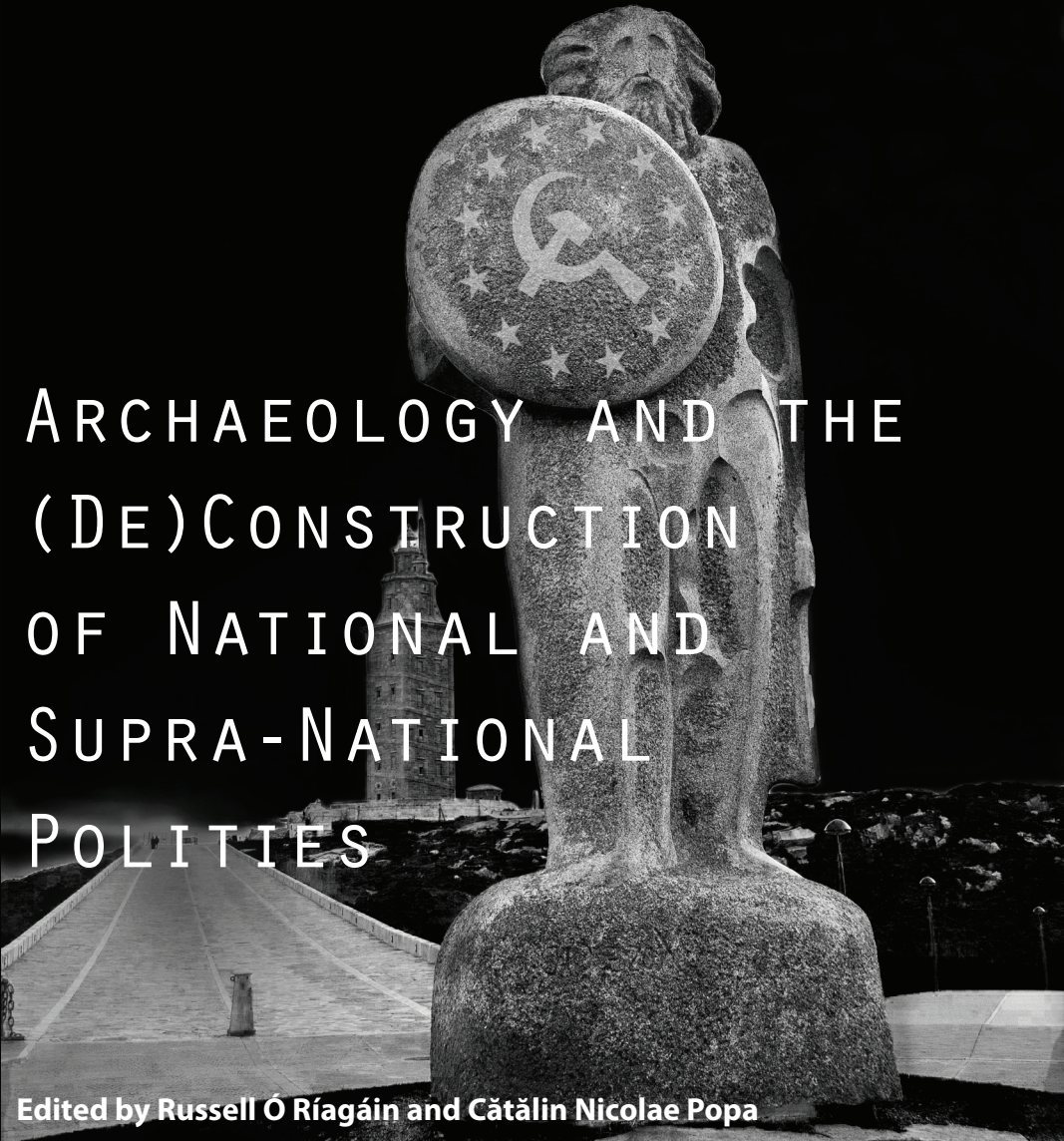


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ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE (DE)CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL AND SUPRA-NATIONAL POLITIES

Edited by Russell Ó Ríagáin and Cătălin Nicolae Popa

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Building Nations in the XXI Century. Celticism, Nationalism and Archaeology in Northern Spain: The Case of Asturias and León

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Introduction

Archaeology was born largely as a product of nineteenth century nationalism and aimed chiefly at providing historical legitimacy for already constituted and nascent nation-state formations (Trigger 2006: 133–137). In Spain, the construction of a centralized bourgeois state proved a particularly problematic historical enterprise. It was only in the late nineteenth century that historical narratives of the central Spanish State and the peripheral regions of Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia, began to fully flourish. Paradoxically, despite confrontation amongst these competing centripetal and centrifugal nationalisms, each variant relied upon structurally similar sources of symbolic legitimacy. The link established between political projects of the present and pre-Roman peoples, loosely framed under the term ‘Celtic groups’, formed a

crucial foundation for both forms of nationalism (Díaz-Andreu 1995; Ruiz Zapatero 2006).

This investigation presents an overview of ‘Celtic’ nationalism in northern Spain, with the regions of Asturias and León as case studies. In these areas, archaeological narratives have served and still serve to justify contemporary political agendas. Archaeologists have thus become major actors in the discursive struggles over the past. However, they have become rather naïve and innocent regarding their contemporary public roles and their relationship towards social and political agendas. This situation has led to a lack of control over the use of their own narratives, which take on a life of their own in the public sphere.

Our paper illustrates how archaeology has been used in the construction of contemporary political identities by regionalist and nationalist agents. Whereas nowadays Asturias aims to reinforce self-government, the objective of León is to become a separate ‘Autonomous Community’¹ endowed with a certain degree of self-government separated from Castile. In both cases, historical narratives on the Iron Age play a central role in justifying the political aspirations of the present nationalist and regionalist ideologies embodied by different political and cultural stakeholders. In recent years, these movements have followed the lead of nationalist groups in the neighbouring region of Galicia (Díaz Santana 2002) and taken on a prominent role in the public and political arenas in León and especially in Asturias (Marín Suárez 2005). In turn, this situation is conditioning archaeological research agendas and the social role of archaeologists. As a consequence, we deem it necessary to reject the post-political trends (Žižek 2000) that currently prevail in our discipline to successfully counter these reactionary movements and narratives.²

1 The 17 Autonomous Communities are the first-level institutions below the central Spanish government in Madrid, established in the Spanish Constitution of 1978. These institutions present a variable but normally high degree of self-governance, being responsible for the administration of culture, spatial planning, education, social services, health care and also policing in some cases.

2 The concept of ‘post-politics’ developed by Žižek (2007) refers to the prevailing attitude in contemporary societies towards a neutralization of the political content of events. Society and its rulers are more interested in ‘making things work’ than in political issues and debates (see Judt 2008 for an application of the term to Tony Blair’s Labour

In parallel, we believe that archaeologists need to assume their role as situated intellectuals (*sensu* Foucault and Deleuze 1977). We must be aware that our specialized knowledge about the past plays a fundamental role in the construction of identities. Thus, we must deploy our academic narratives within a comprehensive critical framework with which the public can grasp the limits of archaeological knowledge (Banks 1996: 2).

Archaeology and Nation Building

The early medieval Christian kingdoms of Iberia have traditionally been used as the outstanding sources of historical legitimacy for most contemporary Spanish regions. The first Christian kingdom emerged in the mountains of Asturias and León during the eighth century, countering the advance of the Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula and beginning the process of *Reconquista*—literally ‘reconquest’—of the southern areas of the peninsula. Therefore, the Kingdom of Asturias and its successor, the Kingdom of León, have been long regarded as the essence of ‘Spanishness’.

However, in a process that began during the Enlightenment and was reinforced throughout the nineteenth century, the political identity of the upper classes of Asturias and León gradually shifted away from the ‘idea of Spain’ towards a more regional consciousness. In this context, the pre-Roman past became a fundamental cultural image to bring forward as a source of legitimacy for contemporary political agendas, like elsewhere in Europe (Collis 2003). The ethnonym *Astures*, used in the classical sources after the Roman conquest to refer to indigenous groups who inhabited the present territory of Asturias and León (fig. 1), along with generic and ambiguous designations such as Celts, became common references in the regionalist creed of ‘Asturianism’ and ‘Leonesism’—designations referring to regionalist or nationalist tendencies in Asturias and León. Therefore, different essentialist historical constructions and founding myths were generated, regardless of archaeological data. Thus, whereas the alleged full extent of both regions was achieved during the glorious

government in Britain). In archaeology, the growing concern about ethical issues such as multivocality, inclusion or participation, weaken the political potential of the discipline (González Ruibal 2010).

medieval times of the Christian kingdoms, their origins dated back to pre-Roman past.

In other regions of Spain, archaeology more or less became a consolidated field of study in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a historical discipline in the service of nationalist ideology (Díaz-Andreu 1995, Viejo-Rose 2011). However, in our study areas archaeological practice was monopolized by the socio-cultural elites of regionalist ideology. This reactionary standpoint did not deny nor reject ‘Spanishness’, but rather emphasized the need to recover local history, culture and language (San Martín Antuña 2006). It could be considered a barely autonomous, incipient scientific field: a *connaissance* rather than a *savoir* following Foucault’s (1972) terminology. Also, it was clearly associated with the expanding bourgeoisie in its twofold process of

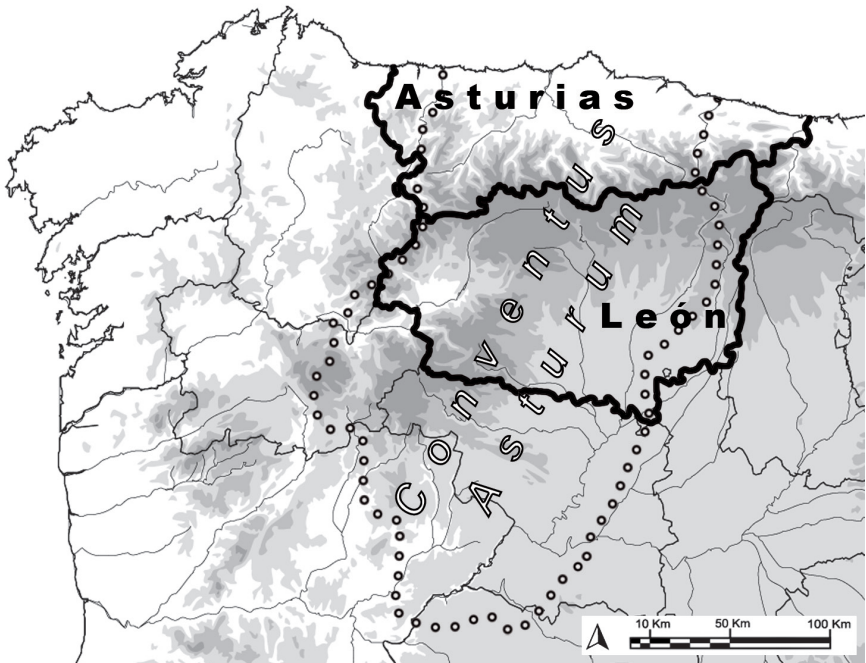


Fig. 1. Map showing the present location of the Autonomous Community of Asturias, the province of León (comprised within the Autonomous Community of Castilla and León) and the limits of the Conventus Asturum created after the Roman conquest.

displacing traditional estates—clergy and nobility—and identifying their own interests with those of the community (Díaz-Andreu and Mora Rodríguez 1995: 28). Moreover, Iron Age archaeology in the late nineteenth century was closer to antiquarianism than to a fully scientific discipline. Accordingly, the Celts were still related to druids, megaliths, shrines in the woods or biblical migrations. Meanwhile, Iron Age hillforts were considered Roman settlements, as shown by the first excavations at the *oppidum* in Lancia, León, in 1867–68 (Grau Lobo 1996: 232–233) or Coaña hillfort, Asturias, in 1878 (Flórez y González 1878).

The Spanish ‘Centralist’ Myth (1939–1975)

The emergence of Iron Age archaeology as an identity-building instrument coincided with the end of the Republican democracy and the beginning of Franco’s dictatorship (1939–1975). At the time, the balance of historical mystification swung towards the idea of a strong centralized Spain, to the detriment of peripheral nationalisms. However, the widespread archaeological discourses that existed prior to the dictatorship were not unanimously rejected. Fundamentally, a culture-historical paradigm continued to prevail. Thus, Iron Age archaeology served as a scientific support to fill ‘gaps’ in the historical narrative derived from classical sources. Through narrowly ethnocentric interpretations, Celts and Iberians became the ethnic and racial underpinnings for the ideology of the fascist regime (Díaz-Andreu 1993). In parallel, archaeologists deployed historical discourses regarding the Iron Age which were scarcely critical and within which the past was more commonly used to serve the political agendas of the present. Moreover, these ‘boring’ approaches (*sensu* Hill 1989) were characterized by their essentialist and androcentric features, and their naturalization of hierarchical and conservative conceptions of society.

The mythologization of the ‘idea of Spain’ was one of the fundamental objectives of the dictatorship. Following the example of other totalitarian states (see Arnold 1990), Franco considered it fundamental to situate the origin of the nation in a remote and idealized past. For their part, the archaeologists who were monopolizing Iron Age archaeology sought the racial roots of Spain in the malleable Celts.

Regime archaeologists like Martín Almagro Basch (1952) and Julio Martínez Santa-Olalla (1946) followed the racial models of Nazi Germany, seeking the Spanish equivalent of Aryans in the pre-Roman ‘Celtic’ peoples such as ‘Celtiberians’ (Díaz-Andreu 1993: 76–77; Ruiz Zapatero 2003: 228–229).

The ambivalence of archaeological literature prior to the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) in Asturias and León facilitated the establishment of a connection with the new doctrine of Franco’s regime and the consolidation of the culture-historical paradigm in archaeology in both regions. The ‘Castro culture’³ was defined as ‘Celtic’. Thus, archaeology joined efforts with a number of disciplines, such as classical history, philology and ethnography in the search of the ‘Celtic’ roots of the national myth under construction. All sorts of historical manipulations were utilized to demonstrate the ‘Celtic’ origins of Asturias and León. For example, some authors argued that mortars found in hillforts such as Coaña, Asturias, were actually urns for the ashes of the dead, so the Celtic ritual of cremation would be documented (Uría Ríu 1945). Moreover, it was common to establish comparative frameworks between these regions and the supposed core of the ‘Celtic’ culture at the time, that is, Central Europe.

However, archaeologists were not alone in the process of constructing the nation’s ‘cultural memory’ (Holtorf 2001). Archaeology was still an ill-defined discipline with porous boundaries, regarded mostly as a technique to unearth objects that confirmed concepts and ideas put forward by other disciplines. Accordingly, the social construction of the past involved many other academic disciplines and a significant number of local scholars and amateurs, predominantly of aristocratic or bourgeois background.

The excavations at a number of prominent hillforts in Asturias were used to provide evidence for Spanish ‘Celtic’ identity. The excavations of Antonio García y Bellido and Juan Uría Ríu in Coaña in 1940 linked the hillforts with the Celts, following a trend present in the neighbouring

³ Hillforts—*castros* in Spanish—are the main type of Iron Age settlement in northwestern Iberia.

Galicia since the 1920s (see Díaz Santana 2002). While acknowledging that they could not scientifically prove the 'Celtic' origin of Asturian hillforts, nor even define what they meant by 'Celtic' (García y Bellido 1941: 111–112), this did not dissuade them from attempting to force the data to fit the 'Celtic' hypotheses for the Asturian Iron Age (Marín Suárez 2005).

León followed Asturian 'Celtic' patterns in a somewhat similar fashion. Figures like José María Luengo, member of the regime's one party and holder of various positions related to archaeological management, had appealed to the Celts as a ubiquitous explanatory mechanism since the 1920s. For him, the classic Latin texts were the fundamental sources for historical explanation, whereas archaeology filled the gaps and provided objects (cf. Luengo 1961).

The 'Celtic' narratives developed by archaeologists during the dictatorship in Asturias and León were constructed using a weak conceptual framework. Still, they were considered as exemplary models for Spanish Iron Age archaeology and were highly influential in the major historiographic syntheses produced during the 1940s and 1950s (e.g. Maluquer de Motes 1954) and in school textbooks (e.g. Ruiz Zapatero and Álvarez Sanchís 1995). In summary, this archaeo-historiographic construct, based chiefly on the criterion of authority of certain privileged archaeologists, gradually gained consistency and became the orthodoxy of the dictatorship's archaeological thought.

Democracy and the Reconstruction of Regional Identities (1975–present)

With the end of the dictatorship a constitutional monarchy was implanted in Spain. The 1978 Constitution set out a model of territorial organization based on 'Autonomous Communities' (A.C.). This scheme is somewhat similar to federalism and envisages different rates of development in political autonomy amongst the regions of Spain (Linz 1981). This new administrative framework increasingly led the north-western Autonomous Communities, i.e. Galicia, Asturias and Cantabria, to rely on archaeological research about the pre-Roman past to gain

renewed historical legitimacy. In both their conservative right and radical left-wing versions, these narratives thrive outside of academia and largely reproduce similar patterns of archaeological literature as the former reactionary Celtic-nationalist paradigm. Moreover, these constructs draw on pan-European Celtic narratives and cultural essentialisms in order to reinforce their discursive foundations.

Asturias became an A.C. in its own right in 1982, although without the same degree of self-governance than the so-called 'historical regions' of Galicia, the Basque Country and Catalonia, and without achieving official recognition for Asturias' vernacular language. In Asturias, the social grip and the political will to strengthen regionalist agendas were a consequence of the failure of Franco's regime's attempts to consolidate a centralized Spanish identity (San Martín Antuña 2006). From then on, scholars and enthusiasts intensively studied Asturian culture, showing special interest in historical and archaeological issues. Asturianist agents such as the cultural association *Conceyu Bable*⁴ or the left-wing party *Conceyu Nacionalista Astur*⁵ situated the origin of Asturian identity in a 'Celtic' pre-Roman past (San Martín Antuña 2006; fig. 2).

Although in León the process is less intense and started later, it follows patterns similar to those described in the case of Asturias. Contrary to the will of its people and elites, León was encapsulated under the Castile and León A.C., with the capital at Valladolid. In the late 1980s and especially during the 1990s, the implementation of centralist policies in Castile and León led to a significant weakening of the latter as a political and economic centre. Thus, socio-cultural and political movements gradually emerged affirming the differential cultural identity of León against Castile and claiming a higher economic and political prominence. Their ultimate aim was to turn the historical Region of León, comprising the provinces of León, Salamanca and Zamora, into a separate A.C. Many social actors emerged from this milieu, such as the cultural association *Grupo*

4 From Asturian: *Bable Assembly* (*Bable* broadly referring to Asturian language).

5 From Asturian: *Nationalist Asturian Assembly*.



Fig. 2. "Celtic peoples fighting for freedom". Poster of the nationalist political party Conceyu Nacionalista Astur (Marín Suárez 2005: 155).

Autonómico Leonés⁶ or political organisations like Partido Regionalista del País Leonés⁷ and Unión del Pueblo Leonés⁸ (UPL), which brought together most strands of 'Leonesism', achieving great electoral success.

Iron Age archaeologists in Asturias and León have tended to avoid the usage of the term Celts since the arrival of democracy. However, they still refer to the Astures. The terminology changed, but the epistemological underpinnings of archaeology were still bound to the culture-historical paradigm. The aim was to distance archaeological discourse from the excesses of 'Celticism' so as to gain legitimacy as a renewed, highly scientific archaeology. Accordingly, typological approaches prevailed, along with the detailed description of stratigraphies and endless discussions over chronologies. It was then that the *oppida* and hillforts of our study area were first empirically ascribed to the Iron Age by radiocarbon analysis.

6 From Spanish: Autonomic Leonese Group.

7 From Spanish: Regionalist Party of the Leonese Country.

8 From Spanish: Leonese People's Union.

These observations raise two reflections:

1. Scientific fields present a clear tendency towards autonomy and to forge their own limits and rules (Bourdieu 1999). Thus, externalist explanations in historiography (Jensen 1997: 81) advocating that the social environment highly conditions scientific practice are misleading. In fact, our research shows how the popular and academic zeniths of 'Celticism' are completely detached chronologically (Marín Suárez 2005).

2. Following Hobsbawm's comparison (1997: 5) between history and nationalism with the drug dealer and heroin addict, we could argue that in our study area many archaeologists have devoted themselves to burning white poppy plantations throughout the past three decades. Paradoxically, it has been during this period that the thirst for history and heritage has reached more sectors and social groups. However, this interest has not been echoed in academia. In the area under study, the lack of engagement by academic archaeologists in on-going popular debates makes their own narratives take on a life of their own and be subject to all kinds of manipulations and political appropriations. Thus, new myths whose protagonists are the all-pervading Celts (e.g. Álvarez Peña 2002) are replacing traditional folklore narratives developed by local communities about the hillforts (González Álvarez 2011).

In order to underpin the historical legitimacy of the idea of Asturias as a nation, the left-wing nationalist political parties that arose with democracy did not hesitate to define Asturias as a 'Celtic' nation, like Ireland, Scotland or Brittany. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, many actors have progressively joined the endeavour of developing a sort of 'Asturian Celtic Marxism', whose construction relies heavily on discourses related to a Celtic Asturian Iron Age. Thus, these groups do not hesitate to denounce the lack of archaeological interventions or museological initiatives aimed at the enhancement and public display of the hillforts.

Similar processes took place in León a few years after. In the early 2000s the 'Leonesist' UPL achieved some power in the local city council

of Astorga, the former capital of a Roman *Conventus iuridicus* where the Roman past had been intensively studied and promoted for the purpose of tourism. Almost immediately, the UPL organized the excavation of the hillfort at La Mesa, located a few kilometres away from Astorga. A commercial archaeological company was put in charge of the enterprise. The excavations went on for a few years without any clear research agenda. In fact, apart from a few superficial references in the local press (Almanza 2010; Fernández 2008), no word has yet been written on the results of those works that began seven years ago. Leonese politicians publicly described archaeologists as “technical hand-workers” (Fernández 2008) and affirmed that the aim of research was to demonstrate the continuity between the pre-Roman and contemporary cultural traits of people from León (Almanza 2006). The role of the “archaeologists/hand-workers” was to exhume remains and objects so as to situate the hillforts and the Astures at the core of the foundational myth for the narrative of the Asturian/Leonese nation.



Fig. 3. Fiesta de Astures y Romanos. Astorga, León (2011). Events recreating the struggle between pre-Roman peoples and the Roman Empire proliferate in both León and Asturias. These events provide an opportunity for different agents to present their (politicized) ideas of the past in a festive atmosphere to a growing audience (photograph by authors).

In conclusion, for certain political actors in Asturias and León, the pre-Roman past is a mere ideological source of legitimacy (fig. 3).

Nonetheless, the ‘Celtic’ fervor is not restricted to archaeology, especially in Asturias. The development and recovery of folk music, now denominated as ‘Celtic’ through cultural labelling processes, has performed a fundamental role in the popularisation of the ‘Celtic factoid’ (*sensu* James 1999: 136). In this regard, the acceptance

of Asturias as a fully-fledged 'Celtic' country in the *Festival Interceltique de Lorient* (France) in 1982 was a turning point. Almost everything has become 'Celtic' in Asturias: from music and crafts, to local pig breeds.

We would like to underscore the significant role played by certain elites in the dissemination of 'Celtic' ideas and labels. For instance, Conceyu d'Estudios Etnográficos Belenos,⁹ a leading intellectual institution supporting the idea of a 'Celtic' Asturian Iron Age, has no historians or archaeologists among its members. Most individuals within it have manifest economic interests related to recording or editorial companies associated with the 'Celtic' culture. The 'Celtic factoid' thus becomes a source of symbolic and economic value added to cultural products such as music, crafts and merchandise broadly. Therefore, the shrewd narrators who are deploying essentialist and partially imagined speeches about the Iron Age in the area are also making money from it.

In Asturias and León the Celts are on everyone's lips, though few can define or explain what they mean by the term. When the public or political actors become interested in the pre-Roman past they can only rely on the old culture-historical approaches and on the hundreds of blogs and websites run by fans and which are full of quasi-scientific narrations close to fringe archaeology (e.g. 'Celtiberia.net', 'Red Española de Historia y Arqueología'). Meanwhile, academic archaeologists refrain from criticizing those esoteric narratives to avoid contentious situations. Instead of becoming involved with the public and offering alternatives to both traditional and fringe archaeology, academics strive to accumulate academic capital and reinforce their positions within stagnant academic structures. Thus, it comes as no surprise that essentialist discourses are taking over the public cultural memory of the past—with the underlying reactionary values included, obviously. This situation threatens the endurance of archaeology as an academic discipline in Spain in the long run: it is entirely dispensable and often a significant obstacle for private sector companies and politicians. Similarly, archaeological knowledge is

⁹ From Asturian: Belenos Group of Ethnographic Studies.

rarely disseminated or explained and thus remains largely detached from the public (Almansa Sánchez 2011).

Discussion: Towards an Engaged Commitment in Iron Age Research

‘Celticism’ is a multifaceted concept that can be conceived as a social construct, para-science, popular science or a postmodern new-age construction. Archaeologists are partially responsible for its development. Despite being well aware of the social and political implications of our work, we have only scratched the surface of the role Iron Age archaeology plays in the contemporary construction of collective identities in Asturias and León. We deem it fundamental to straightforwardly break the false dichotomy between scholarship and commitment, seeking a way out of the problem through the advocacy of a scholarship with commitment (cf. Bourdieu 2002: 152).

In Anglophone archaeological tradition multivocality has been presented as a potential solution to tackle the difficulties we are facing in our area of study. According to this, archaeologists should democratize knowledge to render it accessible for groups that want to relate with the past, respecting the different visions of the past deployed by each group: the archaeologist becomes a mediator and promoter of plurality (Hodder 1992: 186). However, invoking an unrestricted multivocality is not a solution since this does not challenge the structures of power and authority (Hamilakis 1999: 75), as we will see later.

In Spain, and especially in our study areas, the strategy followed by most archaeologists in the last 30 years has been clear: a withdrawal from the public sphere accompanied by a lack of involvement in the discussion of nationalist historic manipulations, and by an attempt to maintain an appearance of a highly scientific and apolitical archaeological practice. This neutrality regarding public uses of history and archaeology is explicit even in authors who discredit ‘Celtic’ discourses. Some of them even consider getting involved in these issues a waste of time, arguing that

“the public will ignore what we have to say as archaeologists” (e.g. Pereira González 2000: 331).

Actually, multivocality and the alleged neutral or value-free scientific practice are dangerous forms of post-political thought (*sensu* Žižek 2007: 30) that waive the political potential of archaeological knowledge and practice. Far from being neutral, current Iron Age Archaeology in Spain remains anchored in the most reactionary political values inherited from the nineteenth century. Moreover, to give equal weight to the voices of ‘New Age Celtic-fans’ and to local inhabitants who incorporate Iron Age hillforts in their traditional cosmology would be a disrespect to vernacular cultures (González Ruibal 2010: 25). From our viewpoint, not all voices can be given equal weight.

Despite the partial disappearance of the Astures and Celts from current archaeological research, Iron Age archaeology in our study areas is still prominently culture-historical, but disguised as scientific archaeology concerned about method and data. Also, its performance can be considered positivist/objectivist and fundamentally conservative as it helps sustain and naturalize present inequalities (Tilley 1998: 318). As usual, its political character is hidden under a semblance of objectivity. Furthermore, it is the heir of the old romantic attitude that keeps promoting disinformation, alienation of people from their own past and the dissolution of the past into the present (Lull 1988: 67–68). As culture-historical approaches are still predominant in our study areas, archaeology remains a source of legitimacy for national identities based on naturalized trans-historical essences (Marín Suárez 2005: 86–93).

We should assume that our academic work is as political as the potential alternative representations of the past we can create. However, to recognize the political nature of all archaeological practice does not entail that all narratives about the past are similar. Our archaeological approaches must confront academic scrutiny and the rigor of scientific method. This objectivity derived from the scientific foundations of archaeology should allow us to acknowledge and think about the past as

a different reality. By contrast, para-scientific narratives privilege identity over otherness. Accordingly, the past is described through perennial features that reinforce the position of the narrator and reproduce contemporary mindsets.

Archaeologists should defend the idea that other historical knowledge(s) are possible. If we really want to be useful to society, we must interpret the past to transform the present. A committed archaeology, understood as a historical theory and a social subversive practice, can provide critical perspectives for different groups, agents and social movements (Falquina Aparicio et al. 2006). This paradigm advocates a radical political archaeology, one that abandons inclusion to embrace division and fully accepts conflict before peaceful coexistence (González Ruibal 2010: 21).

To meet this political agenda, the first step should be to develop a critical historiography, in which the objectifying subject is objectified as well, and the genealogy of every aspect of the process of archaeological research is analyzed. In parallel, we must explain our work to the public along with the problems and limits of archaeological knowledge. For example, it is necessary to ask ourselves: "what are the Celts for?" (González Ruibal 2005). Moreover, we should deconstruct concepts such as 'Celticism and reveal the manipulations carried out by archaeologists for its construction (Ruiz Zapatero 2003: 239).

In the past 30 years, the essentialist discourses built around the Iron Age in Asturias and León have been integrated into the cultural and political construction of the A.C. This is no trivial matter, as these institutions have direct control of archaeological practice and scientific research funding.

To legitimize their quest for higher levels of self-government against the Spanish central government, some agents within Asturias and other Autonomous Communities resort to archaeology in search of symbolic reaffirmation. Accordingly, since the arrival of democracy, it has become

common in Asturias to speak of an 'Asturian Castro culture' as opposed to the traditional 'Castro culture' of northwestern Iberia. The research concerns are limited to the current boundaries of administrative units and not to past cultural geographies, thus projecting contemporary boundaries into the Iron Age.

In León, nationalist rhetoric has aimed to develop a culture-historical construct that places the pre-Roman Astures in opposition to contemporary Castilian 'others', whoever they may be. However, this tendency towards the atomization of identities is not restricted to the level of the A.C. and extends to all levels of administration. Thus, the area of El Bierzo affirms a 'Celtic' identity linked to Galicia to support their claims of independency from the province of León. Thus, both in Asturias and León different agents draw on Iron Age archaeology to seek the ideological underpinnings for contemporary identities and political agendas at many different levels. They do so despite the historical inconsistencies that this entails, as the ethnonym Astures is consistent with a political identity imposed after the Roman conquest over a great heterogeneity of people and cultures (Marín Suárez and González Álvarez 2011).

We have affirmed that our knowledge can have a political purpose and prove beneficial to the society in which we live. But what form of non-nationalist or conservative political objective could our study of the Iron Age pursue? We could deconstruct national assemblages and replace the prevailing categories of identity discourse with a new set of alternative concepts that bring to the fore issues of gender, politics and ethnicity.

The northern Iberian Iron Age provides a good framework of research for gender issues. In fact, the study of hillforts in the western Cantabrian Mountains shows how gradual changes in power and gender relations occur during the Iron Age. Here, patriarchy was consolidated along with a whole new male ideology. Men embodied prominent warrior roles and were devoted to herding activities, while women stayed in the hillforts carrying on the maintenance activities (Marín Suárez 2011). A feminist

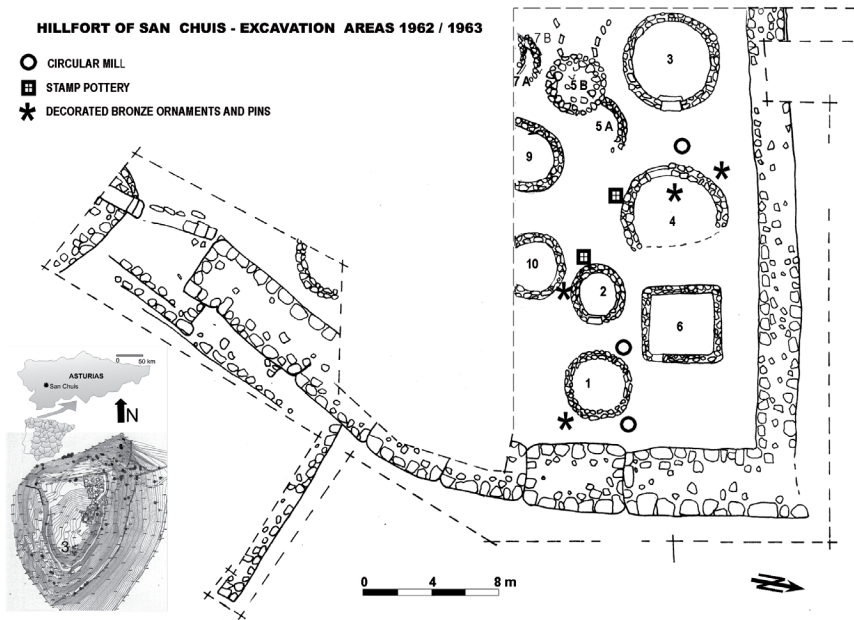


Fig. 4. Drawing on different tools available, such as the contextual analysis of the technical and operational procedures, ethnoarchaeology, gender, architecture and landscape archaeologies, archaeologists can trace the roots of 'otherness' in the past. This might enable us to acknowledge new potential identities and conflicts that were unimagined before (after Marín Suárez 2007).

viewpoint on Iron Age studies could help denaturalizing contemporary gender inequalities (fig. 4).

During the Iron Age the defining traits of the rural landscape characterized by small villages, which continues to exist in Asturias and León, were laid out (Fernández Mier 1999; Sánchez Pardo 2010). The study of the Iron Age landscape is thus fundamental for gaining an understanding of the peasant societies living in these areas until the present day. Furthermore, this issue is linked to a compelling contemporary socioeconomic problem: the breakdown of traditional economy and cultures, and subsequent rural depopulation in Asturias and León.

Moreover, Iron Age research could show how in some cases family and community identities can be more relevant for people than other

identities such as ethnicity. Despite this fact, popular and some academic archaeological narratives tend to underscore ethnic or national concepts (i.e. Asturian, Galician, Celtic, etc.), deploying an urban and fundamentally presentist vision of the pre-Roman past.

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