that there is no evidence for a 'Celtic' invasion of Britain or Ireland from the Continent and that continuity from the late Bronze Age, rather than innovation introduced from abroad is the distinguishing feature of insular Iron Age cultures.

It is noteworthy that these criticisms are all directed towards the inappropriateness of the Celtic model in relation to the Iron age. This ignores the basic fact that the main rationale for the model, the evidence of language, belongs to the period of the Roman empire and to the early medieval literatures of Ireland and Wales. The Coligny calendar demonstrates the existence of closely related words in Gaul during the period of Roman occupation and in Ireland in the eighth century AD. This poses fundamental questions of interpretation for those who seek to understand the relationships between the countries of north-western Europe in the first millennium after Christ.

The history and date of the calendars

The Coligny calendar was inscribed on a series of bronze tablets and something under half of it was found in fragments at Charmoux, just to the north-west of Coligny off the main road from Lyon to Strasbourg in the canton of Ain (Burgundy) in 1897. The small pieces were mingled with those of a bronze statue, apparently of Mars and also in fragments. The 1897 discovery was immediately reported to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres on the grounds that, of the approximately 150 fragments, 120 bore Gaulish inscriptions. In 1898, following the publicity which the calendar had evoked, Héron de Villefosse sent a communication to the Académie in which he highlighted the discovery of a similar fragment, in the waters of a stream feeding into the Lac d'Antre, at Villards d'Héria in the Jura, in 1807. This fragment was too small to say more than that it belonged to a calendar of the same type as Coligny and scholarly attention quickly reverted to the longer text. A number of re-constructions and studies were subsequently published of which the highlights were those of Eoin MacNeill (1928) and Paul-Marie Duval and Georges Pinault (1986). This last benefited from a conservation programme in the 1960s. The most recent edition is that of Garrett Olmsted (1992a) who, unlike most of his predecessors, has chosen to base his reconstruction, not on the sequence of identifiable days and months but rather on patterns (identified with the use of a computer), in the series of what he terms 'TII marks' which are found linked to certain days.

The sites where the calendars were found were both subsequently excavated in the twentieth century. In 1962, Émile Thevenot undertook a small excavation on the site of a cherry tree in Charmoux which, as Rhÿs confirms in his 1910 paper, had been planted over the area where the fragments had been found. This brought forth a fragment of bronze, without inscription, and some *tegulae*. In the north of the same field and some fifty metres to the west of the cherry tree, flagstones and tiles were also noted. In 1967, excavations of the remains of a Romano-Gaulish shrine at Villards d'Héria, by Lucien Lerat, produced at least five and possibly eight fragments of the calendar. (The shrine was in operation from the first to the third centuries AD) These additional pieces were sufficient to indicate that the Villiards calendar was similar to that of Coligny but that there were also differences in detail (Duval and Pinault 1986: 1–13, 258–60). It is worth noting, at this point, that both calendars are linked by the circumstances of their discovery with Romano-Gaulish cult practices.

The first serious dating evidence for the Coligny calendar was outlined by Rudolf Thurneysen in 1899 in the *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*. He described the script as a Latin script of the first to second centuries AD. Linguistically he confirmed the language as Celtic (quashing earlier speculations that it might be Ligurian or Sequanian) and he suggested that a date of the first to second centuries AD would explain the fact that a number of the words inscribed on the calendar seemed to show the onset of apocope or loss of final syllables. His dates were, however, subsequently dismissed by Eoin MacNeill on the historical grounds that the calendar was unlikely to have been produced after Augustus' programme of rapid Romanization in Gaul (MacNeill 1928: 4–7). MacNeill's revamped dating is still current in British academia, being found, for example, in general textbooks such as Miranda Green's *Gods of the Celts* (1986: 27) or Barry Cunliffe's *The Ancient Celts* (1997: 188).

Judging from his comments MacNeill had not seen the statue which had been found with the calendar. This had been restored in 1897 and again in 1975 and represents a life-size naked man in naturalistic Mediterranean style with right hand raised and traces of a circular fitting on his curly hair – apparently to hold a helmet. He has been identified by Stéphanie Boucher as a Mars type which she dated to the end of the first century AD and by J. J. Hatt to the second half of the second century AD (Duval and Pinault 1986: 35–7).

MacNeill also stated in his article that “a decision may be reached on the grounds of palaeography which are beyond my scope” (1928: 4). Such a study was undertaken by Robert Marichal in the 1960s and published by Duval and Pinault in their 1986 edition. Marichal argues for a date in the latter half of the second century or even the first half of the third century AD, citing the heavy horizontal serifs of the letters A, M and N and the alternation of broad and slender strokes in the letters of A, M, N and X (Duval and Pinault 1986: 24–26). Marichal’s arguments are the basis of the later dating used by scholars such as Andrew Fitzpatrick (1997: 74) Clive Ruggles (1999: 332) and Greg Woolf (1998: 230) although, in point of fact, all three scholars cite the most recent edition by Olmsted rather than Duval or Marichal. (See also Green 1998: 197 where she uses the later dating).

Whilst acknowledging the dating provided by Marichal in the 1986 edition, Garrett Olmsted is concerned to stress his belief that whatever the date of the calendar, the date of the calendrical system long predates the bronze tablets as we have them. His fundamental reason appears close to that of MacNeill: “the calendars could hardly have been developed as [sic] this date and still fail to show some Latin influence” (Olmsted 1992a: 71). Through the use of mathematical patterning of TII marks, which are inscribed sporadically beside certain days, Olmsted identifies two different calendrical systems in operation in the calendar. He sees the original source behind the surviving plates as belonging to the first century BC “when the Gaulish priestly class received the full support of the native aristocracy” (ibid. 71–2). He believes that this original source would have been a 25-year cycle, itself a subsequent development from an earlier 30-year cycle, and enhanced in its later stages by the use of TII notation. He feels that these TII marks could only have been adopted by a literate community and thus, so the argument runs, the last phase in the development of the 25-year calendar (prior to its inscription on the bronze tablets of Coligny) belongs to some period after the adoption of the Rhône valley coinage series around 120 BC (1992: 74, 134). In contrast, “the developmental history of the calendar perhaps can be traced back to the period 850 ± 300 BC” (ibid. 73) when the ultimate ancestor of the Coligny system would have been in existence as a piece of oral lore, based on a 30-year cycle and used by druids who memorised the relevant detail in gnomic verse (ibid. 201–3).

Olmsted’s remarkably early dates for the postulated origins of Coligny’s calendrical system coincides with his equally early dating of other ‘Celtic’ texts such as his belief that one can detect seventh-century poems outlining the later saga, the *Táin Bó Cúailgne*. That attempt was summarized succinctly by one reviewer: “His analysis and interpretation of these texts, moreover, appears to be inspired by his desire to project the composition of the *Táin* as far back as possible in time but his arguments do not rest on a clear and logical evaluation of the evidence” (Ó hUiginn 1992: 63 *re* Olmsted

1992b). Olmsted's Bronze Age dates for the system underpinning Coligny are equally unconvincing for they derive from his belief that the medieval Irish festival of *Samain* (at the beginning of November) had shifted backwards from its original location at the mid-winter solstice, on December 22nd. The grounds for this belief are nowhere explained in detail but "such a shift would be accounted for if it had been in operation for some 1300 years at the adoption of the Julian calendar, suggesting an origin for a common Celtic calendar within 300 years either side of 850 BC or sometime in the period between 1150 and 550 B.C." (Olmsted 1992a: 20). I am not qualified to judge the validity of the computer-based modelling which allows him to calculate this shift but it is disquieting to note that the dates put forward for the Bronze Age precursor differ within the same book. (He twice cites dates of 850 ± 300 but elsewhere suggests that the 30-year calendar would have been adopted between 1150 and 1100 BC; 1992, 20, 71 *versus* 134). Furthermore, the textual and mathematical arguments for his proposed reconstruction of the calendar are undermined by the statement that he has been forced to supply "items mistakenly left out of the original text" by the Coligny carvers while "correction of [their] errors are enclosed within exclamation points!" (1992: xii).

In short, there are currently three dating schemes for Coligny in print. The first, by MacNeill, is based on his historical understanding of Gallic Romanization. The second is the epigraphical dating provided by Marichal. The third, by Olmsted, accepts the Marichal dating for the extant calendar (1996: 70–71) but argues that the plates merely represent the ultimate development of something originating in oral druidical lore in the first millennium BC.

Like MacNeill, therefore, Olmsted sees the calendar as being essentially a pre-Roman artefact with, as it were, the cosmetic use of Roman elements. Also in line with MacNeill's thinking, Olmsted further interprets this pre-Roman source as "common Celtic" in origin or, in other words, as having been in use throughout the Celtic world at some pre-existing point in time (MacNeill 1928:16; Olmsted 1992a: 20). The Roman contexts in which both calendars were discovered, together with the epigraphical analysis by Marichal, are thus ignored in favour of a shaky reconstruction of putative pre-existing calendars belonging to a 'Celtic' civilisation of either Iron Age or Bronze Age date.

Discarding this 'Celtic' interpretation and concentrating instead on Marichal's epigraphical dates for Coligny and Villiards d'Heria (later second to early third centuries AD), we appear to be talking of a system in use on Gallo-Roman religious sites some two hundred years or more after the Julian reforms. Moreover, it would seem that the calendrical system inscribed on the two sets of tablets was sufficiently widely available for two such calendars, broadly similar though not identical, to have been produced some 30 km apart.

Roman elements on the Coligny calendar

A context for the production and use of the Coligny calendar within a Romanized setting is provided in E. J. Bickerman's *Chronology of the Ancient World* (1968). Bickerman makes it clear that the Julian calendar was only adopted gradually by many societies in

the empire. Galen, writing c. AD 160 states that numerous Greek cities and the inhabitants of Palestine had still to adopt the calendar in his day while pre-existing calendars were still being used in Rhodes as late as AD 244–8 (Bickerman 1968: 49–51). Bickerman also indicates that it was reasonably common in many ancient societies to operate two calendars, one civil and the other religious, contemporaneously and that the religious calendar, in particular, would often stem from older traditions (1968: 26, 39, 41). In this, the situation mirrors that of Britain today where, despite the relatively small number of practising Christians and the manifold problems posed by the movable date of the Christian festival of Easter, it is still widely seen as an important break within the working year. Given the contexts in which both the Coligny and Villiards calendars were found, there is no obvious reason why we should continue to follow MacNeill or Olmsted in believing that Coligny could not have been in use as a religious calendar after the age of Augustus.

It has already been mentioned that Coligny is written in a Latin script. It also uses the Roman numeral system and displays a habit of abbreviation which is characteristic of Roman inscriptions. The word DVMANNI (in the genitive) can be rendered DVMANN, DVMAN, DUMN, DVM, the word IVOS can be rendered IVO or IV and so forth (MacNeill 1928: 33–43). A long I is used in the manner typical of imperial Latin usage, without phonetic value (Duval and Pinault 1986: 27–30). Some Gaulish words are given Latinised endings as in the alteration of the forms PRINO – Gaulish -u- or -i- stem genitive – and PRINI – a Latin second declension genitive (Duval and Pinault 1986: 421). The photographs in Duval and Pinault's edition show that word division is not uniform and there is no apparent evidence for the use of interpunct. Such a transitional style is also found in the Vindolanda letters and would tend to reinforce Marichal's dating (Bowman and Thomas 1983: 68–9). The very form of the calendar, in large tablets of bronze, can be compared with practices in the Mediterranean world while the holes for the insertion of pegs by each day are also a Roman feature, known as *parapegma*. On the evidence of Vitruvius, Roman astronomers would have used these to mark stellar phenomena (Bickerman 1968: 58).

As against these features, there is no trace of Roman feasts, no trace of the Roman names for the months and no trace, as far as we can tell, of the Roman habit of naming months after gods or rulers. More importantly, there is a binary element to the Coligny system which is completely lacking in the Roman calendar. Coligny represents a cycle of five solar years or sixty-two lunar months. At the beginning of the five year cycle and at its half-way point, an intercalary month is inserted, thus subdividing the five years neatly into two. The year, consisting of twelve lunar months, is also subdivided by the two months of SAMON- and GIAMONI- which, on analogy with other Celtic languages, incorporate the word for summer and winter respectively. These two 6-month seasons are also marked by the cycles of PRINNI LOVDIN and PRINNI LAGIT (MacNeill 1928: 17; Duval and Pinault 1986: 279). Each month, consisting of either 29 or 30 days, is, in turn, subdivided into two halves of 15 days or 14 days.

This is by no means the whole story of the calendar. There are good months and not-good months signified by the letters MAT and ANM (reconstructed as *math* and *an-math* respectively.) There are days which are marked D (apparently an abbreviation for **dijos* – 'day' and other days marked MD, thought to be *mathos dijos* – 'a good day'.

These variations have not been tied down to a single consistent pattern. Similarly there are days which for some as yet unknown reason, are interchanged with other days in the months to either side and there are days marked by the TII marks, »ll, l»l, and ll». The consensus among most scholars is that these too, follow no obvious pattern but Olmsted believes that they represent a sophisticated method for identifying the changing pattern of lunar and solar solstices over a sequence of years (1992a: 15–17, 112–120). Finally, there are days which are marked as IVOS which has been interpreted by Rudolph Thurneysen as meaning ‘festival’ (1898: 530).

In short, the binary structure of the calendar is a neat framework which provides the backdrop to a far more complex reality. For the purposes of this paper, however, the important feature is that neither the binary arrangements nor the additional features appear to parallel Roman usage. The one possible exception to this is the concept of days which can be identified as good days; Greg Woolf has suggested that these show that Coligny was “thoroughly Roman in its concern to distinguish days of good omen from days of bad” (Woolf 1998: 96). In fact, whilst the identification of ‘good days’ is reasonably clear; the identification of ‘bad’ or unlucky days is an inference drawn by modern observers – the annotation so interpreted is simply D or day.

The significance of Samon- on the Coligny calendar

The main reason Coligny has been interpreted as a ‘Celtic’ calendar is because it contains some sixty Gaulish words, many of which occur in abbreviated forms (MacNeill 1928: 1–2). Gaulish is the language represented on a series of inscriptions in Greek characters from southern France in the last three centuries BC and in the Latin alphabet from approximately the first century BC to some unknown period in the first millennium (Eska and Ellis-Evans 1993: 27). It belongs to the group of related languages grouped together on philological grounds as ‘Celtic’ These include Gaulish, Lepontic and Celtiberian from the ancient world and Irish, Welsh, Cornish and Breton from the modern era (McCone 1996: 1–2).

Of these Gaulish words, the most interesting from the point of view of this enquiry, is the name of the first month in the Coligny year: SAMON-, genitive SAMONI (Duval and Pinault 1986: 265–6). The root of this word is also attested as the Old Irish word for summer: *sam*. Similarly, the name for Coligny’s seventh month, GIAMONIOS, would seem to contain a reflex of the Irish word *gam* meaning winter.

These facts are generally agreed. Still controversial is the question of whether SAMON- signifies the mid-summer month, containing the summer solstice as MacNeill suggested (1928: 41); the end of summer around November as argued by Duval and Pinault (1986: 403) or the month encapsulating the mid-winter solstice as Olmsted believes (1992a: 190–4). Of these, the November option seems to me the most likely for two reasons. Firstly, although the fragmentary nature of the remains makes it difficult to determine the names of the months with any certainty, it appears that the tenth month (i.e. two months before SAMON-) is EDRIN-. The root of this word has been interpreted as cognate with the Irish word *áed* ‘fire’ (Duval and Pinault, 1986: 269). A month named after fire would seem eminently suited to the period around September/

early October when the first fires of the winter tend to be lit in northern Europe. In contrast, there is no obvious reason why fire should be associated with the period around March since most would agree that this would not be a suitable time to either begin or cease to use fire for heating purposes. Similarly, though less conclusive philologically, the root of the word designating the month OGRONN- (number five in the sequence), has been linked to Welsh *oer*, Irish *úar* meaning 'cold' (Duval and Pinault 1986: 267). Taking SAMON- to be November, this cold month would be located around late February/March which seems to fit reasonably well into the climatic sequence of northern Europe.

Secondly, on the second day of the second half of the month of SAMON- we find the notation TRINUX SAMONI (Duval and Pinault 1986: 334, 438). The first word is made up of two elements: TRI attested elsewhere in Gaulish with the meaning 'three' (Holder 1904: 1939–40) and NUX which has been interpreted as the Gaulish word (nominative singular) for 'night' (MacNeill 1928: 40; Duval and Pinault 1986: 334; Olmsted 1992a: 179). The phrase as a whole can thus be interpreted as 'three nights of SAMON-'. The use of the singular following the word for three to form a collective is a feature of Old Irish (Thurneysen 1946: 242–4) but a closer connection between Coligny and Ireland is probably implied by the fact that an Irish festival of *Samain* is well-attested in medieval Irish literature. Furthermore, that festival is described as *trenae Samna* or 'three-fold Samain' (Le Roux 1957; Duval and Pinault 1986: 403, 427).¹ In the Irish sagas it is depicted as a religious occasion which acts as a transition point both between this world and the Otherworld, a period when "supernatural power breaks through in a most ominous way.. the joints between the two great seasons of the year" (Rees and Rees 1961: 89). These two great seasons are those identified in O'Clery's etymological glossary:

samain i.e. *sam-fuin* i.e. the end (*fuin*) of summer. For it is from this the course of the year: the summer from *beltaine* to *samain* and the winter from *samain* to *beltaine*'

(DIL 1983)

A Christian martyrology in verse, *Félire Óengusso*, written c. AD 800, abandons the notion of three nights and instead draws a connection between *Samain* and November 1st (Stokes 1905: 232). Today the festival is regarded as a predecessor of modern Halloween.

The Irish festival *Samain* is also attested in the vernacular law tracts of (approximately) the eighth century AD where it is identified as the turning point of the year for key domestic animals such as cattle, sheep and pigs. Obviously, animals would be born at various times in the preceding spring and summer but in order to arrive at a standardised market value, they would be deemed to have reached their first birthday on the first *Samain* after their birth. It was at this time of year, too, that the cattle would be brought back to the home farm from the summer grazing grounds. It is also said that *Samain* was a time of feasting when the lord might receive food-rent of animal-carcasses, allowing the farmer to kill unwanted animals and minimise the burden of winter feed (Kelly 1997: 46, 59–60, 320, 357, 461). The Irish evidence, in short, suggests that *Samain* was seen as a turning point in the agricultural year which took place around the beginning of November. This, in turn, strengthens the argument that the

Gaulish SAMON- which marks the beginning of the Gaulish year, together with its festival of TRINUX SAMONI in the middle of that month, also occurred in late October/November.

The justification for the use of medieval Irish parallels

At this point, people who are not persuaded by the Celtic model might well ask: what is the rationale behind the use of Irish texts to explain a Romano-Gaulish calendar of the late second century AD? Are the similarities in language sufficient to bespeak a common culture or even a common ethnicity? Do the arguments outlined above depend, by their very nature on the assumption that the Irish and the Gauls formed a single Celtic entity, sundered though they are by five hundred odd years and a long sea passage?

To answer these questions one must first summarize the 'Celtic' model, a model often cited but only rarely broken down into its constituent elements. In the two centuries either side of the birth of Christ, Roman authors record words deriving from native speech in north Italy, Gaul, parts of Spain, Britain and Ireland. These words would seem to be clearly related to one another. Because of the interests of the Roman authors, the bulk of this evidence consists of personal names (both of humans and of gods) and place-names. Due to the widespread distribution of this evidence (traces are also found in Greece and Turkey), and because of classical references to the invasions of *Celtae/Keltoi* from the north, philologists have termed these related languages Celtic. They have proposed that all the Celtic languages stem ultimately from a single language known as Common Celtic or Proto-Celtic but this common language exists on no inscription and there is no clear evidence as to when it might have been in use. Since Common Celtic must, according to this model, exist prior to the period of its attested descendants, archaeologists have variously assumed that it must have been the language in use in north-west Europe either in the Iron Age, the Bronze Age or even the Neolithic.

The foundation on which this model is drawn up is the existence of related languages at the time of Roman conquest. Since most of the evidence is onomastic in nature, we have relatively little evidence for the grammar of these related languages. The parallels are therefore drawn, for the most part, on the basis of the pool of common vocabulary but as the number of names attested are, in themselves, relatively small, it has proved difficult to extract their meaning from sources of Roman date. Instead, scholars have sought clarification in the medieval descendants of these languages. As the Continental Celtic languages were superseded by Vulgar Latin and later the Romance languages, the best attested of these medieval descendants and the one with the richest vocabulary is Irish, which is unique in the number of extant sources ranging in date from the fifth century to the twelfth. Philologists trying to identify the meaning behind Gaulish vocabulary are thus driven to seek explanations in Old and Middle Irish and, to a lesser extent, in Middle Welsh as a pragmatic solution to the difficulties imposed by the scarcity of Continental Celtic records. In short, the discipline of philology is concerned with the identification and interpretation of words and the modifications introduced to those words across time and space; it is not concerned with the historical and material reality experienced by the people who spoke them.

This fundamental point has been entirely ignored by what one might term the 'anti-Celts' of the insular archaeological community whose works were mentioned in the introduction. What such people are attacking is a particular archaeological model, favoured by archaeologists of a preceding generation such as T. E. Powell (1958: 61–62); Stuart Piggott (1965: 226–9) or Anne Ross (1974: 42–4). These scholars sought to explain the common vocabulary witnessed in Roman sources from across Europe by reference to cultural diffusion of Continental Iron Age cultures into the British Isles. Their suggestions were enthusiastically taken up by their colleagues in philology who seized on this archaeological explanation as support for their theories about the existence of Common Celtic. I cite three by way of illustration:

There is no agreement amongst scholars about the precise date at which Irish arrived but it is interesting to see that a recent archaeological survey suggests that we might think of Celts being in Ireland by the third century B.C.

(Greene 1966: 7)

..no source tells us when the Celtic people who in historic times inhabited the British Isles came there. Their arrival in a series of invasions is nonetheless archaeologically detectable...

(Ó Murchú 1985: 5)

As pointed out by Stuart Piggott, it is not until the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. that ... archaeologists can start thinking about Celts in terms of the material culture known from areas where such people, or something of their languages, have been recorded in written sources...

(Schmidt 1993: 64)

In short, it was the archaeological community itself which first introduced the notion of common cultures and thus, by way of Childean logic, common ethnicity into the study of Celtic language (McNairn 1980: 46–73). Curiously, attempts by some philologists to avoid this paradigm have been derided by the very archaeologists who seek to dismember the Celtic model. Myles Dillon's (philological) definition of Celts in 1977 is cited with particular disdain by Simon James:

"By Celts I mean people who spoke a Celtic dialect, not people who buried their dead in urn-fields or had leaf-shaped swords or any particular kind of pottery. Language is the test. This is not an infallible statement of known truth; it is merely an agreed use of the term upon which linguists insist" ([Dillon 1977 cited in] Renfrew 1987, 225). From my own recent contact with Celtic linguists, such usage is still current. To me this 'insistence' is simply unacceptable. 'Celt' was originally a group name applied to one or more peoples, *not* a linguistic description.

(James 1999: 81).

It is, of course, true that the words *Celtae/Keltoi* were used in classical times to denote peoples rather than language but 'Celtic' has a long and prestigious background in philological writing as a word describing a group of related languages and, provided we know that this is the intended meaning, such a use, in my opinion, is perfectly acceptable. In any event, it is with such 'linguistic Celticity' in mind that I cite Irish material to provide a possible context for the Coligny calendar. This does not imply that the people of Romano-Gaulish Burgundy and pre-Viking Ireland shared a genetic

relationship or even a similar material culture. It does, however, mean that some explanation for a three-fold festival of SAMON-/Samain in both Roman Gaul and medieval Ireland is required.

Conclusion

The criticism of many modern archaeologists that there is no strong archaeological evidence for an invasion of Continental 'Celts' *en masse* into these islands during the Iron Age appears a valid one. Philologists searching to anchor 'Common Celtic' in space and time must acknowledge that, notwithstanding the sporadic occurrence of La Tène and Hallstatt artefacts in both Britain and Ireland, the archaeological interpretations of a previous generation of scholars have now been tested and found wanting. As yet, however, this development has not been acknowledged by Celtic philologists who, as a group, are not particularly interested in the historical implications of their interpretative model.

On the other hand, there is no basis for the criticism that the concept of 'Celticity' has no validity other than in the nationalistic preconceptions of modern Irish, Welsh, Scottish, Breton and Cornish ideologues (*pace* James 1999). Roman sources provide clear evidence for the interrelationship of the Gaulish, British (as ancestor of Welsh, Cornish and Breton) and Irish languages amongst others for they indicate clearly the existence of a common pool of vocabulary shared by all three regions. Furthermore, the evidence of the Coligny calendar provides clear indication of Irish/Gaulish links in social practice as represented by the three-fold festival of SAMON-/Samain.

In the absence of linguistic evidence from the pre-literate era in North-West Europe and the relative lack of interest expressed by Roman authorities in inter-regional contact by native peoples, any attempt to provide an interpretation of these links must inevitably be speculative. If the 'Common Celtic' model of shared origins in the remote past is to be dismissed, it follows that other explanations must be developed. It is noteworthy, for example, that much of the common vocabulary concerns the practice of religion. One possible explanation for the festival of SAMON-/Samain may lie in Caesar's comment that the druidic *disciplina* was thought to have originated in Britain and that, in his day, Gaulish students would travel to Britain to study it (*De Bello Gallico* VI 13). It is equally possible that Irishmen also travelled to Britain at the same time for we know that the word *druuides* is inscribed in Roman capitals on a stone from Co. Kildare (Swift 1997: 57–8). Of course, this particular explanation leaves unanswered the various other cognate words shared by the Celtic languages which, in subject matter, range across such diverse categories as topographic features, fortifications, family members, blacksmiths and beer. If our understanding of this ill-documented period in European history is to deepen, however, we must begin the process of analysing this linguistic material in more detail and produce more nuanced interpretative models.

The Coligny calendar provides in microcosm an example of the potential ways in which our understanding can be increased through an acknowledgement of this pool of common vocabulary. Celtic scholars like Eoin MacNeill or Garret Olmsted have

invariably interpreted the bronze tablets in the light of a putative 'Common Celtic' origin. In contrast, the epigraphy and the morphology of the tablets and, indeed, the contexts in which they were found, indicate clearly that they were being used as part of Gallo-Roman religious practice. Given the nature of the Irish parallels, I would like to suggest that the Coligny calendar was one which drew its inspiration from the rhythms of the north-European agricultural year. The turning point from one year to the next is the very end of the harvest season, after the grass growth has ceased, the cows no longer yield milk and the animals have been brought in from summer pasture. It is the time of transition in one's eating habits, from the green foodstuffs of the summer season to the meat-based diet of the winter. This time of year would have continued to be of major importance to subsistence farmers long after Roman overlords came to rule their lands. It seems perfectly reasonable that, in the amalgam which was Romano-Gaulish religion, their priests would have continued to celebrate this season, while tracking the year's progress in a manner which owed much to Mediterranean inspiration. No matter how complicated the super-structure of good months and bad months, good days and stellar observations may have been, the Coligny calendar is only likely to have continued in operation if it was of relevance to the community at large. An association with the production and consumption of food would have ensured that its provisions remained of fundamental interest to Gaul and Roman alike.

Department of History, NUI Maynooth

Note

Residual doubt about the identification of SAMON- and *Samain* has been expressed by Duval and Pinault (1986: 427) on the basis of the palatal 'n' in the Irish word, indicated by the pre-existing 'i'. This appears unwarranted as palatalisation of their own reconstruction of the Gaulish nominative form, *Samonios* would inevitably have occurred in Primitive or Archaic Irish (McManus 1991: 90-1).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Benet Salway for his kindness in sending me the reference to E.J. Bickerman's work and Dr Philip Freeman for his encouragement of a Celticist dabbling in the deep waters of the unknown.

Bibliography

- Bickerman, E. J. 1968. *Chronology of the ancient world*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press
- Bowman, A. K. and Thomas, J. D. 1983. *Vindolanda: the Latin writing-tablets*. London: Britannia Monograph series 4
- Champion, T. 1982. The myth of Iron Age invasions in Ireland. In B. G. Scott (ed.) *Studies on Early Ireland*. Belfast: Association of Young Irish Archaeologists
- Champion, T. 1996. The Celt in Archaeology. In T. Brown (ed.) *Celticism*. Amsterdam: Atlanta

- Chapman, M. 1992. *The Celts: the construction of a myth*. London: St Martin's Press
- Collis, J. 1996. The origin and spread of the Celts. *Studia Celtica*, 30: 17–34
- Cunliffe, B. 1974. *Iron Age communities in Britain*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Cunliffe, B. 1997. *The ancient Celts*. Oxford: University Press
- DIL. 1983. *Dictionary of the Irish Language*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy
- Duval, P.-M. and Pinault, G. 1986. *Recueil des inscriptions gauloises III: les calendriers*. Paris: Éditions du centre national de la recherche scientifique
- Eska, J. F. and Ellis Evans, D. 1993. Continental Celtic. In M. Ball and J. Fife (eds.) *The Celtic languages*. London: Routledge. 26–63
- Fitzpatrick, A. P. 1997. Everyday life in Iron Age Wessex. In A. Gwilt and C. Haselgrove (eds.). *Reconstructing Iron Age societies*. Oxford: Oxbow Monograph Series 71. 87–95
- Green, M. 1986. *The gods of the Celts*. Stroud: Sutton
- Green, M. 1998. The time lords: ritual calendars, druids and the sacred year. In A. Gibson and D. Simpson (eds.) *Prehistoric ritual and religion*. Stroud: Sutton. 190–202
- Greene, D. 1966. *The Irish language: An Ghaeilge*. Dublin: Cultural Relations Committee of Ireland
- Holder, A. 1904. *Alt-celtischer Sprachschatz II*. Leipzig: B.G. Teubner
- James, S. 1999. *The Atlantic Celts: ancient people or modern invention?* London: British Museum
- Kelly, F. 1997. *Early Irish Farming*. Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies
- Le Roux, F. 1961. Le calendrier gaulois de Coligny (Ain). *Ogam*, 13: 520–32, 635–60
- Mac Neill, E. 1928. On the notation and chronography of the calendar of Coligny. *Ériu*, 10: 1–67
- McCone, K. 1996. *Towards a relative chronology of ancient and medieval Celtic sound change*. Maynooth: Maynooth Studies in Celtic Linguistics I
- McManus, D. 1991. *A guide to Ogam*. Maynooth: Maynooth Monographs 4
- McNairn, B. 1980. *The method and theory of V. Gordon Childe*. Edinburgh: University Press
- Ó Donnabháin, B. 2000. *An appalling vista: the Celts and the archaeology of later prehistoric Ireland*. Bray: Wordwell
- Ó hUiginn, R. 1992. The background and development of *Táin Bó Cúailgne*. In J. Mallory (ed.) *Aspects of the Táin*. Belfast: Universities Press. 29–68
- Olmsted, G. 1992a. *The Gaulish calendar*. Bonn: Dr. Rudolf Habelt
- Olmsted, G. 1992b. The earliest narrative version of the *Táin*: seventh-century poetic references to *Táin Bó Cúailgne*. *Emania*, 10: 5–17
- Ó Murchú, M. 1985. *The Irish language*. Dublin: Dept. of Foreign Affairs
- Piggott, S. 1965. *Ancient Europe: from the beginnings of agriculture to classical Antiquity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
- Powell, T. G. E. 1958. *The Celts*. London: Thames and Hudson
- Renfrew, C. 1987. *Archaeology and Language: the puzzle of Indo-European origins*. London: Jonathan Cape
- Rees, A. and Rees, B. 1961. *Celtic Heritage: ancient tradition in Ireland and Wales*. London: Thames and Hudson
- Rhŷs, J. 1910. Notes on the Coligny calendar. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 6: 315–69
- Ross, A. 1974. *Pagan Celtic Britain: studies in iconography and tradition*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Ruggles, C. L. N. 1999. *Astronomy in prehistoric Britain and Ireland*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press
- Schmidt, K. H. 1993. Insular Celtic P- and Q-Celtic. In M. J. Ball and J. Fife (eds.) *The Celtic languages*. London: Routledge
- Stokes, W. 1905. *The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*. London: Henry Bradshaw Society
- Swift, C. 1997. *Ogam stones and the earliest Irish Christians*. Maynooth: Maynooth Monographs, series minor 2

- Thurneysen, R. 1899. Der Kalendar von Coligny. *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 2: 523–44
- Thurneysen, R. 1946. *A grammar of Old Irish*. Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies
- Waddell, J. 1991. The question of Celticization of Ireland. *Emania*, 9: 5–16
- Waddell, J. 1995. Celts, Celticisation and the Irish Bronze Age. In J. Waddell and E. S. Twohig (eds.) *Ireland in the Bronze Age: proceedings of the Dublin conference April 1995*. Dublin: The Stationery Office. 158–69
- Woolf, G. 1998. *Becoming Roman: the origins of provincial civilisation in Gaul*. Cambridge: University Press