1 Migrants and Colonisers

This Element is about the art of the period roughly 500–1100 CE, but there was no entity recognised as 'England' until the tenth century, hence this Element's title *Art and the Formation of Early Medieval England*. Before England there was Britannia (the Roman name for the island), inhabited by the multiple Brittonic peoples who would eventually become the Scots, the Welsh, and the Cornish. All of them had arrived on the island long before the Romans, and others continued to arrive during and after the Roman occupation. This brief summary highlights the fact that, culturally and ethnically, the island was a diverse place, and so all art on the island is ultimately the work of migrants and colonisers. The art of pre-Roman Britannia is abstract, curvilinear, and largely non-representational, and it displays a love of pattern, movement, and colour. The Romans defined it as 'barbaric', meaning simply that it was non-Roman, but it was distinctly different from the Roman interest in naturalistic and figural forms, pictorial narrative, and monumentality. With the arrival of the Romans a hybrid art developed, especially in areas of close cultural contact such as the Hadrian's Wall corridor. The hybridity of form and image this produced continued to be a rich source of inspiration for artists into the eighth century and, in some places, beyond. The early-eighth-century Lindisfarne Gospels (London, BL, Cotton MS Nero D.iv) is a work in which we see Roman influence in, for example, the portraits of the evangelists seated at their desks, with Brittonic influence in the dynamic abstract patterns of the incipit pages to the individual gospels.[1]

The Brittonic peoples were migrants, settling discrete areas of the island and living alongside each other sometimes in peace and sometimes in conflict. The Romans, however, were colonisers intent on claiming the island, or at least as much of it as they could manage to hold on to, by military strength. They met with considerable resistance, but, in becoming part of the Roman Empire, the island became part of a much larger political and cultural order that stretched across Europe and into areas of the Middle East and Africa. It is here that we can locate the beginnings of what would become England in the early medieval world. Not only was the island now linked to vast trading networks, but the Roman presence included individuals from other Roman provinces, at least some of whom stayed on after the departure of Roman troops in the early fifth century.[2] For example, 11 per cent of the bodies at the Trentholme Drive, York, cemetery are of likely African ancestry.[3] Many sites were abandoned when the

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[1] See www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?index=14&ref=Cotton_MS_Nero_D_IV.

[2] See further Gowland, 'Embodied Identities'.

[3] Montgomery Ramírez, 'Colonial Representations', 5.

Romans withdrew, others were gradually deserted, and still others remained inhabited but by different population groups who converted them to different functions. An elaborate floor mosaic in the Roman villa at Chedworth (Cotswolds) dated 424–544 CE shows a decline in artistic standards from fourth-century mosaics but also the continuation of an elite and very Roman style of life.[4] The Roman city of Wroxeter (Shropshire) doesn't preserve such lavish artworks but is thought to have remained inhabited and functioned as a town into at least the late fifth century, while the Roman fort at Birdoswald (Cumbria) was partially demolished and its walls used to enclose a new settlement with new wooden buildings in the fifth century.[5] There was also significant continuity in the use of farmland.[6]

Interpretation of archaeological evidence for the decades after the Roman departure is fraught with disagreement and uncertainty, but it is indisputable that, whether as raiders, settlers, or colonisers, groups of people from the coastal areas across the North Sea arrived on the island during the fifth and sixth centuries. Gildas (c.500–c.570) described them as barbarians, wolves, and dogs.[7] Bede, whose *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* created an enduring image of the early English as a people,[8] names them as the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, although he was writing centuries after their arrival. Whatever the reality on the ground, by the eighth century the narrative had come to be one of violent conquest, and the Britons were eventually confined to Wales, and the Scots and Picts to areas north of Hadrian's Wall. Archaeological evidence indicates that there was also much interaction, cooperation, and assimilation between all these peoples. The evolution of pottery designs in the Nene Valley, for instance, suggests both a gradual adoption and production of new designs by British artists.[9] Colonisation is a long process, not a single event or even a series of events, and it is a process that is not limited to violence against the colonised.[10] Ultimately, it was the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, all of whom spoke Germanic rather than Brittonic languages, who would form the early English kingdoms which during the tenth century were brought together under a single king to become England. Traditionally known as the 'Anglo-Saxons', a term now being abandoned due to its racist implications, their art was

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[4]   Morris, 'Stunning Dark Age Mosaic'.

[5]   For Wroxeter: Barker et al., *Baths-Basilica Wroxeter*. For Birdoswald: Wilmott, *Birdoswald*. See more generally: Gerrard, *Ruin of Britain*.

[6]   Oosthuizen, *Emergence of the English*, 106–19.   [7]   Winterbottom, *Ruin of Britain*, 26, 97.

[8]   See, for example, Story, Ormrod, and Tyler, 'Framing Migration', 1–3.

[9]   Oosthuizen, *Emergence of the English*, 33–4.

[10] Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism'. For example, the British kingdom of Rheged became part of Anglian Northumbria through intermarriage, conversion, baptism, and possibly the erection of stone monuments carved in an Anglian style (Orton and Wood with Lees, *Fragments of History*, 121–5).

Figure 1 Chessell Down brooch, British
Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

influenced by contact with the Roman world but characterised by animal and abstract ornament and portability, a combination exemplified by a fifth-century buckle from Mucking, Essex.[11] This is the point at which the art of early medieval England can truly be said to begin.

Surviving art of the sixth and seventh centuries consists mostly of portable metalwork objects such as jewellery, coins, weapons, and items of personal dress. The focus on portable rather than more monumental forms of art likely reflects the unsettled nature of kingdoms in formation, with their shifting borders and political and religious centres. Most of this metalwork comes from graves, such as the early-sixth-century square-headed brooch from a woman's grave at Chessell Down, Isle of Wight (Figure 1) and the early-sixth-century drinking horn mounts from a 'princely burial' at Taplow, Buckinghamshire.[12] Both are silver-gilt, and both are decorated with Style I animal ornament. The motifs of Style I had their origins in fifth-century Scandinavia, but the chip-carving technique used on these pieces comes from

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[11] See www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1970–0406-26-b.
[12] See www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1883–1214-20.

Roman art. The term chip-carving (*kerbschnitt*) refers to the faceted surfaces of the pieces that look as if they had been chipped away, with a chisel. Style I reached south-eastern England in the late fifth century and flourished during the first half of the sixth. The brooch's fragmented and highly stylised animals and masks are typical of the style. Animals and humans are reduced to just one or two body parts, as can be seen in the three faces that stare out from the brooch's foot-plate. At the centre of the foot-plate is a double bird-headed creature (or two bird heads flanking a helmeted head). Two dots form its eyes and the curving C-shapes suggest its heads, from which tiny curving beaks project. There are four abstract creatures facing away from each other and towards the circular lobes of the foot-plate in the lower borders outside the central lozenge. Above the foot-plate are two downturned animal heads with open mouths, each side of which ends in a tiny head. Above them, the bow of the brooch ends in a relief mask like an arching human-headed serpent. It is nose-to-nose with another stylised animal. Two more stylised animals crawl away from each other in the upper border of the head-plate; their leg-like limbs are visible to either side of its centre and their heads and curving beaks near its edges. They appear to crawl towards the scrolling patterns that fill the side borders. Each of the two halves of the head-plate's central panel is filled with pairs of human–animal hybrids separated by S-shaped scrolls. Their limbs are visible in the outer corners of the panel's upper edge and to either side of the relief mask that divides it. Small dots form their eyes.

The ornament's meaning is uncertain though it is assumed to be apotropaic, meaning that it was designed to protect the wearer from danger or evil. The human–animal hybrids and the confrontations between creatures might represent supernatural beings and a battle (or perhaps harmony) between different or opposing forces. The frontal face that looks out from beneath the bird heads in the foot-plate could represent Woden with his two ravens.[13]

The brooch comes from a woman's grave, as do most Style I objects, though not the most luxurious objects. It is an item of jewellery, with its ornament considered protective for the wearer, as noted. Early medieval English women are often interpreted as passive displays of a husband or family's wealth and power rather than powerful or aggressive in their own right, but, as with the status of migrants, this is being rethought. Queens and elite women did pursue political roles and fight for favoured causes or beliefs. Ælfflæd, Abbess of Whitby (654–714), maintained an active interest in Northumbrian court life. Æthelthryth of Ely (c.636–79) defied her royal

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[13] Webster, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, 17.

husband to become a nun and donated the land for Hexham Abbey to Bishop Wilfrid, while her successor as queen, Iurminburh, maintained a highly political feud with Wilfrid.

Style I on male-associated objects, on the other hand, is considered symbolic of 'male warrior status'.[14] The Taplow drinking horn with the Style I mounts around its rim is a prime example. Drinking horns were elite items, and the mounts, older than the early-seventh-century grave in which they were found, were probably heirlooms, possibly representing lineage or heritage. The fragmented tangled forms in the triangular fields and flanking the relief masks in the panels surrounding the rim are examples of the 'helmet and hand' motif. The figures' hands are raised in front of their faces, and their heads are covered by a curving 'helmet'. It is possible that this latter detail is not a helmet at all but some other form of headdress or simply an extension of the linear design crowning the heads of the human forms on the Chessell Down brooch. The same type of head is found on a variety of objects, including brooches, for which a military context is not evident. That does not mean to say that the occupant of the Taplow princely burial was not a warrior. The issue is the language we use and the way it has served to create an image of a period defined by only two clearly distinguished gender possibilities – male and female – with normalised male violence and female passivity or servility as its distinguishing features. This, in addition to its casting as the origin of a people (rather than just a political geography),[15] has made it easy for white supremacists and nationalist groups to appropriate it to their causes. What is rarely mentioned about the Taplow burial is that it also contained a two-handled Coptic bowl with a scalloped rim and open-work decoration above the foot that came from the eastern Mediterranean.[16] It is one of a number of objects produced in the eastern Mediterranean, Africa, or India demonstrating that, early on, the people of England had a sense of themselves as part of a much larger and more diverse world. The grave-goods from the contemporary Mound 1 Sutton Hoo burial display similarly wide connections with jewellery decorated with garnets originating in India or Sri Lanka, Merovingian coins, silver spoons and bowls from Byzantium or the eastern Mediterranean, textile fragments woven using a Syrian technique, Scandinavian-influenced weaponry, and shoulder clasps (or fasteners for a chest protector) possibly made by a Byzantine-trained

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[14] Webster, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, 60; Mittman and MacCormack, 'Rebuilding'.

[15] For example, the introductory essay of the catalogue for *The Making of England* begins, 'The Anglo-Saxons, whose artistic, technological and cultural achievements in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries are displayed in this exhibition, were the true ancestors of the English today'; Brooks, 'Historical Introduction', 9.

[16] See www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1883-1214-8.

goldsmith.[17] However, it is generally the regalia and military gear that garner the most scholarly and popular attention.[18]

The great gold belt buckle from Mound 1 displays Style II decoration, which became popular in England in the late sixth century.[19] Style II is characterised by elongated ribbon-bodied animal ornament with the knotted or interlaced animals remaining whole, coherent bodies and by the disappearance of human mask motifs. The front-plate of the buckle is decorated with twelve symmetrically paired interlaced creatures and a single thirteenth animal between the jaws of two beasts at one end.

The Christian church was another early incomer to the island. Christianity was practised during the Roman occupation but only on a limited scale. The Romans left no major Christian centres that survived the century or so after their withdrawal. Individual monastic centres were established during the fifth and sixth centuries, especially in the north and west. Gildas is thought to have received his monastic education in South Wales, possibly at Cor Tewdws, under Illtud, who came to Britain from northern France. Columba came from Ireland to found Iona in 563, and Augustine arrived in Kent from Rome in 597, possibly with the Italian-made St Augustine's Gospels (C.C. C.C., MS 286). The remains of a fifth- or sixth-century church and fragments of a fifth-century lead chalice – decorated with images that include crosses, angels, ships, fish, and a whale and inscribed with letters in Greek, Latin, and possibly Ogham – from the Roman fort of Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall have provided evidence of a significant ecclesiastical site in northern England in the immediate post-Roman period.[20] Monks, teachers, and craftspeople from across Europe and Ireland were members of these early monastic communities, which must have been diverse and multilingual places. Writing towards the end of the ninth century, King Alfred lamented the fact that both learning and the knowledge of multiple languages that had flourished during the age of Bede had disappeared by his own day – although some knowledge of Latin, the universal language of the western church, remained.[21]

The c.600 grave of a teenage girl whose DNA showed her to be of sub-Saharan West African descent in Kent indicates that migrants from that area had arrived in Britain at an early date; however, very little else can be said about how the girl's ancestor came to be here, and a full report on the grave has yet to be published.[22] The remains of Black men and women living in England in the late

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[17] Adams, 'Sutton Hoo Shoulder Clasps'.　　[18] Allfrey, 'Sutton Hoo in Public'.

[19] See www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1939-1010-1.

[20] Alberge, 'Hadrian's Wall Dig'.

[21] Schreiber, *King Alfred's Old English Translation*, 191–9.　　[22] Hines, 'Future of the Past'.

Saxon period have also been recovered from St Benet's (York), North Elmham (Norfolk), and Fairford (Gloucestershire).[23] It is possible that the number of migrants from Africa or of African descent present on the island in the early medieval period was significant.[24] Research tends to focus on the well-known individuals, sites, and stories, while other less clearly documented stories are lost. At the end of the seventh century, one such well-known individual, Theodore, a Byzantine Greek from Tarsus in the eastern Mediterranean, became archbishop of Canterbury. He was accompanied by Hadrian from Cyrenia in Libya, a refugee from the Arab invasion of North Africa, who became abbot of the monastery of St Peter's (later St Augustine's) in Canterbury.[25] The two certainly also brought books and other objects with them, although none now survives. It is likely that some Byzantine manuscripts came north and west with them, given the focus on Greek language and learning in their educational reforms – perhaps icons too, as they are credited with introducing some eastern saints to the island. They established an important school of Greek and Latin learning at Canterbury, introducing knowledge of the saints and the eastern church, the study of poetry and music, and perhaps also knowledge of Coptic art. Details of the history and education of both Theodore and Hadrian are few, but Theodore was familiar with the art and architecture of Constantinople and also of Rome, where he was a monk for a number of years.[26] Hadrian, from Greek-speaking North Africa, was also familiar with Byzantine art and learning along with Egyptian culture, bringing this knowledge to the monastery near Naples that was his home before England. He had also been a confidant of both the pope and the Byzantine emperor,[27] and thus he was familiar with the luxury art of both worlds.

The art and/or artists that accompanied Theodore and Hadrian to England remain unknown, but a sustained interest in the Greek-speaking world from which the two men came is evident in the eighth century, the period in which we would expect their influence on education and monastic culture to become broadly apparent. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 140 contains a mid-eighth-century copy of Primasius's *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*. Primasius wrote his Latin commentary in what is now Sousse, Tunisia, in the middle of the sixth century, at which time the city was part of the Byzantine Empire. It is a rare text, although Bede consulted a version of it for his own *Commentary on the*

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[23] Montgomery Ramírez, 'Colonial Representations', 4–6.

[24] Green, 'Evidence for African Migrants in Britain'.

[25] See further Rambaran-Olm and Wade, *Race in Early Medieval England*; Rambaran-Olm, 'Wrinkle in Medieval Time'.

[26] Bischoff and Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*, 42, 60.

[27] Bischoff and Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*, 13.

Apocalypse, and the Oxford manuscript is written in an unusual script that seems to copy a continental or African exemplar.[28] The influence of Theodore and Hadrian on art takes a backseat to their influence on learning and liturgy, but it can be seen in the art produced by the generation that would have studied under them. Early-eighth-century manuscripts from southern England display a lavishness, classicising style, and use of gold and silver that is broadly Roman or Mediterranean but has similarities with the seventh-century Byzantine art with which Theodore and Hadrian were familiar. Both the 725–50 Vespasian Psalter (London, BL, Cotton MS Vespasian A.i) and the mid-eighth-century Codex Aureus (Stockholm, Kungliga Biblioteket, MS A.135) have been attributed to Canterbury – the former to St Augustine's – but it is not necessary for them to have been made in Canterbury for them to show its influence.

The Vespasian Psalter, the earliest surviving illuminated Southumbrian manuscript, boasts two of the earliest historiated initials, initials that contain figures or abbreviated narrative scenes that relate directly to the text they introduce. The initial introducing Psalm 26 (fol. 31r) depicts David and Jonathan holding spears and clasping hands, while the initial to Psalm 52 (fol. 53r) depicts David rescuing the lamb from the lion.[29] The scribe-artist has been described as 'a master who drew upon Italo-Byzantine, "oriental", Frankish and Hiberno-Saxon' sources.[30] Its model may have been a sixth-century Byzantine psalter brought north by Theodore, as it makes lavish use of gold and silver, materials particularly, though not exclusively, associated with Byzantine manuscripts.[31] The foliate designs flanking the arch above David's head in the miniature of David composing the psalms (fol. 30v) and the columns that support the arch have similarities with the carved capitals, impost blocks, and inlaid columns of churches like St Polyeuktos, Constantinople (c.520), while the painterly modelling of elements of the bodies and draperies of the figures combined with their thick dark contour lines can be compared with those of sixth-century Coptic icons. The figure style and naturalistic movements of the figures – David is playing the strings of his lyre with realistic hand positions – are unprecedented in northern manuscript illumination. David's ankles show through the folds of his robe in a suggestion of transparent cloth rare in early medieval England. Both these details and the energetic poses of the dancers before him have sources in manuscripts such as the sixth-century Vienna Genesis probably produced in Syria (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. Theol. Gr. 31). The trumpet-scrolls

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[28] Breay and Story, *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, 132.
[29] A complete facsimile of the manuscript is available: www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Vespasian_A_I.
[30] Webster and Backhouse, *Making of England*, 197.   [31] Wright, *Vespasian Psalter*.

filling the arch, as well as the animal ornament and dot stippling seen on other pages of the manuscript, are typical of earlier Insular art. The script is primarily uncials, a luxury script associated with Roman manuscripts. It is a truly cosmopolitan style suited to the linguistic and cultural diversity of Theodore and Hadrian's Canterbury.

The Codex Aureus is close in style to the Vespasian Psalter but more lavish in its appearance and materials.[32] It consists of alternating plain vellum and purple stained pages, the latter reminiscent of the imperial manuscripts of Rome and Constantinople. In Byzantium the colour purple was reserved for the imperial court. The text is written in gold, silver, white, and coloured inks. Different inks have been used to pick out letters and words creating visual interest and, in some instances, working cruciform patterns into the text. Crosses and other geometric shapes have also been used to frame areas of text, a textual patterning and display associated with the *carmina figurata* of Constantine's court poet Porphyrius. A mid-eighth-century letter from the bishop of Mainz complains that a copy of Porphyrius's work had been borrowed but not returned by Cuthbert, archbishop of Canterbury, so this could have been the model for the Codex Aureus. Only two evangelist portraits, Matthew and John, survive, both painted on plain vellum versos facing purple incipit pages. The opening of John's gospel is especially grand, befitting its special status in early England. John (Figure 2) is shown frontally displaying his open book. It's possible that the first words of his gospel were to have been written on its open pages, as they are on the scroll held by Matthew on folio 9v. His chair is decorated with vinescroll, and the columns supporting the arch are painted purple with spiral patterning, a possible reference to the twisted columns surrounding the shrine of St Peter in Rome. His halo and the decorative circles on the curtains are filled with gold. The figure style is like that of the Vespasian Psalter but even more classicising, with a greater suggestion of the bulk of the body beneath the drapery. The ankles again show through the transparent cloth covering them. The shading and highlighting on John's face and arms create a more subtly modelled figure, and even his fingernails have been delicately outlined. On the facing page, the opening words of his gospel are written in display capitals using coloured inks that originally stood out against a gold leaf background panel. These classicising elements are balanced by the canon tables, which are filled with interlace patterns and trumpet spirals derived from Insular art. Several of their arcades are treated as decorative patterns rather than architectural structures, their bases replaced by roundels which in three cases (folios 6r–7r) are linked together by ornamental bands hanging like chains from the roundels.

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[32] See https://archive.org/details/urn-nbn-se-kb-digark-4890092.
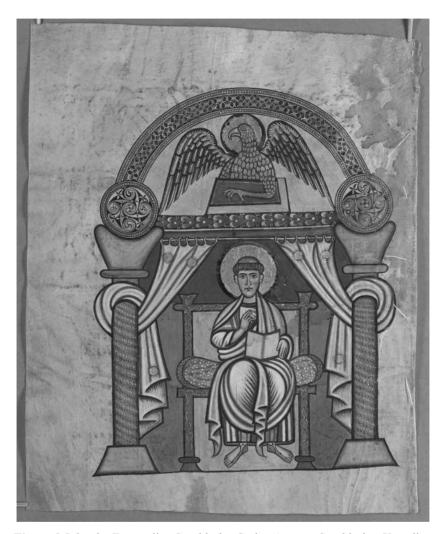
Figure 2 John the Evangelist, Stockholm Codex Aureus, Stockholm, Kungliga
Biblioteket, MS A.135, fol. 150v. Wikimedia Commons/CC-SA-1.0.

The Codex Aureus is famous for its chi-rho page (Figure 3), which celebrates
the incarnation of Christ and receives special attention in English and Irish
manuscripts. In this manuscript the text, aside from the first line, is written in
alternating registers of gold capitals against a plain vellum background and
capitals in coloured ink against a gold background. In the first line, the X of
Christ's monogram is a dynamic curving shape with two terminals ending in
golden beast heads that set the monogram off from the rest of the line. The arms
of the X extend beyond the frame, suggesting the uncontainable nature of
Christ. The body of the X and the background of the panel to the right are filled