

CONTROLLING COLOURS

**Function and Meaning of Colour in the British
Iron Age**

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Chapter 1

Introduction

'Colour is my day-long obsession, joy and torment'
(Claude Monet)

Some years ago I was told the true story of a little boy who asked his grandfather what the world was like 'when granddad was young and everything was black and white'. Having seen old black and white photographs of his grandparents, he assumed that colour did not exist when they were young.

This story made me realize that we perceive archaeological material in a similar way. We are so used to seeing monochrome photographs of artefacts that colour photographs come as a surprise. Even though colour photographs and illustrations in books have recently become more affordable due to advanced technology, a great number of archaeological publications still display black and white photography and illustrations. However, technology and the cost constraints of publishing houses are not the only reason why we have become conditioned to readily accept a monochrome view of archaeological material.

The hugely influential 18th century founder of German modern archaeology Johann Joachim Winckelmann saw beauty and aesthetics first and foremost in the line, form and harmony of an object. His obsession with '*edle Einfalt und stille Groesse*' (Winckelmann 1925: 81) led to a disregard of colour in favour of form which continues to this day. He would probably have been appalled to see the reconstruction of original paintings on Greek statues (Brinkmann and Wuensche 2004), since they display very little of the stillness and simplicity he was so fond of. The early and middle 19th century regarded bold colours as frivolous, feminine and unfashionable (Goethe 1840: 55, 329-330) and as a result colour is even now regarded as a side issue, although more recently it has become the focus of a number of studies in antiquity and prehistory (Cleland 2004: v). The importance of colour should not be underestimated. Our perception of the material world is shaped not only through form, but also through colour, and to examine one without at least having regard to the other may lead to a biased and perhaps even incorrect interpretation, as exemplified by Greek sculpture (Brinkmann and Wuensche 2004).

Aims and objectives

The aim of this work is to examine the function and meaning of colour in the context of the British Iron

Age and to emphasise the importance of colour in the evaluation of archaeological data. I have concentrated my research on well documented material objects, such as metal weapons and horse gear, grave goods made out of metal, amber, glass or enamel, artefacts made out of stone such as chalk, and metal objects decorated with coral and enamel. I have not only examined the colours of the artefacts per se, but also colour associations suggested by the objects' biography, usage and contexts, in order to gain a better understanding of colour perception in Iron Age Britain, and to explore whether the deliberate use of certain colours may have had symbolic meaning. It is suggested that this will contribute to our insight into belief systems and social relationships within the context of the British Iron Age. I have given particular emphasis to the following objectives:

Stability and Transformation

The symbolic value of the consistent nature of certain colours, and underlying materials in contrast to materials whose biographies demonstrate colour changes, whether by manipulation or natural processes, have been examined within the context of origin, production and decoration of metal objects.

Light and Brilliance

I have explored the importance of light and brilliance in the context of materials such as metal and wood, and the manipulation of objects to enhance luminosity, e.g. polishing or simulating brilliance by using certain decorative patterns. My aim was to ascertain if such manipulation was used as a communicative tool or agent to express social relationships, but also to explore the metaphysical and symbolic aspects of such treatments.

Contrasting Colours, Colour patterns, Colour in Landscape

I have examined recurring colour patterns and contrasts within the material object per se, as well as the contrast between the object and its topographical, biographical and functional contexts including colours alluded to by, or related to, iconography. Linked to this I have also explored shamanic rituals and journeys, colour perception under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs

and empirical evidence of colour perception of shamans during their rituals in order to strengthen the argument that Iron Age belief systems had shamanic elements.

Death, Life and Gender

I have studied the association of bodies and certain coloured objects with life, death, or life after death and the changes in colour occasioned by transference from a life to a death situation and beyond. In this context I have not only looked at the fluidity of boundaries between life and death, between this world and the Otherworld and various stages in between, but also preservation of life or giving life to material objects, and in particular associations of colour with bodily fluids. I have re-assessed gender specific materials in order to ascertain if certain colours echo such categorisation.

Body Decoration

I have concluded the research with a fresh assessment of evidence for body decoration, both in terms of materials and colours used and the reason for such decoration.

Methodology

In order to achieve the aims and objectives set out above I have used the following methodology:

Theoretical Aspects of Colour

It would not be appropriate to investigate colour in the context of Iron Age Britain without illustrating the limitations and inapplicability of our own colour perception and giving an insight into alternative colour perceptions, based both on archaeological research from other periods and ethnographical or anthropological sources. I have carried out a survey of research into colour and colour perception from the fields of psychology, philosophy, anthropology and colour theory, as well as recent theory on semantics, in order to provide the theoretical background required to attempt an interpretation of prehistoric colour perception.

Examination of Material Evidence and Collation of Data

I have re-examined well documented objects and sites of the British Iron Age in terms of their colour and colour associations, taking into account the context of their biography, location and use. The main sites, objects and human remains discussed are listed in Appendices 1, 2 and 3. As the symbolic meaning of certain colours may not be generic but circumstantial, each object or site has been treated on its own merits and where appropriate within its specific context.

Written Sources

I have examined colour symbolism in Classical Greek, Latin and early Irish and Welsh written sources which

may assist in the interpretation of archaeological material or which hint at symbolic value of colours or colour perception.

Anthropological and Ethnological Comparisons

Colour symbolism has been the subject of various anthropological and ethnological studies. Apart from a critical assessment of some of these colour theories which claim to be universally applicable, I have also examined approaches to colour and colour symbolism in a variety of culture groups and used them as comparators. Of course such comparators can only ever be suggestive rather than conclusive, but nevertheless assist in understanding thought processes which may be of relevance. Cultures can be regarded as structural variants of each other especially if they share the same origin or cultural tradition. Even though it has been argued that analogies with more remote cultures are less powerful as they do not share ideological values (Diepeveen-Jansen 2001: 30), certain values and ideas transcended humanity and are universally applicable.

Experimental Archaeology

I have used the evidence gained from experimental archaeology especially in the field of metal working. I also carried out a certain number of experiments with different materials. Whilst replication experiments can never determine conclusively every detail of how something was made, they can provide insight into technology and are often the only basis of inference about prehistoric technologies. Even though they can only simulate activities of a past agent and not the past social agency (Brysbaert 2004: 13), together with contextualisation of the activities they prove a useful tool.

Difficulties with Methodology

As there are currently no comprehensive studies into the subject of colour in an Iron Age context, I have decided to use a wide approach and look at geographically and temporally diverse objects within Iron Age Britain, rather than concentrate on one particular area, site, or isolated aspect. I accept that this approach has certain flaws. Colour is a part of or applied to material objects and the study of colour is therefore the study of everything material, which would be a far too wide approach for the purposes of this research. I have therefore deliberately excluded detailed colour analysis of certain materials, such as pottery. The corpus of pottery from the British Iron Age is so vast that only a separate study of colour implications of pottery would do it justice. In addition, it is also as simplistic and incorrect to look at the whole of Britain as one homogenous region as it is to impose modern territorial descriptions such as Welsh Iron Age or Scottish Iron Age (Bevan 1999a: 14). It is similarly

problematic to look at the whole period classified as Iron Age. Not only is the classification a modern concept (Wells 2001:35) which implies a definite differentiation from the Bronze Age and the Romano British period without allowing for overlaps or fluid transitions, but even within this classification the differences between the archaeology of the earlier and later Iron Age suggest changes in social constructs, belief systems and perceptions throughout the period.

I have refrained from relying too much on statistics in evaluating archaeological data. Statistics have only limited value because they usually lack individual context which in my view frequently provides answers, clues or at least suggestions which are instrumental in our understanding and interpretation of material artefacts. I have therefore opted for an exploration of themes on the basis of individual but well documented finds or sites. The use of individual case studies, as opposed to a survey, adds to difficulty, as the results of an analysis of an individual case study may not be universally applicable (Diinhoff 1997: 115). Certain objects and sites undoubtedly merit further and more detailed individual analysis than has been possible for the purposes of this research, but, as Bevan (1999a: 15) suggested, whilst only in-depth analysis and evaluation of parts will give meaningful insight, those parts must be seen as part of a whole. Despite the diversity displayed in British Iron Age artefacts, there are common themes which I have sought to identify and which, I hope, present a basis for further studies.

Contextual archaeology, to use the term introduced by Ian Hodder (1982: 217), has its own limitations. Certain conclusions can be drawn by merely examining a particular way in which material evidence is assembled in its context, but despite it being perhaps the most scientific and least subjective and interpretative approach to the subject of colours and their symbolic meaning we have to bear in mind that even contextualisation is a cultural construction. We superimpose our own context on 'how things are made' and it is incorrect to believe that meaning always follows context. However, whilst context may not necessarily reveal meaning, probing into contextual circumstances can expand our ideas as to what we mean by the concept of context. A contextual approach as opposed to formalistic assessment can widen the interpretative scope, as has been demonstrated by contextual approaches to prehistoric rock art (Conckey 1997: 361–362). However, care must be taken not to impose preconceived general rules for possible meaning or intent (Marshack 1981: 190–191). The use of red ochre in Palaeolithic and Mesolithic contexts for example, could have had symbolic value or it could have been a ritual body decoration to mark rank, status, age or sex. It could even have been both, as one does not necessarily preclude the other. On the other hand ochre was at that time already a deeply rooted symbolic

construct, but it seems to have attained different meanings and significance for the culture groups who used it in a variety of circumstances (Hovers *et al.* 2003: 510). Hodder (1989a: 69) likens the process of interpreting context to interpreting writing. Interpretation of the written text itself is meaningless if it is taken outside its reading.

In order to assess possible symbolic meaning, it is therefore necessary to go beyond mere contextualisation and observation. By using a hermeneutic or 'emic'¹ approach, and by interpreting material evidence and its contextual associations with the help of colour psychology, anthropology, literary as well as linguistic sources, and interpretation of art in its widest sense (which has been largely ignored by post-processual archaeologists (Haselgrove and Moore 2007: 3)), we might not obtain definite answers or conclusions beyond doubt, but at least suggestions, which in turn may allow us to look at archaeological evidence from a new perspective and ask new questions (Melas 1989: 139, 153; Symonds 1999: 114–115).

Each of these methods of interpretation has of course its own flaws and I just want to briefly outline some of them. Firstly, we cannot presume that the available archaeological evidence for the Iron Age period in Britain is representative. Not only are we faced with a deficiency of preserved organic material, but even inorganic objects are likely to be selective. In addition, many objects lack context and archaeological site reports often ignore any colour or colour association.

In terms of written evidence, we do have very few primary written sources dealing with the British Iron Age. The few which exist may be biased, temporally remote or based on hearsay and their reliability is therefore questionable. It is doubtful if any classical sources concerning the Gauls can be used as evidence for the British Iron Age. In addition, translation often offers interpretation which in itself may already be biased. Early Welsh and Irish vernacular literature is temporally so far remote that any attempt to use it as evidence for prehistoric times can only be suggestive rather than conclusive, although it contains many references to pre-Christian mythology and paganism (Green 1993: 10; Green 1999: 54).

Using anthropological or ethnological analogies can lead to an interpretation which is based on the observer's or the other culture group's paradigms (Bruner 1993: 3).²

¹ The terms 'emic' and 'etic' are used in linguistics and have been applied by Melas (1989: 139) to anthropological study. Etic approach is to acquire knowledge through observation whereas emic approach means determination within a style of reasoning or insight. The emic approach is external rather than internal and empathy and implication are prevalent in this approach.

² Anthropologists tend to compare culture groups by reference to the closeness or strangeness to their own cultural background. The

Symbolic classifications can be manifold (Turner 1969: 41) and material culture can only be really understood within the implications of particular social practices (Barrett 1990: 179). As Joanna Brueck (1999: 327) argued, the assumption of practices being governed by universal laws of behaviour must be questioned and familiarity does not necessarily allow explanation.

Conclusion

In the light of the issues and problems outlined above, it would be easy to be defeatist, but in the words of Goethe:

‘It is useless to attempt to express the nature of a thing abstractedly. Effects we can perceive, and a complete history of those effects would, in fact, sufficiently define the nature of the thing itself. We should try in vain to describe a man’s character, but let his acts be collected and an idea of the character will be presented to us’ (Goethe 1840: xxxvii).

Adopting the approach outlined above can be likened to one of the mirror balls which used to hang from the ceilings in every 1970s discotheque. Each part of this study is a little shiny facet which provides a limited and isolated glimpse at the function and meaning of colour. But all the facets looked at together might just provide sufficient material to see the outline of a shape.

anthropologist Spiro argued that cultures, which can be explained and interpreted by reference to our own cannot be that strange. If they cannot be explained, then either their culture is strange or, if we believe contemporary anthropology, our own world is strange (Spiro 1990: 59).