

COPTIC AND IRISH ART

It has been asserted that Irish art is derived from Coptic art. The only precise affirmations that resurface most often concern illuminated books, suggesting a need for concentrated research on this subject. C. Nordenfalk (1977, p. 13) formulated a prudent opinion on the subject.

Towards the middle of the seventh century, a new advance was made when a kind of ornamentation previously unknown was found in Ireland: interlacings. The hypothesis is often proposed that this decorative motif was imported directly from Egypt. However, the fact that certain of these most evolved forms have been discovered in Coptic art does not constitute a decisive argument. Similar tendencies existed in Byzantine and Italian art.

Nordenfalk's brief list could be completed by adding the art of the Mesopotamians, Hittites, and Chaldeans, all of which accorded interlacings a privileged place, if one believes the objects discovered at Susa dating from 3000-2500 B.C. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that the Copts were very inventive in the field of decoration, notably in breaking monotony with interlacings. On the stringcourse at the base of the southern [church](#) at BAWIT?, two braided stalks enclose animals, while squares and circles are interlaced. But one wonders whether this is sufficient reason to maintain that the interlacing motif or that of the fully illuminated page indicate Coptic influences in Ireland.

Interlacings

J. Baltrusaitis believes that between the Hittite and Coptic eras, interlacings were preserved by the barbarians, in particular the Scythian populations of the southeastern steppes of Europe and the shores of the Black Sea (1929, p. 38). This opinion is especially interesting if placed in a Celtic context.

Since the third century, the interlacing motif appeared on Coptic textiles conserved by the tens of thousands (du Bourguet, 1964, p. 17), and is later found on Coptic manuscripts, along with many other [motifs](#) that the Celts also held in high esteem at a very ancient epoch. The stylization of geometric lines—both rectilinear and curvilinear—which was pushed to the extreme, did not belong solely to Coptic civilization. Disks, wheels, crescents, spirals, interlacings and scrolls, chevrons, triangles, squares and rectangles? these were not born in Celtic Europe.

Rather, they came from Eritrea, Greece, and the plateaus of Iran, and thus were borrowed forms to which the Celts gave a completely original plastic art and sacred meaning. In 1927 a pair of Celtic *oinokhoai* (cans for ladling wine) was discovered near Metz, France (fourth century B.C., bronze, British Museum). They offer not only an interesting synthesis of Greek art with that of Asia Minor but also attest to the Celts' knowledge of decorative interlacing. These *oinokhoai* formed the subject of an in-depth study in an unpublished paper by J. V. S. Megaw. It is thought-provoking to see how and when the Celts came into contact with the Mediterranean civilization, even to the point of abandoning the purely geometric style that animated their first works.

From the end of the Hallstadian period (c. 530 B.C.), Celtic art was influenced by figurative Mediterranean art, as is attested by P. M. Duval and V. Kruta (1982, p. 25). Later, in contact with the Etruscans—alongside whom they lived for nearly thirty years (480- 450 B.C.) (Duval and Kruta, 1982, p. 28)—they transformed the human figure by stylizing it to the ultimate of the fantastic and monstrous, as may be seen on the ornamentation of the handles of the two *oinokhoai* from Basse-Yutz (Moselle) (Smith, 1929, pp. 1- 12; Jacobsthal, 1969, no. 381, pls. 178-83; Duval, 1977, pp. 54 and 310).

The repertoire of Celtic ornamental [motifs](#) was further enriched as a result of new Italian and Balkan conquests. O. Klindt-Jensen (1982, p. 83) asserts that “the Celtic style was influenced by the Orient from the

beginning . . . it was not a question of direct contacts, but rather of spiritual affinities. . . .” According to him, Thrace was the liaison that—because of its geographic location— was in constant contact with both the Balkans and Asia Minor.

Klindt-Jensen also states that the eastern art of the Balkans influenced the Scythians, as is evidenced by the objects discovered during the excavations of Kelermos and Melguenov: “One should not ignore the role played by the Scythian artisans around the Celts as intermediaries with the Oriental elements,” an opinion confirming that of Baltrusaitis. It is evident that the interlacings at the base of the *oinokhoai* in the British Museum, which are of a similar date, can only have an eastern, but non-Coptic, inspiration.

At Waldalgesheim (Germany) around 250 B.C., the interlacing motif appears on numerous objects. Spirals interlace: “no separate spiral is visible; one sees only one tendril” (Duval and Kruta, 1982, Fig. 11). According to Klindt-Jensen, intellectual affinities without direct contact could well have existed between Coptic Egypt and Ireland. However, the essentially spiritual nature of these affinities must be emphasized.

Ireland

Ireland—that veritable “conservatory of Celticism” spared by the Roman conquest—had a destiny very different from that of the other countries of Europe at the beginning of the Christian era. This distant country, enclosed within itself, was to develop an art that mixed all the influences received by the Celts during their formidable period of expansion, an expansion definitively interrupted in the first century of the Christian era when the [Romans](#) put an end to the Celtic powers, except the kingdoms of Ireland.

If one wishes to admit the very simple hypothesis of a strong and unique Celtic influence on Irish illuminated books, one must cite the influence

that Gaul exercised on Ireland; this would have come only through the Druids who took refuge in Ireland, and later through monasticism (see below). In Gaul, Roman pavings with interlacing decoration flourished from the beginning of the Christian era everywhere in the South, in the provinces of Narbonensis, Lugdunensis, and Aquitania (Stern and Glay, 1975, Vol. 3, pl. 3 and 72).

Closer still to Ireland, Great Britain adopted the interlacing motif as seen on the marvelous treasure of Sutton Hoo (seventh century A.D.). Thus the different [motifs](#) exploited by the English silversmiths on the objects of the royal cenotaph of Sutton Hoo appear also on the Book of Durrow: checkerboards, spirals, interlacings, and Greek key patterns.

The Fully Illuminated Page

The same may be said for the fully illuminated page that the Copts supposedly passed to the Irish monks.

To take the oft-cited example of the great aniconical crosses painted at the head of manuscripts and across the full page, which is rather significant, “The oldest depiction of these aniconical crosses that we possess appears to be that conserved at the Leningrad Library, folio 2 of a manuscript dated 462” (Leroy, 1964, p. 2, pl. 4).

The fully illuminated pages seem to have appeared in Syria before they appeared in Egypt. The examples of ornamental crosses given by J. Leroy (1964, Syr. 30, fol. 62; Syr. 70, fol. 1; Syr. 40, fol. 10v, 1. 4, pls. 1, 2, and 3), dating from the end of the tenth century to the beginning of the twelfth and kept in the [National Library](#) in Paris, precede the great Coptic crosses that appear on the [Bohairic-Arabic](#) manuscript of A.D. 1319, the Pentateuch of A.D. 1398, and the Bohairic-Arabic manuscript of A.D. 1547 cited by M. Cramer (1969, pp. 46 and 47), though these are very similar to the Syrian crosses decorated with interlacings.

It is true that on Irish manuscripts, the intersecting foliated branch and the intersected cross (or the two scepters) are often held by the Evangelists in the traditional pose of Osiris, and a Coptic origin is often suggested for this. But the Copts did not adopt the Osirian poses in their own iconography for the Evangelists, and thus they cannot be at the origin of this Irish iconography.

“Illuminations—of clear [Pharaonic](#) tradition—do not seem to have appealed to Coptic scribes” (du Bourguet, 1967, p. 104) before the ninth century. However, the influence of Coptic Egypt on Ireland seems evident to one great specialist of Irish art, F. Henry, who believes that it was because of the circulation of Oriental textiles that the Irish were inspired by forms and [motifs](#) belonging to the repertoire of the Orient: “The Occidental world was filled with Oriental textiles used for hangings or to enwrap the relics, just as the heavy and stylized personages that the Copts had the habit of drawing must have inspired the Irish artists” (Henry, p. 51).

True, the distribution of Middle Eastern textiles in Western Europe was accomplished by merchants, but one wonders if they were specifically Coptic. These textiles convey an overall decoration of great richness and variety whose influence is undeniable, but this decoration is found throughout the entire Mediterranean basin at the same period. However, tradition maintains that Coptic influence spread through Ireland thanks to the monks who copied in the scriptoria. This powerful monastic phenomenon that developed in Ireland during the fifth century owed, as did [Gallic](#) monasticism, the essence of its spirituality to Egypt.

Everyone agrees on this, but the role played by Gaul itself in the spread of Egyptian monasticism is not cited often enough. Saint Martin of Tours founded Ligugé in 360 after the Egyptian model. According to L. Bouyer (1950, p. 15), the *Vita Antonii* began to circulate in Gaul from 370, after the arrival of Saint Athanasius in Trier. But it was not until the return of [John CASSIAN](#) and Jerome from Egypt, that is, the first years of the fifth

century, that Ireland (like Great Britain and Spain) became aware of this *Vita*. Nonetheless, this suffices for many scholars to establish a relationship between Coptic and Irish art. This common point of relationship between the two countries has too easily served as a basis for affirming—without proof—that the Irish art of illumination found its source in Egypt.

Coptic Monks in Ireland

One trail, however, may lead from Egypt to Ireland. An Irish saint of the eighth century named Oengus the Culdée accorded a place in his writings to the foreign fathers, abbots and monks, buried in Ireland.

Saint Oengus or Aengus, called “le Culdée” (anchorite) because of the mortifications he inflicted upon himself as a young man, was born near the monastery founded by Saint Fintan at Clonegah in Ireland. His mysticism and profound devotion made him a remarkable poet. He left a considerable work known in Irish as *Feílire* (in Latin; *Festilogium de Sancti Aengus*). This work was not compiled in one place alone. According to E. O’Curry (*Leabhar breac*), Saint Aengus began his long poem at Cuil Bennchair in County Offaly, continued it at Cluain Eidhnech, and completed it during his priesthood at Tallagh. O’Curry, who spent years studying the manuscript of Aengus, thinks that it was written before, or at the very latest, in 798, as no saint who died after this date is named (Stokes, 1907, pp. 176f.).

Saint Aengus seems to have literally venerated the saints of his country. In his First Book he lists 345 bishops and 229 priests and abbots of Ireland, about whom he gives valuable information. The Second Book is known by the name of *Homonymi*, and refers to all the saints having the same name. It is divided into two parts, the first fifty chapters devoted to the holy men and the last twelve to the holy women of Ireland.

The Third Book is devoted to the genealogy of the saints, while the Fourth

Book treats the maternal ancestry of 210 saints. The Fifth Book, comprising part of the *Martyrology of Tallagh* and entitled *Book of Litanies* (cf. bibliography for Tallagh), is of particular interest. Here, in the form of an invocation, Saint Aengus enumerates the names of the principal saints and their disciples and introduces the names of several foreigners, among whom are some Copts who lived as hermits on the island and were buried there. In principle, this litany refers to the Oriental abbots, fathers, monks, and ecclesiastics who, attracted by Irish monasticism, lived in Ireland in the second half of the eighth century.

G. T. Stokes, the eminent specialist of Irish literature, explains that, during the iconoclastic crisis, the monks violently defied the Byzantine emperor and the iconoclasts made war against the monasteries, forcing the monks to seek refuge in the West. However, at this time, the Copts, who were under the Muslim yoke, had no relations with the iconoclastic Byzantine rulers. Thus this “exodus” cannot be connected to the iconoclastic crisis.

Conclusion

The testimony of Aengus actually offers little information about the Copts buried in Ireland during the eighth century, and it is questionable whether it explains a Coptic influence on Irish manuscripts or on the tomb of Agilbert of Jouarre (Hubert, 1967, p. 77). All these mysterious resemblances, which supposedly connect Bawit to Jouarre, or Coptic illuminations to those of Ireland, may be rather the common fruit of an awakening medieval art. Likewise, it cannot be confirmed that the Copts mentioned by Saint Aengus brought with them to Ireland any famous Coptic textiles or manuscripts that could have transmitted the idea to Irish illuminators for the decoration or iconography of their manuscripts.

Moreover, we do not know what books might have existed at the end of the eighth or beginning of the ninth century in such great Irish centers as Iona, Clonmacnoise, and Echternach, or what pictures might have

inspired their painters. However, it seems logical to assume that the Celtic illuminators working in the scriptoria of Ireland profited from the experience acquired over the centuries by bronzesmiths, silversmiths, and goldsmiths, on the one hand, and by the Oriental scriptoria on the other.

In fact, the influence of Syrian manuscripts might possibly be explained by the presence of the Irish in Rome (where they went in order to ascertain how the date of Easter was set) during the end of the seventh century. It is true that there must have been some exchange between Syria and Egypt in all artistic domains, including illumination. Certain elements of Coptic decoration could have slipped into Syrian illuminations and then been lost in the mass of [motifs](#) that made the Oriental manuscripts great. But this would have been very late, and in any case not before the twelfth century.

In summary, the source of a motif upon which are based nearly all the relations proposed between Irish and Coptic art—that of interlacing—is to be sought some three centuries before the Christian era. During the first centuries, interlacing and the fully illuminated page were reinforced in Europe itself by influences from Syria and Constantinople. Consequently, there is nothing to indicate any connection, in either the arrangement of the [motifs](#) or the style, to the Copts.

The arrival in Ireland of an isolated group of a few Coptic monks who were buried there cannot suffice as evidence that they brought Coptic decorated textiles; direct proof is necessary, which no tomb or manuscript has yet revealed. Coptic illumination began only in the twelfth century, and there is no indication that it crossed the Mediterranean or English Channel at that time. Further, the sole knowledge of Coptic monasticism and its founders cannot furnish any kind of argument for the introduction of Coptic [motifs](#) into Ireland.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baltrusaitis, J. *Etudes sur l'art médiéval [en](#) Géorgie et en Arménie*. Paris, 1929.
- Bourguet, P. du. *Catalogue des étoffes coptes*. Musée national du Louvre. Paris, 1964.
- . *L'Art copte*. Paris, 1967.
- Bouyer, L. *La Vie de saint Antoine*. Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1950.
- Cramer, M. *[Koptische](#) Buchmalerei*. Recklinghausen, 1964.
- Duval, P. M. *Les Celtes*. Paris, 1977.
- Duval, P. M., and V. Kruta. *L'Art celtique de la période d'expansion—IVème et IIIème siècle avant notre ère*. Geneva, 1982.
- Henry, F. *Irish Art in the [Early Christian](#) Period*. London, 1940; 1947; 1965; Ithaca, N.Y., 1965.
- Hubert, J. *L'Europe des invasions*. Paris, 1967; New York, 1969.
- Jacobsthal, P. *Early Celtic Art*, Vols. 1 and 2. Oxford, 1944, 1969.
- Klindt-Jensen, O. "[Motifs](#) orientalisants." In *L'Art celtique de la période d'expansion IVème et IIIème Siècles*. Paris, 1982.
- Leroy, J. *Les Manuscrits syriaques*. Institut français d'Archéologie de Beyrouth, 1964.
- Nordenfolk, C. *L'Enluminure moyen-age*, trans. Henri Stierlin and Pontus Grate. Geneva, 1988.
- O'Curry, E. *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History*. Dublin, 1861. Repr. Dublin and London, 1873; Dublin, 1878; 2 vols., New York, 1965.
- Smith, R. A. "On the Basse Yutz Flagons." *Archaeologia* 79 (1929):1-12.
- Stern, H. and M. Glay. *La Mosaïque gréco-romaine*, Vols. 1 and 2. Deuxième colloque international pour l'étude de la mosaïque antique. Vienna, 30 August to 4 September 1971. Paris, 1975.
- Stokes, G. T. *Ireland and the Celtic [Church](#)*. London, 1907.
- Tallagh. The oldest copy of the *Martyrology of Tallagh* is found in the book of Leinster. A Brussels manuscript (very incomplete), which is a

copy of the *Martyrology*, was probably copied from the book of Leinster, conserved in the Franciscan monastery of Dublin. The Book of Litanies, the fifth book of the *Martyrology of Tallagh*, was translated and published in its entirety, with notes and explanations at the foot of the page, in the *Irish Ecclesiastic Record*, Vol. 8, no. 32, May-June, 1867.

MONIQUE BLANC

PIERRE DU BOURGUET, S.J.

Tags: [Heritage](#), [History](#)