European Celtic art and its eastern connections

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The project

Around 500 BC, two distinctive art styles arose in Europe. New modes in painting and sculpture appeared along the shores of the Mediterranean, contrasting sharply with the so-called 'Celtic art' that appeared to the north of the Alps (the term 'Celtic art' is a common designation in the archaeological literature and does not necessarily imply that this material was produced by people known as the Celts). The art of the Mediterranean, familiar through later Classical and Neoclassical art, emphasised narrative and more rigidly 'realistic' representations of the world; Celtic art, with its flowing s-forms, spirals and zoomorphic ornament was the art of ambiguity, and it continues to defy interpretation.

If changes in artistic representations of the world can be understood as a proxy for broader changes in contemporary social philosophy, we might begin to frame the changes in the Classical world in terms of property, profit, science and the gradual emergence of a mechanistic worldview. Celtic art, in contrast, is an art of animation, albeit suspended, and seems to reflect a world in which boundaries between people, objects and the natural world were decidedly blurred.

While these two forms of art are not disconnected from each other—a fact emphasised by generations of scholars—both have a place within deeper continental streams of interaction. Just as changes within Greek and Roman art fit into broader patterns of change in connected urbanised networks—stretching out into Iran, India and beyond, so too should Celtic art be explored in the context of its relationship with the shape-shifting artistic traditions of the Eurasian steppe and forest zone (Jacobsthal 1944). Although we are not seeking stylistic origins, our new research project will look seriously at eastern links for the first time.

At the methodological heart of this project is the construction of a database of material for much of Europe, collating information on form, ornamentation and archaeological context. The European Celtic Art in Context (ECAIC) database currently includes Iron Age art from around 500 BC–AD 100, amalgamated from Garrow and Gosden's 'Technologies of Enchantment' project (Garrow 2008) and a database of objects prepared by Vincent Megaw in advance of his forthcoming monograph on Celtic art. The relational database currently includes over 5000 objects of a range of different types. The team is currently adding to this database, collating information from published sources, museum collections and other research databases. This database will also include a small but representative number of so-called Scythian objects from Russia, central Asia and Siberia. The database includes information on dating and archaeological context, categorisations of imagery, form and material, production and ornamentation techniques, and an extensive reference library. The structure of the database will allow comparison of objects across Eurasia, and will enable the team to look at the distribution of, for example, object types, animal representations and 'styles', and their relationships to archaeological contexts. Although the database will not be comprehensive, it will include a vast number of objects representative of Celtic art, which will become the basis for placing this material in its broader context (see Figures 1–3).

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Figure 1. The Late Iron Age (120 BC–AD 43) Wittenham Sword from the River Thames near Little Wittenham, Oxfordshire; © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

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Figure 2. An Iron Age wooden roundel from Tuetka I, Altai Republic, Russian Federation (12.5cm diameter); © ECAIC Project.

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Figure 3. The early Iron Age (350 BC–150 BC) Wandsworth shield boss found in the River Thames; © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Together, the two sets of information will, for the first time, allow us to look at ancient art from Ireland to the borders of China. The connections across ancient Eurasia were vast and long-lasting, but they stand in considerable contrast to the emerging urban worlds to the south, and are still poorly understood.

This research project is funded by the Leverhulme Trust and will run for three years from February 2015–March 2018. The project is led by Chris Gosden, J.D. Hill and Jody Joy, with two researchers, Courtney Nimura and Peter Hommel.

Outcomes

There are two aims for this project: a monograph, and a website that will provide access to the project database. Updates and current information can be found on our project blog or on our website. The project team will also produce a number of articles on specific aspects of the research. A conference presentation on the project was given by the three team members at the European Association of Archaeologists Annual Meeting in Glasgow, September 2015, and by Gosden in the British Museum, October 2015. The team will

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present on the progress of their work at the Prehistoric Society Europa conference in Edinburgh in June 2016, and at the World Archaeological Congress in Kyoto in September 2016.

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