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. In several cases, the documentation forms the solid foundation for Celtic Studies. In turn, Celtic Studies has been the main source of information and insight about the insular Celtic societies, such as histories, laws, genealogies, poetry, and drama. This documentation provides not only copious linguistic evidence but all manner of information and insight about the insular Celtic societies. Moreover, since the seventh century, 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. 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 who arrived in the fifth century, occupied the southeast. The British (p-Celtic speakers) 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 Scott 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 “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 written evidence, were too far removed from the Continental Celtic languages of the time...
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 A.D.

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 Catilobian (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 off” in q-Celtic this is the familiar prefix mac- (early form m-aq 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.

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 (Kohly) and the earlier medieval period (Ryan). The definitive introduction to La Tène art is Megaw and Megaw. (See For Further Reading on page 31.)

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 “dncu,” a contraction of Domine (God). Probably sixth or seventh century A.D.
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 expansion 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 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 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 “multiethic” 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.

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