Imag(in)ing the Celts

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In the latest of his periodic reviews of Celtic exhibitions in the pages of Antiquity (Megaw 1981; 1992; 1994) Vincent resumes the Grand Tour and evaluates a series of such events over the past decade.

It is fifteen years since that blockbuster of all Celtic exhibition blockbusters, I Celti: la prima Europa packed them in to Venice’s Palazzo Grassi. While its doorstopper of a catalogue has long since been out of print, until recently it was still possible to obtain a pocket-bursting

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In what follows we shall largely restrict ourselves to noting those projects which have involved more than one country. In this context it is Venceslas Kruta, recently retired from the Ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, who seems to have continued a second career as major exhibitions co-ordinator, aided by his wife, Luana Kruta Poppi, herself associated with a small publishing firm set up with Japanese backing, Kronos B.Y. Editions. Together with other members of what might well be termed 'the early Celtic art mafia', Miklós Szabó in Budapest, Barry Raftery in Dublin and Otto-Herman Frey, formerly of Marburg University and surely the Godfather of early Celtic art studies, Kruta developed in 1998 the Japanese connection and was responsible for *Treasures of Celtic art*, shown at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum and accompanied by that rare thing, a catalogue both sumptuous and scholarly (Kruta 1998).

However, in the '90s, not everything was flourishing in the world of representing the Celts. In an extraordinary exhibition — all right, pun intended — of stingy local government tunnel vision, the Musée municipal of Epernay, situated amidst some of the richest Champagne houses of France, was closed to the public and essential repairs to its fabric postponed indefinitely. Its impressively titled 'Conservateur en chef du Patrimoine', Jean-Jacques Charpy, a former pupil of Kruta's, now finds himself in charge of rows of empty showcases and one of the most important Iron Age collections in Europe, when not in store, is now perennially on the road; its swan song on home territory was in 1991 — certainly a good year for Celtic exhibitions (Charpy & Roualet 1991). What is Champagne's loss has been the rest of Europe's gain; thus in 1999 the Museo della Ceramica in Fiorano Modenese was host to *Le arti del fuoco dei Celti* (Kruta Poppi 1999) followed by *Splendeurs celtes: armes et bijoux* in the Musée du Malgré-Tout at Treignes in Belgium (CEDARC 2001). And there is one more exhibition where the archaeological riches of Epernay have been on view — but we shall leave the best to last.

Since *I Celti*, there have been many other exhibitions investigating aspects of the European Iron Age. The Italians in fact have something of a European record for producing mega-displays accompanied by mammoth publications — both usually financially underpinned by an enviable level of sponsorship. Many volumes have been literally bankrolled (Carratelli 1988) and the problem is tracking them down before they go out of print. The Palazzo Grassi — a cultural foundation of the Fiat Group — followed the Celts by presenting the Etruscans in an exhibition which travelled to Paris and Berlin, once more plugging the European theme (Pallottino 1992); next came the Western Greeks (Carratelli 1996). Some other Italian-originating presentations, dealing with aspects of the Iron Age of key importance for studying the ethnogenesis of the region, have also travelled north: first *Die Picener – ein Volk Europas* — there's that word again — had a dramatic showing in Frankfurt's Schirn Kunsthalle (Schädler 1999). The shadowy Leponti, that Alpine community who appear to hold the key to many aspects of what might be termed proto-Celtic culture, have also been well served by exhibitions in Italy, Switzerland and Germany (de Marinis & Biaggio Simone 2000; Schweizerisches Landesmuseum 2001) as have the Ligurians (de Marinis & Spadea 2004). But the heavyweight title must go to *Guerrieri, principi ed eroi*, an exhibition mounted in Trento by two of the most energetic archaeologists in Europe (Marzatico &
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Gleirscher 2004). Tipping the scales at 8kg — beating I Celti by 500g — and with the co-operation of a large number of Italian as well as Austrian, German, Slovene and Swiss institutions, Guerrieri covers the whole of prehistory to the Migration Period but is worth squeezing onto one’s shelves just for the sections dealing with the rise of later elites; and, as has become the norm in Italy, it is beautifully designed and printed.

But there is one Iron Age warrior who is better known than any other — the ‘Stone Knight’ of the Glauberg (Figure 2). Recent excavations in the area of the Glauberg in the Wetteraukreis north-east of Frankfurt have resulted in one of the most important Iron Age exhibitions of the decade. Culminating in the 1994-6 unearthing of three early La Tène rich warriors’ graves associated with one whole and several fragments of life-size warrior-figures, the Glauberg finds have lead to considerable revision of ideas concerning the development of and interaction between various so-called Fürstensitze (Biel & Krausse 2005). It is hardly surprising that the legacy of these discoveries has been a tussle between local and wider interests; it has now been decided that, with significant Federal support, it is the small town of Glauburg (pop. 3500) rather than the Hessisches Landesmuseum at Darmstadt which is to have a new display permanently to house the Glauberg material. Despite these discoveries forming a central feature of the research project ‘Frühe Zentralisierungs- und Urbanisierungsprozesse’ funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft let alone that the finds — in particular ‘Glaubi’ the stone knight — having had extensive exposure worldwide, up till now the Glauberg has drawn a blank in the pages of Antiquity.

So too has Das Rätsel der Kelten (The riddle of the Celts) the somewhat clichéd title of another exhibition at Frankfurt’s Schirn gallery. Taking the Glauberg as the central theme, the object was to unveil at least some of the ‘mysteries’ of Central and Western Europe in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, or early La Tène period. Material was brought together from many other parts of Germany — the majority of the other Fürsten- or Fürstinnengräber was there together with a selection of finds from sites ranging from Croatia to Belgium. There was ample room to move around the exhibits with only the usual pit-fall for exhibition designers — how to place and particularly how to light the small-scale pieces which represent most of the artefacts of the period. Probably the most arresting feature of the Schirn show was the ‘sculpture court’ comprising not only the statuary from the Glauberg.

Figure 2. Glauberg bei Glauburg-Glauberg, Wetteraukreis (Hessen, Germany). Life-size sandstone figure, La Tène A, fifth century BC. Total height: 1.86m (photograph by U. Seitz-Gray, Frankfurt).
but contemporary figures from Italy, the south of France and the remarkable warrior-figures from Lusitania (northern Portugal). While this last group had had a preview in Italy a few years earlier (Sestieri 2000), the Frankfurt exhibition has as a permanent record a volume which must stand as a model of such things — a series of essays by most of the usual suspects, almost without exception of lasting value plus full catalogue entries and a bibliography which lacks only a few key English-language references; the whole is well packaged with colour printing of (mostly) excellent quality (Baitinger & Pinsker 2002).

If cult, belief systems, evidence for long-distance trade and social stratification all came together in the fascinating discoveries of the Glauberg, there have been other shows dealing with aspects of religion. Three of the most important have been *Kult der Vorzeit in den Alpen* (Zemmer-Plank 1997), *Die Religion der Kelten* (Cain & Rieckoff 2002) and, touring from Austria to Germany where it is currently on show at the Keltenmuseum Heuneburg, *Donau, Fürsten und Druiden* (Bayer-Niemeier et al. 2006). Most recently the exhibition mounted at the Musée Gallo-Romain at Lyon-Fourvière under the title *Par Toutatis! La religion des Gaulois* was remarkable for its attempts — mostly successful — to draw the visitor through a window into the past and a view which was not just circumscribed by museum cases and sterile labels. Perhaps Lyon had too much Celtic twilight, not to mention that a processional way leading down first to a replica of the Gundestrup, Aars silver cauldron and then to the central feature — a full-scale reconstruction of the gateway of the Gournay-sur-Aronde sanctuary — was lined with images from Gundestrup. But surely there should by now be a health warning prohibiting the use of Gundestrup as an emblem of Celtic culture — however defined (on this most disputed of all Iron Age relics see most recently Nielsen 2005). Although Lyon had no catalogue as such there is an associated finely produced volume edited by Christian Goudineau who is also the author of a splendid polemic, a kind of Socratic dialogue which deconstructs most effectively the concept of a long-lasting Gaulish culture (Goudineau 2002; 2006).

In July 2006 Christian Goudineau retired from the Collège de France coinciding with celebrations marking the twentieth anniversary of the Centre archéologique européen at Mont Beuvray (ancient Bibracte, capital of the Aedui), a project that Goudineau has been associated with since its inception. At the conclusion of a whole series of international colloquia five volumes of proceedings have been published offering a complete overview of Celtic society from its presumed origins to present day perceptions and misconceptions (Haselgrove 2006; Paunier 2006; Rieckhoff 2006; Szabó 2006; Vitali 2006). At Bibracte itself the Musée de la Civilisation celtique, a striking and remarkably airy as well as flexible exhibition space, has been established, tucked into the hill-slope below the oppidum (Romero & Maillier 2006). Apart from its own evolving display illustrating the pre-Roman and Roman occupation of the site the museum hosts temporary exhibitions, themselves co-operative affairs, each accompanied by attractive — and sponsored — short guides. In 2006 the theme was *Trésors des femmes* displaying material from not only French but Austrian, Czech, Slovak and Swiss collections, much from the latest and as yet only partially published salvage excavations in advance of the seemingly unstoppable progress of trunk road and high speed train corridors (Exposition Bibracte 2006). These are virtually re-writing the later prehistory of Western and Central Europe.
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Since the establishment and expansion of the European Union, a feature of many European exhibitions and not just those restricted to archaeology, is that they have been just that — European. Perhaps it is that art and archaeology lend themselves to being presented like so many three-dimensional demonstrations of the EU’s motto, *In varietate concordia*. One may shift a little uneasily at the subtitle of *IC e l t i*, ‘the first Europeans’ but in fact post-World War II co-operative exhibitions sponsored by the Council of Europe, founded in 1948, also looked beyond contemporary political boundaries. How this trend is evolving is best seen in two recent exhibitions that take us to the Benelux countries, a geo-political grouping that has itself become a historical artefact.

While no one would think of the Low Countries as the heartland of ancient Celtic society — however defined — there has been considerable interest in the question of the interrelations of various protohistoric groups on what might be called the fringe of not so much the Celtic but rather the La Tène culture (for a wide-ranging examination of this topic see Dobrzańska *et al.* 2005). Perhaps just because the Low Countries has always been on the fringe, debates about later prehistory, identity and ethnicity started early here. *Kelten in Nederland?* was the title of an exhibition held in Amsterdam in 1993 (Jiskoort *et al.* 1995) when the Stichting A.G. van Hamel voor Keltische Studies at the University of Utrecht organised a colloquium under the auspices of that grand, perhaps too grand project, the International Unesco Committee for the Study of Celtic Cultures (Schmidt 1986).

At one corner stands an Iron Age family, at the other a sacred tree from whose branches hang strips of cloth — shades of the ‘clootie well’ in Ian Rankin’s *The naming of the dead*. But this is not the world of the detective story but rather a glimpse into the Limburgs Museum in Venlo. Here Wim Huppertz, curator at the Museum and Leo Verhart of the Rijksmuseum voor Oudheden in Leiden were largely responsible for *Het geheim van de Kelten* (*The mystery of the Celts*) an exhibition centred on evidence for Celts between the Rhine and the North Sea. Despite its hackneyed title it stands out amongst all others we have seen in the last 15 years. The display is placed within a striking new brick, steel and concrete building designed by the renowned Dutch architect, Jeanne Dekkers, which acts as a multi-purpose cultural centre in the middle of town and it comes as no surprise to learn that some 32 000 people visited the exhibition during its six months run, from May to November 2006. *Het geheim van de Kelten* offered an innovative and appealing attempt to combine the presentation of a range of...
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artefacts from the contiguous regions of the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, with reconstructions — confrontations in many cases — of such stars of the Iron Age as the early Hallstatt chieftain of Oss cremated with his sword inlaid with sheet gold. Old familiars (the early La Tène Fürstengrab of Eigenbilzen, the Beringen and Niederzer gold hoards and the Nijmegen bronze mirror, this last one of a handful of later British Iron Age exports to the Continent) were side by side with new finds including an addition to the very few early La Tène gold torcs of the middle Rhineland, found in clearing a building site in Heerlen. The story, which the exhibition retold in sound as well as vision, begins around 1000 BC, and continues through the coming of the Romans to the roots of the Celtic revival (and of Celtomania).

The Limburgs Museum has a well-deserved reputation for its educational programme and for attracting a wide cross-section of the local community. Its excellent bookshop hosts a range of publications associated with all aspects of Celtic studies. A free if rather basic and unillustrated guide was augmented by a familiarmagazin: you start at one end with the question (in Dutch) ‘What do you know about the Celts?’ and at the other ‘Are you a Celt?’ Interviews with a trio of young Goths, a tattooist, a metal detectorist and a museum curator and short essays on material culture, Celtic linguistics, pop groups and ogham alphabets, all find a place (Buist et al. n.d.). And for those who wanted a bit more there is now a richly illustrated introduction to the Celts between the North Sea and the Rhine (Verhart 2006). It will be interesting to see how this many-faced picture of the Celts, having travelled in Belgium and Germany, ends up in summer 2007 as part of a major exhibition in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn, ‘Kelten – Römer – Germanen’, linked to the XIIIth International Congress of Celtic Studies.

The last exhibition — or rather two exhibitions — takes us back to the beginning of this survey; once more a bit of background history is required. In 2004 the Civico Museo Archeologico in Varese mounted a two-part exhibition under the title of Celti dal cuore dell’Europa all’Insubria. Coordinated by Milan Lička, of the Národní Muzeum in Prague and Vencelas Kruta, and exploiting both the latter’s wide circle of Czech contact and his interest in the Celtic settlement of Italy, the larger part was devoted to a wide selection of material from Bohemian and Moravian collections (Kruta & Lička 2004). A smaller part displayed some of the key material from the territory of the Insubres including the principal warrior grave from Sesto Calende (Kruta 2004). Both sections were provided with substantial catalogues including the fine photography of Dario Bertuzzi who in recent years has enhanced several of Kruta’s publishing projects. But there is a catch — it has proved impossible to obtain copies of the catalogues either from booksellers, the Museum or the publisher who, once more was Kronos; not all is lost however.

On the outskirts of the small town of Morlanwelz in the southern Belgian province of Hainaut is the grand park of the former royal palace of Mariemont. Associated down the centuries with Queen Mary of Hungary and Louis Quatorze, it owes its present form to a wealthy industrialist and collector, Raoul Warocqué (1870-1917). The largely rebuilt château bequeathed by Warocqué together with his collection and library to the Belgian state was destroyed by a major fire which broke out on Christmas Day 1960, but miraculously spared the collections themselves. The present-day concrete structure designed by Roger Bastin, architect of the Musée d’Art moderne in Brussels, fits remarkably well into the formal
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park landscape (Donnay 1995). Warocqué was a most eclectic collector (his collection includes frescos from Pompeii and a fragment of Beethoven's string quartet op.135) who also supported local pre- and protohistory and the Museum today devotes a special section to ‘l'Archéologie du Hainaut’.

Responsible for this last is Jacqueline Cession-Louppe and it is she who, together with Jean-Jacques Charpy and Germaine Leman-Delerive have revised the Varese exhibition by the addition to the original selection of Bohemian and Moravian material of some key finds from Belgium and northern France (Figure 1). Entering the gallery which houses the exhibition Celtes, Belges, Boïens, Rèmes, Volques we come face to face with the splendid early third century BC mounts for a wooden vessel found in the cemetery of Brno-Maloměrice and it is one of these that forms the main subject of the publicity material and the cover of the catalogue. There are some ten main sections, commencing with ‘Les “princes” de la Bohême aux VIIIè-VIIè siècles avant J.-C.’ and ending with ‘La Champagne et les Rèmes’. As at Varese, each piece has a serviceable if often over-small line drawing frequently complemented by more of Bertuzzi’s mood photographs. Swollen to some 400 pages the catalogue — readily available from the Museum (Kruta 2006) — presents a much more balanced and better edited whole; indeed, to own a copy each of the catalogues for I Celti, Das Rätsel der Kelten and Celtes would go a long way towards having a good grounding in the Iron Age of Europe.

But what of the display at Mariemont? Well, the chief quality was that the individual pieces were, mostly, well lit, that once more there was plenty of space to move around and just about sufficient text material to inform the casual visitor who had not yet picked up a catalogue. As in Venlo, the Museum clearly takes its educational rôle seriously; a group of well-informed guides seemed to be continuously on the go as yet another school group appeared. With 30 000 visitors over the six months it was open (June to December 2006) and 2000 catalogues sold, Celtes attracted numbers very similar to those at Venlo. Yet, divorced of much contextual support, this event, like so many of the other exhibitions noted here, was really one for the specialist, where, as with I Celti, there was a chance to get up close and serious with objects which one is unlikely ever to see in three dimensions again. But I wonder how many other visitors were really drawn into the questions that all such exhibitions must raise. Specialist though I am supposed to be, I missed the chance to chat about Celts with Karin, Ingrid and Sanne, the three Goths of Venlo.

References


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