Early Medieval Art of the British Isles: Celtic or Anglo-Saxon?

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Abstract

Germanic craftsmen and artisans who migrated to Britain in the post-Roman period (beginning *c.*410) introduced artistic traits that gradually merged with the island's long-established La Tène-style Celtic art. As the immigrants evolved into the Anglo-Saxon people, a distinctive new art form emerged, labeled variously as Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Insular, and Hiberno-Saxon. So many titles cause confusion. Art history tends to study Celtic and Anglo-Saxon art individually, but it lacks analysis of which culture influenced the other more, by what means, and whether either can or should fully claim the new art form as its own. By comparing artistic traits in Britain before the Anglo-Saxon migration to changes spanning from the earliest Germanic settlements of the mid-fifth century up to the disruptions of the first Viking invasion at the end of the eighth century, a clearer picture emerges of to whom the period's art belongs.

Keywords: Post-Roman Britain, Early Medieval Britain, Hiberno-Saxon art, Celtic art, Anglo-Saxon art, Germanic migration, La Tène Art, Interlace patterns, Ireland, Orientalization, Dark Ages.

Arte medieval temprano de las islas británicas: ¿celta o anglosajón?

Resumen

Los artesanos y artesanos germánicos que emigraron a Gran Bretaña en el período posromano (a partir del 410 a. C.) introdujeron rasgos artísticos que se fusionaron gradualmente con el arte celta de estilo La Tène, establecido hace mucho tiempo en la isla. A medida que los inmigrantes evolucionaron hacia el pueblo anglosajón, surgió una nueva forma de arte distintiva, etiquetada de diversas formas como celta, anglosajona, insular e hiberno-sajona. Tantos

títulos causan confusión. La historia del arte tiende a estudiar el arte celta y anglosajón individualmente, pero carece de un análisis de qué cultura influyó más en la otra, por qué medios y si puede o debe reclamar la nueva forma de arte como propia. Al comparar los rasgos artísticos en Gran Bretaña antes de la migración anglosajona con los cambios que van desde los primeros asentamientos germánicos de mediados del siglo V hasta las perturbaciones de la primera invasión vikinga a fines del siglo VIII, surge una imagen más clara de a quién. pertenece el arte de la época.

Palabras clave: Gran Bretaña posromana, Gran Bretaña medieval temprana, Arte hibernosajón, Arte celta, Arte anglosajón, Migración germánica, Arte La Tène, Patrones entrelazados, Irlanda, Orientalización, Edad Media.

不列颠群岛的中世纪早期艺术：凯尔特艺术还是盎格鲁-撒克逊艺术？

摘要

在后罗马时期（约公元410年开始）移居英国的日耳曼工匠引入了艺术特征，这些特征逐渐与岛上历史悠久的La Tène风格的凯尔特艺术相融合。随着移民演变成盎格鲁-撒克逊民族，一种独特的新艺术形式得以出现，该艺术形式被贴上了不同的标签，包括凯尔特艺术、盎格鲁-撒克逊艺术、岛屿艺术、以及希伯诺-撒克逊艺术。太多的标签会造成混淆。艺术史往往分开研究凯尔特艺术和盎格鲁-撒克逊艺术，但却缺乏分析哪种文化对另一种文化的影响更大，通过什么方式，以及是否可以或应该完全宣称新的艺术形式属于自己。通过将“盎格鲁-撒克逊移民之前英国的艺术特征”与“从5世纪中叶最早的日耳曼人定居点到8世纪末维京人首次入侵破坏之间的一系列变化”进行比较，可以更清楚地了解该时期的艺术属于谁。

关键词：后罗马时期的英国，中世纪早期的英国，希伯诺-撒克逊艺术，凯尔特艺术，盎格鲁-撒克逊艺术，日耳曼移民，La Tène艺术，交错图案，爱尔兰，东方化，黑暗时代

Introduction

The art produced during the early medieval period in the British Isles illustrates a spectacularly rich and varied body of work. Art historians and archaeologists tend to place the art of this period, which ranges from the end of Roman rule (*c.*410) to the first Viking invasion (794), under either a Celtic or Anglo-Saxon label. Scholars examine the influence of one culture onto the other but offer only vague opinions or conclusions as to which culture should ultimately claim it. Other descriptors include "Insular" art, a generalized term that simply implies art from Britain and Ireland. "Insular" is sometimes equated with "Hiberno-Saxon," another label applied to the art of Wales, southern Scotland, northern England, and Ireland produced during the seventh, eighth, and first half of the ninth centuries. Geographically, this designation ignores the south and eastern parts of England from where a large contribution to the style came. Yet, "Hiberno" derives from the Latin *Hibernia*—Ireland—and ignores the other regions considered Celtic in origin (Wales, Scotland, Isle of Man, Brittany, Cornwall) as well as its European continental roots. The label "Anglo-Saxon," refers to the art produced in England during its transformation from post-Roman Britain into Anglo-Saxon England, all the way to the Norman Conquest in 1066. This connotation implies it is simply art produced in a specific region without regard to style, cultural background, or influence.

The following analysis begins with the form of Celtic art that migrants brought from the European continent to the British Isles prior to the Roman occupation. It proceeds through the sequence of influences that gradually fused it into a new form that carries not only its Celtic foundation and Anglo-Saxon transformation, but Roman, Eurasian, and Christian characteristics as well. Within this focus, a clearer picture of how craftsmen discovered and embraced new artistic attributes and to whom the era's resilient, enduring art belongs.

Celtic Art Prior to the Roman Occupation

Before the Roman occupation of Britain (43 CE - 410 CE), the art and culture of the island's people had originated in the vast European continental territory once held by the people known as the Celts. Unified by language and custom, the Celts who moved into Britain formed a migration of culture rather than a movement of a genetically distinct people.[1] An oral-based society, they left behind no written history. The only records that remain are from ancient Greek and Roman mariners, geographers, and historians, plus a handful of chroniclers. How these early British Celts are known best is through their artistic designs that have proven incredibly resilient. According to Barry Cunliffe, archaeologist and emeritus professor of European Archaeology at University of Oxford, their artisans were considered high status members of their society

and possessed, "not only skill but a deep knowledge of society's beliefs and values expressed in symbols. That knowledge was potent and it must surely have been revered and feared."[2]

Celtic art developed through several phases, possibly dating as far back as 1300 BCE. The phase known as La Tène (450 BCE – 43 CE) coincided approximately with Britain's Iron Age (*c.*550 BCE – 100 CE), and is considered to be what took root in Britain. This stage is characterized by free-flowing curvilinear motifs that included highly stylized vegetal and foliage shapes such as palmettes, vines, tendrils, and lotus-like flowers, as well as spirals, S-curves, C-curves and slender trumpet patterns.[3] The *triskele* (pl. *triskelion*), a triple spiral form, pervaded the style. Faces of both humans and animals appeared cartoon-like. Although not as elaborate or finely made as that on the continent, its characteristics decorated Iron Age British inscriptions, metalwork, jewelry, pottery, stone monuments, and weaponry.[4]

Barry Cunliffe is considered a leading authority on Celtic history and culture. From his work on numerous excavations, he describes how three general zones of social and cultural development spread La Tène art across Britain. In the east from the Yorkshire moors to the Thames Valley, a social complexity developed by the fifth to third centuries BCE that was not found in the rest of the island. It displayed a strong ruling class, nucleated settlements, and elite burials. Skilled local metalworkers catered to the elite, creating prestige warrior items such as sword scabbards and shields. Of this zone, Cunliffe writes, the "corpus of surviving material is impressive."[5] From this eastern zone, La Tène spread across Britain into a central zone, then a western zone, though less evenly and with less abundance and lavishness.[6]

Roman Influence

The three zones Cunliffe identifies reflect each new wave of cultural elements that spread across Britain for centuries to come. When the Romans arrived, they began their conquest in the same southeastern region as had surges of pirates, invaders, and settlers before them due to its proximity to the continent. The Romans made numerous attempts to take control of all Britain, and although they stationed their legions and built fortresses in strategic locations, they never achieved much success north of Hadrian's Wall.[7]

Roman conquest usually meant the imposition of Roman-style government and a degree of Romanization of the people. The south and east experienced this change the most as the heart of Roman administration and colonists settled there, built fortresses, towns, and villas, but as with most of their conquests, the Romans left the native people to their own languages, customs, and cultures. In general, people in the central and western zones would have been aware of Roman rule—they were required to pay taxes—and some would have lived within sight of fortresses or even served as auxiliary soldiers in the army. As long as they remained peaceful, they could live as they always had.

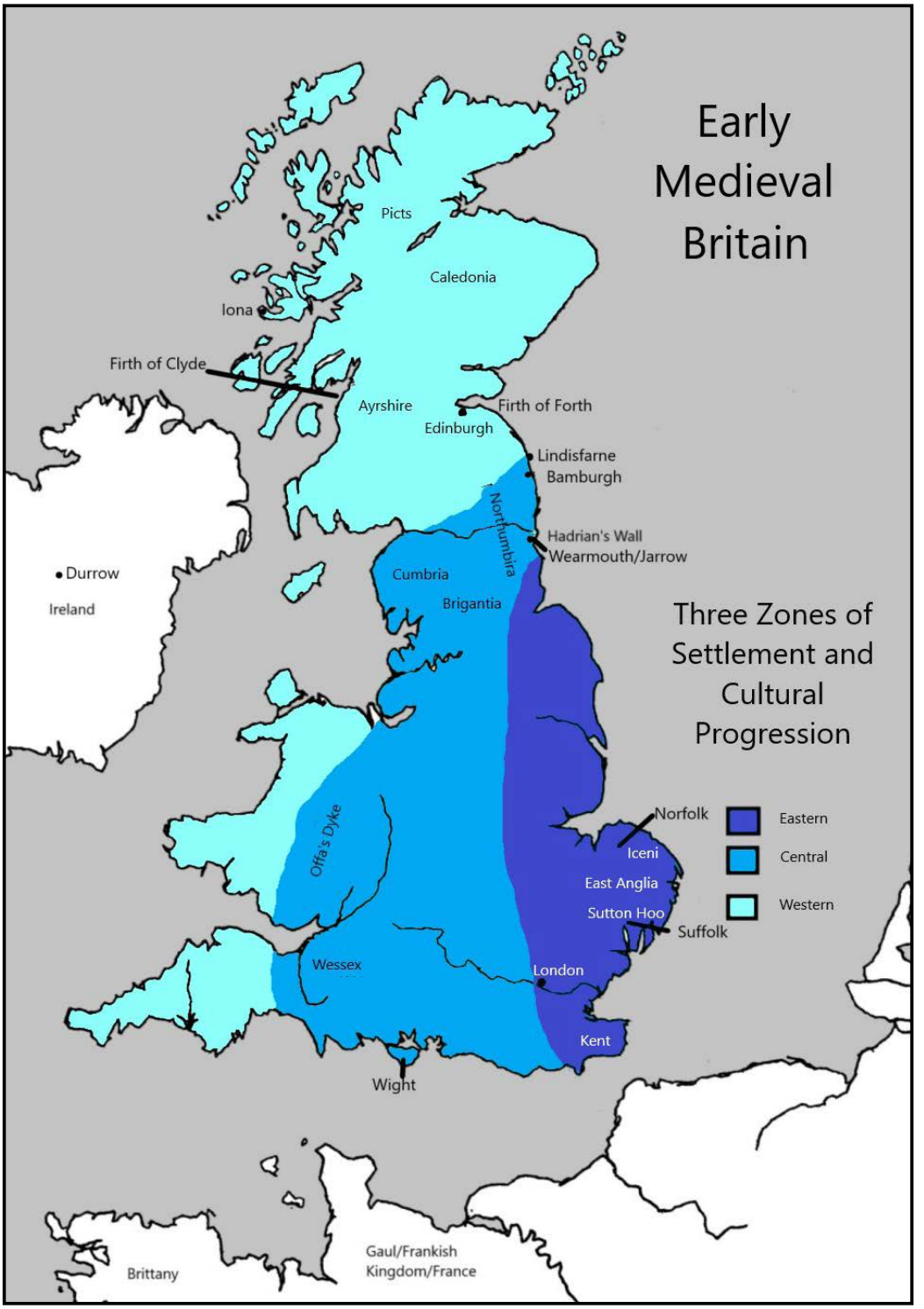

Image 1: Map of Early Medieval Britain. The map shows the approximate three zones through which social, cultural, and political development spread across Britain as suggested by archaeologist Barry Cunliffe. [Map by the author.]

Although these early people of Britain are customarily referred to as Britons or Romano-British, their culture retained a strong Celtic flavor.

Archaeologists and art historians Ruth and Vincent Megaw claim that during the Roman occupation of Britain, Celtic art "took on a more mechanical, provincial appearance."[8] They also say that some Roman media, particularly sculpture in the round and frescoes, seem to have met resistance to adaptation, perhaps due to its being ill-suited to Celtic artistic language rather than from lack of interest in learning such techniques.[9] The Megaws note that R.G. Collingwood (British philosopher, 1889-1943) stated that Celtic art was "interrupted," and Sheppard Frere's (British scholar of Roman history, 1916-2015) claim that Celtic artisans were simply tinkers—metalsmiths who repair household utensils—and not true artisans.[10]

These observances, however, conflict with both the evidence of a continuation of Celtic art during the Roman period and its recrudescence after the withdrawal. Tinkers existed indeed, however, in pre-Roman days Celtic metalsmiths often traveled in the entourages of chieftains, indicative of their high status in society as Barry Cunliffe posits. Even the Megaws' analysis concludes that individual metalsmiths could be convincingly identified through his/her particular artistic patterns. It is reasonable to expect metalsmiths continued traditional itinerancy to some degree following the Roman conquest.[11] Professor of Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh, D.W. Harding, also counters the "interrupted" claim, pointing out that although routine products were indeed "pedestrian and uninspired," finer pieces were produced in greater quantities and higher quality in response to Roman desire for the creativity and originality of Celtic art.[12]

Celtic craftsmen neither vanished nor went underground. Archaeologists Lloyd and Jennifer Laing, who have directed numerous excavations in Britain, have identified a flourishing "school" of Celtic art centered in Britain's southeast prior to the Roman occupation that continued to operate through the first century CE. Late in that century the school moved north, splitting between Brigantia (now northern England), and Caledonia (north of the Forth-Clyde line). The schools' move may have occurred after the disastrous conflict in 61 CE between the Romans and the Celtic Iceni tribe in the Norfolk area, as southeastern influence appears in Caledonian work. A third school of art seems to have been established in what is now lowland Scotland and a fourth "without a clear focus, perhaps with one center on the Eden Valley" in Cumbria. These northern schools seemed to have declined somewhat by the late second/early third century. [13] Celtic metalsmiths catered to the Roman market, integrating Roman symmetry, beaded borders, and rosettes in the centers of designs; but essentially, as Ruth and Vincent Megaw concede, the "swirling, mystical, curvilinear world of Celtic art and belief was able to meet the four-square, rational, naturalistic world of the Romans, and survive."[14]

The Coming of Germanic Migrants

The few written primary sources that survive the early medieval period and purportedly cover the post-Roman era in Britain portray Germanic migrants as fierce invaders who romped throughout the British landscape, pillaging and raping for entertainment. One source, *On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain,* was probably written sometime in the 540s by the cleric Gildas (*c*.500-*c*.570). He notes that the Britons fled to the west and north and refortified hill forts to escape or defend against the invaders.[15] While Gildas was the closest in time to the actual influx of Germanic peoples, his writings were meant to serve special interests, mainly the Church. Other primary sources include the *Historia Brittonum*, written by a monk(s) known as Nennius, as late as the ninth century. Similar in tone and bias, this work draws heavily from Gildas.[16]

With advances in archaeological excavations, reliance on these prejudiced early sources has declined, although they serve as guides when searching for evidence. Current views see Germanic immigrants more like insistent settlers encroaching their way across Britain after their initial introduction as mercenaries. Moreover, especially in the southeastern zone, Britons involved in trade or other modes of contact with their counterparts in Gaul[17] would have already been somewhat familiar with Germanic tribes as Gaul gradually submitted to the Franks. Northeastern Gaul had also been trading with Germans in the Rhineland for centuries just as they had traded with the southeastern Britons.[18]

The average Briton perceived the variety of Germanic peoples as more or less the same and lumped them together under the generic label of "Saxon." These immigrants were actually a mixed lot from the coastal lands of northern Europe with the highest proportion being Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. Angles came from Angeln, the southern part of the Danish peninsula and some Danish islands. Saxons originated west of the Angles along the North Sea coast and were the most prominent. These two were involved in each other's business on both the continent and in Britain. Although unconfirmed, the Jutes may have originated on the Jutland Peninsula of Denmark or along the North Frisian coast. According to the famed monk Bede (*c*.673-735), author of *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, other migrant groups may have included Frisians, Rugians, Danes, Huns, Old Saxons, and Boructuars.[19] The migrants appear to have come in many small groups, bringing all sorts of languages and customs, but like most native Britons, they were illiterate, leaving behind no written material.[20]

No definitive date can be established for the Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain—the so-called *Adventus Saxonum*. Although a handful of sources mention some early Saxon activity, the key reference identifies a British ruler named Vortigern, who "invited" German mercenaries to help quell Pictish and Irish (Scoti) raiders from the north

in return for land. This is generally dated to the mid-fifth century. Piracy had plagued Britain for centuries, and the Romans had provided military protection from those raiders, but as the legions withdrew to fight barbarians on the continent, incursions increased dramatically. Possibly Vortigern followed a Roman pattern when he hired Germanic mercenaries, echoing a common practice on the continent of filling Roman armies with men recruited from conquered areas. The mercenaries settled, brought their families, and many more followed, fleeing low-lying lands in northern Europe that were flooding due to rising sea levels at the time. As keen traders with the empire in the Rhine borderlands, they may have also sought to escape an economy that was declining.

Though at first the mercenaries provided the protection Vortigern sought, when he could no longer afford to reimburse them, they revolted. Too many had come and many more were migrating, all demanding land, but to confiscate land from native Britons and give it to the Saxons likely caused natives to rebel as well. Bede describes how these "alien peoples vied together to crowd into the island" and "that the natives who had invited them began to live in terror."[21] Sources cite several battles starting around the mid-fifth century. While accuracy of these sources is suspect, they mark a gradual Saxon takeover of British lands, starting in the southeast and moving north and west across the three zones which Cunliffe outlined. New small kingdoms under warlord-like Angle and Saxon kings formed in the progression's wake. By *c.*500 the western frontier halted its advance for a time after the Battle of Badon (*Mons Badonicus*). It ran roughly along a north-south line where Offa's Dyke runs parallel to the modern border between England and Wales, and north in a strip along the eastern coast to the region around Edinburgh.[22] A purported period of relative peace lasted about fifty years, judging from the lack of entries in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Both British and Anglo-Saxon chroniclers tended to show their bias by omitting mentions of their losses.[23] The period could also have been one of British advances as native warlords raised their own defenses and war bands. Famine struck in the 530s and the plague in the 540s, causing a drop in population and the weakening of British power. Saxon advances began anew by the 560s.[24]

The establishment of Germanic kingdoms and dynasties did not happen all at once. Political infighting plagued the Germans as much as it did the Britons, and power would have waxed and waned over a long period. The *Gallia Chronica* of 452 gives the entry, "The Britains, which to this time had suffered from various disasters and misfortunes, are reduced to the power of the Saxons."[25] This entry carries significant meaning, however, its dating is questionable as the chronicler ties it to the eighteenth and nineteenth years of the reign of the Byzantine emperor, Theodosius II. That would place the "event" around the years 441 and 442, too early for such a complete Saxon takeover.[26] Further, Saxon domination resulting from a British surrender as this entry

Image 2: Pre-Roman Celtic La Tène style Bronze Mirror, 50 BCE – 50 CE, Desborough, Northamptonshire, England. The mirror's decorative back demonstrates typical La Tène curvilinear C-curves, S-curves, trumpet, and spirals. [British Museum.]

implies would have been very unlikely, even if it were placed in a more credible time. There is no evidence of a British high king or consortium of kings with such authority. Nor did the Anglo-Saxons have any sort of centralized power base to demand a broad surrender.[27]

By *c*.600 the main Saxon settlement ranged across the east and south from Suffolk to as far west as Devonshire. Angles settled Norfolk and up along the east coast to Northumbria and the Firth of Forth. Jutes took Kent in the far southeast, the Isle of Wight, and some lands onshore near Wight. Names of Anglo-Saxon kings gradually emerged in the late fifth century and into the sixth, with more certainty beginning around the year 600. The co-founding of Wessex by a Saxon man with a British name, Cerdic, may indicate intermarriage of elites. Boundaries were fluid and numbers impossible to quantify with any reliability.[28]

Despite this influx of Germanic people, the Celtic art of the Britons in the fifth and sixth centuries saw continued resiliency and tenacity. Evidence suggests that it even experienced a renaissance of sorts after the Roman withdrawal. Further, in the same manner that the Britons and Saxons were moving back and forth with each other politically, apparently so was the sharing of ideas among their craftsmen. Germanic techniques of filigree (twisted gold wire) and granular design (gold beading) were well established before the end of the sixth century in Anglo-Saxon territory. Craftsmen in areas still beyond Anglo-Saxon control, like Ayrshire and Cumbria, were beginning to learn these techniques by the 600s. Celtic jewelry had used amber in cloisonné work, and by the end of the century they were using garnets, an Anglo-Saxon trait. Two additional techniques picked up from Germanic craftsmen were *pressblech*, the use of thin foils stamped with a die from the back, and grilles, a sort of pseudo-cloisonné form. Some pieces may have been Celtic-influenced Saxon works produced by a Briton working for a Saxon patron in the mid-seventh century.[29]

The Anglo-Saxons seemed to greatly appreciate Celtic metalwork, as seen in a series of bowls made of bronze that hung on chains by three or four escutcheon hooks crafted in zoomorphic figures. According to Lloyd and Jennifer Laing, the bowls are akin to a "sourcebook" for Celtic art of the early post-Roman period.[30] Most importantly, nearly all bowls that have been found came from Anglo-Saxon contexts. Some were stray domestic or church finds, but most are from Saxon burials that date to the 600s, apparently an item the Anglo-Saxons liked enough to include in their grave goods. The bowls appear to have been produced in Northumbria, Scotland, and western England, some as late as the seventh century and seem to have been made for both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon patrons. The symbolism in their patterns does not indicate a clear affinity for either Christianized Celtic British or pagan Anglo-Saxons.[31]

The Sutton Hoo ship burial in East Anglia (Suffolk) included three of these bowls. The burial held a wide-ranging conglomeration of grave furnishings buried in a ship most prob-

ably of Swedish origin. It also included everything from Christian and pagan symbols to Saxon jewelry, Coptic bowls, a Byzantine silver dish, items from the Rhineland, and Merovingian coins. The three Celtic bronze hanging bowls were already old when buried and had been repaired by Germanic metalsmiths. The enameled disc on the outside of the base of one bowl displays *millifiori* techniques like designs in Sutton Hoo jewelry. Some pieces also displayed a cloisonné method that inserted enamel into raised cells on the surface whereas Celtic methods usually entailed cutting spaces into the metal. The variations of technique again demonstrate an exchange of ideas. The Laings suggest, "Some bowls could have been made in a British milieu, some by Britons working for Anglo-Saxon patrons, some by Anglo-Saxons trying to imitate native British styles, some by Picts, and some by Irish."[32] The function of the hanging bowls remains unknown, but their high quality, extensive use of symbols, and beauty suggests they may have been meant for some sort of ceremony, either religious or related to royalty.

A surviving fifth century Romano-British school of metalworking appears to have been operating in the Midlands. By the sixth century, Anglo-Saxon workshops were making their own bowls with "either debased 'Romano-British' ornament or purely Germanic decoration."[33] The progression from Romano-British to Anglo-Saxon styles peaked in the sixth century; the latter remained popular until the Viking disruptions of the ninth century.

The Fate of Celtic Britons in England

An intriguing trend in the fifth and sixth centuries is how quickly the Britons in German-settled regions appear to have either completely assimilated or died out within a few generations. The existing Britons and the incoming Germanic people appear to have gone through a back-and-forth dynamic that may have ranged anywhere from peaceful intermingling and settlement to all out violent resistance ending in submission. As discussed in the previous section, Gildas, Nennius, and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles suggest extensive war or at least deep hostility, but these reflect biased viewpoints.

At this time, archaeological evidence does not support the notion of all-out war. No large scale burnings or mass graves have been discovered, and the distinction between settlers and invaders remains unclear. Historian James Campbell explains that fifth-century Anglo-Saxon graves were few or in some places non-existent, but increased dramatically throughout the sixth century, while British graves dwindled over the same period. However, some spots appear to have retained British control in the midst of German rule, such as at St. Albans, where no Germanic cemeteries existed until the seventh century. Campbell speculates, "For all we know, all or part of the area may have been ruled by Britons till the sixth century."[34]

Linguistics and other studies seem to support the rapid disappearance of Britons in Anglo-Saxon re-

gions. The British language—Brittonic/Brythonic—declined quickly and was replaced with Germanic tongues that evolved into English. Few British words remained in the language that developed. According to historian Malcolm Lambert, "An overwhelming dominance of the language of the incomers over that of the existing inhabitants was established and maintained. Brittonic became profoundly unfashionable."[35] The Britons, interestingly, had not adopted Latin from the Romans, possibly indicative of their relative personal freedom under the empire as opposed to under the Anglo-Saxons. Kenneth Jackson's analysis of river names also supports the nearly wholesale takeover by Germanic languages. All small waterways were renamed and only a handful of larger rivers retained their Celtic names.[36] Additionally, according to the laws of the kingdom of Wessex, *wergild* (blood-price) was lower for Britons than Anglo-Saxons, suggesting Britons were seen as a lesser caste.

One more point: modern genetic studies indicate that Y-chromosomes of men in today's central England correspond to men in modern Friesland (Netherlands, Frisia in antiquity), another possible sign of the native British population's decline.[37] Some Britons migrated west and north to what is now Wales and Scotland, or sailed to Brittany to escape foreign domination. But of those who stayed or could not travel—did they die out within a few generations out of isolation? Or did they simply adopt Germanic customs, assimilating and disappearing into the Anglo-Saxon milieu?

A New Culture Emerges

Neither of the above questions can be answered with any certainty, but the eclecticism of late sixth century art in Britain reflects the notion that "cultures never exist in total isolation and are always formed in response to contacts with other cultures," according to art historian Catherine Karkov.[38] The art that emerged did not develop in a linear fashion, as when a primitive style takes on the attributes of a more advanced society. Rather, British Celtic art, along with a few traits of the Romans, joined with the art of the Germanic settlers, shifting back and forth as if "in negotiation with each other."[39] Neither was more sophisticated than the other.

After Christianity introduced literacy into Britain, writings explained how the Anglo-Saxons saw both the splendor of Rome and its decay in Britain's ruins. They built upon those remains, yet where Rome had defined the island simply in geography, the Anglo-Saxons defined themselves through the new world they were building, a whole new culture that blended the traditions of the various Germanic peoples just as their languages melded together into English.[40] Indeed, the Anglo-Saxons changed up their origin stories numerous times—they had an Exodus tale, a fallen rebel angel story, and a "golden age" story that they reinvented several times—as if seeking to find their true origin but never quite finding it. The only consistency was in the inconsistency, and this was reflected in both

the cultural flux and the art that began to emerge after 600.

As with much of early medieval art, Anglo-Saxon art was produced to have meaning for its audience. But what was "art" to the Anglo-Saxons? Purely mundane objects to a sixth-century Saxon might be seen as "art" to twenty-first century eyes. Like the Celts before them, they infused spirituality and sacredness into their jewelry, weaponry, and other objects. Prior to literacy, the Anglo-Saxons used riddles and symbolism in their designs to tell stories or communicate meanings through a visual vocabulary.[41] Stylized animals, mask-like faces or hybrids of the two appeared in Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries. By the late sixth century, patterns became more symmetrical and rhythmic. Examples on metalwork brooches, belt buckles and shoulder clasps displayed faces that were often a pattern within themselves, viewable both right-side up and upside down, and carefully placed in a wider pattern of animal figures and other ornamentation. Some patterns were believed to have an apotropaic function (a talisman-like quality). Others had concealed messages only the wearer knew. Bracteates (die-impressed gold sheet pendants) appear to have been inspired by portraits of emperors on Roman coins. In the hands of Germanic craftsmen, the portraits transformed into the pagan god Woden/Odin. Sometimes Runic inscriptions or the god's attributes were also incorporated into the design. Acting as an amulet, the bracteate both protected the wearer and threatened adversaries.[42]

Two of the most iconic Anglo-Saxon motifs to have been introduced are interlace and animal art. This is an important key and should be considered pivotal in the shift towards a new culture and art forms in Britain. Lloyd and Jennifer Laing clearly state that interlace, either zoomorphic or non-zoomorphic, was not found in Celtic art before the sixth century and did not appear in the continental Celtic art of antiquity.[43]

Interlace is thought to have derived from Germanic animal art, a zoomorphic style that employed various kinds of birds, griffins, and other animals. Swedish archaeologist Bernhard Salin (1861-1931) divided Germanic animal art into three general styles that follow its development from simple spiral-like motifs (Style I), to zoomorphic ornament (Style II), to a combination of zoomorphic and interlace (Style III).[44] The Franks on the continent were demonstrating Style II by the third quarter of the sixth century.[45] This type of ornament was also found in Sutton Hoo and elsewhere, showing that interlace ornament was reaching Anglian and Kentish areas from the continent in the sixth century.[46]

While Salin's work formed the basis for many subsequent studies of Germanic art, additional works suggest that influences from classical, oriental, and Celtic traditions affected Germanic ornamentation even before it "took form and substance of its own."[47] Scholars such as Paul Jacobsthal, Ellis Hovell Minns, Michael Rostovtzeff, Karl Jettmar, and others have written extensive-

ly on the probability that Eurasian nomadic peoples—Scythians, Sarmatians, and other groups from the southern Ukrainian and Russian steppes, introduced their styles of animal art to western Europeans, a process known as orientalization.[48] [49] In the fourth and third centuries BCE, the continental Celts had extensive contact with these peoples in the Balkans and parts of Eurasia. With their keen willingness to adopt artistic traits and their high mobility over vast distances, the Celts spread characteristics of eastern art into western Europe, introducing such high status items as the neck ring called a torc.[50] Also, in the late Roman period, Roman craftsmen, merchants, and traders set up shop in Bohemia, a region that had originally been thoroughly Celtic—the "Bo" in the name derives from the ancient Boii tribe. From there, trade routes along major rivers to the north spread luxury and utility items throughout Germanic lands. Significantly, if this sequence of influence is correct, then it is possible that Germanic animal art may have been orientalized Celtic art in origin. As the Romans conquered Celtic lands across the continent, the Germans remained on their own, preserving this animal art, though in a far more primitive style than pure Celtic examples. With Germanic migrations to Britain, animal art was reintroduced.

Christianity – The Next Phase

The years around 600 represent the critical starting point in the main development of Anglo-Saxon culture and art. By this time, the incomers had become dominant over the Britons in Germanic-settled regions. They embraced features of Celtic art, surviving Britons learned new techniques from the Anglo-Saxons, and on this framework, artisans built a new art form that included interlace and zoomorphic motifs. Though still

Image 3: The Great Snettisham Gold Torc, 1st Century BCE, Snettisham Hoard. Celts adopted torcs from eastern cultures, such as Persians and Eurasian nomads that included Scythians and Sarmatians. Adding their own metalworking talents and styles, the Celts spread torcs across Europe into Britain. [Gift of the Art Fund, British Museum.]

made up of disorganized tribal groups, the Germanic peoples of Britain were starting the long journey to becoming the English.

The same scenario that suggests the rapid disappearance of Celtic Britons in Anglo-Saxon controlled lands also suggests that British Christianity virtually disappeared and was replaced with Germanic paganism.[51] Christianity had been introduced into Britain in the third century and by around the end of the fifth century had taken root. From there it spread to Ireland with St. Patrick's mission. Grave goods clearly showed a shift to Germanic paganism that began in the mid-fifth century and gained momentum throughout the sixth.

This trend reversed when Pope Gregory I (d. 604) charged his missionary Augustine of Canterbury (d. 604) to convert the Anglo-Saxons in 597. As Christianity took hold and spread, a whole new market inspired the development of their art as it began to take on new religious meanings and functions. The cross, a symbol that had long preceded Christianity in many cultures, was already ubiquitous in Germanic art and made it easy to adapt going forward.[52]

Grave goods are once more key to following the progress of this new cultural element. Female burials show the advance of Christianity across Anglo-Saxon areas. They reflected a state of religious flux until a final phase in the seventh century when paganism faded and Christianity took over. Not yet condemned by the church, the continental pagan custom of burials with grave goods continued even though pagan altars and temples had been destroyed during the conversion.[53] Along with objects that spoke of the new religion, burials contained pagan items that showed a continuity with the past: an individual's favorite heirlooms portrayed the person's status, wealth, personal identity, and communal customs.[54]

Though the materials were not of as high quality as those in the Sutton Hoo treasure, the metalworking techniques were just as well done.[55] The symbolism of the red blood of Christ and the golden light of heaven translated into pieces of jewelry with red garnets set in gold. While the Anglo-Saxons never took to icons in the way the Carolingians and the Byzantines had, their designs displayed complex symbolism that foreshadowed the illuminated manuscripts that would soon come. Christian Anglo-Saxon poetry echoes and supports the meaning behind such representation.

Irish Christianity Meets the Anglo-Saxons: Hiberno-Saxon Art

Ironically, the interlace and animal art motifs introduced by the Anglo-Saxons in the sixth century are both strongly associated with Celtic art in modern times, especially interlace, popularly called "Celtic knotwork." Numerous books that teach how to draw knotwork and zoomorphics are sold under the guise of Celtic art.[56] Why? This becomes clearer with the understanding of how the motifs traveled from Britain to Ireland and back.

Image 4: Anglo-Saxon Gold & Garnet Sword Hilt Fitting, Staffordshire Hoard (before cleaning), 7th-8th Century. The fitting shows a simple interlace pattern using garnets set in gold. [Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.]

While Roman Christianity swept across Anglo-Saxon territories, another movement was on the way. Because Ireland (Hibernia) had remained relatively isolated, its church did not form an administration modeled on the Roman government as the Romano-British church had. Instead, monasticism formed the basic structure. Furthermore, the Irish church encouraged missionary work more than the British and Roman churches ever had.

In the 560s, Irish missionaries brought a new wave of Christianity into northern Britain when St. Columba established a monastery on the island of Iona, off the western coast of what is now Scotland. Other monasteries followed.[57] From Iona, Aidan (d.651) went east in the 630s to found Lindisfarne in Northumbria, a kingdom settled by the Angles in what is now northeast England and southeast Scotland. Lindisfarne was close to Bamburgh Castle, the base of King Oswald (604-642) who had converted while in exile with the Irish. Wanting to convert his people in turn, Oswald requested Aidan's help in exchange for the island location of the new monastery. Wearmouth, founded in 673, and its twin monastery of Jarrow, founded in 681, were also established in Northumbria.[58] Eventually, because the Irish church, sometimes called the "Celtic" church, and its monastic brand of Christianity was consid-

ered inferior to the Roman church that the Anglo-Saxons were adopting, conflicts arose. These differences, such as calculating the date of Easter or the season of Lent, were resolved in the Synod of Whitby in 664, in which the "Celtic" church was absorbed into the Roman church. [59]

Ruth and Vincent Megaw explain that the Irish church was a "spur to the revival of Celtic art, providing new patronage, new subject-matter, and new techniques."[60] The Irish, with whom the Britons had been trading off and on across the Irish Sea for centuries, reawakened many of the familiar curvilinear characteristics of British Celtic art. While some Celtic motifs had always stayed in use in northern British workshops, trade between Britain and Ireland in the fourth and fifth centuries maintained strong artistic links that allowed the Irish to preserve the motifs.[61]

The harmony created with the merger of the two styles of Christianity resulted in the blending of Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Christian artistic elements. This produced a cultural renaissance that blossomed from the mid-seventh to mid-eighth centuries, sometimes known as the Golden Age or Northumbrian Renaissance, but also dubbed Hiberno-Saxon art.[62] The period's ascendency brought about a new, easier to read script, vernacular epic poetry, the works of Bede, and illuminated manuscripts.

The most visual and recognizable art form of the Golden Age was the illuminated manuscript. Although evidence suggests that many of the earliest manuscripts were produced in Britain, the manuscript tradition itself certainly originated in Ireland. The tradition of complex riddling images that had been part of pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon art came into full maturity in ecclesiastical art. The Irish monks who preserved Celtic motifs proved true to their ancestors' love of integrating new characteristics. They also remained true to their missionary vows. The earliest surviving work is the *Cathach* (Battler) of St Columba, a Psalter probably dating to the late seventh century. It is the first manuscript with decorated initials and the pre-runner of later illuminated manuscripts in the British Isles. The *Cathach* and later manuscripts like the *Book of Durrow* show Byzantine influence that probably reached the British Isles via the Bobbio monastery in Italy, founded in 613 by Irish missionaries. *Durrow*, created somewhere between 650 and 700, includes a "carpet" page that resembles a Middle Eastern rug, a motif infused with the four essential elements of the Hiberno-Saxon style: Celtic motifs, ribbon interlace, animal interlace, and rectilinear patterns. Yet it still shows a pagan element in the restraint and non-naturalist traits of late Celtic paganism and the early Irish church. The Christ figure of this and other manuscripts recalls earlier Celtic faces with oval eyes and stylized hair. The figure is also clothed, not the semi-naked Christ of the cross; rather, he wears a garment edged with pagan Celtic La Tène art. The *Book of Durrow* was most probably produced in either Iona, Lindisfarne, or Durrow itself in Ireland. [63]

Image 5: Book of Durrow, Gospel of Mark, c.700. This page from the Book of Durrow demonstrates how Celtic curvilinear patterns and spirals fused with Anglo-Saxon interlace in elaborately decorated initials. The script also became thought of as art in itself. [Library of Trinity College, Dublin.]

With the gradual shift from oral tradition to narrative art, the written word became art as well. Anglo-Saxon illuminators saw themselves as continuators of the gospels, not just copyists, translators, or glossators. The combination of elements first realized in the *Book of Durrow* flourished into perfection by the time the *Lindisfarne Gospels* were produced, probably in the late seventh or early eighth century. An Old English colophon (printer's or publisher's imprint) and glosses were added much later, probably in the third quarter of the tenth century. Four churchmen, Eadfrith, the bishop of Lindisfarne church, Eoilwald, bishop of Lindisfarne island, Billfrith, an anchorite, and Aldred, a priest, all saw themselves as the scribal descendants of the four evangelists of the gospels. Further, they thought of not only the book's original scribe(s) as an additional author(s), but the maker of its decorated cover and those who provided glosses were authors as well.[64]

The Book of Kells, produced in Ireland around 800, is considered the most extravagant and complex of works in the illuminated manuscript tradition and Ireland's greatest national treasure. While it falls under the heading of Insular art, having been produced in the British Isles and having employed the same artistic features as other manuscripts of the period, it is usually considered to be purely Irish rather than Hiberno-Saxon. What it represents is the transmission of Anglo-Saxon traits—interlace in particular—back to Ireland where it was integrated into Ireland's native manuscript tradition.

Alongside the newly developing art, the architecture of Northumbrian monasteries also represent hybrids of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon elements, even though little is truly known of either interior or exterior decorations. As examples, Wearmouth and Jarrow, though actually two monasteries, were strongly considered to be one monastery in two locations. Each developed its own

identity, appearing quite different from each other as well as from other monasteries in northern Britain. Fragments of sculptural decorations that had been painted in red and black on a white background appear to be a combination of Anglo-Saxon and Roman styles. Panels were carved with Germanic interlace, and door jamb figures were carved like serpents with intertwining tails. The similarity to the talisman-like qualities of figures on personal adornments suggest that the door jamb figures were meant to protect the entrance to the church or chapel. While these motifs looked backward to Anglo-Saxon paganism, they also looked forward towards the highly decorated Romanesque archways of the future. More fragments survive at Jarrow; almost all are from the eighth century or later.[65]

The period of the Viking invasions began at the end of the eighth century with the destruction of the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793. With this and further disruptions, new cultural elements once again changed the characteristics of the island's art and began another phase of development.

Conclusion: Celtic or Anglo-Saxon?

As illustrated throughout this study, Celtic motifs and patterns formed the foundation of art in the early medieval period of the British Isles. Other cultures introduced changes that were adopted into the islands' art, from the Roman occupation, Christian iconography, and the influx of the Anglo-Saxons, the latter providing the strongest influence. Art historians and archaeologists tend to place the early medieval art of the British Isles under either a general Celtic or Anglo-Saxon label yet offer only vague suggestions as to which culture should ultimately claim it and why.

As stated in the introduction, none of the terms adequately describes the period's artwork. Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Insular, and Hiberno-Saxon all miss the mark as none of these truly describe the range of this resilient work. As if in defiance of the Germanic political, cultural, and linguistic takeover of the Celtic-based society of early medieval Britain, Celtic artistic traits not only survived, but thrived while accepting and joining with Anglo-Saxon traits. Neither dominates the other despite Roman, Eastern, and Christian influences mixed in. The final product shows both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon characteristics that are clearly identifiable and remained so until Viking disruptions. It represents a true fusion between these two artistic traditions.

Perhaps the art of early medieval Britain should be called simply that—Early Medieval British Art. But to be fully inclusive, with such works as the *Book of Kells*, perhaps it should expand to Early Medieval Art of the British Isles. Regardless of its name, its producers embraced both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon characteristics and created some of the most beautiful, enduring works of the early medieval period. It belongs to both the Celts and the Anglo-Saxons.

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2 Barry Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 132.

3 Numerous other cultures also created curvilinear and spiral artistic traits, but the Celts' versions were bolder and more distinctive, making them more recognizable.

4 Ruth and Vincent Megaw, *Celtic Art: From its Beginnings to the Book of Kells* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 59.

5 Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, 160-161.

6 Ibid., 160-161.

7 Ibid., 255-257.

8 Megaw, *Celtic Art*, 228.

9 Ibid., 244.

10 Ibid., 243.

11 Ibid., 81.

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13 Lloyd and Jennifer Laing, *Celtic Britain and Ireland, AD 200-800: The Myth of the Dark Ages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 198-200.

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Edition. n.p.: MacMay, 2008), Kindle Locations 14-337.

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17 Gaul had been largely Celtic prior to Julius Caesar's conquest, completed in 51 BCE.

18 Gidlow, *The Reign of Arthur*, 7-8.

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26 Ibid., 393.

27 Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxons*, 17.

28 Ibid., 37.

29 Laing, *Celtic Britain*, 226-227.

30 Ibid., 211-214

31 Ibid., 211.

32 Ibid., 212.

33 Ibid., 213.

34 Campbell, *Anglo-Saxons*, 29.

35 Lambert, *Christians and Pagans*, 57.

36 Ibid., 58.

37 Ibid., 58.

38 Catherine E. Karkov, *The Art of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2011), 2.

39 Ibid., 2-3.

40 Ibid., 13-14.

41 Leslie Webster, *Anglo-Saxon Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 34.

42 Ibid., 29-30.

43 Laing, *Celtic Britain*, 215.

44 Bernhard Salin, *Die altgermanische Thieronamentik* (Stockholm, n.p.,1904), 214-290.

45 George Speake, *Anglo-Saxon Animal Art and its Germanic Background* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 10.

46 Ibid., 10.

47 Ibid., 13.

48 Ibid., 14.

49 While some of these studies are from decades ago, they have aged well and remain valid. Newer studies and archaeological finds continue to support them.

50 Torcs may have been first created by the ancient Persians and circulated among Middle Eastern and Balkan cultures, but the Celts brought this style of neck ring into its full magnificent potential with creations such as the Snettisham Great Torc.

51 Lambert, *Christians and Pagans*, 57.

52 Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, 12.

53 Ibid., 20.

54 Ibid., 21.

55 Ibid., 26.

56 George Bain, *Celtic Art: The Methods of Construction* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), passim.

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58 Megaw, *Celtic Art*, 247. Jarrow had been Bede's home.

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60 Megaw, *Celtic Art*, 247.

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