Chapter Five

Westward Ho?
Sword-Bearers and All the Rest of It...

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Recent advances in identifying the language of inscriptions from Early Iron Age stelae in south-western Iberia as an archaic branch of Celtic call into question much of our conventional wisdom about the introduction of Celtic languages into the Iberian Peninsula (Koch 2009; 2011). In consequence, the reliability of Herodotus’ account of Κελτοί Keltai inhabiting the lands around the headwaters of the Danube is now being questioned, and long-cherished assumptions about the location of a presumed Celtic homeland in the area between modern-day Bohemia, northern Italy and east-central France are coming under critical scrutiny.

Even before the new linguistic evidence from the decipherment of the stelae inscriptions from south-west Iberia became available, archaeologists in their attempts to get to the bottom of cultural formation and transformation processes affecting Europe’s Atlantic seaboard during later prehistory had started increasingly to turn their attention away from continental connections. Instead, they began to focus on the role of the western seaways and on maritime links between different parts of the Atlantic façade (Ruiz-Gálvez 1990, 81–99; 1998, 121–273; Cunliffe 1997, 145–56; 2001, 109–58).

This has meant a radical departure from a paradigm centred very much on the notion of population influx from central Europe conditioning the development of Atlantic Bronze Age and Iron Age societies. While J. Déchelette (1913, 725) stands out as an early sceptic of the invasion theory, most of his contemporaries supported the notion of sword-wielding invaders from the north or north-western Alpine foreland spreading Celtic culture and language throughout Atlantic Europe.

This attitude is seen, for example, in the work of L. Siret (1913, 420–5) who used some very general similarities between metalwork objects either side of the Pyrenees to place the ‘Celtisation’ of Iberia firmly in the Late Bronze Age.

Following very much in the same vein were the works of O. G. S. Crawford (1922, 27f.), H. Peake (1922, 130 f.), E. Evans (1930, 157–71), and R. A. S. Macalister (1935, 54–87) championing the idea of a Late Bronze Age invasion of the British Isles and other parts of Atlantic Europe by bellicose Celtic-speaking ‘sword-bearers’ originating from Urnfield lands. This was based mostly on the notion of Deverel Rimbury pottery
as Urnfield-inspired and on a presumed origin of many elements of the carp’s-tongue complex—sensu lato—in the area around the western Alps.

Further elaborating on those concepts a few years later, but applying a much-refined chronology, A. Mahr (1937, 389–402) and P. Bosch Gimpera (1942, 8–43) presented a somewhat more complex model for the ‘Celtization’ of the British Isles and Iberia respectively. They sought to identify two consecutive ‘waves’ of Celtic-speaking invaders, the earlier dating to the Late Bronze Age, the later to the Iron Age. Fairly soon, however, shortcomings in the models proposed by these two scholars and their predecessors became apparent. Neither the assumed chronology nor the presumed nature and geographical origin of most of the elements, as used to argue for an Urnfield invasion of much of western Europe at the height of the Late Bronze Age, would stand up to closer scrutiny (Savory 1948, 157–66).

As a consequence, during more recent decades any theories of an Urnfield expansion into western Europe have met with increasing scepticism (Clark 1966, 184f.; Ruiz Zapatero 1985, 24–44; Brun 1986, 61–78). Research trying to pin down the origins of any Celts in Iberia has focused mainly on evidence for Iron Age contacts between the lands to the north-east of the Pyrenees on the one hand and the Iberian Peninsula on the other (cf. Almagro Basch 1952; Sangmeister 1960; Schüle 1969; Kalb 1979; Lenerz-de Wilde 1991). At the same time, focus has shifted from attempts at identifying mass migrations to more subtle mechanisms potentially driving language shift. Thus, in recent discussions, the adoption of sets of ‘foreign’ status markers by social élites plays a prominent role as a material-culture indicator of processes potentially linked to language shift (cf. Mallory 1992; Arnold 1995; Anthony 1997).

It might be worthwhile then to take a fresh look at the archaeological evidence from west-central and Atlantic Europe and ask if at any stage prior to the mid-first millennium BC—when the presence of Celtic speakers is attested for both northern Italy and south-western Iberia—there is any indication of sets of status markers having been passed on from one to the other. In essence, the answer to this question is that a transmission of status markers between west-central and Atlantic Europe prior to the mid-first millennium BC occurred on at least two different occasions, but that movement of the elements in question was not always in the same direction.

During the earlier part of the Late Bronze Age—Bz D and Ha A / phases Appleby and Penard respectively—the movement was clearly from east to west. At this stage we see the adoption of such emblematic Urnfield items as grip-tongue swords and sheet-bronze metalwork by various Atlantic communities, along with new specialist know-how needed for their production and ritual knowledge about their ‘proper’ treatment upon deposition (cf. Jockenhövel 1975, 140–6; Colqhoun & Burgess 1988, 24–31; Brandherm 2007, 29–37 for swords; Gerloff 2010 for sheet-metal vessels; Brandherm 2011 for helmets).

So far, scholarly attention regarding this process has focused largely on the area between the rivers Loire and Thames, but regions further to the south are equally affected,
5.1. Some early Urnfield imports and direct derivatives from southern and western Iberia: 1–3 Arroyomolinos, prov. Jaén (after Siret 1913, fig. 131); 4, 5 Santa Vitória, conc. Beja (after Schubart 1975, pl. 38, 397, 398); 6 Santa Ana de Trujillo, prov. Cáceres (after Harrison 2004, fig. p. 212); 7 Ría de Huelva, prov. Huelva (after Brandherm 2007, pl. 1, 6), not to scale
involving some long-distance movement not only of physical items, but also of abstract
concepts. This is exemplified by the Arroyomolinos hoard from southern Spain (Siret 1913, 358f. fig. 131), with its two Type Grigny winged axes which were deposited with
bracelets inserted into their side loops (Fig. 5.1.1, 5.1.2). Type Grigny axes are common
in the ‘rilledware’ early Urnfield province between the upper Rhine and the Paris basin,
but only rarely found further to the west or to the south. Furthermore, the custom of
depositing axes with bracelets inserted into their side loops seems to have originated

By its very nature, the adoption of foreign manufacturing techniques is much harder
to pin down in geographical terms than the deposition of any category of items—
either imported or locally manufactured—according to foreign ritual. Things are further
complicated by the fact that in south-western Iberia many of the items in question only
survive as images on the Late Bronze Age warrior stelae that precede the inscription-
bearing stelae of the Early Iron Age.

In any case, while later warrior stelae depict a broad range of Mediterranean object
types, this is clearly not true for those stelae dating to the earlier part of the Late Bronze
Age (cf. Pingel 1974; 1993; Celestino Pérez 2001, 304–14). Their imagery is almost
exclusively ‘Atlantic’ in nature, but a number of object types regularly depicted in the
earlier warrior stelae, e.g. swords and helmets, must be considered to be of ultimately
central European origin. Where these were first adopted from Urnfield prototypes is of
course difficult to establish.

However, judging from the amalgamation of Urnfield sheet-bronze working tech-
niques and eastern Mediterranean design seen in the Late Bronze Age helmets of
western Europe, it would certainly not seem implausible to suggest a direct involvement
of south-western Iberia in this process (Fig. 5.1.6).

More tangible evidence for an exposure of south-western Iberia to early Urnfield
stimuli comes from a Type Rixheim sword dredged from the Ría de Huelva and
imitations of early Urnfield rilled-ware vessels from Late Bronze Age burials in southern
Portugal (Fig. 5.1.4, 5.1.5, 5.1.7). While the presence of imported metalwork might well
be attributable to indirect down-the-line contact, this hardly applies to the imitation of
pottery designs whose nearest parallels are found in west-central France (cf. e.g. Unz
1973, pl. 37, 8.12).

Overall, though, evidence for direct exposure of southern and western Iberia to
Urnfield influence remains rather sparse. What indication there is, however, is consistent
in exposing contacts mainly with the Bz D rilled-ware province of the Paris basin and the
north-western Alpine foreland, and to a lesser extent also with the Rhine-Swiss-French
group of Ha A.

With the end of the Late Bronze Age this tide changes completely. While we still
see the incorporation of some central and even south-eastern European elements into
Atlantic Late Bronze Age / Early Iron Age material culture (Huth 2000, 176–84), in a
total reversal of what could be observed during the earlier stages of the Late Bronze Age,
5.2. Early Hallstatt élite status markers derived from Atlantic prototypes of the Ewart Park phase: 1–2 Villement, dép. Indre; 3 Wiesloch, Baden; 4 Feldkirch-Hartheim, Baden; 5 Esslingen, Württemberg; 6 Großeibstadt, Lower Franconia; 7 Bingen, Rhineland-Palatinate; 8 Breisach, Baden; 9 Großeibstadt, Lower Franconia; 10 Thalmaßing, Middle Franconia; 11 Poláky, Bohemia; 12 Hohenstein-Oberstetten, Württemberg; 13 Nymburk-Habeš, Bohemia; 14 Rvenice, Bohemia; 15 Frankfurt Stadtwald, Hesse (after Milcent 2009, fig. 16), not to scale
5.3. Early Western Urnfield and the Late Bronze Age in Iberia: Group C1 crested helmets (Egg & Tomedi 2002, fig. 12, with additions); group C1 crested helmets depicted on Iberian 'warrior' stelae (Harrison 2004, fig. 7.12); Rixheim swords, Variants E and F (Reim 1974, pl. 13), rilled ware and rilled-ware imitations (cf. Unz 1973, map 4, with additions)

(map by D. Brandherm, M. Crampin, J.T. Koch)
many status markers used by the early Hallstatt élites of west-central Europe are now derived from Atlantic prototypes (Milcent 2009, 466) (Fig. 2).

These, however, are totally lacking from south-western Iberia which at this stage had ceased to be an integral part of the Atlantic Late Bronze Age world, probably due to the early introduction of iron technology into this area and its re-orientation towards Mediterranean trade networks, triggered by the strong Phoenician presence in the area (cf. Burgess 1991, 38f).

Still, both directional movements of élite status-marker sets between west-central Europe on the one hand and the Atlantic façade on the other—east-west at the outset of the Late Bronze Age, west-east at its very end—certainly could be viewed as indicative of historical processes that might have been accompanied by language shift. Due to the lack of richly furnished élite burials in the Atlantic world, the earlier of these movements shows up somewhat less clearly in the archaeological record than the latter, but which of the two processes—if either—might claim a better likelihood of being associated with an expansion of Celtic language(s) is impossible to decide based on the archaeological evidence at our disposal.

Even though we believe to have identified some evidence for direct contact between south-western Iberia and Urnfield lands north of the Pyrenees at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, such direct contact is very definitely not the only possible explanation for the presence of Celtic speakers in either area at a much later date. A number of alternative scenarios—potentially with other Atlantic regions, e.g. Brittany and north-western Iberia acting as intermediaries—might offer equally plausible if less simplistic models to account for the presence of Keltoi both beyond the Pillars of Hercules and on the headwaters of the Danube at the end of the Early Iron Age.

The problem of course is that, where direct linguistic evidence is lacking, archaeology has no means of either verifying or even falsifying any of these. As prior to the later stages of the Iron Age virtually all archaeological evidence from central and north-western Europe, including the British Isles and most of Iberia is non-linguistic in nature, a reliable answer to the question of where Celtic speech first developed and how it might have spread to areas outside its place of origin should perhaps not be expected.
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