The art of the British Celts. A critical review

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Abstract. *The article discusses Celtic art in pre-Roman Britain. The author of the article disagrees with the opinion expressed by R.G. Collingwood and certain other scholars that the art of British Celts, being fragile, linear and abstract, having shallow social foundations (since it was the art of the nobility), was doomed to decline and extinction, even if the Roman conquest of Britain had not taken place. The sources referred to in the article demonstrate that Celtic art, whose intrinsic feature was that bent for poetic abstraction which was typical of Celtic mentality in general, had great potential for growth that lay dormant during the Roman period. The view that the artistic style of British Celts possessed creative capacity which remained hidden under Roman reign is confirmed by the Celtic art's revival in medieval Britain during the Anglo-Saxon domination.*

Rezumat. *Articolul tratează problema artei celtice în Britania preromană. Autoarea nu este de acord cu opiniile emise de R.G. Conningwood și un număr de alți cercetători potrivit cărora arta celților britanici, fiind fragilă, lineară și abstractă, având fundamente sociale superficiale (deoarece era o artă a elitei nobiliare), era condamnată să decadă și să dispară, chiar dacă cucerirea romană a Britaniei nu ar fi avut loc. Sursele menționate în articol demonstrează că arta celtică, a cărei trăsătură intrinsecă era acea aplecare spre abstracțiune poetică, tipică mentalității celtice în general, a avut un mare potențial de creștere care a rămas latent în perioada romană. Opinia că stilul artistic al celților britanici a avut o capacitate creativă care a rămas ascunsă sub stăpânirea romană este confirmată de renașterea artei celtice în Britania medievală în timpul dominației anglo-saxone.*

Keywords: British Celts, Celtic art, pre-Roman Britain, post-Roman Britain.

The prevailing trend (so to say, the mainstream) of Celtic art emerged and developed in Continental Europe, within the territories populated by Celts during the La Tène period (5th–1st century BC), named after the archaeological site at the eastern end of Lake Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

"Early Celtic Art", a most thorough, two-volume study by P. Jacobsthal[2] is justly considered the fundamental work on Celtic art of the pre-Roman period, a classic in the field. One of the volumes contains a large number of photographs and line drawings of Celtic artworks. The other provides a careful and in-depth analysis of the artworks, and also includes a systematic survey of Celtic art. Jacobsthal was the first to devise a stylistic

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classification of Celtic art, outlining the three stages of evolution it went through. He also identified the main sources of origin of the art. Subsequent scholars to a large extent follow the line of research developed by Jacobsthal, using his theories, his definitions and his periodization of Celtic art.

The distinguishing characteristic of Celtic art is that the beauty, originality and creative power of Celtic genius found its expression in applied arts, rather than in monumental art. It is the applied art that made the most valuable contribution to the formation of artistic styles of Europe in later times. Externally Celtic applied art stands in marked contrast to works of monumental art. Set against the austere, sometimes primitively uniform, sometimes formidably grim stone monuments, Celtic applied art blossoms into a fanciful and intricate device of costly gold jewellery which was ordered and paid for, coveted and enjoyed by Celtic nobility (the art of the La Tène period was the art of Celtic nobles)[3].

Aristocratic burials dating back to the early La Tène period—the so-called "princely burials"—include both male and female graves. Men were buried with weapons. Finely decorated two-wheeled chariots, as well as food offerings (such as half a boar) and feasting gear, e.g., paired drinking horns, are often found among the grave-goods. Female burials contain a lot of ornate necklaces, bracelets (Figures 1 and 2) and anklets, as well other items of female jewellery[4]. It is in this aristocratic world, imbued both with the spirit of barbaric splendour and refined subtlety—a product of imported luxury items—that the first works of applied art of the La Tène period appear. They mostly come from the excavations of princely burials found in the region of the Saarland.

P. Jacobsthal[5] and other scholars[6] in his wake believed that Celtic art has a triple root. Two major branches of the root are classical Graeco-Italic forms and Irano-Persian, with a smattering of Central Asian elements. The input of the classical heritage was the lotus buds and flowers, and the palmettes used in floral patterns that became an integral part of Celtic ornamentation, while human masks and zoomorphic ornaments in Celtic art have eastern origins.

The third source of Celtic art is to be found in the local Hallstatt tradition, which derives its name from the type site, Hallstatt, a lakeside village in Upper Austria. The La Tène culture followed the Hallstatt culture. The regions where the early La Tène culture developed were notable for advanced crafts. Hallstatt workshops housed highly skilled craftsmen well-versed in complex techniques of metalworking. Bronze casting, gold repoussé, piercing, soldering

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[3] POWELL 1958, 98; MEGAW 1970, 17.

[4] MEGAW 1970, 17.

[5] JACOBSTHAL 1944, 155.

[6] POWELL 1966, 187; MEGAW 1970, 24.

cut-out shapes of sheet gold to iron or bronze surface — all these methods were known to Hallstatt artisans[7].

Hallstatt art boasted a considerable number of varied ornamental motifs. For the most part it was abstract geometric patterns, including the meander, which is by no means characteristic of Ancient Greece alone. Sometimes one encounters human faces, reduced to the most basic linear elements, or animal motifs—water birds being the most typical example—depicted in an almost jocular style[8]. Therefore, Celtic art found a plentiful source of inspiration close at hand.

According to the three stages of development Celtic artistic style underwent, Paul Jacobsthal recognized three periods in the La Tène epoch, the first of which he termed as "Early Style". The "Early Style" is a time of experiment and innovation, spanning about a century and a half, from the beginning of the 5th century BC till the middle of the 4th century BC. During this period Celtic art was profoundly influenced by early classical floral patterns and archaic orientalising symbolism.

Jacobsthal called the second stage of La Tène art evolution (the 3rd century BC) "Waldalgesheim Style" in honour of the magnificent gold jewellery of very high quality, crafted in a manner more advanced in comparison to the Early Style and discovered in the female grave of the Waldalgesheim burial mound in the Mainz-Bingen district in Rhineland. It was during the Waldalgesheim period that one of the most typical and original features of Celtic ornamentation manifested and developed, namely the tendency for merging two adjacent identical motifs, which led to the creation of a new image, sometimes transformed in a most unexpected way enabling one to interpret the resulting image differently every time. "Double, triple, multiple interpretation; the temptation of metamorphosis, illusory though it may be, and here we are, finding ourselves in the climate which is typically Celtic"[9], wrote P. Duval.

The crowning achievement of the Waldalgesheim style was the rejection of the rigid symmetry that Celtic art inherited from geometric patterns of the Hallstatt period, and the introduction of fluid, unconstrained, intense compositions that T.G.E. Powell compared to a rippling tracery of lines seen on the surface of a swift current[10].

In the 2nd century BC the third style of La Tène art became prevalent. Jacobsthal termed it as the "Plastic Style". Patterns favoured during the previous period of Celtic art were mostly two-dimensional and executed in the technique of low relief; though some ornamental motifs, e.g. S-scrolls, tended towards bulging and gaining certain plasticity from the very

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[7] JACOBSTHAL 1944, 158–159.

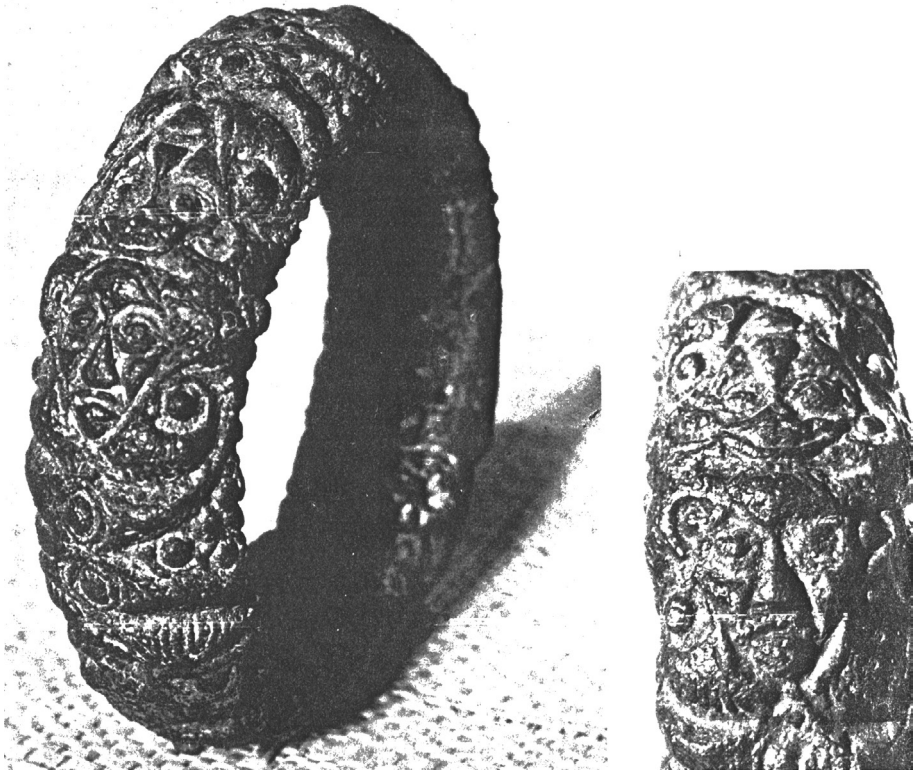[8] MEGAW 1970, 23–24.

[9] DUVAL 1977, 65.

[10] POWELL 1966, 201.

Figure 1. Bronze bracelet and a detail, the beginning of the 3rd century BC, La Charme, France.

Figure 2. Gold bracelet, 3rd century BC, Aurillac, France (CC BY-SA 3.0 by Siren-Com on wikimedia.org).

beginning. This trend reached its logical culmination in the Plastic style, resulting in distinctly three-dimensional, raised works. There are certain works, originating from western parts of the Celtic world and executed in the Plastic style, that demonstrate ornamental patterns constantly transforming classical foliage motifs now into zoomorphics, now into human imagery, appearing element by element from curving tendrils. Those items fell into the category of the "Cheshire (cat) style"[11], as it was termed by Jacobsthal, since they reminded the scholar of the Cheshire cat — a wonderful character from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Caroll that appears and disappears at will and finally melts away leaving only a grin in his wake. The Cheshire style displays most prominently the tendency Celtic artists had towards ambiguity, towards creating blurry, elusive images that, being dreamily enigmatic and vague, constitute the charm of Celtic art.

To properly evaluate the Celtic art of pre-Roman Britain it would be advisable to take into account the opinion of R.G. Collingwood, one of the most brilliant English philosophers and historians of the first half of the 20th century, whose works to a considerable degree shaped the subsequent English historiography of Roman Britain[12]. Noting that the art of pre-Roman Britain was an offshoot of the continental La Tène style, the scholar still credited it with its own path of development. To reveal the characteristic features of Celtic art in Britain Collingwood started with a general description of continental La Tène art. He wrote that "the finest works of continental La Tène art have in their repertory of motives a large remnant of naturalistic material: the lotus and the palmette are still everywhere recognizable, even though in a shadowy form, as if remembered in a dream; human masks, often strange and terrifying, are common; birds and beasts not rare. In their style, they have a certain fullness or roundness. The artist has not altogether lost his sense for the solidity of things. His world may be a dream-world, but the dream has three dimensions. And in their tradition they stand sometimes within sight of Graeco-Etruscan work, sometimes even more clearly in sight of eastern models, Scythian or Iranian. These, however, are not the dominant characteristics even of continental La Tène art; they are recessive; they appear most strongly in its early days, and as time goes on they tend to be overcome by their own opposites: naturalistic motives gradually turn into abstract patterns, the plump forms become more and more wire-drawn, and the reminiscence of southern and eastern originals fades away into an art that is more and more turned inward upon itself"[13].

In his description Collingwood accurately identifies the key feature of Celtic art: its tendency towards reverie and creating phantom-like, elusive images hovering on the border between dream and wakefulness. So it was with good reason that V. Megaw, who is

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[11] JACOBSTHAL 1944, 162.

[12] COLLINGWOOD 1937, 247–250.

[13] COLINGWOOD 1937, 248.

considered by M. Henig "one of the best commentators on Celtic art in our time"[14], wrote of the "elusive image"[15] in his book *Art of the European Iron Age*. However, Collingwood's idea of the direction in which Celtic art developed—from vibrant three-dimensional images whose originals were recognizable to a certain extent to planar linear abstractions—is contrary to fact. As we have seen, P. Jacobsthal termed the last period of independent Celtic art as Plastic style referring to its characteristic three-dimensional works executed in high-relief. Some of these works bear ornamentation of plant motifs resembling leaves, flowers and fruit, forming astonishingly dynamic compositions that have an aura of baroque restlessness and tropical abundance around them. Jacobsthal considered the Plastic style the pinnacle of achievement of Celtic art[16].

When describing Celtic art of pre-Roman Britain, Collingwood built on his main idea that Celtic artistic style evolved from three-dimensionality and naturalism into linearity and abstractness. According to him, the art of the La Tène Celts was transplanted to British soil when the above-mention evolution process had already gone some distance. Collingwood argued that "cut off from its original source, British art lost almost all vestige of naturalism, and much of its plastic feeling; and although it could still do fine work in the round, it became chiefly an affair of abstract design in two dimensions"[17]. The vocabulary of decorative motifs, from Collingwood's point of view, consisted almost exclusively of S-scrolls and the spiral curves that in the art of continental Celts had been tendrils. But in Britain their origin, as well as the tradition of weaving these motifs into subtle and delicate linear patterns was forgotten.

At the same time Collingwood gave to the achievements of British art their due. He wrote that while "no school of art maintains a constant level; … among the works of this British school there are individual pieces so perfect, so entirely rich and harmonious in design, that within the narrow limits of the problem he has set himself we cannot deny to their maker the name of a great artist"[18].

Besides, Collingwood drew attention to another peculiarity of Celtic art which led nineteenth-century Europeans to misapprehend it. He wrote that "this concentration on abstract design, practically all of it made out of a single type of line, is a most unusual thing in the history of art: to a person brought up in the nineteenth-century belief that the artist must always be returning to nature for his material and inspiration, a monstrous and unnatural thing"[19]. Yet, the more familiar one becomes with the work of the artists of pre-Roman

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[14] HENIG 2003, 21.

[15] MEGAW 1970.

[16] JACOBSTHAL 1944, 47.

[17] COLLINGWOOD, MYRES 1937, 248.

[18] COLLINGWOOD, MYRES 1937, 249.

[19] COLLINGWOOD, MYRES 1937, 249.

Britain, the more impressive one finds it, and also becomes better able to look at it from the point of view of those for whom this work had been designed.

V. Megaw viewed Celtic art from roughly the same angle, though as a result he arrived at far-reaching conclusions which turned him into a veritable apologist of the artistic style of pre-Roman Celts, both continental and insular. The scholar noted that Celtic artworks were based on aesthetic principles different from those which constituted the foundation of antique art, since they were not marked with ideal harmony and proportionality. They were often full of preternatural mysticism, and sometimes evoked formidably repulsive or grotesque images, which however capture imagination and excite the mind now by dreamlike mysteriousness and subtlety of their elusive images, and now by vibrating tension and extraordinary expressive dynamics of composition[20].

La Tène art was brought to Britain by Celtic tribes that invaded the island in the middle of the 3rd century BC. The culture of this group (sometimes called the Marnians since they came from the Marne region in France) is referred to as "Iron Age B" in Britain. The formation of the artistic style of insular Celts of the pre-Roman period was completed as influenced by the art of the Belgae, a confederation of tribes living in northern Gaul who made their way across the English Channel into southern Britain in the 1st century BC

One of the earliest, and most striking, objects of La Tène art, discovered on British soil, is a mysterious round bronze item, which was found near the Thames at Brentford (Figure 3). V. Megaw argues that this is a bronze detail of a cup[21], while T.G.E Powell refers to it as a "chariot fitting"[22]. Be it as it may, this item demonstrates a superb example of a typically Waldalgesheim pattern. The pattern which is found on the interior surface of the disk consists of a circular band of lyres and inverted palmettes with volutes transforming into tendrils, resembling at the same time a head of a duck whose eyes have not been traced.

The pattern also includes shields morphing into grotesque masks. Three pairs of tendrils of a different variety than those in the centre are placed on the periphery. Their static row girdles the composition counterbalancing the illusion of rotary motion in the centre. This elegant ornamental pattern incorporates the most significant achievements of the Waldalgesheim style, being notable for its free composition, the absence of complete symmetry in every detail and the tendency to the "discrete metamorphosis"[23].

Hence, at least this beautiful object is free of the shortcomings Collingwood listed as typical of the art of British Celts. The repertoire of its decorative motifs is quite extensive, by no means limiting itself to S-scrolls and spiral curves forming solely abstract patterns. As we have demonstrated, the pattern includes all the elements characteristic of Celtic

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[20] MEGAW 1970, 9–39.

[21] MEGAW 1970, 35.

[22] POWELL 1966, 204.

[23] DUVAL 1977, 130.

ornamentation at its zenith: lyres, made up by two adjacent S-scrolls; inverted palmettes; curving tendrils ending in a duck head; shields turning into grotesque masks. All this abundance blends together, creating a subtle and elegant composition, rich with typically Celtic mysterious, elusive images tending towards metamorphosis. So, Collingwood was in error, thinking that insular Celts had lost the tradition of weaving ornamental motifs into such delicate tracery.

One might think that the beauty and opulence of the pattern decorating the Brentford disc are the result of it being an "import" of Waldalgesheim style of the 3rd century BC; and thus the item could have been crafted by a Gallic artisan or a British one deeply and positively influenced by the Gallic tradition. However, such floral pattern as can be found on the Brentford disc—including tendrils which terminate in raised "buds" doubling as the heads of water birds with or without engraved eyes—is typical of the Celtic art of Britain of later periods as well.

Among the best examples of such artefacts is an unusual set consisting of a bronze pony-cap and a pair of horns placed on the front section of the cap (Figure 4). Characteristically, duck's heads form the terminals of the horns. The cap and the horns were found together at Torrs Farm in Galloway, the pieces are dated around 2nd century B.C[24]. Though the function of the Torrs cap and horns is not completely clear, it is argued that the items might have served as part of parade armour for a horse (albeit a small one). The design on the surface of the cap comprises familiar motifs: tendrils terminating in stylized bird's heads and domed buds.

The characteristic features of this floral pattern may be seen even more distinctly on the magnificent bronze shield boss dated 1st century BC and found in the river Thames at Wandsworth (Figure 5). The curves of the tendrils, terminating now in peltate leaves, now in duck's heads with embossed eyes[25], stand in rotational relationship around the hemispherical umbo, underlining the circular form of the flange in which they are inscribed. I. Finlay wrote that the elements of the ornamental pattern are arranged symmetrically, a detail that argues for precise calculation, yet the design conveys an impression of spontaneity, which testifies to the Celtic artisan's skill and talent[26].

The art of insular Celts, just as the art of their continental brethren, was the art of their nobility. In this regard the artefacts discovered in the British Isles mostly belong to luxury goods: parade armour, such as helmets, shields and swords; elements of horse-harness adornment; torcs — symbols of high rank of the wearer; mirrors created for high status women.

Another splendid artefact is the Waterloo Helmet (Figure 6), a Celtic bronze ceremonial horned helmet dated the 1st century BC and found in the River Thames by Waterloo Bridge.

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[24] FINLAY 1973, 82.

[25] The whole design is executed using the technique of repoussé.

[26] FINLAY 1973, 83.

Figure 3. Bronze disc, 1st century AD, River Thames at Brentford, England.

Figure 4. The Torrs chamfrein, 2nd century BC, Galloway, Scotland (CC BY-SA 3.0 by Kim Traynor on wikimedia.org)

Figure 5. The Wandsworth shield boss, 1st century BC, River Thames at Wandsworth, England (CC BY-SA 3.0 by Johnbod on wikimedia.org).

Figure 6. Bronze horned helmet, 1st century BC, River Thames by Waterloo Bridge, England (CC BY-SA 3.0 by Ealdgyth on wikimedia.org).

The Waterloo Helmet is decorated with an asymmetric floral pattern. Besides, there are bronze roundels on the front and on the back of the helmet which have cross scores on them. Each disc is riveted to the helmet with a red glass enamel stud[27]. The appearance and location of the discs—between the curving tendrils terminating in peltate leaves—evokes the image

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[27] TOYNBEE 1964, 17.

of decorative flowers. On the whole, the artefact gives off an aura of might and vigour. So it was with good reason that I. Finlay compared the works of British armourers of the pre-Roman period to those of Italian and German Renaissance craftsmen which he considered the most skilfully and wonderfully wrought arms of all time[28].

The Witham Shield, an elongated bronze shield facing of the typical shape (Figure 7), was found in the River Witham in Lincolnshire, and is believed to date from the 3rd century BC It has an ornamental midrib (I. Finlay uses the term "spine") which forms a domed umbo over the handgrip and terminates in roundels that resemble torcs in appearance and are covered with the engraving of a delicately balanced asymmetric ornamental design. Around the central boss there once had been a highly-stylized silhouette of a wild boar made of leather

Figure 7. Bronze shield, Iron Age, River Witham, Lincolnshire, England (CC BY-SA 3.0 by Garth on wikimedia.org).

Figure 8. Bronze covering of a shield, detail (bronze, enamel), around 2nd century BC(?), River Thames near Battersea, England (CC BY-SA 3.0 by Jorge Royan on wikimedia.org).

[28] FINLAY 1973, 80.

and riveted to the shield. Under certain lighting conditions one can make out this ghostly outline by the discoloration in the bronze (where the leather had been fixed to the shield) and by the rivet-holes that follow the outline. I. Finlay notes that the Witham Shield, like many other items of military accoutrements and weaponry of British Celts, demonstrates the ambiguity that Jacobsthal discovered in Celtic art, the evasiveness and absence of straightforwardness that attracted Diodorus' attention in a conversation between Celts. If a Greek or a Roman warrior had conceived a plan to decorate his parade shield, he would have placed in the centre some formidable image or at least something connected with the chief function of the item. A Celt could not have acted in so apparent a manner. The only veiled hint of the shield's true purpose was the silhouette of the boar (it is known that Celtic banners displayed a boar)[29].

Along with the horned helmet dredged from the bed of the Thames by Waterloo Bridge, the famous Battersea Shield (Figure 8) is one of the most striking examples of parade armour. It was also found in the Thames and is dated approximately to the 2nd century BC. The shield is decorated with a splendid ornamental design, complete with red 'enamel' inlay settings that contrast vividly with the bronze background and, according to I. Finlay, breathe life and fire into the pattern[30]. While the horned helmet's decoration pattern is asymmetrical, the design of the shield is one of strict symmetry. The 'enamel' settings are placed in small round compartments in raised bronze[31]; the curving tendrils, connecting them, form a sort of swastika. The symmetry of the design creates an impression of harmony and extraordinary dynamics at the same time, which is underscored by the vibrant colours of red glass and golden-hued bronze. I. Finlay was greatly impressed by the decoration of this item, writing that it was not merely filling the space with a pleasing pattern, but rather creating a work of art—elegantly wrought, perfect and thrilling; likening it to a piece of music full of elusive images—in a word, to "a bronze sonata in three movements"[32].

The charm typical of the works by British Celts is greatly enhanced by their bright colouring. I. Finlay noted that highly-emotional Celts were quick to comprehend the significance of colour, yet being subtle and refined in this regard, they would not settle for a low level technique. In the end, British Celts developed the enamelling technique to a degree of perfection. In the 3rd century BC enamel started to replace coral inlays that Celtic craftsmen had previously used for decorating their works. Artisans began to understand that if they wanted to fully take advantage of colour adorning the elaborate fluid designs that pleased them so much, it would have to be placed in some perfectly plastic substance. Definitely, vitreous enamels constitute just the medium. But achieving the technical solution

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[29] SHIROKOVA 2004, 164.

[30] FINLAY 1973, 85.

[31] The technique of cloisonné.

[32] FINLAY 1973, 81.

took a long time. At first heated vitreous substance was simply pushed into crisscrossed recesses whose roughened surface kept the inlay in place. Later a different method came into use: the so-called champlevé technique which resorted to carving troughs or cells into the metal surface of an object, filling them with powdered glass and firing the object until the enamel fused. There is an opinion that in the Celtic world it was insular Celts who pioneered in development of this technique, which came to be called opus Britannicum[33]. Different pigments could add colour to enamels — copper oxide tingeing glass red was the first to be used by Celtic artisans. Celts undoubtedly valued the beauty of highly-polished bronze surface shining through semi-transparent enamel. Yellow, blue and other colours came into use much later.

Contrary to R.G. Collingwood's opinion that the Celtic art of Britain mostly evolved into planar, two-dimensional, abstract forms, archaeological findings prove that British craftsmen widely used both linear and plastic technique in their work. Sumptuous gold torcs from Broighter (Co. Derry, Ireland, 2nd century BC) (Figure 9) and Snettisham (Norfolk, England, 2nd half of the 1st century BC) can serve as examples since they are both executed in the purely Plastic style[34]. These neck ornaments are outstanding specimens of magnificent jewellery worn by Celtic royalty and nobility.

Along the full length of the Broighter Collar stretches the ornamental design that consists of raised and incised tendrils blossoming into fleshy, chunky leaves; lentoid bosses; trumpet motifs and curvilinear foliage pattern. The design avoids strict symmetry, though it is wonderfully harmonious; and the engraved arcs create texture through cross-hatching that serves to set off the relief parts. Even more impressive is the Great Torc from Snettisham (Figure 10), very skillfully made from eight gold ropes twisted around each other. At the ends of the necklace there are two massive rings cast in gold and welded onto the metal ropes.

A sizable group of mirrors[35] created for women's personal use will serve as an important addition to male ceremonial jewellery of predominantly military character. I. Finlay underscores the aesthetic and spiritual value this item held in ancient world, especially in the aristocratic world of insular Celts. He notes that "the mirror, in its way, is as evocative as the sword. If one is a symbol of knightly honour, the other reflects the graces and virtues of woman, and the craftsmen of most of the great civilizations have therefore lavished their talents on both".

I. Finlay, who generally gave a glowing account of Celtic culture, being its apologist, wrote that "the Celt, with his peculiar sensibility, created the most delicately beautiful and

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[33] FINLAY 1973, 85.

[34] FINLAY 1973, 89–90.

[35] Nine engraved mirror were discovered in the territory of southern Britain: in Cornwall, Gloucestershire, Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire and Essex (TOYNBEE 1964, 19).

Figure 9. Gold torc, 2nd century BC, Broighter, Co. Derry, Ireland (CC-NC-ND 2.0 by Pomax on Flickr.com).

Figure 10. The "Great torc", 2nd half of the 1st century BC, Snettisham, Norfolk, England (CC BY 2.0 by Alistair Paterson on Flickr.com).

Figure 11. Bronze mirror with a cast handle, 1st century BC, Desborough, Northants, England.

Figure 12. Bronze mirror with enamel dots, the early 1st century BC, Birdlip, Gloucestershire, England.

significant mirrors of all"[36]. In his opinion, even Chinese bronze-workers during the Tang dynasty, though refined and artistic in their craft, often chose to decorate the backplates of their mirrors with scenes more appropriate for temple ceremonies or hunts than for a woman's bower. "The mind of the Celt was subtler and more *galante* than any courtier of the Louvre, and he would never have offered his lady an instrument for her toilette encrusted with masculine imagery"[37].

J.M.C. Toynbee, being both more reserved and less enthusiastic, noted that the tradition of decorating the backplates of mirrors with etched ornaments had already been of long standing among ancient Greeks and Etruscans when it entered the world of late La Tène art as a skill of British craftsmen – one without parallel among continental Celts. However, while mirror-making was not a new craft, the designs of mirror ornaments in Britain were completely original[38].

Although mirrors were often kidney-shaped, this slight departure from the perfect circle only furthers the sense of balance and harmony of their form. The cast handle, at once exquisite and massive, being attached to the backplate, brings everything together into a whole. The elements of the ornamental design covering the backplate of a mirror unfold into luxurious flower buds, curving and coiling, but keeping within two or three circles, or opening as a single fan-like petal, spanning the entire surface of the backplate.

The best examples of Celtic mirror style are a bronze mirror from Desborough (Northants, 1st century BC) (Figure 11) and an enamelled bronze mirror found in a female burial near Birdlip, Gloucestershire (the early 1st century BC) (Figure 12)[39]. The design of the gorgeous, striking, very well-preserved mirror from Desborough displays near-perfect symmetry. The florid scrolls of the ornament are shining against the darker background created by cross-hatching in a basket pattern. This basketry hatching is a decorative element of itself. The Birdlip mirror, also in a good condition, with the exception of a part of the rim, shows the design etched into the metal. Cross-hatching, again resembling a basket-weave pattern, makes the pattern of interlocking triskeles stand out. To sum up, we may say that craftsmen of pre-Roman Britain fully realized their potential both in plastic and in planar forms.

Although R.G. Collingwood's argues that the art of insular Celts finally tapered to completely abstract designs, the fact remains that there are enough zoomorphic images in the repertoire of Celtic artists. While these images are not exactly drawn from nature, their originals are recognizable. Animals and birds played a major role in Celtic mythology and cult, so Celtic artists carefully studied their habits and external features, yet depicted them in a refined and

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[36] FINLAY 1973, 86.

[37] FINLAY 1973, 86.

[38] TOYNBEE 1964, 19.

[39] FINLAY 1973, 87–88.

symbolic manner[40] which formed the basis of Celtic art.

A Celtic artisan immediately grasped the essence of what he saw, disregarding insignificant details, often over-emphasizing and exaggerating the defining features of the original. Even when he appeared to create a realistic picture, upon examination it turned out highly stylized. Sometimes an ancient artist, like a modern cartoonist, sensed certain eccentricity typical of a depicted being. In this case he created a comical image, like that of the amusing duck with a longish bill from Milber Down (1st century AD, Devon) (Figure 13)[41]. As we have already pointed out, North European Hallstatt tradition, which is one of the sources of Celtic art, included depicting water birds in a jocular, humorous manner.

Another striking part of the legacy left by ancient Celts is the White Horse of Uffington (Figure 14). The huge (about 374 ft. in length) image is formed from deep trenches filled with chalk and situated on the upper slopes of a hill in Oxfordshire (Iron Age). The figure is thought to represent the horse goddess Epona, worshipped throughout the Celtic world. Executed on such a vast scale, this religious symbol was intended to be seen from afar[42]. The White Horse of Uffington also confirms that a Celtic artist could diverge from the original realistic model and transform the depicted being into a decorative pattern of a fantastic design. I. Finlay terms this image as a formula of mystic sense[43].

In conclusion, after the analysis of the most outstanding specimens of Celtic artistic style is completed, researches try to make a careful evaluation of the art in general and speculate what its fate would have been if the Roman conquest had not taken place. Opinions on the Celtic art of pre-Roman Britain differ widely. E.T. Leeds, for one, argued that "Celtic art at this period contained within it all the seeds of a rapid and complete decay; it was breaking up on the rocks of petty details"[44]. Then, "nature, it seems, was to them almost a closed book. Throughout their artistic history it is impossible to detect those natural powers of accurate observation, the lack of which must constitute an eternal bar to the entry into the higher spheres of art, among which plastic art takes a leading place"[45].

Sh. Frere thought that shortly before the Roman conquest Celtic art was already past its prime. Although the process of degeneration had not gone too far, the simple motifs that constituted the inherent power of Celtic artistic style started to disintegrate and disappear in the excess of too elaborate and whimsical details[46].

M. Henig, remarking on the technical excellence typical of many Celtic artworks of pre-Roman period, still argues that they had "more to do with the mastery of a skill than with

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[40] FINLAY 1973, 95.

[41] FINLAY 1973, 95.

[42] HENIG 2003, 18.

[43] FINLAY 1973, 95.

[44] LEEDS 1933, 62.

[45] LEEDS 1933, 86.

[46] FRERE 1967, 316.

what we would describe as 'art'"[47]. Nor is he the only scholar who upholds this opinion. In France F. Benoit thought that works of Celtic artisans had not outgrown honest craftsmanship[48]. Russian scholar A. Mongait also adhered to the opinion that Celts did not know fine arts, only highly artistic crafts[49].

Figure 13. Bronze animal figurines, 1st–2nd century AD, Milber Down, Devon, England.

Figure 14. White horse — a prehistoric hill figure of white chalk bedrock, Iron Age, Uffington, Oxfordshire, aerial photography (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 by Dave Price on Flickr.com).

[47] HENIG 2003, 21.
[48] BENOIT 1945, 7.
[49] MONGAIT 1974, 261–277.

In reality, this belief has already been abandoned. The most prominent scholars of Celtic art noted that the title 'primitive' is often granted to an art whose vocabulary differs from that of Europeans brought up on antique artworks. They advocated the high value, uniqueness and originality of Celtic art which let it compare favourably to antique art, though it is built on completely different, non-classical principles[50]. P. Duval, while describing Celtic artistic style, wrote about many aspects of Celtic art "whose flexibility creates charm, whose elegance seduces, whose austerity guarantees its value, and knowledge vouches for its authenticity"[51]. He called Celtic art "the Celtic miracle" occurring in barbaric Europe when in Greece "the Greek miracle" was happening[52].

Thus, the above-mentioned opinion on Celtic art expressed by M. Henig is groundless, just like his further arguments are when he compares Celtic culture to modern primitive cultures, concluding the comparison with the following general statement: "'Primitive' cultures, ancient and modern, are valuable because they tell us about ourselves, the more primitive sides of our natures and untutored talent and imagination"[53]. Such statements are inapplicable to the complex, mature, highly developed art of Celts. Referring to Celtic ornamentation itself, Henig notes that while "almost every item of Celtic art challenges the beholder to admire the virtuosity of the creator in organizing a pattern, but like a kaleidoscope such pattern-forming has no potential to lead onto other developments"[54].

In contrast to these unflattering descriptions of Celtic art I. Finlay offers the opinion that it fell to the Celtic tribes of pre-Roman Britain that were shielded from the direct influence of the cultures of the antique south to develop the La Tène style to a high degree of perfection, so it might have been for the first time in history that the original Celtic genius shone, free of the slightest hint of this compromise with the classical tradition that tinges so many other works of Gallic art[55].

Reflecting on the future of art in pre-Roman Britain, Collingwood adopted a rather unusual position. On the one hand, he considered Celtic art genuine high art; on the other hand, certain characteristics lying in its artistic quality boded ill for its future. Among these characteristics was the (typical of Celts, in Collingwood's opinion) love of abstraction built upon the play of planar curvilinear patterns. He writes that to make great art, or even good art, by the purely abstract manipulation of curved lines is a feat of extreme difficulty, demanding the rarest combination of favourable circumstances. Such circumstances would

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[50] MEGAW 1970, 9–39.

[51] DUVAL 1977, 8.

[52] DUVAL 1977, 9.

[53] HENIG 2003, 23.

[54] HENIG 2003,21.

[55] FINLAY 1973, 79.

include isolation from external influences that would permit the artist and his patron to develop their canons of taste remaining in ignorance of any other art possible.

The second dangerous characteristic of Celtic art according to Collingwood was its dream-like quality that to some extent pervaded all Celtic art but reached its culmination in Britain. "So delicate is the meditative poise of the best early British art, that a touch will destroy it"[56], wrote Collingwood.

The researchers who adopted the position that the Celtic art of the pre-Roman period did not show potential for growth, shared the view that the weakness of the art lay mostly in its narrow social basis. The art of British Celts was the art of their aristocracy; it was royalty and nobility that commissioned British artisans to create parade armour, jewellery and other luxury goods for them. Hence, the lower strata of society had little access to works of art; only decorated pottery and ivory works contained some typically Celtic ornamental motifs[57]. In a more radical manner this point of view is introduced by M. Henig who argues that Celtic art "was narrowly based both socially and in its repertoire of forms and would surely have become ever more repetitive if it had continued without new influences, until it became moribund"[58].

Presenting compelling arguments, I. Finlay stood in opposition to all those who predicted speedy decline of Celtic art if there had been no Roman conquest and if the art of insular Celts had been left to its fate. He argued that Roman art that gained ground in Britain after it had become a province of the empire was just as narrowly based socially. Its influence was limited to the settlements, where provincial administration concentrated and Roman colonists lived, and to forts built by the ancient Romans to defend the borders of the province. As to those of British noble class who adopted the Roman way of life, their control did not go beyond their lands[59].

Besides, the bent for poetic abstraction, which was vital for Celtic art and which was destroyed by classical realism, however ideal it might be, represented an intrinsic part of Celtic mentality. When the King and Queen of the Fairies in British folklore (who later came to be called Oberon and Titania) assumed human shape, they lost a significant part of their magical charm. Symbolism was a second nature to Celts. Their visions were woven from symbols; those symbols—graceful, unusual, and dreamily enigmatic—were embodied and Celtic art and folklore. In this regard the awareness of the national culture, so deeply rooted in Celtic mentality, and the affection for it did not wane even in the territories conquered by Rome; rather they lay dormant during the Roman period. In the territories outside the Roman

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[56] COLLINGWOOD, MYRES 1937, 251.

[57] TOYNBEE 1964, 20.

[58] HENIG 2003, 23.

[59] FINLAY 1973, 103.

sphere of influence (Northern Scotland and Ireland) the traditional Celtic style survived and had enough potential for development.

To the presence of hidden powers within the artistic style of British Celts—the powers that did not manifest during the Roman period—testifies the style's revival in the medieval Britain at the time of Anglo-Saxon invasion. The main medium for artistic expression among Celtic tribes was metal-working, both in this epoch and before the Roman conquest. The most outstanding works of art of this epoch are bronze artefacts, crafted with the use of the techniques that Celtic artisans had mastered in the pre-Roman period, and decorated in the Celtic tradition.

Figure 15. Escutcheon from a bronze hanging bowl, 6th–7th century AD, Sutton Hoo burial, Suffolk, England.

These include the so-called 'hanging bowls' from the Sutton Hoo ship burial[60]. They are bronze bowls, complete with rings by which they were suspended. It is thought that during the Roman period they were used as oil burners. In medieval Britain such bowls were suspended within a tripod and used in religious ceremonies for ritual hand-washing[61].

On the outer surface of the big bronze 'hanging bowl' from Sutton Hoo one can see round ornamental mounts resembling escutcheons. Flowing curvilinear ornament on the escutcheons forms a complex pattern: every curving tendril rotates around a pair of adjacent heads of some unknown tiny monsters; the rotary motion of these vortexes, although compositionally precise and set out with immaculate taste, appears spontaneous and unconstricted, not limited even by the wires holding enamel inlays into which these ornamental designs are fused[62]. In such artefacts the poetic beauty of ornamental motifs adorning La Tène metalwork becomes richer: the size of images shrinks but they shine in new splendour.
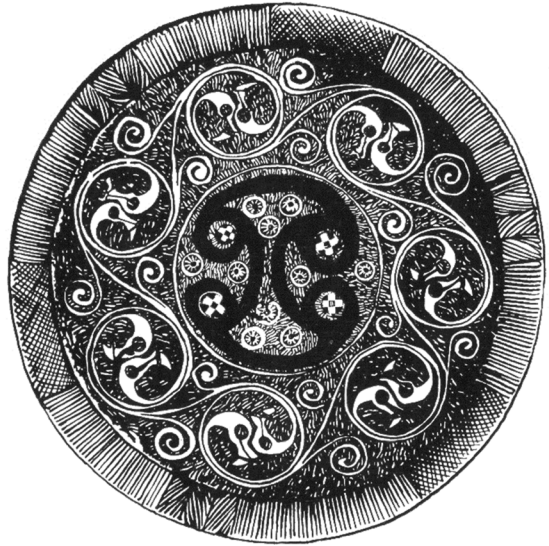
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[60] Sutton Hoo, near Woodbridge, in Suffolk, is the site of two 6th and early 7th cemeteries which were excavated in 1938–1939. One cemetery contained an undisturbed ship burial of an Anglo-Saxon king, including a wealth of artefacts of outstanding historical and archaeological significance.

[61] FINLAY 1973, 106–107.

[62] FINLAY 1973, 107.

On the whole, it was a much more expressive art than the works of Anglo-Saxon goldsmiths of the same period, who, while decorating jewellery, imposed severe limits on their fantasy literally confining it to the compartments of cloisonné works.

In conclusion, we can say that although it is impossible to find traces of direct influence of Celtic artistic style on Gothic architecture or see the Celtic inner flow in Rococo art or decorative styles of the early 20th century, as some unrestrained apologists of Celtic art do, we would be perfectly within rights to view Celtic art (the art of insular Celts included) as the first significant contribution of barbaric peoples to the formation of the future European civilization, the first important chapter of European art[63]. I. Finlay was not far from the truth when writing that "without this ascending flow Europe might have remained desolate wilderness surrounding the ruins of Mediterranean civilizations"[64].

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[63] JACOBSTHAL 1944, 163.

[64] FINLAY 1973, 17.