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ROMAN IMPERIALISM: POST-COLONIAL PERSPECTIVES

edited by

Jane Webster & Nick Cooper



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email: ADM3@Leicester.ac.uk

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Contributors

- Richard Alston* Department of Classics, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX
- Simon Clarke* Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford, West Yorkshire BD7 1DP
- Nicholas J Cooper* School of Archaeological Studies, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH
- Philip de Souza* St Mary's University College, Waldegrave Road, Strawberry Hill, Twickenham TW1 4SX
- Philip Freeman* Department of Archaeology, School of Archaeology, Classics and Oriental Studies, University of Liverpool, William Hartley Building, Brownlow Street, Liverpool L69 3BX
- Richard Hingley* Historic Scotland, Longmore House, Salisbury Place, Edinburgh EH9 1SH
- Kathryn Lomas* Department of Classics, University of Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU
- David J Mattingly* School of Archaeological Studies, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH
- Jane Webster* School of Archaeological Studies, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH

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8. Ethnographic barbarity: colonial discourse and 'Celtic warrior societies'

Jane Webster

The whole race, which is now called Gallic or Galatic, is madly fond of war, high-spirited and quick to battle. ... And so when they are stirred up they assemble in their bands for battle, quite openly and without forethought, so that they are easily handled by those who desire to outwit them.

(Strabo *Geographia* 4.1.14)

[colonial discourse analysis] argues the need for the careful deconstruction of the very structures of dominant, and marginal. One of the forms which this takes is an analysis which, instead of obediently adopting a marginal place in itself, brings the margins into the centre by applying deconstructive critique to the dominant self-histories of the West.

(Connor 1989, 232)

Introduction

This paper aims to demonstrate the impact which Classical accounts of the wars of conquest fought in Northern Italy and, in particular, Gaul have had upon archaeological perceptions of Iron Age 'Celtic' societies. I will argue that two of the most common discursive statements embedded within Roman colonial discourse of the Other conjoined in the Late Republic to produce a construct which has constrained Iron Age studies ever since. The first of these discourses is that of *barbarism*, which ensured that levels of Celtic internicine warfare were exaggerated.

At the same time, much of the warfare documented by Classical writers in the Later Iron Age was not internicine conflict, but was warfare with Rome, and the threat of Rome was frequently met by increased militarization. However, a second discourse, that of the *timeless primitive*, denied the specific circumstances in which Classical accounts of Celtic warfare were produced. Together, these colonial discourses - voiced in the specific historical context of the Roman conquest and annexation of the western provinces - constructed a pan-European, Celtic warrior elite.

Iron Age archaeologists, whose approach to the study of Iron Age warfare is itself a-historical (Sharples 1991a), have yet fully to challenge this construct.¹ Sporting moustaches and an ostentatious array of weaponry, and buried with their 'chariots' after a lifetime of heroic violence and competitive drinking, this (inevitably male) warrior elite still dominates the archaeology of 'the Celts'.

The timeless primitive

I should like to begin not with the Celts, but with the concept of peoples without history.

Recent anthropological studies of the practice of ethnography have indicated that one of the more fundamental aspects of colonial discourse on

indigenous warfare has been a textual suppression of *historical context* (Fabian 1983); a denial of the changes wrought by contact and colonization, despite the fact that ethnography is itself a product of European colonial encounters. A recent reanalysis of warfare among an Amazonian people, the Yanomami, illustrates the problem of ethnographic timelessness with startling clarity. I should emphasize here that I am drawing no parallels whatsoever between the Yanomami and any Celtic people: all I wish to take from the Yanomami example is its illustration of the way in which due attention to historical context can create a radically different reading of apparently innate aggression.

The Yanomami of southern Venezuela were the subject of one of the most widely read texts in the history of anthropology: Napoleon Chagnon's *Yanomamo: The Fierce People* (1968). Chagnon famously portrayed Yanomami warfare as the normal state of existence for a tribal people whom Chagnon argued had been little influenced by contact with external populations; a life of endless warfare, fuelled by sexual competition, status rivalry, and revenge.

A recent re-analysis of the Yanomami case by Ferguson (1992) affords a strong critique of this portrayal of innate aggression. Ferguson stresses that during the period described in Chagnon's monographs (1964-72) the Yanomami were undergoing accelerated change stimulated by increased Western contact, and the mode of extreme conflict which Chagnon depicted reflected a specific set of circumstances. Ferguson argues that the aggression documented by Chagnon resulted in part from antagonism over access to, and control over, trade in technologically superior Western manufactured goods. These goods were mostly disseminated by missions. Between 1960 and 1972, the Catholic mission in Chagnon's field area gave away a huge quantity of manufactures: 3,850 machetes, 620 axes, 2,850 cooking pots and 759,000 fishhooks. Chagnon himself handed out gifts of similar items to locals who facilitated his fieldwork. The tensions associated with down-the-line distribution of these much wanted goods led, on Ferguson's reading, to a pervasive reorganization of Yanomami society and culture, so that for a short period life became oriented toward violence. This conflict was at its height at the time of Chagnon's fieldwork.

The points I wish to draw from Ferguson are twofold. Firstly, Chagnon was not 'wrong' to present the Yanomami as locked into a culture of violence. But he ignored the fact that this violence had a specific historic context; one in which he, and other Western observers were implicated. Instead, he lifted the Yanomami out of history, presenting the violence of those few years synchronically, and turning the Yanomami into 'the fierce people' innately and for ever.

My second point relates to the active choices of the Yanomami themselves. Ferguson argues that, as has often been the case when expanding states have interacted with a 'tribal zone', interaction with Western agents and other indigenous polities led to increased internicine aggression among the Yanomami, and ultimately to a pervasive social reorganization. However, there is no suggestion that the Yanomami were simply victims of these circumstances. On the contrary, Ferguson (1992) undertook a reanalysis of Yanomami warfare in part to illustrate the pragmatic responses which the

Yanomami made to their changing circumstances. Rosaldo (1980) makes a similar point in his study of the complex interrelationship between colonial contact and changes in the practice of headhunting among the Ilongot of North Luzon (Philippines), from 1883-1974. Rosaldo argues that although American colonial policies influenced patterns of feuding, the motivation for and conduct of these disputes were themselves rooted in much older Ilongot feuding patterns and histories of feuding (1980, 274-5). Rosaldo's point is that when colonial contact is viewed historically, it becomes possible to see that events which it would be easy to interpret as beyond local control, are in fact mediated through social processes and cultural forms in a local setting.

There are lessons here, in my opinion, for Iron Age European archaeology, which continues to be dominated by a centre-periphery paradigm (papers in Rowlands *et al* 1987; Champion (ed) 1989). The inadequacies of this paradigm with regard to the recognition of the active voice of the 'peripheral' peoples surrounding the Mediterranean 'core' was recognized even as the paradigm was being employed (cf Champion 1989, 9-13). But at the same time, recent attempts to stress the active choices made by Iron Age peoples in their trading relationship with Rome (eg Fitzpatrick 1989; Woolf 1992) perhaps pay too little attention to the concept of the structured growth of inequality which underlies World Systems theory and its centre-periphery manifestation (Wallerstein 1974; Champion 1989, 5), and which can only with difficulty be ignored in the analysis of the relationship between Rome and the north-western peoples eventually incorporated into the Roman Empire. The balance achieved by Ferguson (1992), Rosaldo (1980), and other post-colonial anthropologists is instructive here. As anthropological study of contact has shifted from synchronic analysis to a renewed interest in historical process, and as it is increasingly recognized that so-called 'marginal' peoples make their own histories, it is at the same time acknowledged that this occurs in circumstances which are not ultimately of those peoples' own choosing. This point must be acknowledged if indigenous histories, and indigenous voices, are to be heard.

Warfare and the ethnographic present

Ferguson's (1992) account of the Yanomami is one of several recent studies to argue that native warfare has been accepted as an indigenous expression of 'warlike' peoples, because it has most often been examined a-historically, within a fallacious ethnographic present which assumes the existence of pristine precontact cultures, with no knowledge of the outside world. The idea of pristine societies, without history and therefore timeless, was of course central to structural anthropology, but the close relationship between this notion and western colonialism has only been explored in the last ten years, especially by Fabian (1983), and Rosaldo (1980). Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983) provides a detailed critique of the anthropological denial of coeval time. He shows that, by using a variety of devices of sequencing and distance, conquered populations are placed in a different time from that of the colonial ethnographers who describe them. Rosaldo (1980), in his work on headhunting among the Ilongot of the Philippines, has similarly stressed that anthropology is implicated in the reduction of the colonized to the status of people without history.

My argument in the remainder of this paper will be that Classical ethnographers, writing in a colonial context, reduced Celtic peoples to a similar status: the innately aggressive warrior society. Iron Age studies subsequently have done little to redress this position.

Celtic warrior societies: out of time?

Love of warfare is commonly depicted as a quintessential Celtic characteristic (Merriman 1987), and the assumption that endemic warfare was an innate feature of Iron Age life continues to inform influential accounts of Celtic society (see eg Cunliffe 1991 and 1995 on Iron Age Britain). For Ritchie and Ritchie (1995), the archaeological and literary evidence for Celtic warriors can still be

evoked so vividly that the popular notion of the Celtic barbarian is second only to that of his Hunnic or Viking successor as the scourge of Classical or later Christian civilisation.

(Ritchie and Ritchie 1995, 38)

Yet, as both Sharples (1991a) and Collis (1994a, 1994b) have pointed out, the *archaeological* evidence for warrior societies (principally weapons, fortifications, and skeletal evidence of physical injury) is in fact ambiguous. ‘Warrior’ interpretations placed upon material culture are heavily text-dependent,² and Ritchie and Ritchie’s comment highlights the important role which textual sources play in the archaeology of Celtic warriors. It also illustrates the assumptions of pan-Celtic, timeless homogeneity which underpin the use of such sources.³

Cunliffe (1991, 496) has created a ‘model of the archaic Celtic battle’. Warfare, in this model, took the form of a raid:

Raids could be on an individual level against a specific settlement or group of settlements, they could be intertribal or they could range wider, as did the Celtic war bands who ... attacked the Roman sphere south of the Apennines in the fourth and third centuries. Whatever the scale, the aim was the same - the gaining of plunder and prowess. ... raids against property would have led to attacks on farmsteads and hillforts, the circumstances dictating the progress. In more general conflict involving opposing forces in the open, a certain standard procedure can be discerned ... the conflict was opened with the warrior heroes from each side driving their chariots along the enemy’s front ranks hurling abuse and challenges. ... Then the field would clear so that individual contests between champions could begin. Once this stage was completed, either the result would be clear in which case the proceedings were at an end, or a general melee might break out...

(Cunliffe 1991, 496)

I should like to offer two comments on this model. First, Cunliffe conflates Classical accounts of ‘Celtic’ wars which took place in northern Italy, France, and Britain over the course of several centuries, to produce a pastiche of timeless, pan-Celtic, largely internicine aggression. Second, Cunliffe does not address the fact that the majority of surviving Classical writing on Celtic warfare (from which this pastiche is composed) is the literature of the contact with and subsequent colonization of Celtic peoples. As discussed more fully below, the body of writing on Celtic warfare was largely produced under the Late Republic and Early Empire, much of it in

the period bracketing the Roman annexation of the southern Provincia (c 120 BC) and Caesar's conquest of non-Mediterranean Gaul (58-50 BC).

The literature of Celtic warfare is historically contingent. It is the literature of Roman imperialism and territorial aggression. Surprisingly, this contingency has been little addressed by those archaeologists who, like Cunliffe, have drawn upon such accounts to formulate pan-Celtic 'aggressive' characteristics.

Passive warriors?

Taking its lead from the Classical sources, the archaeology of the Late Iron Age north-west often appears content to perpetuate the notion of innately aggressive Celtic warrior societies. This is true also of centre-periphery analyses which have attempted to context changing levels of Celtic warfare historically, in the relationship between the expanding Roman Empire and Iron Age western Europe, and above all in the demands of Mediterranean markets. Nash (1976, 1978a 1978b, 1985, 1987), for example, produced a series of influential papers arguing for a social revolution in Late Iron Age central France, stimulated by exchange with the Roman sphere. Nash argued that Roman expansion in the Later Republican period had a profound effect on Gaul. Prior to this period, migration and mercenary service had been important means by which the Celts of Gaul gained status and booty. Rome, however, did not require mercenaries, and when status could no longer be won by these means, internicine fighting increased. This warfare provided an opportunity for militarily successful nobles to increase their status and authority, thereby creating a situation in which a small number of families could create an oligarchy. Nash argues that Roman demand for slaves to work on Italian latifundia was a crucial spur to the increase in Celtic warfare, in that raiding produced captives who could be sold to Rome as slaves. Foreign goods, used in competitive gift exchange, further stimulated warfare. The increase in warfare, coupled with these new trade opportunities with the Roman sphere, stimulated wealth accumulation and a growth of coercive power, invested in a limited number of successful groups increasingly able to control large-scale territories from urbanising central foci (Nash's early 'states').

As Fitzpatrick (1989) has pointed out, however, both archaeological and Classical literary evidence for the most important ingredient in this model - cash-crop slavery in Gaul - is in fact slight.⁴ Nash's arguments for archaic states in Gaul have been forcefully questioned in recent years (Ralston 1988, Woolf 1992), and it is not my intention to rehearse these critiques here. I simply wish to remark that Nash's contention that

as a by-product of their socially endemic warfare, the Gauls were able to provide a supply of captives [for Rome]

(Nash 1978a, 459, emphasis mine)

derives, like that of Cunliffe,⁵ from a Classical portrait of endemic warfare and innate aggression which was largely created at the moment of Roman territorial expansion in the north west, and the peak of Rome's clashes with Celtic peoples.⁶ The historical contingency of this portrait is not acknowledged. At the same time, the warrior societies envisaged by Nash are

ultimately reduceable to passive warriors - peripheral victims of the demands of a central market, and a global territorial trajectory, beyond their control. Their histories are a by-product of the birth of the Roman Empire.

How to pass beyond the perjorative notion of the Celtic periphery to understand the active lives of peoples (both colonized and colonizer, Celtic and Roman) at the *intersections* of global and local Iron Age histories? That is the challenge which faces later Iron Age archaeology. With reference to the arguments rehearsed above, that the aggressive character of Celtic society was both innate and further stimulated by contact with Rome, we may at least begin to question the centrist perspective (both Classical and contemporary) by recognising that much of what we accept as literary evidence for Celtic warfare can be deconstructed as colonial discourse.

The aim of the remainder of this paper is to resituate Classical discourse on Celtic warfare in its historical context, and to deconstruct it as the literature of colonialism. It is necessary to begin by considering a Classical discourse whose origins lay much earlier than the Republican period, but which shaped subsequent writing on the Celts. This is the discourse of barbarism.

The discourse of barbarism

The concept of the culturally Other has been one of the most influential ideas in Western thought. As Hall (1989) has documented, this Other first emerged in Greek thinking at the time of the Persian Wars (500-479 BC). As a result of the struggle against Persian imperialism, Greek ethnic self-consciousness and xenophobia were radically heightened (Hall 1989, 62). The Other arose as an antithesis, providing a means for Greeks to pursue a self-identity at a time of threat. The Other was the anti-Greek, the other-than-us, the *barbarian* (see also Hartog 1988). Aeschylus' *Persae* (472 BC) provides the earliest demonstration of the civilized (Greek) : barbarian (anti-Greek) polarity informing the 'discourse of barbarism'⁷ which first emerged in Athenian tragedy. For Aeschylus, two of the principal flaws in the barbarian (ie Persian) psychology were hierarchalism (the antithesis of Greek democratic principles), and unrestrained emotionalism (the antithesis of the Greek virtue of *sophrosyne* (discipline or restraint)).

The 'discourse of barbarism' harnessed a range of literary themes and motifs which have been of lasting influence. For example, the Greek portrait of Asiatic peoples as effeminate, despotic, and cruel had a fundamental impact on the development of Orientalism (Hall 1989, 99-100; Said 1978, 56-7). As Ascherson has eloquently stated:

'Civilisation' and 'barbarism' were twins gestated and born in the Greek but above all in the Athenian imagination. They in turn gave birth to a ruthless mental dynasty which still holds invisible power over the Western mind. The Roman and Byzantine Empires sanctified their own imperial struggles as the defence of 'civilised' order against 'barbaric' primitivism. So did the Holy Roman Empire and the colonial expansions of Spain, Portugal, Holland, France, Italy, Germany and Britain.

(Ascherson 1995, 50)⁸

The Greek discourse of barbarism was, as Ascherson suggests, also harnessed by Rome. Late Republican Rome, in particular, took the Greek

discourse of the barbarian and turned it into something specifically imperial - a discourse which justified territorial expansion. Graeco-Roman writing on the barbarian at the time of Roman expansion in the west drew repeated attention to barbarian (ie 'Celtic') savagery; an inversion, of course, of the Classical virtue of *sophrosyne* (restraint), mentioned above (cf Hall 1989, 126). For Republican Rome, at the height of its westward expansion, barbarian savagery became a key statement in a specifically *colonial* discourse.⁹

Celtic warriors and colonial barbarian discourse

Hall (1989, 167) may over-exaggerate somewhat when she declares that prior to the second century BC the Greeks were 'astoundingly ignorant' regarding the Celts, but with reference to informed ethnographic data, this statement is largely accurate (cf Rankin 1987). As discussed above, it was not until the First Transalpine War (125-121 BC) that significant quantities of ethnographic data were generated on Celtic peoples.

By that date, the western Celts had already been mythologized as volatile and ferocious peoples. A long history of troubled interaction with the Keltoi/Galli who had settled in the Po Valley from the fourth century BC, and had invaded Anatolia as a by-product of incursions into Greece in the third century BC, had fostered fear and prejudice among both Greeks and Romans. By the second century BC, the combination of these fears with the wholesale extension of the barbarian *logos* described above to 'Celtic' north-western Europe, had given the peoples of this area a strong aura of violence and instability. As the Roman Empire expanded north-westwards, this aura was readily mobilized to justify Roman territorial expansion, as will be discussed below with reference to the wars in Transalpine Gaul.

However, it should first be noted that with the exception of Polybius' *Histories*,¹⁰ the principal surviving accounts of Rome's Cisalpine wars, and of the *Galatae* of Asia Minor, are to be found in histories of the rise of Rome which were penned under the Late Republic and Early Empire: that is, at the time of Rome's major westward expansion. These texts include Diodorus' *Bibliotheca* (circulated in the early Augustan period), which covered the *dies ater* and the third-century Celtic incursions into Greece, and Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*. The latter may serve as an example of some of the considerations which are raised by these histories of early Roman and Celtic contact which were written in a later colonial context.

Livy described the long history of wars against the Cisalpine Celts, from the sack of Rome in 390 BC to the second century. His account of the death of the consul Postumius at the hands of the Cisalpine Boii in 216 BC is an excellent example of the barbarity of the Celts:

Spoils taken from his body and the severed head of the general were carried in triumph by the Boians to the temple which is most revered in their land. Then after cleaning the head they adorned the skull with gold, according to their custom. And it served them as a sacred vessel from which to pour libations at festivals and at the same time as a drinking cup for the priests and the keepers of the temple.

(Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* 23.24.11)

This account of events in 216 BC was compiled at some point between c 36 BC - AD 4 (ie, in the aftermath of the annexation of non-Mediterranean

Gaul). It does not appear in Livy's main source (Polybius) and probably owes a debt to the accounts of Celtic headhunting which were popularized by copyists of Posidonius (eg Diodorus *Bibliotheca* 5.29.4; Strabo *Geographia* 4.4.5), who in *c* 100 BC, some twenty years after the annexation of Southern Gaul, had reported seeing heads nailed to doorways in the Marseille area. It is impossible to determine whether Livy's account has a basis in fact, or has been elaborated in terms which reflect late-first-century BC discourse on the Celts of Gaul. Posidonius' extremely influential ethnography of the Celto-Ligurians of the Marseille littoral was itself part of an historical work. Posidonius' (now largely lost) *Histories* took up the narrative thread of the rise of Rome where Polybius had left off, and his Celto Ligurian ethnography almost certainly occurred as part of his documentation of the First Transalpine War in Gaul (125-121 BC). This account, too, therefore, was contexted in Roman territorial expansion.

Caesar on Gaul

The same is of course true for Julius Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*, an account of the Second Transalpine War (58-50 BC). Both in the Republican period and subsequently, this has been perhaps the most influential Classical account of the Celts of Gaul. As is unsurprising for an account of conquest and pacification, Caesar is our principal source of information on Celtic warfare tactics.¹¹ But here I wish to focus on Caesar's references to *innate* aggression among the western barbarians, and the volatile nature of the Gauls.¹²

Caesar opens his account by suggesting that the Helvetii - whose movement from Switzerland to western France set in motion the chain of events which culminated in the Gallic War - emigrated because their Swiss homeland was hemmed in by natural barriers:

These obstacles restricted their movement and made it more difficult to attack their neighbours; and as they are a warlike people they greatly resented this restraint. Considering their large population, military prestige, and reputation for bravery, they felt that their territory ... was unduly small.

(Caesar *De Bello Gallico* 1.2)

In this way, the downfall of the Helvetii is suggested to result from innate aggressive tendencies. Caesar fails to mention here that years of territorial pressure exerted by the Germani had reduced the lands of the Helvetii considerably.

Caesar's main account of Gallic customs takes the form of an ethnographic digression in Book 6 of *De Bello Gallico*, which opens with the comment that:

In Gaul, not only every tribe, canton, and subdivision of a canton, but almost every family, is divided into rival factions. At the head of these factions are the men who are regarded by their followers as having particularly great prestige, and these have the final say on all questions that come up for judgement and in all discussions of policy. ... The same principle holds good in intertribal politics: all the tribes are grouped into two factions.

(Caesar *De Bello Gallico* 6.11)

Having set out this recipe for inter-factional conflict, Caesar proceeds to describe the inter-tribal fighting between two leading tribes, the Aedui and

the Sequani (70-65 BC), which precipitated the Sequani's alliance with the German Ariovistus. This alliance upset the balance of power and in 61 BC led the Aedui to ask for Caesar's 'intervention' in Gaul. Again, it is Caesar's thesis that innate Gallic aggression (rather than Roman territorial aggression) was the key causational factor in Roman intervention. The subsequent Roman conquest of Gaul is also depicted as bringing an end to volatile barbarian disputes:

When [the Gallic *equites*] services are required in some war - and before Caesar's arrival in the country the Gallic states used to fight offensive or defensive wars almost every year - these all take to the field, surrounded by their servants and retainers, of whom each [of the *equites*] has a greater or smaller number according to birth and fortune. The possession of such a following is the only criterion of position and power that they recognize.

(Caesar *De Bello Gallico* 6.15)

At the time Caesar was writing, the social organization of Gallic warfare was almost certainly being transformed as a response to the Roman invasion. This transformation would necessarily have involved increased militarization against Rome, and the threat posed by the expanding Roman state may also have stimulated increased internicine aggression among tribal and familial factions in Gaul. But by suggesting that these emergent cycles of violence were the result of an innate, and therefore timeless, aggressive tendency, Caesar sidesteps the fact that the majority of the acts of Gallic violence described in *De Bello Gallico* are contexted in Roman imperial aggression: not 'Gallic warfare' but war with Rome. The resultant elision between innate internicine Gallic warfare and Gallic war against Rome has created a confusion which remains with us today.

As I have argued above, Late Republican and Early Imperial portraits of innate Celtic aggression have informed a number of influential studies of Iron Age warfare, both in Gaul and beyond. Ultimately, however, it is not Caesar's imperialist agenda, but our own complicity in the concept of the timeless Celtic barbarian, which allows archaeologists to ignore the historical context in which this body of literature was produced. Reviewing the evidence for what he called the 'aggressive nature' of British Iron Age communities, Cunliffe (1991) repeats the often-cited comment by Strabo (*Geographia* 4.1.14) that the entire Gallic race is war mad. Strabo, an Asiatic Greek born in 64/3 BC, compiled *Geographia* between 9 BC and AD 19. Having never travelled further west than Tuscany (Duval 1971, 324), he was not a first-hand authority on Gaul, and drew his information from a variety of sources, but particularly from Posidonius' account of the Celto-Ligurians (c 100 BC). Strabo also made use of Artemidorus' *Geographia* (c 100 BC) Timagenes' now lost history of Gaul (written after 55 BC) and Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* (58-50 BC). This second-hand description was therefore compiled some fifty years after the conquest of non-Mediterranean Gaul, and relied heavily on texts dating to the Roman annexation of the *Provincia*. For Cunliffe, however, Strabo's comment on the Gallic fondness for warfare is literally outside of time; it has a pan-Celtic, and therefore *pre-Conquest*, applicability, extending even to Britain.

This generalized picture of the Celt is one repeated many times by other Classical writers and there is no reason to suppose that the British tribes were in any way different.

(Cunliffe 1991, 488)

It has been my contention above that there are a number of grounds on which an assumption of this sort not only can, but should, be questioned. The thinking which underpins archaeological acceptance of 'Celtic' as a by-word for 'warrior' is little removed from that which, as Whitehead (1990) has argued in his study of post-Columban Carib warfare, enabled the Spanish to categorize 'the Caribs' as a bloodthirsty and cruel people. Whitehead has shown that the Spanish used the term *caribe* as a political category, not just a cultural term, for those Amerindian groups who resisted conquest most fiercely. As a result, all Caribs were regarded as aggressive, despite the fact that only some Carib groups were persistently warlike, and the origin and purpose of warfare among the more militant groups itself varied considerably (1990, 147). Whitehead has persuasively argued that 'Carib warfare' - in the sense that a single causal explanation can be found for it - is an illusory phenomenon. The same may surely be argued for the Celts.

Whitehead (1990) was able to draw on extensive unpublished documentary archives to counterbalance the shortcomings of the more readily available sources on which the popular portrait of the Caribs depends. Iron Age archaeologists do not have this option, but I hope that I have been able to show that we may make some progress by resituating the literature which is available to us in its proper historical context. At the same time, archaeological evidence is slowly being used to challenge the literary portrait of the warrior Celt. This is particularly the case in Britain, where it is now widely accepted that much of the archaeological evidence for Iron Age 'warriors' is open to multiple interpretations (eg Collis 1994a and 1994b). In this context, hillforts - long regarded as the most obvious physical manifestation of Celtic warfare - are now viewed as having symbolic rather than simply defensive functions (see eg Bowden and McComish 1987).

Conclusion

In this paper, it has not, of course, been my intention to imply that the Iron Age Celts *never* went to war with each other, or acted aggressively towards external peoples. Sharples (1991a) has emphasized that warfare is on some level an endemic feature of virtually all societies, and the Iron Age is unlikely to have been an exception.¹³ All that I have sought to illustrate here is another of Sharples' contentions; that warfare, and ethnographies of warfare, are historically contingent. The archaeological arguments that the aggressive nature of Celtic society was both innate and further stimulated by contact with Rome reflect our refusal to come to terms with the specific historical circumstances in which much of the literary evidence for 'Celtic warfare' was produced. The literature of Celtic warrior society is the literature of Roman territorial ambition, aggression, and conquest, which has far more to say regarding Graeco-Roman attitudes to Celtic peoples, and Rome's need to justify territorial expansion, than it does regarding Celtic warfare. Iron Age archaeology, finally, which has drawn so heavily on Classical literature

without fully acknowledging that this body of literature is historically contingent, is itself implicated in the perpetuation of both the construct of Celtic warrior societies, and the dominant self-history of the Roman centre.

Footnotes

- 1 On the continuing failure of Iron Age archaeology to address the dominance of the 'warrior elite', see also Collis 1994a, 138-140; 1994b 32-3.
- 2 Collis 1994a, 139 points out that most of the British Iron Age 'warrior burials' appear from their contexts to be the graves of rich farmers. He advocates the use of the term 'burials with weapons'.
- 3 On the heavy dependence on Classical sources in the archaeology of many aspects of Celtic society, see Champion 1985 and Webster 1992. On pan-Celtic social homogeneity, and the assumptions of timeless and unchanging Celtic society on which this notion is based, see Fitzpatrick 1989 and 1996.
- 4 The most important literary references are Cicero *Pro Quinctio* VI, 2; Diodorus 5.26; Strabo 5.1.8.
- 5 The influence of Nash's centre-periphery model, with its supposition of innate Celtic aggression, can be seen in Cunliffe 1988, and also in his recent comments on the relationship between endemic aggression and the slave trade in the British Isles, c 120-60 BC, in Cunliffe 1995, 97.
- 6 This process is seen even more clearly in Nash 1985, 67 where similar attempts to link the rise of the Early La Tene 'warrior societies' of the Rhineland, Seine Basin, and Central Europe with slave raiding to feed Mediterranean markets is predicated on a concept of perpetually warring Belgic and Germanic warriors drawn from Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* (eg 1.1.4; 6.21.3).
- 7 Hall 1989, 2 defines the discourse of barbarism as

a complex system of signifiers, denoting the ethnically, psychologically, and politically other: terms, themes, actions, and images.
- 8 Ascherson is arguing that the Greek discourse of barbarism can still be seen at work in Russian historical thought on the steppe nomads and non-Slav cultures of the Black Sea encountered by the Rus and then by the medieval Russian state (1995, 45).
- 9 Hulme 1992, who documents the role of the trope of barbarian savagery in sixteenth-century Spanish Latin America (where it was employed to demonstrate the unsuitability of the conquered to rule themselves), defines colonial discourse as:

an ensemble of linguistically-based practices unified by their common deployment in the management of colonial relationships

(Hulme 1992, 2)
- 10 Polybius was born c 200 BC and died c 118 BC.
- 11 See for example his account of British chariot warfare (*De Bello Gallico* 4.35), and of *muris gallicis* rampart technology (*ibid* 7.23).
- 12 Despite dividing the population of Gaul into *Belgae*, *Aquitani*, and *Celti*, (1.1) Caesar proceeds to use the term *Galli* (the Roman term for the *Celti*) indiscriminately throughout *De Bello Gallico*. Where population distinctions can be clearly made, I note them here.

Otherwise, I have replicated Caesar's use of *Galli*, rather than imposing the geographically restricted *Celti* on the whole of Gaul.

- 13 Sharples (1991b) develops a persuasive model for changing patterns of warfare in the Iron Age of Wessex, proposing a distinction between the Early and Middle Iron Ages, when warfare was primarily between communities for control over land, and the Later Iron Age when the elite-centred nature of competition made hillforts redundant.

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