

# Unity and Diversity in Celtic Cultures: Le Cailar in the 3rd-2nd Century BC.

## Introduction

An identifying trait of the ‘Celtic’ culture is as said by Strabo is that they were “war-mad, and both high spirited and quick for battle” (Strab. IV. II. (trans. Jones.) p.237) this stereotype has been carried through the ancient period and into the modern times to a certain extent. The site of Le Cailar was a fortified settlement in the Gard area in south modern day France close to the Mediterranean (Ghezal et al, 2019). This site can be used as a brilliant example of the for the notion that the Iron age Indo-Europeans could be viewed as violent in their culture and identity. By examining the archaeological evidence from this site and a couple of others, the possibility of this will be analysed.

## Decapitated skulls and fragments and distribution

One of the most spoken about practices in ancient accounts about the Iron Age Indo-Europeans is that they decapitated people after battle and “the heads of their most distinguished enemies they embalm in cedar-oil and carefully preserve in a chest” (Diod. Sic. V. (trans. Oldfather), which is used as an example of the so-called barbarism that the Celtic societies portrayed in the eyes of the ancient societies of Ancient Greece and Rome. The Le Cailar site’s main feature is the extensive evidence of embalmed skulls compared to other areas in Europe. Both intact skulls with evidence of iron nails inside them as well as many as 2700 fragments of skull are found at the site (Ghezal et al, 2019) found in a ‘deposit area’ and the evidence of the skulls being displayed to the community is post holes that have no clear structure so could be presentation brackets (Cantuel et al, 2010), and considering the amount of skull bone evidence found, it is possible that they displayed the decapitated heads of their enemies, as described in the ancient sources. Of course, even with the evidence suggesting that it is the practice of keeping the heads of enemies as ‘souvenirs’ so to speak, may not even be true, this is because ancient writers of Greek and Roman origin are known to write with heavy bias for the political gain of themselves as well as the empire. In addition to this, there is a lot of indications throughout ancient texts that the people now known as the Celts, were largely viewed in a negative manner. The skulls could possibly be an act of ritualistic sacrifice, which is also mentioned in Ancient texts like that of Diodorus. In further evidence, there is indication that the skulls were embalmed in some kind of ‘fatty acid’ (Ghezal et al, 2019), although it was not possible to distinguish whether or not ‘cedar oil’ as Diodorus’ account suggests. Despite this, the fact that the link between the ancient account and the archaeological evidence is apparent, it shows that it was a widely used practice throughout the different Iron Age societies



(Girard and Roure 2010)

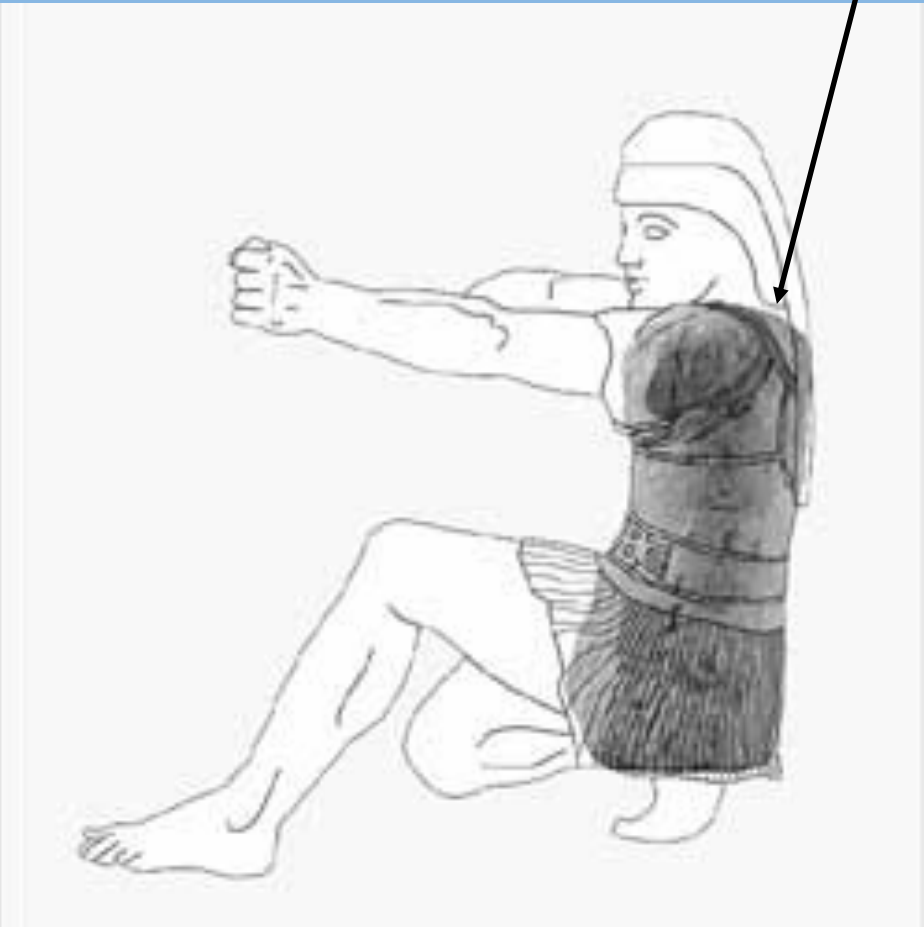


(Choi, 2018)

The distribution map does also show that there is evidence of skull bone that has been cut like that found in Le Cailar in other places within France such as Glanum and Pech Maho. This shows that in southern France at least, shows the evidence of victory decapitation. There is also some evidence that this was carried out in Celtic cultures in Iron Age Wales, an example being from the site Dinorben in Denbighshire. Out of the 15 recorded remains, 9 were individual heads or parts of heads although, it is thought they were not obviously displayed like at Le Cailar (Davis, 2017). However, it does not completely discount the possibility that the display of the heads did not take place at all, there could even be a chance that they were kept in a chest-like container as described in Diodorus’ account. It may also be possible to bring in the theory of ethnicity and identity into this, because of the varying evidence between the ‘Celtic’ societies that have the channel between them means that the cultures closer to each other have more in common with a settlement closer to them, because the sharing of ideas would be more likely than the ideas travelling across Iron Age France and into Britain. This means that although in ancient sources and even modern ones, tend to group the so-called ‘Celtic’ societies together at times, they could not realistically share the same culture purely because they were grouped together by another society entirely.

## Weaponry and Art

Other artefacts that were found at the site was multiple examples of military equipment; these included swords, lances, shields and sheaths, although they are not as numerous as the bone fragments. For example, there were around ten swords found at the site, although all but one was fragmented, as is shown with most of the weapons found at the site (Cantuel et al, 2010). This could be a ritualistic process that was carried out in several different so-called Celtic societies throughout Europe as well as Britain as well, mainly in a funerary context. As well as this, there was five spears discovered at the site (Cantuel et al, 2010), which is thought to be a popular weapon choice of the Iron Age peoples. The emphasis of these weapons is shown in artwork in different areas of the Languedoc region; there is a statue of a warrior which is posed “in a semi-kneeling position” (Dietler and Py, 2003, P785) which can be showing the pose of a spear carrier. As well as this there is “a linear trace of an effaced object..... representation of a dagger or sword” (Dietler and Py 2003, P788), This shows that the warrior represented in the statue carries multiple pieces of weaponry. This kind of action is also shown in ancient texts, for example Strabo states in Geography that “a long sabre, which hangs along the right side.....and spears in proportion” (IV, III. P242-243 (trans. Jones)). The literary and artistic evidence shows that The Iron Age people of the Mediterranean coastal area of France represented themselves to an extent the way that ancient writers described them in the military context, which is of a culture who are ready to fight in several different situations. However, this does not prove that every culture that is now perceived as ‘Celtic’ revered war in a ritualistic or even religious context.



(Harms, 2004)

## Conclusion

Overall, it must be stated that unity among the cultures in Iron Age Mediterranean France along with the other so-called ‘Celtic’ cultures cannot be determined to have been wide-spread although there are indications of it to an extent. This is shown by the societies of Le Cailar and others around the Mediterranean coastal region of France having similar archaeological evidence when it comes to the trait of decapitated heads and the strong evidence in art and archaeology from the sites focussing on war and military such as Lattes as well as Le Cailar. In contrast to this the Welsh site of Dinorben does show a few similarities but they are not as obvious, and it is likely that any connection culturally between them would have been slight. As well as this archaeological sites like Le Cailar, Lattes and Pech Maho do have some dissimilar features, for example, as shown on the distribution map; have the slight difference in that they do both have skull bone evidence but the Pech Maho site has more evidence of nailing the skulls as well as just cutting them, whereas Le Cailar mostly just indicates the cutting. This shows that the keeping and possible display of the embalmed skulls may have likely been presented in a different manner. Therefore, giving the sites an element of uniqueness in their similarities.

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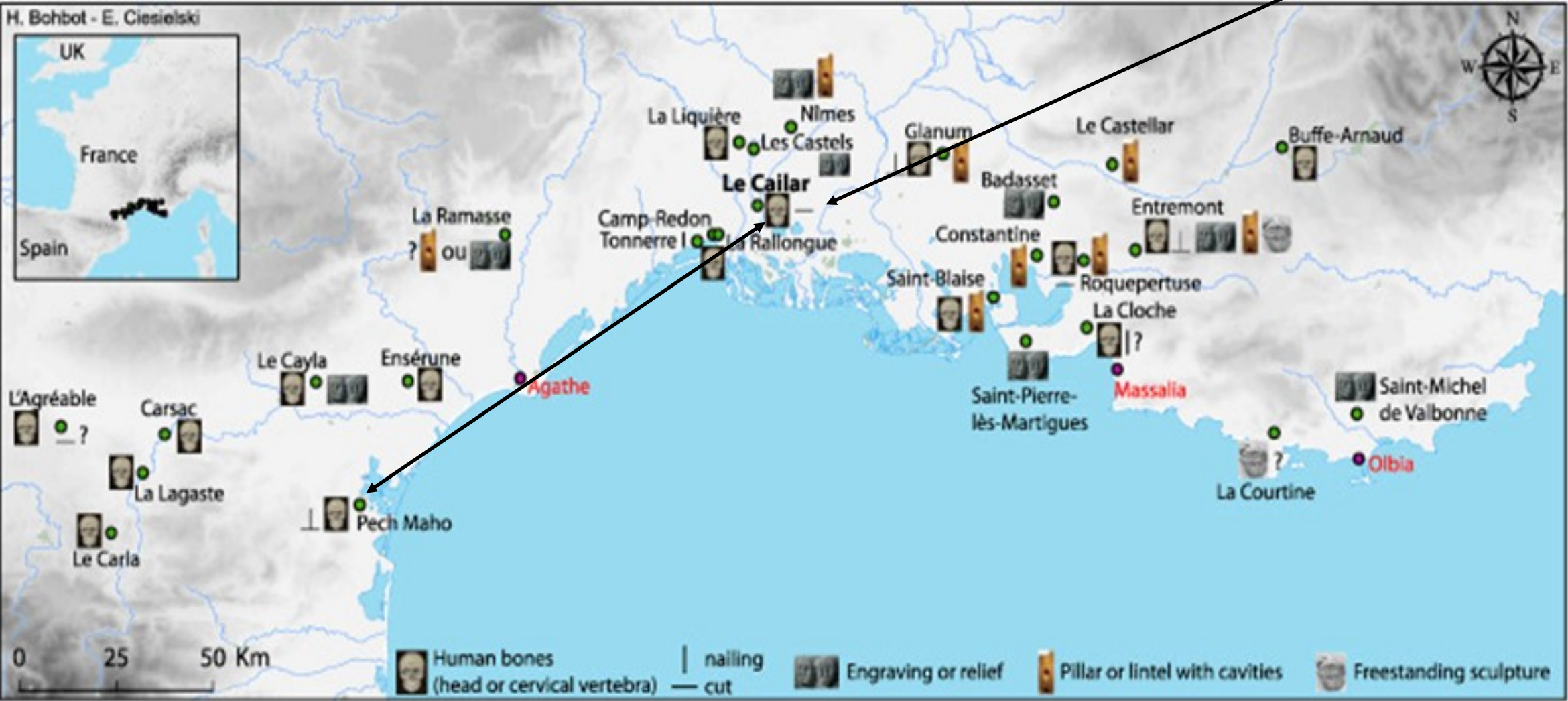
#### Images:

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(Ghezal et al 2019)