Where the land ends: isolation and identity on the western edge of prehistoric Europe

Donde termina la tierra: aislamiento e identidad en el borde occidental de la Europa prehistórica

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Abstract

This is a discussion of the prehistoric archaeology of four regions of Atlantic Europe which share similar names: Cabo Finistere in Galicia, Finistère in Brittany, Land's End in south-west England, and the Mull of Kintyre in the west of Scotland. They suggest that such places were cut off from their hinterland and possibly from one another. These regions shared certain features in the Medieval period, but that was equally true during prehistory. Not only did they possess common characteristics, including the importance of craft production, art styles and traditions of monuments, recent work has documented direct connections between them and particularly between Galicia and Brittany and between Brittany and Cornwall. They may have been regarded as places where the land came to an end, but any impression that they lacked wider contacts is due to the assumptions made by archaeologists who have not taken into account the social importance of seafaring.

KEY WORDS: *Atlantic, cosmology, core, periphery, isolation, seafaring, prehistory.*

RESUMEN

El texto discute la arqueología prehistórica de cuatro regiones de la Europa atlántica que comparten nombres similares: Cabo Finisterre en Galicia, Finistère, en Bretaña, Land's End en el suroeste de Inglaterra, y el Mull of Kintyre, en el oeste de Escocia. Ello sugiere que estos lugares estuvieron separados de sus hinterlands y, posiblemente, unos de otros. Estas regiones comparten ciertas características en la época medieval, pero igualmente en la prehistoria. No sólo poseen características comunes, como la importancia de la producción artesanal, estilos de arte y tradiciones de los monumentos, sino que trabajos recientes han documentado las conexiones directas entre ellos y sobre todo entre Galicia y la Bretaña y entre Bretaña y Cornualles. Es posible que hayan sido considerados como lugares donde la tierra llegó a su fin, pero cualquier impresión de que carecían de contactos más amplios se debe a las asunciones de los arqueólogos que no han tenido en cuenta la importancia social de la marinería.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Atlántico, cosmología, centro, periferia, asilamiento, navegación, prehistoria.

1. Introduction: the outer limits

In the cosmology of the Christian Middle Ages the city of Jerusalem was at the centre of the world. It was where the sun rose and where the continents of Africa, Europe and Asia came together (Edson 1997). At the edges of that world there was an ocean which was home to the beast that would ultimately destroy mankind. North and South America were still unknown, and so the western margin of Europe was considered as the farthest extent of the land. The offshore islands favoured by early monastic communities were «the battleground between Christianity and its demons» (Mack 2011: 90).

A similar notion is present in the writings of geographers in the Classical world (Thomson 1948). Hecataeus of Miletus described the land as a circular disc which was entirely surrounded by water. The Mediterranean was placed at its centre, but there were two outlets that provided access to other regions. Only the dead could cross the river which followed the outer boundary of the earth. Nobody could live there.

Such schemes bear a certain resemblance to those used by prehistorians who consider that farming and the use of metals developed in the Near East. These innovations were adopted only gradually in Southern, Western and Northern Europe. During the twentieth century the principle was expressed by the idea of cultural diffusion and by the famous dictum *ex oriente lux*. If this scheme echoed the cosmology of the Medieval period, the Classical conception of geography, with its distinction between the Mediterranean and its hinterland, also had a counterpart in prehistoric archaeology, for it recalled the long-held opinion that megalithic tombs were first constructed in the Aegean Bronze Age.

That idea raised problems for archaeologists investigating monuments along the Atlantic coastline. The distribution of these structures followed the outer edges of both the Classical and Medieval worlds and focussed on the area where the continent reached its western limit. Such assumptions had an unfortunate influence, for all too often this area was treated as a periphery. Spain and Portugal were not considered in Oscar Montelius's studies of Bronze Age metalwork and played a restricted role in Gordon Childe's account of European prehistory. The same approach is illustrated by Colin Renfrew's paper 'Megaliths, territories and populations' which argues that stone tombs were employed as territorial markers in regions where the presence of the coastline prevented the westward expansion of agriculture (Renfrew 1976). It was here that productive farmland came under the

greatest pressure. The construction of stone monuments was one way of claiming resources.

Some of the same attitudes are illustrated by a Portuguese novel, José Saramago's *A Jangada de Pedra* (Saramago 1986). His parable embarks from a simple premise. A deep crack develops along the course of the Pyrenees. As a result the Iberian Peninsula is changed into an island which moves away from the rest of Europe until it approaches the Azores, 1800 kilometres further to the west. In this way a segment of the continental landmass becomes part of the Atlantic Ocean, with all its connotations of remoteness and seclusion.

2. The land's endings

The last example raises an interesting question. Where does Europe end, and where does the sea begin? Although the western margin of the continent follows the Atlantic coastline, there are several places whose inhabitants must have been particularly conscious of their geographical isolation, for those regions share similar names. In north-west Spain (Galicia), there is Cabo Finisterre or Fisterra, which in Gallego means 'the end of the land'. Almost the same name is used for part of Brittany (Finistère), and the farthest tip of Cornwall (West Penwith) which is described as 'Land's End'. The regions are of quite different extents, and for the purpose of this discussion I shall also consider the areas around them, so this paper will be concerned with the coastal margins of north-west Spain, north-west France and southwest England. It will end by considering the little known archaeology of western Scotland and the peninsula known by its Gaelic name the Mull of Kintyre. The locations of all four areas are mapped in Figure 1.

Not only were they located on the outer edges of Europe, they were in places that carried other connotations of remoteness or even of danger. In practical terms they must have presented a challenge to early navigators, for they were marked by difficult currents and by rocky shorelines. Indeed, the coastline by Cabo Finisterre is known as the Costa da Morte, the coast of death. If they were where the land ended, they were also where people moved between one element and another. That is equally true of their roles in Classical and Medieval beliefs.

These regions share other characteristics, even in the historical period. Cornwall and Finistère had similar languages, and it has been argued that settlers moved between the two areas in the early post-Roman period, as they may have done

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between south-west England and Galicia (Fleuriot 1980; Cunliffe 2001 a: chapter 10). The early medieval text Lebor Gabála Érenn (The Book of Invasions) was complied in the eleventh century AD and provided an origin myth for the Irish. It sought to reconcile the biblical account of human origins in the Holy Land with the marginal location of these regions and featured a settler called Mil who was associated with north-west Iberia. He has been described as «the ancestral figure of Gaelic Ireland» (Waddell 2005: 21). This story led to the belief that the island was settled from Galicia: a view which influenced insular archaeology through to the twentieth century. The political uses of this account are discussed by Clíodhna Ní Lionáin (2012). Other sources are equally revealing, and north-west France has a national literature that stresses its distinctive and isolated location (Chadwick 1969, chapter 8). Brittany and Cornwall are also connected in one version of the Medieval romance of Tristan and Yseult.

In the Middle Ages a further feature which sets Galicia, northern France and south-west England apart is the importance of pilgrimage as a journey towards a remote but sacred location. That is not surprising as these places were located towards the outer limits of the Christian world. It certainly applies to the offshore islands of Mont St Michel in Normandy and St Michael's Mount in Cornwall. In other cases churches in Brittany and southwest England were dedicated to the same saints, suggesting the sharing of beliefs between both areas (Bowen 1972: chapter 5). The importance of longer distance connections is apparent with the cult of St James (Santiago) at Compostela. It was located on the farthest edge of Christian Europe, in the only part of the Iberian Peninsula that remained beyond the influence of Islam. It attracted pilgrims from all over Europe. What is more, the origins of the pilgrimage or *camino* are found in a legend that refers to the rocky west coast of Galicia. Close to Cabo Finisterre (Fisterra), the relics of St James were washed ashore. That is why the cape became part of the pilgrimage route (Brierly 2003). The visitors who had already experienced a lengthy journey continued for another 100 kilometres from the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela until they reached the ocean. And here it became the custom for them to burn their boots.

3. Prehistoric precedents

There are references to the sea in the prehistoric archaeology of these areas (Bettencourt 2009). During the Neolithic period it provides an impor-

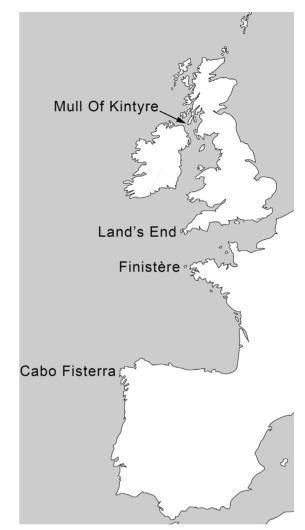


Figure 1.- Map showing the four regions of Atlantic Europe considered in this article. Drawing by Aaron Watson.

tant focus for the distribution of Breton passage graves; it is no accident that Chris Scarre calls his account of these structures 'At the edges of the world' (2011: chapter 6). In south-west England the same comment would apply to the siting of many Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments. Similar associations are apparent in later prehistory when settlements were attracted to offshore islands, whether these were in the drowned valleys or rias of north-west Spain, or those off the west coast of Brittany such as Ouessant with its megalithic enclosure at La Pointe d'Arlan and the important Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement of Mez-Notariou (Le Bihan and Villard 2001; Le Bihan 2011). The same emphasis is illustrated by the construction of Iron Age cliff castles In Brittany and south-west England. Some, like Gurnards Head in Cornwall, embellished striking rock formations which may have possessed a special significance in their own right (Cripps 2007). The preference for marginal locations is also illustrated by the fortified settlement of Castro de Baroña on the shore of Galicia.

At the same time, the archaeology of all three regions has very local characteristics, as if to express the distinctive identities of the inhabitants of these areas. Thus the decoration of Neolithic tombs in Galicia is in a different style from megalithic art in other parts of Iberia (Carrera Ramírez and Fábregas Valcarce 2006: chapter 3). The same is true of the open air rock carvings in this region and the north of Portugal, which are different from those found elsewhere (Alves 2008). Similarly, during the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age the same region includes an especially dense distribution of circular hillforts or castros, each of them characterised by a number of round houses (Ferreira da Silva 1986: González Ruibal 2007). Their distribution focuses on the north-west, but it does extend more widely and there are coastal sites with evidence of contacts with the Phoenician world (González Ruibal 2004). The same region has a local tradition of stone sculptures depicting warriors (Schattner 2004).

In the same way, north-western France includes a number of features that are rare or absent in other areas. The earliest date from the Neolithic period and include decorated *menhirs*, stone alignments, and the megalithic enclosures described by the Breton word '*cromlech*' (Cassen 2009; Scarre 2011). If they emphasise the distinctive character of this region, the same is true of the tumulus graves established in the Early Bronze Age (Briard 1984). In contrast to the concentration of Neolithic monuments in the Morbihan, they are most often found in Finistère. Another distinctive local tradition was the use of decorated pillars which date from the Iron Age. These are sometimes associated with cemeteries (Daire and Villard 1996).

South-west England is no less distinctive. In the Neolithic period it is characterised by a kind of chambered tomb described by the local name 'quoit' and also by 'tor enclosures' like Carn Brea which made creative use of prominent granite outcrops (Mercer 1986). The Bronze Age cairns have an individual character too, for surprisingly few of them are associated with human remains (Jones 2005), whilst the Cornish Iron Age includes some very idiosyncratic monuments – small enclosed settlements or 'rounds', and what have become known as 'courtyard houses' which probably date from the Roman era (Cripps 2007). That might suggest that the inhabitants of these areas emphasised their distinctive identities in relation to a wider world. That seems perfectly natural since they were living in comparatively remote areas. They were as accessible by sea as they were by land, but in either case it would have involved a protracted journey. It is all too easy to suppose that communities turned in on themselves, illustrating the perception that they lived on the edge of the world.

4. Common elements

Little could be more misleading. Despite the sense of isolation suggested by the place names, the people who lived in these regions formed important links with other communities. In fact they made distinctive artefacts that were exchanged over an extensive area, and were especially adept at exploiting local raw materials. This allowed them to forge relationships with more distant areas.

To some extent it happened because all three areas included sources of metal that were not generally available. Galicia had copper and tin, Brittany had a local supply of copper, and Cornish tin was also important. In the late third millennium BC it allowed the production of bronze in Britain before this distinctive technology became available in adjacent regions of Europe (Ottaway and Roberts 2008). Cornish tin was also exported as far as Scotland where it was employed in making faience beads. The pivotal position of Brittany in a wider system of exchange probably accounts for its exceptional richness in the early Metal Age, but even before that time it had played an important role in the movement of distinctive artefacts. During the Neolithic period the Morbihan was one of the destinations of jadeite axes produced in the southern foothills of the Alps (Pétrequin et al. 2012: chapter 18), but it also possessed stone sources of its own. They have been studied in detail, and it is clear that the products of quarries like Plussulien were distributed over an extensive area (Le Roux 1999). A small number have even been found in southern England. A similar network has been suggested in Galicia but was associated with perforated axe heads (Fábregas Valcarce 1991: 80-5), and there was yet another in Cornwall, where the precise sources of the parent rock have still to be identified. Even so, their products travelled over a more extensive area than their French or Spanish counterparts and may have been distributed through the same exchange networks as finely-made ceramics (Mercer 1986).

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The same could be true of later phases. In the early Iron Age large numbers of socketed axes were made in north-west France where they commonly appear in hoards (Briard 1965; Milcent 2012: 142-65). They may have been produced according to standard weights and could have been intended as ingots. In Cornwall, the specialised production of ceramics did not end with the Neolithic period as characterisation studies have shown that the same region was the source of a local tradition of Early and Middle Bronze Age pottery (Parker Pearson 1990). The same applies to middle Iron Age ceramics whose distinctive decoration shares features in common with vessels in north-west France (Peacock 1968). Although the distribution of raw material is obviously important, these may all be instances of a more general principle: the development of craft specialisation as a way of supplementing the subsistence economies of marginal areas. But perhaps that is too deterministic. It is worth considering whether these connections developed in order to overcome a sense of social isolation. Were they more important in sustaining alliances with distant regions?

5. Coastal connections

In fact there is evidence of connections between some or all the areas considered in this article, but they can be overlooked when prehistorians work on too small a scale. They emphasise the local over the long distance and, in doing so, they can easily lose a sense of perspective. What is so striking about the archaeology of Atlantic Europe is that some of the closest connections seem to have been over the greatest distances. There are general processes like the use of decorated passage graves, the adoption of Bell Beakers, copper metallurgy and gold working, and the predilection for weapons and feasting equipment that characterises the Atlantic Bronze Age. But there are also links between smaller regions whose later inhabitants thought of them as the ends of the land. Some of the closest connections were between Brittany and Cornwall and between Galicia and north-west France.

Styles of portable artefacts are particularly important. During the Neolithic period jadeite axes from northern Italy were deposited in significant numbers in the Morbihan in north-west France where some of them were reused as pendants, but their characteristic forms were closely copied in Galicia where there are a few examples made of the same raw material (Pétrequin *et al.* 2012: chapter 21). During the Early Bronze Age these regions were linked by similar styles of gold ornaments, daggers, Bell Beakers and Palmela Points. This is particularly obvious from a recently published study of the burial at Lottéa in Finistère (Nicolas et al. 2013). In the same way, the gold ornaments known as lunulae are found in both Brittany and Cornwall, although they are more common in Ireland where they may have been made (Taylor 1970). Further connections extended in a different medium as carvings of Early Bronze Age weapons are found in western Scotland, Wessex and along the Atlantic coast of Iberia. Unlike their counterparts elsewhere in the Iberian Peninsula, they portray the objects that might be found in a hoard rather than the contents of a grave (Commendador Rev 1997: Bradlev 1998).

Prehistoric rock art is important in yet another way, for similar motifs have a discontinuous distribution along the western margin of Europe. The same style of open air rock carvings seems to be shared between Britain, Ireland, Galicia and the north of Portugal, but its chronology is difficult to establish (Fábregas Valcarce 2009). Manuel Santos suggests that direct connections between these regions were a feature of the earlier examples - the same may not be true of later developments (Santos Estévez 2008 and 2013). By contrast, Cornish petroglyphs share features with those in Brittany and Wales, but not with the dominant style in Britain and Ireland (Jones and Kirkham 2013). In Galicia rock art may have retained its significance as late at the Iron Age, but by that time this tradition must have lapsed in regions further to the north.

Other connections are less specific, like a predilection for Iron Age circular enclosures, some of which are associated with groups of roundhouses. They are commonly found in Galicia, Cornwall and, to some extent, in Brittany, whilst settlements in north-west France and south-west England include the distinctive storage structures known as souterrains (Christie 1978; Giot 1990). Other connections between these areas are evidenced by ceramic decoration and by the distinctive monuments known as 'cliff castles' (Cripps 2007). There are suggestions of another long distance link as the defences of hillforts in Britain, Ireland and the Iberian Peninsula were reinforced by the settings of upright stones known as chevaux de frise (Harbison 1971). There is even a literary source of direct relevance to the argument. During the Iron Age Pytheas recorded that tin was acquired by long sea voyages along the Atlantic littoral and obtained from the inhabitants of south-west England on a small offshore island (Cunliffe 2001 b).

6. Chronology and geography

These connections show a certain patterning. The strongest links were between Galicia and Brittany, or between Brittany and Cornwall, and only rarely were the same elements shared between all three areas. The distribution of jadeite axes provides one example. Another is the metalwork of the Atlantic Bronze Age, although this has a wider distribution, extending into southern Iberia and the west Mediterranean in one direction and into Scotland and Ireland, in the other (Ruiz-Gálvez 1998). In this case there is a striking contrast. All the Neolithic artefacts used raw material from the same sources, although they were sometimes reworked. The metalwork shows greater variety and recent research by Dirk Brandherm (2007) and Pierre-Yves Milcent (2012) suggests that large scale distributions of bronze swords may have been crosscut by regional differences of style and chronology. In this case what matters is that the same sorts of weapon were employed over an extensive area and were deposited according to similar conventions once their period of use was at an end (Vilaça 2007). The same is true of the artefacts associated with feasting, like cauldrons, buckets, flesh-hooks and spits (Needham and Bowman 2005; Gerloff 2010).

For the most part the earlier connections along the Atlantic coast were formed by styles of chambered tombs and by portable artefacts that were employed in mortuary ritual. Open air rock art may have possessed a similar significance, for its characteristic repertoire can overlap with the decoration found in passage graves. This raises the possibility that at first long distance contacts did not play much part in daily life, although it would be wrong to overlook the movement of metals and the knowledge of how to work them. The connections during later prehistory took a different form. The acquisition of raw material obviously played a part, but there was a growing emphasis on the sharing of particular practices, including feasting, fighting and displays of wealth. This phase sees the first hilltop settlements from Galicia to southwest England. There is evidence for the sharing of new beliefs, which are most apparent from the practice of hoarding and the deposition of bronze metalwork (Vilaça 2007; Milcent 2012: 63-179). It is possible that long distance journeys occurred more often and employed more dependable craft.

7. Final reflections

Perhaps the sense of living on the edge of Europe was actually an illusion. Or maybe it developed

with the growth of the nation state, with its capital cities far away in London, Paris and Madrid. Surely the sea provided a vital connection between communities who were less accessible by land. Marginality, whether social or geographical, is often a state of mind, and so, of course, is the existence of boundaries. During the twentieth century communities in all three areas – Galicia, Brittany and Cornwall - have forged important cultural links with one another, partly in opposition to central government. Indeed, at the time of writing Cornwall has been granted special status within the United Kingdom. According to a government press release «the proud history, unique culture, and distinctive language of Cornwall will be fully recognised under European rules for the protection of national minorities» (www.gov.uk/ government/news/cornish-granted-minority-status-within-the-uk). Local communities along the Atlantic coast have come to celebrate a common Celtic heritage, even if the links involved are sometimes tenuous (Ruiz Zapatero 2006).

This article began with place names and with the self-image of several parts of Western Europe as places where the land comes to an end. Another way of expressing this is to consider the outermost margin of the continent as the boundary between the land and the sea. Such names can evoke a sense of economic and social isolation. I have tried to show that what could be regarded as a barrier was also a vital link, extending from south to north, connecting a series of self-contained communities which nevertheless had strong links with one another. Travel overland may have been more difficult than journeys by sea.

This is not always clear because accounts of prehistoric seafaring make unwarranted assumptions. They assume that there was a purely practical reason for travelling and that prehistoric people necessarily took the safest routes along the seaboard. Thus Sean McGrail, a mariner by background, calculated the dangers involved in crossing open water rather than remaining within sight of the coast (McGrail 1997). Comparison with the ethnographic record suggests that this form of risk assessment is inappropriate (Helms 1988; Kristiansen and Larsson 2005; Mack 2011). In non-Western societies people seek out danger in order to overcome it and thus to win renown. Knowledge of the perilous and remote can be a source of prestige and there is little to be gained by seeking the safest option. Since so many of the contacts between communities along the Atlantic brought little material benefit, archaeologists should make allowance for more dangerous journeys across the sea. That may have made these ventures fairly infrequent, but it endowed them with a greater significance. The same should apply to the objects they conveyed.

8. The case of the Mull of Kintyre

This paper ends with a fourth area whose archaeology remains too little known. The Mull of Kintyre is a narrow peninsula 75 kilometres in length situated on the west coast of Scotland. It is relevant because the Gaelic name 'Kintyre' means 'land's end'. In one sense it *is* cut off from large parts of mainland Scotland, but not to travellers by sea. Far from being outside the main currents of ancient social life, at its closest point it is only 20 kilometres from Ireland, and there is considerable evidence that the inhabitants of both regions were in contact with one another. Stone axes and worked flints of Irish origin were imported across the water (Saville 1999) and these areas may have shared similar styles of tomb (Scott 1969). It is true that Galicia is far removed from Cornwall, and that Cornwall is a significant distance from Brittany, but here is surely a case in which any feelings of social isolation contradict the realities of geography. Boundaries exist in the mind as much as they do on the ground, and it can be difficult to bring them into alignment. Where the land ends, the sea begins, and the water can be either a barrier or a highway.

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