



## Book Reviews

### **CELTIC FROM THE WEST 3. ATLANTIC EUROPE IN THE METAL AGES: QUESTIONS OF SHARED LANGUAGE EDITED BY JOHN T. KOCH AND BARRY CUNLIFFE**

*Oxbow Books, Oxford. 2016. 539pp, 174 illustrations, 21 tables, ISBN 978-1-78570-227-3, hb, £45.00*

Concern over the origin of the Celts and the patterns of the dispersal of the Celtic language have a long history, both in the study of prehistoric archaeology and ancient languages, with discussions dating back to the beginnings of both disciplines but with a general conception of a pan-European Celtic culture stretching from Ireland to the Black Sea. During the 1980s, an often hotly-tempered debate developed between those scholars who believed in a connected Celtic Europe and those who were sceptical of the idea and saw differences between regions and over time (Collis 2003; 1997; James 1999; Megaw & Megaw 1989; 1996). In more recent years, genetic data gathered from modern populations and prehistoric human remains have reignited discussion (e.g. Oppenheimer 2006). The 'Celtic from the West' (CftW) project has also driven debate. It originates from an idea first presented in Barry Cunliffe's book *Facing the Ocean* (Cunliffe 2001, 293–7) and further developed in the first two volumes of the 'Celtic from the West' series, *Celtic from the West* (Cunliffe and Koch 2010) and *Celtic from the West 2* (Koch and Cunliffe 2013). The overarching argument presented by the various iterations of the CftW project is that a proto-Celtic language existed in the Atlantic zone of Europe (comprising of Ireland, Britain, Armorica and north and west Iberia) during the Bronze Age, from which the Celtic languages of the Iron Age developed.

In addition to a short introduction, *Celtic from the West 3* contains 18 chapters divided into three sections drawing on different strands of evidence: archaeology, genetics and linguistics. It should be stressed from the outset that this is a fine volume. Fine in terms of the quality of the publication, which has many clear colour images and maps, and fine in terms of the high standard of papers. Following an introductory chapter written by the editors, the next 10 papers examine the archaeological evidence. They focus on a range of subjects including the Beaker culture (chapters by Salanova, Needham, Gibson and Timberlake), burial practices and hillforts in Ireland (Cleary and O'Brien respectively), group identities in Iberia (Brandherm), British Bronze Age swords (Bray) and two reports on different sites from Wales (Karl and Gwilt *et al.*). In the section on genetics two papers are presented, one on the genetic structure of British populations (Winney and Bodmer), the other focused on possible archaeogenetic evidence for mobility in Europe (Pala *et al.*). The final section on linguistics covers topics as diverse as archaeology and language shift (Mallory), possible links between Celtic and Afro-Asiatic languages (Hewitt), proto-Celtic as a possible lingua franca in Atlantic Europe (Koch) and the different versions of the word for 'dog' in the Iberian Peninsula (Palacios). Included in this final section are two papers by Peter Schrijver and Theo Vennemann, labelled 'ancillary studies', and providing linguistic evidence which directly contests or counters the CftW standpoint. Schrijver sees the origin of the Celtic language as somewhere in or close to northern Italy and Vennemann provides evidence supporting the traditional view that the Celtic language spread outwards from western central Europe during the Early Iron Age. It is to the great credit of the editors that each chapter, whether they agree with CftW or not, is given equal weight. The 'ancillary studies' add to the overall sense of a balanced presentation of different ideas, allowing readers to make up their own minds, or at least providing them with a base from which to begin to form their own impressions. I found the papers on genetics and linguistics particularly enlightening, especially as a non-specialist in these disciplines because they provide a range of different perspectives and insights into the wider debates concerning the Celts and Celtic languages. But as an archaeologist I feel less

qualified to comment in detail on these papers. There is also not space to discuss each paper in turn. Instead, throughout the rest of this review I will focus on wider themes and perspectives, especially those relevant to CftW.

It is difficult to single out individual papers as the standard is generally high but I particularly enjoyed reading Needham's paper which draws a distinction between Beaker and halberd users across Atlantic Europe. His approach highlights how contemporary societies chose to adopt or reject the 'Beaker package' and his colour maps are particularly effective in showing different patterns in different countries and regions. Bray's paper examining the chemical composition of British Bronze Age swords also raises interesting questions. For example, he highlights the 'flow' or 'life histories' of metal as it is melted down to make new artefacts. Sometimes metal content links artefacts that we might otherwise regard as being very different such as English swords and socketed axes, suggesting that if there were specialist sword producers in the Late Bronze Age, they were not as separated from the manufacture of other types of artefact as has sometimes been suggested. Another highlight is the paper by Gwilt et al., examining the Early Iron Age midden from Llanmaes. This is an impressive site providing evidence for deposition at the midden from 750–400 BC, with three late dates potentially indicating continuing additions were made to the midden throughout the Iron Age. Detailed examination of the faunal remains and metalwork assemblage show that the site was a focal point for metalwork deposition and feasting, acting to maintain social relationships and support community identity.

Regarding CftW, as Cunliffe and Koch (p.2) admit in their introduction to the book, some of the papers relate directly to the CftW debate, others only tangentially. Many mention it only briefly in a concluding paragraph. In terms of the main ideas behind CftW, the perspectives that various contributors take can be gathered into different groups. In addition to those that support CftW, others value the importance of the Atlantic region for the transmission of ideas and objects but draw the line at accepting there was a common language. Many also highlight the importance of regionalisation and changes over time, as well as the movement of objects and ideas: clearly people were in contact but they also possessed distinct regional identities. One aspect that stood out to me was that in many instances, the data just aren't there to prove or disprove CftW and it therefore must remain a hypothesis. Archaeologists are used to this type of scenario but this was especially apparent when reading the two chapters on genetics where authors are careful to stress that any conclusions they have reached are 'provisional' (Pala et al. p.374). In his chapter, Stuart Needham uses the phrase 'network of affiliation' (p.65) to portray the nature of the archaeology of Atlantic Europe during the Bronze Age. One wonders if this is not a better means of describing and explaining some of the similarities and differences discussed throughout this book.

In conclusion, this is a high-quality volume containing much of interest to a wide audience. At the heart of this book is a tension apparent in discussions of prehistoric archaeology in many different regions and periods, involving similarity and difference. How do we account for broad similarities across wide geographical areas such as the Beaker Complex or Celtic Art, but also take account of distinct and important regional differences? The fact that no firm conclusions are reached in this book may point to the answer: imposing explanations is not always possible given the diverse nature of the available evidence, instead we should probably embrace similarity and difference as it challenges existing assumptions and therefore promotes a better understanding of the past.

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