Iron Age Slaving and Enslavement in Northwest Europe

Karim Mata

The cover image was drawn specifically for this book by Julia Haines.

This book is available direct from Archaeopress or from our website www.archaeopress.com

Contents

List of Figures

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Archaeologists have yet to consider seriously the impact of slaving and enslavement on socio-cultural developments in Iron Age Europe. When slaves are mentioned in the literature this generally remains limited to their inclusion in lists of trade goods believed to have circulated through far-reaching exchange circuits. Many also doubt it is possible to perceive the presence of slaves in the material record, let alone that it is possible for archaeologists to speak with any measure of conviction about slavery in terms of lived experience, social institutions, or cultural ideals. While there are of course exceptions, many who have given the subject attention remain preoccupied with the identification of material markers of slavery (Aldhouse-Green 2005; Arnold 1988; Cosack and Kehne 1999; Daubigney and Guillaumet 1985; Gronenborn 2001; Peschel 1971; Schönfelder 2015; Thompson 1993). Any broader conclusions tend to remain uninspiringly cautious.

With enslavement commonly treated as a mere byproduct of incessant 'tribal warfare', it is generally held that slavery was not a significant phenomenon in temperate Europe before the Roman era.[1] When slavery as a social fact is granted a place in Celto-Germanic[2] contexts, it tends to be distinguished from Greco-Roman slave systems where forced labor had a fundamental economic role. This follows a contrast commonly made in the literature on slavery, between informal modes of social inequality and subservience allowed for stateless societies (and involving such things as ritualized hostage-taking or the social integration of captives), and the formal slave systems of complex states that relied heavily on the economic exploitation of commodified human bodies (Dal Lago and Katsari 2008; Finley 1980; Hopkins 1978; Taylor 2005; Webster 2008). While such distinctions can be useful, I aim to move beyond classifying slavery, instead choosing to focus on elucidating historical, material, behavioral, and ideological aspects of Iron Age slaving and enslavement in Northwest Europe (Figure 1).

The La Tène cultural phenomenon that arose on the northwestern periphery of the West-Central Hallstatt world during the Middle Iron Age[3] has been studied by generations of archaeologists with distinct theoretical and methodological orientations, yet research on slaving and enslavement has not developed on a level comparable to that of other periods and regions. Indeed, no disciplinary perspective stands out in this regard. This is quite surprising considering the way human social life tends to be theorized in our discipline, irrespective of what operators of social complexification are granted analytical prominence. A brief exercise in disciplinary caricaturing can reveal this.

The belief that indigenous transformations resulted primarily from Mediterranean influences pervaded the earliest scholarship, with variations on the theme persisting for decades thereafter (Arnold and Gibson 1995; Frankenstein and Rowlands 1978; Haselgrove 1987; Nash 1985). Characteristically, those operating within a cultural-historical framework tend to accept the transformative capacity of

---

[1]   Even a cursory look at ancient sources suggests otherwise (Caesar *Gallic Wars* 6.15.2, 6.19.4; Cicero *Letters to Atticus* 4.17.303; Diodorus *Library of History* V.26; Strabo *Geography* IV 5.2). The Roman historian Tacitus, in particular, provides copious information about slavery as a well-developed Germanic institution (Thompson 1957). However, overcoming the problem of unavoidable cultural bias in the literary sources requires assessment of a wider range of evidence, such as offered in this book.

[2]   I refer to the pre-Roman inhabitants of West-Central Europe in a variety of ways, but predominantly as this relates to chronology (e.g. Iron Age, Hallstatt, La Tène) and geography (e.g. trans-Alpine, Aisne-Marne). Such usage has certain shortcomings, though these are less problematic than ancient references to 'tribal' (e.g. Treveri or Batavi), or cultural affiliations (e.g. Celtic or Germanic). For reasons of communication and style I use all without making any definitive claims about emic understandings and perspectives.

[3]   I use the following chronological periods throughout the text: Early Iron Age (EIA), *c.* 800-500 BC, broadly corresponding to Early Hallstatt (EHa) C and Late Hallstatt (LHa) D; Middle Iron Age (MIA), *c.* 500-350 BC, broadly corresponding to Early La Tène (ELT) A-B; Late Iron Age (LIA), *c.* 350-12 BC, broadly corresponding to Middle La Tène (MLT) C and Late La Tène (LLT) D.

material culture, even if older ideas on diffusion and acculturation no longer shape interpretations significantly. But, more importantly, this perspective generally supposes that any indigenous desire for exotic goods (like Mediterranean wine, bronze wares, and fine ceramics) was shaped by a universal human interest for competition and differentiation. Especially for the latter half of the Late Iron Age, these prime motivators are widely perceived as the main causes of social complexification and cultural transformation (Barrett 2012; Kienlin 2017).

Post-processualists, by contrast, have generally been critical of core-periphery perspectives that too readily link indigenous developments to external forces, whether economic or cultural. Further rejecting the innate capacity of objects and materials for shaping cultural ideals and social norms, they instead underscore the importance of indigenous value systems that determined how non-local goods, ideas, and practices were contextually negotiated. Nonetheless, 'nativist' scholarship of this kind still grants substantial transformative significance to social differentiation, likely due to the influence of Marxist theory (Miller and Tilley 1984; Sastre 2011), which holds that socio-cultural transformation primarily results from 'class struggles'. This perception is also shared by those who have been inspired by social theorists (Bourdieu 1977; de Certeau 1988; Giddens 1984) and likewise foreground the transformative importance of 'social struggles' (Diepeveen-Jansen 2001; Dornan 2002; van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017). Reliance on structuralist theory (Hodder 1982; Hodder *et al.* 2007) only exaggerates such preoccupations when it grants socio-cosmic significance to the violent excesses of prehistoric life. Where ancient observers commonly blamed 'barbarian' feuding and warfare on essential dispositions and cultural shortcomings – the same sources, it must be remembered, that informed the ideological imaginaries of modern European state builders (Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996; Dietler 1994) – archaeologists inspired by structuralist ideas tend to overstate the cultural significance of Celto-Germanic violence and bellicosity by embedding these in transhistorical value systems that uniquely characterized 'warrior societies' (Arnold and Murray 2002: 112; Bazelmans 1999; Derks 1998; Diepeveen-Jansen 2001; Lenski 2008: 88). While it might be thought, then, that the post-processual emphasis on indigenous agency and contextual meaning-making has significantly changed archaeological interpretation of Iron Age societies, it is the uncritical foregrounding of competition and conflict as universal determinants of socio-cultural transformation that remains problematic.

Theories and methods that might be characterized as processualist continue to shape perspectives on Iron Age transitions as well. These generally aim to explain socio-cultural complexification in reference to quantifiable economic, demographic, and environmental data. One common assumption that recurs widely in this literature is that social complexification follows directly from demographic growth, with increased agricultural production a necessary (and measurable!) prerequisite (Brun 1995; Fernández-Götz 2018). For example, recent work on Early Iron Age urbanism treats demographic growth as the main driver of socio-economic inequality and political centralization (Fernández-Götz and Krausse 2013: 479; Fernández-Götz and Ralston 2017: 274). At the well-known Heuneburg hillfort (Baden-Württemberg, Germany), local aspirers are believed to have achieved their superior status by successfully mobilizing communal loyalties through the manipulation of shared ideologies, specifically by staging public ceremonies at sacred places (Fernández-Götz 2014a: 117). Yet, it remains difficult to understand how exactly differentiating aspirers were able to convince members of politically decentralized and socially undifferentiated farming communities to voluntarily participate in their aggrandizing projects in such a chronologically and geographically erratic manner. Further, if population growth encouraged centralization and stratification, should we expect opposing developments when population numbers decline? Did the persistence of egalitarian ideals among communities that were contemporary with LHa 'princely' hillforts result from a lack of demographic growth? How likely is it that the abandonment of countless large fortified settlements like that of the Heuneburg was uniformly caused by conveniently quantifiable factors like environmental degradation, economic contraction, and depopulation?

Partly in an attempt to address interpretive challenges of this kind, some archaeologists have sought to examine Iron Age complexification through a comparative-ethnographic lens. Such works typically argue against the presumed universality of economic and demographic imperatives, while also rejecting any innate capacities of material culture. Instead, certain social mechanisms are foregrounded for their purported transformative potential. Thus, it is through mechanisms like 'feasting' (Dietler and Herbich 2001; Hayden 2003; Michael 2003; Spielmann 2002) that aspiring individuals and their kin groups were able to mobilize local labor forces and differentiate themselves within their community. Yet, even with this privileging of certain cross-culturally attested practices and institutions, our understanding of past lifeways does not improve significantly if the interpretive focus remains on competition and differentiation. Further still, the relevance of comparative information also remains to be demonstrated for each context under investigation (Peregrine 2001). It is difficult to see, for example, how farming families could have built the monumental walls, gates, and towers of LHa princely hillforts like the Heuneburg through participation in voluntary work feasts. Such projects required labor investments of a scale and duration far exceeding the construction of even the largest barn or burial mound (Wells 2002: 366).[4] Furthermore, without clear evidence for a prevalence of extended or polygamous family arrangements in Iron Age Europe (Nash-Briggs 2003: 254), it is not at all certain whether the work feast could produce the same level of labor attested in certain African contexts.

On the one hand, this brief overview of interpretive orientations shows how the privileging of either internal or external causes of socio-cultural transformation risks reducing past complexities as well as the interpretive dexterity of archaeologists. In other words, archaeological analyses remain diminished if they cannot tackle aspects of relationality and co-constitution (Mata 2017a: 11). But, more than this, it also demonstrates that the supposed inevitability of social complexification is rarely questioned, irrespective of preferences in theory and method.[5] The notion that differentiation and competition are essential human aptitudes that need only be stimulated – by such things as demographic growth, the inevitable scheming of social aspirers, or the innate qualities of exotic objects – wholly ignores the complex interplay of different motivations and capacities that have always shaped all human social engagements (González-Ruibal 2012; Mata 2017a; Ortner 2005).[6]

Where this concerns the presumed inevitability of social differentiation specifically, it can be observed that norms, traditions, and institutions universally operate to prevent the disruption of social systems. Indeed, the efforts of those who seek to differentiate themselves rarely remains unopposed,[7] especially since challengers of social norms risk eroding bonds with kin and community, something that can have detrimental consequences for groups and individuals alike (Mata 2012: 37). All human communities have always developed strong deterrents for non-egalitarian behavior, whether understood weakly as differentiation or strongly as domination. Further, the Marxist position that elites always manage to successfully deploy mystifying discourse in order to convince subordinate masses to accept inequality is untenable. Not only does this negate the complex interplay of discrepant understandings, motivations, and abilities, it ignores the fact that stratification has historically most readily occurred under conditions

---

[4] At the LLT *oppidum* at Manching, for example, it has been calculated that a single phase of construction required approximately 500,000 person-days of labor (Wells 2005: 57).

[5] The main socio-historical transition recognized is that from a broadly egalitarian to an increasingly stratified society. This is widely perceived as the main developmental trajectory for Iron Age societies (Dietler 1990; Fernández-Götz *et al.* 2014; Haselgrove 1987; Roymans 1990; Sastre 2011).

[6] Recent interest for 'non-triangular' social systems among Iron Age researchers (Hill 2006; Moore and Armada 2011) is a welcome development in this regard.

[7] Caesar's (*Gallic Wars* I.2) retelling of the political machinations of Orgetorix of the Helvetii (Switzerland), whose political ambitions were resisted within his own community, may serve as an illustrative example of this. Another example concerns Caesar's (*Gallic Wars* VII-33) arbitration of internal conflicts among the Aeduans (Central-East France). Within this community, laws seemed to have been in place to prevent the centralization of power; Aeduan families could only have one of their members serve as an 'officer of the state', in order to prevent certain families gaining too much influence.

that are rarely inevitable. Throughout human history, physical insecurity and psychological anxiety are prime factors that can readily be shown to have promoted the proliferation of disproportionately powerful groups and individuals. While both can also inspire cooperative behavior and strengthen egalitarian discourse, the successful realization of equality-based collaborative projects is never easy to achieve, and a threshold can be reached (with or without the assistance of manipulating aspirers) when people willingly surrender autonomy and equality as a way of improving insecure conditions. The asymmetrical relations that often initially form under such circumstances then can become reified into social institutions, cultural ideals, and even personal worldviews (Conteh-Morgan 2002). There seems little doubt that insecurity and anxiety have historically been key factors in the rise and persistence of social inequality (Nussbaum 2018).

Crucially, the cultural normalization of social inequality is a necessary precondition for the manifestation of systems of subservience and enslavement. Yet, such processes are first and foremost historical and therefore require contextual scrutiny. Comparative research on African slaving and enslavement is particularly illustrative in this regard because it reveals what can happen when broadly egalitarian segmentary communities are enduringly preyed upon by often better organized stratified groups (Fitts 2015; Klein 2001: 65; Kusimba 2004 and 2015; MacEachern 2011; Nwokeji 2010; Robertshaw and Duncan 2008). The former are forced through a transformative process in response to a persistent external threat. This commonly starts with the formation of inter-group alliances and communal cooperation in the construction of defenses. Other responses include innovations in the built environment (e.g. increased control of movement), changes in everyday behaviors (e.g. regimented workdays), centralization of decision-making (e.g. management of labor and defense), social differentiation (e.g. individuals and families gaining social prominence), economic specialization (e.g. metalsmithing generally, and weapon manufacture in particular), and the formation of belief systems that assist in dealing with insecurity psychologically (e.g. increased interest for protective rituals and objects, and spread of fatalist worldviews). As affected societies become better organized, the persistent threat posed by slaving greatly impacts how such processes unfold, commonly leading to increased intra- and inter-group conflict.[8]

So, while archaeologists rarely think twice about this strong disciplinary tendency to centralize the transformative impact of competition and conflict in their studies of Iron Age societies, there has been little critical reflection on the exact historical circumstances for these and associated phenomena. Or, to put it more succinctly, a true flourishing of slavery research has yet to occur. I would argue that, just like it would be rather negligent not to consider the impact of slaving and enslavement when examining Early Modern contexts in Africa (Alexander 2001; Klein 2001; Kusimba 2004; Lane and MacDonald 2011) and North America (Berlin 1998; Fitts 2015; Snyder 2012), or Early Medieval contexts in Viking and Slavic Europe (Fontaine 2017; Henning 1992; Jankowiak 2013; Korpela 2014; McCormick 2002), so it is crucial to assess the nature and impact of such distinct phenomena if we are to accurately understand socio-cultural developments in Iron Age Europe. As comparative research shows, slavery is a multifaceted phenomenon with complex interrelated material, behavioral, and ideological dimensions, such that any meaningful archaeological study has to take a multi-thread approach whereby a wide range of material categories and domains of social practice are examined, contextually, relationally, and comparatively (Dal Lago and Katsari 2008; Gronenborn 2001; Marshall 2015). In this brief contribution on the topic, I

---

[8] Consider, for example, how it is far more likely for peaceful relations between competing groups to be reestablished (e.g. for war captives to be exchanged conditionally) when a formal trade in slaves is lacking. When present, however, antagonists have a tempting means for dealing with competitors through an extra-societal mechanism. Consequently, the sale of captives to slavers perpetuates conflict because individuals are not returned to their home communities, which are also not compensated for their losses in other ways (Fitts 2015: 307). There are countless other means by which groups and individuals might exploit the presence of an external mechanism like a slave trade to pursue certain personal or collective goals (Afigbo 2006), often with enduring consequences for the societies in question.

take an exploratory approach whereby I consider evidence from various Iron Age periods and contexts in the study area as I follow particular lines of inquiry. I first turn to the key matter of insecurity by considering the evidence for refuge construction, because this provides a useful inroad for assessing the dynamics of Iron Age slaving and enslavement in Northwest Europe.

Figure 1: The study area in Northwest Europe