Dossier
Presentation
New perspectives in Celtic Studies

New perspectives in Celtic Studies: where shall we go from now on?

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Abstract: In the last twenty years, there have been large advances in Celtic Studies — be it in Linguistics, Comparative Literature, Media, History, Politics, or Archaeology. These were not only due to new theoretical approaches and further development of interdisciplinary debate, but above all to new discoveries and innovative methods of analysis. The models for a so-called 'Celtic World' or a 'Celtic Society' have been thoroughly questioned and scholars acknowledge the importance of different local and regional developments. Very few now accept that medieval societies in Ireland and the Celtic-speaking parts of Britain preserve unchanged examples of so-called 'archaism'. Societies are understood to be dynamic and are viewed in their own terms. Large regional variability is evident, particularly in cross-comparative analyses of Irish and Welsh medieval laws, vernacular literature and archaeology. Drawing from such a debate, we propose that the terms 'Celt' and 'Celtic' are changing concepts. In our perspective, the area of 'Celtic Studies' is better defined by the notions of interconnectivity and mobility.

Keywords: Celtic Studies; Medieval societies; Archaism; Interconnectivity and mobility.

Novas perspectivas em estudos célticos: para onde vamos a partir de agora?

Resumo: Nos últimos vinte anos, houve grandes avanços nos Estudos Celtas — seja em Linguística, Literatura Comparada, Mídia, História, Política ou Arqueologia. Essas mudanças não se devem apenas a novas abordagens teóricas e ao desenvolvimento do debate interdisciplinar, mas, sobretudo, a novas descobertas e métodos inovadores de análise. Os modelos para um chamado "Mundo Celta" ou uma "Sociedade Celta" foram minuciosamente questionados e os estudiosos reconhecem a importância de diferentes desenvolvimentos locais e regionais. Hoje, poucos aceitam que as sociedades medievais na Irlanda e nas partes de língua celta da Grã-Bretanha preservam exemplos inalterados do chamado "arcaísmo". Entende-se que as sociedades são dinâmicas e são vistas em seus próprios termos. A grande variabilidade regional é evidente, particularmente em análises comparativas cruzadas de leis medievais irlandesas e galesas, literatura vernacular e arqueologia. Com base em tal debate, propomos que os termos "celta" e "céltico" são conceitos em transformação. Em nossa perspectiva, a área de "Estudos Célticos" é melhor definida pelas noções de interconectividade e mobilidade.

Palavras-chave: Estudos celtas; Sociedades medievais; Arcaísmo; Interconectividade e mobilidade.

I n 2000, Hale and Payton suggested a new agenda for Celtic Studies, urging scholars to go beyond the focus on an essentialist (and homogeneous) view of Celtic ethnicity and culture in order to face the issues of 'exploitation, appropriation, representation, and authenticity' (Hale and Payton, 2000, p. 12). These are not questions just for those who work on modern Celtic culture and languages. As a matter of fact, such issues are fundamental for any social scientist working on past societies, including those interested in Celtic and Iron Age Studies. It is important for scholars working within the disciplines that make up Celtic Studies to draw more broadly from the research questions and insights from cognate fields. This will both enrich Celtic Studies (without simplifying it) and bring it into dialogue with related disciplines, creating exciting trans-disciplinary discourses. At the same time, by resisting homogeneity and essentialism, the diversity within the field will be recognised and supported.

Interconnectivity and mobility are two of the main principles that one can use to define Celtic Studies nowadays and to drive forward agendas that align it more with these other disciplines. Interconnectivity emphasises relationships in time, in space, in approaches and within research disciplines that can lead to a multifaceted field. The latter throws a light on population diasporas, trade and exchange, as well as on the constant changes that created what today is considered as 'Celtic culture(s)'. These two concepts are as relevant for ancient history and archaeology as they are for modern ideas of 'Celticity'. They have a complex origin. The core of the argument concerning the so-called 'Celtic culture' lies in a highly debated Celtic ethnogenesis. Since the sixteenth century, it has guided the search for the ancient Celts, the definition and apprehension of the family of Celtic languages (as part of the Indo-European languages), of their material vestiges, as well as of their heritage, reimaginings and appropriations throughout time. Moreover, the search for the ancient Celts has also led to one for the Insular Celts of Ireland and Britain. For example, in an important study, Mark Williams has demonstrated that the way in which the Irish Celtic past came to be perceived in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland (as well as further afield) was deeply influenced by romantic nationalisms that had an impact on the emerging scholarly fields of Literature, Language, Archaeology and History (Williams, 2016). This is what can make Celtic Studies so fascinating and complex: there is a constant interplay between academic discourses and appropriations within popular culture. How these two relate with each other is still a matter for nuanced debate.

As a multidisciplinary field, Celtic Studies has been an area of dispute since its beginnings. Nationalisms, imperialisms, and the large variability of local identities from Iron Age to the present day have produced a large array of images of the Celtic, what it means and how these meanings change. In Britain, the term Celt has been challenged and considered inappropriate, particularly in archaeology (*e.g.* Collis, 1997, 2003; James, 1998, 1999). 'Celtoscepticism' (cf. Sims-Williams, 1998; Karl, 2004b) has certainly opened up new frontiers of contest

concerning the 'Celtic past', as well as academic practice and scholarly traditions (be it in History, Archaeology, or Language Studies). Evading the stereotypes of barbarity and mysticism, the lures of Celticity and Celticism, 'Celtosceptics' dispute the existence of such a past and the actual value of employing 'Celtic' terminology. In archaeology, the debate has served to generate new outlines for Iron Age Studies (cf. Karl, 2016) and has deconstructed traditional models of the so-called 'Celtic World'. Today, no one still believes in the old invasionist theories. Moreover, the problems associated with the term 'Celtic' are widely known, and the 'Atlantic Paradigm' (cf. Cunliffe 2001; Cunliffe and Koch 2010; Koch and Cunliffe 2013, 2015; Moore and Armada, 2015) is stronger than ever, just to mention a few major changes in the field. The recent finds of Iron Age burials and settlements in France and Germany, but also the increasing importance of landscape research, particularly in Britain and Ireland, are inspiring new views and exciting methodologies. This has produced studies that already look to be fundamental (Ó Carragáin and Turner, 2016). More than ever, there is an effort to tell alternative histories, and to employ different ways of analysing and interpreting the remains of the past.

This is also relevant to the medievalists who focus on the Celtic-language literature and cultures of early medieval Ireland. Generally, there has been a sceptical understanding of what it means to be Celtic, as shown in the nativist and anti-nativist debates of the 1980s and 1990s, which mainly focused on early Ireland but were also influential in Literary Studies and Archaeology (McCone, 1990; McCone and Simms, 1996; Wooding, 2009). Scholars such as Donnchadh Ó Corráin challenged the idea that early Irish society, and particularly its laws, echoed the Celtic and even Indo-European past (Ó Corráin, 1978; Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 1984). Anti-nativists, who were radically 'Celtosceptic' argued that early Irish society was profoundly transformed by Christianity and that this almost completely wiped out whatever vestiges remained of the pre-Christian era (McCone, 1990). The anti-nativists were also influenced by the so-called revisionist debate in Irish History whose aim, at least at first, was to overthrow romantic ideas of the Irish past (Brady, 1994). More recent understandings, taking on board the insights of the anti-nativists, have begun to situate early Irish Studies more solidly. Scholars no longer believe that early Ireland was a 'window on the Iron Age' or that pagan customs survived unchanged for millennia (Jackson, 1964; Wooding, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2015). However, they are also more willing to identify the dynamism of native social organisation.

On the other hand, as Wooding has pointed out, although scepticism is often warranted, scholars should avoid a 'zero-sum' approach where interconnectivities across time and space are not taken into account (Wooding, 2017). Doing so impoverishes our approaches to the past and assumes that past societies were not as complex and contradictory as our own. For instance, druids survived, although marginalised, into the eighth century AD (Slavin, 2009) and the influence of non-Christian culture on how Christianity developed in Ireland

is more appreciated (Johnston, 2017). This included the survival of Celtic theonyms (for example, Lug from Lugus or Nuadu from Nodens), as well as a few echoes of pre-Christian beliefs that shared a degree of commonality with those found elsewhere in Celtic-speaking societies, such as ideas about the transmigration of souls (Wooding, 2017). Moving beyond the zero-sum approach, scholars can more confidently place early Ireland in the context of appropriations and reimaginings of its own past while also thinking of interconnectivity and mobility with its neighbours across both time and space.

Taking those trends together, it can be seen that the models for a so-called 'Celtic World' or a 'Celtic Society' have been thoroughly questioned (cf. Collis, 1994; Hill, 1995; Sims-Williams, 1998; Giles, 2008) across a number of disciplines. Scholars acknowledge the importance of different local and regional developments. Very few now accept that medieval societies in Ireland and the Celtic-speaking parts of Britain preserve unchanged examples of so-called 'archaism'. Societies are understood to be dynamic and are viewed in their own terms. Large regional variability is evident, particularly in cross-comparative analyses of Irish and Welsh medieval laws (Charles-Edwards, 1993), vernacular literature and archaeology. In face of those changes across the various disciplines of Celtic Studies, the following papers focus on three key-aspects of the current debate: space and the mapping of Early Iron age material culture, local identities and the applicability of the Celtic ethnonym, and finally possible analogies and interconnections between Iron Age and Medieval Studies.

The first contribution challenges the traditional spatial construction of early Iron Age societies in Central-Western Europe. Grounded in Postcolonial Studies, Stockhammer and Athanassov propose an interpretation of the so-call West Hallstatt zone as a 'contact zone'. Long distance contacts and their relevance for the internal political dynamics of the Hallstatt zone have been the overarching topic of study on late Hallstatt period. One can say that since Kimmig (1969), and in particular after the application of Thiessen Polygons and central place theory in archaeology from the 1970's to 1990's, spatial analysis has been crucial to the explanation of both settlement hierarchy and the production of social inequality within those communities. As the authors point out this body of research 'seen from a traditional point of view, (...) identifies contact and concludes sameness; (whereas) most other disciplines — and also an increasing number of archaeologists — identify contact and emphasize difference'(Stockhammer and Athanassov, p. 639). Thus, they propose to consider the West Hallstatt zone not as enclosed and static, but rather as a changing entity. Their proposition is not only attuned to interpretations that have defied the traditional models of the Iron Age societies, but also to a much larger debate that questions the usage of 'cultural-historical' and ethnic classifications.

As a matter of fact, such a proposition is apposite to the new perspectives of 'Celtic cultures' as products of *longue durée* contacts (cf. Cunliffe, 2010). Hence, as Cañizares-Esguerra (2007) pointed out for the study of transatlantic contacts, in order to advance on

the comprehension of 'entangled histories' one needs to go beyond the traditional spatial boundaries and perspectives. In other words, one ought to consider how contacts created different perceptions of space, and how these contribute to social and cultural change. In a sense, it might also be time to question our spatial understanding of a 'Celtic' world. This is crucial because it problematizes the 'Celtic' but also widens the horizons of scholarship and makes scholars think about issues of contact between different cultures. How did they influence one another and how do these influences make us think about the complexities of past societies?

Building upon the definition of the 'Celtic', O'Neill's contribution brings up its possible application to modern Irish history. As mentioned earlier, the romanticisation of the past played a role in the popularisation of Celtic Studies in Ireland and even in the origins of academic discourses and assumptions (Williams, 2016). However, these discourses focused almost entirely on the 'Heroic Age' of early Irish literature and tended to ignore later medieval Ireland, especially after the changes brought about by the arrival of the Normans in 1169-70. O'Neill argues that later medieval Gaelic Ireland should be considered within the area of 'Celtic Studies'. It has the particular value of complexifying discussions concerning ethnic identities within Ireland, a major feature of this period of history. Different ethnic and political groups inhabited the island, engaging in both cultural exchange and in conflict. The landscape itself and human interactions within it were vibrant, looking both to the past and the future (Fitzpatrick, 2004). It is also a central era for examining perceptions and appropriations of a so-called 'Celtic' past for political and religious reasons. Indeed, many of the manuscripts, through which modern scholars approach the early Irish past, were produced during this period. Thus, it can be argued that later medieval Ireland was a time of rich cultural invention that helped shape how early Ireland came to be understood.

Drawing on new methodologies and approaches for the study of Iron Age practices, Tenreiro and Moya-Maleno propose a trans-disciplinary investigation of archaeological finds, folklore and Medieval sources in order to analyse the ritual practices of Late Iron Age Iberia. Particularly interested in the rituals involving animal sacrifices and depositions, they offer an engaging and daring contribution to ethnoarchaeology. A challenge in itself, such an approach draws on the perspective that cultural practices had great longevity in Medieval and Modern popular cultures, allowing scholars to engage to not only with ethnographic theory, but also with Medieval sources and Modern folklore.

In such a view, popular traditions are rooted in a long lost past, but should nonetheless be treated carefully by researchers. For these are not the 'windows into the Iron Age' (Jackson, 1964), as they used to be considered. Karl (2004a) was the first scholar to suggest that these types of sources should be considered in a new interpretative light to contribute to the interpretation of Iron Age societies. His proposition and views stirred the field and provoked strong debates, particularly from those who dispute the usage of the Celtic ethnonym, such

as John Collis. Whereas the latter believes the 'Celt' to be a modern construction, which makes it implausible and unattainable for the comprehension of Iron Age communities, what Karl and others such as Tenreiro and Moya-Maleno show is that such cultural and political constructions are inherent in our field, thus remaining relevant for historical and archaeological analyses.

For 'Celt' is more than an ethnonym; it is a concept that entails language, art, material culture, historical, cultural and religious identifications both in the past and the present (Karl, 2010). In other words, the 'Celt' is a changing construction that is bound to political agendas, to scientific traditions, as well as to the life of local populations. To ignore this dynamic does not explain those historical phenomena, and most certainly does not give us ground to further our views of the past or of our disciplines. Therefore, it is our view that the 'Celt' is not just useful, but crucial to the comprehension of changing and non-essentialist views of culture. Cultures are always changing; they are not crystallised and immutable throughout time. Scepticism towards romanticised and overly literal approaches to the Celts of Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the present has been a useful corrective. But it also runs the risk of being overly reductionist and of closing off dialogues with the complex pasts of Celtic-speaking peoples, the cultures that they encountered and the changes that happened over time. Used with care, the terms 'Celt' and 'Celtic' can help encourage new transdisciplinary dialogues that will enrich the scholarship of our cognates field. So the 'Celt' is as diverse as its own history; and that is what remains to be explained.

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