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The Archaeology of Celtic Britain and Ireland

The image of the Celt is one of the most emotive in the European past, evoking pictures of warriors, feasts and gentle saints and scholars. This comprehensive and fully illustrated book re-appraises the archaeology of the Celtic-speaking areas of Britain and Ireland from the late fourth to the twelfth centuries AD, a period in which the Celts were a leading cultural force in northern Europe. Drawing on recent scientific advances, the book provides a new perspective on the economy, settlement, material culture, art and technological achievements of the early medieval Celts and re-examines their interaction with the Romans and Vikings. Including a full survey of artefacts and archaeological sites, from memorial stones to monasteries, this is essential reading for any student or scholar with an interest in Celtic archaeology, history or culture.

LLOYD LAING is Associate Professor of Archaeology at the University of Nottingham.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521547406

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First published 2006

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-83862-7 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-54740-6 Paperback

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Preface

When I wrote the first edition of this book, some thirty-five years ago, I had been hired to teach university students early medieval archaeology. In my first academic post I did not realize how difficult it would be both for them and me, to find our way through the hotch-potch of conflicting, inadequate data, dubious source material and incomprehensible papers in obscure journals. I felt I had no option but to try to make some sense of it.

The world has moved on, and many areas which caused problems are now seen as irrelevant, unimportant or solved by modern technology and new approaches. There has also been a revival of interest in the Celts, who currently inspire literature, films, fashion, art and popular events.

The one fact remains: the term Celtic is one of the most emotive in the European past. The concept is strong from Spain to France and Switzerland, and Celtic peoples have included the Galatians of the Bible and Caesar's opponents, the Gauls. It is no less strong in the areas which border the Irish Sea, that are the subject of this book – present day Wales, Scotland, Ireland, the Isle of Man and the south-west peninsula of England (often termed the Insular Celts as opposed to the Continental).

The most enduring image of the Celts includes firelit feasts where druids recited poetry, and the exploits of heroes and kings. It is the world of Caratacus, Queen Boudicca, King Arthur, and (on the Continent), Vercingetorix who fought the Romans and gained historical fame. It takes only a small feat of imagination to deck the halls with sumptuous treasures and a few fey, spirited red-haired maidens for good measure. For less secular moments we can indulge in images of clerics defending church treasures against the Viking looters or painstakingly applying rich colours to sumptuous manuscripts.

Particularly thirty years ago, this picture, gleaned mostly from poetic sources, did not fit the dry, mundane realities of the archaeological material.

The time-span covered in this book roughly coincides with the period between the Roman presence in Britain and the Norman presence in Britain and Ireland. Thirty years ago, the end of the Roman period in Britain (traditionally, AD 409) was still seen as a cut-off point, despite the fact that many traditions were seen to have started well before that time and to have continued past 800. In 1970 not only were technological advances such as pollen analysis, tree-ring dating or geophysical survey relatively undeveloped for this period and area, but study of literary sources was less well advanced.

Even the basic question ‘Who were the Celts?’ has created academic turmoils. For most of the twentieth century there was major resistance to any suggestion that the Celtic areas were influenced from outside. In search of the ‘pure’ Celtic culture, some scholars approached the subject by trying to prove or disprove points for which there was simply insufficient data available. Other difficulties were created because forceful personalities could not be questioned.

Sometimes, it seems, individual scholars were simply determined not to agree. Over the centuries the Celtic areas became separated from one another not only linguistically and politically but by religious beliefs. By the nineteenth century they were often in competition with one another on many fronts, so academic study of the past became drawn into their controversies.

The fact that research grants and promotions have been largely unavailable for the writing of syntheses has furthered the compartmentalizing of interests and a certain introversion in which not all evidence available has been taken into account.

Interpretation of both the written and material remains has often kindled bitter controversies which, if traced to their origins, can sometimes be seen to have been based on what (by today’s standards of scientific investigation) appear to be the most tenuous of arguments and flimsiest of evidence.

There has been a tendency to assign a site to the period on the grounds that it does not readily conform to what is known about sites of other periods: ‘if it isn’t obviously Iron Age or later medieval, it must be Dark Age.’ An example of this is the site at Dalmahoy (Midlothian, Scotland) which has never been excavated, but was assigned to the early medieval period on the strength of a small piece of gold foil found in fieldwalking, and then became the type site in all discussions of similar-looking sites.

Similarly circular arguments were applied in art history. The Tara brooch was dated from the Ardagh chalice, and the Ardagh chalice dated from the Tara brooch, for example.

Today, it remains difficult to gain a balanced survey of the period, less because of constrictions on voicing ideas, than because of the uneven survival of material and equally uneven research fields. However, there is now more interest in the European milieu in which the Celts operated than in any perceived Celtic isolation. This view appears easier to justify at the present state of knowledge.

The situation at present is therefore unsatisfactory. Some areas of knowledge have stagnated simply because there has been insufficient time to reappraise them in the light of advances in other subjects and areas. It has therefore not been possible in this volume to trace every statement or assumption to its origins for minute scrutiny. The positive side of this is that there is still plenty of scope for students to shine through reappraisal of material.

On a more general front, there is a continuing problem over terminology. I have generally speaking used the terms early medieval or post-Roman to mean roughly AD 350–800, depending on the context and region. The many alternatives – Dark Ages, late Iron Age, early Christian, pagan Saxon, sub-Roman are also in common use for the same period, and their usage in other publications is outlined in Appendix 3.

This edition of the book began as a simple ‘update’. It has required a virtual rewrite. It has been a back-breaking, time consuming and soul-destroying task. The width of available research methods have both aided and hindered the production of an overview. The subjects used to research the Celts range from the very highly scientific to art history, linguistics, history, archaeology and ethnology. I therefore assume that readers may be familiar with one or some of the subjects, but not necessarily all, and have endeavoured to remove as much jargon as is feasible. For example, those who are immediately familiar with words such as paralleliped, ingate and skeuomorphic may well not be instantly aware of the implications of MNI, VCP and ARS. My guess is that those cognizant with terms such as argentiferous galena or plough pebbles, may not even be aware the significance of triskeles, peltas, language death, colophons, totenmemoria or the cumdach of the cathach of Columcille.

I have tried to provide a guide to give students and the general reader an insight into the type of material available and the state of knowledge to (approximately) late 2004.

The more complex or obscure arguments have been omitted, while, hopefully, I have pointed those interested in the right direction. The size of the bibliography itself (which is far from exhaustive), will give some idea of the vastness of the subject and the difficulties of creating an understandable outline. I have listed short descriptions of the groups of people discussed in the book in Appendix 1, and some of the individuals mentioned in Appendix 2.

Finally, with the passage of nearly four decades, even the original title of the book *The Archaeology of Late Celtic Britain and Ireland* (which was in itself a change in approach at the time), has become outmoded.

My thanks are due to colleagues, friends and family who have read sections, or all of this book and in particular Graeme Cavers, William Gillies, David Longley, Ross Trench-Jellicoe and Niamh Whitfield, who have made helpful comments on the text. I am also indebted to those who helped with the illustrations, particularly Sophie Brown, Charlotte Jones and David Taylor. Jennifer Laing very kindly cut some 20,000 words from the penultimate draft on the grounds that the general reader would not relish the more abstruse and unintelligible, jargon-ridden arguments and descriptions.