WARFARE AND VIOLENCE IN THE IRON AGE OF SOUTHERN FRANCE BY MAGS MCCARTNEY

Southern France has some of the richest and most interesting Iron Age archaeology in Europe, to say nothing of a gloriously sunny climate, delectable cuisine and wonderful scenery! Despite these attractions, as the author notes, the region has not perhaps received as much attention from anglophone scholars engaged in the study of Iron Age Europe as one might expect. There are several reasons for this. Language sadly is one of them. Another is the long-time preoccupation of Iron Age archaeology with the supposed Celtic heartland and La Tène core area north of the Alps, although southern France is if anything a better claimant to be the former (Collis 2003) and has no lack of La Tène material. This perceived liminality to ‘mainstream’ Iron Age studies was compounded by the region serving as the setting for intensive cultural, economic and political interaction between many different ethnic groups and peoples in this period, including Etruscans, Gauls, Greeks, Ligurians, Phoenicians and Romans. This has certainly given its archaeology a distinctive feel, to the extent that for many years something of a binary divide existed even among French Iron Age specialists, between those who worked in the north and their southern counterparts.

Where Iron Age southern France does feature in existing Anglophone syntheses, it is often as a stepping stone in the inexorable expansion of Rome and in the spread of various innovations: base metal coinage, writing and wine production to name but three. Alternatively – and there is no small irony here – the region is cited because it fills in gaps in our evidence elsewhere: for example, by confirming the existence of the ‘Celtic’ practice of head hunting, or by providing examples of phenomena that long remained elusive in the La Tène areas north of the Alps, such as built sanctuaries and life-sized human representations. With the notable exception of Michael Dietler’s many contributions (eg 2005; 2010), too rarely have the Iron Age inhabitants of southern France been the focus of attention in their own right, or from a broader anthropological perspective, as opposed to a narrowly historical one. Now, however, this is changing, and through the work of McCartney and others, there are signs that the intriguing evidence from this region is claiming its place in debate about the nature and diversity of developments across later prehistoric Europe as a whole.

That said, the title of this book is something of a misnomer. McCartney’s focus is almost entirely on a small area of southern Provence near the Rhone delta. As Armit (2011; 2012) has noted, the evidence in Languedoc differs in a number of respects from that in Provence. West of the Rhone, we see an enduring tradition of depositing human remains on settlements (just as in Iron Age Britain), whereas the iconographic material is concentrated east of the Rhone. The distinction is not absolute, but it might indicate that neighbouring parts of the region followed different trajectories. It is fine, as McCartney does, to select one of these as a detailed case study, but these variations are not irrelevant to her aim of identifying patterns of warfare in the southern French Iron Age and the potential wider validity of her findings. As it is, questions arise as soon as one tries to put her interesting suggestions about the role of warfare as a cause of increasing socio-political complexity into a wider perspective. Less that 40km from the Rhone delta is the port of Lattes. Here was a thriving community engaged in lucrative (and sophisticated)
commercial activities throughout the entire period, apparently without serious interruption (Py 2009). McCartney’s view of conflict as the ‘normal’ state of affairs in the Iron Age in her study area is not incompatible with the more peaceful vision of society that emerges from Lattes – for example if slaves were traded, at least some of them were presumably war captives – but it would have strengthened her arguments and conclusions if she had lived up to her own title by looking at relevant evidence from the rest of southern France.

The book originated in a PhD thesis and has a structure conventional to the genre. In her introduction, McCartney explains the resurgence of interest in the role and scale of warfare in past societies. As she indicates, many archaeologists and anthropologists in the later 20th century were guilty, intentionally or otherwise, of ‘pacifying’ the past. This was certainly the case in British Iron Age studies (James 2007) – although much less so on the continent – and McCartney’s project was conceived in reaction to this trend. To adopt a more balanced approach has to be a good thing, although it remains to be seen whether the pendulum will eventually swing too far in the opposite direction and warfare will end up once again as the predominant concern. I personally hope not. Chapter 2 discusses anthropological theories about the causes and effects of conflict in non-industrial societies, while Chapters 3–4 respectively summarise the archaeological background, and the rich Greek and Roman sources relating to southern France. That this latter chapter covers some rather familiar ground is no fault of McCartney’s. The problem is rather our inappropriate use of generalisations in these sources to flesh out details of Iron Age societies in other parts of Europe, when in fact, if these applied anywhere, it was probably to southern France. The obvious example is Poseidonius’s account of Celtic headhunting, paraphrased by Strabo and Diodorus Siculus, which contains nothing that could not have come from the hinterland of Marseille. I did however find the remark that Diodorus’ account [of the distinction between Celts and Gauls] ‘appears to be corroborated by Caesar’ (p14) rather odd, since Caesar was the earlier writer.

The core of McCartney’s book (Chapters 5–8) is an innovative analysis of ten enclosed sites in the lower Rhone valley, together with the iconographic evidence for which the region is famous, and human remains from some of the sites. The settlements are examined both for direct and indirect evidence of aggression: for instance fire damage or destruction levels in the case of the former; scale or strategic placing of ramparts in the latter. These are tabulated through time and scored. McCartney also searches out indications of what she terms ‘socialisation for mistrust’ – strongly correlated with embedded warfare in the ethnographic record – by undertaking access analysis of the sites plans and measuring trends in household size and the securing of personal goods. Some of the sites are already well known (Entremont, Roquepertuse) others less so (eg Saint-Pierre, Tamaris and Teste-Nègre), but all have been fairly extensively explored. That said, the reasoning for selecting these particular sites and the extent to which they are representative of the overall settlement pattern at different periods needed to explored in much greater depth. What do other settlements tell us? The lack of a plan of Roquepertuse (see Bossinot 2004, redrawn in Armit 2012, 132) is a major handicap, as is the absence of a scale for l’Île de Martigues and Notre-Dame-du-Pitié. It is worth emphasising how small many of the sites are (0.5–1.5 ha or less). Larger settlements (6ha at most) are, with a few exceptions, found only at the end of the period and whilst dignified with the term oppidum (eg Entremont, La Cloche) are still tiny compared to many fortified sites of this period in temperate Europe. In the context of McCarthy’s wider study, the fact that new hilltop settlements were founded (St-Antonin-sur-Bayon) and existing sites refortified (La Cloche) after southern Provence came under effective Roman control in the late 120s BC perhaps merited more discussion.

Chapter 6 analyses the warrior statues and severed head representations for which Entremont and Roquepertuse are particularly famous, but also known from sites like Glanum and La Cloche. Detailed dating of the regional traditions of stone engraving and anthropomorphic statuary is still
a matter of debate, but there is now a better understanding of their broader chronological context, allowing McCartney to identify some significant changes over time: early in the period, warrior representations were overtly ritualistic; from the 3rd century BC, warriors are depicted with offensive weaponry, whilst by the 2nd century BC, they are depicted as combatants – seemingly coinciding with the growth of Roman aggression. Apart from three female heads from Entremont, the representations are all male.

Notwithstanding the frequent depiction of human heads, McCartney argues against accepting this as proof of war-related head hunting without independent evidence. In search of this, she turns to the cranial and other human remains from the sites, but the sample is too small for firm conclusions to be drawn. There does seem to be some relationship between the iconography and the nature of the human remains found over time, but convincing evidence of trauma and war trophies does not occur until right at the end of the period and then only on a handful of sites. Finally, Chapter 8 brings the different strands of information together: it appears that levels of warfare remained broadly constant in the earlier Iron Age; began to rise in the 4th to 3rd centuries BC, when we also see the emergence of iconography of expansion; and reached a peak in the 2nd century BC. The nature of warfare also changed over this period: initially internally-driven and largely cyclical in nature, it remained small-scale until around 200 BC, when widespread violence suddenly erupted. McCartney suggests that this outbreak of warfare may lie behind the subsequent increase in socio-political complexity evidence in the settlement pattern and other aspects of the archaeological record in the 2nd century BC. More generally, if archaeologists are adequately to characterise the scale and nature of warfare in the societies they study, all the available evidence must be considered together.

McCartney indicates that her thesis was submitted in 2007, but despite the lapse of five years, I only found two later references: a 2008 paper of her own and Armit (2011, without page numbers). This made me wonder to what extent the thesis has been revised for publication. Quite apart from relevant work that has appeared more recently – Armit’s book (2012) and the new edition of Py’s comprehensive survey (2012) will have come too late, but together show the dynamism of research in southern France – I feel that McCartney has missed an opportunity by not exploring how far her ideas hold over the rest of this region.

In the longer term, a willingness to publish theses, apparently with few revisions, so long after submission, may well raise issues for British Archaeological Reports. Over forty years, the archaeological community has greatly benefited from their readiness to publish PhDs (my own included) more or less as written, and nowadays very smartly. But is this sustainable commercially now that many universities are making theses available online within months of submission? How long will cash-strapped libraries or individuals be prepared to continue buying monographs, which differ very little from the original dissertation, if they can get the latter for free? I have several recent theses published as British Archaeological Reports on my shelves and find this very useful, but I suspect a younger generation may well prefer a digital copy, which is also quickly searched. Where there is still a niche for British Archaeological Reports is where authors want to publish a revised and/or expanded version of their thesis, but without the wholesale rewriting that many other publishers would expect and more quickly than is usually possible through this latter route.

McCartney’s book is well produced and generously illustrated, although some figures are a little fuzzy (eg figs 5.2, 5.3, 7.1) and a map depicting an area larger than southern Provence would have been desirable. One or two tables are a little daunting, notably Table 8.1 summarizing the evidence for warfare through time, which has seven separate elements and a complex key. Otherwise I found only a few minor errors. McCartney writes clearly and fluently and I look
forward to seeing her ideas and methodology for detecting and quantifying the incidence of conflict and violence put to the test on other bodies of evidence from the period.

References


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