



Equality, inequality, and the problem of “Elites” in late Iron Age Eastern Languedoc (Mediterranean France), ca. 400–125 BC



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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the ways discernible in the material record by which individuals obtained influence and power in late Iron Age (ca. 425–125 BC) Eastern Languedoc in Mediterranean France. Specifically, the article examines the extent to which the control over agricultural production, the control over the circulation of prestige goods, and a monopoly on the use of violence may have been used by individuals to influence and direct group activity. Although archaeologists have often portrayed Iron Age Mediterranean France, as well as Iron Age Europe more generally, as being dominated by a class of warrior aristocrats, an examination of the material evidence in regard to these three aspects of political power suggests that in fact, late Iron Age society in Eastern Languedoc was fairly egalitarian, with political power diffused and open to a large number of competing adults. A real socio-economic hierarchy based upon classes only emerged under the influence of the Roman colonial state in the first century BC. Far from offering any analytical precision, the overly broad term “elite” in this way actually obscures important changes in political strategies occurring under Roman colonialism.

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1. Introduction

“I have often heard of Indian Kings, but never saw any. – How any term used by the Indians in their own tongue, for the chief man of a nation, could be rendered King, I know not. The chief of a nation is neither a supreme ruler, monarch, or potentate – He can neither make war or peace, leagues or treaties – He cannot impress soldiers, or dispose of magazines – He cannot adjourn, prorogue or dissolve a general assembly, nor can he refuse his assent to their conclusions, or in any manner controul [sic] them. . . The chief of a nation has to hunt for his living, as any other citizen.” (Colonel James Smith, 1755, quoted in [Wallace, 2005](#): 53).

When European colonists in the modern age encountered other peoples throughout the world, it was not unusual for these explorers to assume that the foreign people they met had political institutions similar to those in Western society. As a result, they would often refer to non-European leaders by using Western terms, and assume that these leaders held power and influence in similar ways to Western rulers. Famous examples of this tendency include European explorers in North America referring to the Native American elders of prominent clans as “kings”, as illustrated by the quote above penned by a European in colonial America in 1755, or the British government in colonial Africa imagining that certain social positions had a real political authority, which they often

lacked, as with the famous Leopard Skin “chiefs” of the Nuer. Indeed, in some cases it was the European colonial state that in fact created local positions of power in places where such positions had previously been nonexistent. In a similar way, it is equally misleading to imagine that ancient societies thought of power and politics in the same terms that we understand them today in the modern capitalist West.

While archaeologists of Iron age Europe (ca. 750–50 BC) have often described Iron Age society as hierarchical and dominated by a class of aristocratic warriors who controlled economic production, the archaeological evidence in fact often points to a great variety of political forms which rarely conform to modern notions of power and which do not fit into preconceived political typologies (see for example the discussion in [Hill, 2006](#); [Thurston, 2010](#)). This article investigates the material evidence for the different ways by which individuals may have obtained influence and power within the context of late Iron Age (ca. 400–125 BC) Mediterranean France, specifically in the region of Eastern Languedoc (especially the modern French *départements* of the Gard and the Hérault). Far from attesting to a socio-economic hierarchy or a system of power rooted in economic domination, the archaeological evidence discussed here suggests that political power in late Iron Age Eastern Languedoc was relatively egalitarian, in the sense that there were no fixed socio-economic classes, and that access to power

or influence over group decisions was often likely open to a fairly large number of competing adults.

Furthermore, an analysis of the specific ways in which power or influence may have been obtained before the Roman conquest of 125–121 BC, as opposed to a descriptive approach using an overly broad term such as “elite”, suggests that the ensuing period of Roman colonialism was a significant rupture, rather than a continuity, in indigenous life. In this sense, rather than offering any kind of practical analysis, use of the overly general term “elite” does more to obscure the ways by which power and influence were accrued in society and how this changed over time. More broadly, this article suggests that at least in some cases, whether ethnographic or archaeological, it is more productive to view the emergence of socio-economic inequality not in terms of a gradual, internal evolution, but rather as the result of the imposition of fundamentally different relationships between economy, power, and control over the means of production.

2. From political typologies to political actors

One of the fundamental areas of research in archaeology has traditionally been the emergence of the state, with the concomitant emergence of socio-economic and political inequality (e.g. Flannery and Marcus, 2012; Johnson and Earle, 2000; Price and Feinman, 2010; Trigger, 2003). Generally speaking, this emergent inequality is conceived of in terms of “unequal access to goods, information, decision making, and power” (Price and Feinman, 2010: 2). However, whereas more traditionally archaeologists have focused on the identification and description in the archaeological record of specific forms of socio-political organization, such as band, tribe, chiefdom, and state, and their evolution over time (e.g. Carneiro, 1970; Earle, 1997; Flannery, 1972), more recently, a growing body of literature has instead increasingly focused on the strategies observable in the material record of different social actors in acquiring and maintaining power (among many other studies see for example Campbell, 2009; Glatz, 2009; Leone, 2005; Routledge, 2004; for a discussion of this development see Hansen and Stepputat, 2006; Smith, 2011). Thus, it is equally important to not just categorize societies by type according to how they were organized politically, but rather to understand politics as a process in which different social actors seek to gain influence or power through different means, some of which can be discernible in the material record.

In contrast, however, archaeologists of Iron Age Europe have often largely remained fixed on identifying specific political typologies and the presence of “elites” in the archaeological record (e.g. Arnold and Gibson, 1995; Brun, 1987, 1995; Brun and Ruby, 2008; Collis, 1995; Hedeager, 1992; Perrin and Decourt, 2002). One of the recurring themes in many of these studies is the suggestion that socio-political inequality emerged in late prehistoric Europe as these “elites” gradually assumed control over access to material resources, especially so-called “prestige goods” (e.g. Bintliff, 1984; Brun, 1987; Earle, 1997, 2002; Wells, 1984). Indeed, some studies have seemingly implied that a fundamental and universal characteristic of all Iron Age Celtic societies was that they were all “inegalitarian”, “strongly hierarchic”, and controlled by a “warrior aristocracy” (e.g. Cunliffe, 1997: 25, 107; Megaw, 1996: 178). Although these studies, often evolutionary in orientation, have revealed certain trends, there has also been a tendency to homogenize a great deal of socio-political diversity in European Iron Age societies (Hill, 2006: 172), as well as overlook more recent theoretical developments within archaeology, and especially anthropology more generally. Indeed, Tina Thurston (2010: 206) has recently suggested that, “A large number of Iron Age specialists, at least in terms of acknowledgment or citation, appear un-

ware of the origins of familiar ideas about elites, power, and hierarchy, or that they have been supplanted by much more interesting and complex ideas over the last 30 years.”

This has certainly been true for Iron Age Mediterranean France (ca. 750–125 BC), where the vast majority of scholarship in regard to power and socio-political organization has focused on the question of whether so-called “elites” existed in Iron Age indigenous societies. The various opinions on the matter range from interpreting these Iron Age societies as relatively “egalitarian” (*égalitaire*) or “communal” (*communautaire*), although nevertheless with political leaders (e.g. Py, 1990: 173–77, 2012: 281–83), to suggesting that these societies were dominated by a class of aristocratic warriors controlling the agricultural production of the countryside from rural estates outside of the main settlements (e.g. Arcelin, 1999; Arcelin and Gruat, 2003; Clavel, 1975; Jannoray, 1955: 265–66). In regard to this latter interpretation, which tends to be the more vocal of the two, there is in particular an emphasis on the use of the terms “dominating class” and “aristocrat” to describe the presumed “elites” of Iron Age Mediterranean France. Archaeologists, for example, have argued that Iron Age society was “very hierarchical” and that, “The base of power would have fundamentally been that of an oligarchic class” (Arcelin and Rapin, 2002: 32; see also Bernard, 2002: 71). However, the implication and meaning of these terms is not always discussed in any great detail (Py, 2012: 246).

Although the term “elite” is quite ubiquitous as well, it is rarely defined, and the term is used equally for both the Iron Age and the Roman period, which, as shall be argued, ultimately obscures important changes brought about by Roman colonialism. Here then, it is important to explicitly note that in this case “class” refers to a “a ranked group within a hierarchically stratified society whose membership is defined primarily in terms of wealth, occupation, or other economic criteria” (author’s emphasis, Schultz and Lavenda, 2014: 312). Societies with social classes are thus “stratified” in that “adults have differential rights of access to basic resources” (Fried, 1967: 52), with status differences therefore being directly based upon economic differences. “Aristocrat” here refers in a very strict sense (although not in the etymological sense of the term) to a social class of wealthy land-owners, set apart by a system of inherited titles and roles, who control, either directly or indirectly, a great deal of the means of agricultural production in a society (see for example Morgan, 1962: 133). As with the term “elite”, it is important to note that the term “aristocrat” has often been used by anthropologists in other, broader senses of the word. Evans-Pritchard (1969: 215), for example, used the term “aristocrat” to translate the Nuer concept of *diel* (someone with a greater level of prestige in Nuer society). Evans-Pritchard, emphatically noted, however, that his use of the term “aristocrat” did not in any way imply any kind of social rank or position of power, and indeed, that the Nuer were on the contrary fiercely egalitarian. As mentioned, in general part of the problem with the archaeology of Iron Age Mediterranean France in regard to the question of inequality and power is that there has not always been a critical discussion of the terms used for analysis. Lastly, we can think of “power”, at least in a comparative, etc, and heuristic sense as “the ability to influence others and/or gain influence over the control of valued action” (Cohen, 1970: 31). However, it is important to note, as we shall shortly see, that this definition, in which power involves a relationship between people, is very much rooted in Western conceptions of socio-political relations. Furthermore, while the notion of “power” often implies in some way the ability to coerce people to do things they normally would be averse to doing, in fact, what we shall see is that in many cases this ability is so limited that “influence” may in some cases be a more suitable term to employ than “power.”

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