

Barry Cunliffe, Archaeologist, champion of the 'From the West' theory, a discussion of his contributions to the study of 'Celtic' Art – By Nat Kane

Sir Barry Cunliffe, renowned archaeologist, and anthropologist in the field of European history, has contributed to the study of Celtic Art in numerous, and tremendously expansive ways. In this essay we will be discussing Cunliffe, and how his contributions have enriched our understanding of the wider 'Celtic' world, and those that participated in that world, how they may have functioned, where they originated, and what trends these populations engaged in.

As an engaging, and accessible figure in the study of European history, Cunliffe has achieved many accolades, and taught many students in substantial institutions, including the University of Oxford where he now holds the position of Emeritus professor of European Archaeology.¹ Through his embracement of new technologies in archaeological investigations we have a fairer understanding of what these ancient populations participated in, and how they started to and continued to develop into.

His long, and highly successful career had to begin somewhere, as of course, we are not born experts in our fields.

The early years

Portsmouth, England, on a winters night, December 10th 1939, Sir Barry Cunliffe came into the world. He went on to study at the University of Cambridge, where his undergraduate, and postgraduate studies took place. Due to his interest in Archaeology earlier on than his Academic career, he followed his passions to hunt down a local archaeologist, and later on once an undergraduate student, participated in various fieldwork projects,² it is also worth mentioning that he showcased his prowess as an innovative researcher quite early on.

Cunliffe is a highly regarded scholar in his field, and this reflects into professional career as an educator on his findings, theories, and discoveries. Cunliffe has held many considerable positions of note, his latest being the Emirate professor of European Archaeology at the University of Oxford, and from 1972 – 2007, he held the position of Professor of European Archaeology at the same prestigious school of advanced education.³

¹ University of Oxford. [n.d.]. 'Sir Barry Cunliffe', *Www.arch.ox.ac.uk* <<https://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/people/sir-barry-cunliffe>> [accessed 13 May 2024]

² Richard Lofthouse, and University of Oxford, Alumni. 2023. 'BARRY CUNLIFFE', *Www.alumni.ox.ac.uk* <<https://www.alumni.ox.ac.uk/article/sir-barry-cunliffe>> [accessed 8 May 2024]

³ Gill Oliver, and The Oxford Mail. 2013. 'Profile: Barry Cunliffe: Oxford University Archaeologist Is Still Getting His Hands Dirty', *Oxford Mail* <<https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/10618489.profile-barry-cunliffe-oxford-university-archaeologist-still-getting-hands-dirty/>> [accessed 14 May 2024]

‘Celtic’ Art?

To understand how Cunliffe has contributed to the study of ‘Celtic’ art, we must first understand that this art type is referring to the art styles which originate in central Europe (Circa 800BCE-1CE), by cultures we know as the Hallstatt, and La tene ‘Celts’.⁴ These populations were timeless artisans. they are mentioned by numerous well known historians and writers in the historical record, with these said authors also unknowingly birthing the beginning elements to the largest controversy known in the field, ‘Celto-scepticism vs. Celto-mania’. They have conflicting knowledge of the locations, identities of the Europeans to the North and West of them,⁵ leading to an over-complicated and at times tense atmosphere, often seen in the modern scholars bouncing back and forth with Barry Cunliffe himself, amongst his other colleagues like John T Koch. These Thanks to trade, migrations, and other forms of mixing amongst European tribes, we saw the spread of these beautiful pieces of material culture that the ancient Europeans adored so much, though a lot of material evidence has not survived due to the materials used in production along with the chemistry of the soil in Britain, there is a limited type of material that we can observe, mainly clay pottery, metal work, and inscriptions upon stone. We also see these spread across from the western European lands to the South eastern Balkan regions, Crimea and later settling in Asia-Minor with the ‘Celtic’ migrations.⁶ From this we can assume, disregarding the artistic flares added to the manufacturing in Briton, that rather than there being a monolith achievement by all ancient Celts in manufacturing, they are primarily of central European origin.

Excavations and Discoveries of note

At the centre of the field of study of ‘Celtic’ art, we of course have archaeology. Though this is by no means a linear and singular study type needing area of research, it is multi-disciplinary, we must use Archaeology, with the most modern advances in technology, the historical records, linguistics, and a lot of blood, sweat and tears, the latter two being the literal of course. When we look at Cunliffe’s most obvious contribution we think of his working with other experts in their fields, and with this approach we see that the understanding of ‘Celtic’ art, or the material culture, is in a far more sophisticated manner, than of the century before.

Some of his most star-studded excavations are of course those at Danebury, a Hillfort located in Hampshire, England,⁷ whilst not forgetting sites in Brittany, France,⁸ and northern Spain.

Danebury -

According to the findings of the excavations, stated in ‘The Danebury Excavations Digital Archive’ ([n.d.])⁹ Cunliffe and his team unearthed priceless artifacts, including pottery, metal objects, tools and they

⁴ Barry Cunliffe. 2003. *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction*, pp’s 2-5 (New York: OUP Oxford)

⁵ Andrew Currie, ‘The Historical Celts - Location’, HPCS4003, *The Early Celts*. 2023. UWTSD Moodle.

⁶ Barry Cunliffe. 2003. pp’s 2-5 (New York: OUP Oxford)

⁷ Barry Cunliffe, 2018. *The Ancient Celts, Second Edition*, pp’s 184, 217, (New York: Oxford University Press)

⁸ University of Oxford, school of Archaeology. [n.d.]. ‘Le Yaudet Project - School of Archaeology - University of Oxford’, [Projects.arch.ox.ac.uk <https://projects.arch.ox.ac.uk/LYP1.html>](https://projects.arch.ox.ac.uk/LYP1.html) [accessed 15 May 2024]

⁹ ‘The Danebury Excavations Digital Archive’. [n.d.]. *Archaeology Data Service* [<https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/danebury_var_2003/>](https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/danebury_var_2003/) [accessed 18 May 2024]

all displayed the characteristics and iconography we now refer to as 'Celtic' art. The site is dated approximately 550 BCE – 100 CE, which as we can see, offers us a linear view of how the art styles and procedures of metal work have developed over time, how they advanced their ability to produce such profound works, even in the day to day items that we not take for granted in the Celto-maniac production of printed Celtic knots onto mugs, drawn onto arms with tattoos, and of course on many religious monuments, and of course glass art-work across Britain and Ireland.

Britanny, and elsewhere -

Though the typical iconography we associate with 'Celtic' art is of course centred in the Hallstatt, and La tene artistry, with Cunliffe's 'from the west', and 'Atlantic network route' theories, we see all forms of material culture being counted in as 'Celtic' Art, these being found to originate and spread around in the lands that spoke what we know as dead, and living 'Celtic' languages. Though stating this is not a criticism as such, more so an acknowledgement of the sphere of influence the centre of Europe, the South-West of Europe, and the West/North Western populations had with each other. Excavations in Britanny, amongst other areas of Europe, including Spain, and the theories mentioned above showcase a continuum of influence, prestige, advancement, socio-politics, and communication amongst a location in Europe that has proven to stand the test of time, for its popularity, and genius.¹⁰

Theories, going deeper

Controversy

Despite his numerous, and substantial contributions to the study of 'Celtic' art, and the other disciplines inside of the anthropology of Europe, Cunliffe is not afforded a career without challenges from his peers,¹¹ friends and foes alike. Especially we see criticism and accolades given for his work with other scholars concerning 'Celtic' origins. The interpretation of 'Celticism', and even more importantly to this essay, 'Celtic' art, is extremely important, and complex. With the 'pan-Celtic' identity being somewhat problematic in the scope of modern constructs verses the reality of what historical populations, and cultures actually experienced, including the why. We see strides in the understanding of Indo-European languages,¹² because of his interdisciplinary work with people such as John T. Koch¹³, whilst simultaneously seeing value in the criticisms made towards the theories.

This article discusses a problem in integrating archaeology and philology. For the most of the twentieth century, archaeologists associated the spread of the Celtic languages with the supposed westward spread of the 'eastern Hallstatt culture' in the first millennium BC. More recently, some have discarded 'Celtic from the east' in favour of 'Celtic from the West', according to which Celtic was a much older lingua France which evolved from a hypothetical Neolithic proto-Indo-European language in the Atlantic zone and then spreads eastwards in the third millennium BC. This article (1) criticizes the assumptions and misinterpretations of classical tests and onomastics that led to

¹⁰ Current Archaeology. 2022. 'Bretons and Britons: Exploring Prehistoric Britain's French Connection | the Past', *The-Past.com*
<<https://the-past.com/feature/bretons-and-britons-exploring-prehistoric-britains-french-connection/>> [accessed 16 May 2024]

¹¹ proquest. 2020. 'An Alternative to "Celtic from the East" and "Celtic from the West"', *Login.microsoftonline.com*
<<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2424076946?parentSessionId=04aVQMRAexXsTtq2yWfKquDVm0dSU5Y%2FAwTc5slZaQo%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=130472&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>> [accessed 17 October 2023]

¹² Koch, John T. "CELTIC FROM THE WEST MEETS LINGUISTICS AND GENETICS." *Exploring Celtic Origins*, edited by John T. Koch and Barry Cunliffe, Oxbow Books, 2019, pp. 19–37. *JSTOR*, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv13pk852>> [Accessed 24 May 2024]

the ‘Celtic from the east’ in the first place; (2) notes the unreliability of the linguistic evidence for ‘Celtic from the west’, namely (i) ‘glottochronology’ (which assumes that language change at a steady rate), (ii) misunderstood place-name distribution maps and (iii) the undeciphered inscriptions in southwest Ibera; and (3) proposes that Celtic radiating from France during the first millennium BC would be more economical explanation of the known facts.¹⁴

Both Cunliffe, and Patrick Sims-Williams are regarded as experts, both seem to have pieces of the puzzle that is ‘Celtic’ Studies.

To conclude

The contributions Cunliffe has made to the study of Celtic art are unmatched to date, his excavations, theoretical insights, interdisciplinary collaborations, and accessibility for the public has had an extremely positive impact on the Academic population of the world, including the public who have a special interest in who the people of the Mediterranean and beyond are.

Scientific advancements, alike the advancements of the expressions of these people are growing with time, and maybe a millennium from now our descendants will have just as much fun trying to understand us, albeit they have far more material to work with than us with our ancestors.

Though we must not take every expert as a 100% correct on everything authority, we can however work with all the experts ideas, and hopefully one day unravel the answers we all so eagerly seek.

‘Celtic’ art, European bronze age – iron age art, central European art, whatever it is that we will end up calling these exquisite pieces of history, we can firmly say that we are an incredibly closer step towards understanding the artistic expressions of these populations, and their legacy to the world, and this is thanks to scholars like Sir Barry Cunliffe

¹⁴ proquest. 2020. ‘An Alternative to “Celtic from the East” and “Celtic from the West”’, [accessed 17 October 2023]