

CELTIC OR KELTIC?

" In school I was told that C in Latin is pronounced like K, and so the people whom Julius Caesar called Celti would be called in English by a name that would sound like Kelt; and besides, the ancient Greeks called them Keltoi. Why, therefore, do you pronounce Celt and Celtic in a way that sounds like Selt, and Seltic? "

Correspondents have asked me this question so many times that a printed reply may be of general interest. It is true that Latinists these days treat Roman C as if it were a K. However, the *Oxford English Dictionary* makes the point that the English language acquired the words Celt and Celtic from Middle French Celte and Celtique. In the thousand years that had elapsed between Caesar's Latin and its descendant tongues of mediaeval Europe a philological principle had become established that states: " The English and French Languages convert the Latin C, and the Greek K, into a soft C (S) if the letter is followed by a narrow vowel ". What is a narrow vowel, you say? It is an e, an i, or a y, or combinations of these vowels with other vowels, such as ae, ie and so on. Broad vowels are a, o and u.

Thus, Greek **Kentron** gives Modern English **Centre** or **Center**, not **Kenter**. Greek **Kuklos** becomes in Modern English **Cycle**, not **Kykle**. Greek compound Bi (2) plus **Kuklos** yields **Bicycle**, not **BiKykle**. Latin **Celtus**, **Celticus**, becomes in Modern English **Celt**, **Celtic**, pronounced with a soft initial C.

When I first enrolled at Edinburgh University I brought from my previous college a residual Latin pronunciation of Celt with a hard K, and was very

promptly told that educated speakers would not make the initial C hard, for the reasons set out above. Usage in the end always wins, and if enough people disregard classical scholarship the pronunciation with a hard K may become standard. I doubt, if Americans will ever talk about Shopping Kenters, or Julius Kaisar.

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