The rapid advances in genetic technology has meant that not only can minute traces of human tissue be used to solve crimes or prove paternity, but also to trace the migrations of our ancestors thousands of years ago. So, for example, the geneticists in the laboratories where my genetic sequencing was done end up by classifying me as “Celtic”.

But what is meant by “Celtic”? The word comes from the Ancient Greek “keltoi” [keltoi] through Latin “Celticus” [keltokus] but it was not a name the people used to describe themselves. It is important to realize that, despite the common name we give those people, they did not constitute a homogeneous historical entity. This is not the place to repeat the history of the Celts who first enter our written history around 600 BC but who were even then split into several language groups and spread over much of Europe, including France, Germany, the Iberian Peninsula, Ireland and Britain, and in the east, in Anatolia, so they obviously had been there long before written history began. For example, the first evidence in Britain of what is called “chariot burial”, one of the cultural features archeologists use to distinguish the Celts, occurred sometime not long after 1000 BC.

1 The pronunciation [seltokus] came about because in Romance languages, derived from Latin, a “c” before an “i” or an “e” is normally pronounced [s]. Although either pronunciation is now regarded as acceptable, the [seltokus] form is usually reserved for Scottish sporting clubs.
The problem is twofold: first, the Celts had no written language\(^2\) — we are all familiar with the way the Druids forbade writing down any of their culture but instead memorized huge amounts of material, including genealogies, epic poems and medical lore — and so what we know about them we must either glean from other (usually Roman or Greek) commentators or deduce from their material artifacts, including their magnificent stone carving and gold jewellery.

The second problem, at least for those of us who have British ancestry, is to determine whether the Celts were a separate people who invaded Britain\(^3\) and thus imposed their culture upon the indigenous Britons, or — as is these days pretty much the received wisdom — Celtic culture came there by way of trade and other peaceful contacts. The position was summed up in a 2006 posting to RootsWeb by Peter A. Kincaid\(^4\) who criticised some others for their historical inconsistencies:

\textit{The term Celt as a people or cultural group is mainland European. The British Isles had their native people but they were not referred to as Celts. They only recently have been labeled as such. There were cultural similarities but the current thinking is that this is a transference of culture among the elite.}

\textit{That said the term invaders do [sic] not apply to all people of the British Isles. Thanks to the ice it was emptied and people migrated there from potentially different sources and may or may not have been in conflict with each other as there was lots of land. These people eventually would have become native to the islands.}

A 2003 genetic yDNA survey of Britain\(^5\) shows that most of England remains predominantly of Ancient Briton stock while areas such as Yorkshire, East Anglia and in Scotland, the Orkney and Shetland Islands show the most evidence of later Germanic — in this case, Viking — genetic infusion a thousand years down the track.

So, when we try to discover how the “Celts” in Britain might have regarded homosexuality, we are relying on observations recorded by historians and military generals (such as Julius Caesar) from the opposite side in battles. And, to complicate matters, we must infer from observations made elsewhere that the same or similar would have applied in Britain.

\(^2\) The Celts had Ogham, but this was used as a monumental inscription only.

\(^3\) Elsewhere, there were definitely Celtic invasions, especially of Italy, Greece and parts of Anatolia, for which we have ample historical evidence.

\(^4\) Kincaid, Peter A.: \textit{Glacial Refugia Linked to R1b Markers?}, GENEALOGY-DNA-L@rootsweb.com, 13 Feb 2006

Bearing those caveats in mind, about all which can be said about the Celtic (and hence, indigenous Briton after the Celtic acculturation), attitude to homosexuality was one of reasonable acceptance as a more or less normal part of life provided it did not interfere with marriage and kin obligations. The Celts were a warrior race. Greek historians, the Divine Julius during his Gallic wars, and several other chroniclers⁶ all found it remarkable that the Celts fought naked⁷ (except, of course, for a torque around their necks), and that it was not uncommon for people of the same sex to sleep together, soldiers sharing their beds of hides and furs with each other. Diodorus Siculus⁸, who observed that the men were “much keener on their own sex” than on the Celtic women, commented that:

*The extraordinary thing is they haven’t the smallest regard for their personal dignity of self-respect; they offer themselves to other men without the least compunction. Furthermore, this isn’t looked down upon, or regarded as in any way disgraceful: on the contrary, if one of them is rejected by another to whom he has offered himself, he takes offence.*

Nudity in battle was most common among the Gaesatae, Celtic warriors who banded together to become more or less free-lance fortune hunters. In his book, *Celtic Warrior: 300 BC-AD 100* Stephen Allen⁹ says the Gaesatae

...formed distinct groups outside the traditional social structure of the tribe or clan. ... The warrior would have dedicated himself to his fellow Gaesatae [as did the Spartans to their mess mates and lovers and Boeotian warriors to their fellows and lovers in the Sacred Band of Thebes] and very likely to a god of war, for example Camulos in Britain and Gaul. Thus, nudity on the battlefield assumed ritual significance. Protected and empowered by divine forces, the warrior displayed his strength and had no need for either armour or clothing.

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⁶ for example, Polybius, Diodorus Siculus, Caesar, and Strabo

⁷ Unlike the Greeks who admired nudity, the Romans found it distasteful.


⁹ with Wayne Reynolds (Illustrator); quoted in introduction by Bill Weintraub to Sarah Hawke’s “Celtic Warrior Love”, at http://www.man2manalliance.org/hero/keltoi.html
Peter Wilcox\textsuperscript{10}, in his rather specialised military history, says that:

\begin{quote}
From early puberty the young man of the warrior caste progressed through the martial arts of the Celt, with the accompaniment of hunting, feasting, and drinking. As a fully-fledged warrior he would support and be supported in battle by a close age group of his own peers, who had been with him throughout his training for manhood. In this way many young men developed a strong man-to-man bond; and Diodorus, Strabo, and Athenaeus all remark that homo-erotic practices were common among the Celts.
\end{quote}

The Celts had rather complicated marriage laws very different from our own. They saw marriage as a civil contract which could be undertaken in a variety of degrees and always with prior understanding of what the terms of contract were: for example, a couple could marry and agree to share property; or they could marry and all property would belong to one or the other party (women, although not equal, had considerable power in Celtic society). Or a marriage could be for a specified length of time. All marriage contracts were designed to protect any children and extended family property rather than the interests of the individuals concerned.

Who you had sex with was of no concern provided the terms of the marriage contract were not broken. Pretty clearly, the gender of one’s sexual partners was of no great importance. However, homosexual partnerships were not recognized as a form of marriage, but were taken more as a special and much-praised form of friendship in which the strength of the emotional bonds were recognized and indeed, celebrated in songs about some of the heroes of the age.

Probably the most famous of such songs is the pre-Christian Irish Lament for Cuchulainn and Ferdia in which, according to Sarah Hawke\textsuperscript{11},

\begin{quote}
we can see parallels ........ with those of other erotically-bonded mythic or real warrior heroes, such as Achilles and Patroclus, Herakles and Iolaüs, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, David and Jonathan, and Alexander and Hephaestion.
\end{quote}

Hawke, by way of introduction, says the following:

\begin{quote}
The information that we have about the Celts is scanty, most of it from myth. However, travelers and philosophers at the time commented that
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} Wilcox, Peter and Mcbride, Angus (Illustrator): Rome's Enemies (2) : Gallic and British Celts, Osprey Men-at-Arms series 158.

\textsuperscript{11} Hawke, Sarah: Celtic Warrior Love, at http://www.man2manalliance.org/hero/keltoi.html. This site, run by Bill Weintraub, and to which Hawke was invited to contribute, is rather gay/male chauvinistic and militaristic in tone but otherwise contains useful material.
the Celts frequently carried on male/male relationships, intimate on both a physical and a spiritual level. It was remarked that Celts often slept on animal skins with their male lovers. Their relationships were varied -- intergenerational, often military in nature; gender-variant; and egalitarian. This suggests that no set ‘ideal’ of a man/man love relationship existed.

While marriage was a sacred and valued institution, their society was, most likely, one in which men were free to express their love and desire for one another in relative freedom. Evidence also exists that close pair-bonds were often formed between men, bonds of brotherhood that occasionally verged into something ……… for which there is regrettably no modern-day analogy.

That they maintained truly loving as well as physical relationships is borne out in a mythic context in a truly touching part of the saga of Cuchulainn (pronounced “Ku Kullen”), where he develops an intimate and lasting brotherhood/friendship with one of his peers while undergoing their warrior training on the island of the warrior witch Scathach. ………. Cu Chulainn - Cu, the Hound, of Chulainn — is the most celebrated warrior and the greatest hero of the most heroic age in the history of prechristian Ireland.

As youths, Cuchulainn and Ferdia formed a deep and loving, including sexual, bond. Years later, and after long separation, they were pitted in battle against each other by the machinations of Maeve the Hag. They fought for three days, each night Cuchulainn sent Ferdia leeches and herbs to heal his wounds, while Ferdia sent his lover a share of his own meal. Then on the fourth day, Cuchulainn calls on what Nora Chadwick\textsuperscript{12} calls “his mysterious weapon gai bolga” and Ferdia was killed. Cuchulainn mourned him in these words:

\begin{quote}
I loved the noble way you blushed,
and loved your fine, perfect form.
I loved your clear blue eye,
your way of speech, your skillfulness.

Ferdia of the hosts and the hard blows,
beloved golden brooch\textsuperscript{13},
I mourn your conquering arm
and our fostering together.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{12} Chadwick, Nora: The Celts, Folio Society, London, 2001, p. 268

\textsuperscript{13} Brooches, some of gold and decorated with fabulous granulation, were among a Celt’s most valued possessions.
You were a sight
to please a prince;
your gold-rimmed shield,
your slender sword.

the ring of bright silver
on your fine hand,
your skill at chess,
your flushed, sweet cheek,

your curled yellow hair
like a lovely jewel,
the leaf-shaped belt
you wore at your waist.

You fell to the Hound,
and I mourn, little calf.
The shield didn’t save you
that you brought to the fray.

Shameful our struggle,
the grief and uproar!
O fair, fine hero
who shattered armies
and crushed them under foot,
golden brooch, I mourn.

Sarah Hawke comments that this is only part of a very long and celebrated
poem of which, she says,

No parallel exists for a woman anywhere in Celtic myth. In fact, poetry
praising women in an ancient Celtic context (as opposed to medieval or
modern) is quite scanty when compared with the body of literature
describing and praising men.

This leads me to believe that men, specifically warriors, were the
standard of beauty, and that relationships between men held a special,
cherished place. The bonds of warrior brotherhood were formed early,
ran very, very deep, and, as testified in myth, endured throughout life
and even to the end of it.
The Vikings

A thousand or more years after the Britons adopted Celtic ways by whatever process of peaceful osmosis, and long after the Romans had quit Britannia, Vikings arrived and once more changed the islands’ ways. From around 800 AD until after 1100AD, the North-men came, first in raiding parties, looted, raped and pillaged and then went home again to attend to their farms. Later, they settled, sometimes bringing their women with them but more commonly, marrying into the local British population.

The first Vikings to come to Britain were the Germanic peoples from the low-lying areas of the Baltic coast of modern Friesland, northern Germany and Denmark. Best known to us these days collectively as the Anglo-Saxons (not to forget the Jutes and Danes), it was these immigrants who, after long settlement, gave us the name “England”, our language, “English”, many of our best-loved myths and fables, and many of the most important principles of our law.

We only have Roman writers to thank for what little we know about the role and place of homosexuality among these Germanic tribes in their homelands. Tacitus\(^{14}\), for example, indicates they punished men described as “ragr” or “ergi” by burying them in swamps, alive, with baskets over their heads. However, what is not clear is whether or not these words, as among the Norse Vikings, referred to effeminate or passive homosexuals, or alternatively, to cowards in battle. Procopius\(^{15}\) on the other hand, claimed that some of these tribes made a cult of male comradeship and may have practised pederasty.

In the six centuries, from 410 when the Romans quit Britannia to 1066 AD, when the Normans conquered England, the political and social landscape of Britain underwent many changes because of the influx of the Anglo-Saxons. The earliest settlers carved out small kingdoms and sub-kingdoms for themselves, largely tribal in nature, along the eastern coast from East Anglia to Yorkshire, all the while pushing the indigenous inhabitants to the west where they found refuge in Wales, Cornwall and Brittany. By the 9th Century, four


\(^{15}\) *History of the Wars of Justinian*, cited in Fone, B. op. cit., p. 119.
major kingdoms had evolved, viz. Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia and Wessex, this last being the only Briton/Celtic kingdom to survive the Viking invasion. Most of what we know of the Anglo-Saxon period comes from an annual log of events known as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

I have been unable to discover much about the role and place of homosexual relationships in Anglo-Saxon England except suggestions that the old-fashioned Celtic acceptance continued among the common people. Equally, it has been difficult to find information about homosexuality among the other major group of Vikings to settle in the British Isles, the sea-going farmers from Norway whom we call the Norse. As with their Anglo-Saxon cousins earlier, the Norse Vikings started out by raiding but eventually came and stayed, in their case, principally in the Hebrides, Orkney, Shetland and Caithness, the Isle of Man, the Dublin area, and southern Wales. Shetland and Orkney were actually part of the Kingdom of Norway until they were given, as part of a dowry payment, to Scotland in the 15th Century.

Most of what we know about the Norse culture comes to us from sagas, particularly from the Islandic Sagas, composed in the 13th Century and influenced by Christianity which had since replaced the old Norse pagan religion of Woden, Thor, and Freya from whom we derive the names of the last three days of our working week. These show Norse society to have been violent and riven by blood feuds as families sought to avenge murders or settle disputes. At the bottom of this very hierarchical society were the *thralls* or slaves who had no rights but who, in some circumstances, could gain their freedom. The free class was divided into common farmers and above them, the nobles, called *jarls* — from which word we gain the word “earl” — who were the owners of large farmsteads. Over all, there were the kings or chiefs.
Gunnora Hallakarva\textsuperscript{16} in a recent essay, said that her personal research into homosexuality in the Viking Age

......... shows clearly that the Vikings had words (and therefore mental constructs and concepts) of same-sex activity; however since the needs of agricultural/pastoral living require reproduction not only to work the farm but also to provide support for the parent in old age, it was expected that no matter what one’s affectional preferences were that each individual would marry and reproduce.

Later, she says of Viking culture what we have already seen applied in many other cultures:

The evidence of the sagas and laws shows that male homosexuality was regarded in two lights: there was nothing at all strange or shameful about a man having intercourse with another man if he was in the active or "manly" role, however the passive partner in homosexual intercourse was regarded with derision. It must be remembered, however, that the laws and sagas reflect the Christian consciousness of the Icelander or Norwegian of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, well after the pagan period. The myths and legends show that honoured gods and heroes were believed to have taken part in homosexual acts, which may indicate that pre-Christian Viking Scandinavia was more tolerant of homosexuality, and history is altogether silent as to the practice of lesbianism in the Viking Age.

Hallakarva found most of her evidence of the Old Norse views about homosexuality in what were a special class of insults known as \textit{níð} which she describes as

......... part of a family of concepts which all have connotations of passive male homosexuality, such as: \textit{ergi} or \textit{regi} (nouns) and \textit{argr} or \textit{ragr} (the adjective form of \textit{ergi}) ("willing or inclined to play or interested in playing the female part in sexual relations with another man, unmanly, effeminate, cowardly"); \textit{ergiask} ("to become \textit{argr}"); \textit{rassragr} ("arse-\textit{ragr}"); \textit{stroðinn} and \textit{sorðinn} ("sexually used by a man") and \textit{sansorðinn} ("demonstrably sexually used by another man").

\textsuperscript{16} See \url{http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/gayvik.html}
Some of these insults were regarded as so bad (in modern terms, “fighting words”) that they were defined in law as grounds to condone a man killing the one who insulted him. For example, the 12th Century Islandic code called Grágás translated and quoted by Hallakarva says:

_Then there are three terms which occasion bringing such a serious suit against a man that they are worthy to outlaw him. If a man call a man unmanly [effeminate], or homosexual, or demonstrably homosexually used by another man, he shall proceed to prosecute as with other terms of abuse, and indeed a man has the right to avenge with combat for these terms of abuse._

*Standing stone, Gotland, Sweden*

Terms of abuse — lower on the scale of insult and perhaps not warranting a fight to the death — included sneering at a man’s poverty (e.g., in one of the sagas, Óðinn calls Thórr “a barefoot beggar with his buttocks shining through his breeches”); to call a man a cuckold; or simply scatological accusations, such as the one hurled at Njorðr: “Shut up! Hymir's maidens used you as a piss-trough and they pissed in your mouth”.

The real fighting words started with accusations of cowardice and escalated in strength through calling a man a “gelding” (e.g. Hrimgerð calls Atli "a gelding who is a coward, whinnying loudly like a stallion but with his heart in his hinder part") and reached the weapons drawn and blood-lust level with suggestions the other man was effeminate or allowed himself to be sodomised, including that he was a mare or any other female animal which bore young.

One of the most important reasons passive anal intercourse was viewed with such strong aversion was that the Norse customarily raped men and women taken as captives in battle. For example, in the Sturlunga saga, Guðmundr takes captive a man and his wife, and plans to have them both raped as a means of humiliating them. This rape, called klámhogg ("shame-stroke") was seen as equal to castration or a fatal wound. And in fact, castration of defeated enemies was also a common custom. It would certainly have been a rather shameful reflection on a man, therefore, to equate him with a defeated, raped and castrated enemy or indeed, for a man to place himself in such a position by consenting to passive sex with even a beloved friend….

These insults came into their own in a special kind of contest enjoyed by these violent men called **sannas**, in which the contestants hurled not spears but
insults at each other. Presumably these insults were in some way privileged and did not result in legal — of more violent — action.

All that being so, it is important to realise however, that

Homosexuality was not regarded by the Viking peoples as being evil, perverted, innately against the laws of nature or any of the other baggage about the concept that Christian belief has provided Western culture. Rather, it was felt that a man who subjected himself to another in sexual affairs would do the same in other areas, being a follower rather than a leader, and allowing others to do his thinking or fighting for him. Thus, homosexual sex was not what was condemned, but rather the failure to stand for one's self and make one's own decisions, to fight one's own fights, which went directly against the Nordic ethic of self-reliance. \(^\text{17}\)

Another way to insult a man mortally was to allege he practised women's magic, called seiðr. While little seems to be known about this (and what we do know is taken from accounts written in Christian times), essentially it seems to involve shamanistic practices, including what is called “form shifting”, that is, changing from human shape into that of some other animal. Equally importantly, men who practised seiðr were said to wear women’s clothes and adopt women’s hairstyles. Exactly why seiðr was regarded as so “unmanly” however is not clear except that, in a warrior culture, it suggested that a man who resorted to magic rather than face his enemies in battle would probably be willing to submit to passive anal penetration. Strangely enough, the Allfather of the Gods, Óðinn, apparently practised seiðr, gaining arcane knowledge by swallowing semen and thereby being able to learn the future and to control men’s destinies. Some commentators suggest that this indicates that homosexuality was more accepted in the pre-Christian long ago when the gods were still young.

Some historians have also suggested that there were internal tensions within Germanic societies, including those of the Norse Vikings, tensions created by the conflict between the old, Neolithic farming traditions (called Vanir) and the emerging warrior values (Aesir). Farmers, they suggested, were more interested in fertility and fertility rituals than in war, especially at harvest time. For example, among the predominantly Vanir and peace-loving Suiones (Swedes) — at least, according to Tacitus — all weapons had to be put aside and warfare was prohibited during the annual fertility festival.

\(^\text{17}\) As before, see http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/gayvik.html
On the other side of the cultural divide, the Aesir, were the younger sons of landowners who were banned from marrying and inheriting family land because only eldest sons inherited and could marry. These unfortunate men were effectively forced to leave home so that most of them ended up joining bachelor clubs or religious societies most of which were dedicated to the war-loving Wotan. They spent their time fighting and hunting, often robbing people, and to show their affiliation, they wore animal skins. Indeed, our word “berserk”\textsuperscript{18} comes from the Old Norse, berserker which meant “having a bear garment”. Since women were strictly guarded by the land-owning families, heterosexual outlets would have been very limited so it is a reasonable assumption that as in Ancient Sparta, ritualised pederasty of some kind would have been practised, especially since entry to these clubs and societies required the landless young men to undergo extensive initiation rites. Greenberg\textsuperscript{19} sums up by saying

\begin{quote}
As war became important to the Germans, the male warriors and their culture became dominant, and the status of women declined. Effeminacy and receptive male homosexuality were increasingly scorned and repressed, along with magical and religious practices associated with them. The effeminate homosexual came to be identified with the were-wolf, the sorcerer, and the outlaw and was depicted as a foul monster. The English word raganuffin, originally the name of a demon (derived from rgr, (effeminate) and bad (originally baedling, effeminate), reflect this development.
\end{quote}

\textbf{Vikings in Modern Times}

Throughout the Middle Ages, even though the name “Viking” was virtually unknown, the image of the invaders from the North Sea as “bloodthirsty, violent and rapacious - ‘wolves among sheep’” was kept alive by the various chroniclers. Then, as Professor Andrew Wawn, in his essay \textit{The Viking Revival}\textsuperscript{20} on the BBC History site says:

\[18\text{ Greenberg, D: } The\ Construction\ of\ Homosexuality\ , \ University\ of\ Chicago\ Press,\ 1988, \ p\ 248\ \text{note}\ 33.\]
\[19\text{ ibid, p. 249}\]
\[20\text{ Wawn, A: } The\ Viking\ Revival\ at \ http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/revival_01.shtml\]
The first coherent challenge to the many anti-Viking images promoted by early chroniclers emerged in the 17th century. Pioneering scholarly editions of what were believed to be texts of the Viking Age began to reach a small but influential readership in Britain. These works revealed an altogether more civilised profile of early Scandinavian culture, with its coherent system of ethics, highly developed (albeit pagan) spirituality, and discernibly democratic instincts and structures. During the 18th century other colourful tales of Old Norse myth and legend also attracted readers.

But it didn’t end there: in Victorian Britain of the 19th Century, and as happened with the previously scorned Scottish Highlander and his tartan kilt, a highly romanticized revision of the Viking myth became fashionable. Andrew Wawn tells us that

There were claims that Victoria was descended from Óðinn; that the entire Hanoverian royal family was related to Ragnarr Hairy-Breeches, a mighty Viking chief; and that King Haraldr Bluetooth was an ancestor of the Danish-born Princess of Wales……..

The Gjermundbo Viking helmet, reconstructed by Torkild Waagaard.

It did not end there either: I note that here in Canberra a rugby football team promotes itself — presumably as aggressive and powerful men — by using the image of bearded blokes wearing horned helmets. The irony is that the Vikings never wore horned helmets (they would have put a warrior at a serious disadvantage in battle), but it was the allegedly effeminate, passive homosexual priests who used the women’s magic instead of fighting, who wore the horns21.

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21 The Vikings often did not wear helmets at all, but if they did they were simple conical or rounded headpieces, sometimes with face protection attached. It is believed that they were also often made from leather and so have not survived. There are depictions of priests (or shamans) wearing headdresses with antlers or other horns (not ox horns) or even whole animal heads.