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Atlantic Sea-ways

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The subject of the Atlantic sea-ways has been discussed by many writers over the last century or so. Among the English archaeologists who have considered the theme – including famous prehistorians such as Fox, Crawford, Daniel and Hawkes – the most extensive treatment to date is by the historical geographer E.G. Bowen in his book *Britain and the Western Sea Ways* published in 1972 in which he considers the *longue durée* of human endeavour from the Mesolithic period until the Middle Ages. Bowen's thesis is that the Atlantic façade of Europe offers constraints and opportunities to which people have responded in broadly similar ways over long periods of time. Without being unduly geographically deterministic this is the approach which I find most helpful.

Let us then begin with geography. At the simplest level the western part of peninsular Europe can be seen to support three broadly defined socio-economic systems – Mediterranean, Continental and Atlantic and between each there were well-defined axes of communication (Fig. 1). Within the Atlantic system, which is our concern, there was always a tension created by oppositions: the individual regions were remote from each other yet were bound by the ocean, while the seaward-looking aspect of the Atlantic communities was held in check by the communication links, mainly along the great rivers, which linked the littoral to the more distant inland systems.

When the whole Atlantic façade is considered in detail its varied nature comes into sharper focus. To do justice to its infinite variety is impossible in the confines of a single lecture but the diagram (Fig. 2) gives some idea of the characteristics which contribute to its distinctive quality. We may distinguish the *narrowing seas* which serve as antichambers between the open Atlantic and other seas, to the north leading to the North Sea and the Baltic and to the south to the Mediterranean. These narrowing seas were choke-points in the maritime system where shipping activities concentrated and in consequence many ports developed. Then there were the *major routes*

of entry along the great rivers flowing to the Atlantic. In almost every case at the point where the wide estuary narrowed to a convenient width for bridging a port developed coming into prominence by the Roman period – Rouen, Nantes, Bordeaux, Oporto, Lisbon, Seville, etc. These routes of entry served not only the immediate hinterlands but also provided long lines of communication thrusting deep into Europe. Between them were *uncongenial coasts*, uncongenial, that is, to sailors. These include the forbidding shores of Cantabria, where the mountain chains come close and parallel to the sea, and long monotonous sand bars, like the Landes of Aquitania, created by long-shore drift. Such places make difficult landfalls and have generally been avoided by mariners.

The constraints and opportunities of the coast have, necessarily, conditioned how communities have responded to them and how easy it has been to develop regular maritime communications. What routes were favoured is, at best, guesswork but the map (Fig. 3) gives some idea of sailing patterns showing medium-haul routes between the major ports. What the map also brings out with great clarity is the crucial importance of Galicia as a stepping stone between the northern and southern parts of the system. Whether or not the open sea routes across the Bay of Biscay (shown by the broken line) were regularly taken is a debatable point. It is generally believed that in the prehistoric and Roman periods sailors preferred to stay in sight of land but I see no reason why the open sea routes should not have been chosen for longer journeys. After all by the first millennium BC the Atlantic communities had been sailing and navigating in these waters for more than five thousand years. It was their familiar sea. The fearlessness of Atlantic seamen is well demonstrated by the remarkable journeys made by Irish monks in the second half of the first millennium AD: reliable accounts of ships sailing for long periods, sometimes as much as fourteen days at a time, out of sight of land come down to us in the vernacular literature.

I strongly suspect that we have hitherto seriously underestimated the abilities of Atlantic seafarers. That the Atlantic communities had developed a meticulous understanding of the movement of sun, moon and stars by as early as the third millennium BC is clear from the orientation of many of the 'megalithic' monuments found along the Atlantic façade. Such an awareness would have been of considerable value in navigation augmenting the accumulated knowledge of the sea passed down from one generation to the next. Nor should we underestimate the seaworthiness of the vessels available at the time. Caesar's famous description of the ships of the Veneti, which he overcame in battle only with difficulty, gives a vivid impression of sturdy local vessels perfectly adapted to the tough conditions of the exposed Atlantic coast. There were also lighter vessels in operation, made of wooden frameworks covered with hide. These were noted by Classical writers at various locations along the coast from Iberia to Britain. The famous gold

model of the first century BC found at Brighter in Ireland shows just such a vessel powered by nine rowers and a square rigged sail. It was hide boats of this kind, called currachs, that took the Irish monks on their ocean voyages in the early Middle Ages. Similar vessels, covered with tarred canvas rather than hides, are still used on the Aran Islands in Galway Bay today.

Even if one accepts that long distance voyages formed a part of the shipping movements in Atlantic waters, much of the maritime activity for most of the time in the prehistoric period would have been short-haul trips, made in sight of the coast, between adjacent harbours, the ships' masters restricting themselves to familiar routes. In this way commodities, value systems and knowledge would have been transmitted over considerable distances. We can visualize the Atlantic sea-ways as a great corridor of activity with ships moving into it and out again at will carrying their goods and all the less tangible aspects of culture from place to place.

These maritime flows are best appreciated from the distribution maps of bronze artefacts found along the Atlantic façade, representing communication in the period centring on 1500–500 BC. For the most part what they show are a series of overlapping but essentially local, distributions which neatly reflect zones of easy and regular contact (Fig. 4). A classic example of this is the distribution of socketed Armorican axes buried in huge numbers in the Armorican peninsula and found, though in much smaller quantities, in Britain and western France. Clearly these axes were exchanged largely within a close regional network but also found their way overseas in cargoes of vessels sailing to adjacent 'foreign' ports. But that some items could travel much further along the trade networks is shown by the wide distribution of the carp's-tongue swords and their copies and by rarer discoveries such as the Irish basal-looped spear heads found among the large collection of bronzes dredged from the harbour of Huelva.

Tools and weapons of this kind could have travelled in a variety of social contexts, as gifts, useful commodities of exchange or as scrap metal. Some novel types may have inspired local craftsmen to modify their own designs or production methods. In this way ideas and technological concepts spread along the Atlantic sea-ways.

Communications could also work at a more complex level allowing belief systems and complex patterns of social behaviour to spread. This is implied by the widespread adoption of elite feasting gear – the cauldron, flesh hook and articulated spit, among the Atlantic communities. These items were evidently luxury goods and reflected a practice in which the feast was central to social articulation at an elite level. Such feasts are reflected in the Homeric literature and were later referred to by Classical writers describing the social behaviour of Celts in western Europe. The distribution of the items belonging to the distinctive set of Late Bronze Age feasting equipment (Fig. 5) is evidently 'Atlantic' and suggests that the feast was deeply embedded in the

social systems of the various Atlantic communities. So too was the practice of depositing propitiatory offerings, dedicated to the gods, in 'watery places' such as rivers, springs and bogs. Again, in this we may be seeing the widespread manifestation of a particular set of beliefs shared in common by Atlantic communities from Scotland to Iberia.

The evidence of maritime contact is particularly clear in the Late Bronze Age at which time large quantities of metal were being moved from place to place. In the second half of the first millennium BC the archaeological evidence is far less rich. This does not, of course, necessarily mean that 'trade' had dramatically declined in volume but simply that the movement of archaeologically recognizable objects had abated: bronze was no longer a significant exchange commodity. Yet something of the continuing exchange patterns can still be discerned. The example of the disc-footed fibula is instructive. Fibulae of this general type are well known in north-western Iberia and in Aquitania and although there are typological differences the similarities are close enough to suggest that the two zones were exchanging ideas in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Fibulae of closely similar type have also been found in the south-west peninsula of Britain at Harlyn Bay in Cornwall and Mount Batten, near Plymouth, in Devon. In the whole of the British Isles the type is otherwise unknown. The implication must surely be that the fibulae from Devon and Cornwall were either imported along the Atlantic sea-ways or were made locally in imitation of imports. By what means the items travelled must remain unknown but among the various options we should not forget the possibility that they may have been worn by women who were sent as gifts, or came as brides, to cement social allegiances between distant élites.

Another artefact belonging to the same broad period – the antennae-hilted sword – emphasizes the maritime links between north-western Iberia and Aquitania. Once again there are some typological differences between the weapons of the two regions; however, adherence to the same general, but quite specialized, type suggests that the two communities had adopted the same symbol of élite warrior status. Swords of this kind were not widely distributed outside their core areas of use.

The few examples chosen here to demonstrate Atlantic exchange patterns are, of course, selected from a great wealth of data spanning the third to the first millennia BC which reflects upon the maritime systems but they have been chosen to show that the patterns of exchange were socially embedded and should not be explained away purely in terms of commercial transactions.

We mentioned earlier that the Atlantic façade was tied to the more inland parts of Europe by long-established route ways, for the most part following the major river systems. It was by these routes that active communication was developed in the Neolithic period and escalated in the

Bronze Age when the metals, such as gold, tin and copper found in abundance in the Atlantic province, came to be much in demand throughout Europe.

In the Late Hallstatt and Early La Tène period a broad region of west central Europe, including north-eastern France, southern Germany, northern Switzerland and Bohemia, became an innovating centre dominated by warrior élites who demonstrated their status in cycles of conspicuous consumption, including the 'destruction' of large quantities of wealth in elaborate burial practices. Such a social system required a constant flow of raw materials and prestige goods to maintain it, and one of the regions from which the raw materials came was the Atlantic region. The principal route used was along the Loire valley. Archaeological traces of this axis are comparatively slight but the establishment of an élite enclave in the vicinity of Bourges probably owed its existence to its ability to control the route. A scatter of exotic items of Etruscan metalwork, found along the Loire and in southern Armorica, are all that remains of the reciprocal gifts probably made in return for valuable metals from the Atlantic region.

Once established it would seem that active trade links along the Loire were maintained throughout the La Tène period and it may well be that it was in this way that La Tène art styles were introduced to the Armorican communities. It has long been recognized that Armorican ceramic decoration, best exemplified by the magnificent decorated jar from Saint Pol-de-Leon, is most closely paralleled by high quality metalwork manufactured in the Marne region and nearby. The simplest explanation of this is that luxury items of decorated metalwork were among the commodities exported from the Marne to the Armorican élite in exchange for metals. Once in circulation in Armorica the designs were emulated by local craftsmen. One of these exotic imports, a decorated bronze helmet, was found at Saint-Jean Trolimon in Finistère. That more imports have not been found need occasion no surprise since many factors, not least their rarity and the acid local soil conditions, will have mitigated against their survival. It is also worth entertaining the possibility that the extension of this trading axis northwards around the Armorican peninsula to south-western Britain and the Irish Sea may have been responsible for introducing the first items of La Tène art to the western parts of the British Isles and Ireland.

The importance of Atlantic tin and gold to the late prehistoric economies of Europe should not be underestimated. The journey of the Massiliot explorer Pytheas in the fourth century BC was no doubt, at least in part, to study the sources of tin and amber. I take the somewhat heretical view that Pytheas probably travelled overland along the old established route along the Aude and Garonne to the Gironde and from there made his great journey in a succession of local vessels. Even this minimalist view does not demean his achievement. It may well have been as a result of this expedition that Massalia acquired a more regular supply of tin from Armorica and Britain.

Thereafter the tin route is mentioned by a number of contemporary commentators.

The other prime source of tin and gold – north-western Iberia – was, surely, the preserve of the southern sector of the trading system, procuring metals for Cadiz (until the end of the third century under the control of the Carthaginian world). There is much logic in this suggestion and even scraps of archaeological and textual evidence to support it. If, then, we are correct in supposing that the two exchange systems were essentially separate (Fig. 6) the very remoteness of the metal supplies and the secrecy with which they were treated would explain why the Classical world had only a most confused notion of the Atlantic resources and conflated what was known into generalized accounts of distant, almost mythical, ‘tin islands’.

One of the more remarkable features of the Atlantic façade, which has impressed archaeologists over the last hundred years, is the high degree of cultural similarity displayed by the maritime communities from Galicia to Scotland. Many characteristics have been chosen for discussion: here there is time to select only a few for brief comment. Perhaps the most impressive is the *chevaux-de-frise* – the arrangement of upstanding angular stones in zones protecting the approaches to defended settlements. This highly specialized phenomenon is well known in northern Iberia and occurs, albeit sporadically, in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, the most dramatic example being at Dún Aonghasa on the Aran Islands off the Atlantic coast of Ireland. It is difficult to believe that so specialized a concept could have arisen spontaneously in such far-flung regions.

Many writers have similarly been impressed by the ‘cliff castles’ found along the entire Atlantic façade – promontories, often remote and windswept, jutting out into the sea and defended by earthworks from a landward approach. Physically these sites show a remarkable similarity and it is difficult to resist the temptation to believe that the choice of location was to a large extent conditioned by a desire to control the interface between land and sea. In all probability these promontories were conceived of as liminal places and as such were endowed with particular power. If so what we are seeing in the distribution of ‘cliff castles’ is the physical manifestation of a belief system shared along the Atlantic interface.

Another of the recurring themes is circularity in domestic architecture. The ‘round house’ is the normal type of building throughout the British Isles from the second millennium BC onwards, and in the more remote areas of the west remained the dominant form even throughout the period of the Roman occupation. Much the same phenomenon is apparent in north-west Iberia. In Armorica, on the other hand, circularity is far less evident. What all this means is difficult to judge but at the very least we must be observing another manifestation of shared beliefs brought about by continuous contact over thousands of years.

The archaeological evidence available to us allows the broad picture of maritime contact and parallel development to be discerned with startling clarity but it also offers the possibility of examining elements of the system in much finer detail. To illustrate this we may briefly look at the cross-Channel trading axis which developed between northern Armorica and central southern Britain in the first half of the first century BC as the result of intensified Roman interest in the economic potential of barbarian Gaul. The principal point of entry to Britain at this time was the promontory of Hengistbury Head which dominated the Solent water-way and protected a fine harbour giving access to the main river routes of Wessex. Hengistbury developed as a port-of-trade in the centre of far-flung trading routes. Excavations on the headland have produced evidence that a wide range of commodities were brought to the port from central southern and south-western Britain. Tin and copper came from Devon and Cornwall, lead/silver alloy from the Mendips, and scrap gold was also accumulated. To this may be added iron from the headland itself, Kimmeridge shale for making bracelets from the Dorset coast and corn and cattle from the hinterland. At Hengistbury materials were refined and prepared for export. Coming into the port from abroad we can recognize large quantities of north Italian wine in distinctive amphorae, lumps of raw purple and yellow glass, metal vessels, figs and quantities of pottery made in northern Armorica which may well have been containers for some desirable foodstuff. It is interesting to compare the archaeologically-attested exports from Britain with the list given by Strabo sixty years or so later in which he mentions metals, corn, hides, slaves and hunting dogs. It may well be that slaves were an important bulk-commodity in the exports from Hengistbury but they are, as yet, archaeologically undetectable.

A broader study of the central region of the English Channel at this time allows us to trace the sea route used, from the bay of Saint Briec on the north coast of Armorica, via the island of Guernsey to Hengistbury, while a detailed consideration of amphora typology suggests that the trade route was at its most active in the period c.120–60 BC but thereafter declined rapidly in importance.

The Hengistbury study, all too briefly sketched out here, gives some idea of the level of detail that the archaeological evidence allows us to achieve. Studies of this sort, undertaken along the Atlantic façade, will eventually enable us to piece together the Atlantic system in all its kaleidoscopic fascination.

For far too long the study of European prehistory and protohistory has focused on the Mediterranean and temperate Europe north of the Alps. These regions were, undoubtedly, of great importance as centres of innovation but the concentration on them has tended to relegate the western fringe of Europe to the status of an insignificant periphery. This it most certainly was not. It is abundantly clear that the Atlantic façade of Europe formed a



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cohesive and innovative system of crucial importance to European development. It was rich in resources and empowered by the ocean. The Atlantic provided the means of easy communication and it created a common identity which only those inhabiting the very edge of the world could enjoy. The communities of the Atlantic sea-ways have, throughout time, been bound together by the sea. It is interesting to find, in the creation of the economic confederation known as L'arc Atlantique, that the European Union is at last recognizing this long and enduring truth.



Fig. 1

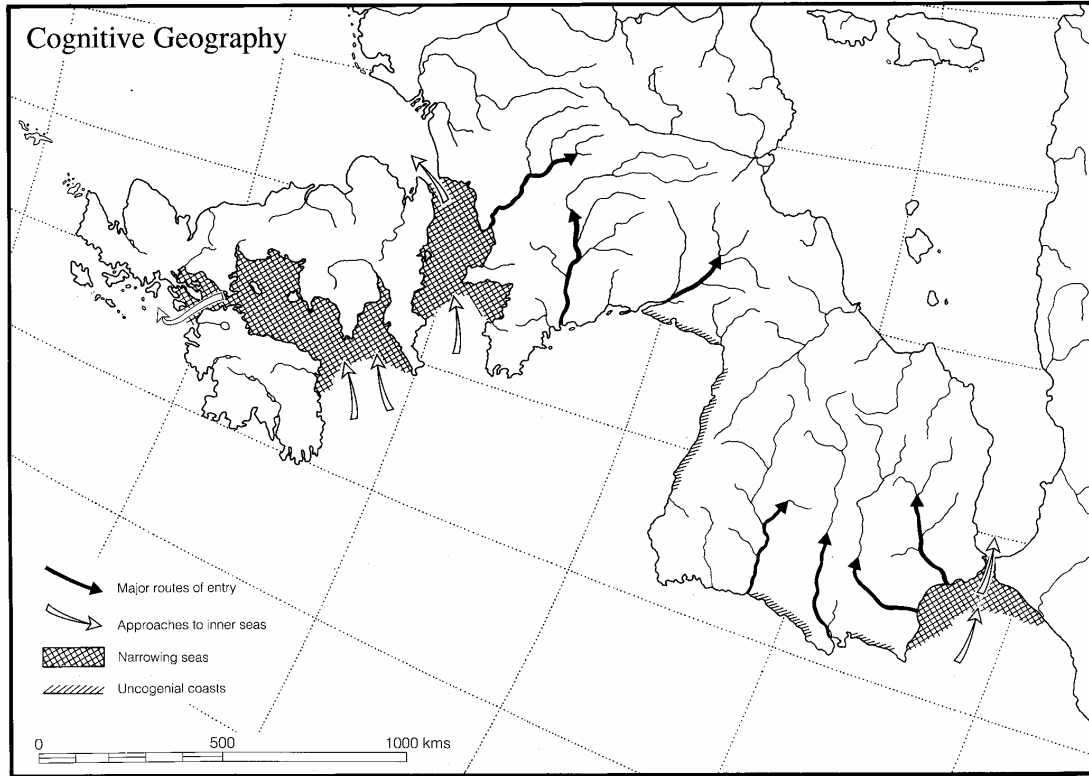
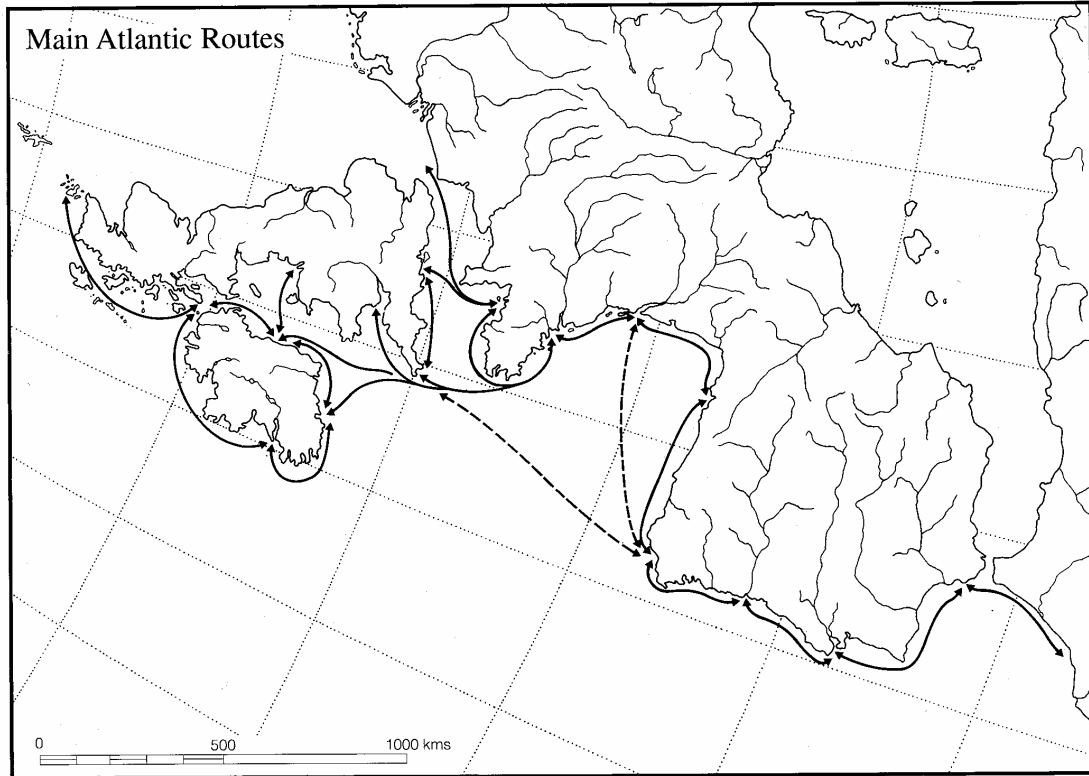




Fig. 2

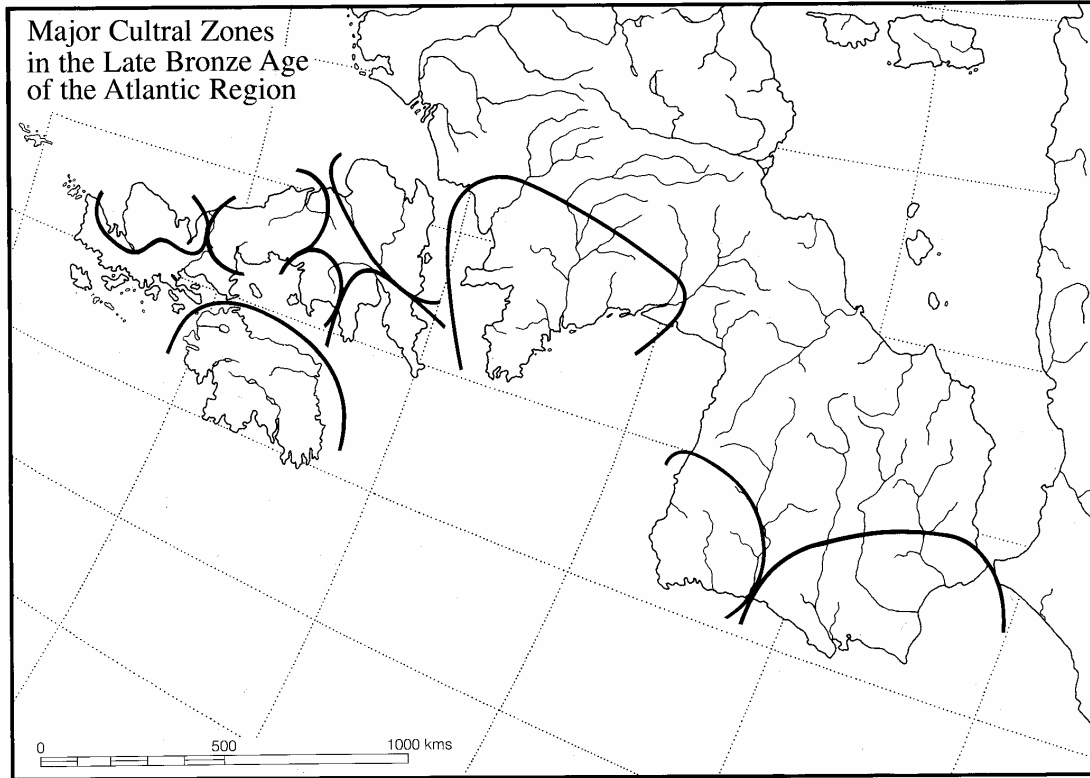




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Fig.3

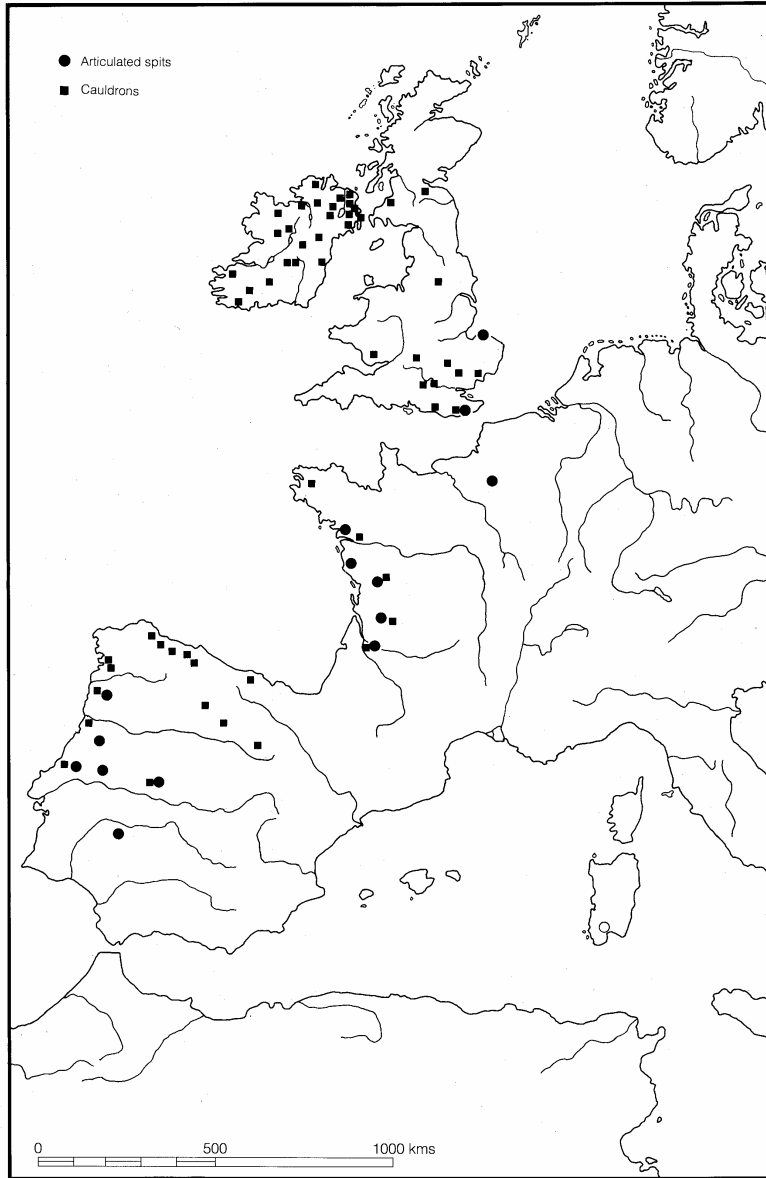




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Fig. 4





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Fig. 5

