

BETWEEN EAST AND WEST:  
ARMORICA AND THE EUROPEAN BRONZE AND IRON AGES

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As one of the peripheral regions of Europe, the Armorican peninsula is often believed to have been a cultural backwater, one that was hardly ever reached by the major cultural and technological changes taking place in late prehistoric continental cultures. For people living away from the ocean, the latter is often seen as an obscure threat, an awful obstacle, a liquid wall isolating continental masses and cultures from one another. However, the ocean was always used as a passage-way, a link between peoples, and, later regions bordering the Atlantic, from the south of the Iberian Peninsula to the North Sea (Cunliffe 2001: 21–63). In this vast sea-space, the Armorican peninsula, situated at the articulation between two maritime zones — the Bay of Biscay to the south, the Irish Sea and the English Channel to the north — was a place where various cultural influences would come into contact and thrive. Far from being a dead end, it was perfectly integrated, during the various phases of its long history, in the major cultural and technological currents running along the western façade of Europe.

The Neolithic stone axes quarried and polished in the vast Sélédin (Plussulien, Côtes-d’Armor) workshops, active from 4200–2000 BC — with more than six million axes produced (Le Roux 1999) — found in southern Britain (Giot et al. 1979) and the Early Bronze Age (c.2000 BC) gold *lunulae* of Irish origin found in the Armorican peninsula, where some were imitated locally (Briard 1965: 71–3), together with the spread of megalithic funerary monuments along the Atlantic façade, are sure signs that, in the late millennia BC, men, goods and ideas circulated freely between the maritime regions of north-western Europe. The distribution maps of Rosnoën-type swords (Late Bronze Age I, 1275–1125 BC; *ibid.*, 151–73) and of swords of the “carp’s tongue” complex (Late Bronze Age III, c.950–800 BC; *ibid.*, 199–239; Brandherm et al. 2014) also clearly show that these long-distance contacts were active along the whole Atlantic façade, from southern Spain to the Netherlands and Ireland, with remarkable concentrations of finds at the mouth and along the course of the Somme, the Seine, the Loire and the Gironde, that is, of rivers leading into the heart of France (Cunliffe 2001: 50–8, fig. 7.14).

Middle and Late Bronze Age metal artefacts dredged off the coast of Kent and Sussex (Samson 2006), in south-eastern Britain, tend to show that the estuaries of the Thames and of the Rhine also played a major role in these exchanges. This is largely confirmed by the discovery of a wreck, dated to the end of the Middle Bronze Age (c.1300–1150 BC) in Langdon Bay, to the east of Dover, with most of

the broken artefacts found on the seabed, meant for smelting, being of continental origin (Needham et al. 1987: 119–24; Clark 2004). On the French coast, the gold torques of British origin dredged off Sotteville-sur-Mer (Seine-Maritime) also tend to testify to the reality of cross-Channel exchanges during the Bronze Age in the eastern part of the Channel (Samson 2006). Further west, off Devon and Cornwall, similar finds reveal maritime exchanges between western France (Normandy and Brittany) and south-western Britain, with another Late Bronze Age wreck, discovered between Prawle Point and Salcombe, in Devon, being loaded with 297 copper ingots and 27 tin ingots, together with metal artefacts (bronze axes and swords, a gold bracelet and torques) of continental origin (Muckelroy et al. 1979: 189–210). In western Brittany, a few objects of British origin and copper ingots found offshore again point to cross-Channel exchanges in the last days of the Bronze Age.

The basis of these “trade links” is still largely unclear. Armorican bronze-smiths certainly made use of local tin, gleaned as cassiterite in the river sand flats (Briard 1965: 15–20), but it is likely that, lacking copper resources for the production of bronze artefacts, they imported ore or metal from insular sources, such as the Ross Island (Killarney) (c.2400–1900 BC) or Mount Gabriel (Co. Cork) copper mines in Ireland or their Welsh equivalent at Great Orme near Llandudno (c.1600–1400 BC) (Jackson 1980; O’Brian 1994: 45–57). Whether these exchanges were part of regular cross-Channel communications between insular and continental communities in need of metal resources and whether the latter were controlled by local aristocracies, such as those developing in the Early Bronze Age on both sides of the Channel (*Civilisation des premiers tumulus armoricains* and Wessex group), are moot points.<sup>1</sup>

The fairly large number of Armorican socketed bronze axes found in southern Britain (Briard 1965: 279–80, Fig. 107; Cunliffe 2001: 287–8, Fig. 7.21) shows that cross-Channel exchanges continued during the Early Iron Age, although their exact nature remains largely unknown, as such axes, which often had a high lead content, were not functional artefacts but elements of a palaeo-coinage (Briard 1987: 37–50). Despite what Strabo tells us of British exports in the early Roman period — “It [the island] bears grain, cattle, gold, silver, and iron. These things, accordingly, are exported from the island, as also hides, and slaves, and dogs that are by nature suited to the purposes of the chase; the *Celti*, however, use both these and the native dogs for the purposes of war too” (Strabo [1923] 2006: 255, *Geography* IV.5.2) — most of these “trades” are and will remain invisible or unrecognisable.

In the early times of the Late Iron Age (5<sup>th</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC), cross-Channel exchanges appear to have lost most of their impetus, this being probably due to the

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1. The *Civilisation des premiers tumulus armoricains*, in western Brittany, and the Wessex group, in central southern England, are Early Bronze Age cultures, characterised by single inhumations with lavish grave goods, placed under large barrows.

end of the massive production of bronze artefacts that had characterised earlier times, and even more to the swift growth of Greek, Etruscan and Phoenician communities, inflecting towards the Mediterranean and Continental Europe the trade routes that had previously used the Atlantic seaways. Though a few objects certainly imported from Aquitania or the Iberian peninsula — such as the Harlyn Bay brooches, the Aust bronze statuette (Cunliffe 1978), the skull of a Barbary monkey from the Atlas mountains of Morocco found in Navan Fort (Northern Ireland) and dated 390–320 BC (Raftery 1994), or further south, the gold coin minted in Cyrenaica (322–15 BC) found on the shore at Lampaul-Ploudalmézeau (Finistère) (Bousquet 1960: 317–23) — point to repeated contacts along the Atlantic façade, they certainly do not imply major maritime exchanges. It was during the same period (352–300 BC), however, that Pytheas, the Marseilles Greek adventurer, explored the Atlantic coasts, sailing possibly as far north as Iceland, recognising on his way Ushant (*Ouxisama*), the land of the Osismi (*Ostimioi*) and the British Isles (Strabo [1923] 2006: 253–61, *Geography*, IV.5; Cunliffe 2001). But even though the tin trade from Cornwall to Gaul and the Mediterranean world is well attested by various documents (Carcopino 1957; Hawkes 1984: 211–33), nothing, in the Armorican archaeological record, shows that local resources were tapped for that long-distance trade with Mediterranean communities.<sup>2</sup>

That a form of Celtic was spoken in the Armorican peninsula in the first millennium BC is certain, as c.325 BC, Pytheas, as I have just pointed out, sailing northwards, identified *Ouxisama* (Ushant) and the territory of the *Ostimioi* (Osismi), both being perfectly recognisable Celtic names (Fig. 1). Other Celtic names, ethnonyms (*Coriosolitae*, *Riedones*, *Veneti*) and place names (*Darioritum*/Vannes, *Vorgium*/Carhaix, *Gesocribate*/Le Conquet?) are only mentioned, often in a Latinised form, after the Roman conquest, but clearly demonstrate that Gaulish was the vernacular language in the peninsula (Fleuriot 1991: 165–94). The 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century AD inscription on an Iron Age stela at Plumergat (Morbihan) shows that it was still spoken, at least in some areas, till the end of the Roman period (Bernier 1970: 669–70).

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2. The only evidence so far identified of early tin working is the Late Middle Bronze Age tin slag found at Délé-Braz in Plouarzel (Finistère), cf. Giot and Lulzac (1998).



**Fig. 1.** The peoples of Iron Age Armorica

It is, however, equally obvious that the traditional model, which had iron-sword-wielding Celts from a Central European *Urheimat* invading Gaul, Ireland and Britain and imposing their ways and their language upon the natives, is no longer tenable, as DNA studies have indeed repeatedly shown that there was no such thing as a common biologically heterogeneous Celtic population, even in reputedly Celtic areas such as Cornwall, Wales and Ireland (Leslie et al. 2015). Archaeology has similarly revealed no trace of such intrusions into native cultures — intrusions that would have shown in new forms of housing, religious or burial rites.

A close examination of the Iron Age cultures of the Armorican peninsula thus only shows that they had progressively evolved from Bronze Age identities in a multicultural Atlantic world extending from southern Spain to the British Isles, and not that they had undergone any such sea change. The reason why Armoricans came to speak Celtic is a problem that I am not going to address. It is high time that one should dissociate ethnic and linguistic facts from both the interpretation of artefacts and cultural trends. Objects and cultural elements should be referred to within a chronological framework, not in terms of ethnic developments. In fact, what is commonly called the “Celtic world” is nowhere near a homogeneous, uniform whole and should be seen as a loose mosaic of independent but interconnected communities. Their ways were largely related to their physical and economic environment and to age-old traditions evolving under outside change. The Armorican tribes are a good case in point of this, as, if one looks at their archaeology, it is clear that their daily activities, mostly agricultural, and their building techniques

have nothing idiosyncratic about them,<sup>3</sup> but were largely dependent on both their Atlantic environment and patterns of subsistence economy that had been widespread in Northern Europe since the Neolithic agricultural revolution of the 5<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. In all these aspects of material life, there is nothing one would dare call “Celtic”, and major elements of “Celtic art”, such as the highly decorated pieces of jewellery and bronze artefacts found in Champagne or in the Rhine and Moselle valleys, appear only very rarely in the West. Neither do the vast proto-urban defended sites called *oppida*, largely regarded as the central places of early tribal states, which appeared in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and multiplied in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> century from Bohemia to central France (Cunliffe et al. 1976). As some of the most telling traits of Late Iron Age developments commonly, but wrongly, associated with *la civilisation Celtique* are clearly missing in western France,<sup>4</sup> should one therefore conclude that Armorica, being geographically distant from the major centres of La Tène culture, was totally excluded from these changes and evolved along its own lines?

Pottery, mostly used for everyday preserving, cooking and eating, is among the most common site finds in Iron Age contexts. Most of it, meant for home usage, was left plain, but some good quality, locally-made wares, distributed in the western-most part of the peninsula, were carefully decorated. The earliest series, appearing in the late 6<sup>th</sup> to early 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, show a combination of lines of geometric patterns stamped on a short range of pots (Giot 1971: 82–4, and see Figs. 2–3 below). They might, of course, be thought of as the rather simplistic artistic expression of local potters, unaware of the major innovations of Late Hallstatt/Early La Tène art, were it not for the presence of similar contemporary decorative styles in northern Italy and in the Hallstatt and La Tène cultures of the Alpine zone (Schwappach 1969; see Fig. 2 below).

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3. Except for the series of underground chambers, known as *souterrains armoricains*, found in most farmsteads and agricultural settlements of the western part of the peninsula, and which could be used as underground storerooms (Giot 1990). Most are dated to the period extending from the Late Hallstatt to Middle La Tène phases.

4. *Résidences aristocratiques*, such as the one excavated at Montmartin (Oise) (Brunaux and Méniel 1997), are also present in Armorica (see, for instance, Menez and Arramond 1997).

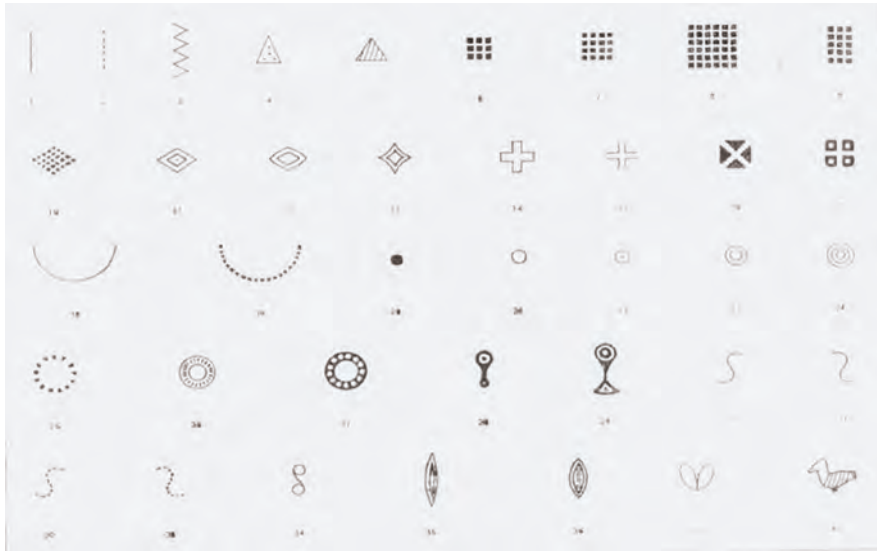


Fig. 2. Some of the motifs stamped on Late Hallstatt / Early La Tène Armorican pottery (after Schwappach 1969, figs. 7-8)

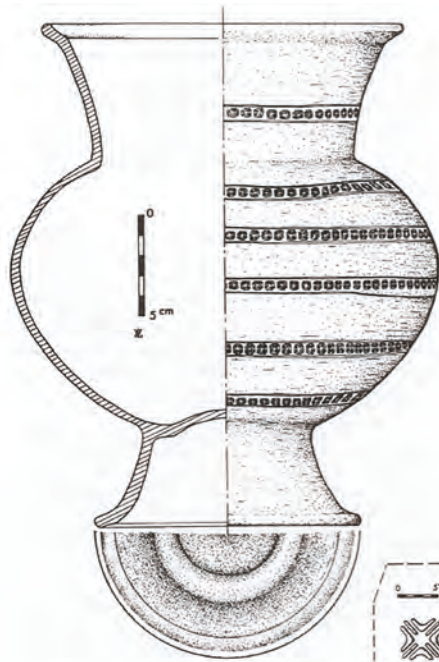


Fig. 3. Early 5<sup>th</sup> century BC cinerary urn (Plovan, Finistère) (after Le Roux 1973)

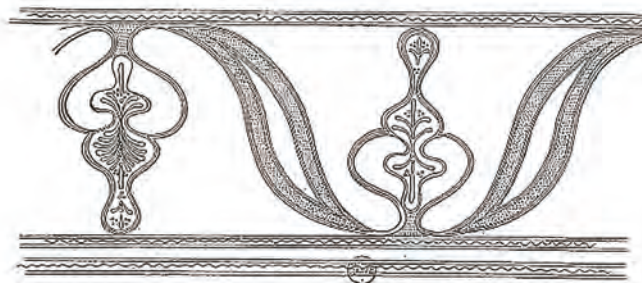
One could, obviously, imagine that such stylistic groups appeared independently in several areas, but a survey of regional pottery styles shows a thin spread of similar and slightly later wares in the in-between zones of Gaul (Gomez de Soto 1999: 1–2). A dissemination from Italy and/or Central Eastern Europe seems more likely,<sup>5</sup> with some of the motifs used, like svastikas, being favoured by western Armorican potters (Daire 2011: 41–52). However, the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Kernavest (Quiberon, Morbihan) dagger (Revelière 1894: 157–66; Villard-Le Tiec et al., 2003: 222–3) is, so far, the only metal object decorated in this style that has been found in the peninsula (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** The Kernavest (Quiberon, Morbihan) dagger (Musées de Vannes)

Other examples of such long-distance contacts may be also be found in a series of slightly later (4<sup>th</sup> century BC, mostly) high-quality pots, decorated with hand-drawn curvilinear motifs, the best-known example of which is the Saint-Pol-de-Léon (Finistère) cinerary urn (Fig. 5). Its glossy surface is essentially decorated with large palmettes, a theme common in the Early La Tène art of the Champagne and the Rhine valley, and ultimately derived from Greek and Etruscan prototypes (Du Chatellier 1897: 25).

5. This is also the case with the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC richly decorated metal helmets found at Saint-Jean-Trolimon (Finistère) and Agris (Charente), which, though evincing North Alpine and Mediterranean stylistic influences, were probably made in western Gaul (Gomez de Soto 1999: 2–3; on the Saint-Jean-Trolimon helmet, see Duval 1990).

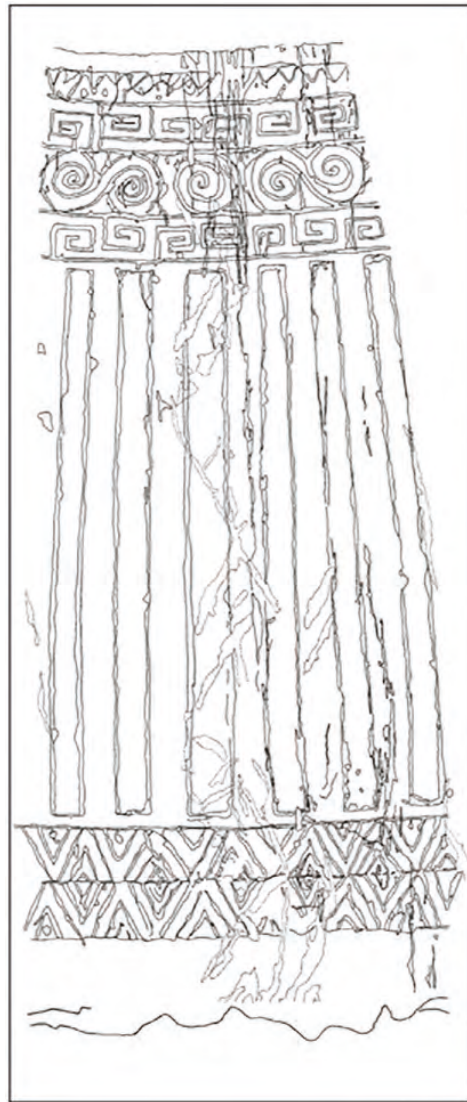


**Fig. 5.** Hand-drawn decoration of the Saint-Pol-de-Léon (Finistère) pot  
(after du Chatellier 1897)

Coming in a variety of shapes, Armorican stelae, of which more than 2,000 are known in Finistère and Morbihan, were used as grave markers in La Tène cemeteries (Daire 2005; Villard-Le Tiec 2011: 323–37). Though carefully hewn from hard granite, these monuments were generally left plain, only a dozen being decorated (surface erosion will, of course, have played havoc on them) with friezes of geometric patterns (spirals, svastikas, hooks and frets), largely similar to those stamped on contemporary potteries and probably derived from the same sources in the same time span (Daire et al. 1996: 123–56). The decoration of the Kerviguérou (Melgven, Finistère) stela (Fig. 6) is so close to that of the Ionic columns of the Metaponte (southern Italy) D temple, dated 470 BC, that a mere coincidence is very unlikely (*ibid.*, 150–1), reminding us that, in spite of distances, men, craftsmen and mercenaries, travelled widely in Europe. Scientific advances, using the strontium and oxygen isotopes present in ancient bones and teeth, have indeed shown that people travelled all over the continent and to Britain, from as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC.<sup>6</sup>

6. The “Amesbury Archer”, whose grave was discovered in Wiltshire and dated to c.2400 BC, probably originated from the Alpine zone (Fitzpatrick 2013). A young girl, aged 16 to 18, buried in Egtved (Denmark) c.1370 BC, had moved several times from the German Schwartzwald to Denmark (Frei et al. 2015).





**Fig. 6.** Decoration of the Kerviguierou (Melgven, Finistère) (Villard et al. 2003)

Iron Age Armorica was not, then, the cultural backwater it is often reputed to have been and its craftsmen were clearly in contact with distant Iron Age communities. It may of course be argued that Armorican tribes showed some backwardness in only adopting such innovations after a certain time lag, and that, besides, they were entirely passive, absorbing changes without in the least innovating themselves. A counterargument may, however, be found, among others, in the development

of La Tène *sanctuaires à armes*, best exemplified by the Tronoën, Saint-Jean-Trolimon sanctuary. Though badly excavated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the latter produced a number of iron weapons, including swords and spearheads, dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC, and fragments of iron and bronze helmets, probably originally decorated in gold leaf, high-value elite artefacts produced in the late 5<sup>th</sup> or early 4<sup>th</sup> century (Gomez de Soto 1999). Tronoën is, of course, one of many such sanctuaries where weapons were ritually “killed” before being devoted to the gods, but all are, so far, dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC (Lejars 1989: 607–30). Tronoën is, therefore, to the best of our knowledge, the earliest example of that series. In that field, at least, Armorican communities, largely integrated in the north-western Gaulish cultural zone, certainly played a major role in Late Iron Age developments, which they otherwise quickly absorbed in their own way (Giot 1973: 602–3).

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