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 ornamentation 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 is 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.

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The fortifications of these new settlements were massive. Even today, 2,000 years after the abandonment of the defenses, the earthen rampart of the Titeilberg 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-faced 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).

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 been concerned with display; a sort of “our wall is bigger than yours” 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 craftsmen 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 one 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 streets, evidence of a planned layout, cross the main road. In some oppida such as Bibracte (Mont Beuvray), and Zawist 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 into a dense network of public buildings and assembly areas but into streets lined with small houses and palisaded enclosures containing the type described by Caesar, the two houses, along with granaries, stone 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 emignacov covered trenches the site of workshops or markets?

In Monthing (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 corner. The gates and entrance pylons on the sides of this complex are 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-Arnon (France), an entire structure was built of the long bones of some 200 people, mostly young men. In the Titeilberg (Luxembourg) a ritual area covering at least a third of the site was desmated by a trench 1.4 meters deep, a conclusive marker by ditches containing numerous fibulae and coins.

What is an oppidum?

Two sources tell us about oppidum: 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 Gallic strongholds 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. Some of the sites, such as Bibracte in France, Monthing in Germany, and Stradonice in Bohemia, seem to have been occupied for several thousand years 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 contributed to our definition of urban, which usually assumes that the site was, first, a center of productive activity, second, occupied permanently by a population of 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 craftsmen probably grew crops and grazed animals. Few settlements had imposing monumental structures as a central focus.

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. Alesia (Alice-

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 became 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 shabby 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.

In the lands not conquered by Caesar were also Transylvania. Several of the oppida of France (Alesia, Bibra, and Gergovie) 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.E.-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.