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HUM120
HISTORY OF
WESTERN ART

INSTRUCTOR
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(Donna's Lecture Week 4: Early Medieval and Romanesque Art)

CHAPTER 14

1. EARLY MEDIEVAL art derives from Germanic and late Roman traditions, and by pre-Christian art from Northern Europe and the Islamic art of Spain.

After the 5th century fall of the Western Roman Empire, control of the areas in Northern Europe—which Romans had inhabited—reverted to Germanic tribes: the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Alemanni, Angles, Saxons, and Franks. These artists worked in the geometric style of the Bronze and Iron Ages and also created fearsome and imaginative “animal style” creatures.

Christianity strengthened and flourished in areas previously Roman. It helped unify the many diverse populations of Europe as it spread to Ireland and even Scandinavia, which had never been ruled by Rome. In the 8th century the German emperor Charlemagne sought to revive the glory of the Empire of Constantine and to reestablish exclusive Christian control over the West, while simultaneously Muslims had made inroads as far as Spain.

NOTE: Muslim was also a monotheistic religion ‘of the Book’ however Muslims were far more tolerant of Jews than were Christians. Muslims recognized both Abraham and Jesus as part of their religion in advance of Muhammed. Unfortunately, while Muslims were willing to accept Christians, the Christians took them for infidels and set out to destroy them.

NOTE: both Islam and Christianity were—and continue to be—missionary religions. They both set out to convert others to their beliefs and this developed into a fundamental conflict over ultimate control. This conflict became responsible for the Crusades.

Meanwhile Anglo-Saxon and Hiberno-Saxon (*Hiberno* = Irish) cultures grew from a fusion of Celtic, Germanic, and Romanized British traditions. During this time there was a cultural clash as Christianity overtook Pagan religions of area.

2. In addition to the exquisite examples of metal jewelry and military objects, Anglo-Saxon and Hiberno-Saxon cultures are also known for producing highly decorated illuminated manuscripts. *The Book of Kells*, a wonderful example of Hiberno-Saxon Gospels, was probably made in the late 8th century in a monastery on Iona, an island off the west coast of Scotland. In it we see how Hiberno-Saxon scribes melded pagan tradition with Christian gospels. The most famous *folio* (manuscript page) in *The Book of Kells* shows the Gospel of Matthew that begins the account of Jesus’ birth.

The Greek letters *chi rho iota* (*XPI*) form the abbreviation for *Christi*, the first word in the Latin sentence *Christi autem generatio*, “Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.” Medieval scribes learned many standard abbreviations for Latin words, and used them like modern shorthand to save time and space in transcribing long documents or copying texts.

NOTE many animal and human forms hidden in the abstracted letters, i.e. a red-headed boy nestled in the curve of the *rho* at the center of the page, possibly symbolizing Jesus. Three angels hold the left of the long stroke of the letter, an otter catches a salmon and pairs of cats capture mice. The cat and mouse scene symbolizes triumph of good (cats) over evil (mice). We will observe this *iconography* again in the work of Northern Renaissance artists.

3. *Gummersmark Brooch* is a large silver-gilt pin made in 6th-century Denmark. It uses several motifs such as spirals, humans, and dragons, interlaced. The viewer must look carefully to identify them. *Gummersmark Brooch* is believed to have been used to fasten a cloak to someone’s shoulders.

4. *Purse Cover* from Sutton Hoo Burial Ship. An early 7th century burial mound in Sutton England contained the grave of an unidentified individual and full of wonderful early medieval metalwork. The occupant was buried in an 86' long ship with weapons, armor and other equipment for the afterlife. The purse lid is decorated with cloisonné enamel with designs based on many sources, with animal interlace forming the central piece. This style grew from the then-popular Scandinavia *animal style*.

NOTE: similarities in the interwoven serpentine with those on the *Gummersmark Brooch*, and the pairs of animals flanking human figures are reminiscent of the animal combat theme prevalent throughout the ancient near east. NOTE the center in which two pair of Norse hawks attack Celtic ducks. Also see p428 ‘Recovering the Past,’ and 14-4, *Hinged Claps* from Sutton Hoo Burial Ship.

5. Detail, *Purse Cover*

