

# Archaeology and patterns of trade iron age europe history essay



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In the Iron Age most European communities would have been linked together to some degree and this can be seen as a continuation of contact established during the Bronze Age (Piggott 1965: 174). Peaceful trade between these communities, for goods that were either a basic necessity or possibly just desirable, would happen for a number of reasons, none of them mutually exclusive, such as exploitation, cross-cultural interchange or mutually beneficial exchange (Woolf 1993: 211). When considering what archaeology can tell us about this trade, according to Collis (1984: 15), there is a common assumption that it divides into the three spatial patterns of long distance, inter-regional and local trade. However, this differentiation may only be a modern construct that would not have been recognised by Iron Age communities (Wells 2008: 356-8). This essay will use some of the material culture available from burials, hoards and settlements to examine each pattern in turn looking at the objects traded, how trade was organised, why and who was involved in an attempt to assess whether or not the archaeological evidence supports this largely economic model.

Before any assessment can be undertaken it is important to define the terms Trade and Iron Age as they are used in this essay. Trade is used here to describe any transaction intended to acquire goods not available in the local environment, which are either required for basic physical needs or are desirable, through purchase, barter or exchange for other goods (Wells 2008: 357). The process of goods or gift exchange was also in operation at this time and this term is used to describe the distribution of goods as a social interaction between communities aimed at increasing wealth, prestige or status (Wells 2008: 356-7). From the available evidence it is not always

possible to tell the difference between these two systems and in fact Iron Age communities may not have differentiated so the two interactions can be interpreted as forming a continuum with traded goods being passed out from centres of trade to the rural periphery via exchange (Wells 2008: 358).

The Iron Age was widespread across Central Europe by the 7th century BC and lasted until the Roman conquest in the 1st century BC. Traditionally it is divided into two phases, the Early Iron Age from 750-450BC, which is also termed Hallstatt after the type site in Austria, and the Late Iron Age from 450-50BC also known as La Tene from the type site in Switzerland (Darvill 2008: 215). This essay will use Early or Late Iron Age when referring to time periods, Hallstatt or La Tene when referring to artefact styles.

Long distance trade is the easiest to detect in the archaeological record through the identification of foreign or exotic goods (Collis 1984: 15-16). In the Early Iron Age trade was stimulated by the metal using state societies of the Mediterranean, principally Greece and Etruria, as they sought sources of the basic raw materials like tin, copper, iron and salt to fuel their growing economies (Collis 1984: 15). Apart from Baltic amber and Mediterranean coral Europe had a plentiful supply of these basic raw materials locally available so the main import was in manufactured goods like the Attic pottery, Greek amphorae and Etruscan bronze vessels found at the Vix grave on Mont Lassois in France and the Heuneburg in Germany. These demonstrate trade as opposed to a social bond but are also indicative of links between the elites of Western Europe and the Mediterranean for the supply of feasting equipment and wine (Wells 1995: 231). The presence of elaborate graves with rich assemblages of local products found in context <https://assignbuster.com/archaeology-and-patterns-of-trade-iron-age-europe-history-essay/>

with imported objects such as those found at Durrnberg in Austria which contained glass vessels from Italy, sword handles from Africa and vessels from Slovenia or grave 6 at Hohmichele on the Heuneburg, which contained silk textile from the far east, are indicative of long distance trade in prestige or luxury goods rather than social interaction (Wells 2008: 363).

Colonies, such as Marseille founded by the Phocaeans in 600BC, were established by the Mediterranean societies to open up new trading markets (Milisauskas 1978: 270) as can be evidenced by the trade in wine and luxury items up the Rhone valley to central Europe (Greene 1990: 116), although not all Mediterranean drinking gear found in central Europe came via this route. Items such as the beaker flagons found in the Vix grave may have come via alpine routes from the Etruscan controlled Po valley (Cunliffe 1999: 62). Correspondingly the Early Iron Age saw the rise of European towns like the Heuneburg and Mont Lassois, with large populations and high levels of production and trade, which acted as core centres in local areas importing foodstuffs and raw materials from rural periphery for inter-regional exchange and distributing finished goods locally (Wells 1980: 46-47). In the Late Iron Age these towns were replaced by oppida like Manching in Bavaria and Bibracte in France which fulfilled a similar role. These oppida were also used as ports of trade and may have been established to attract and increase trade rather than to restrict or control it (Woolf 1993: 211). Following the foundation of the colonies feasting and drinking artefacts from Greek and Etruscan workshops appear in graves of the European aristocracy indicating the presence of well established trading links between central Europe and the Mediterranean (Cunliffe 2010: 462). It could therefore be assumed that

that this elite aristocracy were in control of trade however there is evidence at the Heuneburg and Narbo for the presence of a merchant class who bring wine and other Mediterranean goods to the native markets and exchange them for raw materials, slaves and, as their population grew, foodstuffs (Nash 1984: 92-94). This trend continues into the Late Iron Age, when following a hiatus after Greece turns eastwards for trade in the 5th Century BC, contact with the Mediterranean is renewed in 2nd century BC, and there is evidence from Magdalensberg near Salzburg for trade being in the hands of Italian merchants with no evidence for native traders (Collis 2002: 31). Not all long distance trade was in luxury or prestige goods. The potential for interchange of rituals, ideas, technologies or even specialists should not be ignored nor should the smaller, domestic or lifestyle products like brooches and pins. It may be that the European elite in the towns and oppida acted as a core for the redistribution of these commodities in their local area or inter-regionally as the distribution of artefacts made from a variety of raw materials and involving the use of many technologies can be taken as indicating a defined social hierarchy within a settled society (Phillips 1980: 266).

Inter-regional trade, or rather at this level exchange, can be described as the movement of goods between communities that share cultural similarities (Collis 1984: 15-16). For example, in the Late Iron Age objects found in graves from France, Austria and Bohemia and ornamented in the La Tene style would seem to indicate a social link between regional elites who express their cultural similarity and identity through material culture (Wells 2008: 363). The objects exchanged may be similar in form to those produced

in the local environment and this exchange is traditionally seen as a social rather than economic event. To this end there is no merchant class involved in the transaction as it is based on family and kin relationships (Collis 1984: 15-16). Occurring more in the Early rather than the Late Iron Age it is characterized by gift exchange between the powerful members of peer societies possibly representing not only trade but also tribute, ransom, dowry payments or even wedding gifts (Wells 1995: 239). This may also represent the practice of reciprocity whereby goods were given as a social interaction between elite members of society, not in the expectation of immediate exchange, but rather as a long term investment whereby reciprocation was made by the provision of services, labour, goods or even trading treaties (Nash 1984: 93-4).

Stretching Europe slightly to include south-west Britain will allow the trade between Alet in France and Hengistbury Head to be used as a case study. The discovery of an iron anchor and chain dating from the 1st century BC at Bulbury in Dorset can be interpreted as providing evidence for maritime trade between continental Europe and Britain (Cunliffe 2010: 480).

Hengistbury Head was a designated port of trade used by the local elite to control the flow of goods both into and out of Britain whilst utilizing the foreign trade relationship to increase their advantage over their regional periphery (Nash 1984: 93). Goods such as iron from the Hengistbury area, non-ferrous metals from the Mendips and Kimmeridge shale were exchanged with Alet, via a short haul sea crossing to the Channel Islands and thence to the port of Reginca, for Mediterranean pottery, prestige finished goods and wine (Languet 1984: 73). This is evidenced by the presence of Dressel 1A

amphorae, glass and fine ware pottery from Northern Italy at Hengistbury Head and changes in the local manufacture of ceramics, bronze and iron artefacts that are indicative of inter-regional exchange of ideas and technologies (Cunliffe 1984: 8). Although this short range, cross-channel contact was probably based on a recurring requirement between the respective core communities it could also be interpreted as a core-periphery pattern of trade whereby Continental Europe is the core supplying finished goods and south-west Britain is the periphery providing raw materials in exchange (Nash 1984: 92). There is evidence from the vast amounts of Armorican pottery at Hengistbury Head that the Armoricans themselves may have lived there, at least for part of the year, and acted as continental agents liaising with the local communities for the exchange of goods (Cunliffe 2010: 479). The hoard from Llyn Fawr in Wales could provide evidence of this interaction as it contains Hallstatt C type artefacts, such as iron swords and bronze discs for harness ornamentation, that are similar to types found in Belgium and southern Germany and could have been shipped via Alet to Hengistbury Head before being exchanged locally (Cunliffe 2010: 456). Thus a case can be made for regarding Hengistbury Head as the core for its immediate environment with the local rural communities as the periphery.

Local trade is probably the least studied of all the patterns of trade as there is a traditional assumption that the mechanisms used are already well understood (Collis 1984: 15). The interaction between local communities was possibly based on reciprocity with the exchange of finished goods for services, labour or raw materials. The oppida of the late Iron Age, like

Manching and Bibracte, and the towns of the Early Iron Age, like Mont Lassois and the Heuneburg, were not just trading centres but were also manufacturing and production sites creating their own finished goods which is evidenced by graves containing bronze objects, pottery and glass beads that reflect local patterns of trade. These manufactured goods may have formed part of a core-periphery trade with smaller local communities for food and forestry products (Wells 1995: 236). Increases in rural production, which created a local self sufficiency and provided a greater surplus for trade, engendered the conditions that allowed for a large scale social organisation with elaborate hierarchies. The emergent elite in these hierarchies were able to engage in local trade for a wide range of goods which could also be used to foster a regular contact with other regional elites for exchange of commodities, technologies and ideas (James and Rigby 1997: 76-7). Although they are classified as elites it is possible that individuals acted as 'centres' for trade and the rich burials in which we find lavish prestige and luxury goods, such as the Etruscan beaked flagons found in the middle Rhine area of Europe and dated to the Late Iron Age (Cunliffe 1999: 63), indicate wealth but maybe not elite status (Collis 1984: 16). After all not all trade was in luxury or prestige goods and the presence of non-elite objects like decorative pins and brooches, such as the bronze fibulae found in the female grave at Vix (Wells 2008: 364), in a local area can be taken as representative of local trade or exchange networks. These socio-economic systems also saw elite leaders give gifts of lesser value to those lower down the hierarchy in order to retain status and power (Cunliffe 2999: 61). The spread of items like the long slashing Grundelingen swords can be explained by simple local exchange mechanisms providing examples that are then copied (Cunliffe

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2010: 449) and at Alb-Salem in Württemberg there have been found ceramics of a particular size and decoration distributed across an area that could be walked in a day (Wells 2008: 361). In the late Iron Age coin evidence appears to indicate that specialist workers, who mass produce goods and administer their own commercial aspects of trade, replace control by elites, initially in their local area but eventually along the whole commodity supply chain (Wells 1995: 240-1). This is further evidenced by the appearance of mass produced Roman wares in graves where they replace unique foreign imports and is paralleled by a diminution in the role played by elites and social networks as they are superseded by professional merchants in a globalised economic market (Wells 1995: 240-2).

The available archaeological evidence is open to ambiguous interpretation however this essay has argued that it would seem to support the spatial model of long distance, inter-regional and local patterns of trade even though this is a modern economic construct. These patterns should not be seen as being mutually exclusive but rather as strands in a complex system of exchange mechanisms that reflect social interaction between communities, that have a symbolic as well as an economic dimension whilst moving commodities, as well as ideas and technologies, bi-directionally around Europe and the Mediterranean (Renfrew 1993: 214). It should also be borne in mind that intangibles such as slaves, foodstuffs, hides and hunting dogs will leave no trace in the archaeological record even though they were subject to the same trade and exchange systems (Cunliffe 1984: 4).

However, without the benefit of written sources to enhance our understanding, what the evidence cannot prove is how the Iron Age

communities themselves regarded trade. It is a possibility that they did not differentiate by region or distance but instead regarded all trade as local and based on simple exchange systems no matter what the commodity or how far it had travelled (Wells 2008: 358). As the Iron Age came to a close, with low value coinage being adopted and Rome becoming predominant in Europe and the Mediterranean, there was a move to a globalised, impersonal, commodity market that removed the need for a differentiation in trading patterns. The emergence of standardised weights, measures and prices rendered redundant the requirement for barter and exchange systems with a professional Italian merchant class controlling trade and replacing local elites who were subsumed into the Roman provincial government process (Collis 2002: 30).