Were Celtic identities constructed by archaeologists..?

Tacitus (1970:62), an eye witness to the Pre-Roman Britons, wrote a non-judgmental analysis of the pre-historic inhabitants saying "it seems likely that Gauls settled in the island lying so close to their shores" and that the peoples had similar language, religious beliefs and courage. In 1705 Abbé Pezron began the construction of Celtic identity by reasoning that Celts spoke Celtic and that Edward Lhuyd added to this by assuming that the Welsh, Scots and Irish were Celtic (Collis 2006:12). James (1999:47-49) added that Lhuyd was a Welsh patriot with a political addenda for this proposal and that Lhuyd's ideas became accepted "as established fact … with remarkable speed" and 'Celtic' was used to define ancient monuments and material remains.

Morse (2005:9) explains that national identity of the British Isles was not a new topic and, for example, works by Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1135), John Major (1535) and George Buchanan (1582) – under the patronage of Kings and Popes - had presented different lineages for political ends linking their identity to Trojans, Druids, and Gallia Celtica. In France, supporting a growing nationalism, interest in Celtic speaking people and their achievements and, similar to England, resulted in "fanciful speculation" (Trigger 2008:89). Napoleon III, during the 1860s, to form a national culture to unite France, financially supported excavations of a Celtic town at Alésia which revealed a resemblance to the La Tène culture. During 1985, over one-hundred years later, on a nearby ancient hilltop at Bibracte President Mitterrand launched an appeal for national unity (Dietler 1994:584) claiming that this was were the "first act of our history took place".

An artist style found in Britain and Ireland was linked by Archaeologist to that of the 'Celtic' La Tène culture to explain the spread and migration of the Celts in Europe and the assumed formation of a Celtic identity including a common artistic style and even religion (Morse, 2005:9). Megaw and Megaw (1994:299) continued to support a Celtic identity by writing that "Celtic and La Tène art is a form of visual communication or language … reflecting a basic belief system", so propagating the theory of a single Celtic identity, in opposition to modern thinking developed by archaeologists such as Collis, James, and Morse.

Archaeologists had made a significant error by accepting the Celtic identity manufactured since the 18th century and in accepting interpretations without academic challenge. Today, even the ethnonym 'Celt' is challenged (Renfrew and Bahn, 2008:193; James 2005) because there is no evidence to suggest that any of the peoples of northwest Europe called themselves 'Celts'. During the last two decades there has resurgence in interest in 'Celtic Spirit' and an adoption of the Celtic Culture of the Iron Age as a "symbol of European unity as well as regional identity" (Collis 2006:10; Trigger 2008:260) and a resultant challenge to the traditional view and an emergence of alternative or differing interpretations has evolved.

A paper written by Megaw and Megaw (Megaw and Megaw 1996:176) outrageously suggested that challenging the Celtic Identity somehow paralleled Nazi ethnic cleansing or events in Bosnia, Rwanda and Australia (Morse 2005:13). I feel that it is a loss that Megaw and Megaw presented their opinions so badly - James (1998) said their writings implied "dark political motives … malevolent, at best irresponsible") – that their arguments, which might have had some merit, were undermined. Ironically the re-emergence of nationalistic and neo-colonialist thinking has accelerated the resistance to accept these reinterpretations – for example James (1999:120) has an altogether different proposal which he calls Ethnogenesis; that the Viking incursions were the initial catalyst for national unity, or identity, in Ireland and Britain.

A variety of evidence and criteria has been presented by archaeologists over-time to support past Celtic identities. It is becoming clearer that these were sophisticated people with evolved identities;

living in social communities, highly skilled in metal working, and who used trade to exchange items, and therefore ideas, from distant places. Some of the evidence and criteria archaeologists have used to construct their unique identities include:

Language/Names: since the 18th century there has been an assumption that Celts shared a common language which forms part of the Proto-Indo-European sub-family and, as Race = Language = Culture (Jones 2005:43), this determination linked all Celts into a single ethnicity. There is increasing thought (Renfrew and Bahn 2008:193) that the Insular Celtic languages diverged as early as 3000 BC in Britain and Ireland - Sims-Williams (1998) links the spread of language to the spread of farming from Anatolia. Collis (2006:129-130) identified four sources of linguistic evidence:
  (1) Places, ethnonyms, and personal names
  (2) Spoken languages
  (3) Epigraphic sources
  (4) Coins

Physical Characteristics: Wilson (1865:57-58,63) wrote "that the form of the human skulls is essentially distinctive of race" and he hoped to be able to distinguish between the well-formed Celtic skulls and those of pre-Celts with narrow skulls and therefore brains that developed differently. His outdated differentiation of skulls included a reasoning that Irish Celtic skulls are long, ponderous and protuberant and Scottish skulls where different because Edinburgh hat manufacturers noted that Scottish heads are two sized large than their southern neighbours.

Genes: Genetic mapping (mtDNA), inherited generic mutations and disorders (such as cystic fibrosis Sims-Williams (1998)) and possibly blood groups. Bodmer (1992:55) presented some useful work on DNA but also theorized that the southward spread of light-skin colour as a result of sexual selection "namely preferential mating with those who had these unusual and no doubt striking features".

Artistry and Skills: Arts, jewellery such as Torcs and their decoration with swirling circles and stylized faces and animals, and creative skills in metal-work (James 2005) and similar ideas and concepts (Sims-Williams 1998).

Historic Texts: Celts are described in a variety of surviving texts including Julius Caesar, Tacitus, Herodotus (Wells 1998:815), and Galitans in the New Testament (BibleGateway, 2009).

Figure-1: Battersea Shield, British Museum (2009)

Gods/Religion: similarities in the pantheon of Gods in different regions, 374 are known including Tacitus's post-conquest pairing of alien deities to Roman gods (Webster 1995:156). Wells (1998:814-815) links the interest in myths, legends, and secret magic to the romantic revivals of the 18th century. The monumental trophy/sanctuary of decapitated bodies at Ribemont-sur-Ancre has given indications of the amalgamation of warlike qualities and religious beliefs (Bahn 2003:95) while the bog-bodies found in Northern Europe (Bahn 2003:98-101), often strangled and sometimes with other wounds, have suggested a similarity in religious beliefs and human sacrifices. Votive offerings,

such as the Battersea Shield (Figure-1) are associated with rivers, bogs, and springs (Haselgrove 2009:114) and Collis (2006:140) wrote that human offering were the most common offering in bogs.

Druids: are attested in Ireland, Britain and Continental Europe (James 2005).

Military Context: swords and shields with ornamentation (Waddell and Twohig 1995:159-160,162) and a similar emphasis on their weapons (in burial contexts). Adkins, Adkins and Leitch (2008:119-122) stress the migration of weapons, as luxury/elite items, such as Hallstatt and La Tène daggers, Hallstatt Gündlingen swords and chariot warfare. Haselgrove (2009:120) explains that hillforts from the Early Iron Age, such as Maiden Castle [Dorset, UK] and Breiddin [Powys, Wales] fell out use in the Middle Iron Age to be reoccupied during the Roman Iron Age.

Habitation Context: houses (such as round and wheel houses, Brochs and Crannogs) and enclosed settlements with arable farming, crop management and pastoralism (Adkins et al 2008:99-101). Archaeology from individual burials, which should be studied in their local context, is rarer because cremations seem to have been commonly used for disposing of the dead or excarnation (Haselgrove 2009:123). Internments typically have the richest graves (Collis 2006:135), possible under barrows which can be grouped into larger cemeteries, and cremations typically included fewer burials goods.

Domestic/Material Context: Textiles and Pottery are used significantly to date and correlate peoples (Adkins et al 2008:104-106) as well as the manufacture of tools such as weaving combs, querns and pottery wheels (Haselgrove 2009:114) – pottery is especially used to suggest chronologies and the diffusion of similar styles in the wider-European context (Waddell and Twohig 1995:161)

Metals: this period has produced some outstanding metalwork artefacts using gold, silver, bronze, copper, tin, lead, and iron. The production of these items demonstrates increasingly sophisticated methods of manufacture (Adkins et al 2008:110-111) and their use ranged from weaponry, decorative jewellery, to households – including tools in agrarian, wood-working, or metal-working contexts.

Trade/Coinage: coins are common (Adkins et al 2008:124-126) and are the first evidence of writing. They offer information on diffusion, dating, leaders/groupings. Many continental coins, such as Galleo-Belgic coins, are also found in southern Britain demonstrating the network of trading throughout the region but also that it was regional and associated with a tribal grouping. Haselgrove (2009:131) wrote that sea-going plank boats powered by sails were employed for costal trading and smaller crafts, built using logs or hide, were used for river transportation.

I agree with James (1999:65-67) when he says that these ancient peoples, who were grouped into an artificial Celtic identity from the 1700s, would not have accepted this classification or any suggestion of joint identity. The birth of Celtic identity, whether for political motivations or 'tidiness', is now, and correctly, challenged and the ancient people's history is being rewritten to include cultural uniqueness and independent development assisted by trading relationships and reciprocity, rather than explaining cultural change through migration or invasion.

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