

# **Challenging Preconceptions of the European Iron Age**

Essays in Honour of  
Professor John Collis

Edited by

Wendy Morrison



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Cover: Extract from Pilbrow's original illustration (1871, Plate XXIII) of Roman Antiquities from Canterbury.  
Hillfort at Berber Hill, Kenn, Devon. Photograph F.M. Griffith, Devon County Council, 29.06.1984.

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## Preface

*Challenging Preconceptions of the European Iron Age* is a collection of essays by some of the leading researchers in the archaeology of the European Iron Age, paying tribute to Professor John Collis. Since the 1960s, John has been involved in investigating and enriching our understanding of Iron Age society, and crucially, questioning the status quo of our narratives about the past. He has influenced generations of students and peers alike and has been one of the strongest voices in the demystification of the ‘Celtic’ world. John has never held back on his continual questioning of the past, and he has been instrumental in helping us unpick the labyrinthine tapestry of myth and misinterpretation, interrogating the way later prehistory has been traditionally investigated, packaged, and presented, to reveal a much more interesting past, filled with more nuance, possibility, and humanity than the uniformly structured Iron Age of the early 20th century narrative.

The idea for this volume was born nearly a decade ago in conversation with my then doctoral supervisor who had been a student of John’s (and one of the contributors to this volume) Chris Gosden. The list of contributors is not an exhaustive cohort of those who would wish to honour John, nor of those to whom he has been a profound guide to their careers and research – indeed that would stretch to many volumes. This volume brings together papers from more than a dozen of Professor Collis’s colleagues and students to mark his 75th birthday. The contributions range across later prehistory and the European continent, taking in major themes that have been his prime interests – hillforts, how we use archaeological data, socio-political structures of the past, and of course, the ‘Celts’.

The volume begins with Strat Halliday and Ian Ralston’s treatment of Scottish promontory forts. Drawing on the wealth of data from the recently published Hillfort Atlas Project,<sup>1</sup> they offer a comprehensive treatment of over 500 promontory and coastal sites. They highlight the challenges facing any attempt to classify such a diverse feature type but the challenges are addressed neatly and convincingly. Through careful and rigorous analysis of their data, Halliday and Ralston offer a compelling challenge to previous received scholarship on the siting of these features. Their conclusion invites an exploration of the wider *Atlas* dataset,<sup>2</sup> freely accessible to all, so that multivocality of interpretations will enrich our growing understanding. In the best tradition of Collis, they are continually questioning the status quo, backed up by good evidence and a dedication to making that evidence, and the new interpretations drawn from them, available to wider audiences.

In a similar vein, the second paper by Henrietta Quinnell also calls for a ‘reworking’ of prior scholarship based on the potential of not only new excavations but also re-interrogating older assemblages in the study of Iron Age Devon. Opening with a wonderful reminiscence of her first professional interactions with Collis, Quinnell quickly sets the stage for the current thinking about ceramics as chronological markers in archaeology, and the thorny issue of dealing with largely aceramic communities. She makes the excellent point that many groups around the globe have done rather well without ceramics for large swathes of time, and there is no reason to suppose that a paucity of a ceramic assemblage will undermine our understanding of peoples who used different materials for food and drink preparation and consumption.

In an age where we are indeed swamped with new excavations and the ability to revisit archived investigations as well, it is fitting to ask some questions about the massive datasets – the embarrassment of riches – we have access to. Martin Kuna explores some of the challenges this presents us with regard to such variables as archaeological visibility, drawing on recent work he has done on the prodigious evidence from Bohemia. Mindful of the reliability of some quantification models, he makes a clear case for why this big data is an important resource, but also why we should be cautious in the conclusions we draw from it. The article is a refreshing antidote to some approaches to ‘Big Data’, which advocate that if there is enough data, we can assume the robust will outweigh the unreliable.

Riffing on the title of Pierre Clastres’ anthropological work *The Society against the State*, Sophie Krausz looks at prehistoric and proto-historic Gaul and the way we have thought about their socio-political systems. Challenging the still-dominant narratives of a Mediterranean-imposed shift in organisation, Krausz invites us to think about things from a point of view that returns more agency of choice to the Gauls, rather than seeing the formation of a Gaulish state as a natural step in the linear progression of societal development. Krausz’s assessment of the stages and influences of urban development in the Iron Age is particularly significant against this refreshing backdrop.

<sup>1</sup> Lock, G. and Ralston, I.B., 2022. *Atlas of the Hillforts of Britain and Ireland*. Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>2</sup> <https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk>

John's interest in non-linear forms of complex progression in political and urban development is also referenced in Chris Gosden's contribution. In what must be the latest review of a publication to be written, Gosden looks at John's unrivalled publication *The European Iron Age*, giving it not only its due in being the only major comprehensive attempt at such a geographical and temporal span, but also offering critiques along the way, as any honest review should. That some of the omissions of John's book were the product of those themes only recently coming into scholarly vogue can hardly be seen as a true criticism; Gosden has written a fitting tribute to a book which has influence generations of archaeologists and pointed out how we can build upon it.

Andrew Fleming provides the volume with a call to consider persistence of a tradition often taken for granted in some periods and regions of Britain, and totally overlooked in others. The practice of transhumance, or the seasonal cycle of moving livestock from one grazing region to another, may, as Fleming argues, have much deeper and wider roots on the island. He shows through a range of evidence sources, both scientific and observational, that this sort of movement of people and animals in a landscape needs to be factored into our prehistoric narratives and suggests that some of the patterns of land modification and earthworks building we see in later prehistory may be indicative of transhumant activity. Fleming's images of modern transhumance in action are particularly compelling.

The call to look more closely at patterns in the landscape is reiterated in the chapter by Frances Griffiths and Eileen Wilkes. Acknowledging John's early interest but subsequent distraction from the prehistory of Devon, the two authors report on four decades of archaeological prospection that have, by looking at the 'big picture' of a wide landscape, produced a more densely exploited and settled prehistoric landscape. Drawing on reconnaissance from above and below, both aerial photographic campaigns flown over decades, and geophysical surveys, Wilkes and Griffiths show that not only is their dedication to the archaeology of Devon aiding our understanding of the past, but also preserving it for the future; they outline how relationships with landowners and farmers are key, and how discovering new archaeological features enables farmers to get support to look after them – a collaboration between researchers and the public that is to be commended and which should be emulated more widely.

The lengthiest chapter in the book represent the first in depth treatment of the plan of Mam Tor, a nationally significant hillfort in the Peak District. Graeme Guilbert has been researching Mam Tor for decades, since his first introduction to the site by John Collis in the late seventies, making this contribution a fitting example of the sort of inspiration John's enthusiasm and passion can lead to in those with whom he comes into contact. Guilbert's plan is a first, recording comprehensively the myriad features of the site, whilst evaluating what previous attempts have observed. The plans, particularly Figure 11, in this chapter will be beneficial for future researchers of the site. Guilbert also draws our attention to the fact that whilst Mam Tor is on the outer limits of just how high up a hillfort settlement can be placed and thrive, our modern perceptions of what constitutes hardship and comfort (and the ability/luxury to *have* such considerations) may bear little relation to the lived experiences of the hardy people who chose to modify this landmark hilltop.

The macro scale of one of the larger hillforts in Britain is followed by the micro scale of a single assemblage. Tim Champion presents new thoughts on what may be the earliest of the south-eastern Late iron Age 'richly furnished' burials. Discovered in the 19th century, and frustratingly reliant on descriptions of that period due to loss of many of the artefacts, Champion nonetheless created a vibrant reconstruction and analysis of the collection of grave goods, and crucially, sets them in their significant context of the development of pre-Roman Canterbury.

Staying with the artefactual focus, Chris Cumberpatch writes an insightful paper on the study of medieval pottery, a topic he states that admittedly may seem at odds with a volume honouring someone who has been the voice of the European Iron Age. Inspired by his early research with John's pottery assemblages from Iron Age Auvergne, Cumberpatch takes us on an exploration of what use may be made of the theoretical approaches more commonly used in prehistoric archaeology when applied to a medieval dataset. It is a fine example of how John's influence is far ranging across areas of study.

In the penultimate chapter, Lisa Brown provides a closer look at a hillfort that has seen much attention, but little examination. Made famous by Peter Gabriel's pop song, Little Solsbury Hill outside of Bath has long relied on the scant evidence from earlier 20th century small investigations and the generation of ceramic and faunal data cast up from animals. Brown puts these finds in the context of new work conducted by the Bath and Counties Archaeological Society and offers a clearer understanding the nature of the site in relation to the early days of pre-Roman Bath.

Finally, the volume concludes with Oliver Buchsenschutz's critical assessment of archaeological mapping of 'The Celts'. Fittingly drawing on John's body of work and acknowledging the pitfalls and potentials we have available with such multiple data sources as placenames and linguistics, Buchsenschutz offers a way through the labyrinth using data mapping to get the most out of overlapping strands of evidence. His admonition to beware the great swathes of time we are dealing with, encompassed in a single period is a relevant one, and he rightfully calls for mapping to be reflective of this.

Together these papers offer readers a cross section of many of the areas John has contributed to and influenced over his decades of dedication leadership in European prehistory. I am grateful to the authors in this volume for their enthusiastic support of the idea, their ready willingness to contribute an article, and crucially, their patience with an editor who was not as alacritous as envisaged. It is a pleasure and privilege to serve as editor for this volume in honour of Professor John Collis. John has been a major influence in the field of prehistoric archaeology and for me personally has been a source of stimulating conversation and challenging debate. Whilst we have not always agreed on everything, I have never come away from a conversation with John without understanding the principles and practices of our discipline better.

I am sure that both contributors and readers alike will agree that no work like this can hope to capture all the facets of our subject with which John has engaged, nor will all the conclusions reached in the chapters jibe 100% with how John might interpret things. Yet the strength of our discipline is that we remain flexible to new concepts, always questioning, and that is a philosophy John has always embodied – challenging preconceptions.



*John Collis on a visit to Titterstone Clee, Shropshire, during a meeting of the Hillfort Study Group in April 2009; photographed by Daryl Garton.*