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"Our Ancestors the Gauls": Archaeology, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Manipulation of Celtic Identity in Modern Europe

> A united Gaul forming a single nation
> animated by the same spirit can defy the universe.
> —Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, VII.29

THESE WORDS ARE TAKEN FROM Julius Caesar's account of his war of conquest against the Celtic peoples of western Europe in the first century B.C. He attributed them to his enemy Vercingetorix, leader of the last great defense of Gaul against the Roman legions. More important in the context of the present discussion, they are inscribed at the base of a monumental bronze statue of Vercingetorix (Figure 1) that surmounts the hilltop fortress of Alésia in Burgundy, the site of the final stand against the Romans. The statue was commissioned in 1865 by the French Emperor Napoleon III, who also lavishly financed archaeological excavations at the site. Over a century later, in 1985, standing in the middle of the nearby ancient hilltop fortress of Bibracte (Mont Beuvray), where Vercingetorix had attempted to rally a united opposition against the Romans, French president François Mitterrand launched an appeal for national unity. Stating that Bibracte was the place where the "first act of our history took place" (Mitterrand 1985:54), he officially declared it a "national site." A monument was also erected to commemorate his visit, and archaeological excavations were begun with financing on an unprecedented scale.

It is my contention that such appeals to an ancient Celtic past have played and continue to play a number of important and often paradoxical roles in the ideological naturalization of modern political communities at several contradictory levels, including: (1) pan-European unity in the context of the evolving European Community, (2) nationalism within member states of that community, and (3) regional resistance to nationalist hegemony. An understanding of this complex process requires exploration of the ways in which language, objects, places, and persons have been differentially emphasized to evoke antiquity and authenticity at each of these levels in the process of constructing and manipulating emotionally and symbolically charged traditions of Celtic identity. As an archaeologist specializing in the study of those societies of ancient Iron Age Europe that serve as a touchstone of authenticity in the invocation of Celtic identity, I have an interest in examining the ways that archaeology has been appropriated, or has collaborated, in these "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm 1983), and its potential role in sorting out the competing claims of what Benedict Anderson (1983) has called "imagined communities."

An exploration of the relationship between archaeology and the construction of identity in modern communities is of considerable importance in Europe today, where attempts to establish a new supranational community are matched by a resurgence of xenophobic nationalism; where tensions based in emotionally charged appeals to ethnic heritage are currently erupting in violence in many areas; where the bonds holding many national polities together are fragmenting and reforming around smaller ethnic

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identities; and where archaeology has been conscripted frequently to establish and validate cultural borders and ancestry, often in the service of dangerous racist and nationalist mythologies.[1] Given that ethnicity and nationalism are such powerful forces in modern Europe, it is crucial for anthropologists to understand the historical processes through which identities are constructed and transformed by competing groups and the ways in which the distant past is marshaled as a symbolic resource to establish authenticity and continuity (Hobsbawm 1992; MacDonald 1993). It is equally important for archaeologists, as the principal conduit to that distant past, to develop a critical awareness of their own situation in this process in order to understand how it informs their practice by conditioning research goals, interpretation, and evaluation of knowledge claims and in order to recognize their responsibilities in presenting the past in the midst of rival appeals to its use in authenticating modern collective identities.

While there are many political cases worthy of investigation, this article focuses on the Celtic situation, both because Celtic identity has been such a widespread, diverse, and important force in recent European history and because its complex relationship to Iron Age archaeology has yet to be adequately explored. While any of several regions could serve as a fruitful focus for this analysis—including Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Galicia—the discussion here will center largely around the case of France.[2]

The Ancient Celts

It is perhaps wise to begin with a brief consideration of what archaeologists know of those ancient societies to which modern historical communities seek to establish links of identity. What, for example, does the word *Celtic* mean and where does it come from? Today the term is applied to everything from a basketball team in Boston to a soccer team in Scotland, to art and music styles, and to a literary genre. As with the Boston Celtics basketball team, the term is generally assumed by Americans to refer to an affiliation with an ethnic heartland in Ireland or Scotland. However, it is highly unlikely that the people of either of these regions ever called themselves Celts before the 19th century. This identification is a product of modern historical philology, which recognized the linguistic connections between modern Irish Goidelic, Scots Gaelic, Welsh, Breton, Cornish, Manx, and the ancient Celtic languages of the continent (Prichard 1857; Zeuss 1853).

The term *Celt* first appeared in the historical record during the late sixth century B.C. in the works of a Greek geographer named Hecataeus of Miletus, who mentioned that a "barbarian" people called *Keltoi* lived beyond the Ligurian peoples inhabiting the hinterland of Marseille in southern France (Tierney 1960:194). About a century later, Herodotus noted that the Danube River had its source in the territory of the Celts (*Historiai* 2.33). The Celts thus became, for the Mediterranean world, the first alien people on their northern border to emerge out of the mists of prehistory with a seemingly coherent identity. By the fourth century B.C., groups of these peoples crossed the Alps to wage war on the classical world. From this time until the first century B.C., when the Roman Empire expanded militarily to incorporate most of these peoples within its sphere of hegemony, Greek and Roman authors fleshed out the earlier sketchy references with descriptions of Celtic cultural practices and physical appearance. Celts also began to appear in classical statuary and vase painting (Andreae 1991).

Greeks generally called these peoples "Celts" (*Keltoi*), while Romans preferred to call them "Gauls" (*Galli, Galatae*), although usage was inconsistent and it is far from clear how these names related to native conceptualizations of identity (Chapman 1982; Renfrew 1987). Julius Caesar, for example, noted that Romans used the term "Gauls" to designate people who called themselves "Celts" (*De Bello Gallico* I.1). Strabo, on the other hand, wrote that the inhabitants of the hinterland of the Greek colony of Marseille in southern France were called "Celts" and that Greeks simply projected this name onto

all the barbarian peoples of northwestern Europe (*The Geography* IV.I.14). The term *Celt* was never applied by classical authors to the inhabitants of Britain or Ireland, although we now know that these insular peoples spoke dialects similar to those of continental Gaul before the latter peoples gradually abandoned their mother tongue in favor of Latin. Scholars today usually reserve the term *Celtic* to designate a group of closely related languages of the Indo-European family that were spoken in the first millennium B.C. over large portions of central and western Europe and that are now spoken only in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Brittany.[3] This linguistic unity was recognized only in the 18th century and well documented only in the 19th century.[4] Ironically, if Strabo is correct in his etymology of the term *Celtic,* it is quite possible that the original Celts may have spoken Ligurian rather than the language that their name has subsequently come to signify (Greene 1964:14).

Speakers of these languages are portrayed in historical texts of the classical world and in the much later heroic and legal literature of early Christian Ireland. They are also represented in the archaeological record of the Iron Age by the remnants of their material culture, settlements, and burials (Collis 1984; Moscati 1991). Certain aspects of Iron Age material culture, such as the well-known La Tène art styles (Megaw and Megaw 1989), exhibit considerable similarity over wide regions. However, much of the material culture shows a great deal of local variation over both time and space, and it would be misleading to speak of anything as homogeneous as a unified "Celtic culture" that could be linked isomorphically to a linguistic community or population. For example, it is not possible to assume that all peoples represented in the archaeological record by La Tène material culture spoke Celtic languages or that all ancient Celtic speakers participated in the La Tène material culture complex; there is, at best, a rather general correlation. It is more appropriate to think of ancient Celtic speakers in terms of a fluid network of autonomous societies speaking a set of related languages, linked by exchange, and differentially sharing certain cultural elements, but exhibiting considerable variation in political organization and other sociocultural structures and practices resulting from local trajectories of historical development. It is doubtful that the peoples of these diverse societies ever had a cohesive collective identity or ethnonym, and they clearly never constituted a unified political community. The Gaul portrayed by Caesar on the eve of his conquest consists of a series of named tribal polities linked through patron-client relations into a shifting configuration of unstable alliances engaged in mutual hostilities (Crumley 1987).

The term *Celtic* is clearly a dubious candidate for an indigenous ethnonym for the peoples that constitute the raw material from which Celtic identity has been fashioned in modern Europe. It first entered the historical record as an alien classificatory concept used in ancient Mediterranean states, projecting an outsider's sense of uniformity upon diverse peoples. Gradually, as contact with these peoples increased, this sense of uniformity was bolstered by generalizations about character, customs, and physical appearance. These generalizations were based in part on observations made in a few limited areas, but also largely on prejudices born of the conceptualization of "barbarians" as a necessary source of contrast for self-definition as "civilized" Greeks and Romans.[5] In the course of modern European history, this classical conceptualization has been influential in the reinvention of two types of essentializing concepts of Celticity. Sometimes Celtic identity has been constructed as a means of classifying "others" and ascribing characteristics to them that serve as a means of self-defining contrast, as in the case of English prejudices concerning the Irish and Scots (Chapman 1978, 1982; Curtis 1968). However, as in the cases examined in this article, Celticism has also been adopted and developed indigenously as a concept of ethnic self-identity, often relying heavily on more positive readings of these same alien stereotypical images from the ancient classical world.

French Nationalism and Celtic Identity

Let us begin the analysis of Celticism with a consideration of the role of Celtic identity in French nationalism. Postrevolutionary France is a classic case of the state preceding the nation and then having to forge a sense of national identity for an invented community of people who had little in common except a political bond and who did not even speak the same language. Naturalization of this invented sense of popular unity required establishing sentiments of authenticity through appeals to the antiquity of a common ethnic heritage. Given the history of France, there are three major strands of ethnic identity that could have been drawn upon. Each of these was invoked in the struggle for power by which the French nation was formed and transformed, and it is revealing to examine which of these identities was emphasized at different periods by different social groups, factions, and classes in the construction of a French nationalist tradition.[6] One possibility was provided by the people after whom the country is named: the Franks. These were Germanic-speaking peoples who penetrated Gaul in the waning days of the Roman Empire and established the Merovingean dynasty in the fifth century A.D. (James 1988). The other two possibilities were the Iron Age Celts (or Gauls) and the Romans who conquered them in the first century B.C.

Frankish identity was jealously monopolized by the nobility and royalty until the Revolution of 1789. By tracing their roots and the birth of the nation back to the fifth-century reign of the Frankish king Clovis, the nobility were able to assert the legitimacy of their rule through its supposed origin in the right of conquerors over the mass of subject commoners. The fact that Clovis converted to Christianity provided the monarchy with convenient connections to the church and divine sanction of its rule. This naturalization of class distinction through appeals to differences of ethnic identity tended to take on a strongly racial character, as in the influential historical writings of the Comte de Boulainvilliers (1727). He repeatedly asserted that France was composed of two races of people: the nobility, who were the descendants of the Franks, and the Third Estate, who were descended from the Gallo-Romans. The former were, by virtue of conquest, "the only people recognized as lords and masters" (Boulainvilliers 1727, III:84). As Barzun (1932) and Poliakov (1971) have pointed out, this concept served to bolster the objections of Boulainvilliers and his peers to the creeping social mobility whereby bourgeois commoners ("Gauls") were being promoted by the king into positions among the nobility. Despite the rare objections of skeptics such as Voltaire, the historical and philosophical literature of the time reflects a general acceptance among intellectuals of the ethnic construction of class.

This invented ethnic/racial dichotomy, ideologically underpinning the class structure, formed an obvious focus of popular countermobilization with the outbreak of the Revolution of 1789. Celtic identity was used both to oppose the nobility in a revolution represented as a racial conflict and, subsequently, as a unifying theme in the new process of popular nationalism by which the nation was defined as a community. For example, the Abbé de Sieyès (1789) urged that those claiming to be a race of conquerors should be "sent back to the forests of Franconia" by the Third Estate in order to purge the nation, which would then be "constituted solely of the descendants of the Gauls and Romans."

The revolutionary leaders, having disposed of the Franks as a legitimate source of ethnic identity for the new republican nation, were faced with crafting a new popular tradition out of the heritage of the ambivalent relationship between the ancient Celts and their Roman conquerors. The dynamic tension of this relationship, which a later writer likened to the "two poles necessary for electricity" (Schrader 1898:85), offered myriad possibilities for symbolic manipulation that were exploited in complex ways throughout French history. The democratic institutions of the ancient Roman Republic constituted an attractive precedent, and much of the political vocabulary of the revolutionary government was inspired by Rome. The members of the *Directoire* even adorned

themselves in crimson Roman togas while legislating (Séguy 1989). But while Rome provided a source for institutional models, the Celts provided a better potential foundation for an emotionally charged sense of ethnic community. Although there had been scattered scholarly interest in the Celts before the revolution, including some suggestions of national origins and the first use of the phrase "our ancestors the Gauls" (Pelloutier 1740; Pezron 1703), the Celts had not been a popular candidate for ancestry aside from fanciful speculations about their place in schemes of biblical genealogy devised for the nation by a few "Celtomaniacs" (Dubois 1972). The revolution, however, found the Celts undergoing an image transformation through the influence of the pan-European popularity of the Ossian epic forgeries (Trevor-Roper 1983) and the Romantic Celtophilia of writers such as Walter Scott and Chateaubriand. La Tour d'Auvergne (1792) went so far as to claim that Celtic was the original human language. Amid cries that "We are descended from the pure-blooded Gauls," it was even proposed that the name of France be abandoned (Poliakov 1971:29).

With the establishment of the French Empire under Napoleon, the ambiguous possibilities of the relationship between Celtic and Roman identities were further developed. On the one hand, Napoleon furthered the popular republican tradition of Gallic identity by founding the *Académie Celtique* in 1805, with the Empress Josephine as its patron. The task of this body of scholars was to exhaustively research Celtic antiquities and languages in order to "avenge our ancestors" for the neglect they had suffered as a result of the contempt of the Greeks and Romans and to restore to the Celts the glory they deserved (Johanneau 1807:62–63). A political goal may also be detected in the project of the academy: an ideological justification of the military expansion of the boundaries of the French Empire, "which, through a series of brilliant victories, has reclaimed all the ancient territory of the Gauls" (Mangourit 1807:65). Johanneau claimed in his opening address to the academy that "nearly all the peoples of Europe are descendants of the Celts, almost all are children of *la Celtique:* newly reunited, they nearly all form again today a single great family under one federative government," but he added the stipulation that, "as the eldest daughter of *la Celtique,*" France should have the best and largest part of the "glorious heritage" of the Celts (Johanneau 1807:42).

Napoleon was even more intrigued by the symbolic potential of the Roman imperial legacy as a naturalization of his aspirations for French military conquest and the legitimacy of his own rule as emperor. His invocation of Roman symbols is evident in such things as the construction of monumental triumphal arches, the portraits of himself in chariot and laurel crown by Ingres and David, and his statue in Roman garb atop the monumental column of the Place Vendôme, which imitates Trajan's Column at Rome. According to Hautecoeur, Napoleon insisted that public monuments "ought always to be in the style of the Romans. His empire ought to be the continuation of that Empire which spread from Egypt to the British Isles" (quoted in Ridley 1992:1). Not coincidentally, after centuries of neglect, the first systematic archaeological excavations and restoration of ancient monuments in Rome were undertaken by the French under Napoleon's orders at precisely this time (Ridley 1992).

A brief resurgence of Frankish national ancestry during the Bourbon Restoration was cut short during the Revolution of 1830 by a forceful counterattack on the part of Celtophile Romantic historians such as Guizot, the Thierry brothers, and Henri Martin. This movement permanently established the Celts as a primary ethnic foundation for the modern French nation through the popularization of an essentialist racial vision of Celtic identity and French history. Here began the construction of a heroic nationalist myth founded in the Celtic past, focused on the character of Vercingetorix, that would develop dramatically later in the century.

With the return of the French Empire under Napoleon III in 1852, the dynamic tension between Celtic and Roman identities also returned. It was personalized through a focus on the two dominant characters in the historical drama of the Roman conquest: Vercingetorix and Caesar. Napoleon III (1865–66) wrote a two-volume study of the life
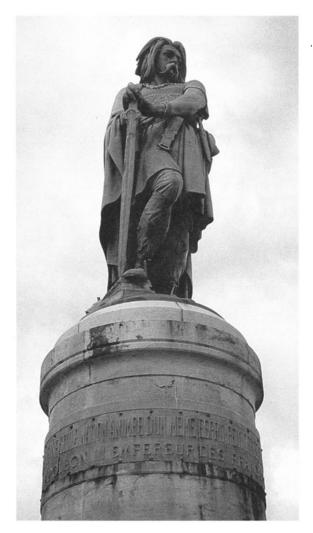
Figure 1
Bronze statue of Vercingetorix by Millet (1865), erected at the site of Alésia. The statue was commissioned by Napoleon III, and the face is modeled after his.

of Caesar while at the same time founding the Museum of National Antiquities. He also financed excavations at three of the main Iron Age settlements that had witnessed major events during the revolt of Vercingetorix: Alésia (the site of the final Celtic defeat), Gergovia (the site of a victory of the Celts over Caesar), and Bibracte (where Vercinge-torix attempted to rally united opposition against the Romans). From his personal treasury he commissioned the sculptor Millet to create at Alésia a monumental bronze statue of Vercingetorix with the face modeled after his own (see Figure 1).

Napoleon's choice of Alésia (rather than Gergovia or Bibracte) as the site for the statue reveals his conception of the identity of the French nation and of the utility of this ancient conflict as a national symbol. It was, as he saw it, the site both of heroic self-sacrifice by the Gauls in defense of their nation and of the ultimately beneficial, if temporarily painful, victory of Roman "civilization" over "barbarism." As he wrote,

> In honoring the memory of Vercingetorix, we must not lament his defeat. Let us admire the ardent and sincere love of this Gallic chief for the independence of his country, but let us not forget that it is to the triumph of the Roman armies that our civilization is due. [Napoleon III 1866:397]

While admitting that Roman domination was accomplished "across streams of blood, it is true," he concluded that it "led these peoples to a better future" (Napoleon III 1866:397). This notion of the ultimate transformative benefits of the Roman enrichment of a proud barbarian people served as a subtle and convenient rationalization for expanding French colonial hegemony in Indochina, North Africa, and other overseas locations, while at the same time emphasizing, on the model of the Gauls, the wisdom and benefits of native submission to this heir of the Roman Empire. As a secondary school text of the period succinctly put it, "The Gauls had sufficient intelligence to understand that civilization is better than barbarism" (quoted in Gerard 1982:361). An informal survey by Goudineau (1990) suggests that this perspective on the Roman conquest is still influential.

At the same time that Alésia was being transformed into a physical symbol of colonial legitimacy, Vercingetorix, the fulcrum of this historical moral lesson, was being promoted to the role of an increasingly popular embodiment of French patriotism and national character. Indeed, the period from 1850 to 1914 marked a virtual frenzy of Celtic identity and the rise of Vercingetorix from obscurity to the status of a preeminent national hero (Simon 1989). Street names in Paris and elsewhere were changed to Vercingetorix, Gergovie, and Place des Gaules, and Gauls became a common theme of artwork and popular and scholarly literature. Pingeot (1982) lists over 200 sculptures of Gallic themes by over 130 artists during this period, of which a number were monumental bronze works erected in town squares around France. Many of these, like Millet's at Alésia (Figure 1), Bartholdi's in the center of Clermont-Ferrand (Figure 2), and Mouly's in Bordeaux, were heroic depictions of Vercingetorix. One statue of 1872 by Chatrousse carries the patriotic historical symbolism to the extreme by depicting Vercingetorix and Joan of Arc advancing hand in hand (Viallaneix and Ehrard 1982:9). Another sculptor, Préault, proposed to construct for Napoleon III "an acropolis of Gallic civilization" out of a mountain in the center of France, bedecked with monumental statues of Celtic warriors and topped by a 40-meter statue of a mounted Vercingetorix resting on a pedestal composed of arms, tools, and symbolic objects of "our ancestors" (Pingeot 1982). The Gauls also became popular subjects for a stream of books, including novels, plays, historical treatises, and military analyses of the Celtic-Roman battles. For the period between 1882 and 1925 alone, the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale registered over 210 works on the Gauls (Croisille 1982:329). Moreover, the mid–19th century marked the first production of a continuing series of entire works specifically about Vercingetorix (Simon 1989:147–153), a character who is known really from only a few passages in Caesar's *Gallic Wars* and stylized depictions on a few coins.

It was also during this period that Vercingetorix began appearing in French schoolbooks for the first time, along with the conceptualization of national identity encapsulated in the cliché "our ancestors the Gauls." History became a mandatory subject in French primary schools only in 1867, two years after the erection of the statue of Vercingetorix at Alésia. The philosophy of primary education, which had a profound influence on the mass of the French population, favored instruction of national history through a focus on heroes and dramatic events. Vercingetorix became the seminal French national hero (Amalvi 1982). In special popularized texts by Celtophile historians, this primary historical education was accompanied by heroic drawings of "our ancestors" (Guizot 1872; Martin 1865). All these artistic and educational media served to widely diffuse and fix firmly in the popular imagination this invented tradition of national identity. An ironic byproduct of the educational system under French colonial administration is that generations of Vietnamese and African children also grew up reciting the phrase "our ancestors the Gauls."[7]

Figure 2
Bronze statue of Vercingetorix by Bartholdi (1870), erected in the Place de Jaude, Clermont-Ferrand, in 1903.

Much of the most fervent French Celticism, with a new focus on Vercingetorix as a national martyr and symbol of revenge, occurred after the humiliating French defeat by the Prussians in 1870. One year after the establishment in 1876 of the first chair of Celtic studies in France at the École Pratique des Hautes-Etudes, Albert Réville attributed a surge of interest in Celtic studies to a national crisis of identity. His comforting conclusion was that, despite some superficial influence on the course of the historical development of the nation from Roman and Germanic invaders, the French still exhibit the same characteristics Caesar described for the Celts and they are profoundly Gallic "in terms of character and blood" (Réville 1877:839). Moreover,

> Vercingetorix is for us more than a brave warrior. . . . He had already the French physiognomy.
> . . . He fought and died not for a canton, not for a petty realm, not for a dynasty, but *pro patria*,
> for the Gallic fatherland which is still ours. [Réville 1877:867]

Race remained a powerful theme throughout the 19th and into the 20th century. It was prominent in the widely influential writings of the Romantic historians Guizot (1820), Thierry (1866), and Martin (1852), and it was lent further legitimacy by the writing of early physical anthropologists such as Broca (1873) and Topinard (1878). The latter, for example, stated that "the impulses inherent in the cerebral matter are so tenacious, in spite of education and civilisation, that they still continue after crossing and mixture of races, and are of assistance in recognizing them," concluding that "the predominating character of the French race is still that of the Gauls described by Caesar" (Topinard 1878:409). Much effort was also expended in attempting to define the physical characteristics of "the Celtic type," which, in contrast to the tall, dolichocephalic "Germanic race," was identified as short, dark, and brachycephalic (Broca 1873:591). Bretons were conceded to be an approximation of this type, but the purest living representatives, with a high brachycephalic index and a cranial capacity "considerably greater than that of Parisians," and with a physical type that "may be looked on as that of the people of Celtica at the time of Caesar and Strabo" (Topinard 1878:460), were held to be the inhabitants of the Auvergne, in the center of France. These Auvergnats were considered direct descendants of "the people who held firmly aloft the banner of national independence on the heights of Gergovia and Alésia."

Camille Jullian (1913), on the other hand, explicitly eschewed the racial perspective, arguing instead for the continuity of the political concept of a Celtic nation, a *"patrie Gauloise,"* which had "motivated Vercingetorix" and which was the source of modern patriotic sentiment (Jullian 1913:68). He believed that Gauls and Gaul "were the names of a people, of a nation constituted in a fixed territory, corresponding more or less to that of France," and that the inhabitants of that nation, although racially mixed, "sang together memories of their past and hopes for their future" (Jullian 1913:68). These views of an eternal Celtic nation with Vercingetorix as an embodiment of its heroic values were a powerful influence in marshaling sentiments of revenge against the Germans and in legitimizing the drive to reestablish the "natural" borders of France. On a larger, pan-Celtic scale, there were even several proposals during the 1890s for the formation of a *Confédération des Gaules,* with France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and a new Republic of the Rhine united to counter German power (Carbonell 1982:394).

Although the period of the Second Empire and the Third Republic undoubtedly marks the apex of emotional popular engagement with the nationalist tradition of Celtic identity, the Celts have continued to serve an important—if more subtle—role in this domain up to the present. As in the past, there have been continuing shifts in the nuances of the symbolic meaning of the places, objects, and persons used to invoke this link to the past and continuing struggles between factions to appropriate these symbols. During World War II, for example, the occupation government of Marshall Pétain and the Resistance struggled for control of the Celtic heritage. In 1942, Pétain organized a ceremony of national unity on the site of Gergovia, with representatives bringing handfuls of soil from all over the French Empire to deposit at the monument erected on the plateau where Vercingetorix and the Gauls had inflicted a defeat on the Roman invaders. The speeches delivered at this event sought to explicitly identify Pétain with Vercingetorix, emphasizing the fact that each, in the wisdom of surrender to overwhelming force, had sacrificed himself to save the nation (Ehrard 1982:313–314). The Resistance, of course, had a rather different reading of the symbolism of Vercingetorix, emphasizing instead his campaign of insurrection against the Roman conqueror and his status as France's first resistance leader (Simon 1989:117–118). The fact that many of the 19th-century monumental bronze statues of Vercingetorix were later melted down by the Vichy government, whereas those of Joan of Arc were not touched, suggests that Pétain eventually came to regard the symbol of Vercingetorix as a threat (Pingeot 1982).

This manipulation of Celtic heritage has continued to play a role in the factionalism of French political life. In the same year that Socialist President François Mitterrand

gave his address at Bibracte, a newspaper photograph taken at the annual festival of the extreme right-wing Front National party showed a young member sporting a badge with the characteristically xenophobic slogan "Gaul for the Gauls." He is standing in front of a poster with a short list of French national heroes that begins with Vercingetorix and ends with Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the party (Brocard 1985:11). The archaeological sites at which Napoleon III first undertook excavations have also continued to anchor national ethnic mythology in a sense of place (Crumley 1991). In addition to the appeals for national unity launched by Pétain at Gergovia in 1942 and by Mitterrand at Bibracte in 1985, the opposition leaders Giscard d'Estaing and Jacques Chirac chose the site of Gergovia, where Vercingetorix accomplished "the first victory of France," to kick off their campaigns for European elections in 1989 with a speech stressing the "continuance of French identity" (Carton 1989:10).

The ideologically naturalizing sense of a national Celtic heritage continues to be subtly reinforced in childhood socialization through schoolbooks, comic books, and illustrated histories.[8] Perhaps the best-known example is the enormously popular Asterix the Gaul comic series, the first issue of which opened with a depiction of the surrender of Vercingetorix to Caesar. Asterix has even spawned a Disneyland-style theme park outside Paris called *Parc Astérix,* paralleled in Ireland by the newly constructed Celtworld theme park. Everyday images of the Celtic heritage in France are present in everything from the state-owned *Gauloises* cigarettes to the myriad bars and cafés named *Le Gaulois.* The Gauls continue to excite the imagination of intellectuals, as well, resulting in a stream of publications, both popular and scholarly, on subjects such as Vercingetorix, druids, and Celtic military matters (for example, Harmand 1984; Lance 1978). That this multimedia invocation of the Gauls has been effective in subtly inculcating and maintaining an axiomatic sense of Celtic national identity is shown by a recent survey on the heroes of schoolchildren of 8 to 11 years of age. In the category of "history, politics, and current affairs," Vercingetorix ranked third. He was bested only by two current French political figures (including the president) and finished three places ahead of Joan of Arc (*Le Monde* 1979:14). It is also evident that, even among well-educated French adults, the sense of a Gallic heritage is something other than a product of accurate historical knowledge (Goudineau 1990:17–19).

Brittany

It is ironic that republican enthusiasm for establishing a nation with claims to authenticity rooted in the ancient Celtic past should have nearly succeeded in wiping out the one surviving link to Celtic identity that had a reasonable claim to continuity: the language spoken by the people of Brittany. It is equally ironic that regional resistance by the people of Brittany to a French state claiming descent from "our ancestors the Gauls" has centered around their counterclaims to Celtic ethnicity. A final irony is that some of the earliest Celtophiles responsible for the invention of the French nationalist myth (such as Dom Pezron and La Tour d'Auvergne) were of Breton origin, and nationalist French Celticists once looked admiringly toward the Breton people, their language, and their folklore as primitive living relics of the ancient nation of the Gauls.[9]

Brittany is not the only French region to have constructed a local vision of Celtic identity: Burgundy, for example, has an invented folkloric tradition of Celtic fire festivals (Marquardt and Crumley 1987). However, no region has had such a pervasive identification with Celtic identity as Brittany, and nowhere else has this identity served as such a strong focus for regional resistance to state hegemony. The development of the essentialist vision of Celtic identity promoted by the Breton movement is, of course, every bit as complicated in its symbolic nuances and its historical relationship to French nationalist ideology as the development of the nationalist myth.[10]

The basic paradox of the Breton situation is rooted in the fact that French nationalists and Breton regionalists seized upon language and history to construct competing

ideological traditions of common identity for their imagined communities of Celts (Nicolas 1986:18). The language paradox is a product of the determination of the newly formed postrevolutionary French state to establish linguistic uniformity throughout the nation and the pragmatically arbitrary nature of the choice of the language used for this purpose. Despite suggestions that the new nation should revive and adopt Celtic, a language that had not been spoken in France outside of Brittany for nearly two millennia, the more practical solution of promoting the Latin-derived language of the Parisian state center as a national language was adopted. At the time of the founding of the French revolutionary state, however, only about 20 percent of the population of the country could properly speak French, and at least 30 percent could not understand it at all (Certeau et al. 1975). The state thus set out on a quasi-religious crusade to instill national unity by bringing French civilization, including especially the French language, to what were viewed as backward rural provinces. Regional languages and dialects became prime targets in the strategy designed to eradicate local popular cultures. The Celtic language of the people of Brittany became a victim of this process and, consequently, it has more recently been promoted as a symbolic focus of regional resistance by militants of the Breton movement.

The history of the decline of the Breton language is a complicated one that involves more than active suppression.[11] Initially, the Breton language and people were viewed by the Jacobin state as a reactionary threat. The promotion of French over Breton in schools and in official discourse was seen as a way of bringing these provincial peasant folk out of dangerous ignorance, superstition, and isolation into political community with the enlightened, rational, progressive nation. As Barère, the sponsor of a law mandating French language instruction, put it: "superstition speaks *bas breton*" (quoted in Certeau et al. 1975:10).

By the 20th century, the combined effects of Francophone educational policies, the stigma of rural backwardness as Brittany (especially the urban areas) became more integrated into the French economy, and the demand of the national bureaucracy for competent French speakers were causing the number and territorial extent of Breton speakers to shrink rapidly, with the linguistic frontier moving steadily westward. Since 1968, support for the Breton language has shifted from the right to the left wing of the political scale, and active revival of Breton (through instructional programs and publications) has been pushed forcefully by regional activists, especially intellectuals. To militants, competence in Breton is a fundamental aspect of the essentialist vision of ethnic identity they have constructed, though many of them are young, urban, Francophone intellectuals who learned Breton as a second language (McDonald 1989).

Most current Breton speakers are confined to an ever smaller rural portion of the unofficial region of Lower Brittany (the western part of the peninsula), while Upper Brittany (including the provincial capital of Rennes) has been historically French-speaking. Estimates are difficult to verify, but surveys from several sources in the 1980s put the number of people able to speak Breton at around 650,000 to 685,000, or about 45 percent of the population of Lower Brittany, although less than half of these spoke it often (Abalain 1989:207). There are four major dialects of modern Breton, with differences dating back several centuries.[12]

Linguistic features have played an important role in the construction of a historical model of the origin of the Breton people, which is a central feature of the vision of Celtic identity promoted by Breton militants. This model stresses close historical links with insular Celtic peoples in Cornwall, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland and denies connections with the continental Gauls, thus allowing an ethnic opposition to the French nation claiming Gallic ancestry. Militants consider Brittany not as a province of France but as an independent Celtic nation allied by ethnic kinship to other "oppressed" insular Celtic nations. This ethnic interpretation rests on the idea that Brittany was repopulated on a massive scale by Celtic immigrants from ancient Briton from the fourth to the sixth century and that Old Breton is a derivative of the language spoken by insular Celtic

immigrants rather than a revived form of the indigenous Gallic language that had persisted during the Roman occupation.

This model of Breton ethic origins represents a radical reversal of concepts that held sway until the 1840s (Guiomar 1987; Tanguy 1977). Until that time, kinship between Bretons and Gauls was an accepted fact and Brittany was seen as a living relic of ancient Gaul. It was for precisely this reason that members of the Académie Celtique were so interested in studying Breton language and folklore. However, the new, revised version of Breton origins gradually became institutionalized orthodoxy during the 1840s and 1850s. This was due in large measure to the influence of Hersart de la Villemarqué and several of his archaeological colleagues. In 1839 he had published the *Barzaz Breiz*, the Breton equivalent of the Ossian folkloric-epic invented in late-18th-century Scotland.

During the 1840s Villemarqué was instrumental in the addition of an archaeology section to the newly formed *Association bretonne*. Soon afterwards, archaeological societies were formed in each of the Breton *départements*. Two prominent archaeologists, Courson and La Borderie, argued forcefully at congresses of the Association bretonne and in print that Celtic immigrants chased from Briton by the invading Anglo-Saxons had settled in a Breton peninsula that had been left vacant by the indigenous Romanized Gauls during the fourth century (Courson 1863). This historical scenario triumphed over counterarguments claiming an ethnic continuity of the indigenous Gauls (Guiomar 1987; Tanguy 1977). The only major significant remaining debate after the 1850s concerned whether the immigrants had settled in a completely vacant land—the view favored by Villemarqué, Courson, and La Borderie—or whether they had inundated and enslaved a remnant population of Gauls (Loth 1883).

The archaeological evidence for or against the idea of a massive migration of insular Celts to Brittany is rather meager and ambiguous, at best, and the historical evidence is equally problematic (Galliou and Jones 1991:128–134). The strongest support for the massive incursion model comes from the evidence of place names (Falc'hun 1981; Fleuriot 1980). Other linguistic evidence is more difficult to interpret because most Celtic dialects of ancient Gaul appear to have been of the same general "P-Celtic" (or Brittonic) variety as Breton, Welsh, and Cornish (Whatmough 1970). Some scholars have noted close connections between Breton, Cornish, and (more distantly) Welsh and have hypothesized a common root protolanguage for the three (Jackson 1967; Loth 1883). Others have returned to a view of Breton—especially the Vannetais dialect—as being derived from the Celtic of the Continental Gauls. For Falc'hun, as for the Académie Celtique of the 19th century, "Breton preserves the last living vestiges of the first national language of France, that of Vercingetorix" and it is "a key to a better understanding of the Celtic past of the whole of France" (Falc'hun 1981:10).

Whatever the historical validity of a model of exclusive ethnic kinship with insular Celts, it has been adopted as a fundamental tenet by the Breton movement and it has helped to spawn a pan-Celtic cultural movement. Breton, Welsh, Irish, Scottish, and Cornish activists attend Interceltic Congresses (an institution started by Villemarqué in 1867) and publish in each other's journals. Reinvented druidic rituals have been imported from Wales, and druids from both sides of the English Channel officiate at common ceremonies (Nicolas 1986:56; Piggott 1968:123–182). Activists share a common cause of resistance to a perceived "cultural genocide" inflicted by France and England as well as a sense of mission to re-Celticize their ethnic homelands through linguistic and cultural revival.[13]

The European Community

Perhaps the most ironic of the three cases examined here is the attempt to establish authenticity through links to Celtic antiquity for the newest and largest imagined community on the European scene, the European Community (EC). Over a dozen major exhibitions on Celtic archaeology have been mounted in Europe since 1980, most

of them well financed, sponsored by more than one nation, and constructed with objects from a wide array of countries. The political theme of these exhibitions is rarely far from the surface, and it conforms perfectly to the strategy for the formation of an integrated European identity through emphasis on cultural heritage, as charted by the European Commission (Shore and Black 1992). An early exhibition, held in Steyr, Austria, was subtitled "An Early Form of European Unity," while the most recent, mounted in Venice in 1991, is entitled "The Celts: The First Europe."

The catalogues of these exhibits are peppered with allusions to the Celts as constituting "the ethnic and cultural foundation of most western peoples" (Otte 1987:11). According to the catalogue of a recent Franco-Belgian exhibition on Celtic archaeology,

> The history of Europe begins with the Celts. The Celtic peoples were able to develop an original culture of great richness, the reflection of a singular spirit which will remain henceforward an essential component of the intellectual evolution of our countries. The multiform heritage of this 'First Europe' remains no less today one of the principal factors of our cohesion. [Kruta 1990:8]

Perhaps most explicit of all is the Venice exhibit, the introduction to which states that

> it was conceived with a mind to the great impending process of the unification of western Europe, a process that pointed eloquently to the truly unique aspect of the Celtic civilization, namely its being the first historically documented civilization on a European scale. . . . We felt, and still feel, that linking that past to this present was in no way forced, but indeed essential, and could effectively call us back to our common roots. [Leclant and Moscati 1991:4]

It remains to be seen how effective such appeals to Celtic identity will be in constructing and popularizing a sense of pan-European unity. Despite the claim that "it is commonly agreed that all European cultures can trace their roots to Celtic origins" (Benvenuti 1991:11), a logical interpretation of the archaeological evidence assembled in these exhibits would seem to exclude regions such as northern Germany and Scandinavia, which were never Celtic speaking and did not share in the La Tène material culture complex on view in the display cases. At the same time, it would necessarily include large areas of eastern Europe that are currently excluded from the EC but that (although of uncertain ancient linguistic affiliation) are central to the definition of La Tène material culture.

Another problem with a Celtic vision of European identity is that it would seem to particularly favor certain nations that already have well-developed nationalist myths of Celtic identity. France, for example, with its claim to be the embodiment of ancient Gaul and the "eldest daughter of *la Celtique*" (Johanneau 1807:42), might feel itself well placed to exercise a certain cultural hegemony within the EC. Indeed, Mitterrand's speech at Bibracte emphasized that, for the French, it was the site "where the first act of our history took place." But he also subtly noted that it was "one of the grand sites of Celtic civilization," a civilization that was "not defined by political boundaries but by common culture" and that "extended over the better part of Europe" (Mitterrand 1985:54).[14] If "the history of Europe begins with the Celts" and the Celts are the "First Europe," then one can easily imagine how the nation that claims Vercingetorix as a personification of its national character might perceive itself as the heart of that new and old Europe. On the other hand, this vision would be difficult to square with that of Breton activists, who interpret the last 2,500 years of European history as a bloody process of the "assassination of *la Celtique*" by Franks, Saxons, and Romans and who see the authentic flame of Celtic identity burning only among a small band of oppressed minorities on the western periphery of Europe (McDonald 1989:117). France, like England, enters this conceptualization of Celtic identity only as an alien oppressor.

Archaeology and Ethnic Nationalism

The ancient Celts, as the first "people" to emerge from the mists of European prehistory as a discrete category of identity by virtue of having a name applied to them, offer a wealth of possibilities for forging the symbolic and emotional links that bond people together in imagined communities. Language, places, objects, and persons have all been used to evoke antiquity and authenticity in the construction of traditions of communal identity for regions, nations, and supranational entities. Because such identities tend to be defined by contrast, different communities—or factions within communities—selectively stress and appropriate those aspects that symbolically highlight their own distinctiveness. The apparent paradox in the manipulation of Celtic identity is explained by the symbolically fecund ambiguities of the Celtic past and the mobile historical trajectories produced in the *bricolage* process of the construction of traditions as they are continually redefined in response to political demands (Abélès 1988; Crumley 1991).

Clearly, archaeological research in the Celtic domain is politically charged, and an awareness of the ramifications and historical situation of one's work is crucial. By the nature of their endeavor, archaeologists find themselves in an ambiguous and delicate position as both the furnishers of the symbolic hardware of invented traditions and the potential agents of deconstruction for those traditions. Archaeology provides for the popular imagination tangible connections to an identity rooted in the awe-inspiring past. Places and objects can be made into powerfully evocative symbols that serve to authenticate constructed traditions (Anderson 1983; Lowenthal 1985). "The most effective expression of ethnicity requires an anchor to a particular geography" (Crumley 1991:3), and archaeology provides that anchor by tying sites to ancient events and people.

It is largely for this reason that nation-states take an interest in archaeology. "What makes a nation *is* the past, what justifies one nation against another is the past" (Hobsbawm 1992:3). Hence the state is concerned to finance excavations, designate and preserve "national sites," and sponsor museums and exhibits that display the "national heritage." Moreover, given that the state is the major owner of the means of production for archaeological research, it is hardly surprising that the pattern of support for archaeological excavation and museum displays has been conditioned by national mythologies of identity. This was most blatantly clear in the projects of Napoleon I and Napoleon III, but it is also subtly operative in the demands placed on archaeologists today as they seek to justify the significance of their sites in the competitive process of requesting grants for excavation or in attempting to protect the archaeological record. Because state functionaries must balance considerations of scientific importance with the potential of sites as national symbolic resources, archaeologists can ill afford to neglect emphasizing the latter. However, one cannot hope to understand the development of what Trigger (1984) has called "nationalist archaeology" by simple reference to a uniform national ideology or set of national interests. Nation-states are not monolithic entities but dynamic social phenomena born of and propelled by the struggle among competing factions. The subtle demands that condition a nationalist archaeology are likely to be shaped by complex, historically evolving, factional contests as much as by overarching state interests.

Archaeologists attempting to critically examine and challenge the incorporation of the past into invented traditions face other difficulties aside from state control of research funds. In the first place, although impressed by professional expertise and intrigued with the objects and monuments archaeologists bring to light, the public often pays little heed to the caveats voiced by archaeologists about the interpretation of these items. This is particularly the case with artistic creations and popular folk traditions. For example, 19th-century Romantic statues and paintings of Gauls are replete with weapons and armor copied carefully from archaeological specimens on view in museums.

Figure 3
Painting of a "Gallic chief near the Roche Salvée of Beuvray inspecting the horizon," by Jules Didier (1895). Reprinted with permission from the Musée Rolin at Autun, France.

However, the artists assembled anachronistic collections of items drawn from past eras ranging from the Bronze Age to the Merovingean period. The statue of Vercingetorix at Alésia is a prime example of this practice (Figure 1), as is a painting by Jules Didier showing a "Gallic chief" wearing a mix of items including Bronze Age armor and what appears to be a form of kilt complete with sporan (Figure 3).[15] Despite the chronological and cultural discrepancies involved in the association of this material, for the nonspecialist they lend an aura of authenticity that is impervious to the criticism of scholars. The reinvention of druidism and its association with Celtic fire festivals at Burgundian archaeological sites and with Stonehenge offer further examples of the inventive incorporation of archaeological monuments in traditions of Celticity (Crumley 1991; Piggott 1968).

Another difficulty facing archaeologists, in the wake of a growing critical awareness of the problematic nature of the archaeological endeavor, has been a loss of confidence in the authority of their interpretations. The problem is not only that the archaeological record is partial and inherently ambiguous but also that archaeologists themselves are products of a particular sociohistorical context and that their interpretations and evaluations of plausibility are not independent of that context, a fact of which they have become increasingly aware.

In the case of the Celts, reconstructions of Celtic history and customs prior to the 19th century had been based almost entirely on interpretations of the alien testimony of classical texts. Archaeology appears to offer the promise of restoring the indigenous voice of the Celts by allowing their material culture, their own creations, to speak directly to later generations. However, this apparent communication is an act of interpretation by modern scholars. As such it remains an alien perspective subject to caveats that include, most critically, a realization of the social situation in which interpretations are formed.

Clearly, archaeologists must continually strive to be self-critical in evaluating the social and political contexts of their interpretive perspectives and their epistemological tools.[16] Examples of the unwitting (or sometimes conscious) participation of historians and archaeologists in the manipulation of the past in the cause of ethnic, nationalist, and colonialist mythologies illustrate the risks of unreflective interpretation and the illusion of objectivity.[17] Moreover, the fact that archaeology came of age as a professional discipline precisely in the context of the development of modern nation-states, with their demands for the construction of popular traditions of identity, should give cause for serious examination of the social construction of the field. Sensitivity to alternative conceptions of the past—especially those of disenfranchised groups—is both necessary and desirable (Layton 1989; Murray 1993). But the dangerous abuses and distortions of the archaeological record promulgated in Nazi Germany to justify territorial expansion and genocide[18] are a warning of the potential consequences of a failure to refute certain interpretations as seriously wrong. Popular traditions of regional ethnicity may seem to be a more benign manipulation of the past, but the violent effects of ethnic conflict, fueled by visions of identity rooted in emotionally charged appeals to the distant past, are readily apparent in Europe today.

If many archaeologists no longer feel comfortable imposing authoritative interpretations, we at least have a duty to engage in critically reflective debate about the manipulation of the past and to expose the profoundly ahistorical nature of essentialist visions of identity to the archaeological record of constant change. The case of "our ancestors the Gauls" offers a compelling example of the delicate challenge that faces archaeologists in sorting out the relationship between how the past has produced the present and how the present invents and manipulates its past.

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Notes

1. See Arnold 1990, Härke 1991, McCann 1990, and Trigger 1984.

2. France richly illustrates all three of the levels. For other areas, see, for example, Chapman 1978, Omnès 1987, Piggott 1989, Sheehy 1980, and Trevor-Roper 1983. A comparative study encompassing these other traditions of Celtic identity is in progress.

3. For a discussion of Celtic linguistics, see Abalain 1989, Renfrew 1987, and Whatmough 1970.

4. See Jones 1807, 3:23–46, Lhuyd 1707, Prichard 1857, and Zeuss 1853.

5. For example, see Chapman 1982, Dauge 1981, and Tierney 1960.

6. See Barzun 1932, Dubois 1972, Poliakov 1971, Simon 1989, Viallaneix and Ehrard 1982, and Weber 1991 on this subject.

7. For illustration and further discussion, see Achebe 1987:35 and Ferro 1981:37–39, 139.

8. See, for example, Harmand 1985, Pageaux 1982, and Simon 1989.

9. See Broca 1873, Johanneau 1807, and La Tour d'Auvergne 1792.

10. For more on this relationship, see McDonald 1989, Nicolas 1986, Reece 1977, and Tanguy 1977.

11. See Abalain 1989, Certeau et al. 1975, McDonald 1989, Nicolas 1986, Reece 1977, and Tanguy 1977.

12. See Abalain 1989, Falc'hun 1981, and Fleuriot 1980.

13. See McDonald 1989; and compare Brékilien 1976 and Gwegen 1975.

14. The site has recently been upgraded from a "national site" to a "European Archaeological Center."

15. This is a symbolic reference to a contemporary, invented tradition of Celtic dress from the Scottish Highlands (see Trevor-Roper 1983).

16. See, for example, Trigger 1989 and Yoffee and Sherratt 1993.

17. Here see Trigger 1984, as well as Fowler 1987 and Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990.

18. See Arnold 1990, Härke 1991, and McCann 1990.

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