

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

F R A S E R H U N T E R

The ‘Scotland in Later Prehistoric Europe’ conference which led to this volume was part of an ongoing series intended to review Scotland’s place in the context of European archaeology (Saville 2004; Shepherd & Barclay 2004). The time frame was broad, from the mid-second millennium BC to the Roman period, and within such an extended framework one could only address particular topics. The conference considered a number of themes: current perspectives on the debate about the Celts; summaries and new perspectives on recent work in Scotland; surveys of the archaeology of neighbouring areas; and the impact of the Roman world. Not all papers were offered for publication, and as a result this volume has a tighter focus on two of these themes: surveying recent Scottish work and providing comparanda from neighbouring areas.

Scotland in Europe – the Atlantic and the Continent

While the volume looks beyond this country’s current frontiers, it avoids being drawn into traditional narratives derived from an assumed shared Celtic past. Instead, it looks to near neighbours with related or analogous histories and concerns – thus, there are papers considering Ireland, northern England, Atlantic France, the Low Countries and Scandinavia, but nothing on traditional foci of the Celtic Iron Age such as central France or southern Germany.¹ Too often, Scotland is seen as marginal or peripheral to the wider European story despite the quality of evidence such as deeply stratified sites or upstanding Iron Age buildings. But we should not rely simply on well-preserved evidence – there must be an intellectual endeavour that seeks to situate Scotland in wider perspectives, and in turn show how this wider view needs Scottish material to augment it, as Strat Halliday argues here.

Barry Cunliffe’s paper takes such a broad view. His characterisation of different Europes, focused variously on the Atlantic seaways or the Continental landmass and river routes, finds echo in other papers – notably those of near-continental colleagues from France and Belgium, where the interplay of these two cultural zones was a key element. Cunliffe’s paper provides a broad perspective on changing contacts over later prehistory and some of the effects of this. In Britain, this moved from a dominance of Atlantic contacts (at least at elite level) in the Later Bronze Age to an increasing focus on the Continent over the first millennium BC. However, there were periods when evidence of contact was sparse except in the Channel zone – the south-east of England often showed strong cross-Channel links when northern parts of the archipelago looked elsewhere.

For the Low Countries, Eugène Warmenbol paints a picture of subtle variation in the strength of Atlantic versus Rhenish or north Alpine contacts over the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. Pierre-Yves Milcent similarly emphasises the subtleties underlying this period in France. His concept of the Atlantic excludes large parts of western France, such as Aquitaine which shows little relevant material, but includes areas such as Champagne which subsequently became key to the development of Early La Tène culture. He stresses the socially restricted nature of these Atlantic contacts, which were primarily concerned with (and driven by?) elites. There was an interdependence between Atlantic and continental (western Hallstatt) areas: much Hallstatt C status material derived from Atlantic models, such as certain styles of swords, razors and buckets. Milcent also sees a strong Atlantic influence on the development of Early La Tène styles, while Cunliffe suggests that such styles reached Britain in different directions and with different effects: an eastern route leading to distinctive styles of weaponry (such

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as the parade shields of Witham and Wandsworth) and a western route seen in decorated pottery and bronze bowls. Such influences were reinterpreted and modified within Britain, as Vincent and Ruth Megaw demonstrate – they note how little clear evidence of early imports there is, and how much of the earlier La Tène material was already insular in its character.

Different Iron Ages

One can write broad narratives of changing outlooks from Atlantic to continental, but this also needs to recognise regional variations. A key difference between Britain and the Continent is the circular form of domestic architecture, shown by Rachel Pope to start in the Earliest Bronze Age if not before, but found on the Continent only along the Channel margins, as Milcent and Cunliffe discuss. Pope uses the corpus of dated northern roundhouses to demonstrate their variety and experimentation over these early centuries in their development, and seeks models of diachronic variation in roundhouse typology. While the dated corpus is still too small for dogma over the details, we need such models to test in future work. Other monument types are shared more widely, notably hillforts; Strat Halliday and Ian Ralston stress some broad commonalities between British and continental examples, especially their Late Bronze Age origins, while Ralston's review sounds a note of caution over the variability within the Scottish material, still very partially understood.

Barry Cunliffe and Colin Haselgrave both emphasise how much of Britain's archaeology itself splits east–west according to whether areas faced the Continent or the western seaways. One can divide Britain at many scales, and issues of regionality have been a recurring focus of Iron Age research in recent years. We have avoided such detailed local studies here, seeking instead broader perspectives on fresh data. Colin Haselgrave's review of the substantial recent work in central Britain from Forth to Humber, and Andrew Dunwell's analysis of patterns from contract archaeology in Scotland, show how much new information has emerged in recent decades. Fresh perspectives can emerge from such engagements – perspectives founded on excavated evidence rather than received wisdom from an older scholarship which was infused by ideas of a Celtic world or by core-periphery models. Rachel Pope's work on the houses, Fraser Hunter's on the craft-related finds, and Martin Goldberg's call to arms on the study of belief

and ritual all serve to highlight the potential of such inductive, contextualising approaches. Goldberg's arguments for a more archaeologically focused study of belief are given illustration by Flemming Kaul's paper, reconstructing the cosmology of the Nordic Bronze Age from its iconography and integrating this into a broad sweep of evidence to show the social changes which took place in the Early Iron Age.

This interpretative dance with the data is seen also in Ian Armit's work, taking long-known evidence and extracting new meaning from it in considering appropriate social models for the Scottish Atlantic Iron Age. His critique of existing social theories is a telling one: there has been a reliance on pan-Celtic models taken from continental scholarship and derived largely from classical sources. In his study of broch worlds, he shows how the data can lead into key social issues such as inheritance patterns: the persistence of particular sites over long timescales fits much better with segmentary rather than stratified societies, and with redistributive patterns of inheritance. This represents a major shift from Bronze Age patterns in Scotland, where Halliday (among others) discusses the apparently short-term and mobile nature of much Bronze Age settlement, implying that these groups could move readily around a large area of landscape. This move from a shifting pattern of settlement to a static one, apparently around 1000–800 BC, represents a major change in the nature of settlement and presumably in the nature of society, although such bald statements overlook considerable divergences in detail.

These large-scale changes are key to long-term views of later prehistory, for patterns changed markedly over the centuries. In Scotland, as in most of Britain, the flitting settlements of the Bronze Age became more fixed; hillforts appeared from the Late Bronze Age; external contacts dominated at this time, largely vanished in the Early Iron Age and then appeared again, more shadowy and more visibly modified to local needs in the Late Iron Age. These patterns can be fitted into Cunliffe's broad story, but each change poses questions. A good example is the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age. Scottish data allow little understanding of the new material, iron, at this period, but there has been a tendency to see other major changes around 800 BC and blame them on the climate. Yet Milcent stresses how ornate metalwork continued over this period, and much of Warmenbol's data for the Low Countries similarly shows continuity. The weather is a key issue – a generation ago, the end of the Bronze Age was seen as a

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time of misery, mayhem and darkness. Now, climatic change is seen as less severe, with an emphasis on human adaptation to change within a resilient agricultural system, as Tipping, Haselgrove, Halliday and Pope stress. Richard Tipping in particular emphasises the variety of different systems and sources of evidence at play, from rainfall and woodland evolution to fluvial development, and the ways in which a well-adjusted agricultural regime could adapt to this. Pope explains part of this as changing emphases in agriculture, for instance a decline in pastoralism in the Late Bronze Age, but Tipping is more cautious over our abilities to reconstruct agricultural systems at this period, and this is clearly an issue requiring major research input.

The Later Iron Age was also a time of considerable change, not least in the landscape, with Tipping and Haselgrove highlighting large-scale clearance of woodland, certainly south of the Forth–Clyde line and arguably north of it as well. Tipping sees this as a mark of societies pushing beyond subsistence to surplus, but potential explanations are varied, as is the timing – it was not a synchronous horizon. Yet societies with a surplus were ones capable of creating change, and this is a clear phenomenon of the Later Iron Age. Armit notes the increasing architectural differentiation between groups in Atlantic Scotland, for instance between brochs and wheelhouses, or within broch villages, as a sign of social inequality; yet he also notes the contrast to Ireland, where there is evidence for large-scale social action in the ‘royal’ centres and major construction projects, in a land still sparse in evidence of everyday settlements. Yet the differences across the Irish Sea may not be so great – much of this Irish evidence belongs to a restricted Late Iron Age period, and he discusses something of the factors which led societies to such expressions. Perhaps the Scottish equivalents lay in the creation of regionally distinctive forms of metalwork, visualising identities at a scale far beyond the local. These are discussed by the Megaws in the context of an explosion of decorative metalwork around the first century AD. The changing societies of this period must also be considered in the context of knock-on impacts of the encroaching Roman world, although the details behind this remain a key area for research.

The broad view

It is in such large-scale and long-term patterns that we should heed Halliday’s cry to make Scottish material

fundamental to wider pictures. His own argument that Scottish hut circles undermine southern English orthodoxies in the Bronze Age is a good example of this. We are not short of data – as Haselgrove and Dunwell demonstrate – though we must ensure that it is published and synthesised. Even areas of perceived weakness can be turned to strengths. Thus, the lack of a rich burial tradition is a marker of very different approaches to the dead, as Haselgrove and Goldberg show – approaches which find parallel elsewhere, for instance in Belgian cave sites studied by Warmenbol. Likewise, the sparsity of finds (Halliday’s ‘shoebox’ from a typical site) gains power when synthesised, as Hunter’s paper examines – and this specific study of craft processes shows how it can support, augment and modify our models of society. The material from Scotland has a collective power to rewrite history over the long term – but it demands an engagement on a wider European scale. We hope the papers in this volume serve to expand the field for debate and stir some responses.

A note on chronologies

In a volume encompassing scholars from five different countries, a degree of variation in chronological terminology is inevitable. The Bronze Age chronology of Scandinavia runs markedly later than that of other areas, continuing to c 500 BC. Continental Iron Age scholarship uses Hallstatt and La Tène periods and sub-periods which are not widely used among British researchers. Researchers in Atlantic Scotland use a long Iron Age stretching to c AD 800 on Scandinavian models, making their Late Iron Age substantially later than that of Wessex or Wales. Scandinavian usage also lies behind the increasing deployment of a Roman Iron Age, which seems very appropriate for areas on the margins of the Roman world.

Even within non-Atlantic British schemes there is disagreement over subdivision of the Bronze and Iron Ages (Early, Middle and Late? Early/Earlier and Late/Later?). One will even find an Earliest Bronze Age (Chalcolithic) and Latest Iron Age (the equivalent of Early Historic/early medieval) lurking in various papers. There has been no attempt to rationalise this into a single system because there is no single agreed system – but, in editing the various papers, it seemed that their usage was generally clear and clarified by reference to absolute dates, so we trust this will not cause any irreconcilable problems.²

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Notes

- ¹ The question of the impact of Rome is not covered here (though it featured on the programme), and indeed it has fallen into a gap in this conference series, as the succeeding conference focused on the early medieval period (recent perspectives on the topic can be found in Fraser 2009; Hunter 2001, 2007). For broader treatments on the current state of research into Iron Age and Roman Scotland, see the relevant reports in the *Scottish Archaeological Research Framework* (Hunter & Carruthers 2012a & b).
- ² Milcent's paper (illus 3.7) summarises the chronologies of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age.

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