

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-17640-8 - A Picture Book of Ancient British Art
Stuart Piggott and Glyn E. Daniel
Frontmatter
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A PICTURE BOOK OF ANCIENT BRITISH ART

BY

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PREFACE

Most introductory books on the prehistory of the British Isles, and more especially the moderately priced ones, are unable to include, from the nature of things, more than a few illustrations of the art of the varied peoples who inhabited these islands in the many centuries that stretch back from the Roman conquest to the first appearance of man in north-western Europe, some three-quarters of a million years ago, according to the reliable calculations of the geochronologists. The illustrations that appear in such books have to show, in any case, not only the artistic achievement of early man, but those aspects of his culture in which what is usually called art is not very evident—houses and tombs, fields, farms, tools and workshops. We count ourselves therefore fortunate in having secured the co-operation of the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press in the production of this moderately priced book of pictures which is exactly what its title suggests—a collection of photographs illustrating the artistic achievements of the pre-Roman inhabitants of the British Isles.

It is inevitable that in the selection of pictures of works of art there should be plenty of room for individual judgement, prejudice and taste. One aspect of the artistic achievement of early man we have excluded from our collection, namely architecture: the reader will not find here photographs of Lanyon Quoit, New Grange, Stonehenge, Skara Brae, Chysauster, or the Broch of Mousa. The architecture of prehistoric Britain would fill another book like this: indeed, of making collections of pictures like these there could be no end. What we have done is to produce a selection; we have been surprised to find that we agreed on the selection ourselves. We do not expect our colleagues to agree with our selection—because it is not theirs; but we have tried to make it representative and at the same time to include those things which are both pleasing to us to-day as well as the best of certain schools of art in the prehistoric past. Our aim has been twofold—to provide the serious student of early Britain with a short but representative collection of ancient British art, and to reveal to the general reader who may pick up this book that the art history of Britain does not begin, as so many still think, with the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Alfred Jewel. We have a heritage of British art which goes back, in a vigorous and varied form, to 2000 B.C. and, in isolated examples, even further.

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But we do not want readers to regard this book as yet another introduction to the study of pre-Roman Britain. These objects should be viewed—and it is our earnest hope that seeing them in these pages will inspire many to view the real things in our national and local museums—not because they are old, but because many of them are of supreme beauty and a part of the heritage of the British spirit. Professor R. E. M. Wheeler has described the design of the Trawsfynydd tankard handle (no. 73) as ranking ‘amongst the highest achievements of one of the most brilliant phases in the history of purely decorative art’, and in the same way we think it no false archaeological snobbery to speak of the Birdlip mirror (no. 41) as superb in craftsmanship and perfect in its artistic achievement. It may be a mistake in many cases to study the art of a period apart from its history and social conditions, but we think it valuable occasionally to see things such as those in the following plates apart from their contexts—the archaeological industries and sites which so many people, genuinely interested in pre-Roman Britain, find difficult to understand. We then have a chance to appreciate them by independent standards of aesthetic satisfaction. Realization of these difficulties has also led us to give in each instance a date in years to the work of art illustrated, even if approximate within a century or two. Here again we are open to criticism, but we have felt that, however provisional, such dates were essential to the ordinary reader and not really confusing to the specialist.

As the pictures are the main purpose of the book, we have confined the letterpress to a short introduction, and a catalogue giving details of provenance, scale, material, etc., in addition to general comments on each piece.

Our thanks are due to the following who have assisted us in our search for good photographs and in the preparation of this little book:

Mr J. W. Brailsford, of the British Museum,
 Mrs E. M. Clifford,
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S.P.
G.E.D.

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