

The influence of archaeological discoveries since the C18th on understanding the ancient pre-Roman inhabitants of Britain.

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Although the British Iron Age technically belongs to prehistory, the writings of classical authors have been highly influential in shaping our understanding of the period, as have more recent archaeological discoveries. This essay will explore these two sources of understanding, as well as other factors which have informed our current views of pre-Roman Britain. It will focus on the concept of unfamiliarity, as demonstrated by the physical appearance of the people living in Britain before and shortly after the Roman invasions of 54BC and AD43, as well as their material and social culture. The continuity and abandonment of concepts from classical writing and how this relates to the archaeological discoveries since the C18th, as well as to other factors, will be explored. A dichotomy of public and academic views of the Iron Age will also be discussed.

The remoteness of the ancient Britons in the Roman world was key to their Classical image. Classical authors created an image of Britain as a wild place of unfamiliar peoples and customs, despite knowing that it was in fact accessible (Stewart 1995). To create this image, they recalled ancient Greek and Roman legends of Britain as a nation isolated from the rest of the world by the surrounding *oceanus*, the river-ocean that rimmed the world (Stewart 1995; Creighton 2000; Braund 1996). This was combined with imagery of a people barbaric in dress, physical appearance and cultural practices - much like other 'barbarians' before them (Hall 1989; Ferris 2000). The unfamiliarity of Britons was also emphasised by their very name, which separated them from the European Gaulish or Celtic people, who were better known in Rome (Stewart 1995). As discussed below, these understandings of culture and appearance can still be seen in the modern day image of Iron Age Britons, whereas the concept of remoteness has largely been lost in favour of a "Celtic commonwealth" identity (James and Rigby 1997).

Classical descriptions

Physically, Caesar describes the Britons as long-haired, wearing pelts and dyeing themselves with woad (*Gallic Wars* V.XIV). He differentiates between the interior and maritime Britons,

the latter considered little different from the Gauls, in that they are more civilised than those inland. Many other sources support the idea of Britons painting or dyeing themselves, although the colour of the woad pigment is contentious (Pliny *Natural History* XXII. 2; Ovid *Amores* II.16). Further descriptions of body decoration include Solinus' image of tattoos based on animal motifs (*Miracles of the World* XXII), an idea corroborated by Claudian's Britannia, who has tattooed cheeks (*On the Consulship of Stilicho* II). Claudian also takes up the idea of wearing animal skins, whilst Herodian writes that the concept of clothing is unfamiliar to the Britons and that they run around naked, in order to best show off their tattoos (III). Cassius Dio adds that Britons never wore shoes (*Roman History* LXXVII). Herodian also notes that Britons wore iron around their waists and necks, valuing it as highly as "other barbarians" valued gold (III).

Culturally, a variety of assertions can be found in classical writing, including Herodian (III) and Cassius Dio's (*Roman History* LXXVII) statements that Britons swam or ran around in bogs and marshes, sometimes up to their necks, for days at a time. Other comments regarding behaviour come from Caesar (*Gallic Wars* V) and Tacitus (*Agricola* XII; XXXV; XXXVI), both of whom emphasize the use of chariots in war, while Herodian notes the use of shields, swords and spears but the lack of armour of any kind (III.14). It is stated by both Caesar and Cassius Dio that many Britons do not grow crops, but live on meat and milk instead, and both write that Britons shared wives between close kin, attributing children to the first husband of the woman in question (*Gallic Wars* V. XIV; *Roman History* LXXVII). The pre-Roman Britons also had druids ruling their tribes, and lacked female leaders. Cassius Dio claims that the "form of rule is democratic", the boldest men chosen as leaders (*Roman History* LXXVII). A relatively positive image of British culture from the period is drawn from Martial, who discusses the woven baskets which are exported to Rome (*Epigrams* XI).

The vast majority of classical authors focused on the barbarity of elements of life in Britain. This was at least partly due to the influence of Caesar's writings on later texts, as well as the influence of classical literary traditions (Stewart 1995). Caesar had a clear twofold agenda when writing about Britain; he wanted to show that the Britons were a barbaric people in need of conquering, and at the same time a worthy opponent, both of which made his victories appear of great importance (Braund 1996). In addition, classical literary traditions meant that even work we would consider factual i.e. geography, was treated more in a literary sense (Braund 1996; Stewart 1995). Within this tradition the "topoi"- "stock literary description" (Mann 1985:21) -saw Britain as a remote place. This acted as an "ideological and cultural reference point... for the negotiation of power" (Stewart 1995). As a result, the classical writings should not be considered an accurate or factual representation of Britain before the Roman

occupation, but rather as a means of justifying and explaining current affairs in Rome (Ferris 2000, Woolf 2011). Despite this, they have held great influence over our understanding of the Iron Age throughout history, and it is only through archaeological means that we can begin to overturn this.

Archaeological discoveries

The concept of remoteness suggests that there was minimal contact between Britain and the continent during this period; however archaeological discoveries have suggested that this is untrue. Evidence of communication between the mainland and Britain can be seen in items such as the Great Torc from Snettisham, which was gilded in mercury, a technique still relatively new and probably introduced from the continent (British Museum 2015b). This demonstrates that ideas and technology travelled. In addition, archaeological investigations have illustrated the transportation and exchange of metal objects imported into lowland Britain from the continent, either as finished articles or as scrap for re-use (Northover 1984, Hunter 2006). Artistically, there are also many similarities between items from mainland Europe and Britain, leading to classifications of material culture found during the middle of the C20th into styles such as "La Tene". All of this evidence indicates that there must have been communication between the mainland and Britain, contrary to the implications of Roman writing. However, the concept of remoteness was just one of many ways in which the Romans sought to differentiate themselves from the Britons.

Many of the classical authors' claims have been shown to be inaccurate, if not totally incorrect, through more recent archaeological discoveries. A good example of this is the idea that there was little or no arable farming in Iron Age Britain (Caesar and Cassius Dio), which has been undermined through various lines of evidence including ard marks and other physical evidence of ploughing, charred grain, and isotopic analysis carried out on human remains. Evidence from as far north as the Antonine wall suggests that land may have been cleared for the purpose of arable agriculture (Dumayne-Peaty 1998), an activity we can see as far back as the Bronze Age from ard marks (Fowler 1983). This is in addition to considerable evidence of cultivated grains from across prehistory (Clay 2001). What's more, dietary studies have shown that there was little change in the average diet between the Roman and Late Iron Age; there was considerable consumption of crop foods in both periods, as shown by the levels of C3 foods in dietary breakdowns (Richards et al 1998; Redfern et al 2010; Jay and Richards 2006; Jay and Richards 2007).

Physical Appearance

Of particular interest to Roman writers was the use of body art, whether in battle or as part of day to day life. The fact that in Rome tattoos and body paint were considered degrading and were used to mark out slaves (Jones 1987) may have influenced their descriptions of Britons, in order to portray them as barbaric. However, as Carr (2005) discusses, there may also be archaeological evidence to support some of the classical writing. Carr begins with a brief warning about and discussion of the importance of translation, in particular relating to the use of *vitrum* in Caesar's writing. Traditionally translated as woad (Thirsk 1985), it may in fact refer to glazes or tattoos. She then goes on to look at material evidence for the use of woad-based indigo dyes and tattoos in prehistory, using evidence from sources such as bog bodies, coins and purported "paraphernalia" for the creation of dyes.

Evidence for woad, including seed and fruit macrofossils from Dragonby (van der Veen 1996), and possible reports of woad-indigo from early unpublished excavations at Sheen (Plowright 1901-2), suggest that this non-native plant was growing in Iron Age Britain, which has led some scholars to suggest that it was intentionally cultivated for use in dyes (van der Veen et al 1993). However, for a practice considered to be widespread there is relatively little evidence, especially as use of woad-dyes cannot be seen on any British bog bodies found to date (James and Rigby 1997). The bog body of the Lindow Man does show evidence of copper traces on his skin, and while this could be an alternative source of the blue paint noted by Caesar (Pyatt et al 1991), more recent papers have suggested that it may simply be a result of post-depositional processes (Cowell and Craddock 1995). Similarly, the paraphernalia identified by Carr (2005), including needles, cauldrons, fire-dogs, tweezers and razors, could be evidence of tattooing or dyeing procedures, but most have more plausible uses. The most interesting and least understood items Carr discusses are cosmetic grinders, which could be related to the process of making woad-indigo. Experiments support this suggestion, but they are not stand alone proof of tattooing or body painting in Iron Age Britain; without the classical texts it is unlikely that any of the archaeological evidence above would have pointed towards such practices, though neither do they contradict the classical authors.

Although fabric rarely survives from the Iron Age, there are some pieces of evidence which illustrate that pre-Roman Britons not only wore clothes, contrary to Herodian's claims, they also wore textiles rather than animal pelts (c.f. Caesar *Gallic Wars*). Evidence of clothing is found in mineralised textile remains or minute wool fragments; James and Rigby (1997) describe a fragment of wool from a grave in East Yorkshire as "the most informative fragment" and yet this is just 28mm across! Mineralized fragments can tell us a little about the weaving patterns used, whilst the location of fasteners in other graves helps to facilitate discussion of

the ways in which garments might have been worn (James and Rigby 1997). Further evidence of clothing comes from the Lexden Tumulus, Colchester, where both cloth of gold and silver-decorated fabric have been found (Laver, 1927), and from tools found in various locations which are associated with textile making such as spindle whorls, loom weights and needles (Gleba & Pásztokei-Szeöke 2013). It should also be noted that there is also evidence that Caesar was in part correct about the use of fur as clothing, with Lindow Man having been shown to be wearing a fox fur armband (Stead et al 1986, British Museum 2015a).

On a similar note the claim from Herodian that Britons did not wear armour cannot be contradicted as a general rule, but evidence from graves at Kirkburn show that there was some use of armour, in this instance a mail tunic, with butted links (Stead and Ambers 1991). Similar items from Stanwick, Lexden and Baldock show that this was not a one off find, with Stead and Ambers noting that "Varro (de Lingua Latina, v, 116)... implies that the Romans adopted mail from the Celts" (1991: 56). This argument is drawn from linguistic studies rather than archaeological discoveries, but combined with the evidence of Iron Age mail it strongly suggests that the Britons might have been more advanced in the technology of warfare than classical sources would like us to believe.

On the subject of ornamentation archaeological evidence has indicated that the classical texts were correct in referring to neckwear, with torcs being in evidence in many Iron Age sites, in particular in hoards such as the Snettisham hoard (Stead 1996). However, as well as some items made of iron, as claimed, ornamental objects were also made of bronze of various colours, and gold; with some even having been shown to have been gilded with gold using an advanced technique known as mercury gilding (British Museum 2015b).

On other matters of appearance it is harder to find evidence to contradict or support the classical writings. In particular hair length and the wearing of a moustache are claims which are very difficult to evaluate from archaeological discoveries, although here bog bodies may be useful. Lindow Man had his hair and beard trimmed with shears before his death, rather than with a razor, and his hair is fairly short (Stead et al 1986, British Museum 2015a). This may not be a typical length, and may relate to the circumstances of his death, but it does appear to contradict classical writing. Evidence for hair styles can possibly be drawn from images in material culture, such as coins and decorative handles; however these give mixed impressions, especially given the ornamental or symbolic nature of the objects in question (James and Rigby 1997).

Discussion

While there are many other areas in which archaeological discoveries have impacted our understanding of the Iron Age people of Britain, it is also important to consider the alternative influences on our current views. In particular, colonialism and empire expansion during the 19th century had a considerable impact on our current understandings of both the Roman and Iron ages in Britain. During this period scholars often aligned modern Britain with the Roman Empire (Lakkur 2006; Hingley 2000; Hanson 1994), and therefore their views of Britain were often shaped by their view of the colonies, in particular the Indian subcontinent (Mills 2012;). Hingley (2000: 104-5) argues that the Edwardians used the connection to the ancient Britons to “dilute” the Victorian idea that Britons today have mostly Germanic Anglo-Saxon blood. In addition, their understanding of prehistoric peoples was shaped by the work of early ethnographers, leading to the popularity of the “noble savage” view of the Iron Age (Harding 2004; Champion 1997). As a result, we have inherited a mixture of perspectives drawn from the Classical sources, the early understandings of these sources and their limited understanding of archaeology, in addition to Antiquarianism. Consequently, we see Britain not only as a country of unrecognisably savage, wild, barbaric or otherwise “different” people, but also as a “Celtic commonwealth”, linked closely to the other Celtic peoples of mainland Europe (James and Rigby 1997).

In this respect there is a considerable difference between the views in academic and public spheres. The vast majority of the public use the terms Celt and Briton interchangeably, however academic literature is more divided. Despite the wide ranging and varied academic writing on the Iron Age, with evidence drawn from all available sources, including historiography of earlier archaeological writing, public understanding is often drawn from a limited range of information. For example, a recent BBC documentary discussing the Iron Age was entitled: “The Celts: Blood, Iron and Sacrifice”. This programme ignored all discussion of the term “celtic” and compared modern “Celtic Festivals” (which draw inspiration from the Irish Annals of the C10th AD) to probable similar occasions in the Iron Age. Whilst not necessarily untrue, this conflation of ideas is misleading. Such decisions might be understandable in the world of film, where sales are vital, but nonetheless these are the aspects of archaeology which are seen by the public and therefore shape general understanding of such topics as the pre-Roman peoples of Britain.

This is also the case in the academic world which, is generally still very much shaped by the classical texts and understandings drawn from them, though this is beginning to change. In particular, Roman and Victorian writings still hold great sway, with regards to the physical appearance and cultural behaviours of these people, due to the relative lack of evidence in

these areas in the archaeological record. There are many volumes of work on the Iron Age, including study of society, settlement, weaponry and metallurgy, but these are not known to the public- as a result, each generation of archaeologists must fight these preconceived ideas, formed by museums, films and documentaries seen in childhood. Due to this, the process of change and movement away from romanticized and classically influenced views of the Iron Age is a remarkably slow process (though it is undeniably happening), despite the volume of archaeological evidence available.

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