



Suessiones vs Atrebates: A social zooarchaeological approach of Late Iron Age animal exploitation in northern France and southern Britain

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Late Iron Age
Social Zooarchaeology
Celtic communities
Britain
Belgic Gaul
Animal husbandry
Animal exploitation

ABSTRACT

The Late Iron Age (the final two centuries BCE) was a period of change in the entire Celtic World. Celtic communities experienced profound economic, political and ideological upheavals and, during this time of great social transformation, the role of animal production within the first Celtic cities of northern France and southern Britain (the so-called “*oppida*” by Caesar) underwent major transformations. Taking a multi-scalar archaeozoological approach, this paper will explore how the changing management of meat resources reflected the social developments that occurred with the emergence of the first cities of in the Suessiones and the Atrebates territories. In doing so, we will see how faunal studies can be used to better understand complex Celtic communities and emphasise wider social issues such as the specialisation and standardisation of animal products distribution, the progressive stratification of societies and the complex evolution of human/animal relationship.

1. Introduction

The study of animal exploitation within the Celtic world has grown considerably the last few decades, and it now allows for large-scale research. Independent intrasite analyses, conducted mostly at the beginning of the 80/90s in various countries and regions, now provide the foundation on which recent intersite comparisons are built. Archaeozoologists are now concentrating their research on the Celtic people and their relations with animals in terms of economic exploitation and ideological conception, rather than studying bones simply in terms of species identification. However, a missing step in the process was expanding this analytic development to international comparisons. The Celtic communities that spread into temperate Europe during the Iron Age have been studied separately and at different rates as archaeological research developed in different countries. We should, however, not forget the common social base on which each of these societies is built. That is precisely why it is necessary to conduct international comparisons of these communities on the basis of data that have already been published. The main aim of this paper is to determine whether different Celtic peoples exploited animals in the same ways. Obviously, this first question raises other ones when it comes to interpreting differences or similarities. In this paper, we present a targeted study based on two Celtic peoples: the first is from northern France in the Aisne valley and is known as the Suessiones, and

the second one, the Atrebates, is from southern England occupying the area that today is Hampshire and West Sussex.

Our international study of Celtic animal use is focused on the Late Iron Age, roughly from 150 BCE to the beginning of the Common Era. This period is marked by important social upheavals that led, in the following centuries, to major changes in Celtic communities, partially dictated by the Roman conquest. This eventful transitional phase shows great economic adjustments in which animal resources played a crucial role that we will examine in this paper.

1.1. Social context: the Late Iron Age - Early Roman Period

Before exploring the social context in which Celtic societies evolved, we have to underline the differences that exist between the French and the English chronologies (Fig. 1). In both timelines, the Late Iron Age period begins approximately at 150 BCE, but there is almost one-century difference at the end of the period. The Roman conquest of northern France ended around 27 BCE with the total invasion and occupation of the Gallia Belgica, while the Roman conquest of Britain began in 43 CE during the reign of Emperor Claudius. The Roman conquest on both side of the Channel symbolises the end of the Celtic era in favour of Roman culture which spread into northern Europe at this time.

Nevertheless, Roman acculturation should not be taken as the only

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2017.10.039>

Received 3 February 2017; Received in revised form 25 October 2017; Accepted 25 October 2017
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Fig. 1. European Iron Age chronologies.

	Gaul	Britain	Roman campaigns
250 BC	La Tène C1	Middle Iron Age	
200 BC	La Tène C2		
150 BC	La Tène D1a	Late Iron Age	War with Cimbri and Teutones (113–110 BC)
100 BC	La Tène D1b		
50 BC	La Tène D2a		
	La Tène D2b		
BC/AD	Roman period		
AD 50		Roman period	Conquest of Britain begins (AD 43)

explanation for the social changes that disrupted Celtic communities. In reality, as [Bradley et al. \(2015\)](#) underlined, “the changes began too early for Roman intervention to be the main cause.” Archaeologists from both sides of the English Channel identified important changes that took place during the last two centuries BCE. On the continental side, the new fortified settlements (called *oppida* by Caesar) that first appeared in northern France around 150 BCE ([Pion, 1996](#), Fig. 40, p. 88) are the most significant of these changes. The construction of the *oppida* involved both a major movement of population towards those settlements and a resulting drop in the population of smaller rural sites ([Malrain et al., 2013](#), pl 1; [Bradley et al., 2015](#): 267). This urbanised phase was accompanied by several forms of economic intensification. Grain silos and crop storage facilities increased significantly at the same time ([Gransar, 2000](#)), which is interpreted as the centralisation of grain storage within the new fortified settlements. The adoption of a new system of cereal farming based on monoculture ([Matterne, 2001](#): 182) also led to increased agricultural production. This intensification in agricultural production can also be linked to metallurgical changes, specifically an increase in metalworking. More extensive metallurgical activity in fortified settlements, linked to a large number of craftsmen, has been identified, for example, at Condé-sur-Suippe ([Bauvais, 2007](#): 490). Improvements in the quality of agricultural implements may have played a role in the intensification of production. Similarly, the higher proportion of cattle within fortified settlements ([Auxiette, 1996](#); [Paris, 2016a](#)), which was partially generated and facilitated by the overproduction of fodder, was also beneficial for agricultural purposes. In addition to these technical and economic changes, the power of political networks increased at the end of the Iron Age; *oppida* are considered to have been economic, political and even religious centres ([Fichtl, 2005](#): 91–134). Moreover, *oppida* were centres of trade, and Roman wine amphorae and bronze vessels were distributed via trading routes across Gaul ([Fichtl, 2005](#): 125–135).

The social and economic situation in Britain during the Late Iron Age was very different. While Britain's people also showed signs of agricultural and metallurgical intensification, the urbanised phase known on the Continent has no obvious equivalent here. Fortified settlements existed, but they do not appear in the last two centuries BCE. The settlements called “hillforts” include all kinds of archaeological sites in terms of size, chronology, and morphology. Hillforts represent a persistent pattern of territorial occupation, the “legacy of the past” ([Harding, 2012](#): 273), extending from the Late Iron Age to the Late Iron Age/Early Roman period ([Harding, 2012](#): 1). The presence of such settlements in Britain may have hindered the emergence of the *oppida* in Britain, which first appear at the very end of the Late Iron Age ([Collis, 1984](#)). The hillforts, which should not be considered as farmsteads ([Hill, 1995](#)), played a major social and economic role in all of Britain's territories and are now considered as places of diplomatic, political, and/or ritual *assembly* ([Harding, 2012](#): 278–282). The appearance of *oppida*, mostly between the reigns of Caesar and Claudius, led to a decrease of population within some hillforts, which became centres of symbolic activities. Maiden Castle, for example, was transformed into a metallurgical centre and a burial place ([Bradley et al., 2015](#): 279). The emergence of *oppida* in Britain was also accompanied by an increase in agglomerated sites. [Bradley et al. \(2015\)](#) suggest that “this may suggest that leading individuals or households were gaining dependents or a retinue...”. Increasing social stratification is also discernible in northern France with agglomerated sites such as, for example, Braine “la Grange des Moines” ([Auxiette et al., 2012](#)).

In both northern France and in Britain, those fortified settlements were very briefly occupied (some of them for less than 50 years) and “that seems completely at odds with the effort involved in moving to them” ([Bradley et al., 2015](#): 299). After the Roman conquest, Roman towns, sometimes built on top of ancient fortified settlements, brought stability to the territories by imposing Roman administrative policies on

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