

By BERNARD WAILES

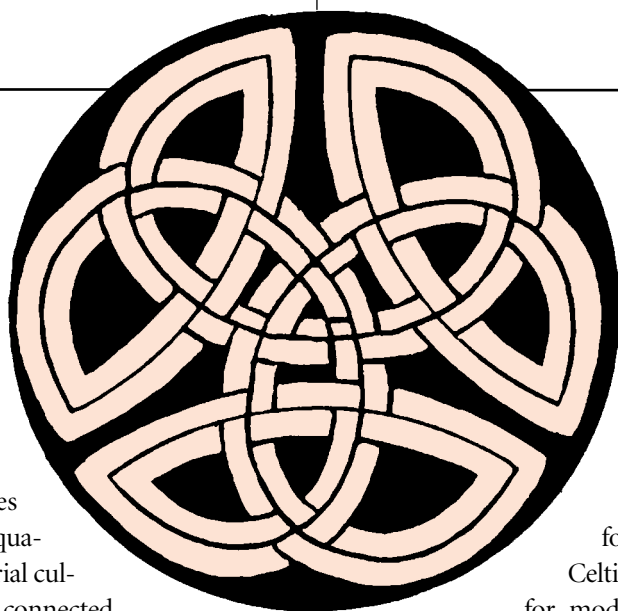
de·fin·ing (kel'tik)

the case of the insular celts

In decades past, archaeologists in search of clues to the origin of ethnic groups like the Celts tended to equate language, culture, and biology. If a site contained a “Celtic” type of brooch or house style, it must have been inhabited by people who spoke a Celtic language and who were the ancestors of present-day people who call themselves Celtic. We now know that such equations are simplistic: language, material culture, and genes are not necessarily connected. The Celts of the islands of Britain and Ireland provide the best example of the difficulties of assigning a Celtic identity to peoples of the past, since these “Insular Celts,” unlike Celtic speakers on the Continent, left extensive written records.

LANGUAGE AS A KEY TO CELTIC IDENTITY

Celtic is a scholarly term used since about 1700 to define a group of closely related European languages (see “Celtic Languages” on page 28). In antiquity, Celtic languages were spoken from the Iberian Peninsula and France through central Europe and northern Italy, parts of the Balkans, and into Anatolia (read about the Galatians on page 14). But these “Continental Celtic” languages disappeared by the fifth century A.D. and we know relatively little about them. In Britain and Ireland, however, Celtic languages *did* survive — indeed,



several are spoken to this day. Moreover, since the seventh century A.D. the numerous texts in these “insular Celtic” languages have provided not only copious linguistic evidence but all manner of information and insight about the insular Celtic societies, such as histories, laws, genealogies, poetry, and drama. This documentation forms the solid foundation for Celtic Studies. In turn, Celtic Studies has been the main source for modern notions of Celtic identity and Celtic ethnicity, but it is essential to remember that such concepts are necessarily more speculative than those dealt with in textual and linguistic studies.

Can we apply the term Celtic to archaeological sites and artifacts? Although a site may be known historically to have been occupied by Celtic speakers, can its material culture be called Celtic when some of the artifacts may have been imported or manufactured locally in imitation of a foreign style? Many of these artifacts may be of types or styles common over a wide area, manufactured and used by Celtic- and non-Celtic-speaking peoples. Labeling such objects as Celtic requires caution.

The earliest solid and contemporary written evidence for the Insular Celts, dating from the seventh century, gives us a fairly clear picture of the distribution of languages and peoples in the British Isles and Ireland. The Anglo-Saxons, Germanic speakers



TOP: Seventh century A.D., peoples of Ireland and Britain, with places and areas that are mentioned in the text. BOTTOM: The Ogham stone now in St. Declan's Cathedral at Ardmore, County Waterford, Ireland. Ogham, or Ogam, was a form of cipher writing based on the Latin alphabet and preserving the earliest-known form of the Irish language. Most Ogham inscriptions are commemorative (e.g., X son of Y) and occur on stone pillars (as here) or on boulders. They date probably from the fourth to seventh centuries A.D.

who arrived in the fifth century, occupied the southeast. The British (p-Celtic speakers; see “Celtic Languages”) formed a series of kingdoms down the western side of Britain and overseas in Brittany. The q-Celtic speaking Irish were established not only in Ireland but also in northwest Britain, a fifth-century settlement that eventually expanded to become the kingdom of Scotland. (The term Scot was used interchangeably with Irish for centuries, but was eventually used to describe only the Irish in northern Britain.) North and east of the Scots, the Picts occupied the rest of northern Britain. We know from written evidence that the Picts interacted extensively with their neighbors, but we know little of their language, for they left no texts. After their incorporation into the kingdom of Scotland in the ninth century, they appear to have adopted the Irish language and consequently disappear from history as a separate entity. We shall return to these historical Celts of the early Middle Ages below, but first we must ask how they came to be in Ireland and Britain at all.

It is almost certain that the Celtic languages originated on the Continent. From late antiquity (last centuries B.C. and early A.D.) we have Classical references to the two islands. Ireland was called Ierne (the origin of “Hibernia”), and recorded tribal names suggest Hellenized renditions of q-Celtic names. A few of these tribal names also occur in p-Celtic-speaking Britain (e.g., Brigantes), so it is possible that around the first century A.D. a few tribes in Ireland may have spoken a p-Celtic language. If so, this language soon disappeared, for the earliest inscriptions in Ireland (Ogham), dating to about the fourth century A.D., are all in q-Celtic Irish.

The name Britain also stems from a word used by classical authors, *Pretania* (the origin of “*Britannia*”). The few names on native British coins of the first century B.C. to the first century A.D. are in p-Celtic. Caesar tells us in 55–54 B.C. that not only did the tribes of southeast Britain speak a language similar to Continental Gaulish, but they also had close kin in northern Gaul. Thus, it appears that by the Roman conquest of Britain (beginning A.D. 43), Ireland was inhabited mainly by q-Celtic speakers, and Britain (apart perhaps from the Picts) by p-Celtic speakers.

Comparative linguistics indicates that the Insular Celtic languages, as revealed by the earliest written evidence, were not too far removed from the Continental Celtic languages of the time



OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM: BERNARD WAILES; TOP: ARDETH ABRAMS AND ELIZABETH HAMILTON



The Turoe Stone, County Galway, Ireland. A superb example of La Tène art carved onto a granite boulder.

(first century B.C. into the early centuries A.D.). This suggests that Celtic languages had entered Ireland and Britain no more than a few centuries earlier. Can the entry of Celtic speakers into Britain and Ireland be identified archaeologically? This is tricky, because, as indicated above, identifying the language of the maker or the user of an artifact is by no means straightforward.

“CELTIC” MATERIAL CULTURE

The distribution of the Celts in antiquity across such a wide swath of Europe makes it hardly surprising that there is no pan-Celtic type of pottery, or settlement, or burial rite. Indeed, these all vary considerably across the vast area of Celtic settlement. There are, however, some items of dress and equipment that do appear widely across the Celtic areas. These include some fibula (brooch) types, some items of arms and armor, torcs (neck rings), and artifacts decorated in the La Tène art style (see “La Tène Art” on page 29). None of these occur in all areas occupied by Celts, nor at all periods during which Celts occupied those

CELTIC LANGUAGES

The Celtic languages form one group within the Indo-European language family, which originated in the fourth or third millennium B.C. as Proto-Indo-European in the lands just north of the Black Sea. Mallory (see For Further Reading on page 31) reviews Proto-Indo-European and its numerous derivative Indo-European languages and relates the linguistic evidence to archaeology.

Today, only two distinct groups of Indo-European languages are known from Ireland and Britain, and there is no evidence that either originated there. The Germanic group is represented historically by Anglo-Saxon and Norse/Danish, both of which were introduced in the first millennium A.D., with the migration of Anglo-Saxons from the fifth century, and Vikings from the late eighth century. It is represented today by English. The other Indo-European insular language group is Celtic, which, based on linguistic analysis, originated in central Europe around 1000 B.C. and was brought to the islands during the first millennium B.C.

The earliest written evidence for Celtic comes from the Continent as well. Inscriptions have been found in three Continental Celtic languages: Lepontic appears in northern Italy from the sixth century B.C., and Celtiberian (or Hispano-Celtic) and Gaulish inscriptions are known from the third century B.C. in Spain and France respectively. Despite the existence of these inscriptions, none of these Celtic languages developed into full literacy before they were replaced by Latin as the Roman Empire expanded. In contrast, the insular Celtic languages developed into full literacy from about the seventh century A.D. Thus, they can be studied in detail over more than a millennium and form the foundation of Celtic studies today.

Insular Celtic languages fall into two subtypes, q-Celtic (or Goidelic) and p-Celtic (or Brittonic). The q-Celtic languages are Irish, Scots Gaelic, and Manx (spoken on the Isle of Man). Scots Gaelic and Manx developed from Irish. (Manx disappeared in the 20th century.) The p-Celtic languages are Welsh, Breton, and Cornish (last spoken as a native language in Cornwall in the 18th century). All three p-Celtic languages developed from British spoken in western Britain in the early medieval period. Although Breton is spoken today in Brittany on the Continent, it is an insular Celtic language introduced by British immigrants in the fifth century A.D.

An example of the difference between the two is “son of.” In q-Celtic this is the familiar prefix *mac-* (early form *maq-* or *maq-*). In p-Celtic it is *map-*. This occurs in modern Wales in contracted form, for example *apRhys*, which becomes familiar when contracted further to become *Price*.

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Cross-decorated slab from the small early monastery at Reask, County Kerry, Ireland. The shaft of the cross is decorated in La Tène style, though not very skillfully. The inscription on the left side of the slab reads “dne,” a contraction of Domine (God). Probably sixth or seventh century A.D.

LA TÈNE ART

In 1859 a remarkable collection of decorated metalwork was discovered during drainage work at the site of La Tène, on the margins of Lake Neuchatel in Switzerland. Similar metalwork found in cemeteries in northern Italy had been attributed plausibly to the Celts who, according to Roman authors, crossed the Alps around 400 B.C. to settle in Italy. By 1872 these connections were fully recognized, and La Tène art, both north and south of the Alps, was seen as a material manifestation of the Celts. Thereafter, this style has been assumed to indicate the presence of Celtic-speaking peoples, and indeed, La Tène art is often simply called Celtic art. Although this seems to be a reasonable approximation in many archaeological contexts, it is not a precise correlation.

The La Tène style arose during the fifth century B.C. in Central Europe as a fusion of elements borrowed from Classical Mediterranean art, preexisting Central European (Hallstatt) motifs, and Scythian art to the east. La Tène combined and transformed these borrowed elements into something entirely original and distinctive, with an emphasis on abstract, flowing, curvilinear patterns. Animal forms are deliberately distorted and fantastic rather than naturalistic. Humans, when they appear at all, are usually restricted to stylized heads.

La Tène art spread throughout much of Europe during the next millennium, changing and developing as it did so. Although no early-style La Tène art is known from Britain or Ireland, by around 300 B.C. later La Tène styles had taken root in the islands, where further distinctive styles developed.

With the spread of the Roman Empire, La Tène art was largely submerged on the Continent by the growing popularity of Roman art. Outside the Roman Empire, however, in northern Britain and in Ireland, La Tène art survived to become a major element in the Insular art style that crystallized during the seventh century A.D. The well-known Book of Kells, for example, is decorated in this often magnificent style.

Stead has written a useful handbook on La Tène in Britain. For Ireland, two similar works outline the art of late prehistory (Kelly) and the earlier medieval period (Ryan). The definitive introduction to La Tène art is Megaw and Megaw. (See For Further Reading on page 31.)

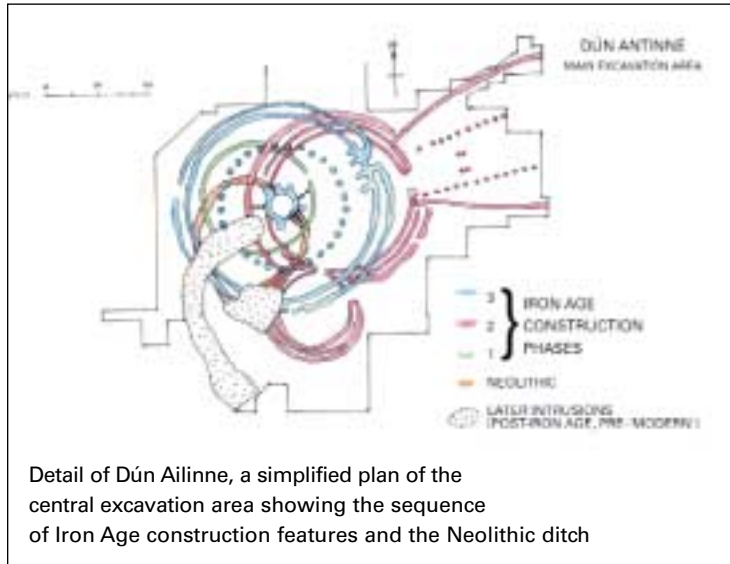
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areas. But they do seem to serve as approximate archaeological indicators of the presence of Celtic speakers. The most useful of these is La Tène art, because it is the most distinctive as well as the longest lasting.

La Tène art appears mainly on items of personal dress and equipment that likely acted as overt “ethnic indicators” of Celts. It became established in Britain and Ireland around 300 B.C., with distinctive Insular variants developing soon after. Most scholars concede, however cautiously, that La Tène-style artifacts are the most likely indicator of immigrant Celtic speakers. Wealthy aristocrats were almost certainly involved since much of the art decorates high-status personal items, but to what extent humbler Celtic speakers migrated into the islands is anyone’s guess. The preexisting population that survived probably simply adopted Celtic speech, as did the Picts after their incorporation into Scotland many centuries later. By the time the Romans arrived, Celtic speakers dominated both Ireland and Britain.

Both the Celtic languages and Anglo-Saxon began to emerge into full literacy around the seventh century A.D., largely as a result of conversion to Christianity. Whatever their native tongues might be, Christian clergy needed to be literate in their common language, Latin. Soon, the clerics turned their attention to writing in the native, vernacular languages. It was



Detail of Dún Ailinne, a simplified plan of the central excavation area showing the sequence of Iron Age construction features and the Neolithic ditch

at this juncture that Ireland and Britain began to make a rather remarkable impact upon the emergence of medieval European civilization through the establishment of monasteries.

Known for their learning, the clerics in these monasteries disseminated knowledge across continental Europe by founding (or refounding) monasteries as far afield as northern Italy and Austria. Irish churchmen were particularly prominent in this monastic spread, along with the non-Celtic Anglo-Saxon clerics. Archaeologically, this development was marked by the appearance in much of Europe of the Insular style of early medieval art.

The earliest example of Insular Art that can be closely dated is the Lindisfarne Gospel book, produced around A.D. 700. But this book is a well-developed example of the Insular style whose genesis lies earlier in the seventh century. And it

THE IRISH "ROYAL SITES"

"... Tara has died . . . great Armagh lives on . . . Cruachain has vanished . . . a fair dignity . . . is . . . Clonmacnoise . . . Ailenn has died . . . great is victorious Brigit . . . Emain Macha has melted away . . . Glendalough is the sanctuary . . . Old cities of the pagans . . . are deserts without worship . . . Paganism has been destroyed . . ."

Thus wrote the Irish cleric Oengus around A.D. 800, contrasting the formerly prestigious pagan sites of Tara, Cruachain, Dún Ailinne, and Emain Macha with four of the most prestigious monasteries of his own day—Armagh, Clonmacnoise, St Brigit's foundation at Kildare, and Glendalough. Other medieval Irish texts refer to these four pagan cities, usually portraying them as the "royal sites" of four of the major kingdoms of pre-Christian Ireland — Tara for Meath, Cruachain for Connacht, Dún Ailinne for Leinster, and Emain Macha (Navan Fort) for Ulster. (The fifth kingdom, Munster, had no equivalent site.) Emain Macha and Dún Ailinne have been extensively excavated, and the University Museum had a hand in both, participating briefly at Emain Macha and conducting the excavations at Dún Ailinne (cosponsored by the National Monuments Branch, Republic of Ireland).

Dún Ailinne is on a hilltop where about 13 hectares are enclosed by an oval bank and ditch. The bank is outside the ditch, so construction was not designed for defense. An eight-meter-wide avenue was constructed to pass through the entrance and lead toward the summit of the hill. There we discovered postholes and trenches outlining the foundations for three successive large circular timber structures, each of which had been dismantled in turn.

Stylistic parallels for metalwork suggest that this sequence dates to the first century B.C. through the first century A.D., though radiocarbon dates fall more broadly between the third century B.C. and the fourth century A.D. With no habitations or graves detected, the archaeological evidence indicates that the site was designed and used for ritual or ceremony.

The excavations at Emain Macha reveal remarkably similar findings while limited work at Tara also indicates a mainly or wholly ritual use during the Iron Age. With characteristic hilltop locations, large circular or oval external banks and internal ditches, and "avenues" at at least two of the three other royal sites, it is clear that these royal sites are an archaeologically defined, as well as a historically defined, type of site.

Although Iron Age ritual sites occur elsewhere in Europe, the Irish royal sites are a unique type. Interestingly, though, the much earlier (Neolithic and Early Bronze Age) "henge monuments" of Ireland and Britain are remarkably similar to these royal sites. These henges — Stonehenge, though atypical, is the best-known example — have a circular or oval external bank with an internal ditch, and often contain the foundations of concentric timber circles. They were ritual monuments.

Thus the royal sites look suspiciously like a deliberate revival of henge construction. Why? It is tempting to suggest that newly dominant groups built the royal sites to legitimize themselves by deliberately emulating the ancient henges built by much earlier inhabitants. These newly dominant people may have been the "first Irish."

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so happens that the monastery of Lindisfarne itself supplies some enlightening clues about the milieu of that genesis, for it is unusually well documented. It is situated in Northumbria, the northernmost Anglo-Saxon kingdom, and was founded in A.D. 634 by Aidan, an Irish cleric from the monastery of Iona in the Hebrides, at the invitation of King Oswald of Northumbria. Lindisfarne had both Irish and Anglo-Saxon monks, and it is clear that their different ethnicities were secondary to their primary loyalty to their monastery and to the Church.

The Insular style reflects just this sort of interaction. It is an amalgam of Germanic (Anglo-Saxon), late Insular La Tène, and late Classical motifs and elements. In addition, some

FOR FURTHER READING

La Tène Art

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Megaw, Ruth, and Vincent Megaw. *Celtic Art: From Its Beginnings to the Book of Kells*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1989.

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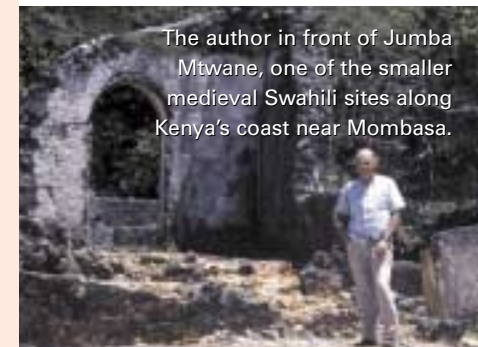
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objects show close stylistic parallels to contemporary art in Pictland, indicating that Pictish craft workers and/or monks also were involved. The Insular script formed another component: This elegant and distinctive variant of late Roman script was developed in Ireland around A.D. 600. Moreover, Insular Art was often deployed in the decoration of liturgical objects such as chalices and illuminated Gospel books. Considering all these factors, seventh-century "multiethnic" monasteries such as Lindisfarne seem highly likely to have played a major part in the development of Insular Art.

This Insular style is often misrepresented as "Irish" or "Celtic" or, more aptly if inelegantly, "Hiberno-Saxon." These ethnic names are misleading since the style does *not* represent one or another of these ethnicities of the early Middle Ages. A good deal of Insular script and Insular art was produced in continental monasteries that had been founded by clerics from Ireland or Britain. The monkish artists and scribes, though clearly influenced by the Insular style, may well have been Germans or other non-Insular peoples. Insular style is a better term, precisely because it eliminates ethnic labels altogether.

The example of the Insular Celts shows clearly that assigning an ethnic label like Celt to the inhabitants of a particular archaeological site or the makers and users of a particular set of artifacts decorated in a particular style is problematic at best. This is true not only of the Celts, but of any ethnic label. Ethnicity is a fluid and frequently self-defined concept. It is always well to ask, whenever the word Celtic is encountered, just what the user means by the term.

Bernard Wailes has been at the University Museum since 1961. Until his retirement in 1999 he was in charge of the European archaeology collections, which were successively in the Mediterranean Section (under Rodney Young) and the Early Man Section (under Carleton Coon) before achieving autonomy as the European Archaeology Section. He edited Expedition from 1978 to 1987 and is delighted to see it better than ever under its new editor. Wailes is now professor emeritus in anthropology and curator emeritus in the Museum. His



The author in front of Jumba Mtwane, one of the smaller medieval Swahili sites along Kenya's coast near Mombasa.

speciality is European archaeology, and he has worked mainly in Ireland, notably the excavation of Dún Ailinne (see *The Irish "Royal Sites"* on page 30), in which Penn graduate students took part.