

INTRODUCTION

The noblest share of earth is the far western world whose name is written Scotia in the ancient books: rich in goods, in silver, jewels, cloth and gold. Benign to the body in air and mellow soil. With honey and with milk flow Ireland's lovely plains with silk and arms, abundant fruit with art and men.

Worthy are the Irish to dwell in this their land, a race of men renowned in war, in peace, in faith.

Donatus, Bishop of Fiesole, mid ninth century.
Translated by Liam de Paor.

Only very few of Ireland's early treasures have survived. The illuminated manuscripts owe their survival to having been jealously treasured in churches and monasteries; nearly all the other objects are of the noble metals - gold, silver and bronze - and so resisted destruction from both exposure to the air and burying in the ground. Treasures were found in abundance throughout Ireland. Excavations in my own garden, however, proved hopeless - endless hours of digging and sweating only resulted in, an old silver spoon (at which time I was certain a fortune was within my grasp); it had only been lost in the year 1971 at an afternoon tea event held during that same year. Other examples found at the same site were such items as chicken bones (later used for stock), two morsels of bones which my dog had hidden, one pair of my grandmother's false teeth which she had lost doing headstands and cartwheels in the garden. 'Give it up' I sighed to myself as I laid down my tools looking at them with downcast eyes and a feeling so deep in my heart that scarcely could I draw my breath in those dreaded moments. Instead, I read about the experts who had gone about it in another way and succeeded.

HERE I REST MY THESIS!

= Sally O'Sullivan.

EARLY TREASURES OF IRISH ART

Ireland did not have one golden age; it had a number of them. This remarkable circumstance was made possible by the amount of gold in the country in early times. Yet, at the time of Ireland's first 'golden' age, the uses of gold were not even known.

Of the three great ages - stone, bronze and iron, that preceded the christian era in Ireland, only the stone age did not involve metal as its primary working material. Nevertheless, it too may be described as a golden age because of the designs and scale of its building projects. Agriculture had been introduced into the country by 3500 B.C., and by 2500 B.C. the farmers had sufficient resources to embark on the construction of great stone megalithic tombs such as Newgrange. A tomb as large as Newgrange must have taken a million sackfuls of materials to build. Surely any society prepared to expend such energy on housing its dead must have had a very strong belief in life after death.

In some of the tombs in the east of Ireland, the stones are decorated with geometrical patterns like spirals, zig-zag forms and diamond shapes. We cannot unlock the meaning these symbols had for those who carved them, but one recurring motif - a circle with radiating lines, suggests that sun worship may have played a part in the ritual of the period, as it probably did in the subsequent bronze age. Some of the stone carved patterns may have been derived from woven cloth of which none survives, and in a few instances they may possibly be the stylized representations of a face or part of a human figure.

The bronze age began before 1800 B.C. and continued until at least 600 B.C. However, during this time a great many gold ornaments were



Gold disc, Tedavnet, County Monaghan

were also made, and to-day Ireland is the repository of the richest collection of pre-historic gold in central or western Europe.

The gold ornaments are remarkable, the simplicity of their shapes and geometrical decoration. About 2000 B.C. a difference in material cultures gradually became apparent between the western and eastern halves of Ireland. Which half began to practise metallurgy first is a matter of debate. In the west the people were building the last of the Irish megalithic tomb-types, the wedge-shaped gallery grave. It is not known whether the builders of these tombs were the descendants of some of Ireland's stone age population or whether they migrated, along with their tomb-type, from somewhere in north-western France. Gallery graves can be seen to-day in the western part of Co. Cork, near some of the few remaining bronze age copper mines. The copper ore mined there was known as 'fahlerz', from which many of Ireland's earliest metal implements and weapons were apparently made. There is thus a possibility that the people who buried their dead in the gallery graves were among the first in Ireland to exploit and trade copper or to allow it to be exploited and traded in their territory. The other people who have been claimed as the first to practise metallurgy on any scale in Ireland were the Beaker Folk, named for a type of pottery often found in their graves. While their ultimate origins are still disputed, it is reasonably certain that they migrated from the Rhineland to Britain and on to Ireland shortly before 2000 B.C. The speed of their dispersion is perhaps due to their having been among the first people in Europe to tame horses. They must have carried metal weapons and trinkets with them, much like modern gypsies, to whom they have been compared. To judge from the products of archaeological excavations, the Beaker Folk settled largely in the north of



Gold armlets, Derrinboy, County Oifaly

of Ireland, and in the east as far south as Dublin Bay. They probably crossed the Irish Sea in several waves from southwestern Scotland, and to a lesser extent from Wales. But as it appears, they never reached the southwest of Ireland where the fahlerz deposits lay, and are unlikely to have been the first to exploit the copper ore in the area. Perhaps when they arrived in Ireland the Beaker Folk began to usurp an already active metal trade which drew much of its raw material from the southwest of the country.

It was the arrival of the Beaker Folk that had ultimately caused the division between the eastern and the western halves of Ireland. Their descendants who made a type of pottery called food vessel, became the dominant element in the eastern half of Ireland during the early bronze age, and they buried their dead in single graves in stark contrast to the communal burial custom of the people in the west. It is in the eastern half of the country, too, that the majority of bronze implements and weapons of the early bronze age have been found.

The people who lived in the eastern half of the country also made gold jewellery. The earliest gold ornaments were small discs of sheet gold, often decorated with a cross motif hammered in from the back in repoussé. A similar motif is occasionally found on the bottom of pottery vessels and also occurs on pottery in eastern Europe, from where the inspiration for these discs may have come. However, as is the case with so much Irish art, ideas were received from outside but were adapted by the local smiths to produce a form that was characteristically Irish. The gold discs are often found in pairs, and two small perforations near their centres suggest that they were attached to leather or to garments and were probably displayed on the chest. Two such discs have been found in England with Beaker pottery - perhaps it was the Beaker people



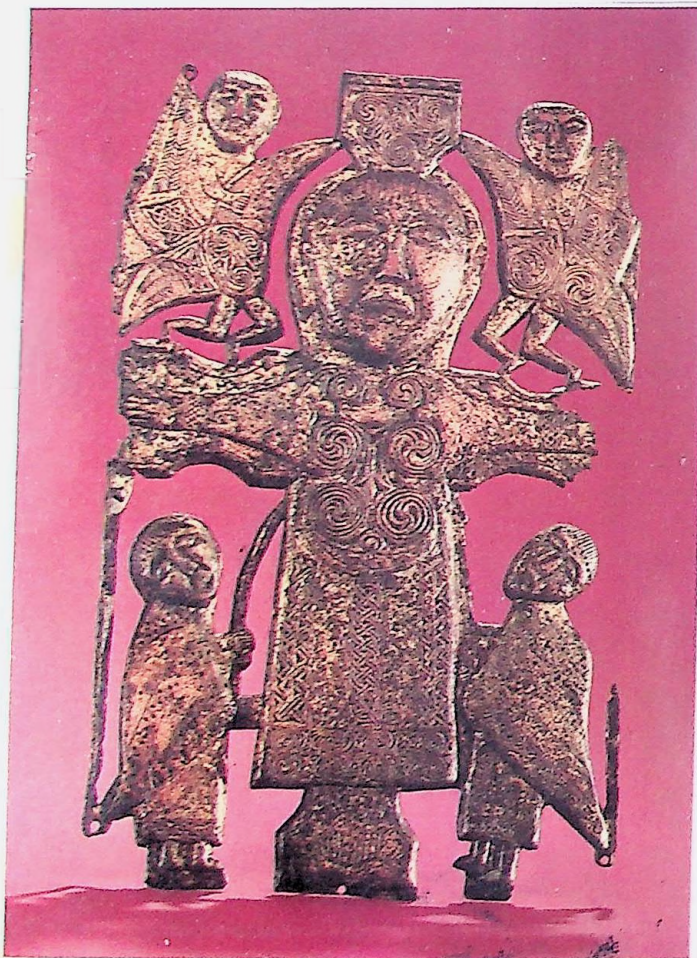
in Ireland who were responsible for the discs?

The gold of the Irish mineral is similar in composition to that of the discs and to that of gold nuggets discovered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in tributaries to the Avoca river. It is a reasonable assumption that much if not all of the gold went into the making of the early bronze age, emanated from rivers in County Wicklow.

The middle bronze age began about 1400 B.C., when the custom of burying food vessels or urns with the dead began to dwindle. This indicates a change in burial rites and possibly also a shift in religious attitudes. But the lack of grave goods in subsequent burials unfortunately deprives many people the period of an important source of material for the study of everyday life. Metal products must serve as the chief indicators of developments in Ireland in the middle and later bronze ages.

The eastern Mediterranean area is the source of inspiration for the few gold objects that can be ascribed to this phase. Earrings of twisted gold are imitations of a type known from Palestine and Cyprus, or possibly the Carpathian basin, as early as the fifteenth century B.C.

The Mediterranean earrings were made by soldering two v-shaped trips of gold together to produce an x-shaped cross section, which was then twisted. The Irish smiths did not know the technique of soldering but managed to produce the same effect by their own methods, which were - cutting a lengthwise v-shaped groove on each face of a long square sectioned bar of gold. Such items were to be Ireland's last contact with the Mediterranean world for some centuries. About 1200 B.C., widespread disturbances plunged the eastern Mediterranean into chaos;



Penannular brooch
Bronze crucifixion plaque, near Athlone, County Westmeath
Bronze figure of an ecclesiastic, Aghaboe, County Leix

Ireland and Scandinavia, isolated from that market, revived their previous trading relationship. Beginning in the 12th century B.C., Scandinavian smiths produced decorative objects which were imitated in Ireland at the beginning of the late bronze age, also called the 'Bishopsland Phase'. During this time, which covers the twelfth to tenth centuries B.C., Ireland produced new bronze types such as socketed axeheads and sickles based on northern Germanic and Scandinavian models. In addition, the twisted arm or neck ornaments of Scandinavia inspired such Irish gold ornaments as the waist Torc from Tara; the Irish smiths showed their inventiveness by adding the re-plexed ends. The Scandinavian prototypes had been in bronze, but the Irish could afford to imitate them in gold. The considerable amount of gold that went into the making of such solid gold ornaments was again beginning to indulge seriously in the hunt for gold. Sites in Britain and France have also produced twisted gold torcs with smooth recurving ends like the Tara example, and they were probably all made with gold from a common source.

By about 900 B.C. the Scandinavian contact would seem to have slackened once more while that with the Atlantic coast of Europe was strengthened. The production of gold ornaments declined, though at the same time the demand for bronze swords modeled on types from central and western Europe increased. Unsettled social conditions as well as a period of intense rains caused the shift of some of the troubled population to the hilltops.

This turbulence was in fact a prelude to the most prolific of all Ireland's prehistoric golden ages, the Dowris Phase of the late bronze age, which had its finest expression during the eighth to sixth centuries B.C. The weight of the solid gold ornaments produced then indicates great wealth, and surplus gold must surely have been exported to Britain. The links with Nordic metal industry, which had contributed to the expanded Irish repertoire during the Bishopsland Phase, now re-emerged to determine



the type and style of many personal adornments produced.

The renewed contact may have been due to an increased export of Irish copper to Scandinavia, and links with the then Mediterranean world were established once again too. Peace had returned to the countries bordering its eastern shores, and Phoenician and later Greek merchants again extended their trade westward. The extraordinary richness of this period is best exemplified in what is known as the Great Clare find - a hoard of gold ornaments uncovered at Mooghaun North when the west Clare railway was built in 1854. Many of the pieces had already been melted down before Sir William Wilde, father of Oscar Wilde, made an inventory: "5 gorgets, 2 neck torcs, 2 unwrought ingots and 137 rings and armillae". The weight of the surviving gold was 174 ounces, the greatest find of pre-historic gold ornaments ever discovered in western Europe.

What Wilde described as 'armillae' are otherwise known as dress fastners, heavy gold ornaments with cup shaped ends joined by a bow. These are simply pinless versions of the bronze fibulae or brooches of northern Europe and were used to join two sides of a garment. The gold collar from the Great Clare find, was evidently modeled on the so called 'oath-rings' from northern Germany, which may date back to about the seventh century B.C. Another characteristically Nordic type of dress fastner was the sunflower pin. Its disc head placed at right angles to a bronze shank, was decorated with concentric circles surrounding a central conical boss and was sometimes also ornamented with radiating lines. A number of these pins were copied in Ireland, particularly in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.

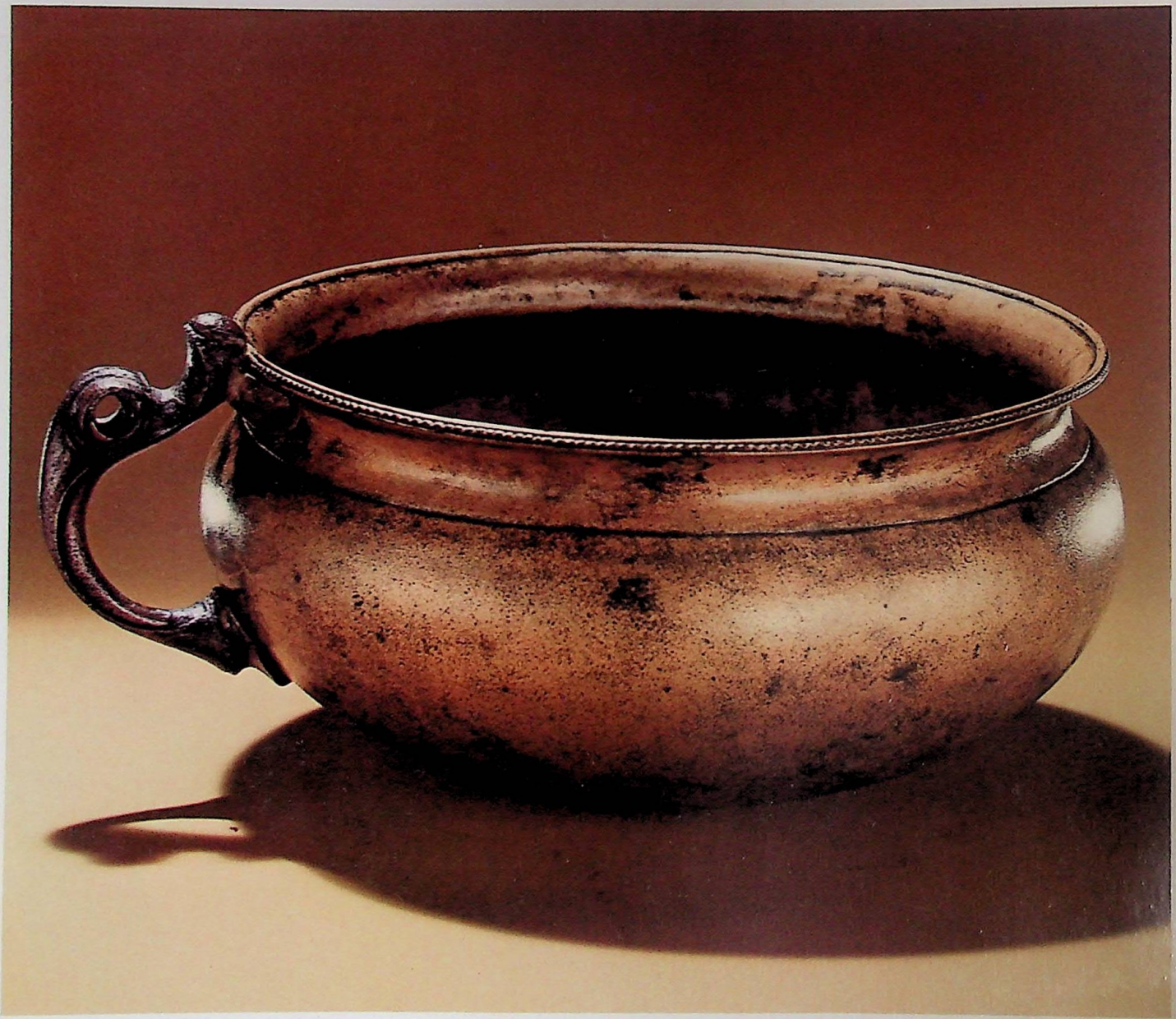
The most interesting of all Ireland's prehistoric gold ornaments is



the gorget. It consists of a crescent-shaped sheet of gold with a gold disc at each end. The crescent has a series of almost concentrically placed raised ribs of rope molding, all having been formed by repossé tools while the sheet metal rested face down on some yielding material. As on the Gleninsheen gorget the terminal discs are decorated with a ring of symmetrically arranged concentric circles enclosing a ring of small bosses, in the centre is a conical spike, surrounded by more concentric circles. All these motifs were copied from Nordic metalwork, and the ribs of the crescentic part of the gorget must have been made in imitation of the northern European fashion of wearing several different sized bronze rings around the neck.

Almost all the gorgets known from Ireland have been found in countries bordering on the mouth of the Shannon river and seem to be original creations of this part of Ireland.

The same lower Shannon area has also produced a number of 'Lock Rings' such as those from Gorteenreagh which may have been hair ornaments. These probably originated in Britain or Ireland, possibly they too were made in the area around the mouth of the river Shannon where so many have been found and where production must have started by about 750 B.C. In strange contrast to the gorgets, one of which was found in the Gorteenreagh hoard, the use of solder is evident in the joints of the ring. It seems strange that the same method of construction was not used on both types, if indeed they emanated from the same workshops. The biconical faceplates of these lock rings are ingenious-composed of concentrically placed gold wires, sometimes so close together that they are as many as five to the millimeter. Possibly



Bronze cup, Shannon River near Keshcarrigan, County Leitrim

this was an attempt to reproduce the granulation work practised at about the same time by the Etruscans. Technically the decoration of the lock rings is superior to that of the gorgets and represents the highest achievement of goldsmith's craft in western Europe during the late bronze age. As no foreign models of these lock rings are known, they represent an outstanding native Irish contribution to gold work in prehistoric Europe and are proof of the ingenuity of the workshops of the lower Shannon area in the eighth century B.C. A 'bulla' of land covered with sheet gold is another Irish contribution to the goldsmith's art, although the shape may have originated in Phoenicia. Besides the familiar boss and concentric circle motif and 'fir tree' decoration, this piece bears what may be the only representation of the human face from the bronze age in Ireland. The interpretation, however, is difficult; the decoration may have been meant to represent a mask or corinthian helmet. A variety of distant influences may be seen in decorative motifs on bronze implements produced in the late bronze age in Ireland. The bronze shield from Lough Gur is one of only a few examples known from Ireland of a type decorated with concentric rings and bosses extraordinarily reminiscent of the back of the disc of the Gleninsheen gold gorget. The thinness of the shield suggest that it was made for ceremonial purposes. The prototype of such shields is from northern Europe, as are the forerunners of the roughly contemporary Irish bronze trumpets. These were derived from the Nordic lurer, though in some of the Irish examples the blowing hole is on the side, as in the modern flute. The influences of both the Nordic and Mediterranean worlds are seen in Ireland in the great bronze cauldrons of the late bronze age. Like others of its type, the spectacular example from Castlederg is made of gently rounded rectangular sheets of bronze joined by



Bronze openwork boxlid, Cornalaragh, County Monaghan

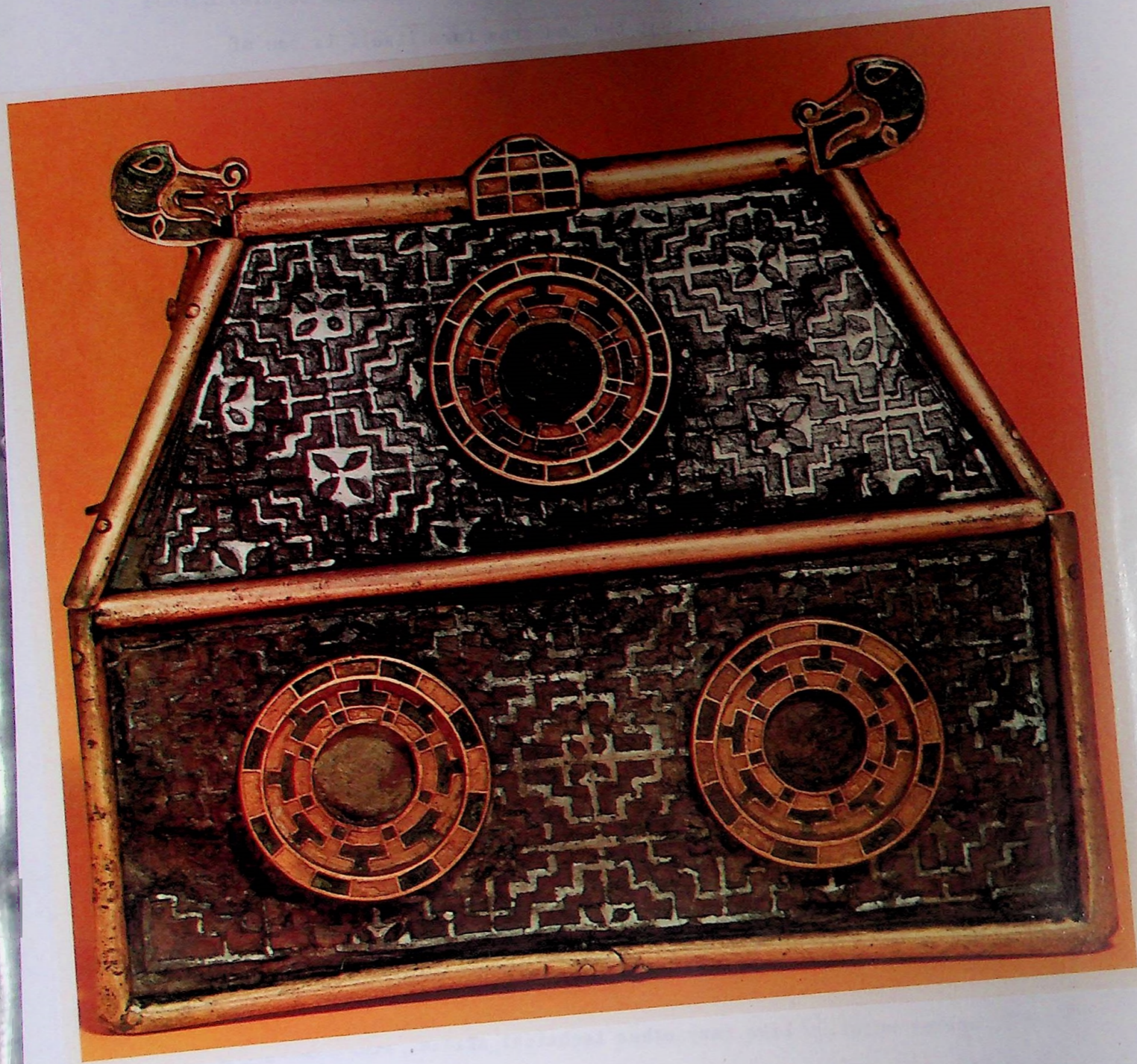
conical rivets. The inspiration for these came from central Europe by way of Scandinavia, but the cauldron form itself is one of eastern Mediterranean origin. Oriental cauldrons must have been peddled by Phoenician traders westward through the Straits of Gibraltar before finding their way to Ireland in the eighth century B.C. Such cauldrons may have served a ritual use in Irish life. An old Irish tale tells of a cauldron that is never emptied no matter how much of its contents are removed, and certainly the capacity of the vessels must have been regarded with awe when they were introduced into Ireland.

The distribution patterns of the objects produced by the Irish gold and bronzesmiths toward the close of the late bronze age show that Ireland was then divided into northern and southern parts, in contrast to the east/west division of the early bronze age. This new partition seems to have foreshadowed developments in the ensuing iron age which were only dimly discernible when Ireland's earliest recorded political 'history' was first set down after the coming of christianity.

Foreign influences and the beginnings of Christian Art.

For most purposes iron, except for its tendency to rust, is greatly superior to bronze, and those who were first to master the techniques of smelting and forging iron easily dominated those still using the weaker metal. Like many other technical skills, ironworking began in the middle east, in about 1300 B.C., and its practice spread slowly westward. In time iron became commonly used for weapons and tools, but most other objects continued to be made of bronze.

Salt was also a luxury in prehistoric central Europe, and the early celts, a group of people who gained control of the salt deposits at



Hallstatl in upper Austria, also gained riches and power. They reached the height of their development between the seventh and fifth centuries B.C. As the widest boundaries of their culture correspond with the widest distribution of celtic place names, they probably spread their language, now known as celtic, throughout Europe. They reached England in the early part of the sixth century B.C.

A late Hallstatl sword-type has a fishtail-shaped notch in the handle; bronze swords of the same type appeared in central and north-eastern Ireland about 600 B.C. However, one cannot find a close link between the two areas from this evidence alone; many varieties of sword fashion may have been taken up in Ireland without any awareness of its origin.

In the fourth century B.C. the centre of European iron age moved west from Austria to Switzerland, where a site at La Tene on lake Neuchâter gives evidence of a rich and powerful culture. Luxuries were imported there from the Mediterranean, and classical motifs such as the palmette came with them, only to be transformed by the local craftsmen into the sinuous curves of the distinctive nonrepresentational style now called La Tene. The La Tene people were known as kelki (celts) in the classical world - a world that watched their rapid development with increasing apprehension. By 300 B.C. the La Tene people had migrated east and west, reinforcing the celtic language and lifestyle wherever they went. They were ignorant of the art of writing, but in the late third century B.C. they developed a system of currency. At nearly the same time they reached Britain and finds of pottery and wooden vessels document their settlements there. In Ireland, evidence of their settlements is more elusive, but there is no doubt that they powerfully influenced native arts. In continental Europe their power ended



St. Patrick's bell

in the first century B.C. when they were crushed between Germanic invaders from the north and the Roman Empire from the south.

Julius Caesar pursued them briefly into Britain but the systematic Roman conquest of that area did not begin until one hundred years later and was not complete until the early second century A.D.

In Scotland in the less accessible and mountainous regions of Wales, and in Ireland, the celts took refuge, and their influence continued uninterrupted.

As early as the third century B.C. some inquisitive celtic adventurers, led by chieftains who wore superb gold collars made a foray into Ireland. After the first century B.C., as the Romans consolidated their position in France and were making their first inroads into England, other celts may have fled further west; a wider range of imported material and some evidence of settlements appeared in Ireland at this time. Paleobotanical evidence suggests that agriculture in Ireland was barely sustaining the dispirited population. Determined invaders armed with iron weapons which they had learned to use well in their desperate efforts against the advancing Roman legions would probably have had little difficulty establishing dominion over much of the land. Ireland was that of a country living in a strange seclusion, on the fringe of the Roman Empire, but outside its grip, free to foster and develop the age old prehistoric tradition which had been handed down to her. Thus, the first century B.C. artifacts most frequently found in Ireland are weapons. By the third century A.D. the christian church was well established in Roman Britain, and missionaries crossing to Ireland brought a wide range of European skills and knowledge, as well as the christian faith, with them. The fourth century church appears to have existed mainly in the south of the island, and surely it is no coincidence that it was there that the first

form of writing known in Ireland - the ogham script, a clumsy transcription of the Roman alphabet - first appeared. By A.D. 400 there were so many christians in Ireland that their spiritual supervision became a matter of concern to Rome, and in 431 Pope Celestine dispatched a mission 'to the Irish believers in Christ' Patrick was the prime missionary; he is thought to have come from north western England, from a christian area still under Roman influence. As a child he had been abducted to Ireland by a raiding party and had spent some years in slavery; later he escaped by ship and made his way back to England. After being urged in a vision to return as an evangelist, he received ecclesiastical training and came to Ireland as a bishop. He must have brought gospel books, psalters and other works of devotion and scholarship with him. Thus bringing about another influencing factor to the progress of early christian art in Ireland. Also the fact that the ship that carried the escaping Patrick may have been en route to France; as early as the fifth century pottery from western France was being traded up and down the coast of the Irish Sea, and a hundred years later pottery from the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa was also available. It was along this same route that motifs from coptic Egypt and christian Africa reached Ireland.

The Great rath at Garranes, Co. Cork, excavated some forty years ago by the late Sean O Riordain, was probably occupied at the beginning of the sixth century. No clearly defined christian objects were found there, but two types of Mediterranean-style pottery were. The Garanes craftsmen also worked with millefiori glass, slipping the glass rods inside metal tubes to facilitate slicing into decorative discs. The most important find at Garranes was a small bronze button (Fig 14) in the purest ultimate La Tene style; the metal was all away from its surface to leave an elegant Kiskele of the utmost delicacy.

Continued pressure from the Anglo-Saxons forced many christian refugees into Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and later on to Brittany a few fled as far as northwestern Spain. Ireland too received contingents.

Columbanus, founder of one of the christian missionaries established a number of monastic centres on the continent after he had fled from Ireland. His transplanted Irish monasteries at Luxeuil, St. Gall and Bobbio became some of the most important cultural centres in western Europe during the early middle ages. Many of the manuscripts produced at these continental centres display a close relationship with Irish illumination and provide valuable evidence of active contacts between the Irish Church and these centres. The Book of Durrow, the first decisive statement of early christian painting, is one of the oldest illuminated gospel books and begins the great series of insular manuscript illumination.

Each gospel begins with a full page evangelist symbol and a carpet page. The ornamentation of the manuscript is rooted in both Celtic and Germanic art. One of the first carpet pages displays a La Tene panel covered with triskeles, trumpet curves peltae, and birdheads. The whole composition is framed by a complicated ribbon interlace that rhythmically alternates red, green and yellow. Interlace emerged as the key element in the ornamental structure of insular illumination. The adaption and elaboration of this type of broad strand interlace ornament in the Book of Durrow may have been inspired by the art of coptic Egypt. Fifth and Sixth century coptic manuscripts and textiles display a system of ribbon interlace that bear a striking resemblance to the earliest type found in insular manuscripts.

Whether this was transmitted directly from the eastern Mediterranean

to Ireland or via Lombard Italy is not certain. In the Book of Durrow the early christian archetyne is completely transformed into a highly original work of great beauty. The northern European Germanic artists influenced the Book of Durrow by their elongated bodys of animals interlaced, thus producing greater tension and activity. The Libraries of the Irish foundations abroad help us to reconstruct the picture of what was happening in Ireland itself. Part of the library of Lindefarne was taken away by the monks when they had to flee in face of the increasing pressure of Scandinavian invasions in the ninth century. After long years of wanderings they finally settled at Durham where the Cathedral Library still keeps some of their manuscripts. Several other manuscripts in English Libraries whose presence is attested fairly early in Britain may even so have originally come from Ireland; one of them, the Lichfield gospels, was already in Wales towards the end of the eighth century, as is shown by several annotations in Welsh which it received at that time.

Although the Book of Durrow contains only one page of animal interlace, the motif rapidly gained power with the early christian craftsmen; it is seen to a greater effect in the Book of Lindisfarne which stands on the threshold of the eighth century, at the opening of the golden age.

The Golden Age

Peace and prosperity continued throughout the eighth century and the monasteries grew in wealth and prestige. The Tara brooch and the Book of Kells were the products of this time. The monasteries also functioned as urban centres. Since the native kings and their courts were far from sedentary and there was as yet no

Irish coinage; no commercial towns existed in Ireland, though there was a network of roads and tracks. Outside the monasteries powerful families controlled many of the petty kingships and each family sought to install its leader as the high king of all Ireland. Furthermore, each leading ruler had his own establishment of lawyers, historians, genealogists, and poets. Travel between Ireland and Northumbria was easy; books both sacred and profane circulated widely; knowledge of writing, both Irish and Latin was widespread.

The Viking Impact

The museums of Scandinavia to-day give clear evidence of the wealth of Ireland at the opening of the ninth century. The golden age was shattered when the Vikings appeared, first at Lambay in 795 and then ranged widely along the coasts and rivers in the early ninth century. Pagans and greedy for precious metals, they found the monasteries, which lacked all military protection, easier targets than the Royal Courts, where the kings bodyguards would have offered some resistance. But if the Vikings came to raid, they stayed to trade. They also established warehouse facilities and a medium of exchange. The Norsemen built the first towns in Ireland in the river at Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Limerick. In western Europe the concept of the hired mercenary was well established by the ninth century and in Ireland uneasy alliances between Irish and Viking Groups were formed. Sometimes by a cash arrangement. There were as many factions among the Viking invaders as there were among the natives, each as ready to quarrel as the other. Gradually the differences between the two communities became blurred, especially after the tenth century, when the Vikings in Ireland became, at least nominally christian.

Contact between Ireland and Scandinavia was not confined to trade; artistic

concepts were also exchanged which led to a blending of styles.

In the ninth century a Hiberno-Viking style emerged from the early christian one.

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