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Fraser Hunter

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A carnyx and a pony cap: unity and diversity in Celtic art across Europe

Fraser Hunter

Introduction

The theme of unity and diversity was a key part of the 'Celts: art and identity' exhibition held in Edinburgh and London in 2015/2016 (Farley, Hunter 2015; the Edinburgh approach is discussed in Hunter, Goldberg 2017). A key aim was to offer a British perspective on links and differences across the 'Celtic world'. Britain is often thought to sit on the edge of this, doing things rather differently. There are indeed clear and major differences, for instance in the dominant style of Iron Age housing: round-houses in all of Britain, rectangular houses on most of the mainland. Yet an island-mainland difference is too simplistic. There are variations across Iron Age Europe at many levels, from styles of pottery to burial habits, and no division is clear-cut: there are roundhouses in Spain and northern France, for instance, and rectangular buildings in Britain (*e.g.* Harding 2009, p. 17; Moore 2003). Diversity is normal, not exceptional; the British habit of circular architecture is simply a more extreme version of this.

Other phenomena linked groups across Europe, notably decorated objects, specifically 'Celtic art' (*e.g.* Megaw, Megaw 2001; Müller 2009). For instance, items such as sword scabbards decorated with 'dragon-pairs' are found across Europe from south-east England to Hungary (Ginoux 2007). In this paper I would like to use two famous Scottish examples of Celtic art to discuss this topic of unity and diversity: the Torrs pony cap and the Deskford carnyx. Both show clear knowledge of international styles but also regional habits.

Plastic Style in Britain and Ireland

To understand the Torrs pony cap, we need to look first at the Plastic Style of Celtic art, dating predominantly to the 3rd century BC (Jacobsthal 1944, p. 97-103; Megaw, Megaw 2001, p. 135-144; Müller 2009, p. 108-110). This was widespread across Europe but is usually considered to be absent from Britain and Ireland, though its influence was seen in local developments (*e.g.* Stead 1996, p. 26). However, recently reported metal-detecting

finds (mostly through the Portable Antiquities Scheme) have changed this picture (fig. 1; Joy 2015, p. 147, fig. 9.3-9.4; Hunter in prep.). They comprise a series of fittings, mostly from south and east England, which are very similar to those found in chariot burials and warrior graves in neighbouring northern France (such as the yoke fittings from the Rouissy chariot grave, or the shield fittings from Plessis-Gassot; Olivier 2012; Ginoux 2009, fig. 19-20). These must be part of the same tradition; the rarity of burials with grave goods in Britain has made the habit invisible previously. We cannot yet tell whether these finds are imports from the continent or locally made, but there is no reason why they cannot be a shared habit made locally, much as the earliest Iron Age coinage in Britain in the 2nd century BC is closely connected to what was made in northern France (Leins, Farley 2015, p. 110).

The idea that Plastic Style was a living tradition in Britain and Ireland, not just an exotic import, is supported by other finds from the islands where Plastic-Style decoration was applied to broadly contemporary insular objects (fig. 2). Examples include ring-headed pins from Ireland and Scotland (*e.g.* Raftery 1984, 157-175; MacGregor 1976, n°265; for their return influence on the continent, see Becker 2008), and rare brooches (*e.g.* Balloch Hill, Argyll; Close-Brooks 1982; Hunter, Joy 2015, fig. 59). It is also seen on the terminals of one of the Snettisham gold torcs (the Grotesque torc; Stead 1996, p. 26). The south-west French Fenouillet-style of gold torc (Ugaglia 2001, p. 134-143), linked by decoration and chronology to Plastic Style, is also found in Scotland and Ireland; technological details here indicate these are local versions rather than imports (Hunter 2018, p. 432-434).

With these new finds, we can extend typical Plastic Style into southern Britain and see the effect of it more widely in northern Britain and Ireland. A similar pattern is seen in Denmark. Here there are animals which are classics of Plastic Style, such as the bulls on the Brå cauldron fittings, most likely an import (Klindt-Jensen 1953), but the style was also applied to local objects, notably ball-terminal torcs (Kaul 1991). Plastic Style was the most widespread of the Celtic art styles, and shows local variations and adaptations as well as shared traditions.



Fig. 1. Examples of Plastic Style from recent metal-detecting in England. a. Mount from Braughing, Hertfordshire. Length 19 mm (Portable Antiquities Scheme BH-B9C05B; © St Albans District Council). b. Fitting or pin with Plastic-Style head, Ropley, Hampshire. Head width 17 mm. (PAS HAMP-C319B7; © Winchester Museums Service). c. Mount from Micklefield, West Yorkshire. Length 38 mm. (PAS SWYOR-FEF701; © West Yorkshire Archaeological Advisory Service). Images licensed by Portable Antiquities Scheme under Creative Commons Licence, CC BY 4.0.

The continental background to the Torrs pony cap

The pony cap from Torrs is one of the most remarkable finds of Celtic art from Europe (fig. 3; Atkinson, Piggott 1955). It consists of a sheet bronze cap curved to fit over a pony's head with two holes for the ears, and is covered in repoussé scrolls of decoration developed from Plastic Style. When it was first reported, two curved horns were attached to it, originally terminating in birds' heads and decorated in an engraved scrolling design related to the repoussé of the cap. Earlier scholars argued that the cap and horns had been fixed together after they were found in the 19th century to increase their interest for antiquaries (Atkinson, Piggott 1955, p. 210-212), but a recently-uncovered contemporary newspaper account makes it clear that they were attached when discovered (Briggs 2014). The horns may not originally have been made to fit the cap, but they were fixed to it in the Iron Age; engraved repairs on the cap in a similar style to the horns confirm this shared history.

The cap is part of a distinctively insular tradition of the third century BC known as the Torrs-Witham-Wandsworth (TWW)

Style after some of the major findspots (Atkinson, Piggott 1955, p. 227-235), or as Style IV in Ian Stead's scheme for insular Celtic art (Stead 1996, p. 29-32). This comprises different regional traditions. Best known are a series of bronze shields from eastern England which combine both repoussé and engraving metalworking techniques like the Torrs cap does. Connected to it are bronze sword scabbards from east Yorkshire and northern Ireland with engraved decoration but no repoussé (Jope 2000, p. 30-35, 54-69, pl. 54-57, 60-75). The different elements of TWW Style show clear inspiration from wider trends in Celtic art of the 3rd century BC: Plastic Style influenced the repoussé work, and Sword Styles informed the engraved scabbard decoration. Indeed, the Yorkshire and Ulster scabbards are best considered as regional variations of Sword Style (*e.g.* Lejars 2012). The TWW Style shows a clear connectedness from Britain and Ireland to the continent as well as regional variations. This tradition of Celtic art shows both unity and diversity. Signalling a link to wider habits was an important consideration for its users as well as expressing their own creativity and regional identity.

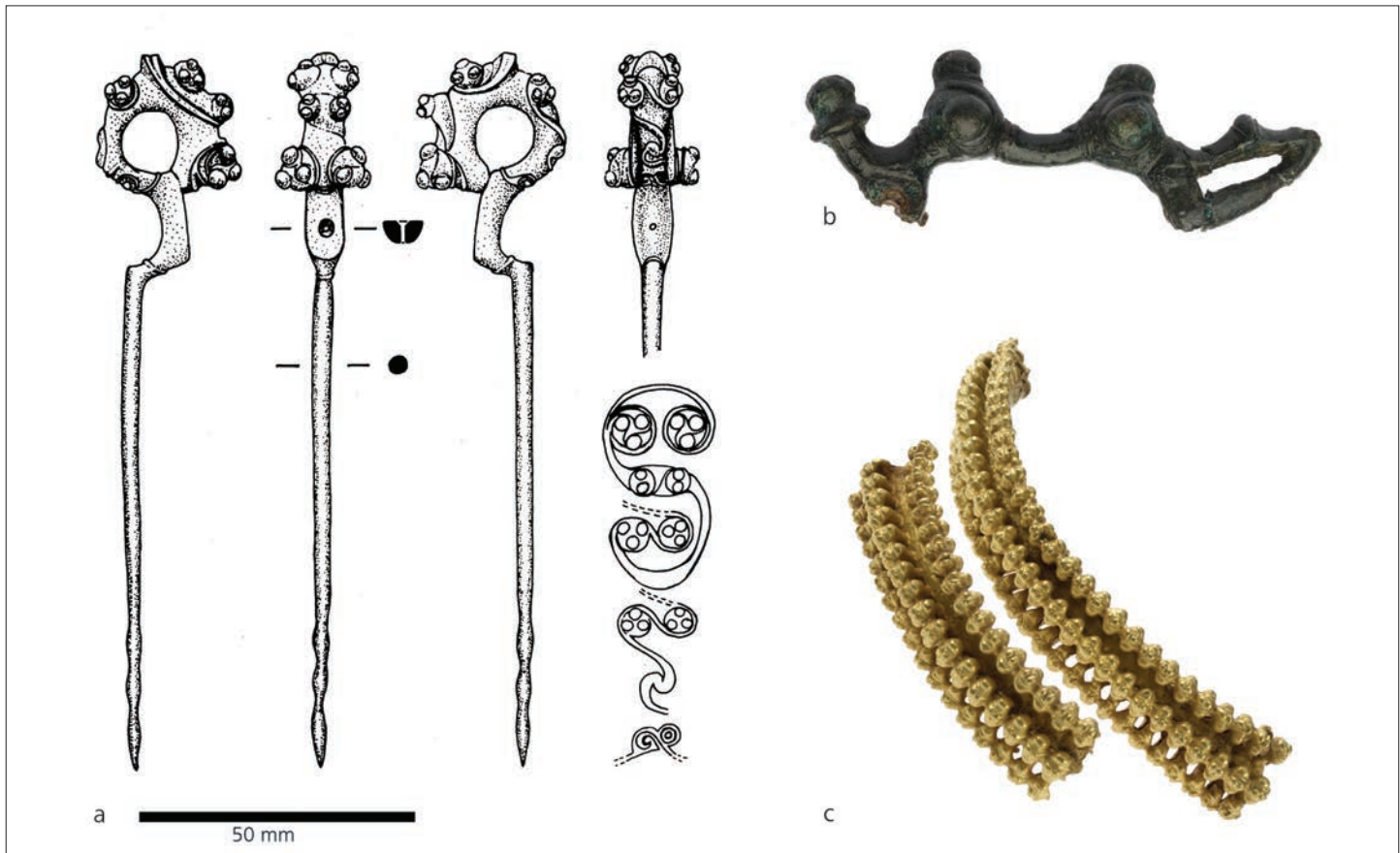


Fig. 2. Variants of Plastic Style from Britain and Ireland. a. Ring-headed pin from Ireland (unprovenanced). Length 129 mm (Raftery 1983, fig 135). b. Brooch, Balloch Hill, Argyll. Length 58 mm (© Glasgow Museums). c. Tubular torc fragments, Blair Drummond, Stirling. Height 17.5 mm. (© National Museums Scotland).

Differing designs in Plastic Style

As well as connections, there are indications of deeper differences in the decoration of Plastic Style and its variants. The Style has not seen recent sustained analysis; what follows are initial observations. Typical decoration can be broadly classed into three categories (fig. 4): zoomorphic (often the so-called 'Disney' style; Megaw 1970); what may be termed 'hidden zoomorphic', where geometric designs have animals hidden in them; and 'simple' geometric (dominated by bosses linked by scrolls). At this stage of analysis, it is not clear if these groups have chronological or geographical significance, but they are artistically distinctive.

Good examples of the 'hidden zoomorphic' category are the brooch from Villeneuve-la-Guyard (Yonne) and a boss probably from the lower Danube, both with bird heads concealed in the decoration (Rapin, Baray 1999; Müller 2011). The Disney style shows a wide variety of creatures, real and imagined, from bulls to flamingos, owls, horses, humans, humanoids, and fantasy creatures such as those on the Rouissy disc (Megaw, Megaw 2001, p. 139-144; Olivier 2012, p. 110-113, fig. 28). The TWW Style which developed from Plastic Style is likewise covered with animals, both obvious and hidden. This includes bulls or horses at the ends of the Witham shield, but it is birds which dominate



Fig. 3. The Torrs pony cap. © National Museums Scotland.

this insular tradition (Fitzpatrick 2007, p. 344, 352, fig. 4-6, 8-10). The Torrs pony cap has birds on the cap and horns (as well as a human face hidden among the scrolls); the Wandsworth round and long shield bosses are dominated by quite obvious birds; they are also present on the Witham shield, but more subtly, with bird heads on the round terminals, and patterns hinting at owl faces (or grebes?) in the boss (fig. 5). To this can be added the fierce raptor which forms the curious bronze knife from Chiswell Green, St Albans and the bird-brooch from Red Hill, Nottinghamshire (Megaw *et al.* 1999; Hull, Hawkes 1987, p. 152-153, pl. 43, no. 6912).

It seems clear that these Plastic-inspired traditions in Britain and Ireland involved quite different creatures from other areas. Any similar regional variability across continental examples will need further investigation, but there is a marked preference for birds in the British and Irish finds. It suggests variations in those beasts which were seen as special or symbolic, and perhaps reflects different regional belief systems. This clearly merits more work; but whatever lies behind it, it is a good example of the conference theme, with both connections and variations across Europe. This style of Celtic art served to mark links but also to inspire revisions that suited local habits.

The carnyx – in and beyond a Celtic world

My second Scottish example is the boar-headed carnyx from Deskford in north-east Scotland, made in sheet bronze and brass (fig. 6; Piggott 1959; Hunter 2019). It belongs to a late tradition of Celtic art known as ‘massive’ metalwork, common in north-east Scotland in the Roman Iron Age (1st-2nd centuries AD; Simpson 1968; Hunter 2014). Its decoration is typical of this region; the technology of assembling it is very different from other known carnyces, and creates a more complex instrument. Yet it is clearly tied in to wider habits: the idea of a carnyx was an international one. Certain styles of carnyx were widespread, such as those represented in the Tintignac and Mandeure finds (Hunter 2019, p. 135-165, 198-202); others were much more local, such as the serpent-headed carnyx from Tintignac or the silver fragment from Săliște in Romania (Hunter 2019, p. 148-149, 190-194). Here, the use of silver is entirely consistent with Dacian and Thracian metalworking traditions in the Danube area (*e.g.* Spănu 2012); as with Plastic-Style objects in Britain, the carnyx was an international idea adapted to local conditions. The Săliște find also takes the carnyx beyond what is traditionally seen as the Celtic world; so too do examples from the territory of the Raeti in northern Italy and southern Austria (Hunter 2019, p. 175-186).

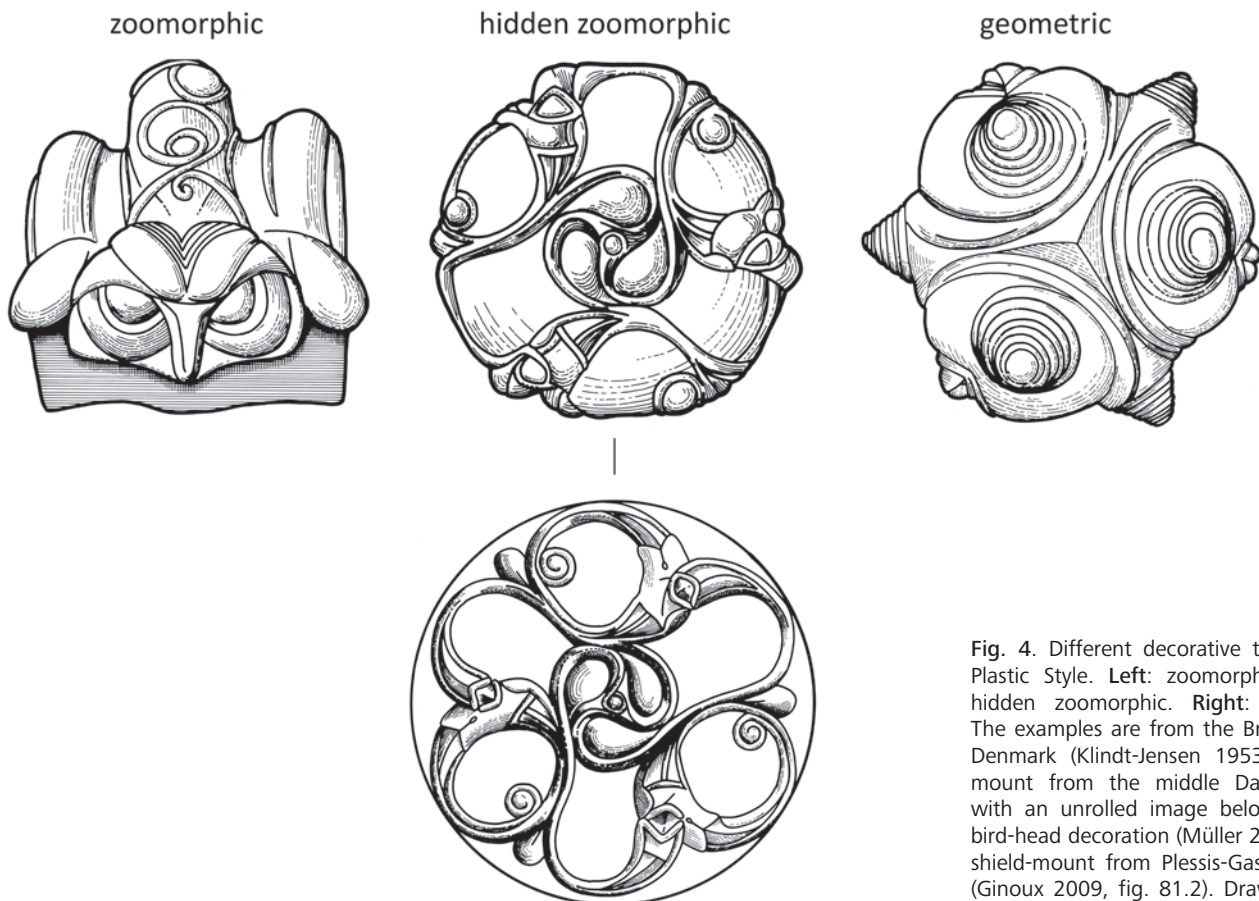


Fig. 4. Different decorative traditions in Plastic Style. Left: zoomorphic. Centre: hidden zoomorphic. Right: geometric. The examples are from the Brå cauldron, Denmark (Klindt-Jensen 1953, pl. 1); a mount from the middle Danube area, with an unrolled image below showing bird-head decoration (Müller 2011); and a shield-mount from Plessis-Gassot, France (Ginoux 2009, fig. 81.2). Drawn by Alan Braby.



Fig. 5. Examples of Torrs-Witham-Wandsworth style. a. Shield bosses from the river Thames at Wandsworth, London. b. Shield cover from the river Witham, Lincolnshire. Images from Kemble 1863, plates XIV and XVI.

Surviving fragments are relatively few; although extensively distributed, they give only a partial picture of how widely the carnyx was known and used. Carnyxes were depicted on coins and artefacts in the Hellenistic world, linked most plausibly to attacks on this area (such as the raid on Delphi in 279/278 BC) and to Celtic mercenaries serving Hellenistic kingdoms. Yet connections were more than just military. This is suggested by a frieze on the gateway to a Buddhist stupa at Sanchi in central India (fig. 7). Among the musicians in a travelling band are two carnyx players wearing distinctively non-Indian costume (Hunter 2019, p. 227-228, 555-557). This emphasises both the wide range of connections, far beyond the 'Celtic world', and the need to look beyond traditional explanations of warriors or mercenaries for such contacts. Other professions allowed people to be highly mobile in the Iron Age, and other events could lead to people, objects and ideas circulating.

These same geographical contacts are epitomised by that most famous of Iron Age objects, the Gundestrup cauldron. It remains a topic of considerable debate, but there are good grounds to argue it was made in the Danube area among groups familiar with silver-working who drew on influences stretching from the carnyx traditions of Europe to depictions of elephants and yoga poses argued to be drawn ultimately from India (Taylor 1992; see also Kaul 2011; reviewed in Hunter 2019, p. 559-563, with further references), while it ended its life far to the north in Denmark. The cauldron emphasises the need to look beyond ideas of a Celtic world in order to understand these wide-ranging phenomena.

The history of the carnyx likewise requires a perspective beyond the Celtic world. When evidence of the surviving objects is considered along with depictions of the carnyx in local and classical coinage and sculpture, its development can be understood



Fig. 6. The carnyx head from Deskford. © National Museums Scotland.



Fig. 7. Carnyx players on a stupa pillar at Sanchi, India.
© Carsten Hermann.

in three broad phases (fig. 8; Hunter 2019, p. 333-338). Its origins probably lie in the heart of the La Tène cultural zone in western Europe, by 300 BC at the latest, arising most likely from local modifications of the concept of bronze trumpets inspired by the Etruscan or Greek world. Its fame spread east with military raids and mercenary service into the Hellenistic world, and as a musical instrument it travelled far beyond that.

In the second phase, *ca* 100 BC - AD 50, the carnyx was intensively used in western Europe, in the La Tène cultural area; its use had spread to Britain, and into the Alpine zone and eastern Europe, including among the Dacians. It moved beyond the traditional 'Celtic world'. This strengthened in the third phase, between *ca* AD 50-300, when it was not only used in northern Britain but also among Germanic tribes on the Rhine and Danube. At the same time, in areas as diverse as Asia Minor and southern France, the carnyx persisted as a symbol of local religious beliefs or local identities (Hunter 2019, p. 234, 265-266).

The carnyx thus provides another way of exploring the theme of unity and diversity. At one level, it was used widely across the Celtic world, but it was also found beyond that area, while in different regions local versions of the idea were created.

Conclusions

A key conclusion from this is the need to ensure that evidence from Britain and Ireland is included in studies of the wider European Iron Age. While many aspects of the British and Irish Iron Ages are distinctive, others are closely connected to the rest of Europe, particularly in the case of Celtic art. Yet there was no single story of Celtic art. It is critical to identify regional variations and adaptations within these traditions. This may be easier on one of the edges of the 'Celtic world', where the island character makes variations clearer, but there are indications of similar

diversity across the rest of Europe, and a study of the Iron Age needs to consider the variabilities as well as the similarities. We need to consider things at regional scales, but also avoid being constrained by rather nebulous ideas of a 'Celtic world', as the evidence of Plastic-Style adaptations on torcs and other items in Denmark, and of carnyces in Dacia and India has shown. The two finds considered as starting points here, the Torrs pony cap and Deskford carnyx, need both local and international perspectives to understand them, and emphasise how both unity and diversity are critical to understanding Celtic art across and beyond Europe.



Fig. 8. Distribution of the evidence for the carnyx in three key phases. Black dots mark surviving examples, question-marks possible examples, open circles Iron Age representations. Light grey tone marks areas of use attested by classical iconography, dark tone by Iron Age iconography (coinage). Images: author.

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Author

Fraser HUNTER, National Museums Scotland, Chambers St, Edinburgh EH1 1JF, GB; f.hunter@nms.ac.uk

Abstract

Britain and Ireland are often seen as rather separate from the rest of 'Celtic Europe', doing things rather differently. Yet variability was a key part of the Iron Age across Europe. Using two famous examples of Celtic art from Scotland, the Torrs pony cap and the Deskford carnyx, this paper explores topics of unity and diversity. The pony cap is strongly influenced by the Plastic Style, and new finds show that this was present in Britain and Ireland, both in a form similar to neighbouring areas of France and adapted to local object styles. The pony cap is part of the 'Torrs-Witham-Wandsworth' Style which drew on the Plastic and Sword Styles but adapted them in an insular context. Analysis of decoration shows a dominance of birds in the insular versions in contrast to continental Plastic style, suggesting different habits within a shared tradition. The Deskford carnyx is similarly a distinctively regional version of an international tradition. The carnyx was used within and beyond the 'Celtic world', with examples from Raetian and Dacian areas, and depictions from as far away as India. This emphasises the connectedness of the Iron Age world: the carnyx habit started in the 'Celtic world' but spread beyond it over the following years. The paper concludes by arguing that British and Irish evidence must be included in wider studies of the European Iron Age, as they provide good examples of both connections and regional adaptations of wider habits in Celtic art.

Résumé

Un carnyx et un chanfrein : approches locales et internationales dans l'étude de l'art celtique en Europe. La Grande-Bretagne et l'Irlande sont souvent considérées comme distinctes du reste de l'Europe celtique. La variabilité est pourtant un élément fondamental de l'âge du Fer européen. Avec deux exemples écossais bien connus de l'art celtique, l'ornement de tête de cheval (chanfrein) de Torrs et le carnyx de Deskford, je veux ici en appréhender l'unité et la diversité. La coiffe équestre est inspirée par le Style plastique et de récentes découvertes démontrent que ce style était connu en Grande-Bretagne et en Irlande : en effet, la morphologie de certains objets rappelle celle d'exemplaires français, tout en affirmant une identité locale. Cette ornement appartient au style de Torrs-Witham-Wandsworth, qui est une inspiration insulaire du Style plastique et du Style des épées. Les oiseaux dominent les décors dans l'art insulaire de cette époque, contrairement au Style plastique du continent, indiquant des conceptions différentes au sein de cet art partagé. De même pour le carnyx de Deskford, qui est une variante régionale d'une tradition internationale. Ce type d'instrument était en effet utilisé dans le monde celtique mais aussi dans les régions au-delà : des exemples sont connus dans les régions daces et rhétiques, et des représentations iconographiques apparaissent jusqu'en Inde. C'est une bonne démonstration de l'ampleur des réseaux d'échanges dans le monde de l'âge du Fer. En conclusion, il est nécessaire d'inclure pleinement les témoignages en provenance des îles Britanniques dans les études sur l'âge du Fer européen, car ils démontrent l'envergure des interactions effectives sur une aire géographique très large, ainsi que l'adaptation régionale de certaines traditions de l'art celtique.