Why do we still dig Iron Age ramparts?

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Viewed from the outside, the obsession with the excavation of ramparts by Iron Age archaeologists in central and western Europe may seem bizarre, but it is an obsession which has now lasted a century and a half, and which shows no sign of abating despite shifts in paradigm. In the 1860s France led the way with the first identifications of the murus gallicus which fitted in with the French state’s interest in its Gallic past. In a series of campaigns of fieldwork and excavation the sites mentioned by Julius Caesar and other ancient authors were identified, especially those associated with the conquest of Gaul by Caesar notably the murus gallicus with its distinctive iron nails and the stone revetment walls pierced front and back by horizontal wooden baulks which he encountered during the siege of Avaricum. The first discovery of a nail was by Vicomte d’Aboville at Mont Beuvray in 1866, followed by Bulliot’s excavation in 1867 on Champlain, and in 1868 between the Porte du Rebout and Come Chaudron (Bulliot 1899; Aylwin Cotton 1957, p. 190-195). In 1868 Castagné discovered the rampart at Murcens which fitted Caesar’s description of the murus gallicus (Castagné 1868; Aylwin Cotton 1957, p. 183-186). This resolved a number of controversies about the identification of sites, demonstrating, for instance, that Bibracte was at Mont Beuvray, not at Autun, and especially Stoffel’s work provided the physical evidence for the topographical framework for Napoléon III’s Histoire de Jules César (1866), and of the subsequent publications across Europe such as Rice Holme’s Caesar’s Conquest of Gaul (1911) at a period when an education in the Classics was an essential element in schools and universities, especially in the imperialist states of Britain, France and Germany.

This historical approach, or paradigm, is not one which has died with the rise of alternative approaches. Thus, it is a model which Otto Urban has recently evoked in his discussion of the Late La Tène defences on the Middle Danube (Urban 1999), or for Závist and Hrazany whose violent ends are witnessed by the burnt gateways and have been linked with historical events such as the conquest of Bohemia by the Germanic Marcomanni under their leader Maroboduus (Drda, Rybová 1997). If in Gaul no spate of rampart construction can be assigned to the conflicts surrounding the conquest in the 50s BC, one or two dates provided by dendrochronology do lead to considerations of historically recorded events. The dates from Metz include one which can be linked with the wandering of the Cimbri and Teutones, as well as one dating to the conquest of Gaul (Faye et al. 1990). The increase of construction in central and northern Gaul in the years following the Roman conquest of Narbonese Gaul in 125-123 BC and the defeat of the Arverni may have caused a power vacuum which led to greater interstate conflict and the foundation of the oppida. Despite the obvious dangers of using a partial and fragmented historical record, this framework still provides a popular way for archaeologists to present their discoveries to a wider public.

By the 1920s and 1930s French archaeology had fallen into the doldrums, and developments in Iron Age archaeology were dominated by German and British scholars, using a new paradigm, often labelled as ‘Culture-Historical’, which sought to identify ‘cultures’ or ‘culture groups’ characterised by distinctive artefact types, settlement forms or burial rites. These were then correlated with ethnic,
or to use the 1930s mode of thought, ‘racial’ groups such as Celts and Germans, and used to document their origins and expansion. This paradigm was especially important under the Third Reich in trying to justify the conquests of countries such as Czechoslovakia for which some sort of Germanic past could be claimed. Rampart constructions and gateway designs were used as another set of cultural traits which could be described and mapped.

Perversely, in the case of the Germanic expansion, the evidence used from defended sites was largely negative as it was assumed that early Germanic society was based around small open villages, and it was not until the early medieval period that defensive structures became important with the establishment of feudal castles and of defences around newly established trading settlements such as Haithabu. Hill-forts were characteristic either of the pre-Roman Celtic peoples who were replaced by Germans in central and southern Germany and Czechoslovakia, or for the early medieval expansion of Slavic speaking peoples in eastern Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia, and so played an important role in the story of the Germanic peoples. German Iron Age archaeologists in the universities such as Gerhard Bersu or Ernst Wahle may have resisted some of the extreme political interpretations, but even for the nationalists the Celts were an essential part of German history, and protohistoric ‘Celtic’ archaeology saw important advances in the definition of the Altkönig-Preist construction, or the discovery of the murus gallicus at Manching.

This Culture Historical paradigm reached its most developed form in Britain, though fortunately lacking the political dimension found on the continent. The framework of thought in Iron Age studies interpreted the period in terms of a series of invasions or migrations from the continent, studies interpreted the period in terms of a series Continental. The framework of thought in Iron Age archaeology was lacking the political dimension found in the Continents. The framework of thought in Iron Age archaeology was lacking the political dimension found in the Continents. The framework of thought in Iron Age archaeology was lacking the political dimension found in the Continents. The framework of thought in Iron Age archaeology was lacking the political dimension found in the Continents. The framework of thought in Iron Age archaeology was lacking the political dimension found in the Continents.

... By the late 1950s the three original invasions had been supplemented by a whole series of smaller events such as the occurrence of chariot burials on the chalk Wolds of Yorkshire, but for the Severn valley a separate invasion from somewhere along the Atlantic coast was suggested to explain the distribution of ‘duck-stamped’ pottery and the ‘guard chambers’ in hill-fort entrances.

The climax to this approach saw the campaign of fieldwork and excavation in northern France initiated by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, whose impact and importance is well documented by the number of times it is referenced in this volume. The publication was supplemented by an extensive survey of the literature on the murus gallicus by Molly Aylwin Cotton. The primary aim of the project was to discover the supposed continental origin of cultural traits (and so of immigrants) found in southern Britain, and specifically in Dorset where Wheeler had excavated the site of Maiden Castle in the 1930s. Though in part pottery attributes were used such as the internal grooving of rims and of the provision of countersunk handles (Wheeler, Richardson 1957, Fig 12), or the cordonned bowls found at Le Petit Celland but also known at Hengistbury Head whose appearance in Britain Wheeler and Richardson (p. 47) identified as ‘foreign’ in a British context, and so as imports (‘the relics of a few ship-loads of refugees at the time of the Caesarian conquest’ or which possibly could ‘be commercial products of a somewhat earlier period’), it was the evidence of shared characteristics of the defences of hill-forts on either side of the Channel which were of primary interest.

Wheeler and Richardson (1957, p. 1) identified three types of site, characterised by different types of rampart:
1. ‘Major tribal oppida of the Le Petit Celland series’, characterised by the murus gallicus;
2. ‘Cliff-castles of the Castel Coz series’ with one, two or three lines of ramparts and so including
‘multivallation’;
3. ‘Belgic earthworks of the Fécamp series’, with massive dump ramparts and wide shallow ditches (discussed in this volume by Stephan Fichth).

In a British context it was the multivallation and the dump ramparts which caused most interest as both are found in southern Britain, while the murus gallicus is not.

If the migrationist/invasionist interpretations have nowadays been largely abandoned, a cultural approach to rampart and gateway constructions has continued, mainly in the form of detailed descriptions of ramparts such as the murus gallicus and specific forms of gateway like the Zangentor by scholars such as Wolfgang Dehn (1960; 1961), giving us both a chronological framework as well as geographical distributions. This is the tacit presumption behind this present collection of papers, but with no clear statement of the aims of this work other than the obvious one of providing criteria for the dating of rampart types, which in some cases can be extended to the dating of unexcavated sites simply based on surface criteria (e.g. the Fécamp construction). At one level we can see the diffusion of shared ideas on how to construct a murus gallicus which can transcend physical constraints such as the nature of the bedrock. But how was this achieved? The shift from murus gallicus to Fécamp construction may be a technological reaction to Roman methods of siege warfare; in other cases there seems to be no functional reason. In the Welsh Marches the construction of semi-circular guardhouses (as against rectangular ones) seems cultural and has been explained in terms of specialist ‘architects’ who might be called in by a community to offer advice about how to construct a hill-Fort. In other cases it may merely be emulation by someone who had visited another site and taken the ideas back to their home community. In both cases it raises questions about the relationship of a group to their neighbours, but also of transmission of ideas over time. Though we can to a certain extent identify an evolution of methods of construction, this is often punctuated by periods of a century or two when certain communities were not constructing new defended sites, but later seem capable of constructing a complex rampart when necessity demanded.

The title of this volume and its contents even imply a certain survival of the ethnic interpretation, widening out the scope from the more narrow meaning of the word gallicus to the Celts to include areas such as Celtiberia, and parts of Hungary where the Eravisci centred on modern Budapest were specifically described as Keltoi. On the other hand the use of the term Celticus is not linguistic as the British Isles are excluded (as is Ireland, though it does not seem to have had hill-forts during the period under consideration – most are Late Bronze Age: Raferty 1994). The same is presumably true of the Germanic speaking areas of northern Europe. Celtiberian sites share more in common with their non-Indo-European neighbours the Iberians who are likewise excluded.

On fig. 1, I show a map of the areas where the ancient written sources talk of the presence of people whom the Greeks and the Romans considered to be Keltoi or Celtae, a name which Caesar claimed was also used by the people themselves, and it is also used by authors such as Trogus Pompeius who was probably himself Celtic (Collis 2003). This map is radically different from the ones traditionally used to show the origin and expansion of the Celts in all directions. It rejects the correlation between language and ethnicity, and also between language and ethnicity with a ‘La Tène Culture’ (for instance, the Celtic speaking Treveri considered themselves to be Germani according to Tacitus). I reject the concept of a La Tène Culture Group, and envisage instead many small societies interacting with one another and exchanging ideas, what Renfrew and Cherry (1988) referred to as ‘peer polity interaction’. The implication of this alternative model for rampart studies is that innovations can appear among any of the societies involved rather than emanating from one area (e.g. southern Germany). To take a specific example, Wheeler and Richardson assumed the precedence on the continent for the development of multivallation and dump ramparts of Fécamp type, but as I argued many years ago, given the continuity of hill-Fort construction in parts of Britain throughout the Iron Age and the development there of complex entrance structures, the ideas are more likely to emanate from Britain and spread there to northern France, a process repeated 2000 years later by Wheeler and Richardson themselves!

In Germany the inter-war period saw the large scale excavation of sites such as the Neolithic settlement of Köln-Lindenthal, and this had been mirrored in hill-Fort studies by projects such as Bersu’s excavations on the Goldberg and the
The distribution of people referred to as Celtae, Celtiberi, Celtici or Galatae in the ancient sources, compared with the distribution of ancient Celtic place names.

Wittnauer Horn, a tradition he brought to Britain with the excavation of Little Woodbury. During the war Hans-Jürgen Hundt stripped the interior of the Aleburg at Befort in Luxembourg, while in Poland the most famous large-scale excavation of all was that of Biskupin. It was a tradition which continued after the war, firstly in a rescue context with Werner Krämer’s large-scale excavations at Manching, and in research contexts Egon Gersbach’s excavations on the Heuneburg, and Reinhardt Schindler’s at Bundenbach. In southern France some sites such as Entremont and Ensère were being excavated, but more in a context of understanding the classical impact rather than the native societies themselves. The general paradigm behind these excavations was still largely cultural, using settlement forms as a means of defining cultural groups and influences.

While the questions posed by these traditional paradigms have continued and the associated excavation methodologies, there has been a gradual shift from narrow historical and cultural questions to ones which are best described as economic or socio-economic, asking what the function of hill-forts and oppida may have been. In Britain in the 1930s it was assumed that Iron Age hill-forts were the equivalent of Roman camps or Norman castles, centres of defence built by an immigrant elite against the indigenous peoples. Thus in the 1960s Hogg could suggest that coastal promontory sites might be ‘bridgeheads’ built by the invaders (Hogg 1972), and this was the specific interpretation used by Wheeler (1953) for the site of Bindon Hill in Dorset. Though he had excavated a certain amount of the interior of Maiden Castle, this had mainly been to clarify the nature and date of the Late Roman activity on the site, and the Roman temple (Wheeler 1943). In the 1960s new interpretations started appearing. In the context of the Heuneburg, Wolfgang Kimmig saw such Late Hallstatt sites as centres of power and wealth, both on the evidence of the rich burials clustered around them and of contacts with the Mediterranean world, and coined the term Fürstensitz, using, perhaps inappropriately, medieval feudal nomenclature, but raising the question of their function within their region. For the oppida, the concept that these were ‘urban’ centres started being discussed, and the major excavations of the 1960s were mainly in
Czechoslovakia, initiated by Jan Filip, and interpreted within a Marxist economic view of the past.

In Britain the change of emphasis in the 1960s was specifically associated with a theoretical shift, with the rise of a new paradigm, the so-called 'New' or 'Processual Archaeology' characterised in hill-fort studies by Barry Cunliffe's excavations at Danebury. Here, though there were the traditional trenches through the ramparts and clearing of the gateway to obtain an evolutionary sequence, the main thrust was to obtain data about the economic role of the site (industrial production, agriculture and grain storage) and the social status if its inhabitants. A new terminology appeared (central places, site hierarchies, ports of trade, pre-industrial cities) taken over from Geography and Economic Anthropology, with the construction of models of trade and exchange systems, land use and seasonal activities (Cunliffe 2005). New field techniques appeared like large-scale area excavation, systematic fieldwalking, and greater use was made of the aerial photographic evidence which had been accumulating since the 1920s. By the 1980s and 1990s attitudes especially in Britain were changing yet again with a plethora of new approaches loosely labelled as 'Post Processual' with a greater emphasis on the symbolic and ideological aspects of hill-forts, characterised by a series of articles especially in the short-lived journal *Scottish Archaeological Review* (volumes 1-10, 1982-1995), and studies such as J.D. Hill's analysis of depositional patterns at Danebury (1995).

So what role do we envisage for rampart studies in the new climate of thought? Though in recent years we have begun to recognise public or communal buildings such as sanctuaries on defended sites, and other public works such as roads and water tanks (Mont Beuvray, The Breiddin, Vladař), the ramparts still represent the major visible investment by the community. But on whose behalf? Cunliffe has argued in the case of Danebury that, like a medieval castle, it is some sort of lord or chief, but he has produced no evidence for this, though it might fit our interpretation of the Heuneburg. Could it indicate the status of the inhabitants like the burgers of a medieval town, or, like a capital city, be an emblem of the society as a whole, as Sharples (1991a; 1991b) has argued in the case of Maiden Castle? In some cases visible status may be more important than the function of defence as I once argued for the hill-forts of Hampshire where big hill-forts have big ramparts, and little hill-forts little defences, which is not what one would expect if defence was the main function (Collis 1977). Some sites in Devon have a massive rampart as viewed by someone approaching the entrance, but only a token bank and ditch elsewhere. The *oppidum* of Ulaca near Ávila in central Spain has substantial ramparts facing the valley, but they are only two courses high facing the mountains. It is not unfinished due to the arrival of the Romans, as the official interpretation states, as the inhabitants had time to construct a second rampart raising the enclosed area from 60 to 80 hectares (Collis 2008). The same symbolic interpretation has been argued for the Porte du Rebout at Mont Beuvray – wider than necessary for simply restricting access, and lacking the expected timber gateway despite the longevity of use and frequent remodelling of the ramparts.

The construction of ramparts involved not only huge quantities of wood and the cutting down of hectares of woodland, the use of stone, sometimes imported from several kilometres away, and, in the case of the *murus gallicus*, the perhaps unnecessary consumption of considerable quantities of iron for the nails or spikes, but also many days and weeks of labour. The construction of the rampart was a major communal effort and may have also been a major force for social solidarity which could have been regularly reinforced if the ditch was to be regularly cleared out and the rampart repaired.

Evidence of repair, or lack of it, is clearly important for our understanding of ramparts, to demonstrate if the construction was simply a one-off single event, or involved a continuous process of maintenance either to maintain the defensive qualities or for social or legal reasons (c.f. the legal status of people living in the confines of a town in medieval times). The data to document such repairs, as has been noted on the rampart of the Münsterhügel at Basel, cannot be obtained from a single narrow trench or even a series of trenches (Furger-Gunti 1980). The rampart of the Heuneburg was frequently rebuilt, with post-holes front and back, but the new post-holes could completely destroy those of an earlier phase, making it difficult if not impossible to correlate the post-holes from one trench to another, and so interpret the phasing, and establish how many times the rampart had been rebuilt, especially as this could involve the total removal of the bank. The traditional trench as employed by Wheeler and by Hawkes, and by others more recently, thus has severe limitations in what it tells us, as Thomas Pertlwieser and Iris...
Ott's re-excavation and extension of Hawkes' 1930s trench on Gergovie clearly demonstrates.

Up to the 1960s the traditional methods of investigation of hill-fort defences followed the same pattern, even on major excavations, with narrow trenches through the ramparts and the clearance of the gateway which could show the basic sequence and perhaps the relationship of the different phases with the internal occupation as at Danebury. However a revolution came with the rescue excavation of two hill-forts in Wales, The Breiddin which was excavated by Chris Musson between 1969 and 1976 (Musson 1991), and Moel-y-Gaer (Rhosesmor) directed by Graeme Guilbert in 1972-3 (Guilbert 1975; 1976), inspired by Leslie Alcock’s excavations at South Cadbury (Barrett et al. 2000). In both cases extensive lengths of the ramparts of 30m and more were excavated revealing complexities which single trenches would be incapable of showing. In the case of The Breiddin, it was one of the first to produce Bronze Age dates, as well as Late Roman structures, demonstrating that the hill-fort was not a phenomenon confined to the Iron Age as assumed under the Culture-Historical model. Guilbert's photograph (fig. 2) of the phase 2 defences at Moel-y-Gaer shows an Altkönig-Preist construction with each section filled in in a completely different way, presumably by separate teams of workers, and even two or three trenches through the rampart would have each given very different results impossible to understand. The examples of large scale rampart excavation in this volume, at Gergovie, Mont Vully and Puech du Mus, underline the need for extensive clearance of ramparts, as Fichtl states in his conclusion.

Besides the cultural restraints on techniques of rampart construction, the other major factor is environmental, especially the availability of suitable timbers for the elaborate timber lacing which is a feature of many of the rampart types discussed in this volume. They also require the availability of soil and rocks, materials which are not necessarily available everywhere. In northern and western Scotland where stocks of suitable timber were at a premium if not non-existent, for instance on Orkney, but where high quality building stone was relatively easily quarried, purely stone structures like the brochs and duns predominate. Similar stone traditions are found in the Mediterranean countries such as Spain and southern France, but there were alternative materials available such as turf or sun-dried bricks, or later mortared walls and fired brick and tile. But clearly environmental determinism to explain the distribution of rampart types is too simplistic, as we find different building traditions overlap geographically, or one technique replaces another.
Examples of ‘foreign’ construction techniques appearing in a region where another dominated can give us ideas about the transfer of cultural traits. The most famous Iron Age example is the dried brick construction (and the bastions) at the Heuneburg, but, though, contrary to what is often stated, it suited the climate very well, it was not repeated or used elsewhere to our knowledge in temperate Europe, and as the excavators argued at the time, it was a Mediterranean influence introduced by someone familiar with building techniques in the developing classical world. Another example is the stone wall at Gergovie in the Auvergne, an outlier to the southern French distribution of such ramparts. But in the Auvergne and neighbouring areas Fécamp dump ramparts are known, as at Gondole, and it is likely that the rampart here overlies an earlier *murus gallicus* as is the case on several sites in the neighbouring areas of the Forez, Berry and Burgundy. The *murus gallicus* at Manching is likely to be another example. In parts of Wales and Scotland the earth, stone and timber rampart constructions may alternate chronologically with pure stone constructions.

But we must also beware of false connections. A trench through the rampart of the Carlwark near Sheffield shows it to be built of turf, revetted on the front by a dry-stone wall. In her publication of the site Peggy Piggott (Margaret Guido) noted the only parallel known to her was a turf rampart in the latest phase at Traprain Law which was considered by the excavators to be post-Roman and this has led to a long tradition that this is a Dark Age defence (Piggott 1951; Avery 1993: p. 86). Neither is it likely to be due to the introduction by the Roman army of turf ramparts for military camps and even the early phase of Hadrian’s Wall, as a Late Bronze Age is just as possible as there are other examples of the use of turf on Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age sites in Britain such as Rainsborough Camp (Avery et al. 1967; Avery 1993: p. 276-290), though in truth it is simply undated. It also reminds us of the suggestion that the *murus gallicus* at the Camp du Castellier at Saint-Désir (Calvados) may have had turf revetment instead of the usual stone because stone was not readily available in the area (Aylwin Cotton 1957, p. 203-204). We thus have to reckon with local innovations tried one or twice, but never repeated.

Another interesting comparison is with the Late Saxon burhs established by King Alfred and his successors as centres of defence in southern and central England against Danish invaders in the 9th and 10th centuries AD. Many were new foundations which might or might not later develop into urban centres. Some of the ramparts, such as Wareham (RCHME 1959) were originally built of earth, but in other cases earlier Roman walls were refurbished using stone and mortar as at Winchester, and some new foundations like Oldaport in Devon (Rainbird 1998; Rainbird, Druce 2004) were given mortared stone walls from the start. In the case of Winchester, the Roman walls gave a certain historical status to the capital of the expanding kingdom of Wessex, what was to become England. The same is true for its successor, London, but in this case the reconstruction of the Roman walls led to a movement of much of the population from the trading site of Lundenwic to the west of the Roman town into the area defended by the walls, bringing with it a special status to ‘The City’ which survives to the modern day, though nowadays the status is defined more by the financial institutions rather than its medieval legal status. The same seems to have happened in York.

This use of special construction techniques and the re-use of previously important sites perhaps have their Iron Age equivalents, again the Heuneburg being an obvious example. When I first coined the term ‘Ehrang’ to describe a *murus gallicus* type of construction, but lacking the iron nails (Collis 197, p. 15), I had in mind not only a chronological distinction, but also an industrial and political development, with the appearance of societies capable of organising labour and resources on a large scale, and deliberately destroying material (e.g. the iron nails) by using it in contexts where it may not have been structurally necessary or visible. This has its parallels on the Iron Age site of Segsbury Camp where Gary Lock and Chris Gosden’s excavation have produced ‘foreign chalk’ which was brought from a considerable distance from the site, but buried in the core of the bank where they were not visible (Lock et al. 2005). Perhaps this conferred status to sites where it was employed, not only as a *chef-lieu*, a political centre of power, but also to the individuals living inside, something which could also be claimed by individual aristocrats as Olivier Buchenschutz has suggested for the small sites enclosed by a *murus gallicus* found in the Berry.

The use of the title *Murus Celticus* for this volume has led to a lively discussion between the editor, the publishers and myself as the academic
referee. We all agreed it was a good snappy title, but one which could lead to major misunderstandings and this introduction is an attempt to clarify the problems of using terms such as 'Celtic'. What we are dealing with is a long tradition of rampart construction whose distribution extends over large areas of temperate Europe, a tradition which is in part dictated by local environmental constraints of the availability of the necessary materials, but is also based on cultural factors, the transfer of traditions between communities and generations. The distribution of this tradition occurs mainly in areas occupied by peoples variously called by the Greeks and Romans and by the people themselves as Keltoi, Galatae, Galli and Celtae, but it was not confined to them, as it was used by people like the Britanni who were never referred to as Celts (Collis 2003). There is also something of a correlation with people who spoke what is now referred to by linguists as Celtic languages, but again we have Celtic speaking people like the Ligurians around Marseille who at most were referred to as ‘Celto-Ligurians’ but who never used this architecture. In Spain we encounter peoples who spoke a Celtic language, and some of whom were also referred to as Celts, but whose architecture resembles more that of their non-Indo-European Iberian neighbours. My colleagues may not go as far as I do in rejecting the idea of a La Tène Culture or Culture Group (though I will accept there were ‘Hallstatt’ and ‘La Tène’ ways of doing things which were technologically and culturally determined). But we all agree that the way in which we use terms like ‘Celtic’ has to be done carefully or it can lead to outcomes which are neither academically or politically acceptable.

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