



**51st International Symposium
of the Association Française pour l'Étude de l'Âge du Fer
Tours (20–22 May 2027)**

THE BODY IN REPRESENTATION(S) DURING THE IRON AGE IN EUROPE

Dates and locations:

The conference will be taking place from 20 to 22 May 2027 in Tours (Indre-et-Loire), in the amphitheatre of François Rabelais University, located in the city centre on the riverside of the Loire. The conference is organised by the AFEAF, in partnership with Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne University and UMR 8215 Trajectoires, the Archaeology Department of the Indre-et-Loire department and the Cethis laboratory (EA 6298), with the support of Inrap, Éveha, and the Regional Archaeology Department of the Centre Val-de-Loire.

Conference topics:

1. Theme 1 (0.25 day): The Iron Age in the Centre-Val de Loire region

In 2027, nearly two decades will have passed since the Bourges Conference (2008), 'The Iron Age in the Loire Loop / The Gauls are in the City' (Buchsenschutz et al. 2009). In 20 years, academic research, preventive and programmed excavations have profoundly renewed our knowledge of the history of the territories that made up the current Centre Val de Loire region (Bituriges, Carnutes, Turones). This knowledge concerns the two phases of the Iron Age and a variety of themes: from agglomerations to the organisation of the rural areas, including cultural practices.

During this first half-day, the focus will be on summary presentations reviewing the major advances made in recent years in the Centre Val-de-Loire region. Various themes may be addressed (rural and urban habitats, fortifications) as well as the latest important discoveries.

2. Theme 2 (1.75 days): The body in representation(s) during the Iron Age in Europe

The question of how the human body is represented in ancient societies encompasses various aspects relating to art and aesthetics, and consequently, systems of values and beliefs. Each culture develops distinct ways of representing humans, reflecting its religious beliefs, social and cultural context, and historical heritage. These modes of representation are not fixed; they change over time, often under the influence of intercultural exchanges, whether near or far. Thus, art and human representation become witnesses to a constantly evolving cultural dynamic.

In any case, human representation is a profound reflection of the culture and values of each society. By exploring these representations, we seek to better understand how humans perceived themselves, what image(s) they wanted to show others, and, beyond that, how they conceived of their place in the world.

Studying the representation of the body in the Iron Age involves exploring various aspects that contribute, individually and together, to characterising societies at the end of European Protohistory. This study requires a multidisciplinary approach: by analysing the interactions between art, value systems and expressions of identity, it should be possible to highlight cultural and social dynamics.

Until relatively recently, the few examples of human representations, often poorly dated, were regarded as exceptional and unique objects, systematically interpreted as divinities or linked to Greek or Roman influence. The numerous discoveries made in recent years have made it possible to move beyond these preconceptions and deepen our knowledge of protohistoric societies. Nearly 40 years after the 1990 national french congress of learned societies in Avignon, *Les représentations humaines du Néolithique à l'âge du Fer* (Briard, Duval 1993), the contributions of preventive and planned archaeology have proved decisive, particularly in France. The discovery of human-shaped objects in their archaeological context, whether coins, stone sculptures or other artefacts, sheds new light on Iron Age societies.

But the question of human representation in the Iron Age is not limited to the visual arts. In the tomb, bodies can also be dramatised through their arrangement, funeral costume and accessories. These details provide information about social and/or family status, gender and perhaps the role that individuals played in their community during their lifetime. Funeral clothing and accessories reveal specific practices surrounding the human body, highlighting social hierarchies and beliefs through a system of values that is intelligible to the living. The position given to the body of the deceased, its location in the tomb (or outside a funerary context) and any manipulations it may have undergone are all indications of the individual's status and how society viewed them. By analysing these aspects, we can seek to understand how Iron Age communities conceived of the human body and its place in the world of the living and the dead.

We propose to approach this theme through three complementary axes:

- The human body on stage;
- Showing the body: media and techniques;
- Social practices, beliefs and collective narratives.

Axis 1: The human body on stage

This axis concerns proposals for papers on the staging of the body or part of the human body in the Iron Age, based on anthropological data or figurative media. Preference will be given to descriptive elements that provide insight into the social status, functions, gender and identity of individuals. How do clothing, hairstyles, ornaments, materials and even the type of burial site highlight the representation of the individual and their body?

A. Identity and social status of individuals

Can accessories, clothing, hairstyles, and even sexual attributes (beards, moustaches, genitals, etc.) reveal specific social roles: distinguishing between men and women, leaders (kings/queens, princes/princesses), warriors, druids, divinities (or deified heroes), or members of various social classes? Are certain characteristics recurrent in protohistoric human figuration observed over time? Can regional particularities/specificities be distinguished in human figuration? Do certain representations or symbols, on the contrary, transcend the regional characteristics of cultures?

- Individual identities: Can individual identities in the Iron Age be discerned from a combination of material and symbolic attributes, social practices, and functional roles within the community?

- Identity and divinities: is it possible to establish links between certain attributes of human figures from the Iron Age and a divine reference? Can a divine character be identified through figurative objects, human postures or hybrid compositions combining human/anthropomorphic representation with animals and/or symbols?

B. Body semiotics

- Staging of the body: the way in which the body is arranged in the tomb (foetal position, supine position or other) may reflect beliefs about death, but may also indicate an individual's social status, with particular positions reserved for elites or certain categories of the population (gender, age groups, hierarchy). The case of individuals seated cross-legged, attested in various forms and media, is particularly significant for the Iron Age. As the corpus is frequently renewed – most recently with spectacular discoveries in Dijon – new proposals on this subject seem necessary.

- Manipulation of the body: practices involving the manipulation of the body can reveal specific religious, social or political rituals. What does the body as a whole represent? What does one part of it represent, or several parts associated or combined? What can we learn from sections of human bodies or bones manipulated in different archaeological contexts (graves, sanctuaries, silos, habitats, fortifications, etc.)?

C. Places of deposition of the body or representation of the body

The places where bodies or representations of bodies are deposited – or even exposed – can themselves reveal information. Whether they are funerary monuments built for the occasion, places of cult, domestic contexts, or even natural spaces (marshlands, springs), these spaces provide us with keys to understanding the meaning of these practices. The typology of monuments can thus be addressed, but only from a societal perspective. New synthesising contributions are also expected on atypical mortuary deposits of bodies or body parts, the corpus of which has grown significantly over the last ten years. These include silos, wells, habitat structures, but also marshy areas (bog bodies).

Axis 2: Displaying the human body: media and techniques

Through a wide variety of materials and techniques, human representations from the Iron Age offer a window into the expertise of protohistoric societies. The diversity of materials and techniques also reveals the level of investment made by individuals and society in the production of these figures. The display of parts of the human body, particularly skulls, was sometimes part of practices and arrangements whose traces have been uncovered by archaeology.

A. The media of human representation

- Stone and wood: statues of various sizes are known to have existed during the Early and Late Iron Ages. These sculptures may represent real individuals or evoke a non-personified function related to religion, war or the memory of ancestors. The context in which stone sculptures were discovered can provide information about practices involving these representations in urban or rural areas, in habitats, necropolises and sanctuaries. Can these objects, studied in their archaeological context, provide information about the status of the individuals represented and their role(s) in society?

- Metal: human representations appear on metal objects such as coins, jewellery, weapons, chariot parts, utensils and figurines. These objects may include figurative and symbolic motifs that convey values. What is the place of the human body among motifs and ornaments, animals, plants and geometric shapes? What is the place of the human figure on exceptional metal objects and those of everyday use?

- Ceramics: painted or engraved human representations from the Iron Age are rare. Beyond the La Tène context, human figures painted on ceramics are more common, particularly in the Iberian Peninsula, among both the Iberians and the Celtiberians. Some ceramics depict scenes of combat and everyday life.

B. Technical representation

- Sculpture is generally created through modelling or carving. Modelling allows for the creation of more expressive and detailed figures, while carving requires precision and mastery of tools to reveal the desired shape. Sculptors used techniques such as bas-relief, high relief and free-standing sculpture to create three-dimensional images that stand out from the surface. Bas-reliefs, in particular, allow stories to be told while integrating human figures into narrative compositions.

- Metalwork: human figures on metal objects (recipients, plates, lids, coins, weapons, jewellery, chariot parts, etc.) are often created using casting or repoussé techniques. These techniques allow for the production of fine details and complex patterns.

- Engraving: on objects such as coins or jewellery, it allows detailed images to be created by cutting into the metal with special tools. These can include portraits, symbols or narrative scenes.

C. The art and manner of displaying a skull

The Celts displayed parts of the human body, mainly the head, as evidenced by archaeology, ancient texts and iconography. This ritual practice is essentially linked to war, since accounts by Greek and Roman authors indicate that the heads were taken from enemies who had died in battle. However, many questions arise about the reality of these practices. Sometimes showing signs of nailing and exposure to the elements, sometimes of embalming, skulls (and other human remains) must have been a common feature of everyday life for certain populations during the Iron Age. How were the bone fragments taken from corpses handled and prepared, and how were they displayed to the living?

Axis 3: Social practices, beliefs and collective narratives

Representations of the Iron Age reflect individuals and human societies. In axis 3, we are looking for original proposals that highlight methods and approaches likely to renew perspectives on social structures, beliefs and cultural identities.

A. Ambiguous representations

Numerous figurative media provide us with an ambiguous image of the human body in the Iron Age: fantastical creatures, monstrous figures, dismembered bodies. The relationship between humans and animals is particularly highlighted through compositions that celebrate hybridity. There are also bone deposits mixing human and animal remains, which appear to have been treated with equal respect and sometimes reveal intentional interchanges. What can we say today about this relationship with the wild world and the philosophical thinking underlying this link?

- Fantasy characters on various types of media.
- Association between humans and horses in complex deposits.
- Use of deer antlers in association with human bodies/representations.

B. Religion and ritual practices

Human representations, whether in art or everyday objects, can serve as a medium for ritual practices involving divinities or ancestors, the protection of the living, or the accompaniment of the deceased to the afterlife. Is it possible to discern ritual symbolism in human representations from the Iron Age? Human representations may have been used as objects of invocation, designed to establish a connection with divinities or ancestors.

Furthermore, these representations can be interpreted as symbols of cultural identity, reflecting the values, beliefs and social practices of protohistoric communities. By examining the materials, styles and contexts in which these figurations were deposited, it becomes possible to reconstruct their ritual value, which transcends their aesthetic significance. In short, human figurations from the Iron Age can be seen as evidence of a rich ritual symbolism, providing clues to the spiritual beliefs and community practices of ancient societies.

Human images can also convey cultural values, such as bravery, fertility or respect for nature, often through mythological or heroic scenarios. They then serve as a medium for transmitting a system of values from one generation to the next.

C. Cultural and ethnic identity

Human representations from the Iron Age can also symbolise collective identities, representing shared narratives, experiences or founding beliefs that unite members of a culture or community.

- Symbols of belonging to local traditions: artistic styles and motifs used in human representations reveal specific cultural identities. Particular stylistic characteristics may indicate membership of an ethnic or cultural group.

- shared narratives: images and sculptures can tell common stories or legends, propagating an ancient mythology that establishes and transmits Celtic memory. Shared stories strengthen community ties and ethnic identity, that of a group claiming common ancestors, real or invented, particularly in cultures without writing, where history and myths are spread orally and through images (examples: the art of 4th-century *situlae*). Which images transcend the entire Iron Age, and do they undergo changes over time?

- External influences: analysing human representations can also show how and to what extent Iron Age societies were influenced by their neighbours through trade, conflict or migration. Similar artistic motifs or practices in different cultures may indicate exchanges or syncretism.

Proposals for papers may take three forms:

- Synthesis papers
- Posters
- Mini-posters

Synthesis papers will remain in the usual 20-minute format and posters will be presented in A1 format. Mini-posters, printed in A3 format, will have a maximum of 1,000 characters (plus or minus 50 characters) and 1 or 2 high-definition images.

Proposals for papers, posters and mini-posters must be submitted to the conference secretariat by 31 August 2026, including the author(s)' contact details, the title and an abstract of 2,500 to 3,000 characters for oral presentations, 1,500 characters for posters and 500 characters for mini-posters.

Conference Secretariat:

afeaf-tours2027@lilo.org

Publication of the conference proceedings:

The proceedings are scheduled to be published in spring 2029 in the AFEAF Collection.

Excursion:

The excursion will focus on visiting the Châtelliers oppidum in Amboise and the Grand-Pressigny Museum of Prehistory, which will host the exhibition 'Face to Face with the Gauls: Human Representation in the Iron Age in the Centre-Val de Loire Region'.

Organising committee:

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Partner institutions :

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 University Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne
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 Museum of Prehistory of Grand Pressigny (37)
 Regional Archaeology Service, DRAC Centre – Loire Valley
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