I have suggested that there is no necessary relationship between the name given to a people, the archaeological or cultural evidence, the linguistic evidence, and the flesh and blood. It is often argued that the spread of the archaeologically defined culture styles across Europe is accompanied by a spread of place-name elements of a Celtic kind. There is a serious danger of circularity here, however, in that an archaeological feature found in a place with a Celtic name will be called Celtic on that account; its presence elsewhere can then be used as evidence of the 'Celtic' nature of the local place-names, and so on. Much argument of this kind has gone on, and there is, of course, no ultimate tribunal. Let it be, however, that a new language – a Celtic language – and a new culture – a Celtic culture – spread across large parts of Europe together during the first millennium BC. What can we then say about the people?

The simplest interpretation would seem to be that a new people accompanied the new language and the new culture. This interpretation then gives us our new ethnic or racial group – the Celts. The demographic questions posed by the evidence of barbarian expansions are, however, far from solved. The Celts give every appearance of having expanded, in the most dramatic and striking way, in the La Tène period. They settled northern Italy, and sacked Rome in 390 BC. They plundered Delphi in 279 BC, and served as mercenaries in the armies of ancient Greece. It is reckoned to have been a group of disaffected Celtic mercenaries that crossed into Asia Minor to found Galatia, commonly assumed to have been the eastern outpost of this particular barbarian expansion.

The Celtic sack of Rome in 390 BC did not seriously impede the growth of Roman power, for it was only a temporary incursion. The fear of the potential of the barbarian masses remained in Rome, however, as the 'terror gallicus'. The fear of Gaul was allayed with its incorporation into the Empire in the first century BC, but the fear of the barbarian masses remained. We might regard the apparent Celtic expansion as an early presage of the seemingly endless waves of barbarian humanity which were to come out of eastern and central
Europe, the Cimbri, Goths, Huns, Vandals, Franks, Angles, Saxons, Langobards, Avars and the like, which overwhelmed and variously dismembered the Western Roman Empire.

What, however, did a wave of barbarians look like? The metaphor is worth taking seriously. In viewing the passage of a wave through water, we have the illusion of sustained forward movement, although in fact only movement in a vertical dimension occurs: the water does not move forward, but simply up and down. Waves at sea only truly give rise to forward movement when they break – at the moment, that is to say, when they collapse, spending such energy as they have. The picture that we get from early archaeological and linguistic evidence of the Celts is, as we have seen, one of expansion. The Celts, like the Indo-Europeans before them, and like their successor barbarians, seem to have expanded, demographically, in a very genuine sense. From a small source, in the salt mines of Hallstatt or the swamps of La Tène, they emerge in ever-increasing numbers, and overwhelm everything around and before them, on a continental scale. There is, it might well be agreed, an inherent demographic improbability about this. Edwin Ardener provides the following insight:

In the past, certain steppe-peoples seemed, to settled observers, to resemble animal populations in their frightening apparent tendency to multiply in numbers and to burst out of their bounds. They appeared to ‘swarm’. They swept like a terrible plague, suddenly dwindling as rapidly as they grew. The ancient cases of the Huns, Goths, and other German tribes, and medieval cases such as the Magyars, Mongols, and the like, are deeply ingrained in the historical consciousness of our civilization. . . . How often have we heard of the dessication of the inner Asian steppes driving out virile hordes? Yet if we take the classic case of the Huns, we know that the swollen masses under Attila included almost every people from the Rhine to the Urals. The swarm effect, as it was experienced, was a combination of mobility plus accretion.


The ‘swarming’ of the Huns could have occurred without any significant numerical change in the originating population at all. We have indeed no certain knowledge of the precise definition of the originating population. When the Attilan entity collapses in A.D. 454 we catch glimpses of small remnant groups of successor