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Using ritual practices to define the Celtic world and its limits: a matter of identity

Réjane Roure

The two fields of research involved in this paper – ritual and identity – are among the most difficult – for an archaeologist working on the Iron Age – to approach because they both belong to the domain of intangible heritage. They are immaterial matters which we are able to understand only through material remains, including artefacts and ecofacts, which are the products of the expression of rituals and the assertion of identity. Furthermore, the Celts themselves constitute a huge issue, strongly entangled with the history of research and with particular political views (Dietler 1994; 2006). Even if many archaeologists have demonstrated that the identification between the Celts and La Tène culture is a historiographical construct (Collis 2003), the two phenomena are treated as synonymous/equal most of the time, which implies that all the manifestations of Celtic peoples outside the area where the La Tène culture was initially defined are understood to represent an expansion of the Celts from their heartland in central Europe. We will try to demonstrate that other views are possible.

Contributions to these proceedings show how difficult it is to deal with issues of identity for the Iron Age and we all know how challenging it is to deal with religion during these centuries. We do not even know if we can speak of a unitary religion, which is why I prefer to use the expression ‘ritual practices’, *i.e.* practices (which can be identified by archaeology) that are linked to a symbolic dimension. These practices might be construed as religious, but also social or political (or indeed – and concurrently – all three), because for the period in which we are interested, these domains were probably not to be considered as separate entities.

Thus, it is quite difficult to understand identity on the one hand and rituals on the other, notably in the case of ancient populations who did not write their own history; we therefore know about them only through their material remains and literary texts composed by other people. This is the case for the peoples of the European Iron Age. The few ancient texts written by Greek or Roman authors who did not belong to the cultures they described are not enough to give us sufficient keys to understand their neighbours; although they at least give us some clues, and shed some light. Nowadays, too, archaeological data allows us

to understand better what these ancient writers meant by their statements.

Iconographic data, normally a gateway to the mindset of ancient societies, are also very rare for this area at this time, because Celtic populations did not represent their gods in a human shape (Brunaux 2000; Roure *et al.* 2019; *contra* Poux 2019). Their art was primarily ornamental and definitely neither figurative nor narrative. Does this lack of easily-accessible information mean that it is impossible to study the rituals and identity of these populations? We will never be entirely certain of our interpretations but at least we can formulate robust hypotheses, underpinned by archaeological data and by new readings of the Classical texts. The expression of rituals is frequently one of the strongest ways that a common identity can be shown; and people make use of rituals to assert their common identity, because identity, individual as well as collective, is always manifested through process and construction, it is not innate.

What is identity?

The concept of *identity* is purely a theoretical construct and is outside the reach of experience. Yet it does exist and is made up of different levels, or overlapping spheres, of identity which possess the noteworthy characteristics of being comprised of never-ending layers of construction and reconstruction, especially as manifested in the context of intercultural encounters (Barth 1969; Amselle, M'Bokolo 1985; Ruby 2006; Derks, Roymans 2009; Boissinot 2011). These spheres of identity may be assembled into two sets: *idion* and *koinon*, to employ the words of Jean-Marie Benoist (Lévi-Strauss ed. 1983, p. 318). These represent respectively the identity of the individual/subject and the identity linked to one's culture (roughly equivalent to a people, or a nation to take a Eurocentric view); sometimes these are more commonly called *social identity* and *ethnic identity*. The first of these may comprise gender (man or woman), age (child or adult, with the possibility of many intermediate stages), social rank, and profession, in some cases at least, as well as other

definitions, whether or not these have clear rules. The second is conditioned by belonging – rather the feeling of belonging – to a group, and, moreover, such belonging is rarely to a single group but rather several groups, of varying sizes, which are known by different names, depending on the society or, more precisely, the type of society (in particular state or non-state societies) under consideration: family, tribe, clan, *gens*, people, nation, ethnic group, *civitas*, State, country, and so on. Changes and reformulations occur as much in social as in ethnic identity (Amselle 1990; 2001; Jones 1997; Luce 2007; Boissinot 2011; Müller 2014; Malkin 2001; 2014). Moreover, ethnologists have shown how these identities can vary over time, depending on reorganizations, choices, and changes that are themselves intimately linked to the existence of societies, which too should not be envisaged as fixed and immutable. This state of affairs provides the reason why it seems more appropriate today to use the terms of ‘identity assertion’, or ‘identity strategy’: these are characteristics which, incidentally, develop intensely in contact situations between cultures (Barth 1969; Amselle 1990; Formoso 2001; Chrétien, Prunier 1989; Halpern 2009). Indeed, the name of a group often appears more important externally rather than inside it, as internally other features of identity are displayed and recognized. Moreover, multiple names can co-exist for the same peoples, depending on whether they are given by insiders or ‘the other’ (Amselle, M’Bokolo 1985; Bats 1999). Dealing with identity, there are always two points of view: one *etic*, or external, the other one *emic*, or internal (Ruby 2006). With the Classical texts, we get the *etic* perspective (it can be considered an *emic* point of view but only in the sense that we are curious about the ways Greeks and Romans saw other people). Approaching the *emic* point of view is quite delicate to achieve in the case of many Iron Age people. For some archaeologists an *emic* view of these communities is definitely impossible, while others believe that a range of hypotheses can none the less be proposed from this perspective. Research on ethnicity with regard to earlier populations, and their collective identity has seen a strong revival over the past twenty years (Boissinot 1998; 2005; 2011; Ruby 2006; Derks, Roymans 2009; Testart 2010; Reher, Fernandez-Götz 2015), spanning the domains of archaeology and the study of ancient societies. The question that always has to be posed is ‘How should we deal with identity when the only available methods are archaeological?’ (Boissinot 1998).

Identity is above all a matter of behaviour, involving a permanent cycle of construction and reconstruction, indeed potentially witnessing many reconstructions throughout the course of the eight centuries of the Iron Age. I think this is the reason why it is so difficult to see ‘THE Celts’ as a fixed entity. All we can do is to try to understand which people claimed, or claimed anew, to be Celts at any given moment in the past. To ask when and where the Celts arose is to seek a falsehood, a chimera. A common mistake is to search for a single enduring identity for the Celts, and then to want to follow its progress across Europe. Identity is however not of a fixed, quintessential importance: people moved, changed and reformulated their identity all the time. For the present writer, this way of thinking is mainly derived from

the French anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle, who works on identity, ethnicity, and culture contacts in Africa. He has shown, primarily in his book *Au cœur de l’ethnie* (Amselle, M’Bokolo 1985), that ethnicity can be totally artificially constructed in colonial contexts. Through the studies of Jean-Loup Amselle, archaeologists discovered for the first time that identity and ethnicity could be almost totally created by colonial activity, and that the same indigenous population could concurrently use several different names to distinguish itself from other peoples (Bats 1999). The idea of *identité mouvante* – flexible changing identities – thus came about, marked by the contemporaneous existence of different levels of identity, even different kinds of identity, and above all by the idea that identity could be continuously constructed and reconstructed, without conforming to any deterministic pattern. His last book *Branchements* (Amselle 2001) offered a new perspective on understanding the identity strategies adopted by different populations. To do so, he developed a new metaphorical comparison – with electrical and information technology networks. Jean-Loup Amselle wanted to break away from his earlier proposition as expressed in *Logiques métisses* (Amselle 1990), in which he demonstrated how identities were always the result of mixing. In his later work, he now thought that the analogy with biological processes had been too strongly advanced by using the metaphor of miscegenation in his earlier book. Furthermore, the biological metaphor is underpinned by the idea of a native culture that only became mixed with the passage of time, whereas in the case of electricity networks, he attempted to show that all the cultures are always mixed and it lacked both frontiers and rigid structures (as is the case with cultures and their diffusion).

So what was the identity or identities that the Iron Age populations of Europe constructed for themselves? How can we approach this issue? And what can we say about the links between religion and identity strategies? If we can provide answers to these dilemmas, we will then be able to suggest a new approach to the matter of the unity and diversity of the Celtic World.

When and how did then ancient populations of Europe express their Celtic identity?

Thanks to this new perspective derived from anthropology, the aim of this paper will not be to try to identify the Celts as an overall entity, but rather to identify where and when people asserted their Celtic identity, and what was perceived as Celtic by others – in this case the contemporary Greeks and Romans.

The later protohistory of the north-western Mediterranean area – that is to say the Iron Age between the 6th and the 1st centuries BC – appears to be a particularly favourable period for the study of identity strategy, because it was a period during which intercultural contacts proliferated – initially with the Greeks (but also with the Etruscans and Phoenicians), and later with the Roman world, albeit under drastically different conditions. This region may be described as a *Middle Ground* (in the sense of the term employed by White 2009), a shared space where asserting

one's identity was an essential activity. This is also a period that is propitious for discerning and gaining access to identity strategies, because many ethnonyms stemming from encounters between the Mediterranean populations on the one hand and European people on the other are available for consideration. It is important in these cases to take the opportunity to combine material information provided by archaeological data with textual information from literary sources – these latter are the only sources able to provide ethnic labels (an *etic* perspective), the analysis of which can, it is here argued, generate direct knowledge of the identity strategies of the protohistoric populations. Such an approach can provide information on how these groups reacted to encounters with foreign populations, as well as taking cognizance of the knowledge of the Greek and Roman societies whose writings preserved these north-west Mediterranean names. The nature of these sources, indirect and external to the societies they describe, means that they can only provide an *etic* perspective on these people for whom the *emic*, or internal, vision will forever remain hidden (Ruby 2006) and only perceptible at one remove through their material remains (Millet 2012).

These studies have none the less shown that it is imperative not to underestimate the changes and transformations undergone by the north-west Mediterranean basin populations during this period – transformations the writer will try to shed light on in what follows. Attention will be paid especially to those transformations related to their identity strategies, so common a feature in situations of cultural contact that act as catalysts for the assertion of identities, as highlighted in Barth's work (Barth 1969). Numerous recent publications have revealed new methodologies for approaching such questions, and have investigated the dead-ends encountered in some cultural studies thus highlighting new paths to explore (Boissinot 2011; Müller 2014).

One of the first times that ancient European populations had to express their identity was in the context (almost a colonial context) of encountering the Greeks: around the 6th century BC. More correctly, this represents the first time we have some information available on such an encounter.

The first expression of Celtic identity we can access appears in the Greek texts of Hecataeus and Herodotus concerning the Greek expansionary movements in the Western Mediterranean. People need to assert their identity when they meet other people. Thus, when the Phocaeans settled around the lower Rhône at Massalia, they came into contact with native people, who are named as 'Segobriges', a Celtic ethnic name (Garcia 2004), in the Classical texts. The fact that at this early date Celts were already located in the South of France is thus clear, even if at a later period this name is found in use across Europe (Collis 2003; Py 2003). In regard to this matter, two further, later Greek texts raise an interesting point of view: '...it will be useful to [point out what] is unknown to many: The peoples who dwell in the interior above Massalia, those on the slopes of the Alps, and those on this side of the Pyrenees mountains are called Celts....' (Diodorus Siculus, V, 32). Strabo said the same thing at the very beginning of his fourth book in which he considered Gaul: he spoke of the people of the South of France, and says that they are Celts and that he thinks the Greeks had used this name to refer to all the

people in the rest of Europe, either because it was the first name they heard when they were living close to Massalia, or that it was adopted because it was the most celebrated designation for the native population (Strabo, *Geography*, IV, 1). Anthropologists like Jean-Loup Amselle relate many instances of this sort: the name of the first people to be met is thereafter used to identify all the others subsequently encountered, even if it is wrong so to do; and moreover, the native populations themselves finally started to use it to identify themselves. Perhaps this is really what happened in Iron Age Europe.

The information contained in the classical texts evolved considerably between the first sources produced during the 6th c. BC and the literature of the 1st c. AD (Bats 2003b): on one hand this occurred because Greek knowledge of the Celts increased, and on the other maybe because the people who claimed they were Celts also changed over time. Thus, in order to achieve a better understanding of identity during the Iron Age, we have to understand what particular Classical texts described in order to comprehend when and how ancient people expressed their identity as Celtic. Work on this aspect is complex and cannot be presented in this short paper; but it will be presented by the writer in subsequent publications.

As previously stated, people express their identity in many ways and through several kinds of behaviour. Several anthropological works indicate that religion is one of the main ways in which people share an identity, thus expressing their belonging to a community (Atran 2002; 2006). It is interesting to develop this aspect further in a discussion of Celtic identity.

The religion of the ancient Celts

Many ancient texts mention the religion of the Celts, generally without fixing their observations either geographically or chronologically, but, rather intimating that what they describe is a common occurrence across the barbarian populations. We have the testimonies of Caesar, Claudius Aelianus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Pliny and Tacitus. At the beginning of last century, Camille Jullian and subsequently Paul Marie Duval studied all these sources, especially with regard to divination (*auguri*). Caesar and Aelian both wrote that the Gauls (for Caesar) or Celts (for Aelian) were very religious (*Natio est omnis Gallorum admodum dedita religionibus*, Caesar, *BG*, VI, 16, 1). Aelian pointed out that the Celts had gods; and that they read the future by means of animals, dreams, and the stars; and noted that they carried out many ritual practices (Claudius Aelianus, *Varia Historia*, II, 31).

The names of Celtic gods are known thanks to epigraphic records (Brunaux 2000). A few of these sources are written in Gallo-Greek and have been found in the South of France where they belong to the end of the Iron Age (Roure *et al.* 2019). Most are however contemporary with the Roman Empire and deployed Roman epigraphy from the 1st century AD onward; these names were thus written down only in those areas into which the Roman Empire expanded. All archaeologists know that distribution maps can only be maps of what has been discovered, but the present

writer wants to emphasize that the availability of archaeological data is also linked to the local history of each country. That is why the boundaries of the known distributions of archaeological evidence cannot be used unambiguously to define Iron Age limits. This is especially the case for evidence of religion: the same gods as have been identified in Gaul could also have been honoured in East Europe: we have no way to be sure because there Roman epigraphic evidence is sparse since the area lies beyond the frontier of the Roman Empire.

Caesar's text (*de Bello gallico*) provides us with plentiful data, in fact almost all the information we have about the religion of the Celts. However, we have very few ways of knowing whether this information was relevant only to Gaul as Caesar defined it (more or less present-day France), or for all of Europe – the latter is a reasonable hypothesis. Above all, there are issues about the chronological span for which Caesar's evidence may be valid: when it began and for what duration it continued (just the end of the Iron Age or longer?).

We know several hundred names of gods, although these are mostly names which are mentioned only a single time. Only a few names appear to belong to gods who were widely known: they include, most famously, Teutates, Taranis, Lug, Belisama, and Cernunnos.

Cernunnos is known thanks to one of the most important iconographic artefacts linked to Celtic religion: this is the Nautes pillar, discovered in 1711 under the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Many gods are depicted on this stone: they include Roman deities such as Jupiter and Vulcan; and Celtic ones such as Cernunnos, Tarvos Trigaranus, and Smertrios. The second main medium which provides our knowledge of Celtic religious images is the famous Gundestrup cauldron, discovered in 1891 in the north of Denmark (Goudineau 2006). On the external plates, seven heads are shown: four of men and three of women. On the internal plates, there are several complex scenes depicting animals and human beings or supposed gods. One of them is Cernunnos, who is named on the Nautes pillar and identifiable on the cauldron thanks to the antlers on the top of his head. He holds a torc in his right hand and with his left hand grips a horned snake. This image echoes the representation of a character holding a snake in each of his hands, drawn on a Roman tile in Pannonia, from Carnuntum (and now in the collection of the Bad Deutsch Altenburg Museum) – one of the very rare religious images to come from East Europe. Another Gundestrup panel shows two figures with a wheel between them and surrounded by wild animals. Wheels are frequently linked to the evocation of the God Taranis in the south of France (Roure *et al.* 2019).

Images of gods are however very few in number, despite discoveries of Iron Age statues. In protohistoric Europe we rather have another kind of representation, in which figurative statues form part of ritual practices, and are linked to something we can call an 'ancestor cult', even if its roots and organization are both highly speculative. These are not images of gods because each one differs in detail, and therefore really seems to illustrate a specific person (Roure 2013). Furthermore, some of these sculptures are clearly related to funerary contexts, albeit many of them are old discoveries without any context. It is possible

such statues could have been associated with cult areas or burials, or indeed both, whether at the same time or successively. This practice emerges at the end of the First Iron Age (Glauberg, Hirschlanden, Sainte-Anastasie, Capestrano) and continues through the Second Iron Age (Nîmes-Grezan, Roquepertuse, Vix, Nîmes-Villa Roma, Boticas-Portugal, Mšecké Žehrovice) until its final phases (Entremont, Paule, Chateameillant), while displaying quite a similar representational code: they shared the same marks of identity, even if they are also distinguished by strong regional and temporal differences. A torc is always present, whether worn around the neck or held in the hand; there are almost always indications of weaponry (helmets, swords, or armour). These statues are distributed widely across Europe, reaching beyond the traditional boundaries delimited by material culture. Another strong motif visible in these statues and some other iconographic elements is the cross-legged sitting position that is adopted; this is known from the south of France to Germany, the centre of France and also in Spain, a pattern which illustrates another kind of network throughout Europe. This sitting position depicted could have held a ritual significance; been a symbol of political power; or may have signified the sacred power of kings or princes (Verger 2006). It could thereafter have been adopted for the gods when the Celts started to represent them during Roman times.

The emergence of built sanctuaries linked to war

Lastly, ritual practices known in the Classical texts and through archaeological excavation have to be added to this debate: notably the severing of heads and the exposure of weapons. Over the last few years, many discoveries have allowed first the recognition, then a better understanding of these practices, both in the South of France and the north of Europe, as well as in western Germany and Switzerland, and even in Spain. Moreover, principally during the 3rd c. BC, a spectacular phenomenon appeared in western Europe: this consists of the rising numbers of built sanctuaries and of ritual practices associated with warriors (Brunaux 2004). Thanks to the increase in the numbers of archaeological excavations over the last thirty years, many ritual sites are now well-known, even if just a few of them have been fully excavated. Far beyond the simple recognition of these phenomena, we have to seek the reasons for, and meanings of, them. In archaeology, the question 'why' is the most difficult to answer, and quite often, archaeologists are only able to explain 'how' something happened. However, we can advance a number of assumptions in order to understand the progress of, and implications of the rise in, practices of these kinds. For this purpose, we have to relate the archaeological data to both historical and social contexts.

The military sanctuaries are often characterized by the presence of weapons and that of (or the depiction of) human heads. It is noteworthy that this kind of collective sacred place appeared at the same time across a large part of western Europe, from Spain to Switzerland, and from the south of France to Germany. These sites share broadly the same practices, albeit with strong

regional differences. Indeed, the nature of the human remains encountered can be referred to a ritual practice described by early Greek authors: the removal of the head of dead enemies on the battlefield (Ciesielski *et al.* 2011; Armit 2012). The bones of the skull include cut marks which anthropologists have linked to the ablation of the tongue and other kind of preparation of the head in order to preserve it (Ciesielski 2017; Ciesielski, Bohbot 2014; Ciesielski *et al.* 2011; Boulestin Gambier 2012). In regard to metal artefacts, it is noteworthy that Second Iron Age weapons are very similar all over Europe, in Switzerland, in Germany, in Bohemia, in Hungary, in Languedoc, and even in Provence (Girard 2013).

However, in the sanctuaries, it is not only the same objects, but also the same practices in their treatment that can be identified, as can be seen from a comparison of two archaeological sites, one in the North, at Gournay-sur-Aronde (Brunaux 2004), and one in the South of Gaul, at Le Cailar (Roure, Girard, Ciesielski 2019). Shared objects can be indicative of trade or other links, but if the same ritual practices have been used on them, this conveys quite a different meaning. At Le Cailar as in Gournay-sur-Aronde, the weapons have been deliberately manipulated in standardized ways to damage them: swords have been deliberately twisted, shields have been broken up in particular ways, and sheaths have been systematically cut.

These shared practices indicate some unity, even if the sacred places themselves are quite different: Gournay, set in the countryside, is a temenos / enclosure with a central temple, whereas Le Cailar is located inside the town, adjacent to the fortification (Roure *et al.* 2019). Each site has its specific characteristics, but arching over all of that, we can envisage that they constitute a similar ritual phenomenon: thus diversity and unity are apparent at the same time. Both these ritual sites are community spaces and not private buildings as in Catalonia where discoveries of weapons and remains of human heads are made mainly in front of private dwellings – big houses probably belonging to the aristocracy, as at Ullastret (Ciesielski *et al.* 2011).

Why did this kind of collective sacred place with discarded, deliberately-damaged weapons appear contemporaneously over a large part of Europe? My hypothesis is that the increase in the number of these military sanctuaries, marked by the presence of human heads and weapons, could represent a phase when people in Europe wanted to assert their identity, that is to say their Celtic identity, an identity they held in common. They had not previously wanted to assert it so strongly, but at this time, they felt the necessity to be identified as Celtic people and this is precisely at the period when the texts provide the most information about the Celts.

I do not claim that the search for identity wholly explains this phenomenon (which was probably also linked to internal evolution, mercenary service, and increasing warfare over territory) but I do suggest that these military sanctuaries which flourished from the end of the 4th century BC until the 1st century BC are key to the identity strategies of the people living in Europe, to the North and the West of the Alps, faced with Mediterranean peoples, notably the Romans who had begun their northward expansion at this time. A similar hypothesis was proposed by Michel Bats

some years ago with regard to the Gallo-Greek writing system (Bats 2003a). He argued that native people in the South of France started to write their own language using the Greek alphabet at the beginning of the 2nd century BC (people had written at earlier times but they wrote in Greek): Bats suggested this development was a reaction to the increasing numbers of Roman people in the area which caused identity to be stressed; that it signified a way for the people in the South of France to express their Celtic identity, in writing their name, identifying their Gods and signalling their graves with their cultural filiation.

Conclusion

Too often our different regional or thematic studies are conducted separately, and so we tend to impose the limits of our own studies on the populations we are studying. The protohistoric populations of west and central Europe knew what was happening in contemporary Italy; people undoubtedly travelled and information was shared by itinerant craftsmen and through trade.

At the same time as Roman expansion extended into Europe, the Celts asserted their identity through their shared ritual practices, and through the invention of the Gallo-Greek writing system. Those ancient Greeks and Romans present in these areas observed the formulation of this identity and gave us their definition of the Celts, including those living throughout Europe. This was a time when several European peoples wanted to assert their identity, their Celtic identity.

We have argued that the native populations of the Iron Age in several areas in Europe could have expressed their identity particularly by means of their ritual practices, like many other societies, because ritual practices are an essential part of societies, being intimately linked to what defines a human group. Ritual practices include the creation of religious places and the development of particular behaviours but also include material culture in which social expressions are embedded, like statuary and ornaments, which could encapsulate meaning in terms of social identity. Ritual practices are one of several fundamental driving forces of collective consciousness. Ethnologists promote the idea of the social efficacy of ritual, with various ritual practices being intended to stimulate the collective interest and to seduce the heart and mind so as to keep individuals in line with the social norms of the group. Recently, the American anthropologist Scott Atran advanced the very stimulating idea that religion could be a 'cognitive behaviour' for human beings (Atran 2002). He argues that religion fulfilled such an important need for humans to believe that religion spread to the whole of humanity; his work has generated important debate and discussion (Atran 2006) which underline the importance of rituals in society. This role of ritual practices is present in both the personal and collective aspects of identity, including in relation to rites of passage (marking the end of childhood or birth, for example) as well as to any other custom with a symbolic dimension that will have a performative value for the recognition of a collective identity – common faiths, metaphysical notions of life after death, creation myths, the importance of the natural world, etc. This symbolic

dimension may carry such importance that it can be the fundament of an identity strategy. In the field of ethnology, there are numerous examples of the reinvestment of ritual practices within the framework of the process of identity assertion. Ethnologists today have come to characterize this kind of manifestation as neo-ritualization, often seeing it as linked to an assertion of identity. That is why I think that the increase in warrior ritual practices that can be observed during the 3rd century BC across a large part of Europe – in particular the exhibition of weapons and the practice of head hunting, which increased toward the end of the 4th and continued into the 2nd century BC throughout a vast region, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Alps, and which is documented both in written sources and by archaeological finds – could be related to a strategy to assert Celtic identity, regardless of whether their practitioners belonged (or considered themselves to belong) to the phenomenon that had been called the ‘Celts’ during the previous centuries or not.

Sometimes people do not express their identity, while on other occasions they do – the identity they choose – because they feel threatened, because they want to share an identity with people they choose to associate with and not with people who impose their power over them nor with people who conquer territories.

The Second Iron Age – also known as the Hellenistic period or the Roman Republic in other areas of Europe – was a period marked by the emergence or assertion of strong common identities – Greek, Roman, Punic – and so it was also for the Celts. We have to keep in mind that these common identities could be maintained in addition to other, more local, ones. Hellenic identity for example was quite complex and emerged as the result of a long-time process (Hall 1997; 2002; Luce 2007). Ancient Greeks were firstly Athenians, Corinthians or Megarians for example, but they were also considered to be, at the same time, Greeks, because they had the same religion and rituals: diversity and unity. So too was the case with the Celts.

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Abstract

Approaching the identity of Iron Age populations is particularly delicate. Many studies have attempted to provide answers to this issue and have put forward different lines of research. This paper is designed to study the links between ritual practices and the expression of identity in Europe during the Iron Age, a time when written sources call its inhabitants 'Celts'. The very notion of identity will be analysed in order to highlight the fact that identity is always a construction, and has to be studied as an assertion, an identity strategy. Thereafter, the religion and ritual practices of the Iron Age will be briefly considered: divinities, cult practices, statuary, and sanctuaries, highlighting the times when common ritual expressions develop, which can be interpreted in terms of identity strategy. The goal is to propose a dynamic vision of Celtic identity.

Résumé

La place des pratiques rituelles dans la définition du monde celtique et de ses limites : l'identité en question. Approcher l'identité des populations de l'âge du Fer est particulièrement délicat. De nombreux travaux ont tenté d'apporter des réponses à cette question et ont proposé différentes pistes de recherches. Cet article propose d'étudier les liens entre les pratiques rituelles et l'expression de l'identité en Europe durant l'âge du Fer, une époque où les sources écrites nomment ces populations « Celtes ». La notion même d'identité sera analysée afin de mettre en avant une vision constructiviste de celle-ci et la notion d'affirmation ou de stratégie identitaire. La religion et les pratiques rituelles de l'âge du Fer seront ensuite brièvement présentées : divinités, cultes, statuaire, sanctuaires, en soulignant les moments où se développent des expressions rituelles communes, pouvant être interprétées en termes de stratégie identitaire. Le but est de proposer une vision dynamique de l'identité celtique.