

How Ancient Europeans Saw the World: Vision, Patterns, and the Shaping of the Mind in Prehistoric Times

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Peter Wells' goal is to investigate why the visual nature of objects changes in Europe in the period between the Bronze Age and the arrival of the Romans. He views the visual changes in artifacts from these periods as an indicator of the ways that "early Europeans perceived their world and their place in it" (Wells 2012:xi). This is a novel approach to interrogating the substantial shifts in the archaeological record from this period that have long puzzled archaeologists, particularly the fact that it is not simply material styles that are transforming, but that these changes may reflect more fundamental transformations in the mindsets of prehistoric people and their conceptions of the world in this period. Wells argues that these periods were not only characterized by fundamentally different "ways of seeing," but that these perceptions, both visual and conceptual, influenced later European cultural development far more than has been realized as a result of the traditional focus on the influence of Greece and Rome in the development of Western civilization (Wells 2012:188-9). More broadly, Wells aims to provide insight into distinctive approaches to visual perception prior to the use of writing (Wells 2012:10). He argues that understanding this shift may provide insight into changes we are experiencing today "as new communication technologies take their places in human action and perception" (Wells 2012:11). In elucidating diachronic transformations of the visual character of artifacts in the Bronze and Iron Ages, he highlights two distinct periods of particularly rapid change in material culture that reflect a substantial reorientation of beliefs, perceptions, and action. The first abrupt stylistic transformation occurred with the advent of the La Tène period (5th century BC). This is a culmination of trends that had picked up momentum throughout the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages with increasing individualization in the decoration of artifacts and frequent visual references to cultures farther afield. Wells concludes that this indicates a turn away from the primary importance of community to a focus on the individual, as well as a broader concern with the place of European communities in a larger, more cul-

turally diverse world. The second period of rapid change in visual culture, according to Wells, occurred in the 2nd century BC with the increased homogenization of material culture that followed the development of mass production, and participation in a European world system (Wells 2012:214).

Aspects of this book will appeal to both a general as well as an archaeological audience. Unfortunately, in trying to meet the demands of such a diverse audience, Wells uneasily straddles the divide between the general reader and professional archaeologist. Part I “Theory and Method” (1-71), provides a helpful orientation to non-archaeological readers by presenting a general introduction to European prehistory, as well as explaining archaeological approaches to the material record and how archaeological claims are made. Other chapters, including those in Part II “Material: Objects and Arrangements” (72-187) will appeal to an archaeological audience due to Wells’ encyclopedic knowledge of the material record of Bronze and Iron Age Europe, as well as his insightful syntheses of patterning in material culture over time. However, while the book as a whole may suit a wide audience, Wells is trying to do too much both archaeologically and theoretically, which means that the archaeological or anthropological reader is left wishing that there had been more time or space for elaboration of some very intriguing proposals or more convincing justification of the less compelling hypotheses. The general audience in turn runs the risk of becoming lost in the details, especially since the book does not begin with a thorough grounding in the larger context of Bronze and Iron Age life.

Theoretically, Wells draws on theories of materiality, visuality, ecological psychology, extended mind theory, and several other non-archaeological disciplines. The use of visuality and ecological psychology suits the work in that this approach highlights the visual nature and appeal of artifacts as well as the necessity of understanding their broader context in the visual world of Bronze and Iron Age Europe (Wells 2012:11, 22-3). Visuality, “the visual properties of things as they are perceived by a viewer” (Wells 2012:11), allows Wells to assess the visual attributes of materials and their impact (especially with reference to the distinctions provided by light, line, and texture) from a more compelling perspective than that provided by the more common typological or chronological approaches (Chapter 2:19-33). This perspective adds more nuance to our own perceptions of these items and provides insight into their potential visual appeal in the periods of their use. However, in other cases the application of theory is less nuanced and less well tailored to

the case studies presented. Wells' use of theories of materiality, specifically Bender and Marrinan's use of diagrams (Wells 2012:14-5, 33; Bender and Marrinan 2010) may be overreaching: "Every product of a society – religious rituals, kinship systems, marriage practices, myths, burial customs, decorative patterns applied to pottery – encapsulates the whole of the society. Thus cultural anthropologists can use a single ritual to elucidate the social, economic, and political workings of a society" (Wells 2012:14). Implying that culture may be embedded in objects, to the extent that a single class of objects or facet of material culture may be used as a proxy for the entire system, is misleading and does not serve his point. For the anthropological or archaeological reader, assertions like this are unnerving, and undermine the thorough contextual work that Wells undertakes later in the book in drawing out the relationships between patterns of change over time that are expressed in material culture. Other theoretical frameworks are also only superficially treated – Gibsonian affordances (Wells 2012:32, 189; Gibson 1977, 1979), Gell's technology of enchantment (Wells 2012:31-2; Gell 1992, 1998), and Clark's extended mind theory (Wells 2012:23-5, 137; Clark 2008) – and without a more nuanced discussion of how these theoretical frameworks inform and deepen the insights provided by Wells' conclusions, they represent theoretical name dropping rather than as useful interpretive tools.

Wells' incredible breadth of knowledge is apparent in the survey of the archaeological record of Bronze and Iron Age Europe in Part II (72-187), focused on pottery, fibulae, swords and scabbards, graves, ritual sites, and coins. In each chapter he focuses on a specific type of material culture and traces the changes in the visual nature, use, and archaeological distribution of these artifacts from the Early Bronze Age to the arrival of the Romans. His discussions of the context and visual nature of the material culture are succinct and to the point, and he does an excellent job of teasing out trends in material culture change. Chapter 5, "Pottery: The Visual Ecology of the Everyday" (72-98) is the most compelling, and while some of his interpretations would have been better supported by more nuanced regional or temporal study they nonetheless provide intriguing avenues for further research. For example, his proposition that the rough temper and texture of storage vessels in the Early Bronze Age visually reference agricultural fields and reflect an intensified relationship between people, agriculture and the landscape is thought provoking, but currently stands as a just-so story (Wells 2012:85). However, his approach to the pottery assemblage as a unit for social analysis is well conceived and provides an excellent methodological template for other archaeologists pursuing similar

aims. He considers the probable modes of use and display of pottery, and so is able to interpret the decoration as reflective as well as communicative of cultural ideals. His treatment of fibulae (Chapter 6:99-111), and swords and scabbards (Chapter 7:112-130), as assemblages is also intriguing, though less compelling than the treatment of pottery, most likely due to the different scales of the distribution of ceramics as compared to swords and fibulae, and their more restricted use overall. Had fibulae and swords been treated as part of the larger assemblage of items of personal adornment and items worn on the body, their changing visual nature over time would have been more contextualized and could perhaps have demonstrated how the changes in the visual nature of these items impacted the changing visual nature of personal ornamentation and distinction more generally. The subsequent chapters on the organization of graves (Chapter 8:131-154) and social performances (including feasts, funerary rituals, votive deposits, and martial rituals) (Chapter 9:155-175) are interesting and propose some plausible vignettes, but are less successful overall since it is hard to draw out truly compelling patterns due to the incredible variation over time and space that Wells has to contend with. Wells is again more successful when he returns to coins as a more materially and temporally restricted assemblage in the final chapter of Part II (Chapter 9:155-175), and this section provides some of the best evidence for changes resulting from participation in an increasingly broad economic system, as well as those changes brought about by the adoption of writing (Wells 2012:179-184).

Wells highlights the La Tène period as a time of shifting cultural orientations that were reflected in the visual culture of the time: “the visual patterns of the Middle Iron Age suggest progressively less concern with the relationships of elite individuals to the communities in which they lived, and more concern with relationships to the larger world” (Wells 2012:196). He argues that the expansion of these increasingly global (or at least broadly extra-regional) networks culminated in the 2nd century BC in a steep decline in individuality in visual culture due to participation in far-reaching trade networks and the advent of mass production (Wells 2012:196, 207-9, 214-21). Finally, Wells highlights the importance of these early periods in the constitution of later European modes of perception that set the stage for what we commonly conceive of as Western culture. He draws stylistic connections between Celtic and later Anglo-Saxon and Viking art, which he sees as reflective of a shared perceptual template that was briefly quashed by Roman oppression, only to reemerge in invigorated and modified form after the decline of Roman influence (Wells 2012:224). While the attempt to highlight the importance of Celtic

influence in the development of later cultures is appreciated, the connections he draws are only touched on briefly and he does not marshal significant evidence to support these assertions. This serves to essentialize the narrative of cultural development in Europe, rather than highlight the multiple prehistoric and historic influences on later European cultures.

In conclusion, Wells provides a thorough and archaeologically rich synthesis of the periods from the Early Bronze Age to the Roman conquest that all archaeologists will be able to appreciate, though those interested in more nuanced interpretations of visual culture may be left somewhat dissatisfied.

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