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Fingerprinting the Iron Age – Approaches to Identity in the European Iron Age. Integrating South-Eastern Europe into the Debate

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It may safely be argued that the introduction of the constructivist concept of identity over the last couple of decades has induced profound changes in the archaeological investigation of the past. However, this strain of inference has not been pursued equally vigorously in all local archaeological communities. Thus, the proliferation of literature written in English is in stark contrast to the sporadic application of the concept of identity in other settings. South-Eastern Europe, one such region reluctant to embrace quickly shifts in archaeological theory, has once more remained more or less withdrawn from the current vivid debate on applicability of the concept of identity in archaeological research.

Therefore the recent conference Fingerprinting the Iron Age. Approaches to identity in the European Iron Age. Integrating South-Eastern Europe into the debate, held at the Magdalene College from 23 to 25 September 2011, and organized with the support of the McDonald Institute of the University of Cambridge, was aimed at addressing this quickly widening gap in communication between the specialists dealing with the late prehistory of different parts of Europe. Archaeologists from eight principal countries of Europe (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia) as well as participants from more than fifteen countries including the United States and Australia, engaged in vivid three-day debate, organized in eleven sessions, ranging in topics from regional surveys and recent discoveries, issues of technology, settlement, burial, art, to politics and theory in the study of identities in the European Iron Age.

The main focus of the majority of the contributions was on the matters of ethnic attributions of the communities in the past, whereas gender, social and other aspects of identity emerged sporadically in the proceedings. This need not come as a surprise, since the concept of cultural group – a construct encompassing a territory and material manifestations of human actions therein, and implying the unity of other cultural elements and ultimately ethnic unity over the region in question, bestowed to us by Vere Gordon Childe, but by Gustaf Kossinna as well – remains the staple element of archaeological investigation. In spite of its amply demonstrated inherent problems, it is still deeply embedded in our basic toolkit and this surely is one of the hardest burdens on the discipline. Moving forward in the direction of acknowledging constant negotiation of group identities in the past, instead of fixing them into sharply delineated stable units, requires continuous theoretical as well as practical reconsideration. The discussions at the Conference echoed this concern and problematized a series of theoretical and methodological aspects of the study into the period particularly laden with the issue of ethnicity, with its echoes in the modern world.

The fact that the communities inhabiting temperate Europe during the first millennium BC attracted attention of the literate southern neighbours – the Greek and Roman authors,
brings forward the key matter of the role of written sources in archaeological research. This point was addressed by a number of contributions to the Conference, reconsidering the attitudes of the Classical world towards ethnic identity and the implications of these texts for our modern understanding of the political maps of the Iron Age Europe. The modern political maps and their consequences for our endeavour of understanding the past were also treated in a number of presentations. This line of inquiry illustrates the appeal of the late prehistory for the current identity-building processes in many parts of Europe, from the ideas of the Celtic realm, to the disputes over the lawful heir to the name of Macedonia and the ancestors of the Albanians.

Fig. 1: Some of the participants of the conference.

In summary, the archaeologists gathered at the Conference differed in their starting points, but the discussions proved that communication between the specialists in different regions, methods, and adhering to different theoretical approaches is possible and indeed fruitful. Therefore, the most important result of the Cambridge gathering lies in setting solid foundation for the future dialogue of the archaeologists from various parts of the world dealing with the Iron Age.

Further details of the conference (including the programme, abstracts, plans for publication and plans for future thematic conferences focused on the Iron Age) can be found here: http://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/iron_age_conference_2011. The conference is grateful for support from the McDonald Institute, Brewin Dolphin investment management, the ACE foundation, the Ironmongers livery company and Magdalene College Cambridge.