

The Celts: unknown masters of ancient enamelling and rulers of Europe

by Attilio Compagnoni – Creativ-Kreis-International Italia

The Celts are an ancient people, whose presence in Europe precedes the great Roman and German civilizations by a few centuries. Their origins, their relevance to the history of enamelling are an interesting subject for study.

ORIGINS: THE HALLSTATT CULTURE

Scholars believe that the first Celtic branch left Asia and settles in central Europe at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC; their most important settlement is the one in the Hallstatt village, East of Salzburg, Austria, where the archaeologists dug an ancient salt mine and a foundry that had a huge historical relevance for the time. It is such an important settlement that it is considered the type-site of Proto-Celtic society for the period 1200-500 BC.

SCATTERING, APOGEE AND DELINE: THE LA TÈNE CULTURE

From the 8th to the 6th century BC, the Celts got in touch with the Scythian culture, of Caucasian origin, whose dominions about 500 BC extended to the borders of present-day Austria. The Scythians were skilled goldsmiths, enamellists, and melters, as witnessed by the several archaeological discoveries in Crimea and Azerbaijan. At this time, the Celts began to expand with ease beyond the Austrian borders, scattering into several tribes across half Europe.

In the 1st century BC chronicles, the Celts were known under different names: Gauls in France and Northern Italy; Britons, Cimbri and Gaels in Great Britain; Belgians in Northern France, the Netherlands and present-day Belgium; Celtiberians in Spain and Portugal; Pannonians in the Western Balkans; Galatians in the Eastern Balkans and Turkey. They were guided by a warrior aristocracy and by the Druids, a priestly chaste. Despite their belligerent nature and their spread through Europe that made of them a pain in the neck of the emerging Roman power, in 300 BC they were progressively absorbed by other cultures and nations. The last heirs of this culture now live in Bretagne (France), Cornwall (England), Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and the little Island of Man in the Irish Sea, where the Celtic languages are still spoken nowadays.



L'ARTE CELTICA: TUTT'ALTRO CHE "BARBARICA"

L'arte dei Celti era fondata soprattutto sulla creazione di motivi geometrici come decorazione per la ceramica e i metalli. Proprio nel caso dei metalli, i Celti si sono rivelati abili artigiani. I ritrovamenti dimostrano che essi eccellevano tanto nei pochi **monili in oro**, realizzati con uno stile del tutto simile a quello degli Sciti, quanto nell'innovativa tecnica dello smalto **champlevé su fusione in bronzo**.

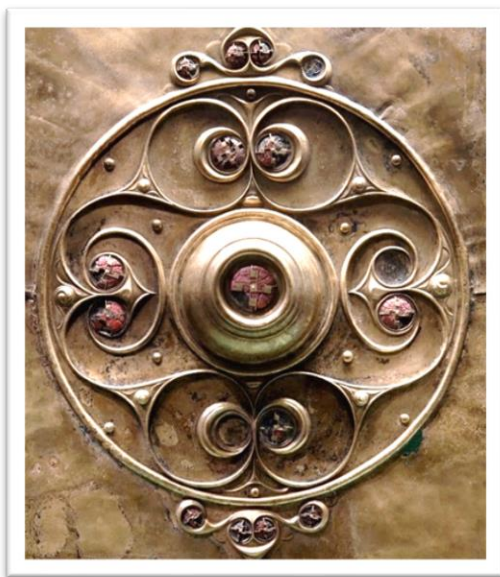
CELTIC ART: ANYTHING BUT "BARBARIAN"

The art of the Celts was founded foremost on the creation of geometric patterns as decoration for ceramics and metals. In the latter case, the Celts have proven skilled craftsmen. Archaeology shows that they excelled in the production of gold jewels, similar in style to those of the Scythians, as well as in the innovative champlevé enamel on bronze fusion.

The Celts used champlevé enamel and, seldom, cloisonné enamel, mostly for the decoration of fibulae, ceremonial helmets, shields, armours, and horse harnesses.



On the left: Amfreville helmet, bronze, golden sheet and encrusted enamels, around 350 BC.
On the right: Breteuil fibula (Oise, France), bronze with encrusted enamels, 1st century AD.



Detail from the **Battersea shield**, 2nd-1st century BC, bronze with encrusted enamels, a rare case of cloisonné technique.

The champlevé on bronze technique that had never been used earlier outside the Celtic world; the Romans and Germans acquired it when they conquered and assimilated them, beginning in the 1st century BC.

Unjustly represented in history as “Barbarians” (a word used to identify whoever did not belong to the Greek-Roman culture), the Celts really were a refined people with noteworthy artistic skill.

In the early 1st century AD, the Germanic peoples on the shores of the Rhine river had already conquered the Celts and acquired their enamelling on bronze technique. The conquest of Germany under the Flavian Dynasty (69-96 AD), the Imperial soldiers on the front began to apply this technology to the creation of fibulae and other decorations for armours.

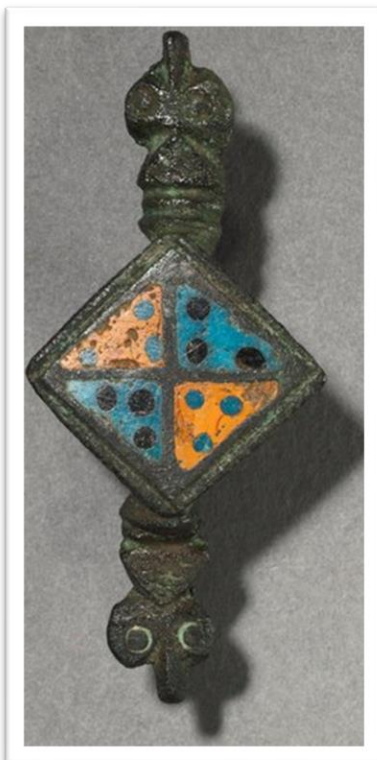


Roman-Barbarian fibula, champlévé enamel on bronze, part of the equipment of a 1st century BC Roman soldier; ArTchivio Museum, Ponte San Pietro.

INFLUENCE OF CELTIC ENAMELLING ON ROMAN ART

During the 2nd century AD, Emperor Adrian (117-138) conquered and latinized England, confining the last Celtic survivors in Northern Britain and Ireland. Celtic art continued to flourish here also in the milieu of enamelling. A beautiful witness to Celtic-style champlévé on bronze was created for the Romans during this period: the Ilam Pan. Found in the Staffordshire Moorlands area, near the Wall of Adrian, this bronze pan is decorated with champlévé enamel Celtic geometric patterns and Latin inscriptions, a witness to the fact that, despite the war going on, the two cultures maintained a fruitful cultural exchange.

According to the most recent research, during the Roman invasion period, several Romano-British brooches have been found along the Wall of Adrian, produced in the Celtic manufactures (Frances McIntosh, A study into Romano-British enamelling with a particular focus on brooches, Newcastle University, 2009).



A sinistra: spilla romano-britannica del II secolo d.C., ritrovata presso il Vallo di Adriano. Sotto: Trulla di Ilam, 200 d.C. circa, champlévé su bronzo con motivi geometrici celtici e iscrizioni latine.



THE CELTIC TECHNIQUE: AN HISTORICAL DESCRIPTION

An important written witness to the enamelling technique of the Celts dates to 200-250 AD. Describing a Celtic hunting scene portrayed on a painting on display in a Neapolitan villa, writer Philostratus of Lemnos the Elder wrote these words on their horse harnesses:

“These pigments, it is said, the barbarians living by the Ocean compound of red-hot bronze, and they combine, and grow hard, and preserve what is painted with them”

(Philostratus of Lemnos, *Imagines* 1.28, 3rd century AD).

CELTIC HERITAGE IN THE MIDDLE AGE

After the Roman troops retreated from the British Isles, the Celts mixed their art with that of the Anglo-Saxon invaders, originating the so-called Insular Art. This is the last historical heir of the Celtic culture in the field of enamelling, whose most representative example is probably the Sutton Hoo Burial Ship Treasure, combining fruitfully the geometric symbols and the preferred colours of the Celts (mainly red, blue and yellow) with the representations of stylized animals and the cloisonné enamelling on gold technique, as typical of German and late-Roman art. This style reached its apogee about 800 AD, and survived in Ireland at least until the 12th century BC, before giving away to Romanic art.



Shoulder clasps from the Sutton-Hoo Burial Ship site. Cloisonné on gold with garnet inlays and white and blue millefiori glass melted in the cloisons like enamel, around 650 AD.

CONCLUSION

Despite almost skipped in the history books, the Celts had a **fundamental role in the Western art and culture**. All of us who dedicate ourselves to enamel should recognize a great merit of the Celts: that of passing the secrets of enamelling down from generation to generation in Western Europe, making it possible for the technique to re-emerge as a protagonist of Medieval art and onwards.

AN EXTRACT FROM:

I CELTI: MOSTRA A PALAZZO GRASSI, ED. BOMPIANI, 1991

Article by Günther Haseloff, Page 639

Lo smalto in epoca lateniana

In epoca lateniana, lo smalto veniva usato dai Celti per l'ornamentazione policroma dei loro lavori in metallo. Era sempre di color rosso, anche se con l'andar del tempo la tonalità è mutata in seguito ad alterazioni chimiche. Lo smalto si accompagnava al corallo, pure utilizzato dai Celti. L'ipotesi di un tempo, secondo la quale l'utilizzazione del corallo sarebbe più antica e sarebbe stata sostituita da quella dello smalto a causa della scarsità della materia prima, è stata dimostrata erronea dalle ricerche condotte da Paul Jacobsthal, che ha provato come corallo e smalto rosso compaiono contemporaneamente l'uno accanto all'altro.

Composizione chimica dello smalto rosso

Lo smalto rosso usato dai Celti consiste di vetro di quarzo con piccole aggiunte di piombo. Il colore veniva ottenuto mediante aggiunta di monossido di rame, Cu_2O . Poiché nel normale processo di fusione il monossido di rame a causa del calore si trasforma in biossido di rame, CuO , di colore verde sporco, doveva venire sottoposto a un ulteriore intervento mediante riduzione, vale a dire, con eliminazione di ossigeno. Nella maggioranza dei casi sembra che la massa vetrosa rossa venisse riscaldata solo al punto da renderla molle, per poi inserirla nelle cavità già predisposte. Per una miglior aderenza dello smalto sul fondo metallico, questo veniva reso ruvido. Nelle officine per lo smalto scoperte a Bibracte (Mont Beuvray) sono stati rinvenuti numerosi lavori in metallo dai quali lo smalto si era distaccato perché non perfettamente aderente.

Tecniche

Sono riconoscibili due diverse tecniche di impiego dello smalto. In una, viene versato semifuso in cavità (*email champlévé*), mentre nell'altra viene collocato sul metallo in sovrapposizione e fissato mediante perni.

Esempi della prima tecnica, quella dell'*email champlévé*, sono offerti tra l'altro dall'elmo di Amfreville, dagli anelli passaredini del corredo funerario di Waldalgesheim (nei quali lo smalto si è staccato), dal disco di Cuperly, nel quale quattro borchie convesse sono ornate di smalto rosso, e infine dalle due *Schnabelkannen* di Basse-Yutz sulla Mosella, nelle quali il coperchio è ornato con la tecnica dello smalto colato in cavità.

Per quanto riguarda il secondo sistema, ricorderemo l'elmo di Saint-Jean-Trolimon (Finistère), sul quale si trovano anche resti di corallo, ma soprattutto i numerosi *torques* a dischi, le cui superfici circolari sono ornate con sovrapposizioni in smalto, per lo più saldate mediante un perno. Le decorazioni più o meno plastiche in smalto sono molto spesso lavorate con motivi a incisione. Valgano da esempi il *torquis* di Nebringen nel Baden-Württemberg, quella dalla Marna (Museo di Saint-Germain) con sovrapposizioni in smalto disposte radialmente e una fibula da Münsingen (tomba 63), con il piede decorato a smalto.

Su una serie di oggetti si ha l'impiego sia di smalto che di corallo. Ne sono esempi gli anelli passaredini di Waldalgesheim, i dischi da Berru e il *torquis* a dischi dalla Marna che ha tre dischi con applicazioni in smalto assai ben conservate; mentre nei solchi alle estremità del *torquis* sono inseriti coralli di forma allungata. Infine, le due *Schnabelkannen* di Basse-Yutz, in gran parte decorate con corallo, presentano sul coperchio un bell'esempio di smalto a *champlévé*.

We thank artist Franco Longhi for the gift of this book that stimulated our research.