

Random Coincidences Or: the return of the *Celtic* to Iron Age Britain

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This paper examines whether there really are fundamental differences between a Celtic model of social organisation and the observations made by J.D. Hill about PRIA social organisation in southern England. Hill's alternative model, which in his opinion seems to be fundamentally at odds with what can be learned from Celtic sources, is characterised by the importance of three main factors. These are the essentially ideological, east-facing orientation of Iron Age houses and enclosed settlements, the ideological boundedness of individual homesteads, and the household as the centre of production. Yet, an examination of the medieval Irish and Welsh literature reveals that these three fundamental characteristics also seem to define the societies described in the Celtic texts. However, while the household is the central independent social and economic unit, the medieval texts also put great emphasis on kinship, with kin-groups fulfilling important, complementary roles for the individual households. It is examined whether a kind of society that is not dominated by either households or kinship, but by both households and kinship, can successfully explain all the archaeological phenomena observable in PRIA Britain, including different 'hillforts' possibly fulfilling several different functions. The striking similarities that can be found between the kinds of societies proposed by Hill as inhabiting PRIA Britain and those described in the medieval Irish and Welsh sources force us to consider whether the Celtic should not better be returned to PRIA Britain, and whether the 'different Iron Ages' were not that different after all.

A single similarity between any two separate things is normally a random coincidence, and need not concern us a lot. If, however, similarities mount up, and we find several, perhaps even many, similarities between two separate things, matters start to change. We will start to wonder whether the two things might not actually somehow be related. Such a relationship might be functional, as in the case of axes or hammers, which are similar all over the world because they need to be in order to work properly. Or it might be structural, as in the case of crystals, which will always grow to very similar shapes because of the properties of the substance they are made of. Or, it might be genetic, like in the case of art styles, each of which produces similar things because the artists use certain techniques or motives that are inspired by similar earlier examples of that same style. In fact, this seems to be a general property of the universe we live in: if two separate things share many similarities, there

usually is some kind of reason for why they do. And thus, tending to generalise this empirical observation as we do, if we find two separate things sharing many, or regular, or particularly striking similarities, we suspect that these are not the result of mere random coincidence, but due to some reason.

In his article on Iron Age southern Britain in *Different Iron Ages*, J.D. Hill (1995a, 45) asked the question 'What if the common assumption of a generalised 'Celtic' form of Iron Age social organisation or religion is a myth?'. From there he proceeded to deconstruct the model proposed by Barry Cunliffe (1983; 1984a-c) for Early and Middle Pre-Roman Iron Age societies in Wessex. He constructs an alternative model (Hill 1995a, 49-54) which, in his opinion, seems to be fundamentally at odds with what can be learned from 'Celtic' sources. He points to the essentially ideological orientation of Iron Age houses and enclosed settlements, with entrances almost exclusively facing eastwards, the essential boundedness of individual homesteads, and compares this to Marx's *Germanic Mode of Production* (1964; Bonte 1977). He thus argues for an essentially tribal, egalitarian, and boundary-obsessed (Hill 1995a, 51) society in Early and Middle Pre-

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Roman Iron Age Wessex, based on what could be called the household mode of production (explicitly used in Hill 1995b, 73).

But what if this were not at odds with what can be learned from ‘Celtic’ sources at all? What if eastward-facing orientation, the ideological boundedness of the household, and what could be seen as a household mode of production also were to be found in the medieval ‘Celtic’ sources? What if what actually was flawed was not the information provided by the ‘Celtic’ sources, but just the ‘general Celtic model’ as usually presented in archaeological literature? What if similarities between PRIA Britain and information found in ‘Celtic’ sources were too striking to possibly be random coincidence? What if ... ?

A ‘WINDOW ON THE IRON AGE’, ‘MEDIEVAL MONK’S FANTASIES’, OR THE PHYSICS OF HISTORY?

Before I look at the evidence, a few things have to be said. The very first issue that needs to be addressed explicitly is that of the ‘Celtic’, in particular whether or not medieval Irish and Welsh texts offer, as Kenneth H. Jackson (1964) has put it, ‘a window on the Iron Age’, an idea that has since been rejected by archaeologists (eg, Mallory 1992; Rieckhoff & Biel 2001, 13–9), but even more importantly, by scholars of medieval Irish literature (eg, Aitchison 1987; McCone 1990). While the charge that these texts are little more than ‘medieval monk’s fantasies’ may be a bit harsh, general consensus now seems to be that the Irish heroic tales in particular are little more than medieval authors’ creative paintings of how they imagined the Irish past to have been, telling us, if anything, more about the early medieval Irish present than about a distant pagan past (McCone 1990; Mallory 1992). I do not in the least intend to challenge this consensus. Quite to the contrary, I completely agree: the early medieval Irish, and also the medieval Welsh texts, are *not* a ‘window on the Iron Age’, but are medieval creative constructs that need to be understood in their own – medieval – context.

Second, however, this in no way prohibits us from using these medieval ‘Celtic’ sources as analogies, much as we would use any other kind of analogy. That is, unless one wants to subscribe to the utterly fallacious logic that, just because the societies of the inhabitants of the British Isles in the medieval period had changed from those of their Iron Age ancestors,

they must necessarily be less comparable to those than any other randomly chosen society from anywhere else in the world. There can even be no serious doubt that there are at least some continuities between the Iron Age and medieval Irish and Welsh communities of the British Isles – not least the Celtic languages (Ball & Fife 1993; Price 2000) – and thus we cannot *a priori* exclude the possibility that there are other continuities connecting the British Iron Age and medieval Ireland and Wales. As such, while the medieval texts themselves may not offer us a ‘window on the Iron Age’, they do offer us a source for valid analogies, some of which might even be homologies.

Third, to better illustrate the previous point, it is worth taking a look at ‘historical’ physics. Physics, which for long has mostly concerned itself with reversible (and thus ahistorical) processes, has recently, in the wake of the emergence of chaos or complexity theory (Ruelle 1992; Kauffman 1996; Prigogine 1997; Buchanan 2001), turned to study non-reversible (and thus historical) processes. One of the most important discoveries of ‘historical’ physics is that seemingly completely random, non-reversible processes guided by very simple rules result in surprisingly similar results (Buchanan 2001, 52–5). If earlier random accidents contribute to the emergence of structures, they become pre-conditions for later events – as is the case with most historical events (*ibid.*, 55–6). Most notably, accidents that are contributing to core points in a structure are particularly influential and especially hard to undo. If the same simple rules are applied to different series of random accidents, while each time a different-looking structure will emerge, any emerging structure will always be characterised by a probabilistic accumulation of features that are uniquely characteristic for the set of rules applied (Ruelle 1992, 161–2; Buchanan 2001, 55–6). This is what we might also find in the medieval sources, permutations of a game of random events, played by the same basic simple rules as the different games played in the Iron Age, and thus resulting in similar probabilistic features.

EARLY AND MIDDLE PRIA HOUSEHOLDS AND THE CELTIC DIMENSION

Let us now turn to Hill’s (1995a; 1995b) households and whether we can easily find anything fitting to them in the medieval Celtic literary sources. For this

purpose, I will simply take Hill's (1995a, 49–51; 1995b, 53–74) descriptions of the essential characteristics of the Early and Middle Pre-Roman Iron Age (PRIA) in southern England at face value and assume that they are accurately reflecting Iron Age reality – even though this should not necessarily be taken as an agreement with his conclusions about social organisation. To repeat once more what I understand to be his main points:

- 1) That orientation and internal spatial organisation of Iron Age houses and settlement enclosures were essentially determined by ideological rather than functional concerns – first and foremost, an east-facing orientation of entrances (1995a, 51; 1995b, 54–60), and second a clear distinction between north/south (1995a, 54, quoting Oswald 1991).
- 2) That individual households were independent and of (roughly) equal status and that this was expressed by the essential boundedness of each household, consciously reinforced by the investment put into physical enclosure, again associated with a strong ritual element, which helped maintain the symbolic independence and isolation of the group inhabiting the household (1995a, 50–1).
- 3) That individual households were the essential centres of production, again a more or less conscious and/or ideologically determined choice to attain and maintain their existence at maximum self-sufficiency, with as little community involvement as possible (1995a, 51–2; 2006, 173–7).

Eastwards orientation

Orientation is definitely of significance in early medieval Irish literature. Approaching a place or person with the left side facing towards the approached is seen as a threatening gesture, an expression of ill intent. This, for instance, is evident from several passages in the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, with perhaps the most prominent one being the boy *CúChulainn*, the main hero of the tale, returning to *Emain Macha* with the left side of his chariot facing the fort, causing major concern (Kinsella 1969, 91–2). But more generally, it seems as if ‘the Celts’, and even more generally, ‘the Indo-Europeans’, oriented themselves facing eastwards (Meid 1987, 160–2). In

the Irish case, this is confirmed by OIr. *airther*, ‘East’ also meaning ‘front, ahead’, OIr. *íar*, ‘West’ also ‘back, rear’, compounds with OIr. *túath-*, ‘North, northerly, left, inverse, bad, evil’ and OIr. *dess*, ‘right, southerly, useful, pleasant’. In Welsh, the same ‘orientation ideology’ is expressed in the terms *gogledd*, ‘North’, lit. ‘under the left (hand)’, and *de*, *deau*, ‘South, right’ (Birkhan 1997, 808), which of course has the proper Welshman facing eastwards too. An ideological orientation of the house, with its ‘front’ – which, of course, in case of a round house, is where its entrance is facing – facing eastwards thus seems to fit quite nicely with medieval ‘Celtic’ ideas.

While there is nothing *sinister* in speculating about a possible *Celtic* connection here, this is a classical example of something that would and perhaps should be considered nothing but an ordinary random coincidence, at least if this is the only similarity. As such, let us look at Hill's (1995a) second essential observation.

The ideological boundedness of the individual household

The boundedness of the individual household, in both a physical and an ideological sense, is something that also sounds awfully familiar to anyone who had more than a cursory look at the medieval Irish and Welsh sources. In fact, Old Irish, Welsh, and Gaulish even provide us with cognate terms which seem to refer to this boundedness: OIr. *les*, the ‘house-enclosure, courtyard’ associated with the Irish ‘ringfort’ (Kelly 1988, 110, 140–1, 316; 1995, 363–7), finds cognates in Welsh *llys*, ‘court, palace, manor house; courtyard, enclosed space’ (GPC 2276) and Gaul. *lissos*, ‘court, palace, enclosure’ (Delamarre 2003, 204). There is little need to demonstrate the physical boundedness of Irish ‘ringforts’ (Edwards 1990, 19–33; Stout 1997), because their boundedness is already clearly referred to in their name. Nor is it necessary to point out the close structural similarities between Irish ‘ringforts’ and many of the British Iron Age ‘enclosed farmsteads’ that Hill (1995a; 1995b) uses to define the ‘archetypical’ British physically bounded Iron Age household, because they are more than blatantly obvious. Nor is it necessary to demonstrate that the medieval Irish law texts, in their description of settlements, refer to such ‘ringforts’, as this has already been convincingly shown (Lynn 1986, 151–2; Edwards 1990; Kelly 1995, 565; Stout 1997, 33). We

can thus concentrate on just the ideological aspects of the enclosure.

It is quite evident from the Irish laws that the enclosure around the homestead was not just imagined as a physical boundary but also as an ideological boundary. Climbing the fence surrounding the courtyard, as well as opening the door of a dwelling, is punishable by a fee of five *sét* each (Kelly 1988, 110; 1995, 431; OIr. *sét* = ‘treasure, jewel, valuable’, one *sét* is worth *c.* half an ounce (*c.* 15g in modern terms) of silver). Even more importantly, the whole courtyard is seen as being under the permanent legal protection (OIr. *maigen dígona*; Kelly 1988, 141) of the owner of the settlement. Any crime committed within this area, regardless of who the actual victim is, is automatically considered a crime against the owner of the settlement, too. A very comparable concept of legal protection, also extending, in the context of the settlement, to the boundaries of the *llys*, is found in the medieval Welsh laws. Welsh *nawdd*, ‘legal protection’, in turn has a cognate in Old Irish *snádud*, the term for the legal protection any head of a medieval Irish household can bestow on a foreigner for at least limited time (Kelly 1988, 140; Jenkins 1990).

In Irish law, such a breach of the legal (read: ideological) protection requires the culprit to pay a part of or the full *lóg n’enech*, the ‘honour price’, of the settlement’s owner (Kelly 1988, 140–1). The *lóg n’enech* is the variable element of the compensation payable by the culprit to the victim based on the latter’s social status (*ibid.*, 8–9). It is quite literally the social value ascribed to a person in medieval Irish law and is usually payable for any kind of insult or serious crime against a person (as opposed to crimes against property). It is also, for all dependent members of a household, the penalty that always depends on, and always is a fraction of, the legal value of its owner, to whom it is also payable (*ibid.*, 33–6, 68–98; Karl 2006, 341–9, 399–413). A breach of the ‘permanent protection’ of the courtyard thus has to be understood as a breach of the spiritual (read: ideological) integrity of its owner and, as such, of the household as a whole.

The enclosure itself is, quite literally, a ‘sanctuary’, an ‘asylum’ in the legal sense, an ideologically independent home, the owner’s castle, where he is the (more or less absolute) ruler and final arbiter of disputes. Maurizio Lupoi (2000, 370–1, 380–1) has recently observed, based on early Germanic laws, that

this very same concept of sanctuary exists in Germanic societies. He argues that it seems to have been originally associated with the Germanic enclosed settlement (on which Marx based his 1964 *Germanic Mode of Production*), and only later have been transferred to public spaces and ultimately the church.

That the idea of sanctuary, and the notion of physical and spiritual protection that goes with it, must have been a deeply rooted ideological concept in early Germanic and Celtic societies is evident from the concept ideologically opposed to it, that of the outlaw. Perhaps most clearly expressed – and also most suited to the discussion of the usefulness of the *Celtic* in the context of PRIA Britain – we actually find this idea in Caesar’s excursus on the Gauls (b.g. vi, 13.6–7): the worst punishment the Gauls know is to ban offenders from the sacrifices. Someone exiled this way is treated, almost literally, like a contagious illness. This is also what happens to the outlaw in the medieval law texts – whether Germanic or Celtic – which make it a legal obligation to refuse the outlaw any kind of assistance, hospitality, or legal protection (Kelly 1988, 140–1; Lupoi 2000, 370–1).

If *Celtic* settlement enclosures are, in the legal sense, sanctuaries, their ‘sanctity’ will almost certainly have to have been established by some kind of ritual. Whether the act of physically enclosing them was sufficient, or whether other ritual activities were deemed necessary can of course not be answered, nor is it likely that there is a general answer to this question. Rather, we should expect that the rituals to establish the sanctity of the household will have been based on regional traditions, if not strictly local ones. It is also to be expected that it would have to be reaffirmed once in a while, at the very least after the death of a previous and instatement of a new head, or a crime had desecrated the sanctity of the household. This may have been achieved by partial or complete recutting of ditches or rebuilding of other enclosing structures, but also by less labour-intensive practices like perambulations or ritual depositions. It is, of course, exactly ritual activities like these which Hill (1995a, 50–1) interprets as evidence for the symbolical boundedness of the enclosed household.

While there is no particular need to see this as evidence for a *Celtic* connection, this at least should start to make us wonder. Not only is there the rather obvious structural similarity between PRIA British enclosed homesteads and early medieval Irish

'ringforts', but the symbolic boundedness of PRIA British enclosed homesteads and the implied necessity to ritually establish and maintain the sanctity of the household also seems to be a perfect fit. While this could still be nothing but a random coincidence, it is a quite striking combination of similarities and, thus, there might well be some reason for it. But instead of jumping to any conclusions, let us take a look at Hill's (1995a) third essential observation.

The individual household as the centre of production

That the individual household is the centre of production is also awfully familiar to the student of medieval Irish and Welsh literature. This should hardly be surprising as central places of any description, with the possible exemption of early monastic centres, are conspicuously absent from both early medieval Ireland and Wales (Edwards & Lane 1988; Edwards 1990; 1997). It is again the law texts in particular, however, that provide us with some quite detailed insights into some aspects of production. These seem to strongly support the idea that individual households – even when forced to cooperate with each other – were striving to achieve maximum economic self-sufficiency and independence (*cf.* Hill 2006, 173–7).

A particularly good example of this is found in the practice of joint ploughing, where members of several households had to cooperate because, otherwise, each single household would not have been able to provide a full ploughing team, with up to 12 households teaming up (*cf.* Jenkins 1982; Kelly 1988, 101–2; 1995, 445, 469–9, 474–7; Charles-Edwards 1993, 446–56; Karl 2006, 176–202, esp. 179–91; *cf.* Hill 2006, 174). The practice, called OIr. *comar*, finds a perfect cognate in its Welsh counterpart, OCy. *cyfar*, both from the common Celtic root **komarom*, 'joint ploughing, farming together' (Karl 2006, 180). It is particularly interesting because it demonstrates that individual households teamed up their resources where they had to in order to survive but, otherwise, kept their economies strictly separate. That Irish and Welsh use cognate terms for it indicates that it is an old practice, pre-dating the linguistic split into P- and Q-Celtic, which must have happened in or before the 4th century BC (as indicated by the attestation of the term *Prettaniké*; Tomaschitz 2002, 20–4 with further references; Schmidt 1993, 67–75). This, of course, would indicate that it was already common in Britain close to the turn from the

Early to the Middle PRIA (Hill 1995b, 48), right in the middle of Hill's 'different Iron Age'.

The form of joint ploughing arrangements in both medieval Irish and Welsh law is that of a contract between individual heads of households. They pool their resources for ploughing only and plough each individual member's field(s) in a strict rota (Williams 1960, 97; Jenkins 1990, 199). Once all fields have been ploughed the cooperative is dissolved and all the resources are returned to their respective owners. Each then continues to farm on his own, with no communal harvesting or sharing of the produced goods taking place (Jenkins 1982, 11; Karl 2006, 185). In the next year, a new cooperative is formed, which may or may not result in the same group as in the previous year (Jenkins 1982; Karl 2006, 178–86; *cf.* Hill 2006, 173–7). While the laws often assume that neighbours are also relatives (CIH I, 64.18–20; I, 64.27–9; Karl 2006, 179), kinship does not matter much in such joint ploughing contracts which are legal contracts between heads of individual households, whether kinsmen or not. At no point in this process do any of the resources become communal property, nor is any partner restricted in his choices as to which field(s) he wants to have ploughed, as long as they can be reached, ploughed, and the animals returned within a day (Williams 1960, 98; Jenkins 1990, 200–1). Even though they are forced to cooperate the ownership rights of each individual household are kept strictly separate, the cooperation only lasts for as long as it absolutely must and, as soon as it has fulfilled its purpose, everyone goes their own way again. Where *Relations of Production* are concerned, this is as *Atomised* (Hill 1995a, 51) as it gets, short of outright autarky.

Where other than agricultural production is concerned the picture painted by the medieval law texts is hardly any different. While there are specialised craftsmen (Kelly 1988, 61–3; Wailes 1995, 61–5), these are also seen as being the heads of their individual households which also seem to operate as ordinary farms. Craftsmen seem to have been either working in their own homesteads or, possibly, been travelling from farm to farm to offer their services. While there is some evidence for 'royal' or 'noble' patronage in the archaeological record (Edwards 1990, 132–71; O'Sullivan 1998, 136–43) and the literature (MacNeill 1923, 277–80; Kelly 1988, 61–3; Jenkins 1990, 37–8; Ó Ríordáin 1992, 20), there is no

indication that these craftsmen and artists were necessarily and exclusively performing their art or craft at royal or noble courts or at some kind of central place under royal or noble prerogative. It thus seems reasonably fair to say that the medieval household also seems to have been the centre of craft production. The expected result of such a mode of production would actually be a relatively even spread of evidence for craft production, much like the distribution of evidence for craft production observed in southern England (Hill 1995a, 48–9), and as equally observable in the archaeology of early medieval Ireland (Edwards 1990, 68–98; O’Sullivan 1998, 141–3).

As such, the evidence actually found in medieval *Celtic* sources (rather than assumed to be found based on one generalised model) on the matter of the *Mode of Production* does not seem to be fundamentally at odds with that from early and middle PRIA either. Quite to the contrary, once more we find a near-perfect match. Of course, once again there is no need to see this as evidence for a *Celtic* connection, but the similarities are mounting up. In fact, three out of three is a pretty good match: if it looks eastwards like a *Celt*, separates the household like a *Celt*, produces like a *Celt* and even talks like a *Celt*, we may very well assume that it actually *is* a *Celt*.

HOUSEHOLD OR KINSHIP, OR HOUSEHOLD AND KINSHIP

There is yet another point in Hill’s (1995a, 51–2) argument that perhaps should be addressed, and in the context of what was demonstrated above, is perhaps best addressed in the context of medieval *Celtic* evidence. This point is:

- 4) That the household *rather than* kinship was the dominant feature in Early and Middle PRIA societies, that webs of kin and economic relations did not form an organic whole but, rather, the larger scale of community, the ‘tribe’, was based on shared locality rather than kinship (Hill 1995a, 51).

While I agree with Hill that the importance of kinship in ‘traditional’ models of PRIA societies has been over-emphasised, and that the pre-supposition

that clans and lineages were the basic unit of society (Hill 1995a, 51) may well have been the wrong starting point, simply reversing the situation and ascribing the fundamental role in ordering social relations to the household alone may well be equally wrong. So what if there was reason to believe that it may not have been either household or kinship, but rather household *and* kinship that both played fundamental roles in ordering social relations?

Let us return to the *Celtic* sources once more. In them, we actually find exactly the latter situation that both household and kinship are of fundamental importance (Karl 2006, 64–93, 93–160). While there is some degree of independence between the two neither can function completely without the other. In fact, this should hardly come as a surprise, as we seem to find a very similar situation in virtually all Indo-European societies, as has already been pointed out by Émile Benveniste (1973) in his seminal study of Indo-European language and society. We can clearly distinguish between kin-group and household, eg, in Celtic **kenetlom* (kin) and **Uenīā* (lineage) – **tēgos* (house, household), Germanic **sebjō* (kin) – **hūsaⁿ* (house, household), Latin *gens* – *domus*, and Greek *γενος* – *δóμος*. (Benveniste 1973, 205–61), and in all cases, both are very important in ordering social relations.

To stick with the *Celtic*, and put it in modern terms, the kin (or, perhaps more correctly in most cases, the lineage) and household fulfil important and complementary functions. While the household is the centre of production and a mostly independent unit, the kin/lineage is the insurance policy for all its members and everyone having dealings with them. While it can be discussed whether the individual household or the kin actually owns land and resources, it is definitely the individual household which has hereditary possession of and control over both, including any dependants (Kelly 1988, 12–3; Charles-Edwards 1993, 63–4, 226–56; Karl 2006, 132–60). Only if something special – usually something bad – happens, the lineage or kin comes into play. The most obvious example is if a kinsman commits a crime which requires him to pay more compensation than his own resources allow, in which case his kinsmen usually have to stand in (although there are some exceptions to this rule; Kelly 1988, 215; Karl 2006, 143). Similarly, if a kinsman is accused of a crime, it is expected that his kinsmen will swear on his behalf (Kelly 1988, 190–213; Karl 2006,

141–2). Kin land can even be redistributed from less prolific branches of a lineage to the heirs of a particularly prolific householder, if the former have more than they need and the latter inherit insufficient land to be able to maintain independent households (Kelly 1988, 12–3; Charles-Edwards 1993, 63–4; Karl 2006, 138–41). Kin can also become involved in all dealings of the household of a kinsman if his dealings put the wider group at some kind of risk: if the kinsman neglects his business, another can take control of it. If a kinsman wants to enter into a contract he himself cannot afford, his lineage can interdict it (Karl 2006, 138–49). The strategy behind this system is to minimise risk for the group as a whole, while allowing the individual householder a maximum of independence to improve his own – and with it, to a certain extent, his kin’s – fortunes.

Such a society will exhibit some of the properties Hill (1995a, 51–2) proposes for household-centred communities, as well as some he describes as necessary consequences of a clan/lineage-centred system. As status depends on the success, land, and wealth of the individual household (Karl 2006, 265–327, 341–99), it is hard to maintain through time. A single household need not necessarily have a short life, but in many cases will (*cf.* Hill 1995a, 52), especially given the practice of equal sharing of inheritance between heirs (Kelly 1988, 102–4; Charles-Edwards 1993, 212–3; Karl 2006, 120–1). However, while the status of the individual household is not directly passed on to the rest of the kin; kin groups with many successful members will slowly accumulate higher amounts of land and resources than kin groups with fewer successful members, with the former slowly coming to dominate the latter (Hill 1995b, 52 based on Rowlands 1980, 19).

As societies are locally constituted this often will result in a *non-triangular society*, much like the ones Hill (2006) has recently proposed as theoretical possibilities to think differently about Iron Age societies. However, in specific historical circumstances, where just one or a few kin groups come to dominate most of the others in a given area, it can also result in *triangular societies* like the ones proposed by the ‘traditional’ model of *Celtic* Iron Age societies. Individual Iron Age societies, even neighbouring ones, thus may have been quite differently organised, but still been built on the same fundamental principles of social organisation.

Given what has already been demonstrated above

regarding Hill’s (1995a) first three main points, it seems that, quite opposite to what he has suggested (*ibid.*, 45–7), it is not so much a generalised *Celtic* form of Iron Age social organisation that is a myth. Rather, very much as Hill (*ibid.*, 56) suggests, it is the *uncritical use*, but not of the *common* or the *Celtic*, but rather of one (albeit very popular) *generalised model*, and it’s uncritical acceptance by archaeologists as a valid summary of what is to be found in *Celtic* sources, where the real problem lies. We should no longer accept this popular model at face value, as many generations of archaeologists have done. However, we should neither reject the *Celtic* sources from which this model has allegedly been derived because the model has shown to be flawed. Rather, we have to *critically* examine the *Celtic* sources available to us: used as analogies, they can provide us with essential information on the constitution of (at least some) Iron Age societies.

SO WHAT ABOUT THE HILLFORTS?

There is one final point that still needs addressing, and that is the hillforts. As should be abundantly clear from the early medieval Irish record (Edwards 1990), societies like the ones described above do not need any hillforts. Nonetheless, they do, at least occasionally, need communal gatherings, where members of the community can interact. In early medieval Ireland, this need is mostly fulfilled by the *óenach*, often seemingly held at important ‘ritual’ sites like *Emain Macha* or *Tailtiu* (Charles-Edwards 2000, 147–8, 198, 556–60), the (annual) communal meeting where marriages are agreed, goods exchanged, judgements passed, rituals performed, etc (Charles-Edwards 2000, 556–60).

Such functions are again exactly what Hill (1995a, 52–5) proposes for at least some of the hillforts, and which can explain features like the similar *orientation* of their entrances compared to ordinary enclosed homesteads, their similar symbolical boundedness, the sometimes especially high frequency of ritual deposits, that they sometimes had little military logic, and that some of them may not have been permanently occupied.

On the other hand, there is no reason why some hillforts (and the Late PRIA *oppida*) could not have functioned as central places, particularly towards the later Iron Age with the possible emergence of large

estates, but perhaps occasionally also well before (like perhaps in the earliest phase at Moel y Gaer; Guilbert 1976). That we do not seem to find ‘royal’ residences in them need not particularly concern us either, as it may well be expected that an emerging royalty also may well have had an interest in physically separating itself from the main body of its lowly hereditary villains: the early medieval Welsh kings also lived in their *llysoedd*, enclosed homesteads, physically separated from the *maerdrefi*, their large tenant villages (Longley 1997; Johnstone 1997; Jones 2000).

In fact, not only does the one function not necessarily preclude the other, there is also no reason why ‘hillforts’ which served either one or both functions could not have existed contemporaneously with each other, even within a relatively limited area. And neither is there a need for any ‘hillforts’ whatsoever. Whether or not a community would have had ‘hillforts’ and, if it had, of which function, will mostly have depended on its individual religious and secular requirements, traditions, and its own specific history.

RANDOM COINCIDENCES? OR: THE RETURN OF THE *CELTIC* TO IRON AGE BRITAIN

In the light of what has been discussed above and, in particular, of the numerous, striking coincidences between Hill’s (1995a; 1995b) description of PRIA Britain and the societies described in the medieval Irish and Welsh *Celtic* sources, the pretence that all we are witnessing here are simply random coincidences can no longer be maintained. Whether for functional, structural, or genetic reasons, the only reasonable conclusion is that the societies I have compared in this article, those of PRIA Britain and medieval Ireland and Wales, are not fundamentally different but actually quite similar. While unquestionably locally constituted and with their individual historical trajectories, and thus subject to change through both space and time, they nonetheless can all be explained by one *Celtic* form of social organisation. This *Celtic* form of social organisation itself, however, has little similarity with the traditional ‘common Celtic model’ as proposed by, for instance, Barry Cunliffe (1983; 1984a–c). Rather, it is more similar, although not identical with, the alternative model(s) proposed by J.D. Hill (1995a; 1995b; 2006).

While this *Celtic* form of social organisation can be described as a general model, which allows us to identify a society as being subject to *Celtic* social attractors (Marion 1999) by probabilistic accumulations of features (Ruelle 1992, 160–7, esp. 161–2), this model is neither completely uniform nor unchanging. Rather, this *Celtic* form of social organisation is itself an evolving set of interactive processes which manifests itself in only temporarily stable structures (Jantsch 1987, 159), but otherwise constantly changes. The general trajectory of this change, at a statistical level of observation, I have addressed elsewhere in detail for the case of Wales (Karl 2007).

Because the specific, individual historical trajectories of specific societies are locally determined, neighbouring societies (whether neighbours in space or time) may appear to us, and may actually be, quite different from each other in many regards. Yet, if they exhibit the probabilistic features typical for a *Celtic* form of social organisation, they can nonetheless, on a statistical (read: generalising) level, be described as essentially similar, *Celtic* societies.

So what about PRIA Britain? As demonstrated above, the societies inhabiting PRIA Britain clearly exhibit an accumulation of probabilistic features that make them identifiable as having been subject to *Celtic* social attractors. An ideological orientation, the ideological boundedness of the household, the household as the centre of production, but also the shared importance of both household and kinship can all be seen as such probabilistic features. It is also likely that, from at least the 4th century BC onwards, at least some but more likely most, British societies were speaking some kind of *Celtic* language. As such, rather than rejecting, for purely ideological reasons, the *Celtic* as an important element in PRIA Britain, we should examine this element much more closely as there might be a lot we can learn from it. As stated above, while the medieval *Celtic* sources do not provide us with a ‘window on the Iron Age’, they are an exceptionally useful source of analogies, many of which might even be actual homologies.

To gain a deeper understanding of the British PRIA, as J.D. Hill (1995a, 56) has rightly observed, it will not suffice to simply apply uncritically some generalised ‘Celtic’ model, but neither will it suffice to simply accept at face value some model as actually representative of what is to be found in the *Celtic*

sources. Much as Hill argues, what is required are 'increasingly detailed and contextual studies of different periods and parts', but not just of later prehistoric, but also of early historic Europe. From such studies we may then also be able to ask;

What if there is one, or are several, grand narratives through which the European Iron Age can better be understood?

Abbreviations

b.g.: Deissmann, M.L. (ed. & trans.). 1980. *Gaius Iulius Caesar. De Bello Gallico/Der Gallische Krieg* (Lateinisch/Deutsch). Stuttgart: Reclam
 CIH: Binchy, D. (ed.). 1978. *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*. 6 Vols. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies
 GPC: *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru – Dictionary of the Welsh Language*. Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru

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