

The Archaeological Celts: Alternatives

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Live differently, die differently:

- ▶ Anatolian Celts
- ▶ Italian Celts
- ▶ British Celts
- ▶ Irish Celts
- ▶ Iberian Celts
- ▶ Celts from the West

The warning issued by Barry Cunliffe that “*for many writers La Tène culture = Celts*” is worthy of further consideration, especially when remembering that some ‘Celtic’ areas received and interpreted La Tène differently, and yet others did not receive it at all.

The Galatae who are recorded as having attacked Delphi in 279 BCE went on from there to cross the Bosphorus and eventually settle in Anatolia (Asia Minor) around Ankara. This much is known from history. In terms of the archaeological record, however, apart from weaponry, they seem to have adopted what was available locally, in a region, which, according to the above author, was “*technically and culturally more advanced than the area from which they had come*” (BC L800-804). Given the praise often lavished on La Tène for its craftsmanship, this view may not be accepted by everyone.

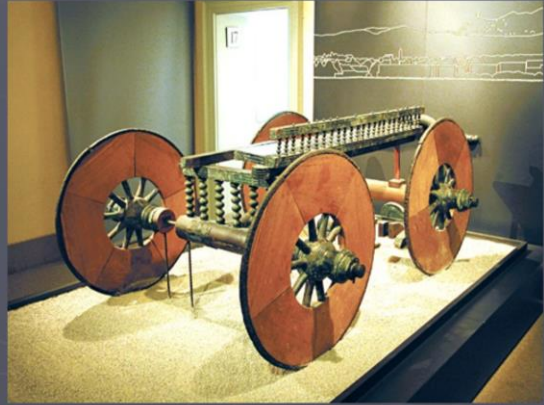
Nevertheless, “*although, as we have seen, they retained the name Galatians, they seem soon to have abandoned all trace of La Tène material culture*” (BC L1132-1134) and this point is important as far as labelling peoples as Celts is concerned, as they were still called Galatians some 600 years after their abandonment of La Tène, when St Jerome referred to the Galatian language in the fourth century CE and its similarity to the Gaulish dialect of Trier. It is doubtful that they would still have been so called had they kept their material culture but adopted a local language.

“*The La Tène cultural package was accepted, adopted and maintained over a wide swathe of middle Europe*” (BC L1125-1126), and its spread corresponds broadly to the Gauls’ expansion at the time.

In northern Italy, for instance, the Golasecca culture, which can be viewed as a cisalpine counterpart to Hallstatt further north, was displaced by La Tène in the 4th century BCE during a known period of Gaulish migration which is reflected not only in the material culture but also in the distinction between the Lepontic and ‘Cisalpine Gaulish’ languages. However, this is a rare case of neat correspondence, and migration should be seen as only partially responsible for this spread. It arrived in Britain at much the same time and later still in Ireland, where it had a limited influence, as it did in Iberia. Insular varieties were in any case quite distinctive, and we clearly have a La Tène core and periphery. “*To the west of the early La Tène core zone, in western France, Britain, and Ireland, aspects of the La Tène cultural packages were differentially absorbed.*” (BC L1135-1136). This is

particularly ironic given that these are precisely the areas where Celtic languages are still spoken today, and even at the time, there were certainly Celtic speakers outside of the core La Tène area, and no doubt speakers of non-Celtic languages within it.

Italian Celts: The Golasecca Culture



Like Hallstatt, the Golasecca culture crosses the divide between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, running from approximately the 9th to the 4th centuries BCE. The type site is located in the *Comune* of Golasecca in Lombardy, but extends across an area from the southern side of the Alps around the Italian lakes down to the River Po. This territory is mostly in northern Italy but also includes some parts of southern Switzerland, principally Lugano, after which the ‘Lugano script’ is named. The Golasecca area is directly below the Hallstatt zone with which it shares some similarities, including princely burials with four-wheeled wagons. It was in an ideal position for trade routes between the Hallstatt zone to the north and the Etruscans to the south. Excavations of about fifty graves containing pottery and metal objects began there as early as 1822, before both Hallstatt (1846) and La Tène (1857), but it was not linked to the Celts in any way until 1865.

Both in terms of geographical extent and timescale, the area of the Golasecca culture overlaps closely with that of the Lepontic language, which provides us with the earliest known inscriptions in a Celtic language (with the possible exception of the more recently discovered Tartessian mentioned earlier).

The dating of the earliest Lepontic inscriptions to the 7th (Sesto Calende) and 6th (Castellette Ticino) centuries BCE also ties in with Livy’s account stating that the first ‘Gauls’ to cross the Alps did so in the 7th century BCE. Their very crossing of the Alps at this period, however, would seem sufficient to rule out the possibility that the Golasecca zone itself is the ‘Celtic homeland’. It nevertheless links historical, linguistic and archaeological evidence together in an unusually convenient manner.

The images above are of items from the Ca’ Morta burial ground west of Como. The bronze helmet is of the Etruscan influenced Negau type. The wagon is on display at Como Archaeological Museum and is a reconstruction based on fragments found at the actual burial. They are dated to c 480 – 450 BCE, roughly the period when Hallstatt was transitioning into La Tène further north.

Image Credits:

- The bronze helmet is courtesy of Siren-Com (Creative Commons license)
- The four-wheeled wagon is from the following website:

<http://www.carrozzecavalli.net/2014/05/anno-450-a-c-il-carro-della-ca-morta/>

British Celtic Chariot Burials



- ▶ Restricted to specific area
- ▶ Arras culture
- ▶ Links to the Parisii of Gaul?
- ▶ None in today's Celtic speaking areas

Iron Age chariot burials in Britain are sparse. There are little more than 20 across the whole country. All of them, bar one located just west of Edinburgh, are found in Yorkshire, with the heaviest concentration in the East Riding. This is the home of the Arras culture, linked by many to the Parisii tribe named in Ptolemy's *Geography* and by extension to the similarly named Parisii of Gaul (from which Paris gets its name). Although similar names are sometimes entirely coincidental, the link is based in this case on the fact that chariot burials are known from this part of Gaul, and virtually absent from the rest of Britain. Occasionally, but rarely, horses will also be found buried with the chariot, and two such examples dating from the first century BCE have been found near Soissons, the ancient capital of the Suessiones, neighbours of the Parisii in the north-east of Gaul. Significantly, one, and only one, example has been found in Britain, in Pocklington, on the edge of the Yorkshire Wolds, dating from some two centuries earlier. Ironically, chariot burials are not known from any of the areas where today's Celtic languages are spoken. The one at Newbridge in Scotland may possibly have fallen into the outermost edge of Gaelic speaking territory but there are no chariot burials known from the Highlands, or anywhere in Wales, Cornwall, Brittany, the Isle of Man or Ireland. Indeed, burial practices of any kind are hard to discern in large parts of Iron Age Britain:

<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2016/march/macabre-burial-practices-of-iron-age-britons-revealed.html>

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/death-and-burial-in-iron-age-britain-9780199687565?cc=gb&lang=en&#>

Another distinctive grouping with links to Gaul is the Aylesford-Swarling culture. This covers much the same part of Britain as that invaded by Caesar (i.e. the south-east corner) and has been used to indicate concrete evidence of the Belgic settlements referenced in *De Bello Gallico*. This culture group sees the introduction of wheel-thrown pottery and coinage to Britain.

In the two areas above we can see clear evidence of similar practices shared between Gaul and Britain. Perhaps of greater significance, though, is the absence of such evidence from the bulk of the country.

Photograph of Pocklington by Henry Hayhurst-France/David Wilson Homes from *the Independent* of 30/03/17 (accessed 24/10/2018):

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/archaeology/iron-age-chariot-horse-yorkshire-archaeology-significant-find-half-a-century-buried-together-a7659091.html>

Squaring an Insular Celtic Circle



- ▶ Homes in Britain and Ireland were mostly circular (roundhouses)
- ▶ Continental houses were rectangular or square
- ▶ La Tène regional variations in Britain and Ireland

Over the area believed to have been occupied by Celts in the Iron Age, it appears that the various geographical areas differed in the way they ‘housed’ not only the dead, but also the living:

“There is an interesting contrast between early Continental Celtic housing and insular Celtic housing for the constructions in Britain and Ireland were mostly round houses.” (PBE L2562-2573)

Iron Age houses across Europe in fact show considerable diversity. In the Mediterranean, around Italy and Greece, subcircular houses from the early Iron Age give way later to rectilinear designs, as straight lines allow for greater flexibility when additional rooms or even storeys are required. These changes also extended geographically to Mediterranean Gaul and Iberia with the passage of time. Early Celtiberian houses were rectangular and made of stone. In temperate mainland Europe, the norm was for houses to be rectangular with thatched roofs, whereas in the ‘Germanic’ lands of the Netherlands and northwest Germany as far as central Scandinavia, aisled longhouses predominate. The inhabitants of Britain, Ireland, northwest Iberia and some parts of northern Gaul lived in roundhouses with conical roofs, but even within the same regions, the way that space was divided for specific purposes within (often single-roomed) homes may vary. *“This suggests that there was no universal template for the organisation of daily life in the British Iron Age even though the same basic house form was shared.”*

http://www.academia.edu/8703788/Households_and_communities_in_Iron_Age_Europe

There can be little doubt, however, that roundhouses were the norm across Britain. Compared to the 20 or so chariot burials that have been discovered, there are something like 4000 excavated roundhouses.

<https://www.archaeology.co.uk/articles/features/roundhouses.htm>

Image: A recreation of a Celtic roundhouse, National History Museum of Wales, 2007.

The Irish Celtic Enigma

- Map of beehive quern stone distribution in Ireland, from: Raftery, B. 1994, *Pagan Celtic Ireland*, London, Thames & Hudson.



There are several ways in which Ireland is unique in the Celtic world. One feature which has left no mark there, at least thus far, is the iconic ‘princely grave’. It should be borne in mind here though that with the exception of the Arras culture, much the same could be said about Britain. However, in the case of Ireland, “*there seems no trace of chariot burials at all.*” (PBE L934-935)

A second distinguishing characteristic is the lack of coinage, which “*is to be found in all parts of the ancient Celtic world, with the significant exception of Ireland. No native coinage appeared to have developed here until the Christian period was well under way.*” (PBE L2413-2414). Here again, however, we should remember that coinage was not produced in Britain either until relatively late, around the first quarter of the first century BCE.

When it comes to that symbol *par excellence* of Celtic material culture, namely La Tène, Ireland does have it, but it arrived late, and may well have been introduced from northern Britain. In all three of these examples, we seem to be witnessing a gradual spread from a central area. Domestic manufacture of La Tène in Ireland dates to as late as the second century BCE, from which point Irish craftsmen “*made an array of items all recognizably La Tène in style but showing modifications in form and decoration that are distinctively Irish.*” (BC L1156-1158). There is also a striking geographical divide between north and south, with La Tène material evident in the north and absent from the south. Nothing illustrates this division better than the distribution of beehive quern stones shown above.

What conclusions should be drawn from distributions such as these about the relationship between material culture and languages? – that the northern half of the island was home to a different ethnic group to the south, or that the people in the northern half of Ireland spoke a different language to those in the southern half, or perhaps that, although there may be some correlation, there is no causal relationship between the ways in which language and material culture spread, and that you cannot tell what language a people spoke from the technology that they used?

Iberian Celts



- ▶ Celtiberians
- ▶ Vettones
- ▶ Vaccaei
- ▶ Celtici
- ▶ Gallaeci
- ▶ Astures
- ▶ Cantabri

The map in the above slide is Figure 14. "Celtic" archaeological groups in the Late Iron Age of Iberia, from *The Celts in Iberia: An Overview* by Alberto J. Lorrio and Gonzalo Ruiz Zapatero (*e-Keltoi Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies*, volume 6) which can be found here: https://www4.uwm.edu/celtic/ekeltoi/volumes/vol6/6_4/lorrio_zapatero_6_4.pdf

Quotes on this slide and the next are from the above article unless otherwise noted.

The shaded areas show some of the different Celtic groups and the line with dashes shows the boundary between Celtic and Iberian populations. Taken as a whole, *"this group of Celts developed a material culture that was clearly distinguishable from the Central European Celts of Hallstatt and La Tène."*

Of these, the Celtici of the southwest are the group mentioned by Herodotus as living beyond the Pillars of Hercules and bordering on the Cynetes, the westernmost inhabitants of Europe. They were described by Pliny in the first century CE as having originated in Lusitania and sharing religious rites, language and place-names with the Celtiberians. The remainder can be divided into two groups of three, namely, the Vettones, the Vaccaei and the aforementioned Celtiberians on the one hand, collectively referred to here as the 'Meseta' group, and the Gallaeci, (shown in the map above as the 'north west culture') the Astures and Cantabri on the other, collectively referred to here as the 'Coastal' group.

According to Strabo (III, 3, 7), the different members of the Coastal group were all closely related to each other in all walks of life. There are some differences within the Meseta group, for example, the Vaccaei, unlike the Celtiberians, did not mint coins. However, the major differences are the ones between the two groups, with the Coastal group having a more obvious link to Bronze Age practices and the Atlantic Zone.

Nevertheless, all of these groups are held to be 'Celtic' as opposed to 'Iberian' and *"we could justifiably defend the Celtic nature of those archaeological groups whose origin dates back at least to the dawn of the Early Iron Age at the turn of the sixth century BC"*.

Iberian Celts:

Comparison of the Meseta and Coastal groups

Vaccean pottery from Tomb 37 at Las Ruedas, *Pintia*, third to second centuries BCE (After Sanz Mínguez and Martín Valls 2001).

Gold diadem from Moñes, Asturias, (After Perea 1995):



In the case of the Meseta cultures, the Early Celtiberian period (contemporary with Hallstatt D) in the uplands of the Iberian interior sees the emergence of hillforts at the source of major rivers, cremation cemeteries, ceramics and objects made from iron. To the Celtiberians' west, the Vettones also lived in hillforts or *oppida*, buried their dead in cemeteries, produced sculptures (most notably the zoomorphic *verracos*), ceramics and metal weapons. The third group, i.e. the Vaccean culture, likewise introduced cremation cemeteries, large hillfort settlements, *"and the widespread use of iron metallurgy and ceramics decorated on a potter's wheel."* Graves are commonly found located near settlements in the Meseta area, some 10,000 have been found in the Celtiberian region alone. Cremation was the usual rite, and some social stratification is apparent via the grave goods.

As far as the communities of the northwest are concerned, they lived predominantly in promontory hillforts chosen for their extensive views of the vicinity. The typical domestic dwellings are roundhouses, a feature of Late Bronze Age origin. They show few connections with the Meseta societies during the Iron Age, and where links do take place they do so on the inland fringes rather than all the way to the coast. *"The idea of a Celtiberian model of society with warrior elites, organized according to the clientship model, with abundant weapons and horses as status symbols, meets with serious difficulties in the northwest"* (González Ruibal 2003: 335-336). Warriors in the Coastal zone used only spears and daggers, and appear to lack not just the elite weaponry of the Meseta, but also the status that came with it. As might be expected, horses were more common in the Meseta than in the Coastal zone. *"We do not know how the peoples of the northwest conducted their burials"* but in any case this would not have been like the cremation cemeteries of the Celtiberians, Vettones and Vaccae.

None of this, however, means that we should look upon the Coastal societies as 'backward'. As Barry Cunliffe has noted, *"throughout much of prehistory the Atlantic communities were highly innovative and relatively self-contained"* (CFTW 33). They had their own set of skills, with a particular talent for producing precious metalwork, such as the diadem from Moñes shown in the slide above, *"whose iconography is closely linked with Celtic mythology."*

Celtic from the West: Some Points for Consideration

'Inland' Zones:

- ▶ Parallels between Hallstatt, Golasecca and Meseta cultures
- ▶ Princely graves and regular burial practices
- ▶ Rectangular houses
- ▶ Greater social stratification
- ▶ Loss of Celtic languages

'Atlantic' Zones:

- ▶ Parallels between Atlantic Iberia, Armorica, Britain and Ireland
- ▶ Rare or unknown burial practices
- ▶ Roundhouses
- ▶ Less social stratification
- ▶ Continuity of Celtic languages

According to Lorrio and Zapatero *"it is absolutely essential to abandon once and for all the traditional interpretation that links the Peninsular Celts with the La Tène culture, a fact that has been used for decades as the criteria to exclude Iberia from the Celtic world."* No attempt will be made to link the Peninsular Celts with La Tène here. However, it could be argued that at the beginning of the 7th century BCE we have three discrete material culture groups which can be related to Celts in geographically distinct locations, namely the Hallstatt, Golasecca and 'Meseta' cultures. The first of these has received much more attention than the latter two, despite their relatively isolated locations making it easier to link them to the Lepontic and Celtiberian languages. Nevertheless, all three are 'inland' zones which exhibit parallels. Hallstatt and Golasecca then 'transitioned' into La Tène while the Meseta culture evolved independently. However, taken together, they still share developments which are much less apparent in the other large area traditionally linked to Celts, namely the 'Atlantic zone' consisting of northwest Iberia, Armorica, Britain and Ireland. These areas not only show affinities with each other (see *chevaux de frise* defences here <http://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue48/5/box2.html>) they are also part of an inland/coastal split, with Hallstatt and La Tène showing much the same relationship with Britain and Ireland as the Meseta culture does with western and northern coastal areas of Iberia.

Whereas the 'inland' culture groups possess many of the iconic symbols traditionally associated with Celts such as elite burials, weaponry and symbols of great wealth, the Atlantic groups have their own ace up their sleeve, namely early (and continuous) indications of the existence of a Celtic language.

Martín Almagro-Gorbea (2001: 101), has noted that there are *"affinities that run along the Atlantic Celtic world, stretching from the British Isles to the Iberian Peninsula, whose origin and characteristics cannot be explained by Celtic invasions from Central Europe"*. Colin Renfrew (CFTW 14) long ago suggested that the Celtic languages evolved in *"those areas where their speech is later attested"* and Barry Cunliffe has proposed that they *"developed in western Europe in the region where later they are to be identified – that is, central and western Iberia, Gaul, Britain, and Ireland – the broad similarity between them resulting from the long-established contacts between these regions"* (BC L921-924). This is the 'Celtic from the West' hypothesis in a nutshell.