

# Barbaric Splendour

## The use of image before and after Rome

Edited by Toby F. Martin with Wendy Morrison



Access Archaeology





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Frontispiece: Design based on images from Iron Age coins and early medieval bracteates, drawing by Toby Martin.

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## Preface

This collection of essays brings together a small group of international experts from the fields of Iron Age and early medieval archaeology to explore the use and meaning of images produced on the fringes of the Roman Empire in northwest Europe. As such, our focus is on the centuries that experienced first the expansion and then the fragmentation of Roman imperial power. Although no papers in this collection focus on the Roman period itself, one of the questions at the centre of the book concerns the various choices to appropriate, reject and transform apparitions of *romanitas* at the geographical and temporal periphery of imperial influence.

The proposition of the book is that intellectual explorations of the images created by Iron Age and early medieval societies appear to have followed similar processes and reached similar conclusions, despite following almost entirely separate trajectories for more than a century. Perhaps, therefore, communication between our period specialisms would be an interesting and illuminating enterprise. The comparability of our separate historiographies may be neither a result of coincidence nor mutual intellectual influence: Iron Age confederacies threatened by imperial growth and early medieval ones taking advantage of its diminution both appear to have had strikingly similar attitudes to the making of images. Such commonalities include similar subjects (animals, people, and hybrids), comparable compositional tendencies (abstraction, geometricization, ambiguity), the same media (jewellery and military equipment), and deposition in comparable contexts (graves and hoards). These comparisons have long been anecdotally observed but have rarely been explored in any depth, though they stand to tell us much about the transference of images across social and political frontiers. By bringing together international experts in their respective fields, this volume provides an introductory account to Iron Age and Early Medieval art for specialists and students alike. Foremost, however, the book is intended as a pioneering opportunity for cross-pollination between fields of expertise that have grown up under quite different disciplinary backgrounds.

The book originated as a conference held on 14 November 2015 at Rewley House, part of the University of Oxford's Department for Continuing Education, arranged between myself and my co-organiser Wendy Morrison. The day included presentations by those included in this volume, as well as additional talks by Melanie Giles, Chris Gosden, and Leslie Webster. On the following day, an informal workshop took place at the University of Oxford's Institute of Archaeology, where the organisers and speakers were joined by additional contributors including Catherine Hills and Susan Youngs. We spent a stimulating and enjoyable day discussing common themes across the period specialisms and left feeling rejuvenated and inspired. In the following year we collected most of the contributions included in this volume. The regrettable length of time between then and now may help to explain any glaring bibliographic absences, for which the reader should hold only the editor responsible.

The contributions of the volume variously adhere to one period or the other, or directly compare imagery from both. The order of chapters reflects this, so that the first two (Olivier and Joy) focus on the Iron Age, while the following three (Kristoffersen and Pedersen, Fern, and Speake) focus on the early medieval period. The final two chapters (Behr and Gannon) compare the depiction of particular subjects (human faces) or depictions on particular objects (coins) across the periods. The introductory chapter lays out the theoretical aims and background of the project, whilst at the same time offering a conceptual framework for comparing images from both periods that does not rely on presumptions of cultural continuity or contextual specificity, but instead explores the independent properties of the images and their contexts. It is tentatively hoped that this somewhat experimental book and the framework suggested in its introduction invites and encourages more inter-period comparison as well as more specialist work in both fields.

This book would not have been possible without the generous help, advice and intellectual input of many others. Firstly, I would like to thank Wendy Morrison without whom the conference and workshop would never have taken place, and I would also like to thank her for academic consultation on this volume and for her help with its compilation. I would like to thank the staff of Rewley House and the Institute of Archaeology for hosting our conference and workshop, as well as the delegates and contributors to the workshop for sharing their knowledge, curiosity and for their positive, adventurous spirit of open academic exploration that made the event the success that it was. I would also like to thank each and every contributor to this volume for their continued commitment to the project and their patience in the assembly of this book. The peer reviewers of these chapters deserve enormous credit for their freely and generously given time, though they must necessarily go unnamed. Finally, it is necessary to thank the publishers Archaeopress and David Davidson in particular for rapid and efficient publication in the innovative and commendable Access Archaeology series.

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21 May 2020



# Barbaric tendencies? Iron Age and early medieval art in comparison

Toby F. Martin

## Introduction

In March 2018, a lidded urn sat in Christie's auction house. The form imitated an antique Chinese vase, but the imagery that decorated its surface depicted a grey and puddled industrial street with its working class denizens and ironic billboards advertising 'dream homes'. The vase was made and painted by the artist Grayson Perry who named it *Barbaric Splendour*: a tongue-in-cheek juxtaposition of a refined form with ornamentation evoking a very different world. The urn was a commentary on class and taste in 21st-century Britain and the moral judgement we place on different aesthetic forms: the sophisticated on the one hand, the vernacular on the other. Perry borrowed the phrase 'barbaric splendour' from Ernst Gombrich, who in his book *The Sense of Order* (1984, 18-19) invokes the term to describe the classical aversion to the flourish and embellishments that characterise inferior rhetoric, in preference for the plain, accurate and honest; a prejudice also reflected in the classical visual arts. 'Barbaric splendour', or the excessive decoration, elaboration and aggrandisement of a subject was a thing to be regarded with distrust, belonging as it did to a less refined, disingenuous, lower moral and therefore inferior aesthetic order. Later that month Grayson Perry's vase sold for £224,750, which invites us to frame both the acts of making and buying as further deeds of 'barbaric splendour': the show and conceit of high art and absurd quantities of money, for a verbose and ostentatious pot that lacks a plain and honest function.

Perry's vase serves to illustrate the point that whenever we use the word 'barbarian' we tap into quite ancient questions about morality, worth and value that framed those living beyond the colonial forces of Greece and then Rome in antiquity. This book attempts an inside view of the images produced by these Iron Age and early medieval societies, largely in northwest Europe. The title of the book – 'barbaric splendour' – is therefore knowingly literal: these were and are images of splendour made and used by people recognised by others as barbarians. The term is therefore appropriated from the classical usage to be re-construed on a more sympathetic basis. To attempt to see these images on their own terms, however, we must unlearn at least some of the classicising, moralising forces that structure the way we view these cultures. Because we tend to regard images from the past through classically trained eyes, images produced outside the classical paradigm can confront us with obstinate inscrutability. The monstrous faces peering out at us from a bronze shield lost to the River Witham in Lincolnshire in the 4th century BC assume the same impenetrable stare as the ground-garnet gaze of similar creatures decorating a helm buried at Sutton Hoo on an East Anglian heath in the 7th century AD. They are both a far cry from the famous dying Gaul, foundering on a marble podium, whose pathos speaks to us with an urgent immediacy. The latter statue is a colonial construction of barbaric splendour with all its insinuations of noble savagery, nudity, muscle, moustache and swagger: a literal embodiment of the barbarian classified, caricatured and conquered. The faces on the shield and helm, however, are images of barbaric splendour from within: these were things regarded by their barbarian owners to have held power in their splendour. However, because of their unfamiliarity to us, images like this can be hard to understand; they appear more foreign because they lack the directness of classical realism. Accordingly, before we can see anything at all we have to overcome the problem of understanding how these images were experienced in their own cultural context, and we lack almost entirely any reliable literary accounts that would aid that pursuit for both periods. Accordingly, like many books about Iron

Age and early medieval art, much of this one is concerned with not just how we might understand barbaric splendour, but how we might first learn to look at it.

### **Challenges to comparison: periodization and linear chronologies**

This book asks whether considering so-called barbaric images from the Iron Age and early medieval period side by side, despite the centuries that separate them, might guide us towards these unfamiliar ways of seeing. However, comparing images separated in most cases by 400 years or more is a difficult thing to do. The challenge at least partly stems from the obstinacy of period boundaries and the dominance of linear chronology as fundamental archaeological principles. Archaeological and art historical knowledge is primarily ordered by period, and this is embedded in the institutions that produce knowledge, such as academic university departments, but also in the mechanisms that disseminate it, such as academic journals and books. This, however, is an undisciplined book.

In terms of periodisation, the delineation of cultures in space and time led scholars to label particular images as classical and non-classical in the first place, not always with much regard to how these items may have been regarded by their makers and owners. In a contemporary critical theoretical framework, such attitudes might be viewed as a pernicious means of disciplining or colonising the past (*cf.* Bhabha 1994). It has long been recognised that the famous stone head from Mšecké Žehrovice near Prague may have been regarded in the 2nd century BC as a version of Mediterranean statuary, just as countless depictions of the human face on decorative metalwork from the 5th and 6th centuries AD in northwest Europe owed much to Roman provincial metalworking. Either way, it would be absurd to suggest that the makers of any of these things regarded them as ‘barbaric’, and they may even have seen their work as continuous with that produced within the Empire. Thanks to the scrupulousness of our art historical schooling, however, these visages look worlds away from what we would call classical art: they stare blankly ahead, eyes agape with no discernible emotion, their cheeks, chin, eyebrows, hair and moustaches more geometric pattern than flesh, bone and hair. We have come to understand classical art through its efforts to achieve realism – “the conquest of appearances” in Gombrich’s terms (1977: 123) – though the point at which we have arrived was in all likelihood not shared by Iron Age and early medieval societies, who would have had a different idea of what classical images strove to ‘do’. Perhaps these communities were also interested in mastering the appearance of a subject, but to them an ‘appearance’ meant something quite different.

This book asks the reader to look beyond period conventions and orthodox specialist interests, but it also asks them to take one step further. Challenges to period boundaries usually concern only neighbouring periods. For instance, in British conventions, precise thresholds lie at AD 43, 410 and 1066, each ringing in the end of one specialist’s field of study and the beginning of another, tolling the ends of the Iron Age, Romano-British and early medieval eras respectively. This book, however, is not only convinced of the arbitrariness of period boundaries, it also advocates leapfrogging an entire period. It should be made clear from the start that the intention is not to brush away the influences of almost half a millennium of imperial dominance as superficial in the face of an indomitable, underlying barbaric cultural continuity. To the contrary, although it is never directly addressed here, the classical world lies at the very heart of this book. Part of the case I would like to advance is a reminder that a linear conception of time need not be the guiding principle of all archaeological comparison. A focus on linearity and process is deeply embedded in archaeological thought, which is why questions about how and why human societies and cultures change have become so prominent in archaeology (Trigger 1989: 294-312). But this is not the only way of thinking about the past. Particularly with regard to the pre- and post-Roman periods in northwest Europe, there are many other fruitful grounds for more open-ended, cross-cultural or anthropological comparison. Such grounds include the economic conditions of production and exchange, scales of political organisation, the prevalence of particular environments and landscapes, levels of

productive technologies, and – perhaps most germane to the Iron Age and early medieval periods – a political situation on the brink of an expanding or fragmenting empire with a strong aesthetic ideal closely linked to the core ideology of a centralised, literate, expansionist state. None of these things depend on a linear chronological narrative, though neither are they determinative or predictive. Put simply, they offer comparative frameworks for the Iron Age and early medieval periods. Rather than considering notions of continuity and unassailable imaginary ‘Celtic’ and ‘Germanic’ cultures, this book asks the reader to assume a comparative or social anthropological mindset in order to ask what might be learnt from a comparison of the images created by societies that were not, after all, that different, and in the grand scheme of things not that far apart in space nor time.

In this introductory chapter, the terms ‘Iron Age’ and ‘early medieval’ will be used to refer loosely to the 5th to 1st centuries BC on the one hand, and the 5th to 8th centuries AD on the other, even though this terminology conventionally refers to much longer periods. The reasons for this truncation is that these are approximately the periods considered by the contributors to this volume. This pre-Roman period captures the tail end of the Hallstatt period (6th to 5th centuries BC) and the floruit of La Tène art (5th to 1st centuries BC). The post-Roman centuries considered here are best defined as including both the Migration Period (5th to later 6th centuries AD) and the Vendel Period (later 6th to 8th centuries AD), sometimes also known as the Merovingian Period, or in Britain the Middle Anglo-Saxon period. These labels elide an extraordinary panoply of region- and sub-period-specific labels, but elision is the unabashed intention of this experiment. Highly specific labels help to illuminate the sheer variety of communities and their products living in Europe during the periods in question, but they are also a symptom and cause of the lack of communication across period and regional boundaries. The pre- and post-Roman Iron Ages from Scandinavian and German scholarship would perhaps be the most suitable appellations to use here, as they can apply equally to areas within and beyond the geographical borders of the Roman Empire. Defining each of these periods as essentially the opposite ends of a single entity – Europe’s long Iron Age – also helps to justify why comparing our different approaches is a useful thing to do. They are, however, highly cumbersome in an English-language volume, so ‘Iron Age’ and ‘early medieval’ will have to suffice, which also helpfully avoids too many assumptions of coherent cultural or ethnic groups. Note that the terminology used in each chapter of this book has been left as that favoured by the individual authors, as their terminological choice is usually sensitive to the material under discussion. It was an editorial decision to maintain that nuance at the expense of standardisation.

### **Comparing Iron Age and early medieval imagery**

Despite the obvious links, there have been few extensive comparisons of Iron Age and early medieval images. The most obvious comparisons lie between the La Tène style art of the later pre-Roman Iron Age and the strictly insular ‘Celtic’ decorative techniques of early medieval Ireland and western Britain. The connections exhibited by such images, capable of connecting a 2nd-century BC horse harness with an 8th-century AD manuscript, are astonishing and still not well comprehended. They have been largely avoided here thanks to extensive treatment elsewhere (Leeds 1933; Bruce-Mitford 2005; Hunter 2008; Youngs 2009; Farley and Hunter 2015). Beyond these images of the so-called ‘Celtic revival’, the vast majority of early medieval images have seen very little comparison with those of the Iron Age. Partly, this is because of the emphasis on period boundaries and linearity outlined above, but it is also because such comparisons do not appeal to modern archaeological approaches, which emphasise cultural relativism and the analysis of particular images in their own, much more narrowly defined contexts, rather than the drawing of connections through cross-cultural comparison. Such pursuits are perhaps seen to be more suited to art historical approaches, eschewed by archaeologists since the discipline’s coming of age in the 1960s and 70s, but perhaps worth some reconsideration now. This, of course, is also a matter of chronological and geographical scale. As mentioned above, from a *longue durée* perspective, the Iron Age and early medieval period in northwest Europe may not seem so different at all.

These two periods were not always strictly segregated. Thomas Kemble's posthumous work (edited by Augustus Franks) *Horæ Ferales* (1863) described highly decorative objects from the Iron Age and early medieval period side by side, and this was one of the very earliest treatments of either of these groups of material. Pretty soon, the respective corpora were hedged into their ethno-nationalist boxes of 'Celtic' and 'Germanic' art from which they have never quite escaped, but for Kemble these items were linked thanks to their belonging to the no less problematically defined 'northern nations'. By 1904, however, imagery from the two periods had become separated and crystallized as distinct subjects, with the coincident publication of Romilly Allen's *Celtic Art in Pagan and Pre-Christian Times* (which followed on from Arthur Evan's highly influential but unpublished Rhind Lectures on 'Celtic Art' in 1895) and Bernhard Salin's *Die Altgermanische Thierornamentik*. These volumes appeared in the same year, they set the agenda for future research, and they were hugely influential when it came to defining the respective canons, not only in the sense of what could be considered 'Celtic' or 'Germanic', but also in terms of what could be considered 'art'. Romilly Allen's themes were picked up again by Edward Thurlow Leeds' *Celtic Ornament in the British Isles* (1933), which reprised and amended his analysis with the use of a greatly improved knowledge of the dating of these insular images (Leeds 1933, xii). Leeds compared the swirls and triskeles of La Tène period images with their reinventions on the surfaces of insular early medieval bowls, but left aside the much greater corpus of what was now known as 'Germanic' material from northwest Europe, which by this point was on its own trajectory thanks to Salin's foundational volume. To Leeds, these two forms of image making were entirely separate, and this is precisely what made the 'Celtic revival' so intriguing and politically charged.

A fuller comparison of images produced before and after Rome was to arrive five years later with Thomas Kendrick's *Anglo-Saxon Art* (1938), which contained two extensive scene-setting chapters on pre-Roman Iron Age and Roman art in Britain. Kendrick raised the idea of a "barbaric aesthetic sensibility", and he is worth quoting at length of the subject:

"The early history of art in England ... is best understood if we regard it as being in the main the recital of a protracted series of conflicts between the mutually irreconcilable principles of the barbaric and the classical aesthetic systems. It is true that we have to record temporary eclipses or phases of ascendancy first of one and then of the other of them; but at no point do we lose sight of the salient fact of a sustained struggle between fundamentally opposed types of artistic expression. Put simply, the issue between them is, of course, that barbaric art ... seeks to satisfy by means of dynamic abstract patterns and by the statement of organic forms in terms of inorganic or surrealist symbols; whereas classical art gives pleasure by means of sympathetic and obvious naturalism. You were asked to decide, as it were, whether you wanted to look at the strange, glittering brilliance of the lively mosaic pattern seen through the kaleidoscope, or the familiar and friendly world in a mirror held up to reflect the visible world. There is no common ground at all; no possible harmony in method or purpose. Thus you might try to render or suggest the natural forms of the mirror-subject by an arrangement of the kaleidoscope pieces; or you might make an abstract kaleidoscope pattern out of the separate organic elements of the mirror-subject. And whether such attempts turned out to be felicitous or unfortunate, the chief effect of them was to add to the sense of aesthetic discord and restlessness that I believe to be characteristic of Anglo-Saxon art" (Kendrick 1938: 1-2).

Kendrick did not so much view early medieval art as a continuation of Iron Age art, but imagined that it was incubated within the same 'barbaric' mindset, eschewing realism, transforming classical models, and possessing qualities that lay in expressive and wild tendencies rather than an interest in mirroring the natural world (cf. Gombrich 1977). We might now be justifiably uncomfortable with Kendrick's interpretation, outdated and touched as it was by romanticised notions of noble savages, imbued with an

untameable genius untainted by civilization. Nevertheless, his technical observations remain accurate: the images produced during the pre-Roman and post-Roman periods really are linked by their subjects and compositional tendencies. Could there really be a tendency for the figural pretences of images to collapse, fragment and kaleidoscope just as the scale of political organisation diminishes at the spatial and temporal fringe of empire? What explanations might we now offer more than 80 years later?

Since Thomas Kendrick, there has been some tacit understanding that images from the later Iron Age and early medieval periods might have been similar because they were both ultimately renditions of classical models skewed by and blended with other traditions. They have, nevertheless, remained largely uncomparated, perhaps due to a (not always conscious) framing of these ‘Celtic’ and ‘Germanic’ subjects as separate and incomparable for the reasons expressed above, despite their occasionally overlapping chronological and geographical trajectories (though see Blankenfeldt 2009). Now that such essentialist notions are deconstructed on what is becoming a cyclical basis (e.g. Collis 2003; Hills 2003 and more recently in Farley and Hunter 2015: 31; Harland 2019), a new explorative comparison that takes up where earlier archaeologists and art historians left off is perhaps ripe for exploration.

### **Introducing images from the Iron Age and early medieval periods**

No comprehensive summary will be given here of previous work on Iron Age and early medieval art. However, because this book is intended to bridge a gap in academic specialisms, some signposting may be helpful. From the beginnings of its modern scholarship with Jacobsthal’s *Early Celtic Art* (1944), studies of images from the European pre-Roman Iron Age have been international in their outlook. This is reflected in a wealth of academic monographs and museum exhibition catalogues with enormous geographical reach (Megaw 1970; Duval and Hawkes 1976; Duval and Kruta 1979; 1982; Müller 2009; Farley and Hunter 2015), most of which cover a similar range of material. The most accessible of these works of international scope is Ruth and Vincent Megaw’s *Celtic Art* (2001), which has been the standard introduction for some time, complemented by a most valuable recent volume edited by Nimura *et al.* (2020) which places European Iron Age art in its even wider global context. In addition to these wider views, there is a good range of more regional studies, among them accounts of the British Isles (Finlay 1973; Megaw and Megaw 1986; Stead 1996), France (Varagnac *et al.* 1964; Duval 1989; Stead and Rigby 1981), Italy (Santoro 1978), and central Europe (Kruta 1975; Pieta 1982). Although ‘Celtic’ art has occasionally verged on becoming a slightly isolated sub-discipline (probably to a greater extent than early medieval art), there are some more contextualised accounts that place these images firmly in their archaeological and cultural contexts (Harding 2007; Garrow *et al.* 2008; Garrow and Gosden 2012).

Early medieval art has never been tackled in the same comprehensive manner as Iron Age art, partly because it is somewhat harder to define, but arguably also because the 19th-century notion of united ‘Celts’ has been more resistant to fragmentation than that of overarching ‘Germanic’ culture, despite the regular deconstruction of both (see above). Although the term is still in regular usage, the study of so-called Germanic peoples, particularly following the Second World War, became increasingly fragmented into various Anglo-Saxon, Frankish, Langobard, Scandinavian, and myriad other factions, at least partly influenced by 19th- and 20th-century processes of nation-building. As a result, from the scholarly literature, one would think that the post-Roman period in Europe was crowded with art styles, variously dissected and defined, mostly adherent to particular regions, periods, and sometimes even specific forms of material culture. In fact, there is rather less variation than the scholarship suggests. This fragmentation has, however, led to the production of numerous excellent and detailed region- or period-specific syntheses, but unfortunately none that cover a European scale. The most recent and comprehensive account of English material is Webster’s *Anglo-Saxon Art: A New History* (2012, see Webster 2011 for a concise summary), but there are many other accounts, some considerably older, that still have much to offer (Dodwell 1982; Kendrick 1938; Speake 1980). Only rarely, however, do English-

language accounts cross the Channel or North Sea (though see the now outdated account of Verzone 1969). Discursive art-historical syntheses have been less explored in Continental and Scandinavian archaeology (though see Roth 1979), where the artefacts in question have benefitted from a tendency to be more thoroughly embedded in broader archaeological concerns rather than specifically artistic ones. Many of the fullest and most well illustrated accounts can instead be found in exhibition catalogues or regional accounts, of which there are many splendid examples. Some are European in scope (Menghin *et al.* 1987; Menghin *et al.* 2007), while others focus on particular regions, such as Scandinavia (Hougen 1967; Fabech and Näsman 2018), England (Webster and Backhouse 1991; Brey and Story 2018); Scotland (Henderson and Henderson 2004), France and southern Germany (Städtisches Reiss-Museum Mannheim 1996), and Italy and Central Europe (Bóna 1974; Arslan and Menis 1990), among many others. There are, however, several broader and archaeologically contextualised accounts in which images, their materiality and their place in particular social settings play a major role, particularly from a northern European perspective (Hedeager 2011; Kristoffersen 2000; Nicolay 2014).

### **Composition, subject and context: an exploratory framework for comparison**

Some of the chapters that follow compare motifs or objects from both periods in question, while others focus on particular objects from just one period. Regardless of the approach taken, a surprising (and heartening) number of connecting themes have emerged through the process of compiling this book, as well as through the conference and workshop on which it was based (see Preface). A comprehensive comparison of Iron Age and early medieval art is well beyond the scope of this introduction. Nevertheless, it would only do justice to the work in the chapters that follow to at least pull on some of the threads that have been collectively woven in this collaborative exploration. The rest of this introduction therefore pursues a little further the main question posed by this volume: how comparable were the images created in Europe before and after Rome? To do this, a small number of aspects will be compared: (1) the subjects of the images, (2) their composition and dimensionality, and (3) the material contexts of the images or their materiality. At the heart of this book is a question about whether the main connection between images of the later Iron Age and early medieval periods was due to their common interface with the expansionist, colonial and literate culture of the Roman Empire. The transmission of images and ideas between these spheres entailed visual and intellectual transformation, not just because these societies had different aesthetic preferences, but also because images meant something different within and beyond the aegis of Rome and its provinces (see above). Accordingly, the focus in what follows is largely on the relationship between the subjects, compositions and materiality of images between the Iron Age and early medieval period on one hand, and Rome on the other.

### ***Subjects and forms: classical models and their transformation***

The subjects found in images from the Iron Age and early medieval periods have much in common. In many cases, these images do not contain 'subjects' as much as they do patterns. Sometimes anthropomorphic or zoomorphic elements can be spotted in what appears to be a geometric pattern, and sometimes the animals, people and hybrids appear to be at risk not only of being engulfed by repetitious lines, curves and shapes, but drifting away into becoming them. As such, these images blur the line between bounded subjects – be they worldly or otherworldly – and geometric or repetitive patterns. To draw some examples from the following chapters, the Iron Age chariot fittings from Roissy (Figure 2.2) and the horse disc from Cuperly (Figure 2.5) on one hand, and the early medieval brooch from Sande (Figure 4.2) and the entwined beasts from the Staffordshire Hoard cross (Figure 6.8) on the other, all show the body and its anatomical components standing on the verge of figural abstraction. They are all trapped in the moment of becoming cadences and intonations rather than bounded entities. The tension between ambiguous bodies and their deconstruction into a rhythm of lines, curves and blocks may well be where the vitality and fascination of many of these images originates. As Joy

outlines in detail in his chapter, many images from these periods can be thought of as visual formulae or vocabularies that lack specific subjects as much as they do specific meanings or messages. Often, the images we discuss in these periods were a means of enriching a surface or finessing a line or terminal, but they could still be technically complex and intellectually rich.

Where a figural element is present in images of the Iron Age and early medieval period, it is more frequently animal than it is human, and can often be traced back to the classical repertoire with more or less immediacy. Backwards-facing beasts, lions, stags, boars, doves, horses, dolphins, hippocamps and other mythical hybrids can all be broadly identified in early medieval imagery, though they are often much transformed, and frequently reduced or abbreviated to a flurry of limbs, eyes, claws, snouts, jaws, beaks and tails; movements, essences, abbreviations. While it is becoming increasingly obvious that the Iron Age zoomorphic repertoire drew on a wider Eurasian pantheon (e.g. Nimura *et al.* 2020), much was borrowed from classical art of the Mediterranean. This repertoire was transformed in a highly similar manner to those images of the early medieval period, being contorted, abbreviated, and abstracted. In both periods, animals mythical and real were readily plucked from the imperial bestiary, but their transition beyond that context was not without radical transformation in a manner that will be described in more detail below. One thing can be said for certain of the animal subjects favoured in both periods, which is that feral or untamed animals were favoured over the docile and domesticated.

This tendency toward zoomorphic images does not deny that human or anthropomorphic imagery was especially rare. The same process of translation and transformation from the classical repertoire was true for humanoid subjects, and this is detailed by Behr in her chapter that traces the variation and similarities in images of the human face in both periods, often elaborated with twirled moustaches and flowing beards in both periods, such as on the Iron Age escutcheon from Kleinaspergle (Figures 7.1) and the early medieval brooch from Galsted (Figure 7.3). In fact, human faces are more common than they might initially appear in both periods, though whole human bodies remain extremely rare. Part of the difficulty of spotting a human subject with certainty comes from the fact that they were rarely depicted unambiguously. For instance, although most human masks and profiles were depicted wearing helms between the 5th and 6th centuries AD, one can never be sure if there is something more sinister lurking within that armour, betrayed by moustaches within which nestle raptor eyes and beaks, and jaws that stretch into gaping maws (Martin 2013: figures 3, 4 and 5), such as those seen on the Sande brooch (Figure 4.2). Many depictions of human figures of masks in both periods were also accompanied by an animal on either side, among which the 5th-century Galsted brooch (Figure 7.3) forms a classic example. One can never be quite sure if the animals are companions or tormentors, and in many cases it is hard to see where the animal ends and the human face begins. One thing remains true for anthropomorphic images in both the Iron Age and the early medieval period, which is the overt dominance of specifically masculine faces, regularly endowed with particularly elaborate moustaches or beards. Feminine images are extremely rare.

In this volume, Olivier makes the important point that although people, animals and occasionally deities – or at least parts of all of them – were lifted from the classical repertoire in the Iron Age, elements of the narrative that accompanied them were probably not imported, leading to the representation of generic rather than specific people, animal and hybrids. Elsewhere, Nancy Wicker (2003) has made a detailed account of similar processes in the early medieval period, suggesting that narrative elements, over time, were variously adapted and rejected. The idea of telling stories with images was not necessarily a foreign or incomprehensible concept to Iron Age or early medieval societies, but it was at least a technology that does not seem to have been especially valued or widely used. This may have something to do with the illiterate nature of most of these communities, narrative being an oral, live or ephemeral tradition, suited to becoming materialised in neither text nor image. Behr makes a similar point in this volume when she describes the remodelling of the emperor's profile on bracteates, which are small

coin-like pendants of 5th- and 6th-centuries AD, usually gold, found widely in northwest Europe, but most commonly in Scandinavia (for examples see Figure 7.4). The re-imagined imperial profile we find on bracteates has all the features that would identify a particular emperor erased, but sometimes added to it instead are superhuman features, such as animal companions and curls of elaborate hairstyles, sometimes transforming into avian beings. Due to these features, some have been led to argue that the individual depicted on bracteates was a representation of the divinity with which Scandinavian kings may have been associated (e.g. Hauck 1970; Hedeager 2011; see Behr 2011 for a summary). The generic and widespread nature of these images should nevertheless be borne in mind, and it may be safer to suggest a more generalised rather than specific interpretation. As described above, most of the time in both Iron Age and early medieval images, the subject is a human-animal hybrid, an ambiguously human or animal being, or might perhaps be caught in the moment of transformation between a human and an animal. Perhaps therefore, these images from both periods do not so much tell stories about kings with divine powers, but represent a means of intellectualising the affinity of human and animal essences, or what it means to be a living, undomesticated animal or a human. As Kristoffersen and Pedersen as well as Olivier discuss in much more detail in their chapters, images from the Iron Age and the early medieval period could be ontological expressions that did not conceive human and animal essences as inexorably separate as they seem to us (see also Hedeager 2011). Behr describes something similar in her chapter, when she describes the strangeness of human visages in the Iron Age and early medieval periods as representing a changing relationship with divinity, or an engagement with another world.

It may not be until the early Christian period of the 7th and 8th centuries AD in parts of northwest Europe that images such as the jewel-studded cross described by Fern in this volume came to stand for narratives once again. As intimated above, this may have something to do with the re-emergence of a literate elite that were closely involved in the manufacture or patronage of such rich and ecclesiastical objects. Christian crosses represent a particularly complex and significant story that encapsulates a new and revelatory religion. The one Fern describes is made of gold, inset with garnets, and saturated in zoomorphic imagery with its roots in a pre-Christian and pre-literate era. Fern describes not just the narrative content of the cross as an object and image, but also the subsequent re-absorption of jewelled crosses just like this into a narrative poetic tradition, just as the helmets described by Speake in this volume also re-emerge centuries later in the text of the epic poem *Beowulf*. This illustrates not just the citational relationship between verbal and physical worlds, but the journeys of iconic objects between textual and material worlds and then back again, always dynamic, always transforming in the process. Elsewhere, Anna Gannon has similarly described the translation of Christian narratives onto early medieval coinage (see Gannon 2003 for a comprehensive account). In this volume, Gannon describes something similar in the cases of depictions of specific deities and borrowed mythological characters on Iron Age coinage, though it is unclear to what extent these images carried narrative to their observers unused to such literal depiction. Gannon also describes the related process of actual text being transcribed with more or less success on coinage of the Iron Age, though in this case it is hard to say whether the text really continued to be a script or whether to the Iron Age minter text was simply further imagery drawn from the classical repertoire, just as Hercules or a horse could be transcribed and transformed into this new context, or Latin script was occasionally copied, either with blunders or entirely illegibly, onto the early medieval gold bracteates described above.

Perhaps the key message when it comes to understanding the relationships between subjects drawn from a classical, literary context into an Iron Age milieu on the one hand or an early medieval one on the other, is that this was never a straightforward or mechanical process of down-the-line copying with increased loss of information or chance mutations. In their chapter, Kristoffersen and Pedersen invoke LeBianca and Witzel's (2007) model of 'big' and 'little' traditions to help explain the relationship between an empire and the communities beyond its fringes. In this framework, a 'big' tradition might

be envisioned in the universalising or canonizing forces of an expansionist empire, compared to ‘little’ traditions, which might be seen as conglomerations of local knowledge and praxis. Kristofferson and Pedersen’s crucial insight is that early medieval visual subjects did not mirror or directly copy the classical repertoire, but were transformed through a creative process of picking, choosing and adapting into a tradition of a radically different structure. The same was probably true in the later Iron Age. We may therefore envision the intercultural contexts through which visual subjects were pushed and pulled at the spatial and temporal fringe of empire as creative, rhizomatic conduits crackling with potential for new visual and intellectual configurations (cf. Bhabha 1994; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Classical visual subjects were not just made to fit into ageless and unchanging barbarian societies: these images and their transformation changed the way these communities thought about their worlds.

### ***Composition and dimensionality: envisioning the subject***

‘Composition and dimensionality’ are taken here to refer both to the spatial arrangement of components within an image and the way in which these arrangements created senses of imagined space. Olivier and Joy’s chapters make good illustrations of the complexity of visual compositions in both two and three dimensions during the Iron Age. Early medieval images tended to be flatter and divided up into less fluid fields of decoration (Haseloff 1981: 175, 188), but in both periods there was a tendency to deconstruct or flatten the subject into two dimensions rather than imagine it as it might be seen in real life. Dimensionality is the principal focus of both Olivier’s and Kristoffersen and Pedersen’s contributions to this volume, although several chapters in this book describe the unfolding of the human or animal subject into its frontal, lateral or even oblique visual plains to produce an image not of the world as it appears, but the world as it was known or imagined. This interaction between classical realism on one hand and the abstract contortions of Iron Age and early medieval images on the other is an important connecting theme because it also potentially links technical principals of composition to intellectual modes of envisioning the world described in the previous section. While human and animal subjects were creatively adopted from the classical repertoire, in both Iron Age and early medieval images, it seems that there was little desire to create a sense of depth or volume in the classical sense. Nowhere is this more obvious than the translation of the low relief of a classical frieze into the concentric contour lines often found amongst ornament of the 5th and 6th centuries AD, such as on the bracteate from Funen (Figure 7.4c), and the brooches from Galsted (Figure 7.3) and Sande (Figure 4.2). Behr describes a similar dimensional transformation in her explanation as to why the eyes on human profiles appear oval as if they were front-on, which was not necessarily the result of ignorance of the rules of classical perspective, but perhaps due to a sense that eyes must meet the gaze of the observer. Dimensionality and perspective were therefore simultaneously deconstructed and systematically removed from these images. Kristoffersen and Pedersen’s fascinating observation of rare attempts to render the subject at a three-quarter profile demonstrate the willingness and curiosity of craftspeople from the same period to experiment with the perspective observed in classical images, and hint at their latent ability to do so, all of which suggests this was more of a choice than it was a lack of technical ability. Something similar is observed in the ‘Chimirri-Russel effect’ mentioned by Gannon in this volume on Iron Age coinage, which describes the way a flat coin might be viewed from an oblique angle to reveal an image not through the perspective depicted on the coin, but on the perspective created by the angle of view (Chimirri-Russel 2005; Talbot 2017).

In his chapter, Olivier illustrates in some detail how this lack of interest in rendering a third dimension through a classical use of perspective lead to the aforementioned flattening out or unfolding of an animal subject, so that both sides of its flanks or head might be seen simultaneously, such as on the depiction of a chariot on the back of *kliné* from Eberdingen-Hochdorf (Figure 2.4). Something similar is seen in much of the Iron Age and early medieval coinage discussed by Gannon or the bracteates discussed by Behr, on which the human profile is fragmented into myriad components; eyes, hair, noses

and mouths drifting across the surface of a coin like leaves on a pond, but no less human for it (Figures 2.8 and 8.1). The same is true for much imagery of the 5th and 6th centuries AD, in which human and animal limbs, heads, bodies and tails could be dissembled and rearranged like puzzle pieces, leading to what Günther Haseloff (1981) described as a '*Tiersalat*' or 'animal salad'. It is this deconstruction of the anatomical body that is picked up in Kristoffersen and Pedersen's description of early medieval image as suggestive of a radically different conception of human and animal bodies, relating these ideas to Huth's similar observations of Iron Age art (2003; 2010). In this alternative ontology, the body becomes an 'additive' accumulation of separate parts quite different from the seamless machine of flesh and bone envisioned in classical realism.

The predilection to unfold a three-dimensional subject onto two plains fed a desire for symmetry in both periods, and the transformation of animals, people or vegetation into geometric, repetitive patterns. A fondness for symmetry may also explain the ubiquity of the *en face* human visage or mask discussed in detail by Behr. As Behr, Olivier and Kristoffersen and Pedersen all indicate in their chapters, the full frontal face offers greater opportunity for symmetry, and it is sometimes also produced as a playful image wherein two facing profiles become a mask (take, for instance, the complex designs on the foot of the Sande brooch in Figure 4.3). Symmetry is also emphasised by the rows of interlinked quadrupeds on the Staffordshire Hoard helmet described by Speake, as well its parades of warriors clutching their swords and shields, worlds away from the parading warriors on Trajan's column in Rome, all of whom, like the dying Gaul, clamour for our sympathy and attention as individuals. A rather more complex form of concentric or *matryoshka*-like symmetry is invoked by the fact that the warriors parading on the helmet wear similar helms, leading the viewer into a vortex of self-referencing, fractal images.

As Kendrick observed, spatial patterning was a key aspect of images from both periods, and these strong geometric principals allowed for complex compositions in which symmetry and its transgression were playfully explored. While symmetry was clearly enjoyed in both periods, such images are often only superficially symmetrical. Closer examination often rewards small revelations in intentional details that confound this symmetry, and this is true for single objects, as well between copies of objects, such as the 'same but different' Iron Age mirrors described by Joy, and the subtle differences in the creatures on the arms of the cross described by Fern. In his chapter, Olivier makes the case that mathematically-executed decoration in the Iron Age – the division of a field into regular pentagons or equilateral triangles – was not done purely to achieve an aesthetic result, but was a form of knowledge in itself, or a philosophy of abstract geometric space. Joy takes this one step further by imagining how that knowledge was learned and transferred between craftspeople, describing the copying of patterns as a form of 'procedural knowledge', suggesting that the complex geometric images of the later Iron Age were experienced as steps and geometrical processes as much as they were envisioned as finished outcomes. The same could potentially be true for the similarly geometrically complex interlace of manuscripts, metal artefacts and stone sculpture of the 7th and 8th centuries AD. In a Christian and monastic context, the process of illustration is sometimes interpreted as a meditative or contemplative act of devotion. There is no reason why something similar should be true on a more general intellectual level for the equally complex images from both the Iron Age and the pre-Christian early medieval period.

Finally, we might broaden the idea of 'composition' as a structuring principle that can not only be applied to single or multiple images on an object, but also between objects. Just as Joy considers aspects of symmetry between different mirrors placed side by side, perhaps the image on a brooch was part of a larger composition of a complete dress ensemble, together with textiles and a moving human body. Should the multiple images on the helmets described by Speake be considered individually, or as a complete composition? If these images had significance as a composition, does that bring further meaning to its violent disassembly and then reassembly as just one component of a hoard? Similarly, if we are considering chariot fittings, should we examine the composition within each terret, ring, mount

or harness fitting, or is the chariot the composition? In terms of its context, the chariot from Roissy described by Olivier was part of the larger composition of a chamber grave, each element deliberately laid out, and the same is true for dress items from the 5th to 7th centuries AD, the vast majority of which are only known from deliberately orchestrated burial tableaux. In her chapter, Gannon discusses Creighton's (2000) theory that collections of coins can be envisioned as spontaneous compositions as they might lie in multiples on the palm of a hand or on a flat surface. In turn, this recalls the manner in which most Iron Age coins were smaller than the die used to make them, meaning that the original die-image can only be reproduced by using multiple coins (Talbot 2017). The way we tend to publish and examine these images can tend toward treating them as monadic *objets d'art*, not the practical fittings, pins, arms and armour that most of these objects really were, always interacting with other objects, inflections of light, sound and other sensory phenomena, and the movements of human and animal bodies. Composition and dimensionality tend to be seen as static properties of an image. They can, however, be dynamically formed and just as quickly dissolved during interactions between people and objects. Perhaps it is this playful interaction or performativity that also links Iron Age and early medieval images.

### ***Context and materiality: images in the world***

Any archaeological consideration of the materiality of images from the Iron Age and early medieval period naturally depends upon those materials that have survived, so our interpretations unavoidably have some bias toward inorganic materials, which for the most part entails metal and stone. Ceramics should of course also be a part of this discussion, but they are unfortunately absent from this book. The major missing evidence, however, is wood and textile, which almost certainly would have held a wealth of imagery of which we only gain the occasional glimpse. The second major bias from both periods is that the things which tend to survive have been placed intentionally in the ground, including graves and hoards to the exclusion of most casually discarded or recycled items. Nevertheless, the fact that the vast majority of the images we know about from both periods were bodily adornments leads us to imagine an unabashed image of truly 'barbaric splendour'. It remains true that the Iron Age and early medieval societies with which we are concerned put particular importance on the exuberant and overt ornamentation of the body. This may relate very closely to the comparatively fragile, fleeting political organisations that held communities together, united some into confederacies, and also fragmented them (*cf.* Martin 2015, 185-90). In this volume Behr describes a process by which figural art quite suddenly came to dominate objects of personal adornment in the 5th and 6th centuries AD, perhaps in the same way that similar items came to be the most highly ornamented in the later Iron Age. In both these periods, at the periphery of a waxing or waning empire, image-laden objects could be fleeting rather than static and enduring things, worn and linked specifically to particular individuals and their mortal bodies.

One of the strongest threads that re-emerges at several points in this book is a concern not just with the subjects and compositions of the images, but with what they *did*. Alfred Gell's influence has been strong in the interpretation of these images and the questions he posed are still of considerable interest, all the more so because most of the objects discussed in this volume were not merely to be observed, but were objects with explicit functions: pins, brooches, swords, mirrors, shields, chariots, coins, crosses, helmets, and much more besides (*cf.* Gell 1999). These things are not the same as the material culture of classical art, which tended to leave most dress fittings, for instance, relatively plain and restrained, with the most attention lavished on larger, more monumental edifices such as statuary and architectural friezes. Of course, nothing is absolute, and perhaps the Iron Age or early medieval farmstead was also bedecked with painted walls or textile wall hangings. Nevertheless, restraint is hardly a quality easily applied to many of these objects, and nearly all of them had a much more personal nature.

In answer to the question of what these images did, Joy describes how the decoration of Iron Age mirrors was constructed to quite literally ‘entrap’ the viewer’s own reflected gaze, as well as hold their attention in the complex curves and swirls of the ornament (*cf.* Garrow and Gosden 2012). The large, shimmering brooches of the early medieval period described by Kristoffersen and Pedersen had a similar function; their flickering gilt reflections gives the impression of moving bodies among the claws, tails, eyes and beaks that inundated their surfaces. Gannon similarly describes Iron Age and early medieval coinage as intentionally designed to hold the attention of the viewer, captivating them for a sufficient amount of time to contemplate the significance of the imagery. The same could be said for elaborate early medieval manuscripts of the 7th and 8th centuries AD. Coins in particular are objects that encourage portability and play, being highly sensory objects with a full potential for human-human or human-object interaction during financial transactions, games and idle moments. Perhaps this is what leads to their perceived potential for what Gannon refers to as ‘ekphrasis’: the ability to describe an external concept or thing in persuasive detail, such as the power of a tribe or king, the trustworthiness of a mint, or the teachings of Christ.

Some images of the Iron Age and early medieval period may have had more immediate purposes, such as the gold bracteates mentioned above, seen by many as magical amulets; objects with sufficient agency to affect the fortunes of their wearers. The imagery that decorated them, as well as the occasional runic inscription, was a key part of their potency, as well as perhaps the materiality of the gold into which their designs were pressed. There is also a suggestion by Oliver that the purpose of the Iron Age objects he describes was not limited to their visual or intellectual impact. He observes among the birds and beasts that ornament the chariot fittings from Roissy smaller details that were too small to be easily if ever actually seen on the object they decorated. Their purpose, Olivier suggests, is more of an enhancing skin, with a potential for otherworldly or druidic potency. One object we can discuss with more certitude in this sense is the jewelled gold cross from the Staffordshire Hoard discussed by Fern, an object that embodied Christ and may have been carried into battle to affect the fortunes of its bearers. A fragment, possibly from a similar cross, came from the same hoard, inscribed with the biblical text, translated here from the Latin, “Rise up, Lord, and may your enemies be dispersed and those who hate you flee from your face”. These crosses, therefore, were powerful objects, rendered in gold and garnet and capable of swaying the tide of battle.

It is worth noting that it is not just images that were lifted from the classical tradition into new Iron Age or early medieval cultural contexts, but entire material forms. Fern details, for instance, how jewelled crosses emerged from the late Roman cult of the cross, perhaps initially associated with Constantine himself. Speake meanwhile discusses how the helmets of the later 6th and 7th centuries from Britain and Scandinavia were similarly borrowed from a Constantinian tradition. The same could be said for coinage in both the Iron Age and early medieval period, along with the entire concept of abstracted, portable and storable wealth. Additionally, some of the manufacturing techniques of these images also had an origin in the Roman world, not least the stone sculpture of both the Iron Age and early medieval period, which is largely absent from this particular volume, but the ‘chip-carved’ metalwork of the 5th and 6th centuries AD was lifted directly from late Roman provincial workshops (Haseloff 1981; Kristoffersen and Pedersen this volume). It was not therefore just the images that drew from the classical tradition, but also new potentials with new materials, and the purposes to which such materials could be put.

## Conclusion

The similarities of images produced in northwest Europe during these periods are obvious: beasts crowd these complex and enchanting compositions, fantastical or real, but almost always more wild than they were docile. Moreover, humans and animals were rarely depicted in a realistic or figural manner, but broken up, contorted, and shown in multiple perspectives. When one looks a little closer, these beings tend to be a mixture of human and animal components. Furthermore, these images are generally

very small compared to the architectural edifices or statuary of classical art, and are most frequently decorations of *other* objects, generally jewellery, weaponry or other fittings. Images in the Iron Age and early medieval period rarely stood alone and for their own sake.

Perhaps these images are best defined by what they are not: almost none were made to be representations of the world as we envision it today. Only very rarely do any of these images approach the illusion of lifelike forms held in such esteem by Greek and Roman art, as well as in western art from the Renaissance to the present day (Gombrich 1977). Instead, most of these images skirt the precipice of the unknown, heading toward an imagined alterity, often through abstraction and compositional rules that emphasise pattern, rhythm and repetition. These images create, split and replicate dimensions, and for that reason they are deeply unfamiliar to the classically influenced modern observer.

This book is an experiment that revisits a line of enquiry of which few were aware, to correct an absence that few had noticed. Despite and perhaps because of this eccentric origin, the conference upon which this book is based was suffused with an open willingness and genuine curiosity to learn from our colleagues across the disciplinary divide. A spirit of mutual learning, experimentation and not entirely disciplined adventure remains my justification, and it has resulted in instances of juxtaposition as well as complementarity. The cases of ‘broken symmetry’ (Joy), multi-dimensionality (Olivier and Kristoffersen and Pedersen), the inhabitation of objects by the subjects that decorate them (Fern, Speake), the use of abbreviated images on coinage (Gannon) as well as the depiction of the human face (Behr), all lead to comparisons that are unexpectedly fluid and complementary. But a juxtaposition can also be a fruitful site for meaningful comparison: the jolt or shock of looking beyond a period with which one has become overly familiar can be a healthy corrective to disciplinary strands that have sometimes risked becoming too specialist, too internalised, and too self-reflective.

All of this comparison leads one to ponder how foreign the images from one of these periods may have seemed to the other. Only one account of Iron Age objects encountered by an individual from the early medieval period is given in this book, which is described by Anna Gannon (for the detail, see Sherlock and Allen 2017: 246). The objects are a pair of Corieltavi gold staters. Whoever found them in the 6th century drilled a small hole in each, and wore them as pendants, as people from these communities were wont to do when they encountered ancient coins, though more usually it was Roman currency they found. And in a world without money, what better use to make of such pretty little coins? On one side of each was an abstract, lunate horse, its body made of loosely interlocking crescents, gracefully leaping across the surface of the coin, hemmed in by pellets and splinters of text. On the other side were two parallel rows of lozenge-shaped pellets, perhaps reminiscent of an ear of wheat, framed by rosettes, and again impinged upon by pseudo lettering. What might we give to understand the meaning of such images to their curious 6th-century discoverer? Rubbing the mud from the surface with a searching thumbnail, did they perhaps see something of their own barbaric splendour on the freshly glittering golden surface?

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