

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

We have called this book *A Picture Book of Ancient British Art* advisedly, because it consists of selected examples of the art of those people who lived in the British Islands in ancient times. The phrases ‘ancient Britain’ and ‘ancient British’ are somehow not very much used at the present day: they have been replaced by such terms as ‘prehistory’ and ‘prehistoric archaeology’. This may be in part due to changing fashions in nomenclature, but also, perhaps, because they savour of those ancient Britons, the woad-painted chariot-driving savages described by Caesar, who formed the curtain-raisers of most standard histories of Britain until very recently. In the days when the only sources for the early history of Britain were literary, the most that could be hoped for was a threefold division into ancient Britons, Romans and Saxons.¹

The development of prehistoric archaeology in the last hundred years and more has provided an entirely different background against which to view the ancient British—one now based on the material used mainly in the manufacture of tools and weapons. This framework, which began in the early nineteenth century with a recognition that in the prehistoric past man went through three successive stages of industrial development which were called the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age, has since been elaborated and subdivided, and now provides at best a rough-and-ready guide to the dating of prehistoric objects. But this nomenclature still has general recognition, so that we must view the development of prehistoric art, illustrated here, against this background. We give below a table of these subdivisions together with their approximate dates, with reference to southern Britain at least. The table works from the bottom upwards:

Early Iron Age (<i>A, B</i> and <i>C</i>)	from 450 B.C. to A.D. 43.
Late Bronze Age	from 1000 B.C. to 450 B.C.
Middle Bronze Age	from 1500 B.C. to 1000 B.C.
Early Bronze Age	from 1700 B.C. to 1500 B.C.
Neolithic or New Stone Age	from 2000 B.C. to 1700 B.C.
Mesolithic Age	from 8000 B.C. to 2000 B.C.
Upper Palaeolithic Age	from 20,000–25,000 B.C., say, to 8000 B.C.

¹ See T. D. Kendrick’s study, *British Antiquity* (1950).

ANCIENT BRITISH ART

Lower and Middle Palaeolithic Age from the first appearance of man in southern Britain, perhaps 750,000 years ago, to 20,000–25,000 B.C.

These dates are only a general guide; in any case very exact dates are not possible in prehistory. But even in the later stages of prehistory in Britain, that is to say, in the last 2000 years B.C. when more exact chronology is possible, the various phases of the industrial stages must be understood as varying from place to place. Thus the absolute dates of each stage vary from one part of the British Isles to another; and while the people in south-east England were in the Early Iron Age, communities in Wales and Ireland were still in the Late Bronze Age.¹

The subdivisions of prehistory based on the technological development of man, while they are still convenient as a guide to the ancient art of Britain, mask a more important subdivision of man's prehistoric culture which is of great significance in the development of art. From the point of view of art we can discount the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic Ages, from which no art has survived unless we include the beautifully chipped hand-axes of flint and hard-grained rocks. The hunters, fishers and gatherers of roots and berries who lived in the British Isles before the last great advance of the Pleistocene ice-sheet, had no art, and the same is true for western Europe and the world as a whole. The birth of art dates from the Upper Palaeolithic period, and the first artists were the Upper Palaeolithic hunters and fishers who flourished at the end of the last great glaciation and whose societies the archaeologist has labelled by such names as Aurignacian, Perigordian, Solutrean and Magdalenian, according to different assemblages of tools. Everyone has heard of the art of these Upper Palaeolithic folk, who carved and engraved objects of bone and stone, and who painted and engraved naturalistic animal designs in such caves of southern France and northern Spain as Font de Gaume, Combarelles, Lascaux, and Altamira.

The first stage of western European art history is, then, the Upper Palaeolithic, and the first stage of ancient British art includes the impoverished representatives of this great art cycle found in Britain, at that time very much the *ultima Thule* of prehistoric Europe. The British Isles have no examples of the magnificent cave art of the Upper Palaeolithic artists of south France and

¹ For a general account of pre-Roman Britain see J. Hawkes, *Early Britain* (1945), Hawkes and Hawkes, *Prehistoric Britain* (1947), J. G. D. Clark, *Prehistoric England* (1940), S. Piggott, *British Prehistory* (1950), and Childe, *The Prehistoric Communities of the British Isles* (1940).

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

north Spain, but it provides a few poor examples of decoration on portable objects. The group of hunters and fishers labelled the Creswellians by archaeologists lived in the rock shelters of the Derbyshire hills at the end of the last ice age; they were cousins of the Aurignacians and Magdalenians of France. One of their designs, the masked man engraved on a piece of bone, opens our display of ancient British art (no. 1): it could perhaps be dated somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000 years ago.

The hunters and fishers who succeeded the Upper Palaeolithic societies, and who go by the archaeological label of Mesolithic, lived in Britain from the end of the ice age to about 2000 B.C. While the Mesolithic folk of other parts of Europe had an art of great interest,¹ there is little from Britain to be placed in this phase. The real art history of early Britain begins round about 2000 B.C., when the first peasant village communities are found. These communities, at first formally Neolithic, and many of them soon metal-using, provide us with our first picture of a native British school of art. Of course in the study of prehistoric art one is very conscious of the limitations of prehistory caused by the differential survival of differing substances. The disappearance of paint may have altered completely our view of some phases (just as it has our view of the stone carvings of the Middle Ages and later centuries), while decoration on wood only rarely survives; for example, the wooden shield (nos. 23, 24), and the model figures (nos. 30–33). Thus it is that most of the objects here portrayed are of stone, bone, gold, bronze, or pottery.

Another of the limitations of prehistory, which becomes apparent as the following pages are turned over, is that in very many cases we have no certain knowledge of the purpose of the objects concerned. The purpose of the Irish bronze bowls or disks (nos. 48, 49) and the Llyn Cerrig crescentic bronze plaque (no. 42), for example, is very much in doubt, and so is the purpose of the Folkton chalk objects (nos. 12–15) and of such things as the Lattoon disk (no. 22). The small carved chalk objects from Folkton are probably best understood as idols; their decoration includes the curious stylized face motif which appears on similar cylindrical objects in south Spain, on collective tombs in France, and is widespread in the prehistoric Mediterranean. It may represent the Earth-Mother goddess whose cult was so ubiquitous in prehistoric times in that area. Whatever they were, they emphasize that the symbolism of prehistoric art must in most cases escape us, and that most of

¹ See particularly J. G. D. Clark, *The Mesolithic Settlement of Northern Europe* (1936), chapter IV.

ANCIENT BRITISH ART

the time we have to be content with recording the designs and forms that were adopted.

But while in some respects the study of prehistoric British art suffers from all the limitations of prehistoric scholarship, in others it transcends them as do few other aspects of prehistoric study. We can feel a kinship with the artists who made the Fordham beaker (nos. 5, 6), the Chippenham axe-hammer (no. 19) and the Dunaverney shaft-mounting (no. 36), for example, which is denied to us when we consider their economy and burial customs. And the results of contemplating the original appearance of some of the things illustrated here—the Mold horse-armour shining on the breast of a small Welsh pony (no. 27), the Torrs horse-mask (nos. 38–40) and the object from Deskford (no. 61) brought out on ceremonial parades, the bright enamels shining on the La Tène armour and trappings—are in strange contrast to many of the reflexions on prehistoric man prompted by the excavation of rubbish pits and graves. As Mr de Navarro has said elsewhere, ‘it is amazing to think of how these artists, living amid the squalor, stink and barbarism of Iron Age surroundings, could attain the highly sophisticated simplicity of such works’.¹

The objects and designs shown here, excluding the one example of Palaeolithic art (no. 1), can be divided roughly into three groups: the first representing the art of the first peasant village communities of, very roughly, the second millennium B.C., the period of the archaeological divisions, Neolithic, Early Bronze Age and Middle Bronze Age (nos. 2–20); the second group representing the art of the first two-thirds of the first millennium B.C., that is, the archaeological periods, Late Bronze Age and Hallstatt (or, in Britain, Iron Age *A*) (nos. 21–36); and thirdly, the art of the Celtic artists in Britain, from the third century B.C. to the first century A.D., Iron Age *B* and *C* (nos. 37–73). But it must be stressed that though these three groups may be so distinguished here, they are, except for the third, the Celtic art group, no more than a convenience for discussion. There was no unity in the art of Britain in the second millennium; we can distinguish neither a constant development, nor schools and trends. But in the third group there is an underlying unity of style, with a consistent development and various local traditions, like the north-eastern English school (nos. 38–40, 46, 47, 59) and the south-western school (nos. 41, 44).

In our first group we may, without postulating any underlying connexions, observe two clear traditions in the art. The first is the tradition of rectilinear

¹ Knowles and Charlesworth, *The Heritage of Early Britain* (1951).

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

geometrical ornament which appears in the chevrons, lozenges and bands of the beakers (nos. 5–7), of the Kilmartin bowl (nos. 8, 9), of the Potalloch jet necklace (no. 16) and of the Irish *lunula* (no. 17). It is a simple tradition which probably springs from the Early Bronze Age communities of central Europe. The second tradition is one which appears on the walls of the great collective tombs, the megaliths and dolmens of popular parlance (see nos. 2–4), on the Folkton idols (nos. 12–15) and also on at least one of the carved balls (no. 18); it is what we may refer to, for want of a better word, as Megalithic art, and it contains spirals and geometrical figures of an entirely different tradition from those of the beakers and the metal work, as well as stylized versions of a human figure almost certainly to be connected with the Earth-Mother goddess of the Mediterranean. The culture of Britain in the second millennium B.C. is very much a blending of central European and Mediterranean elements and it is not surprising to find these two cultural provinces reflected in the art.

In making any general survey of British art of the second and early first millennium B.C., therefore, it is convenient to discuss its application to the various substances in use during the Bronze Age for use or adornment. The patient grinding and polishing of stone could on occasion produce ceremonial pieces, such as the axe-hammer (no. 19) and the jadeite axe-head (no. 20), which give to a modern mind something of the satisfaction of sheer smooth form to be found in early Chinese jade; and softer stones, such as amber and jet, could also be used to admirable effect for personal ornaments, as for instance the jet necklace or collar (no. 16). The arrangement of the beads and space-plates in such necklaces is known as a result of careful excavation in which the exact position of the elements of such a collar in a grave was noted: this precise record gave a new significance to a whole series of older finds and transformed them from a handful of miscellaneous beads into graceful pieces of jewellery.

Gold, almost entirely of Irish and Scottish origin, was extensively used from about 1600 B.C. in British jewellery, sometimes combined with amber but usually relying on the intrinsic beauty of the plain metal for its effect. We can see two main phases in the development of the goldsmith's craft in the second millennium; the first uses the relatively restricted supplies of metal to obtain the maximum effect by beating it into thin sheets. To this 'sheet' phase belong such objects as the thin gold collars or *lunulae* (no. 17), themselves copies of the crescentic necklaces of the type of no. 16; and in southern England we can perceive technical advances in metal-work which seem to be due to

ANCIENT BRITISH ART

trade contacts with the Mycenaean world in the century about 1500–1400 B.C. The gold cup from a grave at Rillaton in Cornwall (nos. 10, 11) is a fine example of this remarkable link between the Aegean and the North—south-west England was then at the meeting of trade-routes from the Aegean, via central Europe and the western sea-ways, and from Ireland, and profited by both.¹

Although the ‘sheet’ technique in gold-work was of course used throughout prehistory where the nature of the work demanded it (for instance in the more elaborate collars such as no. 21, or in great pieces of horse-trapping such as no. 27), we see, however, about 1000 B.C. the use of metal in ‘bar’ form, implying a greater command over the sources of the raw material, and used in such ornaments as the four-foot long coiled neck- or arm-ornament (no. 26). Here the cutting of the solid gold bar into four leaves is an imitation of soldered strip-work of the type known in the east Mediterranean about this time (and earlier): the technique of soldering was never achieved by the Irish Bronze Age gold-workers.

British gold-work was constantly developing under the stimulus of other schools of craftsmanship in Europe with which goldsmiths in these islands were brought into touch by their trade. In the later Irish Bronze Age, for instance, we can trace the influence of designs used by contemporary Scandinavian metal-workers, and the closely spaced, compass-drawn concentric circles seen for instance on the disk (no. 22) and along the gunwale of the boat-bowl (nos. 28, 29) are almost certainly derived from Denmark or south Sweden; and it is interesting to see that these patterns appear in Ireland just about the time of the first imported amber, a Danish product.

British bronze-work also developed to a high degree of competence, and Ireland led the way in the manufacture of the impressive great cauldrons of riveted bronze plates such as nos. 34, 35. The use of several plates, rather than a single sheet wrought into shape, was in fact due to ignorance on the part of the Irish bronze-smiths of the methods of hammering and annealing necessary for such work (although the process had been well known in the ancient centres of civilization for centuries), and the cauldrons are, in this respect, really a superb example of evading a technical difficulty, and the rivets are turned to good effect by being made a feature of the decoration.

Some rather remarkable pieces of wood-carving survive which are almost certainly of the Late Bronze Age. Of the shield (nos. 23, 24) and the boat-bowl (nos. 28, 29) there is no doubt, and the model boat with its shield-bearing

¹ *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, IV (1938), 52 ff.

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

warriors (no. 30) has very good claims to be of the same date as the undoubtedly Late Bronze Age circular shields of wood (nos. 23, 24) or those mounted with bronze (no. 25). The human figures (nos. 31–33) have, we admit, no direct evidence of date, but they are included at this point in our series for their intrinsic interest and in the hope that by drawing attention to them we may gain new information on their affinities: similar wooden figures are known from Brandenburg and Jutland. When found, the Ballachulish figure ‘lay on its face, covered with a sort of wicker work; and several pole-like sticks lying near it suggested the idea that it might have been kept in a wattled hut’.¹ Whether images or idols, these figures are in their way among the most striking pieces of ancient British art.

When we turn to works of art in Britain from about the end of the third century B.C. until (and in some regions during) the Roman occupation of A.D. 43–400, we can for the first time in our survey consider them as a group, related to one another in a continuous stylistic sequence. It is convenient to call this art ‘Celtic’: its craftsmen and its patrons were linguistically Celts, and within the restricted scope of this book we are not concerned with the problems of what is, and what is not, to be called Celtic in post-Roman, early Christian art.

The origins of prehistoric Celtic art are to be found in the Rhineland and eastern France in the fifth century B.C., where three traditions were blended into something wholly new and distinctive: the old geometric art of the European Bronze Age, ideas (notably fantastic animal ornament) from the Orient, probably through the Scyths, and, most important, certain motifs of classical Greek art, such as the palmette and the plant-tendrils, acquired at second hand as a result of the wine trade with Etruscan Italy.²

In Britain the new art was introduced by trade and immigration from the second half of the third century B.C. onwards, and from the first we can see how it takes on a peculiarly characteristic insular form, developing parallel to the Continent in some respects, but with an individual genius of its own. It is an art which has survived almost entirely in metal-work, and it is the expression of the aristocratic element in a heroic society: the barbaric ostentation of a warrior nobility finding an outlet in the magnificence of shields, scabbards, helmets and spears, in chariot trappings and in harness. The lavish hospitality of the chieftain shows itself in the decorated fire-dogs of the hearth,

¹ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, xv (1881), 158, with illustrations of the Brandenburg and Danish figures.

² P. Jacobsthal, *Early Celtic Art* (1944).

ANCIENT BRITISH ART

and the tankards for the feast; the vanity of the ladies of the court in the great chased bronze mirrors. Such a society was by its very nature doomed to destruction by the *pax Romana*. The impact on the native craftsmen of Roman provincial art was an influence deadening enough, but they had already lost their patrons with the extinction of the Celtic nobility, and a tradition based upon feudal magnificence and battle panoply could hardly survive in the new world of Roman Britain. Only in the north and in Ireland can we trace the later stages of Celtic art, on the fringes or beyond the bounds of the Roman province.

The main area of production of the metal-work under consideration (nos. 37–73) was an arc of country stretching from Somerset to Yorkshire, and it has a background of small peasant communities static in themselves, but linked by the travelling craftsmen and by the movements in warfare and raiding of the upper classes of the society: it is much the world of Homer or of Beowulf, and is in fact described in very similar terms in the more or less contemporary Irish stories of the Ulster Cycle.¹ The earliest pieces of metal-work we can identify are likely to belong to about 200 B.C., and most lie between about 150 B.C. and A.D. 30. Politically, the area was divided into tribes under princes or chieftains, and from 75 B.C. the newly arrived Belgae from the Continent established a powerful kingdom in south-eastern England, while in the north the recognition of the great tribe of the Brigantes as a client kingdom after the conquest of A.D. 43 led to their hegemony and prosperity until their inclusion in the Province after A.D. 71.

From the beginning, two regional schools of Celtic art can be identified, one in the north-east and the other in the south-west. What seem to be the earliest pieces belong to the northern and eastern provinces, either actually found there, such as the Witham scabbard-mount and shield (nos. 46, 56), or of north-eastern style, such as the Torrs horse-mask from south-west Scotland (nos. 38–40) and the helmet without location (no. 54). This early school uses plastic form, usually in cast or repoussé bronze, to great effect, sometimes combined with fine incised tendril motifs, and has from the first two modes, asymmetric and symmetrical, the latter usually based on the classical palmette motif. The Torrs horse-mask and the helmet (no. 54), and some elements of the shield (no. 56), show a symmetrical arrangement of pattern, but in the last piece asymmetry is also present in the detail, and is very well shown in the scabbard-mount (no. 46). (It also appears in engraved

¹ For the literary sources, cf. T. G. E. Powell, 'The Celtic settlement of Ireland', in *Early Cultures of North-West Europe* (Chadwick Memorial Studies, 1950), 173.

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

ornament on the Torrs horse-mask, though not in the photographs shown here.) The date of these pieces is probably between 250 and 150 B.C.¹

It is convenient to follow the north-eastern style in its subsequent development before turning to that of the south-west; naturally there was give-and-take between the two provinces, and some pieces do indeed show a mixture of traditions. But in the north-eastern manner of a slightly later date is the helmet from the Thames at Waterloo Bridge (no. 53), with its thin relief tendril-ornament following an asymmetric pattern. This closely resembles a Yorkshire scabbard almost certainly about 75–50 B.C. (not illustrated), and to the same date is to be assigned the beautiful crescentic plaque from Llyn Cerrig (no. 42), which, although found in Anglesey, must have been made in some north-east English atelier. The asymmetric triquetral design of this plaque was used as the basis of a whole series of works in relief or engraving from both the north-eastern and the south-western areas, and indeed one of the striking characteristics of British Celtic art is the relatively limited number of basic motifs coupled with the most amazing fertility of inventive genius in their use.

The dagger-hilt in stylized human form (no. 37) is one of the rare surviving decorative works wrought in iron, rather than in bronze, and it copies continental forms introduced into Yorkshire a little before 100 B.C. The later development of the north-eastern style, in the middle of the first century A.D., is shown by the haunting horse's head (no. 59), a remarkable object found in a hoard of metal-work in the North Riding of Yorkshire near the great Stanwick earthworks, which may well have been the defences of a tribal capital: at all events the hoard is likely to date from the period of Brigantian prosperity between A.D. 43 and 71.

From Yorkshire the art-style of the north-eastern school was taken to Ireland, probably late in the first century B.C., with an invasion of warriors attested by archaeological remains and probably by literary traditions too. The magnificent gold neck ornament (no. 45) from Broighter, Co. Derry, shows a development of the style of relief work already seen on the Waterloo helmet (no. 53); and the bronze disks (nos. 48, 49) take the story of the peculiarly Irish development well into the period of the Roman occupation of Britain.

The final development of Celtic art on the fringes of the Roman province is represented by one of the finest pieces in our whole series, the bronze tankard from Trawsfynydd in North Wales (no. 73). The open-work pattern

¹ In general, our dates are in accordance with Sir Cyril Fox's studies listed in the footnote at the end of this essay, p. 11.

ANCIENT BRITISH ART

of the handle, with the junctions of the curves emphasized by little round bosses, relates it to other less splendid examples of the style from west Yorkshire and southern Scotland, especially on sword-scabbards which can be dated to the late first century A.D. Finally, the extraordinary bronze boar's head from Deskford in north-east Scotland (no. 61) is of the same or a rather later date, belonging to a local school best known by a series of baroque arm-rings, and ultimately related to the later north-eastern English style as shown in some of the pieces of the Stanwick hoard.

The south-west English style is best represented by a noble series of bronze mirrors with engraved backs, often of such proportions that they must have been held by a servant rather than by their user. The fine chased or incised patterns so characteristic of the south-western school do not, unfortunately, register well in photographs, but the mirror from Birdlip in Gloucestershire (no. 41) shows the superb balance of design which was achieved in these pieces. Stylistically it shows a stage of evolution in the pattern which should make it rather later than a mirror found in a grave at Colchester which can be dated to between A.D. 10 and 25: the Colchester mirror may have been a generation old when buried with its owner, and that from Birdlip (also from a grave) must at least date from the very beginning of the Christian era. The mounts from Chepstow and Sudeley (nos. 43, 44) show the Celtic craftsman at work upon minor pieces with the same sureness of touch as upon the great masterpieces; the little triangles of multi-coloured enamel on the Chepstow mount (no. 43) show the influence of Roman provincial enamelled objects in the first century A.D., and are quite foreign to the native tradition. We can see the same use of Roman enamelled devices still less satisfactorily on the Felmersham spout (no. 58).

The growth in power of the Belgic dynasties from the middle of the first century B.C. meant that south-eastern England was able to offer lucrative patronage to craftsmen skilled in making the traditional panoply of the Celtic courts. Talent was recruited from both the north-eastern and the south-western ateliers, and there are such pieces as the spear-head from the Thames (no. 47), which shows in its decorative plates the merging of two modes, north-eastern asymmetric motifs combined with the hatched 'basketry' technique used to form a background to the pattern in the south-western manner. The famous Battersea shield (no. 55) shows in its handling of relief-moulded circular elements a familiarity with the incised 'mirror-style'.

The blacksmith's craft is effectively shown in the great decorative fire-dogs with their terminals wrought as fantastic bulls' heads (nos. 50–52). Although