

Ireland in the Bronze Age

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Celts, Celticisation and the Irish Bronze Age

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Abstract

It is argued that the emergence of a Celtic language in Ireland was the culmination of a long process of social and economic interaction between Ireland and Britain, and between these islands and adjacent parts of Continental Europe. For Ireland, the Irish Sea was one crucial factor in this process, facilitating contact and enabling this island to share in the European phenomenon of the creation of the larger speech communities of later prehistory. This model of 'becoming Celtic-speaking' demands that we should examine even more closely the nature and the degree of contact between Ireland and Britain and the Continent. However, the archaeological data needs to be studied in its own right, free of ethnic 'Celtic' labels and preconceptions. Presumptions about a modern common Celticity have tended to impose a similar and equally questionable construction on the ancient 'Celtic World'. Celticisation, becoming Celtic-speaking, was a Bronze Age process.

The title of this contribution might be considered doubly unfortunate: the 'Bronze Age' is claimed to be an out-moded concept, useful perhaps as a general chapter heading but no longer an indication of an important theme in prehistory (Barrett 1994). 'Celticisation' may mean, in the narrow sense employed here, 'becoming Celtic-speaking' but, like the name Celt, it inevitably raises a plethora of cultural, ethnic and other issues.

To complicate matters further, the question of 'who spoke what?' in prehistory is, of course, one inherently incapable of resolution and most sensible prehistorians do not succumb to the temptation to speculate. But the question is important nonetheless because it forces us to confront the essence of human communication on a particular and on a general level. It also forces us to examine many aspects of society, such as structure, demography, trade and exchange, and the problem of ethnic identity. Archaeology is equipped to address some of these issues and if we cannot conclusively answer the general question, at the very least we can attempt to harmonise the archaeological and the linguistic models employed.

What language was spoken in Neolithic Ireland? According to Colin Renfrew (in his 1987 *Archaeology and Language*) it was an Indo-European tongue disseminated with the demographic changes associated with the transition to an agricultural economic system; it was a pre-Indo-European language according to J. P. Mallory's 1989 *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* in which the traditional view of a late Neolithic or early Bronze Age dispersal of Indo-European folk is

cogently argued. There are alternative views of course: one compromise is offered by Zvelebil and Zvelebil (1988) and to a great extent, one or other solution to the two extremes is acceptable depending on the primacy given to either the linguistic or the archaeological evidence (Yoffee 1990). Whatever solution is adopted, there is general agreement that some Indo-European language or languages could have been spoken in these islands, and indeed over a much wider area of Europe, at the beginning of the Bronze Age.

We should probably envisage a complex mosaic of interacting mono- or bilingual communities (some Indo-European, some non-Indo-European), but all interlinking linguistically in various ways with their neighbouring communities. This early prehistoric picture is not a static one - but one of constant and dynamic flux. The dynamic nature of linguistic interaction needs to be stressed and this is well illustrated in modern sociolinguistics, in the study of dialect chaining and various forms of language mixing. However, according to the traditional Neo-grammarians historical linguistic model, language groups such as Common Germanic, Slavonic, and Common Celtic emerged in time from the parent Indo-European. Common Celtic (or Proto-Celtic), ancestral to Brittonic, Goidelic and other Celtic languages such as Hispano-Celtic (or Celtiberian) and Gaulish, developed in a Continental 'homeland' from whence the Celtic languages spread to various parts of 'the Celtic World' including Britain and Ireland (Fig. 57). This is an enduring belief, as one writer

recently put it: 'that the Celts arrived in Britain and Ireland from the mainland of Europe can be taken as certain, but there is a great deal of uncertainty about the circumstances in which they arrived' (Price 1987, 6). Or as another has said: 'the Celts of the Hallstatt and particularly the La Tène period spread over the whole of Europe . . .' (Schmidt 1992, 44). Indeed McCone (1994, 63) believes the first speakers of a Celtic tongue arrived in Ireland as late as about 200 BC. Maps like Fig. 57 showing homelands and varying directions of Celtic expansion figure in recent works such as *Celtic Art* (Megaw and Megaw 1989, fig. 2), *Art of the Celts* (Laing and Laing 1992, fig. 10) and *The Celtic World* (Green 1995, xxiv).

The genetic, family tree, model of linguistic reconstruction, which implies divergence as the significant factor in language change (Fig. 58a), has supported and has been supported by migratory archaeological theories. The inevitable equation of attested Celtic languages such as Goidelic or Brittonic with a people such as 'Q-Celts' and 'P-Celts' or with a material culture has had a long history. In Ireland, various writers have, in the past, equated 'the coming of the Celts' with the introduction of such archaeological phenomena as the knowledge of iron or a La Tène art style. This prolonged and convoluted debate has been summarised in Waddell (1991, 1991a). In 1928, for example, R. A. S. Macalister stated in his *Archaeology of Ireland* that the Celts came to Ireland at the inception of the Iron Age c. 400 BC; they were few in numbers but subdued the pre-Celtic aborigines with their superior iron weapons. The notion of Bronze Age Celts, however, is not a new one. In 1889 Sir John Rhys suggested that the round barrows of the British Bronze Age were the work of invading Celts, a view also proposed by Lloyd in his *History of Wales* in 1911 and by Hubert in his 1932 *Les Celtes et l'expansion celtique*.

Others in the 1920s and 1930s attributed early Celticisation to the late Bronze Age 'sword-bearers'. O. G. S. Crawford published an influential paper in 1922 in which he argued that 'towards the close of the Bronze Age the British Isles were invaded by the first wave of Celtic-speaking peoples bringing with them leaf-shaped bronze swords, many other new types of bronze objects, and at least two types of pottery new to these islands'. A few years later, in 1930, Estyn Evans, influenced by the work of Cyril Fox, suggested that in the Highland Zone of Britain and in Ireland the new language was acquired by a process of absorption: 'it is not unlikely that with this absorption, and without any important movement of peoples, the first Celtic language brought by the invaders from the Celtic Cradle may have reached the west, replacing a primitive tongue of pre-Aryan type'.

Here we have an early recognition that the archaeological record in this island did not offer convincing evidence for intrusive Celts on any scale.

In the late 1960s Myles Dillon, who had studied Indo-European elements in early Irish tradition, reverted to older notions of early Bronze Age Celts and suggested that they might even be identified with the 'Beaker Folk' around 2000 BC (Dillon and Chadwick 1967; Dillon 1968). He was aware that most scholars dated the first Celtic settlements in Britain as late as 600 BC but he argued that the great archaism of Irish tradition in language, literature and social organisation made such an early date a probability. Today such wide linguistic disagreement seems to be a thing of the past; now, at least in this one area, a measure of consensus is evident: these islands became Celtic-speaking in later prehistoric times (MacEoin 1986; Schmidt 1994). But how this came about is still the subject of some disagreement in both archaeological and linguistic circles.

The saga of controversy and argument as to how Ireland became Celtic-speaking has been a long one but the recent debate on the origins of the Irish may be firmly blamed on J. P. Mallory who initiated a conference on this subject in Belfast in 1984. There was general agreement then that Celtic emerged in the last millennium BC and some consensus that this could not be explained satisfactorily without some reference to an intrusion of people though this was not recognisable in the archaeological record of either the later Bronze Age or the Iron Age. My suggestion that a prestige goods economy reflecting the interaction of regional élites may have been a primary factor in the emergence of an insular Celtic language was not received with great enthusiasm. However, alternative models of language diffusion were at least being canvassed. Piggott (1979, 1983) had suggested that prestige gift exchange formed a mobile upper class archaeology and that the transmission of the Celtic languages might have occurred in this way too. Koch (1986, 16) agreed: 'given the importance of metal weapons and ornaments for the tribal hierarchs to superordinate and define themselves, the *koiné* of the metal trade might naturally have become a prestige speech which distinguished the upper strata from a peasantry whose limited means excluded them from this cosmopolitan market'.

In 1987 Renfrew proposed a convergence model of Celtic linguistic development and adapted Christopher Hawkes' concept of 'cumulative Celticity' which ascribed the Celticisation of Britain and Ireland to the continuing accumulation of new, upper class, Celtic-speaking masters. Renfrew suggested that peer polity interaction contributed to the emergence of the Celtic languages from generalised Indo-European

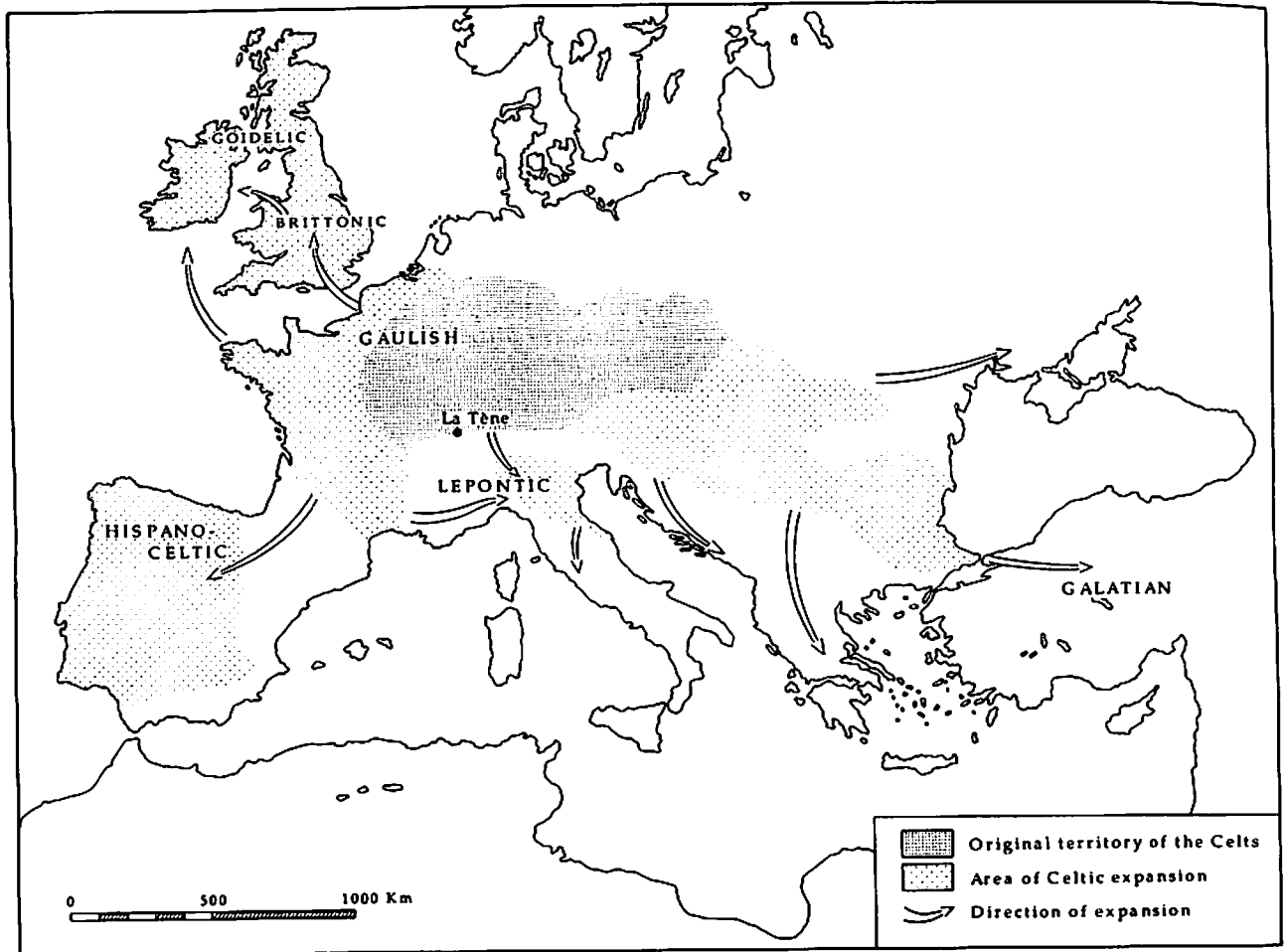


Fig. 57. 'The Celtic World': a modified version of a map in P.-M. Duval's *Les Celtes* (1977).

'essentially in those areas where their speech is later attested' there being no one localised Celtic 'homeland'. The homelands of the Celts would be constituted by the full extent of the area where Celtic languages came to be spoken (always excluding such later offshoots as Galatia). He envisaged a process of parallel development precipitated by the elite elements of ranked societies.

There are alternatives to the phylogenetic linguistic model which are more in keeping with a processual archaeological approach. Robb (1993), for instance, has proposed a non-genetic model of the prehistory of European languages in which the rate of the creation and demise of languages (due to a variety of social processes) will change through time. Large language areas would have been a feature of the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic and throughout this long period the small number of language families would probably fluctuate around an average (represented by the vertical line in Fig. 58b). Increasing sedentism and population growth in the Mesolithic and earlier Neolithic, and the formation of small, self-sufficient territorial groups would have produced a considerable

increase in the number of languages spoken. Language proliferation would have halted and then declined in the later Neolithic and throughout the Bronze Age with the gradual formation of fewer, larger language groups.

The emergence of a Celtic language or languages in later prehistory would be due to an intensification of a complex series of processes operating across parts of Europe since the 3rd millennium BC: these would have included economic intensification, increasing polity size, developing gender and social stratification, and increasingly active trade along coasts and rivers. Factors such as a vertical social continuum (perhaps represented by some form of clientship) allowing for reciprocal linguistic contacts at every level in a hierarchical society, may have been important too. Koch (1991, 18) sees the developments in the later Irish Bronze Age from about 1300 BC as significant in this respect. The more aristocratic and warlike nature of society, the conspicuous display in fine weaponry and ornament and the deposition of fine metalwork in pits and in watery contexts (a shift towards a chthonic religion) all find parallels in Britain

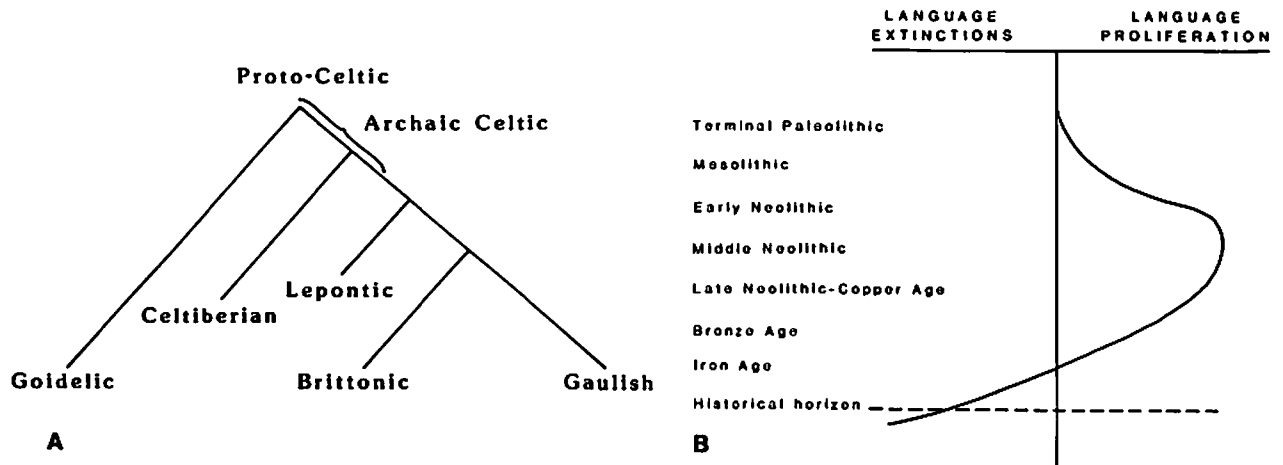


Fig. 58. a: Phylogenetic model of the Celtic language family (after Schmidt 1992a).
 b: Hypothetical trajectory of prehistoric European languages (after Robb 1993).

and on the Continent and reflect a social and cultural reordering 'in all respects recognisably Celtic'. Marisa Ruiz-Galvez (1991) has argued that the Atlantic seaways of the Iberian peninsula may have been important vectors of linguistic change and development. She suggests that Lusitanian in western Iberia developed as a pre-Celtic trade language on the Atlantic coasts of the peninsula and became the dominant language between the Tagus and the Douro. The status of Lusitanian is debated - some believe it to be pre-Celtic as she claims, but others have argued that it is a Celtic dialect related to Hispano-Celtic. In any event, the development of stable settlement, of technological improvements including complex ship-building techniques and of long distance exchange were all significant factors in the process of its development. Changes in social structure, including greater ranking and greater social complexity were equally important. She emphasises that, as history demonstrates, intense and continuous trade contacts imply the arrival and establishment of small groups of people who are immensely influential and active in the communities in which they find themselves.

There is abundant sociolinguistic evidence to illustrate the importance of trade and sea-borne contact in the spheres of language change and development: among the conditions which determine the nature and outcome of language contact, new language needs and consequent patterns of use 'those of the economic environment play a crucial role' (Coulmas 1992, 154).

While, as elsewhere, Ireland had its own regional idiosyncrasies, there is good evidence that it participated at an élite level in wider European fashions in the later Bronze Age. This evidence consists of a

range of metal types and some items, notably bronze spears and shields, and finely decorated or crafted objects of gold or bronze, of various dates, are justifiably seen as prestigious possessions, some probably for ostentatious display. There is some evidence too that social stratification became more marked in the later Bronze Age. There are significant gaps in the archaeological record but the broad picture is a fairly consistent one.

I suspect that the intensity of Ireland's contacts with Britain, across that relatively modest body of water, the Irish Sea, has been underestimated. A multitude of small craft must have plied both Irish rivers and coastal waters throughout prehistory. The high seas would rarely have been used, long distance travel by sea was the exception rather than the rule until relatively recent times. Brief sea voyages which rarely, if ever, took the sefarer out of sight of land were the norm. On the coast a variety of boats would have hugged the land and provided a labyrinthine network of contacts around these shores and across the Irish Sea. Fernand Braudel's evocative picture of the ancient Mediterranean with voyagers 'moving crab-like from rock to rock, from promontories to islands and from islands to promontories' may be applied to this part of the world as well. The archaeological evidence suggests that the Irish Sea, far from being a barrier to communication, may have been a focal area for interaction and exchange, displaying evidence for recurring cycles of contact over long periods of time.

There is no shortage of distribution maps of Bronze Age material to illustrate this point (Waddell 1992, figs 2ff.). For the earlier Bronze Age, the distribution of a characteristically Irish type of early Bronze Age pottery vessel, the Irish Bowl, suggests a significant pattern of contact with south-west Scotland, and

to a lesser extent with the Isle of Man and south-west Wales. A limited amount of analysis suggests that most pottery vessels of this sort were made of more or less local clays and, in all probability, were not exported any great distance. But how pottery fashions themselves were transmitted over wider areas is not at all clear. Since these bowls come mainly from burials, it is possible that we are witnessing the spread of some ritual rather than something like the exogamous movement of female potters. Whatever the transmission mechanism, the distribution of a pottery fashion is very likely to be an indication of an integrated social network at some level.

The Cordoned Urn is an Irish-Scottish type (Waddell 1995) and most examples come from funerary contexts, invariably with cremated burials, but finds from coastal sandhills in northern Ireland and in Scotland are a reminder that the exploitation of coastal resources was part of the spectrum of economic activity of the makers of these vessels. Island finds are particularly interesting, besides the Isle of Man, urns are recorded from Aran, on the Atlantic coast in the west of Ireland, Arran and Bute in Scotland and Anglesea in north Wales. It is a possibility that the makers of cordoned urns were among the important middlemen in the transmission of the products of the copper workshops of the south-west of Ireland to the north-east of that island and across the North Channel to Scotland. The concentration of these urns in Counties Antrim and Down is noteworthy; this was an area of important metal workshops. The distribution of the Collared Urn Tradition may imply a more extensive use of the Irish Sea basin. Here, however, an essentially English phenomenon impinges mainly on the eastern half of Ireland. The widespread distributions of both these Urn Traditions are particularly difficult to explain. Older notions of the migration of various 'Urn Folk' seem less than adequate today but the significant degree of standardisation in burial rite and general pot shape, which transcend the regional differences that do exist, imply something more than the mere diffusion of a pottery fashion. Once more, a possible explanation may lie in an extensive and intricate system of interaction between communities, this complex pattern of communication serving to impose and maintain a measure of uniformity sufficient to publicly demonstrate participation in a symbolic activity which conferred some measure of social approbation. Clearly the networks of relationships and the social imperatives were both sufficiently strong and compelling to allow their material expression to cover great distances and to traverse the Irish Sea.

The pottery fashions instanced here disappear from the archaeological record at the end of the earlier Bronze Age but the contacts they represent were only

a part of a wider spectrum of activity which must have included some of the contemporary metal exchanges; these presumably continued and intensified in the later Bronze Age.

New patterns of interaction do seem to have developed from about 1300 BC, novel gold and bronze types appear and there are significant developments in weaponry. Many of these innovations indicate long distance exchange networks and it has been plausibly argued that élite elements of ranked societies were now major participants in the exchange process and that their political power and status rested to some degree on their ability to control the distribution and value of certain prestigious objects. A whole range of material indicates that Ireland shared in the social transformations taking place elsewhere, both in Britain and on the Continent. Gold objects like the ornate neck-rings called bar torcs are generally believed to have been the prestigious possessions of such a social élite. Though mainly an Irish-British fashion, a significant number of these torcs have been found in France, mostly in the north-west. Their insular distribution implies that they may have been a limited element in a pattern of alliances across the North Channel but a significant feature of traffic across the southern half of the Irish Sea with north Wales playing a central role (Fig. 59).

One of the earliest types of bronze sword in these islands is the Ballintober sword type and it seems to be a weapon form favoured for some reason in the northern half of Ireland and the southern half of England. The type may have been first developed in the Thames Valley which was clearly an important area of sword manufacture as well as being a crucial link with the Continent (Fig. 60). Though the nature of the alliances postulated is not at all clear, it is tempting to speculate that a scatter of dots like this may conceivably be an echo of the competing ambitions of a network of major and minor chiefs. Significant imports are rare but the Kurd buckets from the Dowris hoard and from Nannau in Wales may be instanced: they had a profound effect on subsequent sheet bronze vessel production. Sabine Gerloff (1986) places them at the head of the insular series of buckets and cauldrons.

The identification of regional assemblages has proved difficult in Ireland but George Eogan has demonstrated two significant concentrations of fine metalwork in his Dowris Phase, one in the region of the Shannon Estuary, the other in the north-east of the country. The Shannon assemblage, which includes distinctive gold gorgets, so-called hair ornaments and bowls also of gold, and some bronze horns or trumpets, illustrates the real difficulty in identifying possible routes of long distance exchange (Eogan



Fig. 59. Distribution of gold torcs (after Eogan 1994).

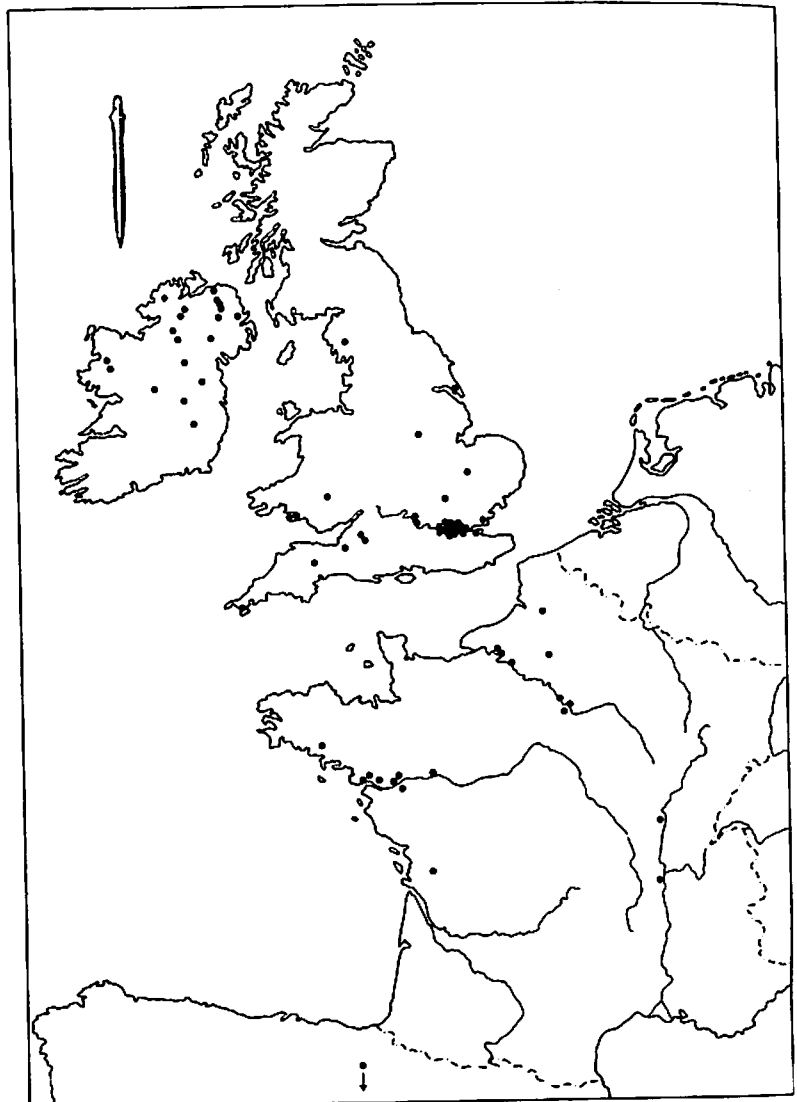
1993). However, Kristiansen (1993) has demonstrated how this may be done in other circumstances with the identification of a series of interacting elite centres stretching from northern Europe to northern Italy in the 8th century BC.

The Irish-British examples of the bronze Gündlingen sword, in use at the beginning of the Iron Age, show that mutual contact continued, as indeed did Continental contacts, for the form is a variant of a wider European sword type. Apart from once again noting the importance of the Thames Valley, the scattered distribution elsewhere in these islands provides few clues as to how the fashion was actually disseminated. As with the earlier Ballintober swords it would be wrong to imagine a uniform weapon type distributed across both islands. Minor typological details occasionally permit the identification of Irish pieces in Britain and vice versa, as Colquhoun and Burgess (1988) have shown. Again what is important, however, is not so much where the type originated, or where a particular sword was made and how far

it may have been transported, but the general impression the distribution map presents of a shared fashion and the communication this implies some time in the middle of the last millennium BC.

Numerous other types of artefacts also demonstrate the importance of the Irish Sea in the Bronze Age: pottery, including Beaker and some Vase Tradition pottery as well as Trevisker ware, and a whole range of other metal types. Iron Age material should be considered too, these patterns of contact did not cease with the end of the Bronze Age. The demise of the bronze industry at this time is as dramatic a transformation as the disappearance of those burial practices of the earlier Bronze Age almost a thousand years before, and it has prompted catastrophic explanations. If, as seems likely, bronze had an important role in the maintenance of status relationships, then iron working may well have disrupted this structure and precipitated a decline in associated customs like hoard deposition. It does not necessarily follow that there was a wider socio-economic collapse since bronze was

Fig. 60. Distribution of Ballintober and related swords (after Eogan 1965 and Colquhoun and Burgess 1988; Continental distribution after Gomez 1987).



probably just one element, admittedly a prestigious one, in a wider spectrum of activity. Cooney and Grogan (1994, 180) have argued convincingly that there is considerable continuity in other spheres in the period in question from about 600 to about 300 BC. If there was some disruption, then the hiatus was to prove a temporary one for a whole series of artefacts, from beehive querns to decorated bronzes, demonstrates a wide range of contacts across the Irish Sea before and after the turn of the millennium (Raftery 1984).

What sort of picture may we now have of prehistoric contact between the two islands? Is it in fact a picture of varying and sporadic connections as sometimes claimed, or is it possible to suggest another pattern? It has to be admitted that the interpretation of archaeological distribution maps is fraught with difficulty. It is not easy to identify the mechanisms which produced a particular distribution and many factors may distort the issue. These difficulties have been

recently considered by Needham (1993) who suggests that such maps should be called maps of recovery, given that they are the products of various possible taphonomic processes and at a minimal level they reflect the 'displacement' of goods, exchange being but one aspect of displacement. No doubt various forms of displacement await identification in the series of maps I have referred to. Consideration of how material finds its way into what we call the archaeological record raises the question of the prior 'life-cycle' of the objects themselves. Needham points out that 'a life-cycle takes place between the acts of production (or extraction) and deposition; these two points, or "nodes", alone being capable of archaeological definition, account for the set of data in a map of recovery. Yet it is life-cycles that are the key to the definition of exchange and other forms of transmission, in order to get beyond mere recognition of displacement'.

Thus some of the patterns recorded on our maps

may well be the visible expression at a particular time for a particular reason, of a deeper rooted and longer lasting network of relationships, the dots being just the archaeologically visible elements of a much more intricate pattern of social interaction. Some may reflect a web of communities, perhaps linked by kinship over a period of many centuries. This sort of interaction may have been a perennial feature of the Irish Sea region and I would argue that its constancy has been underestimated. The prehistoric reality may have been a constant pattern of communication, the Irish Sea and its hinterlands being a focal area for interaction and exchange over the 'longue durée' of almost two millennia of the Bronze Age. It is even possible that the degree of traffic of people and kin across the North Channel, for instance, may have been sufficiently regular to constitute a 'migration stream' in both directions. In the Irish Sea region in general, the patterns of contact may have shifted from time to time, and different regional systems of interrelationships may have operated in different places, perhaps making the term 'culture province' inappropriate, but constantly recurring cycles of contact over such a long time span must have had interminable consequences in many spheres not least in terms of linguistic developments.

The degree to which the island of Ireland participated in this pattern of socio-economic interaction is probably one of the difficulties uppermost in the minds of many Irish historical linguists and archaeologists. Koch (1991) however would agree that proto-Celtic was consolidated in the prestige economies of the late Bronze Age (c. 1300-600 BC) 'in which an Atlantic Zone with centres in Armorica, south-east England, south Wales, Ireland, and later on Iberia, was in a continuous close contact with, and generally followed the cultural lead of, Urnfield/Hallstatt C west-central Europe'. He has also argued that invasion is not 'at the heart of the social process of Insular Celticisation which depended rather upon the spread of heroic values through exchange and competition within a stable network, and not upon overwhelming force or population replacement'. But other historical linguists may well ask if the supposed contacts were sufficiently constant and intense to initiate and maintain the linguistic developments envisaged here. Evans (1992, 9) would consider any attempt to mate a processual view of archaeology with an assumed processual view of Celtic linguistic formation 'an especially hazardous exercise'.

Many would probably agree with Koch (1991, 17) that 'by any reckoning the Celticisation of the British Isles was one of the great events of Insular prehistory' but would still believe, in some form, in 'the coming' of at least some Celts (Mallory 1989, 1991, 1992;

Warner 1991). It is interesting, in this regard, to note that Barry Raftery's recent study of the Irish Iron Age, *Pagan Celtic Ireland*, which deals only briefly with this problem, concludes that 'it seems almost heretical to conclude that a Celtic invasion of Ireland never happened' (1994, 228).

This is not the place to pursue the argument that the role of maritime contacts in precipitating language development may be underestimated. However, one of the main vectors for language spread is trade, whatever the conditions of the exchange and the form of goods traded (up to and including people, in which case the 'commodity' can actually become an agent of change). It would in fact be surprising if, in what may well have been a multilingual environment, the level of material displacement evidenced by archaeological research had not resulted in some pattern of language spread and the adoption of a *lingua franca*, particularly in coastal regions of early Europe and, of course, particularly in islands with extensive coastlines such as Ireland and Britain.

The debate about how these islands became Celtic speaking will undoubtedly continue and progress will be made - not merely in the realm of archaeological research but also in the promising field of molecular genetics which may help to untangle some ancient ethnic knots (Bodmer 1993).

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper the term 'Celticisation' presents difficulties. Like 'Celt' it has more than linguistic significance for many people and like the phrase 'the Celtic World' it may seem to suggest a degree of cultural homogeneity which is, to say the least, disputable. It is not surprising that the widespread distribution of linguistic evidence or of elements of material culture like sword, fibula or art style should inspire the idea that 'in early times the Celts (whether or not they were themselves aware of the fact) were an ethnically identifiable group' (Price 1992, 2). Such perceptions and the extent to which 'common factors in material culture, and rural economy, no less than in social institutions and language' (to use Powell's phrase: 1958, 65) were characteristic of 'the Celtic World' as a whole is now the subject of some healthy scrutiny. Old myths, like the notion of a 'Celtic church', are being re-evaluated (Davies 1992). To date, however, greater attention has been paid to more recent Celtic mythologies: for example Sims-Williams (1986) on the racial stereotype of the visionary Celt, McDonald (1986) on the creation of modern Breton Celticity, Dietler (1994) on Celtic identity in both France and the European Union, Leerssen (1994) on the west of Ireland as part of the 'Celtic Fringe', and particularly Chapman (1992) who examines the question of Celtic ethnic identity past and present. Chapman points out that

the common modern definition of the ancient Celts is a scholarly and retrospective one with limitations that are not always recognised; there is no evidence that the Celts of the last millennium BC considered themselves to be Celts and had a unitary language. It may be added that even if there was a significant degree of linguistic unity between adjacent regions, as may have been the case, the presence of a broadly common language in a series of geographical locations does not of itself imply shared ethnic identity or even a *sense* of shared identity.

Celtic identities are in great measure a nineteenth and twentieth-century construct and the investigation of these concepts is important because they have shaped modern scholarship. Modern presumptions about a common Celticity have tended to impose a similar vision on the past. Naive or exaggerated ideas about cultural and racial integrity have inevitably produced a bogus historiography which has hindered archaeological analysis. Self-stereotypes are not peculiar to modern 'Celts' of course but some of the quainter misconceptions are well known and include, for instance, a belief in 'the good people', in such engaging qualities as a special loquaciousness and in the existence of a 'Celtic approach to life' (Severy 1977, 619).

Fortunately there is a growing body of archaeological work which is beginning to delineate the many problems posed by 'Celtic' archaeology particularly in the realms of settlement, social structure, religion and art. Champion (1987) has remarked that 'Iron Age studies have been hijacked by a special concern with the Celts deeply rooted in nineteenth century thinking' and Hill (1989, 1995) has called for a different approach to this period, one untrammelled by Celtic labels (and with less emphasis on the exciting bits such as Mediterranean contacts, princely graves and oppida). Champion has also examined the question of Celtic migrations (1980), the written sources for the wider Iron Age (1985), and the variegated nature of 'Celtic society' in time and space (1995). Collis (1986) would reject the idea that certain cultural assemblages can be labelled 'Celtic' and has also remarked upon the different sorts of contemporary societies 'with different social organisations and settlement patterns, and presumably ideologies' which have been considered Celtic - a term which when 'linked with concepts such as "Hallstatt" and "La Tène" will inevitably warp our conceptual framework. . .' (1994, 32). He has noted the contrasting types of Iron Age society, ranging from the urbanised societies of Gaul in the first century BC to the decentralised societies of the Pennines. In attempting to understand what is evidently a most complicated situation, we should be aware that 'the written

sources may be as much a snare and delusion as a guide'. Even the image of Celtic intemperance has not escaped some reassessment: Dietler (1990) has studied the social role of alcohol and the prejudices of Classical authors have been examined by Chapman (1992, 166).

The subject of Celtic religion is a vast and unwieldy one but a good illustration of how the interpretation of a remarkable body of archaeological data is coloured by an equally impressive corpus of literary material. However, the Romano-Celtic evidence is not as revealing or as reliable as has been thought (Webster 1995). Much of the Irish and Welsh literature is, of course, of considerably later, medieval, date and coupling it with earlier evidence gives a misleadingly timeless image (Fitzpatrick 1991). Moreover, we now know that some of the later Irish tales were 'pasts dreamt of, artefacts of past glories' to quote Barrett's (1981, 217) expressive phrase: they are at best a very opaque window on the Iron Age, at worst no window at all (see Koch 1994 and references to the work of Aitchison, McCone and Mallory in particular). As far as the archaeological evidence for ritual and religion is concerned, at one level there are great regional differences and, at another, some remarkable similarities across a wide geographical area, both of which deserve careful and impartial analysis. For example, there must be few representations of a human head, a horned figure or a pig that have not received a Celtic label. The 'cult of the head' . . . 'a persistent theme throughout all aspects of Celtic life' (Ross 1967, 61, 126) is questioned by Chapman (1992, 287) who describes it as one example of a 'creative scholarly invention'. Horned figures (Ross 1967, 127) or antlered figures (Green 1989, 86) are widely named Cernunnos and Powell's caveat (1971, 202) is equally widely ignored: writing on the well-known antlered figure on the Gundestrup cauldron, he described how it had 'become a sure target for every Celtic mythologizer, but there is no ground for believing, on the strength of a single defective inscription in Paris, that every Celtic horned god should be called "Cernunnos" nor that this is certainly the true form of the name'. The image of the pig was obviously of major cultic importance in some parts of 'the Celtic World' (Green 1989, 139; Ford 1990). But it had a wider and variable currency (Foster 1977) and why a bronze statuette of a boar from Liechtenstein and a figurine of a depressed-looking pig from far-away Bulgaria should be included in various catalogues of Celtic material (Megaw 1970, 129; Pauli 1980, 246; Moscati 1991, 481) must be a puzzle to those uncertain as to how to assess their 'Celticity'. The literature on what is invariably termed Celtic art or La Tène art is enormous and complicated by ambiguity at every turn. These two terms are sometimes synonymous,

as in Megaw and Megaw (1995), and sometimes not and few writers have adequately addressed such fundamental questions as definition or ethnic attribution (Taylor 1991). In assuming that Celtic speakers produced La Tène art, there has been a tendency to attribute to the art style the elaborate, paradoxical, mysterious and ambiguous characteristics supposedly possessed by the Celts themselves (Merriman 1987). The correlation of La Tène art and Celts has been questioned by various writers and obviously, given its discontinuous distribution, some Celts had no use for it. It is also possible that some non-Celts may have adopted it: because the evidence is so scanty, the distribution of Celtic speaking peoples on the 'Celtic fringe' in Central Europe is uncertain and whether La Tène material there represents a Celtic presence is unclear (Barford 1991; Cumberpatch 1995; for the linguistic evidence see Evans 1979). It may have been a status symbol, rapidly emulated but used in radically different ways from region to region (Champion and Champion 1986, 64; Champion 1987, 105). The potential magical charge of the motifs may also explain their widespread use (Kruta 1985, 92). According to Megaw and Megaw (1994) La Tène art is a 'Europe-wide visual language linking together related but not necessarily identical groups of people'. For Jope (1987), however, Celtic art is more than just a product of people who spoke Celtic languages, it has a coherence which spans more than two millennia and may represent an equally coherent ethnicity.

It may seem foolhardy to attempt to separate insular 'Celticisation' and 'Celts' but it is surely time to try. The emergence of a Celtic language in Ireland was, I would argue, the culmination of a long process of social and economic interaction between Ireland and Britain, and between these islands and adjacent parts of Continental Europe. For Ireland, the Irish Sea was one crucial factor in this process, facilitating rather than inhibiting contact, and enabling this island to share not just in the European phenomenon of the creation of the larger speech communities of later prehistory but in wider systems of fashions and beliefs as well. This model of Celticization, 'of becoming Celtic-speaking', should force us to examine even more closely the nature and the degree of contact between Ireland and Britain and the Continent. However, the archaeological data deserves to be studied in its own right, free of ethnic labels and preconceptions, and if linguistic and archaeological models can be harmonised, so much the better. The process as envisaged does not see Ireland just as a recipient nor does it exclude the possibility of movements of people – as we know only too well these are difficult to detect in the archaeological record. If such movements did occur in the Bronze

Age or in the Iron Age, then they only gave added impetus to a diachronic dynamic long underway. For the island of Ireland, to paraphrase Koch (1991, 19), Celticization, *as an instance of language shift*, was not an event but a process, and a Bronze Age process at that.

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