



Book Reviews

THE ANCIENT CELTS (2nd edition) BY BARRY CUNLIFFE

Oxford University Press, Oxford. 486pp, 2018, 278 col & B&W illustrations, 3 tables, 30 maps, hb, ISBN 9780198752929, £35.00

In certain academic circles Celt or Celtic can sometimes feel like dirty words and many scholars actively avoid mentioning them, preferring to pretend they never existed (which may or may not be the case!). Yet the Celts and the debates surrounding the usefulness and applicability of the term never seem to go away. For example, they were again brought into sharp focus through recent exhibitions at the British Museum and the National Museum of Scotland (Farley & Hunter 2015). As the high visitor numbers for both exhibitions illustrate, like it or not, the idea of a group of ancient peoples calling themselves Celts with a common language, as well as certain other social and character attributes, looms large in the popular imagination. As such, archaeologists, particularly those specialising in the European Iron Age, cannot continue to bury their heads in the sand: it is a topic we should continue to engage with both within academia and more widely. Professor Barry Cunliffe's book *The Ancient Celts*, first published in 1997, is one of only a very few publications exploring the world of the Celts which is both authoritative and scholarly but also accessible to a general audience. It is therefore a very important volume in terms of how prehistoric European scholarship is presented to the public. This new edition incorporates Cunliffe's current thinking about Celtic origins and language into this pre-existing already highly successful format. Comparing the two editions, the updated and revised version is over 100 pages longer with an additional chapter and a modified chapter sequence. This review will first outline and evaluate these adjustments before exploring how this new edition stands up over 20 years after its original publication.

From the outset, it is very well presented with large colour images and numerous helpful maps. If one were to be overly critical, the paper is rather thin, but this does not detract from the bright appearance and feel of the book – it makes you want to pick it up and read it. There is also some beautiful writing. In turns we are greeted by firedogs with the 'spirited essence of horned bulls' heads' and a large pottery jar with 'its series of flowing scrolls and arabesques lightly incised on the body before firing' (p. 239). As already mentioned, the biggest change to this second edition is the incorporation of Cunliffe's current thinking about Celtic origins and language which has been presented and developed in numerous volumes in recent years (e.g. Cunliffe 2001; Cunliffe

& Koch 2010; Koch & Cunliffe 2013; 2016). The first edition began the story of the Celts in the late Bronze Age but in this one chapter 3, 'In the Beginning: 5500-1300 BC', takes us to the early Neolithic, the origins of Indo-European languages and the so-called 'Atlantic Community', where communities living on the Atlantic coast were in widespread contact. At the risk of oversimplification, Cunliffe's main contention is that Celtic languages developed along the Atlantic coast as a form of lingua franca. In his usual easy style Cunliffe has done a fine job of outlining these, often complicated ideas, neatly distilling a great deal of information and data. This shift in focus from continental Europe to the Atlantic coast follows easily into the next chapter 'The Atlantic System: 1300-200 BC' which concentrates on Iberia and the North part of the Atlantic Zone. As an aside, it is worth noting Cunliffe's reliance on the distribution map as an analytical tool which is particularly apparent in this chapter. While useful for presenting large quantities of data and distilling complicated ideas, the presentation of often varied sites and information as dots on a map tends towards the general and the regional rather than the local and the particular, an issue I will return to later in this review. Having set out his current thinking on the origins of Celtic languages, much of the rest of the book follows the pattern of the first edition. There is a shift away from the Atlantic coast to continental Europe and the Mediterranean, converging on art and artefacts as well as the movement of people. These chapters sit uneasily beside the relatively new and fresh research presented in previous chapters on the Atlantic Zone making one wonder if Cunliffe should have fully revisited the entire book. This is because although data are updated, much of the discussion and interpretation in this second section is underpinned by well-trodden notions of shared Celtic traits and values, many of which originate in the writings of classical authors and from early medieval texts. As such, common themes like raiding, fighting and drinking recur throughout and Celtic society is presented as being dominated by warriors and chiefs. While in some instances these assumptions may be fair ones, it is the persistent representation of these ideas which is problematic because it serves to perpetuate universalistic notions of the Celt and Celtic, a source of so much academic contention and debate during the 1990s and early 2000s (e.g. Collis 2003; 1997; James 1999; Megaw & Megaw 1989; 1996). Cunliffe does acknowledge these debates, for example in chapter 15 'retrospect', but as with much of his writing, one gains the impression that they are embraced without much enthusiasm. Certainly, they haven't resulted in significant alterations in terms of how he presents the organisation and mores of Celtic society throughout this book.

Thinking more widely, the presentation of the regional and general versus the local and the particular (outlined above through the example of Cunliffe's use of distribution maps) neatly distils continuing scholarly friction, particularly in the study of the British Iron Age. On the one hand, academics led by Cunliffe believe in the Celts and view Iron Age society as being dominated by tribes and chiefly elites. On the other, scholars are more interested in the local and the particular, arguing that society should be examined at the level of the household (Sharpley 2010, 2). At the

heart of this dispute is the tension between the presentation of a 'universal' Iron Age with similar social structures stretching across regions and through time, versus a series of different, regional and temporarily distinctive Iron Ages. This discussion is relevant in the context of this review because many of the assumptions underpinning the universalistic, chiefly model of society stem from the traditional ideas of how Celtic society was organised that are put forward throughout *The Ancient Celts*. This book is therefore of wider significance than just a volume for the general readership. It matters. It is at the forefront of a battle in Iron Age scholarship and the presentation of different ideas to the public, a battle which through publications like this one and others, Cunliffe is currently winning hands down.

In sum, this is a fine book combining scholarly erudition and depth with popular appeal. Professor Cunliffe is one of the few academics able to achieve this fine balance. As a quote on the back of the book by the historian Ronald Hutton states, Cunliffe is 'one of our greatest living archaeologists', not least because of his ability to communicate complicated ideas engagingly to a general audience. Like the first edition, not everyone will agree with the ideas Cunliffe presents. Indeed, there are some excellent academic books and papers presenting alternative visions of the Celts and Iron Age society, but how many of these are known to and understood by the wider public? The challenge to these authors and future generations is to present their ideas in a way that is as accessible and stimulating as *The Ancient Celts*. This is no easy task.

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