The Celts and urbanization

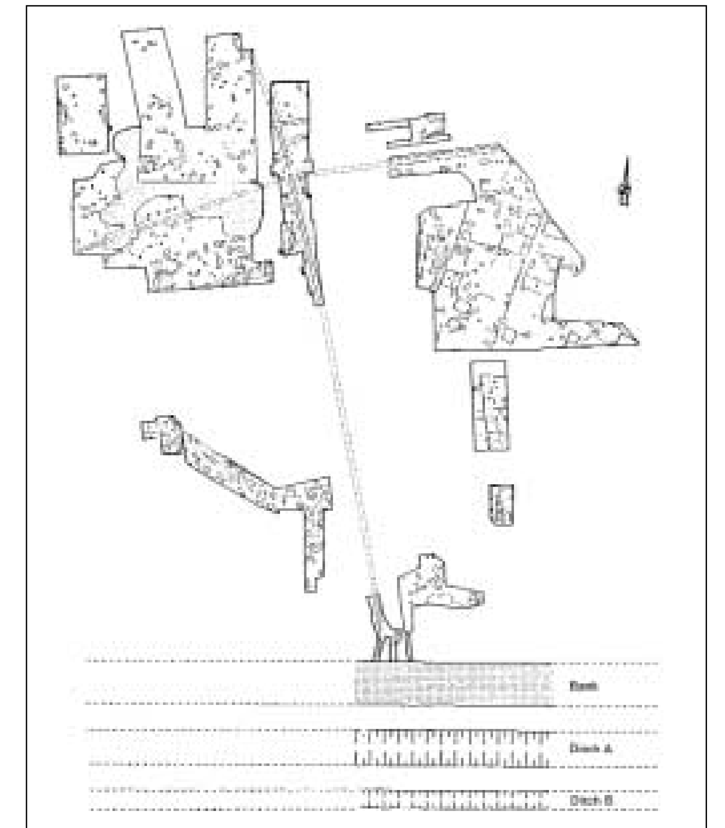
THE ENDURING PUZZLE OF THE *OPPIDA*

By Elizabeth Hamilton

Archaeologists have speculated for decades about the role of Celtic settlements called *oppida,* because they fit only loosely into the category we call "urban." Unlike the people of the Middle East, who possessed large cities such as Ur, Babylon, and Tyre, among many others, the people of Europe north of the Alps preferred to cluster in small villages or hillforts, with their ritual sites out in the countryside. During most of the Bronze and Iron Ages, both southwest Asia and Europe north of the Alps were densely populated, socially stratified, and crossed by established trade networks, but only in the last two centuries B.C. do we see what may have been the first towns north of the Alps, the *oppida*. Although these were the largest and most complex sites in temperate Europe before the coming of the Romans, their scale remained modest, and the question of why they did not become cities continues to be a puzzle.

OPPOSITE PAGE, PHOTOGRAPH: J. METZLER, MUSÉE NATIONAL D'HISTOIRE ET D'ART, LUXEMBOURG; MAP: ELIZABETH HAMILTON; THIS PAGE, ILLUSTRATION: BEEBE BAHRAMI; PLAN AND BOTTOM RIGHT ILLUSTRATION: S. FICHTL, 2000

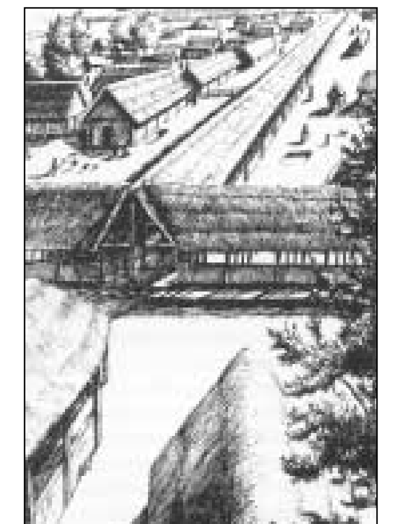
OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: An aerial view of the Titelberg, Luxembourg. The site of a major *oppidum* and uninhabited since A.D. 500, the Titelberg, like many *oppida,* was constructed on a high and easily fortified plateau. BOTTOM: Map of Europe showing sites of the major *oppida* and sites mentioned in the text. The area of the *oppida* included southern England and much of transalpine Europe from France to Bohemia, but did not include northern Italy. THIS PAGE, LEFT: A reconstruction of the main pincer gate of an *oppidum.* The clothing and structure of the walls are based on archaeological finds and classical descriptions. BELOW: A plan of Villeneuve-St.-Germain showing the enigmatic perpendicular ditches. BOTTOM: A reconstruction of the covered ditches at Villeneuve-St.-Germain.



GROWTH AND CHANGE IN IRON AGE SETTLEMENTS

The Early Iron Age, the Hallstatt C-D Period (700 B.C.–450 B.C.), was characterized by wealthy "princely" graves and fortified hillforts, the most elaborate of which is described by Bettina Arnold on page 8. From about 450 B.C. to 200 B.C., though, most people settled in undefended lowland villages. This period saw the introduction and spread of the La Tène art style, after which the Middle and Late Iron Age period is named. This swirling, almost hallucinogenic style of ornament is widely associated with Celtic-speaking people (see Bernard Wailes' article on page 26), and by the end of the third century B.C. it is found from Central Anatolia to Ireland and from southern France to southern Poland. Although Celtic speakers certainly did not occupy all of this wide area, the rapidity of the spread and the similarity of the ornaments and vessels found so many miles apart are a testament to the widespread trading networks of the Celtic world.

In the second century B.C. we see the abrupt reappearance of the fortified hilltop site, but on a much vaster scale. The wall of the Hallstatt Period Heuneberg in Germany enclosed an area of 7.5 hectares (18 acres); in contrast, the wall of the Heidengraben in southern Germany covers 1,500 hectares (3,705 acres). The sites are located on prominent hills, in river bends, or at the edges of swamps. In most cases, they were new establishments, and often the low-lying unfortified villages near them were abandoned. Presumably the population moved into the new *oppida*. At the same time we see signs of greatly increased trade with the Mediterranean world, especially in wine and drinking equipment.



The fortifications of these new settlements were massive. Even today, 2,000 years after the abandonment of the defenses, the earthen rampart of the Titelberg in Luxembourg stands 10 meters high and 40 to 50 meters wide at the base. The exact type of defense varied geographically, but the type described by Caesar, the *murus gallicus*, or Gallic wall, consisted of an earthen rampart with internal timber lacing fastened together with thousands of long iron spikes. The timber-laced rampart was then faced with stone blocks. It has been estimated that it took 200,000–435,000 working hours to construct the 5-kilometer-long murus *gallicus* around the *oppidum* of Bibracte (Mont Beuvray, France).

A reconstruction of Complex B at Manching

RIGHT: ARCHÄOLOGISCHE STAATSAMMLUNG MUSEUM FÜR VOR- UND FRÜHGESCHICHTE, MUNICH

In most cases these huge walls enclosed an area far larger than was actually inhabited. It has always been assumed from Caesar's accounts that these *oppida* served as refuges for the rural population in times of war, and thus in normal times would have had a great deal of excess land. But what is puzzling is that in some cases the walls enclose an area so large as to be indefensible. Clearly more is involved than straightforward defense. Perhaps the walls of the *oppida* reflect a trend seen in many Late Iron Age structures from palisaded farmsteads to ditched and palisaded ritual sites: a concern with boundaries, a desire to definitively mark terrain and separate categories of territory. Likewise, the wall builders could have also have been concerned with display, a sort of "our wall is bigger" competition.

THE *OPPIDA* AND POLITICS

The classical writers, especially Caesar, described Celtic society as highly stratified and oppressive. The only two groups who counted were the nobles and the druids, who acted as religious leaders and judges. The common people were at the bottom, regarded almost as slaves, with no voice in affairs, and serving the nobles in a patron-client relationship. We also know that some Gauls, the Celtic peoples of what is now France, were traders and specialist craftspeople who may have owed some allegiance to a noble but who probably conducted much of their craft work independently.

It is likely that some of the Celtic tribal polities had reached the status of states at the time of Caesar's invasion, especially the tribes of central France. What differentiates the Celtic states from those in the Mediterranean is that the Celtic states were tribal, not based on a city-state. A city-state is a fixed territory; a tribal state is based on a potentially movable population and can include many political and economic centers. Caesar noted that each tribe possessed numerous *oppida,* and while some *oppida* were described as especially beautiful or important, none was described as a political center. Indeed, though few *oppida* have undergone broad horizontal excavations, it is rare to find large public buildings or even areas of public assembly in those that have been excavated. Caesar noted that particular *oppida* were the dependencies of certain nobles, which is in keeping with the oligarchic nature of the polity. When the coins produced in the *oppida* and other sites are inscribed, the name they bear is not a tribal name, or even a town name, but the name of the issuing magistrate or chieftain.

LIFE IN THE *OPPIDA*

What would we see if we were to walk into an *oppidum*? There is no typical *oppidum*, but we will take as examples several of the largest and most prominent.

The site would be completely surrounded by walls of earth and stone, topped by a wooden palisade. The walls would have one or more massive pincer gates topped by a watchtower and designed to control the flow of people in and out. The oppidum is bisected by an unpaved main street that leads from the main gate to a gate on the other side; other straight streets, evidence of a planned layout, cross the main road. In some *oppida* such as Bibracte (Mont Beuvray), and Závist and Stradonice (Bohemia), what seem to be workshops and craft areas are found clustered on the main road near the gate. Here the bronze and iron smiths, the workers in bone and leather, and the makers of fine pottery and glass would have their shops and sell their wares.

Passing the workshop area, you would emerge not into a dense network of public buildings and assembly areas but into streets lined with small houses and palisaded enclosures containing one or two houses, along with granaries, storage pits, and probably stock pens for chickens, pigs, and other domestic animals. In their layout, the enclosures and the buildings within were very like the isolated farmsteads found in the countryside. Often traces of craft production are found within these enclosures. Most of the rest of the land enclosed by the defensive ramparts would be used for farming and pasture.

In a few sites there is evidence for what may be public buildings. In Villeneuve-Saint-Germain (France), the *oppidum* is crossed by two intersecting trenches, 500 and 300 meters long, 1.4 meters deep, and 2 meters wide, dividing the site into four unequal areas. Rows of postholes follow the trenches, showing that they were covered by a wooden structure. Many traces of fibulae (brooches) in various stages of manufacture are found near the covered trenches. Other areas nearby have traces of fur and leather working. Were these enigmatic covered trenches the site of workshops or markets?

In Manching (Germany), the area known as Complex B was a giant enclosed area some 80 meters on one side and surrounded on three sides by streets. The enclosure contained seven long houses; the longest two were 44 meters long and 6 meters wide. The roofed wall around the complex was pierced at one point by a gate and a guardroom. The purpose of this complex is unknown. Was it an aristocratic residence? Were the buildings warehouses for trade goods?

Inside the *oppidum* would be cult areas as well. The forms vary, but most contain elements of enclosures, ritual deposits in ditches, and sometimes human sacrifice. Frequently what appear to be ritual deposits of human and animal bones and broken weapons are found in the ditches. Gournay-sur-Aronde in France has an enclosure with sides 40 meters long and with a palisade that concealed the interior from the populace. Found in the ditch were hundreds of deliberately broken weapons, many bones of large animals, and the bones of 12 decapitated humans. In an enclosure at Ribemont-sur-Ancre (France), an entire structure was built of the long bones of some 200 people, mostly young men. In the Titelberg (Luxembourg) a ritual area covering at least a third of the site was demarcated by a trench; inside is an enclosure marked by ditches containing numerous fibulae and coins.

WHAT IS AN *OPPIDUM*?

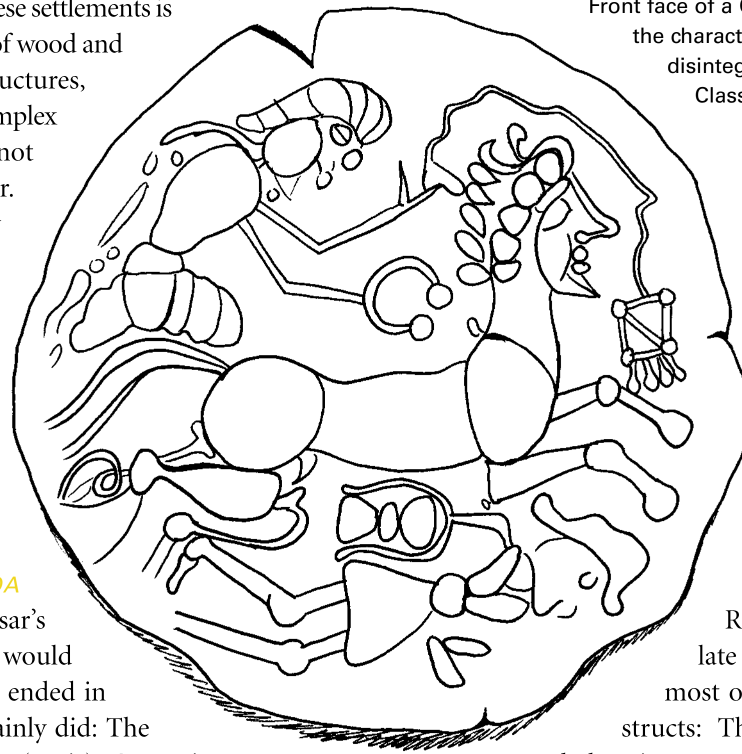
Two sources tell us about *oppida:* the archaeological record and written records, especially those of Julius Caesar. Indeed, the word *oppidum* comes from Caesar's *The Battle for Gaul,* where he refers to fortified Gallic strongholds. *Oppidum* simply means "town" in Latin, and its usage implies that Caesar recognized similarities between the *oppida* and the town centers familiar to him from the Roman world.

Unfortunately for us, Caesar was not writing a cultural account but a war report largely composed for propaganda and to justify his invasions. Also, Caesar was observing the Gallic landscape during a time of trauma (that he caused), so what he reports may not have been representative of the *oppida* 10 years earlier. In addition, his use of the term *oppida* is inconsistent; when describing his British campaigns, he uses it to refer to smaller fortified sites with no permanent population.

To better solve the *oppidum* puzzle, we must rely upon archaeology. English-speaking archaeologists define an *oppidum* as a site from 20 to over 1,000 hectares large (1 hectare=2.47 acres) that is entirely surrounded by fortifications, both natural (rivers, cliffs, and swamps) and constructed. (French archaeologists use *oppidum* to refer to any hillfort of this period.) Often located on high ground, the *oppida* have a commanding view of the surrounding terrain. We find sites of this kind from the Czech Republic to southern France to southern Britain. Some of these sites, such as Bibracte in France, Manching in Germany, and Stradonice in Bohemia, had dense permanent populations of several thousand and were clearly centers of industrial production. Others, such as Kelheim in Bavaria and Závist in Bohemia, seem to have been only thinly populated.

Most *oppida* were located near trade routes or natural resources, especially iron ore. There is evidence that certain *oppida* specialized in the production of various goods, such as salt, fine pottery, and glass. Many *oppida* produced both raw iron and finished iron and steel articles that were highly regarded in Rome for their quality. Many of the *oppida* produced coins. But to add to the confusion, some unfortified sites were clearly large industrial centers as well, and many produced coins. Nor is it clear from excavations how much even the well-populated *oppida* would have conformed to our definition of urban, which usually assumes that the site was, first, a center of public or administrative life, second, occupied permanently by at least 1,000 people, and third, divided into zones with different functions.

The rural character of these settlements is striking. The buildings are of wood and thatched with straw. Structures, with exceptions such as Complex B at Manching, were not densely packed together. Most households probably produced their own food and crafts, and even the specialist craftspeople probably grew crops and grazed animals. Few settlements had imposing monumental structures as a central focus.



Front face of a Celtic gold coin showing the characteristic La Tène process of disintegration and Celticization of Classical motifs.

THE END OF THE *OPPIDA*

If our reference were Caesar's *The Battle for Gaul,* we would assume that all the *oppida* ended in fire and blood. Some certainly did: The *oppida* in France of Lutetia (Paris), Gergovia (Gergovie), and others were burned by the Gauls to prevent the Romans from seizing them. Alésia (Alice-Sainte-Reine) and Avaricum (Bourges) fell to Roman siege engines, in campaigns that took all of Caesar's might and engineering skills.

Most of the *oppida* in Gaul, however, were abandoned without signs of destruction in the first few decades after the Caesarian invasion. There are no signs of any deliberate attempt by the Roman government to depopulate the *oppida*. Instead, it seems that most of the *oppida* were artificial constructs: They were erected by chieftains belonging to rapidly centralizing polities in response to the threat of intertribal warfare. Because defense was the main purpose of most of the *oppida*, most were built in high, inconvenient positions, some even without adequate provisions of water. After the Roman conquest, with intertribal warfare suppressed, there was little need to maintain these massive defensive sites. Many continued to be occupied and even flourished until roughly 20 B.C., when Augustan Rome, finally stable after the power struggle that followed Caesar's assassination, could turn its attention to its neglected possession. But with the establishment of newer settlements on the plains and near trade routes, most of the high-ground *oppida* were abandoned. Those that remained in use either were on low ground, such as Lutetia, or had been important more for administration than defense, such as Bibracte (Mont Beuvray). A few, such as the Titelberg, remained in use but dwindled into a *vicus*, a village.

The *oppida* in the lands not conquered by Caesar were also depopulated. The *oppida* of Bohemia and southern Germany had been the earliest in Europe. Manching, one of the largest and best excavated, was abandoned a generation before the Roman invasion of 15 B.C., with no evidence of violence. In Bohemia, though, the gates of *oppida* such as Hrazany and Závist were destroyed by burning, and the sites were abandoned in the last years of the first century B.C. The new material culture in this area had affinities with the Germanic culture around the Elbe. The historical sources say that the Germanic Marcomanni invaded this area around 10 B.C., and no towns were to reappear here for another thousand years.

BEEBE BAHRAMI

CELTIC COINAGE

The Greeks of Asia Minor manufactured the first coins in the seventh century B.C. These coins were of gold or silver, suitable for taxes, tribute, dowries, and payments to mercenaries. As a result of this last use, the coins began to appear in temperate Europe in the fourth century B.C., when the Celts were in high demand as mercenaries for the chronic wars of the Hellenistic kingdoms. In the third century, homegrown imitations of these coins began to be manufactured north of the Alps. Huge numbers of these coins have survived—a single hoard may contain more than 10,000 coins. They were made to a consistent weight, representing standardized currency values. (They were also quite rapidly forged and debased, showing that shady business practices are as old as business itself.)

Most Celtic coins, as with all coins in the Mediterranean, were die stamped. Unique to the Celts were cast bronze coins, used for small payments. The Celts possessed small-value coins by the early first century B.C., well before the Romans did, arguing that a true market economy — market goods in exchange for money — appeared in the Celtic *oppida* decades before it did in the Mediterranean.

The defensive wall at Kelheim today

Thus, for a variety of reasons, the first native transalpine European settlements that could be called towns came to an end. Archaeological sites the size of the *oppida* do not disappear when they are abandoned: They remain and enter the mythology of the people who live around them, even in the modern day. In the last two centuries, several of the *oppida* of France (Alésia, Bibracte, and Gergovia) have been used by French leaders from Napoleon III to Jean-Marie Le Pen as foci for the culture of "Frenchness," as monuments where Gallic civilization and communal identity were created. Even though they were depopulated 2,000 years ago, all across temperate Europe these enigmatic monumental *oppida* continue to live, capturing the modern imagination.

Elizabeth Hamilton received her Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1995, doing her dissertation work on changes in the copper-working industry at the Titelberg, one of the few oppida *to have been occupied from the Late Iron Age through the Roman period. Titled* Technology and Social Change in Belgic Gaul: Copper Working at the Titelberg, Luxembourg, 125 B.C.–A.D. 300, *this work is published as a MASCA (Museum Applied Science Center for Archaeology) Monograph. She has excavated in sites in the United States, Europe, Egypt, and India, and has taught courses at Penn in archaeology, ancient metalworking, and the anthropology of war. She is currently a researcher in the Ban Chiang Project at the University of Pennsylvania Museum, studying the development of prehistoric Thai metalworking.*

TOP: ELIZABETH HAMILTON; RIGHT: NAOMI F. MILLER

FOR FURTHER READING

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