

Celts, Collective Identity and Archaeological Responsibility: Asturias (Northern Spain) as case study

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Abstract

Celtism was introduced in Asturias (Northern Spain) as a source of identity in the 19th century by the bourgeois and intellectual elite which developed the Asturianism and a regionalist political agenda. The archaeological Celts did not appear until Franco dictatorship, when they were linked to the Iron Age hillforts. Since the beginning of Spanish democracy, in 1978, most of the archaeologists who have been working on Asturian Iron Age have omitted ethnic studies. Today, almost nobody speaks about Celts in Academia. But, in the last years the Celtism has widespread on Asturian society. Celts are a very important political reference point in the new frame of Autonomous regions in Spain. In this context, archaeologists must to assume our responsibility in order of clarifying the uses and abuses of Celtism as a historiographical myth. We have to transmit the deconstruction of Celtism to society and we should be able to present alternatives to these archaeological old discourses in which Celtism entail the assumption of an ethnocentric, hierarchical and androcentric view of the past.

Zusammenfassung

Der Keltizismus wurde in Asturien (Nordspanien) als identitätsstiftende Ressource im 19. Jahrhundert durch bürgerliche und intellektuelle Eliten entwickelt, die Asturianismus und regionalistische politische Ziele propagierte. Die archäologischen Kelten erschienen allerdings erst während der Franco-Diktatur, während der sie mit den eisenzeitlichen befestigten Höhensiedlungen verknüpft wurden. Seit der Einführung der Demokratie in Spanien im Jahr 1978 haben die meisten Archäologen, die über die asturische Eisenzeit arbeiten, ethnische Studien vernachlässigt. In der modernen asturischen Wissenschaft spricht so gut wie niemand mehr über die Kelten. Allerdings ist in den letzten Jahren der Keltizismus in der asturischen Gesellschaft ein populäres Thema geworden. Die Kelten sind heute ein bedeutendes politisches Schlagwort im neuen Rahmen der autonomen Regionen in Spanien. In diesem Kontext müssen sich Archäologen ihrer Verpflichtung besinnen, die Nutzung und den Missbrauch des Keltizismus als historiographischen Mythos zu erklären. Wir müssen die Dekonstruktion des Keltizismus öffentlich vermitteln und sollten dazu im Stande sein, Alternativen zu den alten archäologischen Erzählungen anzubieten, in denen der Keltizismus auf ethnizentrischen, hierarchischen und androzentrischen Vorstellungen über die Vergangenheit beruht.

1. Introduction

Asturias is a small region in Northern Spain facing the Cantabrian Sea. It is bordered on the south by the Cantabrian Mountains, a barrier of high peaks that separates Asturias from Central Iberia.

In the Middle Ages, the former Kingdom of Asturias was one of the few areas that remained outside the Muslim conquest of 8th century. Later, it served as a starting point of the Christian advance further south. Therefore, this medieval kingdom was instrumental in the idea of Spain and *Spanishness*. It was understood, and it still is, as its *alma mater*. The History of Asturias, like Kosovo to Serbs, has been used both for the vindication of the idea of Spain as for the Asturias.

Since the Age of Enlightenment, political identity of some Asturian – from the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy – moved progressively from the Spanish to regional sphere. The historical significance of the Kingdom of Asturias was gradually redefined, with a new regionalist perspective. If the Kingdom of Asturias had provided the institutional and legal bases for political and cultural demands of Asturias, from Enlightenment the reference to ethnicity, race and culture for pre-Roman times became increasingly important. The pre-Roman period will be seen as the birth of the Asturian nation, with the *astures* as their legendary references (Marín 2005a).

Here, we will look at the role that Archaeology has played in the creation of these representations of the Iron Age in Asturias. We will pay attention on Celts as a historical construction, and finally, we will offer our perspective on the representation of the past into the present, and the relationship between archaeologists and the social context where we work.

2. The Celts appear

In the 16th century, some Asturian authors began to mention the Celts. They reviewed the names of ancient peoples in order to find their ancestors, as it was typical in Europe since the Renaissance historiography (Barreiro, 1993: 183). Greek and Roman sources were considered as indisputable authorities, which displaced biblical or hagiographical sources. History served as honorary instruments for the Asturian aris-

tocracy, which sought to legitimize their sociopolitical position. The pre-Roman past progressively became an instrument of vindication (Bermejo 1989: 81; Díaz-Andreu, Mora, 1995: 28).

Jovellanos stands out among these authors. He was a very influential politician in the Court of Madrid in the late 18th century. In Asturias, he was known as the father of a cultural and political movement called *Asturianism* (San Martín 1998: 25). He developed popular historiographical topics that have been repeated insistently until now:

- the similarity between pre-Roman peoples and the contemporary Asturian society.
- the essentialist idea that Asturias was born during the Iron Age and reached its golden age with the Kingdom of Asturias.
- the characteristic features of the Asturians are the struggle, ferocity, and resistance against the invaders.

Asturianism was set up as a political enlightened project. It was similar to other European countries where, before Nationalism, a *cultural identity* was being built by reinterpreting some elements of *ethnic identity* – language, traditions and history – (Fernández González 2000: 77).

3. Celts and Archaeo-Historical narratives

In the late 19th century, there was a great development of studies on Asturian history, ethnography, folklore, literature... encouraged by regional political interests. The Celtic theses emerged with force (Champion 1996: 66; Cunliffe 2003: 111), but Spanish archaeologists still remained outside the major European paradigm about Celts and Iron Age. Here, Celts were associated with megalithic monuments, but never with Iron Age elements.

The Asturian, Galician and Cantabrian pre-Roman peoples mentioned by classical authors such as Strabo were seen as Celts. The distinctiveness of Northern regions, such as Asturias, was highlighted. Homophony of the terms was a key factor in this essentialist identification (Fig.1).

After ensuring that the Celts were settled in Asturias, they described some features that characterize the

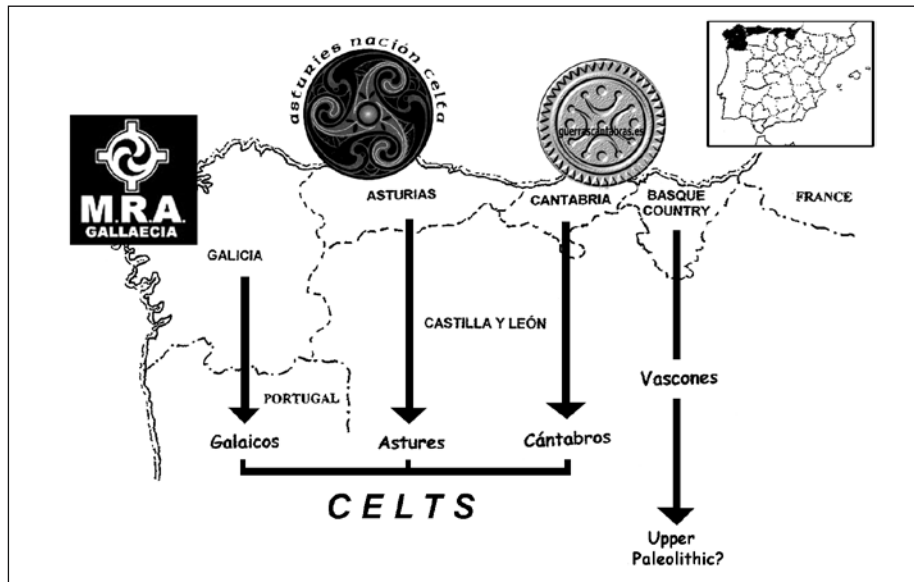


Fig.1: The pre-Roman peoples mentioned by classical authors serve as references to contemporary national identities (Ruiz Zapatero 2006).

contemporary Asturian people as of Celtic descent. The dances and songs of traditional music derive from the Celtic warriors who sang it when they went into battle. The Celtic essence also remains in the Asturians' courage and their love of freedom, since they were the only people that were conquered neither by the Muslims or by Napoleon. These stories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries used to mix data from classical historians, linguistics, ethnography and mythology. The result was a mythical reconstruction of the past (Marín 2004; 2005a; 2005b).

When they sought the archaeological Celticity of their pre-Roman ancestors, they still talked about megaliths and Palaeolithic cave paintings, although in those years some Iron Age hillforts were known already (i.e. Flórez 1878).

The first regionalist party with parliamentary representation in the Spanish Parliament was Junta Regionalista Asturiana in 1916. His regionalism was not nationalistic. They only wanted to recover the originality and historical personality of Asturias, to strengthen its political clout within the Spanish state (San Martín 1998; 2006; Fernández González 2000). In the political texts of the party, the History of Asturias was mythologized, with the Celts in its origin.

4. Celts and Franco's dictatorship in Asturias

During the Franco dictatorship, archaeologists linked the Asturian hillforts of the Iron Age to the Celts for the first time. They would monopolize the Celtic discourse (Díaz-Andreu 1993: 75; Ruiz Zapatero 2003: 224). The cultural and political elites continued promoting the study of local issues. The previous historiographical topics (Acevedo 1893; Canella, Bellmunt 1895–1900) were used, but from a clearly Spanish point of view. This was possible thanks to the ambiguity of essentialist discourses of Asturian regionalism, because that way of thinking could effectively support both the Spanishness and the Asturianism (Fernández González 2000: 82; San Martín 2006). In 1946 the Instituto de Estudios Asturianos was created within the scheme of the *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas* (Scientific Research Council), which was an institution run by the Catholic sect *Opus Dei*, where all scientific and cultural institutions were centralized after the insurgency of 1936 (Uría 1984: 57; Mora 2003).

The role played by these archaeologists within the fascist dictatorship was the *discovery* of the racial bases of Spanishness – the Celts – to legitimize the imposed political system (Díaz-Andreu 2003: 57; Ruiz



Fig. 2: Reconstruction view of Coaña hillfort drawn by Antonio García y Bellido (1942).

Zapatero 2003: 228–9). They tried to prove the Celtic character of Iron Age in many areas of Spain, including the *Castro culture* of the Northwest (Pereira 2000; González Ruibal 2006–2007: 41–8). They combined linguistic and ethnographic data uncritically, and they made forced analogies in space and time – for example, with medieval Irish mythology or with the Central-European Iron Age – (Collis 2003). The excavations of some Asturian hillforts helped to build a Spanish racial unity raised by archaeologists related to the Franco regime as Julio Martínez Santa-Olalla (1946) and Martín Almagro Basch (1952). The reference to the Celts was the easiest option, refusing in some cases the Iberian culture of the Mediterranean region (Ruiz Zapatero 2003: 226).

It is not a coincidence that the Culture-historical paradigm was consolidated in Spain at this time, clearly related to the nationalist ideology and ethnocentric vision of the past. Cultural change was only explained by conquests or peoples' migrations. Archaeological data were used to relate archaeological cultures with current languages, peoples and *races* (López Jiménez 2001).

Since 1940, Antonio García y Bellido and Juan Uria Ríu excavated several sites in Asturias (García y Bellido

1941; 1942; García y Bellido, Uría 1940) with the aim of determining if their inhabitants were or were not the Celts of classical sources (Fig. 2). Ancient historians did not mention the Celticity of pre-Roman peoples from actual Asturias or Cantabria, although this was not a problem for them.

Archaeologists who worked in Asturias at the time started to use the concept of “Castro culture”, in relation to other Celtic Spanish areas. In Galicia, the Celtic explanation had been used in Archaeology since the 1920s (González Ruibal 2006–2007: 48–60). Ethnic studies became the main focus of attention for archaeologists, above chronological, geographical and typological studies. They appealed to strongly racial conceptions of *archaeological cultures*, and archaeological data were self-serving interpreted (Marín 2011). For example, they argued that the mortars were actually urns for the ashes of the dead, so the Celtic ritual of incineration would be documented (Uría 1945).

The Celtic label became extremely blurred and it was unclear if it was used in an ethnic, linguistic, racial or material sense. Sometimes, a hillfort was considered Celtic because a single piece of one kind of decorated pottery appeared (Uría 1941).

Even the authors who developed this model stated they were not able to check the Celticity of Asturian hillforts. There was a clear lack of definition of what was meant by Celtic in the archaeological record. In any case, all hillforts studied in Asturias will be labelled as Celtic, using sources as uncertain as Avienus' work (González 1976).

Further archaeological research will be marked by the blind acceptance of Celtic *factoid*, as Simon James meant (1999: 136): a theoretical construction hidied as a fact. The Celtic paradigm in Spanish Iron Age Archaeology contributed to theoretical and methodological stagnation during the Franco period.

5. Celts disappeared from Academia...

Since the late 1970s, Celtic-based interpretations were roughly forgotten in Asturias. Since then, academic discussion has focused on chronological aspects, in material typologies, descriptions of ramparts, etc. and looking for a more “scientific” discourse in the Archaeology of Asturian Iron Age (Marín 2004: 86–92).



Fig. 3: Poster of the Asturian nationalist party Conceyu Nacionalista Astur: "Celtic nations fighting for freedom".

Many technical innovations will be adopted in the Spanish Archaeology from the 1980s. With a Culture-historical theoretical background, new methods helped the new archaeologists to distinguish themselves conceptually from previous generations (Hernando 1992: 19). In this way they will be able to accumulate scientific capital very quickly (*sensu* Bourdieu 1999a: 81). The Celtic paradigm was abandoned. These authors preferred a sterile scientism they find in the New Archaeology, omitting the social interpretation of the archaeological record (*i.e.* Villa 2002; 2007).

6. ...but Celts were widespread at popular level

While Celts were eliminated from the archaeological scientific discourse, there was a real explosion of Celtism at a popular level with the coming of democracy (Marín 2005a: 151–82). In the late 1960s and especially in the 1970s some nationalist political currents in Asturias began to grow. Their ideology recovered the constructions of Asturian regionalism from early 20th century, returning to the vindication of the idea of Asturias over time.

The 1978 Spanish Constitution created a model of territorial organization midway between the cen-

tral and federal state. The Autonomous Communities gained a great power within the Spanish State, and they began to arm themselves with an ideological device in order to defend the national historic rights in their region. At the same time, there was development of nationalist political parties (González Morales 1994; Ruiz Zapatero 2006: 200–3).

In 1977, the first Asturian nationalist party – the Conceyu Nacionalista Astur – was founded with a leftist revolutionary project to fight for the self-determination of Asturias (San Martín 2006). They interpreted the country's situation as a colonial reality. It was the first in a series of parties, unions and political groups that began to make use of the alleged Celtic past of Asturias. They compared the struggle between Asturias and Spain with the rest of *Celtic countries* in the Atlantic region with the fights of Celts against Rome in the antiquity (Fig.3).

In general, the Asturian nationalism is a leftist movement aiming to *achieve a nation-state based on Celtic ethnicity and Socialism* (Girón 2000: 106). The Asturian uniqueness was usually marked by establishing a direct continuity with the past in an essentialist way. This is common to all nationalist ideologies. The Asturian nationalism established continuities from the Iron Age



Fig. 4: The celtic pig: a vernacular variety of Asturian pig (from Álvarez Sevilla 2004).



Fig. 5: Poster of the “1998 Interceltic Music Festival of Nava”, in Asturias.

and the Kingdom of Asturias until the present (Iglesias 1999). These discourses were often disguised as scientific and unsurprisingly resorted to Archaeology, since Celtic explanations had prevailed in Academia for decades (Collis 2006: 200–1).

Nationalist parties still have little electoral clout in Asturias, but we must not confuse their small representation in parliament with the importance of this social movement. They have a great mobilizing force in Asturias. Some of their proposals, such as the officialdom of the Asturian language, are as the focus of attention in the public debate. Even recently, the leftist nationalist party Bloque por Asturias was part of the government coalition in Asturias during 2003–2007 and 2008–2010.

7. Cultural Celtism... and marketing!

In addition to political parties, certain cultural elites have supported Celtism in recent years. The creation in 1981 of the Lliga Celta d’Asturies was particularly important. In their magazine *Ástor* they made clear how almost everything in Asturias was Celtic. They even said the Asturian language could be understood as Celtic, despite being a Romance language, because it was in danger of disappearing as did the Celtic languages of the British Isles. They also were worried about historical and archaeological issues. They criticized archaeologists for having abandoned the Celtic paradigm (Lliga Celta d’Asturies 1983; Lombardía 1990).

The relay is taken by Conceyu d’Estudios Etnográficos Belenos, with the magazine *Asturies, memoria encesa d’un país*. Since 1996, they have defended the Asturian heritage. At the same time, they have come to endorse the theory that everything in Asturias is Celtic (Álvarez Sevilla 2001; Álvarez Peña 2002; Llope 2010) (Fig. 4).

Music is one of the most important ways in the spread of Celtism. With the resurgence of Folk music since the 1970s, the term *Celtic music* has been accepted at a popular level. This new label comprises a vague array of types of traditional music. At the same time, it has generated new musical styles such as *Celtic Rock* (Elipe 1996). *Celtic Nights* and *Interceltic* festivals began to be frequent in Asturias, consolidating gradually the supposed cultural brotherhood with other Celtic countries (Fernández McClintock 2002) (Fig. 5).

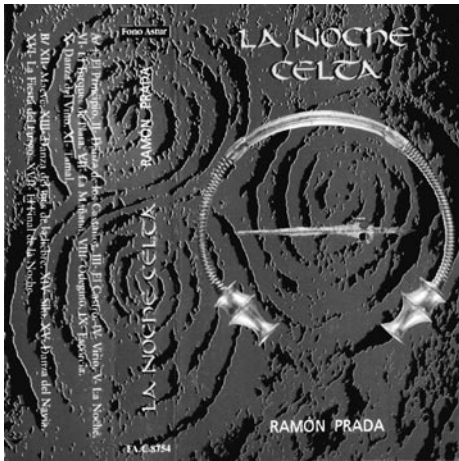


Fig. 6: Sleeve of the cassette “The Celtic Night”.



Fig. 7: Poster of the “2006 Cantabrian Wars”.

The Festival Interceltique de Lorient (Brittany, France), which began in 1971, has accepted the inclusion of Asturias as new Celtic country since 1987, thanks to the pressure of the Conceyu d’Estudios Etnográficos Belenos. One of their components, Lisardo Lombardía, has recently become director of this festival (Llope 2010).

Actually, the use of the label *celtic* in Asturian folk music is mainly associated with marketing. It is a way in which a traditional music could be sold worldwide under a universal category. One of the most important features of celtic label nowadays is its economic profitability. This is one of the factors that have made

the celtic label has quickly been incorporated to economic sectors such as leisure and tourism (Fernández McClintock 2002: 43–8) (Fig.6).

In Spain, the proliferation of historical festivals and recreations in recent years is an example of the interest of the public in the pre-Roman past (Ruiz Zapatero 2006: 207–12). We do not like enough the discourses which are underlying on these historical recreations, neither those with archaeological advice (such as *Keltiberoi* in Numancia, Soria), nor those that do not (such as *Cantabrian Wars* in Los Corrales de Buelna, Cantabria, or *Asturian Wars*, in Carabanzo, Asturias) (Fig.7). They develop and perpetuate some historiographical



Fig. 8: Battle between Romans and astures in the “Asturian Wars” recreation festival.

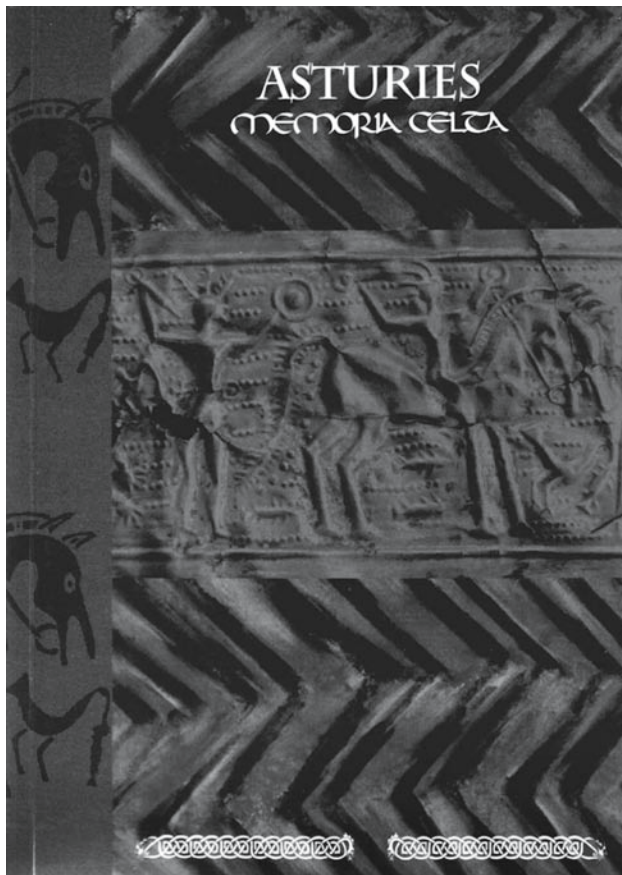


Fig. 9: Cover of the book “Asturias: Celtic Memory”, from Beunos Foundation.

commonplace ideas: past-present essentialism, androcentrism or naturalization of social conflicts, because their discourse assumes the characteristic features of Culture-historical archaeology. They understand the peoples of the Iron Age as ethnic references to present-day regions or nations and they show that the most outstanding of these peoples is their heroic struggle against the conqueror (Fig.8). They only look at the final moment of these societies, like homogeneous entities. The Iron Age is shown as a uniform and happy whole, without social conflicts before the conquest.

8. Archaeologists, Celts and Society

In many cases citizens can not participate in the scientific discourse because it is unintelligible for them. People tend to accept scientific beliefs from an institutionalized source of knowledge, from the authori-

ties of scientific knowledge (Barnes 1980: 276). As a result, people begin to tolerate science, replacing the traditional way of thinking. But along with formal science is born a “popular science” that does not accept the limits of academic science and meets the needs of the people, being accommodated to traditional way of thinking (Handlin 1980: 259–60). The Celts are the main characters of this historical popular science in Asturias.

The social sciences are in a paradigmatic situation, because they share their object of study –society– with other symbolic production professionals such as politicians or journalists. As a result, recognition of the monopoly of legitimate discourse about their objects of study is not so easily obtained in the social sciences (Bourdieu 1999a: 79; 1999b: 114–5). Therefore, there are frequent intrusions by non-specialists in generating archaeological popular narratives, which often resemble *fringe archaeology*.

Currently, we see a complete disengagement of archaeologists and society, which are supposed to be the final audience of our work. Since the Celtic paradigm was abandoned in Iron Age, very few archaeologists have dealt that subject in Asturias. The prevailing opinion among them is that new techniques and new excavations in hillforts will replace the mythical explanations, like Celtism, of the Iron Age in Asturias.

Today, many non-specialists try to defend “scientifically” the existence of Celts in Asturian Prehistory (*i.e.* Lombardía 1990; 2006; Fernández Gutiérrez 2001; Álvarez Peña 2002; Llope 2010) (Fig.9). These popular Celts are constructed using same arguments than archaeological Celts of Franco’s historiographical period: the ancient texts as authority sources, uncritical analogies in space and time, the naturalization of social inequalities or a positivist objectivism in the study of the Past. This generates a strongly essentialist discourse that exclusively uses the past to justify present realities and contemporary political agendas.

9. Alternatives

By the first time, the Celtism was used in Asturias by people outside the Archaeology and totally disconnected with the archaeological remains of the Iron Age. But, from excavations in Coaña 1940, archaeologists



Fig. 10: Singular combat between two warriors in the “Asturian Wars” recreation festival.

were the main instigators of the Celtic explanation of the Iron Age. Thus, archaeologists are fully responsible for carrying out the theoretical deconstruction of Celtism for society (Marín 2005a: 183–200).

Historiographical analysis should make us understand how archaeological knowledge about the past has been built, because it is our beginning. If we want our scientific field to become increasingly autonomous and less dependent on politics, we must know which concepts have been central to our science in order to discuss its validity, as John Collis (2003) and Gonzalo Ruiz Zapatero (1993) have pointed out.

Celtism is a clear example of a concept that was been created with nationalism and has been applied uncritically in the social sciences until a couple of decades. Following J.D. Hill (1989), Celtism involves maintaining an essentialist thinking that rests on 19th century conceptions, racists and nationalists. We oppose that because it is pernicious at an Epistemological level.

Asturian Celtism demonstrates a curious contradiction. Continually there are attempts to demonstrate the specificity of Asturian culture from prehistory. But, the Celtic Asturian Iron Age is inserted into an amalgam, with other Atlantic countries (Álvarez Peña 2002). In order to distinguish Asturianess of Spanishness, Astu-

rian past is confused with Irish or Scottish history. Inserting the Asturian Iron Age into a confused Celtic European culture means not being able to correctly analyze the specificities of its cultural characteristics (Marín 2005b: 327).

Celtism naturalizes hierarchies and perpetuates racialized and androcentric interpretations. For example, society is often defined by the features that are then related to the activities of men, such as war and herding activities. There is also a tendency to overestimate the study of weapons or jewelry, interpreted as symbols of range and masculinity (Fig.10). The traditional views of Celtic archaeology are not compatible with a comprehensive assessment of gender relations or the application of anthropological egalitarian models of societies. In addition, Celts are mostly recreations made by urban-dwellers who reject other explanations of the archaeological remains made by subordinate groups, such as peasants, which are reflected in the traditional folklore (Gazin-Schwartz, Holtorf 1999; González Álvarez 2011). Therefore if our aim is to produce knowledge as objective as possible through the theoretical and methodological autonomy of our scientific field, Celts do not work.

However we aim to be sensitive to the problems of

society which we belong to and ensure that our scientific knowledge reverts to its advancement. People who currently use Celtism in the self-construction of their cultural identity could be understood as the authentic Celts. According to Simon James (1999: 76), ethnicity is a cultural construct that has little to do with real history, but rather with what people believe. Some current Asturian people consider themselves and their culture as Celtic. The ethnogenesis of these modern Celts did not start two thousand years ago. It is a process that must be understood in its contemporary sociological context. Therefore, if we want to bring the Archaeology to Society we cannot ignore the Celts, since it is the main historical concept which is handled at popular level. Our first objective must be communicating to society the origin and reactionary political connotations in the use of the Celts throughout modernity.

Archaeologists have a debt to society. We must strive for Archaeology to also be critical social science. If we care about the archaeological heritage of a region we should care about people who live there and their cultural values. People explore for themselves the meanings of the archaeological remains and we must be sensitive to this fact. We do not believe in unlimited multivocality, but we think we should at least talk with the other stakeholders of the past. Multivocality in itself does not fight the power and authority structures, as Hamilakis (1999) has noted. We must provide to the rest of society with the materials necessary to modify its relationship with the past, as Hodder (1992) has proposed.

In this sense, exhibitions, publications, conferences, the musealization of archaeological sites or historical recreations must help us in the dialogue with society. There, we can share some key issues to rethink the past in a critical way through our doubts and questions, not through closed speeches. They can be a good resource to promote reflection of society on many social issues of current interest. That may help others to think historically many historical problems, which have existed in the past and continue to exist today. The Iron Age is

the birth of a rural landscape of small villages that still remains alive in Asturias with few changes, even today. These studies are essential if we want to understand the subsequent peasant societies which have lived in this place until almost our time.

On the other side, the Iron Age in Northern Spain was neither a social haven nor a scene of constant warfare, like most of the historical recreations show. The hillforts were hillforts 800 years before the Roman conquest. These Iron Age communities did not have such hierarchical social forms than their southern neighbours of the *oppida* in Central Iberia. But, there were other interesting social conflicts to reflect on the present-day society. Patriarchy was consolidated in the Iron Age, with a new male ideology materialized in the ramparts of the hillforts and the warrior assemblage. Men were occupied on the herding activities which moved them away from the dwellings and women remained there carrying on the maintenance activities which absorbed all of their time inside the ramparts of the hillforts. The previous complementarity of functions between men and women began to disappear in the Iron Age.

The Iron Age also shows us how family and community identities may be more important than other identities such as ethnicity. In spite of this, historical recreations and many archaeologists tend to focus on ethnic or national concepts, like *Astures*, *Cantabri* or Celtic, more related to an urban and contemporary vision of the pre-Roman past. This also omits the archaeological record and ethnoarchaeological references.

Therefore, the deconstruction of Celtism is not a fashionable archaeological trend. It has to be the foundation of a critical archaeology in order to overcome the Culture-historical archaeology. We have to assume the political character of any interpretation of the past and the present (Falquina, Marín, Rolland 2006). Archaeologists can hope to dialogue with society to provide it with ways of thinking that allow them to think about themselves in a more critical way, through the denaturing of the traditional ideas about the past and the present functioning of society.

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