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Art in the Eurasian Iron Age

Context, connections and scale

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Chapter 2

Collecting Iron Age art

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Abstract

This paper introduces the process of creating the database of objects for the European Celtic Art in Context project. It gives the details of the data included, highlighting their benefits and weaknesses. Through a series of distribution maps and tables, we provide an introduction to some of the general patterns seen in the data and suggest directions for future research.

Creating a database of Celtic Art

The European Celtic Art in Context (ECAIC) project had a general aim of considering the different forms and ornamentation of Celtic Art within a wider archaeological context across Europe and further east into Eurasia. As we explained in the Introduction of this volume, the origins of Celtic Art have generally been associated with the Mediterranean world, yet alternative observations about the eastern influence on the origins of Celtic Art have also been theorised (see list of research in Pare 2012, 153–54). Although our primary focus was on Europe (in its broadest geographical sense), this project also considered what non-Mediterranean influences might have been exerted as part of widespread east–west connections, ultimately linking Europe with the Eurasian steppe and Central Asia.

As a first step to understanding these connections, we set out to build a database of ornamented or ornamental objects from across Europe. It aimed to combine information on the form and decoration of objects on the one hand, with information about their archaeological context on the other, and eventually grew to include 38,383 objects from 47 countries.

Origins and issues

The ECAIC database grew mainly out of two previous databases on Celtic Art, the Technologies of Enchantment project database (2005–2008; see Garrow 2008; Garrow

& Gosden 2012), and a database of objects collected by Vincent Megaw (forthcoming) as part of his book *Early Celtic Art: A supplement*. Because of their different origins, and the subsequent datasets that were incorporated, the ECAIC database is decidedly uneven. This unevenness of geographical, chronological and typological representation points to a number of greater issues that arise not only from the study of Celtic Art, but also in any attempt to quantify the qualitative.

The first issue one faces when creating such a database is what should be considered Celtic Art, and therefore included or excluded from such a database. The definition of Celtic Art (what is Celtic? what is art?) has been amply debated, and we will not replicate that debate here (see Garrow & Gosden 2012, chapter 1). But how then can one create a database of something undefined? Garrow (2008, 17–18) summarised the issue encountered when creating the Technologies of Enchantment database and came to a single important conclusion: that the database should err on the side of inclusivity rather than exclusivity. Therefore, anything that had ever been classified as 'Celtic Art' previously would be included in their dataset. This explains the presence of a number of objects that are undecorated and plain, but are of an object class that is typically considered Celtic Art. We have taken a similar approach, as a continuation of the Technologies of Enchantment project, which is explained below.

The second issue is when the tradition of Celtic Art 'begins' and 'ends'. Numerous theoretical debates have occurred about the dating of these objects, and although we are sensitive to these discussions, we have used fairly conservative date parameters. Again, this is largely because of the existing date parameters included in the foundational and subsequent datasets that comprise the ECAIC database.

The third issue is how you can categorise a style of art that seems to confound categories. Celtic Art by definition is entangled, swirly, and not easily broken up into discreet and definable motifs – the apparent intention of this decoration is to defy exactly this type of categorisation. Although some have attempted to do so (*e.g.* Fox 1958; Jacobsthal 1944), this was not our aim. Instead, we wanted to think about the overall impression that an object gives. Without wanting to be overly constrained by the established styles of Celtic Art (see Joy 2015; Chapter 7, this volume, Fig. 7.2), or be hindered by trying to break up designs into composite pieces, we devised a set of broad descriptive terms with which we could 'tag' each object (*e.g.* 'geometric', mirror symmetry, rotational symmetry, narrative). Although entirely subjective, this allowed our database to be more flexible about how we stored information on the ornamentation of these objects.

Certain steps were taken to mitigate these issues. We have been inclusive as opposed to exclusive, widening our parameters to encompass an array of objects. The earliest adorned metalwork that formed the basis of the Celtic Art corpus are the La Tène style objects dated to *c.* 475 BC found on the continent (*e.g.* Megaw & Megaw 1989; but see Krausse, Chapter 9, this volume), and the latest are found in Britain even after the primary Roman occupation (*e.g.* Hunter 2008). We therefore chose to include objects that fall within the period 500 BC to the 1st century AD

(these include objects whose beginning/end dates fall within this period, *e.g.* from 550–450 BC). The geographical parameters were equally wide, with the primary list including: the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Italy (northern), Austria and the Czech Republic. Other countries are represented in the database, including Spain and Portugal to the west and the Balkan States to the east, but the data from these regions was decidedly patchier. Based on previous databases, catalogues and definitions of Celtic Art, we also included any metal or stone object that has a decorative form (where the ornamentation is integral to the form of the object, such as torcs, bracelets etc., but which may not have surface ornamentation); and any object that has surface ornamentation. Although we would have preferred to include glass, ceramic, bone and other materials, these would have made our (already very large) dataset untenable. We did, however, include all object types that are worn on the body (including weaponry and tools), on animals (*e.g.* horses) or are parts of chariots. These include, for example: brooches, pins, anklets, bracelets, arm rings, torcs, pendants, plaques, toggles and horse gear. Just as with the Technologies of Enchantment database, not all of these objects are ornamented, but they have still been included. Miscellaneous fixtures and fittings that may have been attachments for weaponry, personal ornament or chariots are also included.

As this database is a collection of datasets pieced together from a number of sources, each object record in the ECAIC database has a provenance that states from where the data were originally derived. We explore these further in the following section.

The data

As described, the ECAIC database was first built from two disparate databases; because of this, it inherited some idiosyncrasies. The Technologies of Enchantment database (Garrow & Gosden 2010) includes Iron Age/Romano-British Celtic Art, from *c.* 400 BC–AD 100. The database brought together in digital form basic information on 2582 objects from five main corpora (Jope 2000; MacGregor 1976; Palk 1984; 1992; Spratling 1972; Stead 2006) and the Portable Antiquities Scheme (a digital database of finds from England; PAS nd). It included only metalwork from England, Scotland and Wales, and did not include certain object types, such as brooches, pins or coins (this database is fully explained in Garrow 2008). The second database, Vincent Megaw's Early Celtic Art Supplement (ECAS), includes objects from across Europe, though not comprehensively, from around the 6th/7th century BC–1st century AD. This dataset highlights the more 'special' Celtic Art objects, mainly derived from Jacobsthal's (1944) catalogue and updated to reflect the objects found since the publication of that magnum opus. As with most catalogues of Celtic Art, it also excludes coins, but does include a wider variety of materials, including glass and ceramic.

After the ECAIC database was created on the basis of these two datasets, data were collected from other museums and select publications and some objects were removed from the database based on our own parameters. As explained above, we decided that the database would house only metal and stone objects. Overall, the ECAIC database includes object records from 11 different datasets, obtained by the project from various sources, but broadly categorised as: (1) records obtained directly from museums, (2) records from other databases and (3) records from museums included in obtained databases. Object records generously given directly from museums (1) included the following institutions: British Museum (6829 objects), Musée d'Archéologie nationale, St-Germain-en-Laye/National Archaeological Museum, France (11,172 objects), Bergmuseum Salzburg/Salzburg Museum (3 objects), Armagh County Museum (32 objects), Rijksmuseum van Oudheden/National Museum of Antiquities, the Netherlands (143 objects), Pánstwowe Muzeum Archeologiczne, Warsaw/State Archaeological Museum, Poland (24 objects) and Neues Museum Biel/Nouveau Musée Bienne (775 objects). Although many of these were national museums, their datasets included objects from outside their own countries. Despite this, we were unable to obtain a broad enough geographical spread by obtaining records only from museums. We were lucky, therefore, to have access to other existing Celtic Art/artefact datasets (category 2). These included the two described above: the *Technologies of Enchantment* database and *ECAS* database (2086 objects), as well as: the *Portable Antiquities Scheme* (PAS) database: a database created through a government-led scheme in England and Wales, that encourages metal detectorists to record and report their finds, which are logged in the database (6302 objects); and *Artefacts: Collaborative online encyclopaedia of small finds*: a database of small finds from a wide range of sources to which many researchers have contributed, which aims to provide a high-level 'wiki' based platform for archaeological finds across Europe (9535 objects; Artefacts 2008–19).

As we pointed out at the start of this chapter, collating a wide variety of datasets means inheriting some of their idiosyncrasies and making space for difference. These datasets were created for different reasons, are of varying quality, quantity and level of detail, and were created in different languages. However, there is also significant crossover between them (which we attempted to cull by searching for museum numbers or other unique identifiers included in both datasets). This is particularly true of the Artefacts database, which draws on a wide range of sources, including the PAS and individual researcher and museum contributions. Similarly, the Technologies of Enchantment database contains objects from the PAS database, as well as objects from the British Museum. The Early Celtic Art Supplement draws on many European museums, but most of them are not museums from which our project directly received data. Despite the data collection difficulties, a vast array of information is contained in the fields included in the ECAIC database, which we look at in more detail below.

The objects

Each record in the ECAIC database equates to an object or a group of objects when applicable, such as the beads of a necklace. A number of data fields were defined, which will not be discussed in detail, but are given in Table 2.1. In short, each object may contain the following information: type of object, date, the place it was found, the materials of which it is made, dimensions, condition, visual characteristics, images, archaeological context, recovery method, a list of references in which it was published, a home institution (or database provenance) and the archaeological site on which it was found (if any). So, what can the ECAIC database tell us? We can begin by looking at some basic information, such as the frequency and spatial distribution of objects of different types and then at objects from particular contexts and datasets.

The what and where of Celtic Art

One of the key benefits of bringing together these datasets into one database is the ability to look at a wider picture of, for example, the distribution of the material, their collective dates, or the contexts in which they were found. Figure 2.1 shows the spatial distribution of the findspots of all objects in the ECAIC database across Europe (where findspots are known). In total, 47 countries are represented in the database (Fig. 2.2). The main biases are towards certain parts of Europe, namely England and France, resulting from the data the project was able to obtain (as described above). The concentration of objects in south-eastern Britain, for example, is partly a result of the success of the Portable Antiquities Scheme in England and Wales, but may also reflect particular depositional practices during the Iron Age, or differences in the types of objects in circulation in different areas. This map also shows a picture of Celtic Art over an extended period of time, from the Middle Iron Age to Early Roman period (*c.* 600 BC–AD 100), which can also be pared down to specific time periods where dating resolution allows.

Each dataset within the ECAIC database used a different set of object categories, which we subsequently placed into one of the following broad categories: Animal Equipment, Armour & Weaponry, Container, Dress Component, Musical Instrument, Other, Personal Accessory, Personal Ornament, Sculpture, Tools & Equipment, Vehicle Component, Vehicle Component/Animal Equipment.

Figure 2.3 shows the frequency of each of the 12 object categories in the database. Personal Ornament is, by far, the largest category, containing 45.34% of the total and encompassing object types such as torcs, brooches and pins. Of the objects in this category, 44.64% are brooches or brooch components. The commonness of personal ornament, particularly brooches, within the ECAIC database suggests that these types of objects were frequent in Iron Age Europe, but may also say something about the ways these objects were deposited and recovered archaeologically.

The Personal Accessory and Dress Component object categories, like Personal Ornament, are also related to personal appearance (see Chittock, Chapter 5, this

Table 2.1. ECAIC database fields.

Object data	
ECAIC UID	Object UID
Object	Smallest category of object type
Object subcategory	Middle category of object type
Object category	Broadest category of object type
Object description	Description
Dimensions	Dimensions of the object
Condition	Condition of the object
Visual characteristics	Series of checkboxes for the visual characteristics of an object
Number of objects	If the object is in more than one piece (fragments) or if it was originally recorded as a group of objects
Site ID	A UID related to the *Site* table
Context	Broadest level of context
Context details	More specific level of context
Context comments	Free text description of context
Recovery method	Method of recovery, *e.g.* metal detector, excavation etc.
Sex, Age, Burial info	More specific details of burial
Probable import	Yes/No and sometimes production place, if known
Place found	
Name	The name of the place found, town, country etc.
Admin area	The type of administrative area, *e.g.* City, Country, County etc.
Place found	Description
Site	
Site name	The name of the site, which may differ from the place it is found
Site type	Categorised using a list of types determined by the ECAIC team
Site	Description
X, Y	Lat/Long
Location provenance	The source of the x/y coordinates
Date	
Start / End date	Numerical start / end date
Type	Type of date: either Context, Estimated, Period (where a chronological division was given but no numerical dates) or Typology
Chronological division	An archaeological 'period' *e.g.* La Tène A
C^{14}	C^{14} BP date, C^{14} standard deviation, Lab code for the radiocarbon date, Material dated, delta C13 value
Dating notes	Any notes for information not captured by the other fields
Date reference	Reference where date was found

(Continued)

Table 2.1. (Continued)

Data/accession information	
Institution	Name of the institution where object is currently held
Collection	The name of the collection within a museum, *e.g.* The Morel Collection within the British Museum
Number	Accession number or related database number where known
Link	A web link to a collection or object, usually on a museum's website, or a web link to an object in another database, *e.g.* PAS website
Date	Name and date data were entered and modified
References	
Reference	Short version of references, including page numbers. Full versions of references are held in separate table *Bibliography*
Materials and production techniques	
Category	Material, Production technique, Surface treatment, Ornamentation technique
Type	The type of the category: *e.g.* Cu alloy for Material, chasing for Surface treatment etc.
Colour	Colour of the material entered
Location on object	Location on object of the material, treatment or technique
Imagery	
Imagery	Specific type of human or animal, where known, and how many present, if countable
Location on object	Where the specific motif is found on the object

volume). Objects related to grooming, such as combs and mirrors are contained within the Personal Accessory category, and the Dress Component category contains components of clothing and accessories, such as belt buckles and footwear components. These two categories make up far smaller proportions of the objects in the database than Personal Ornament: just 1.78% and 2.82% respectively. The Other category, which contains miscellaneous tools, fittings and ornaments makes up a fairly large proportion of the database (19.28%), as does Armour and Weaponry (11.60%). The remaining categories (Animal Equipment, Container, Musical Instrument, Sculpture, Tools & Equipment, Vehicle Component, Vehicle Component/Animal Equipment) each constitute less than 10% of the database.

Mapping particular categories of objects shows that not all object types reflect the overall spatial distribution seen in Figure 2.1. For example, torcs are clustered in parts of eastern and southern Britain and in the area to the north-west of the Alps (Fig. 2.4), with a sparser distribution centring on modern Hungary. Brooches, conversely, are concentrated in England and along parts of the Mediterranean and Adriatic coastlines, in clusters across the Alps, and more sparsely scattered across

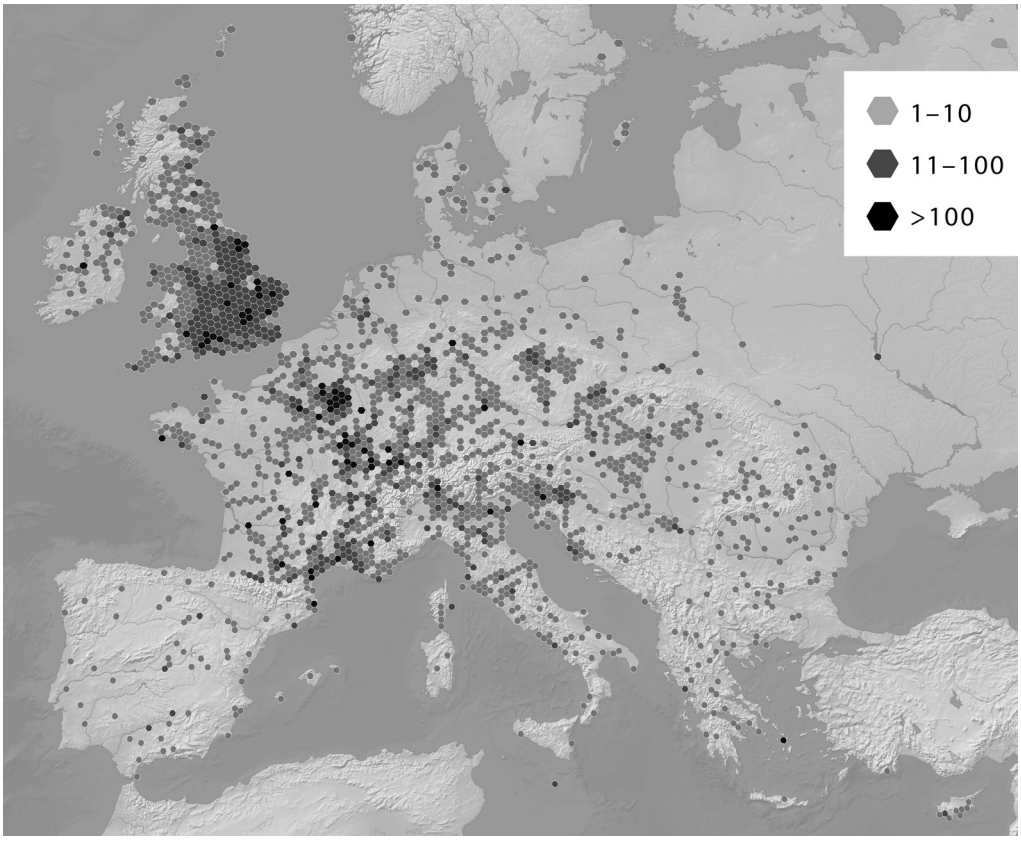

Fig. 2.1. The distribution of all object findspots in the ECAIC database.

central Europe and Spain (Fig. 2.5). Again, these trends can be attributed to a complex combination of Iron Age activity, archaeological activity and the construction of the ECAIC database. We can also look at these patterns in their archaeological contexts.

The context of Celtic Art

Celtic Art objects are commonly found in graves, hoards, wet places and settlement contexts, to name a few. The range of sites and contexts from which the objects in the ECAIC database have been recovered is wide and complex. Sites can be divided fairly simply into categories such as Funerary and Settlement, for example, but the diversity within these types is great, and the ranges of context types within each site can be wide. This is an issue that is compounded when multiple countries are represented in one database – naming traditions are national and archaeological phenomena are varied.

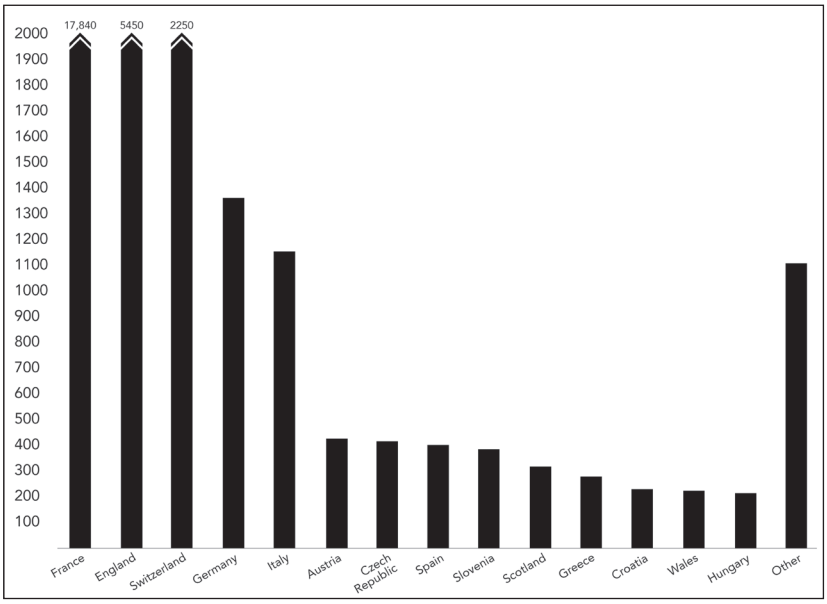

Fig. 2.2. Quantities of objects from the 47 countries represented in the ECAIC database.

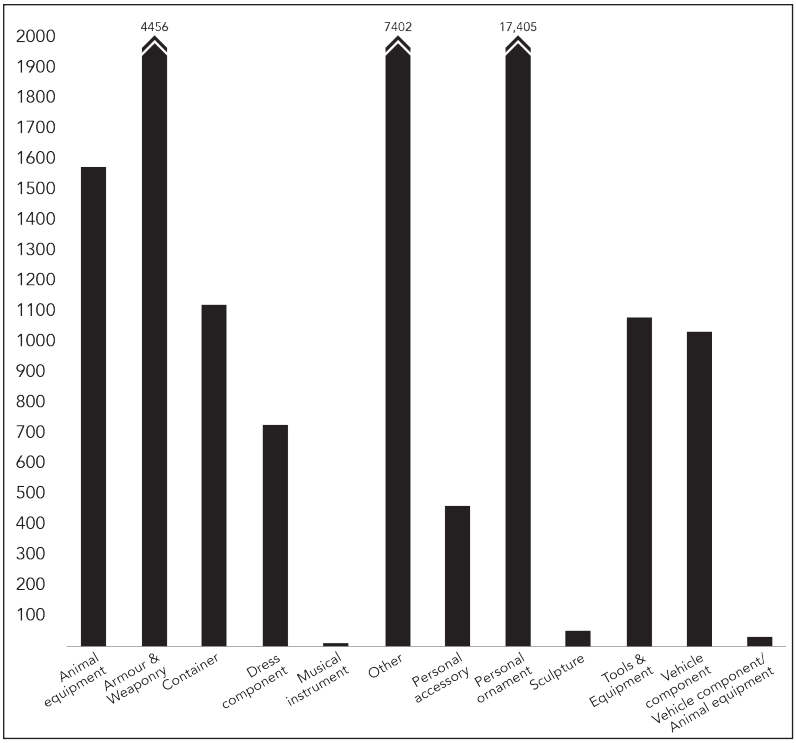

Fig. 2.3. The overall frequencies of different object categories in the ECAIC database.

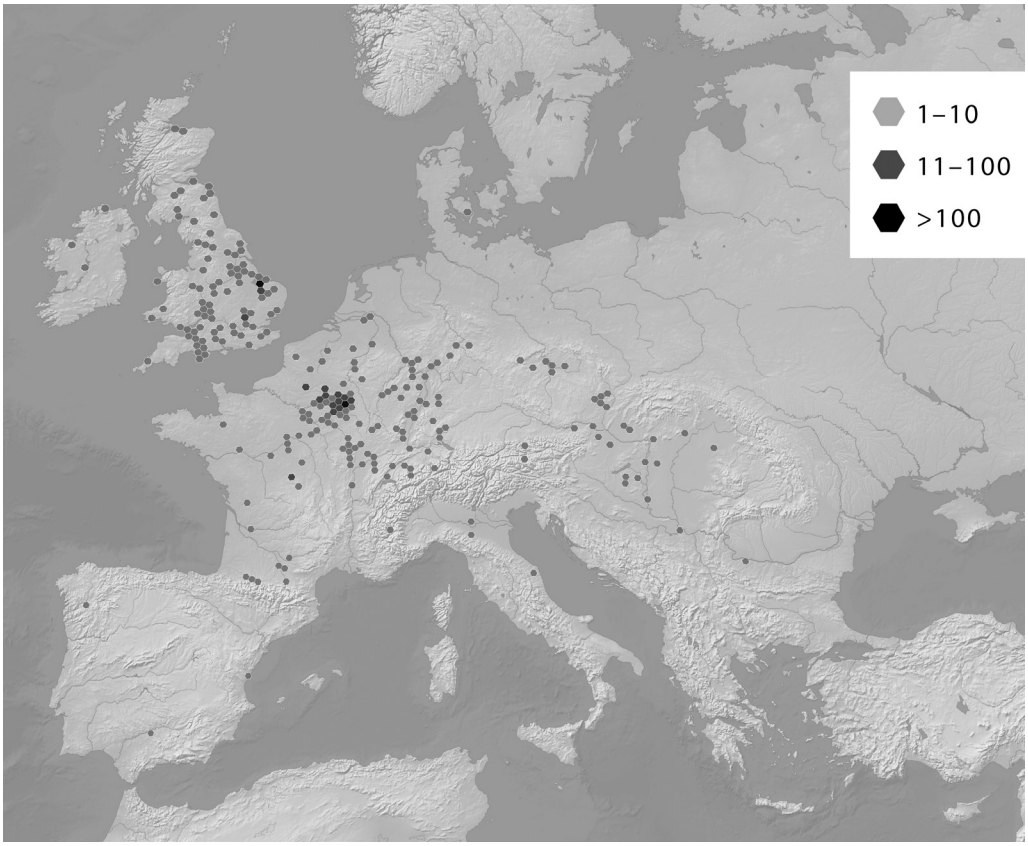

Fig. 2.4. The distribution of torc findspots from the ECAIC database.

We can look at the example of 'Funerary' sites (sites with, for example, grave, burial, inhumation etc. in their description), which make up 21.7% of the objects in the ECAIC database (Fig. 2.6). The contexts within these sites include those from within many types of graves: flat graves, graves under mounds, cremation burials, chariot burials, single burials, graves as part of cemeteries and mass burials. They also include objects from probable or possible burials: contexts that 'look like' burials, but where no human remains survive, and those that have been disturbed, but contain burial-like assemblages. Many of the objects from funerary sites within the ECAIC database are classified simply as coming from burial contexts, but others are classified more specifically. For example, around 8.64% of the objects from funerary sites are classified as coming from tumuli, barrows or mounds, whilst 17.71% come from wagon, cart or chariot burials.

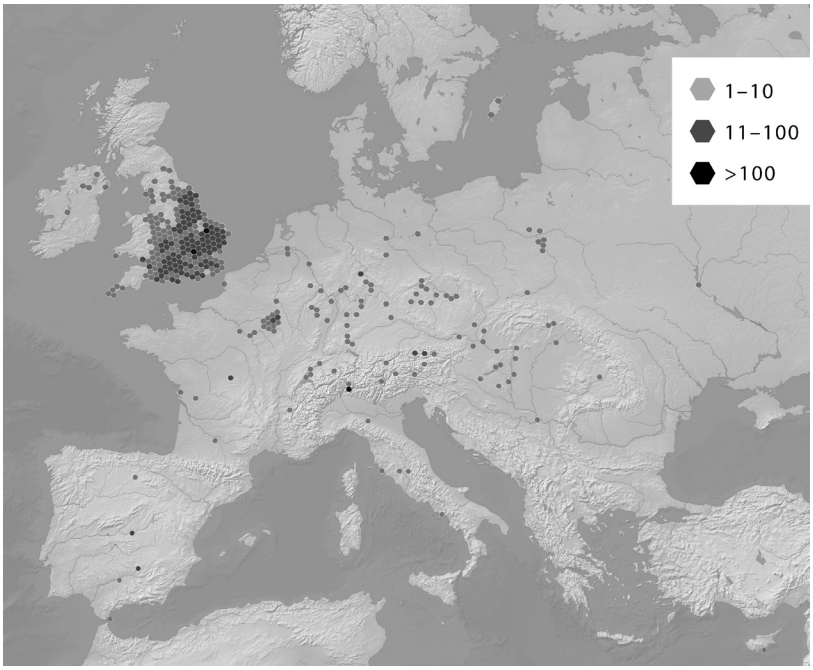

Fig. 2.5. The distribution of brooch findspots from the ECAIC database.

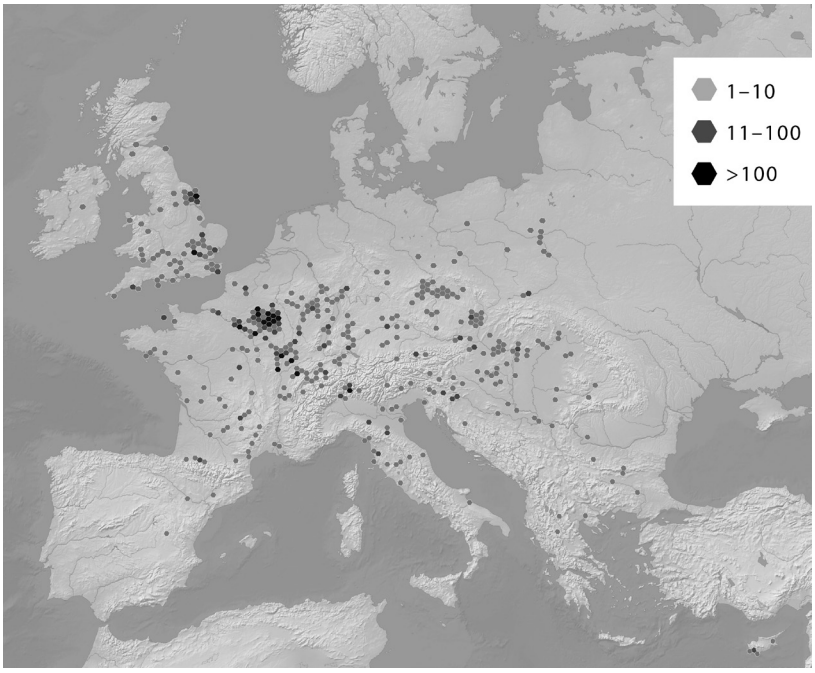

Fig. 2.6. The distribution of objects from funerary sites in the ECAIC database.

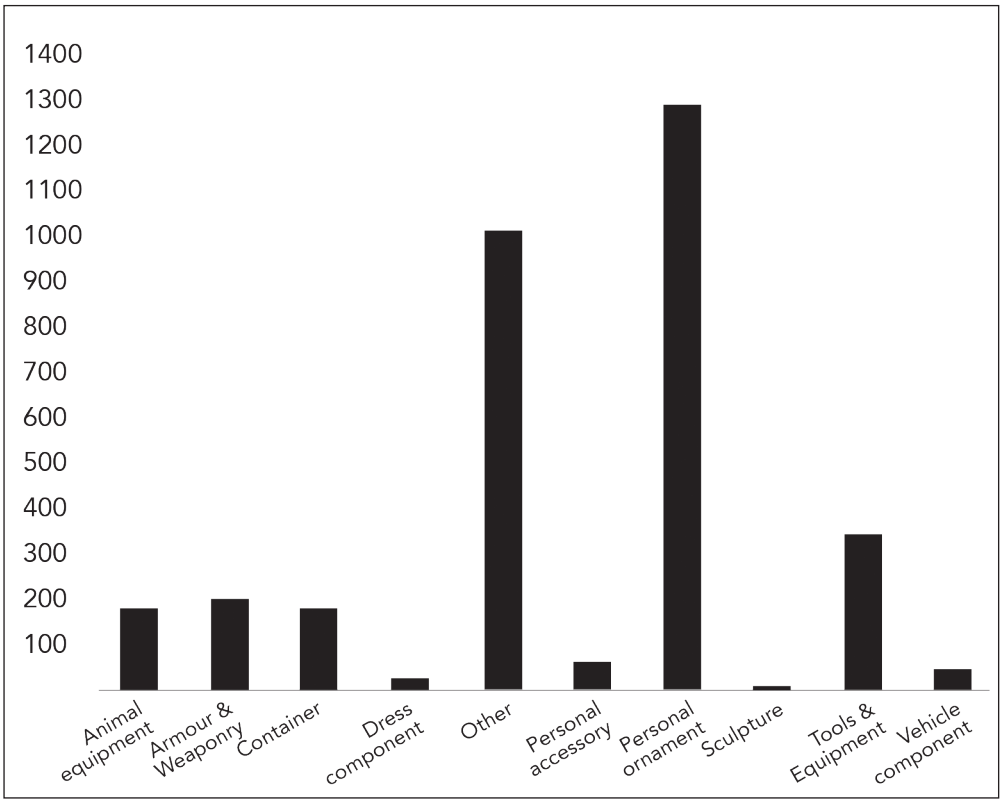

Fig. 2.7. Frequencies of different objects from settlement sites in the ECAIC database.

The densest concentration is in north-east France, with smaller clusters in eastern France and across the north of the Alps, stretching into central Europe. Despite the overall concentration of objects from the ECAIC database in England, the density of objects from funerary sites here is comparatively low, with small clusters in East Yorkshire and south-east England, reflecting a dearth of contexts traditionally defined as 'funerary' in Iron Age Britain.

We can also look more specifically at the relationship of object types and contexts, for example, from settlement sites. In the ECAIC database, a number of contexts were included in the site type Settlement. These included not only pits, post holes and ditches, for example, but also graves and hoards in some cases. They were determined based on: previous categorisations (such as in the Technologies of Enchantment database), by information included in the object descriptions or by the nature of the context (a villa context was automatically included in the Settlement site type, but not hillfort). Interrogating the database shows that 8.69% of objects come from Settlement site types. Breaking down the category of settlement sites, of the 3336 objects classified as coming from settlement sites, 58.63% are categorised as coming

from oppidum contexts; and the remainder are from settlement features or structures, such as ditches, houses, pits and floors. Other contexts from settlements that appear in very small numbers are villa features and Late Iron Age/Romano British settlement features.

We can then look at the frequencies of different object categories from settlement sites (Fig. 2.7). Personal Ornament is the most frequent find on these sites, making up 38.60% of the objects in this graph, but other categories are also unusually frequent: Other (30.30%) and Tools & Equipment (10.19%). The frequency of Personal Ornament is expected, given its overall domination of the ECAIC database. Tools & Equipment and miscellaneous objects from the Other category would also be expected to be frequent on settlement sites, seeing as these are sites where the use and storage of tools and equipment occurred most often.

Concluding thoughts

This chapter has introduced the ECAIC database and described some of its strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities for analysis it affords. We have introduced some very broad stroke trends, such as the dominance of personal ornaments, especially brooches (see Chittock, Chapter 5, this volume), and some basic patterns of deposition. It is clear that there are distinctions between Britain and the continent, which are only partially attributable to discrepancies in the database (see Garrow 2008; Garrow & Gosden 2012). It is also clear that there are major and many influences from varied site taphonomies and biases in the database, but we would argue that genuine Iron Age patterns can be discerned and, most importantly, tested on smaller scales – the ECAIC database provides a springboard for future enquiries.

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