Celtic art has long been a rather arcane sub-species of Iron Age studies, with international scope and importance, but poorly integrated into wider narratives – especially in Britain, where the burial groups so key to Continental social reconstructions are largely lacking. Recent years have seen various attempts to integrate the British art evidence into the archaeology of the Iron Age, and this volume presents the results of an AHRC-funded project which was conceived as a contextual study of Celtic art in Britain. The project has already had important outcomes – a very valuable set of conference proceedings (Garrow et al 2008) and a re-examination of dating evidence, including new radiocarbon dates (Garrow et al 2010). Now this volume provides a stimulating study which sets fresh agendas in the field. Its material basis is a database of over 2500 pieces of decorative metalwork (made available online), using sensibly inclusive parameters – Garrow and Gosden note (p.55 & appendix 1) that barely 100 objects form the core of most studies, and their total has been greatly enhanced by both excavation and metal-detecting in recent years, demanding fresh study. Their intellectual basis is informed by wide reading in current archaeology and anthropology, and, has at its core, a concern with ontologies, which they define as the nature of being, and in particular the ways that Iron Age people saw and made the world, their perception of objects and the roles they played in this. Garrow and Gosden’s recurrent question is not what did art mean but what did objects do? How were they used and perceived and how did this change over time? They are firmly tied to current approaches to the Iron Age – a strongly contextual approach to interpretation, and a critique of concepts such as elites and individuality. Theirs is an Iron Age of dispersed communities making and re-making relationships – acts in which objects played a central role.

Chapters 1 and 2 set out their theoretical stall, with valuable summaries of current trends in British Iron Age archaeology and approaches to Celtic art. Chapter 3 considers not only their practical methodology but also lays out the basic data in terms of contexts, dates and distributions in a series of bar charts and maps – although a few glitches may be noted. This reviewer was intrigued to note massive armlets from Roman forts and Romano-British settlements (Fig 3.8), for instance, as none are known, and while there is no sign of major problems here, future researchers should check the data before building on the detail. Garrow and Gosden stress what a wide-ranging phenomenon Celtic art is, covering these isles, though this is only partly true, and the devil is in the detail: such decorative metalwork is all but unknown beyond the Great Glen, and rare in Devon and Cornwall, while the distributions of datable material by period are notably regional, as Garrow and Gosden note (Figs 3.11-12).

A number of key points are made in these early chapters. One is a telling comparison with the Bronze Age: a material culture based on quantity (repeated, essentially similar material) was replaced by one based on quality – fewer, more individual items. This contrast is seen also in styles: they rightly critique the typological approach, so successful in the Bronze Age, when applied to Celtic art. “Styles” refuse to behave in neat typological fashion, and they argue for a more accumulative approach, where new styles augmented rather than replaced older ones.
(supporting the arguments of Philip Macdonald 2007). This may cause havoc with attempts to date objects by traditional art-historical methods, but their solution has been to look closely at the associations of decorated objects and reconstruct a chronology from this, augmented wherever possible by a new series of radiocarbon dates.

The dates and the detailed argument are published elsewhere (Garrow et al 2010), presenting a series of options and arguing for one as the most likely. Here their preferred option is adopted largely without caveat: an early style of art (rarer, highly individual, and typically asymmetrical and complex), and a later style (more symmetrical, less complex, and produced in greater numbers), with a chronological gap between the two styles, c. 20 BC – AD 40. Their meta-narrative with this two-fold split is compelling and can be linked to wider changes in society in the late pre-Roman Iron Age, with increasing evidence for emergent power structures, especially in south-east Britain. Their demonstration that this later material runs across the ‘boundary’ of the Roman conquest and through the first two centuries AD is an important one, but their late Iron Age chronological gap is less certain. It may be true, but one would like more evidence – and one could also point to the development of coinage carrying over this gap (though showing a broadly contemporary shift from abstracted designs to more naturalistic Roman-inspired ones), and to objects apparently deposited at this time (Figs 3.11-12). The idea of a punctuated rather than a continuous development is feasible – there is no inherent need for an evolutionary view – and it should provoke more work. Was it a gap or drop in production, or in deposition, in both or in neither?

The remaining chapters broadly adopt a life-cycle approach, from manufacture (Chapter 4), through the lives of particular objects (Chapter 5) to deposition (Chapters 6-8). In each case a series of worked examples are presented, carefully chosen to bring out key points in the argument and to present objects and contexts which represent significant parts of the corpus.

Chapter 4 considers some stimulating observations on the nature of metal, following on from useful earlier discussion (pp.14-20) on the relationship between iron and copper alloy; this is part of their concern with reconstructing ontologies and getting away from modern concepts. Were iron and copper alloy perceived to be different metals as they are today, or was there more significance to different alloys, or to wrought versus cast metal? And one might also wonder whether perceptions varied between actors – how did the craftworker, the wearers and the viewers see such questions? Here, as in a number of places, the evidence refuses to play ball with the theories; they struggle valiantly to find different patterns, but these are not entirely convincing on current evidence. A good example is their discussion of manufacturing, an area beset with problems (pp.89-96). Garrow and Gosden discuss evidence of different alloy use (showing shifts from the late Bronze Age to the Iron Age) and in location of manufacture. However, their adoption of the time-worn model that sheet-working was a phenomenon of hillforts and casting of non-hillfort sites is flawed. This model, in origin based essentially on evidence from Wessex, does not consider whether cast items were ‘Celtic art’ or other items such as pins, rings, mounts, and so forth; nor whether sheet-working represents manufacture or repair; nor how this works in other areas of the country outside the scope of Peter Northover’s original paper (1984). One can understand a desire to include manufacture, but it lay largely outwith the project’s original scope, and their own comment (p.96) is telling: “Analyses and syntheses of iron and bronze production are lacking generally”. There is more to their argument that different depositional contexts were preferred for cast versus sheet objects (dry and wet respectively), though a regional analysis would be needed to assess and confirm this, not least in assessing less direct relationships to water, such as sites overlooking confluences of rivers or on watersheds. Do such differences arise not from a perceived significance to the technology used in the object’s creation, but from the role they were intended to play? Is the significant feature of
a cauldron the fact that it was made of sheet, or the fact that it was a massive and impressive container? One rather suspects the latter.

While their arguments here are open to query, Garrow and Gosden follow up with a useful discussion of the technology of different decorative styles and their effects. They make sterling efforts to analyse the complexity of different motifs; while inevitably subjective, this is an area which needs to be addressed (see also Wells 2012), and they offer valuable insights into processes of perceiving such complex objects, stressing the fluid and developing nature of the viewer’s understanding as their eye takes in different aspects of a complex surface. There is a tendency for tentative conclusions to become harder as the pages advance – the concluding discussion (pp. 107-111) is rather firmer in its views than the preceding analysis – but these approaches define the potential for further work on differing perceptions of these art styles.

Chapter 5 takes three key artefact types – torcs, swords, and coins – and considers their varying histories in an artefact-focussed view of time and change. They raise numerous interesting points – for instance, in arguing for an extended life for swords, which may have been the oldest participants at the events where they were deposited, evoking the histories of past events. The discussion of coins includes a useful compare-and-contrast with other material, stressing how different they are in their designs (both in style and in concept, with no one coin preserving all of the intended image), their more regionally-constrained distributions and their clear Continental connections; they were also more commonplace, and Garrow and Gosden suggest these are used in the creation of new links between people rather than within the existing networks established and maintained by other forms of art.

The discussion of different contexts of deposition in Chapters 6-8 looks at the key loci of discovery: hoards, burials, and settlements. Each contains well-written and interesting arguments and perspectives. The hoard chapter emphasises how much of the material comes from late-phase hoards, and their innovative ‘wagon-wheels’ of object connections stress how much more diverse the later hoards were, with quantity becoming a dominant feature once more in this later material. Attempts to find patterns in fragmentation and wear are unsuccessful, and it seems to this reviewer that this question, along with that of landscape setting, is better considered at a more regional scale instead of seeking national-scale patterns. Indeed, it is in coming closer to detail that Garrow and Gosden’s approach flourishes: the real stimulation of this and the following chapters are the detailed case studies of particular finds. Here they can take the specifics of particular cases and explore possible interpretations, framed within their wider concerns of how objects acted, and in looking for evidence of communal relations rather than individual elites. This leads them to note the detailed variation beneath the apparent homogeneity of the Polden Hills hoard, for instance, suggesting the actions of several groups in bringing together several sets of horse gear. This same accumulation of relations is argued in their burial case studies, with the Kirkburn chariot burial bringing together different groups or symbolising different connections, while the Deal warrior was buried with an accumulation of material, some potentially quite old when buried. Both of these were, in essence, founder’s graves, and Garrow and Gosden emphasise the ways in which a community may have sought deliberately to create an appropriate ancestor. The stress here is on the maintenance and building of relations between dispersed groups (and perhaps with spiritual forces) rather than any concern with individual or elite status – though in their case study on Baldock, their focus turns to the individual. This highlights one of the problems in this area: their arguments are stimulating and informative, but rely also on wider models of Iron Age society (currently very much concerned with small-scale communities until the late Iron Age in the south-east), leading to the richness of the Baldock grave being interpreted differently from the earlier rich burials. Much rests also on specific interpretations of minor differences. Thus, the Kirkburn terrets, differing in minor detail, may be brought together from several sets, belonging to different groups, to make up a chariot for burial;
but they could equally represent repairs, or simply that the notion of a matching set is a rather modern one. Equally, the recognition of such minor differences presupposes an informed audience – was this a skill available across the community, or a more restricted one?

The settlement chapter likewise contains some novel and convincing interpretations of apparently well-known material. Two of the three case studies are in Wessex: the deliberate deposition of moulds and crucibles at Gussage All Saints prominently placed near the entrance, and what is plausibly seen as the burning of a chariot at Bury Hill. These are interpreted as events which emphasised the roots of each site’s claim to significance. Their third study considers Celtic-style material from Newstead Roman fort, stressing how it was embedded within frontiers lives and was found both inside and outside the fort, with no oppositional view of Celtic art. This continuation and development of Celtic art within Roman Britain, which Garrow and Gosden can only touch on, is a key area for further work.

Their concluding chapter draws strands together and reiterates their view of the material as based in an archaeology of communities and their relationships, with art-objects functioning to shape and modify relations between different groups in a socially unstable world lacking hierarchical structure. This represents a valuable and developed expression of such perspectives – although this reviewer has qualms. The move away from the uncritical application of models of elites and hierarchies is very welcome, but the shift to a communal focus rather downplays the individual and in particular the role of differences between individuals, not least in access to, or command of, resources, whether material, knowledge or connections. Even if these were transitory, existing in the being and efforts of one person rather than persisting in the family or group, these aspects were significant in the lives of wearers and viewers – and nowhere more than in Celtic art. This is perhaps best seen in the two areas which Garrow and Gosden consciously avoid – Continental links, and the ‘meaning’ of art. Continental links in the earliest Celtic art in Britain stress how British material was closely in step with the Continent (as their dating programme emphasised), and this knowledge of a wider world must have been significant for some groups or individuals. So too must a knowledge of the art. We do not need to fantasise over its interpretation to suggest that it had a meaning beyond the purely decorative, and that this meaning would have been multi-faceted and complex. This, surely, was a restricted art – if not in its performance, then in knowledge of its intended meaning – and in this lay the seeds for some individuals to mark out difference from others. A restriction is seen in material terms too – such swirly decoration was apparently seen as appropriate for bronze and gold, but only very rarely on other materials. It was a habit which marked out difference. We do not need to return to a world of burly chiefs in their hillforts to argue that significant differences emerged between people (and groups) during the later first millennium BC.

This should not be seen as a criticism but a stimulus. This is a highly engaging, original and informative book, full of interesting insights and valuable avenues for further work. It is a proper archaeology of Celtic art, setting an agenda for further work – not least in linking this to other decorative material culture, a topic which is only touched on (cf Sharples 2008). The book is an elegant one, well-produced and well-edited (though the rivers (recte rivets) flowing on the Dinnington torc in the caption of Fig. 9.3 may join the enamelled ferret from the Fayyum in the solecisms of Celtic art (Megaw and Megaw 2001, 45)). My only real gripe is price. £84? Are OUP trying to bankrupt Iron Age archaeologists? A scan of their recent Iron Age backlist reveals a series of must-have titles ranging from £75-£110; yet Windgather Press can produce Melanie Giles’ equally important work for £30 (Giles 2012). Perhaps their intended market is purely institutional libraries, but that would be a real shame – this is a book for all Iron Age archaeologists in Britain to read and argue over, and should be a prompt for Continental scholars. Celtic art in Britain will never look the same again.
References


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*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society of the Reviews Editor*