THE ART OF REJECTION – Balkan Celtic Art

Classical portrait of Philip II of Macedonia (left – Glyptotek Collection of classical and modern art – Copenhagen) and portrait reconstruction by the University of Manchester (right – after Prag J., 2003)

The Celtic coins based on the Philip II model, and the images portrayed on them, have variously been defined as ‘illiterate copies of Hellenistic models’ or ‘barbarian attempts to produce classical images’. However, as illustrated below, when these ‘barbarian’ images are put into their proper historical and artistic context, a different picture begins to emerge.

The artistic processes visible on Celtic coins from the Balkans during this period clearly illustrate that the abstract/surrealist images that developed were the result of a conscious and deliberate rejection of Greco–Roman art and experimentation with alternative artistic ideas that would not resurface in European art until the modern era.
Some of the early Celtic imitations (Fig. 2), as in the case of the Thasos and Philip III models (see relevant sections), remain fairly close to the Hellenistic originals, even copying the Greek inscription. These coins clearly illustrate that Celtic craftsmen were perfectly capable of reproducing both classical images and inscriptions in the Greek alphabet, if they so desired. From the end of the 3rd c. BC, however, we witness a movement into ‘uncharted waters’ and the emergence of ‘barbarized’ images which marked Celtic coinage and numismatic art in the centuries that followed:
Artistic evolution of Celtic (Philip II model) coinage from Romania / Bulgaria (3rd – 1st c. BC):

Process 1 (Lateral Vision):

Phase 1

Phase 2

Phase 3
Process 2 (Moonhead):

Phase 1

Phase 2

Phase 3

Phase 4
Process 3 (The Butterfly):

Phase 1

Phase 2

Phase 3
Process 4 (The Fat Man):

Phase 1

Phase 2

Phase 3

Phase 4
Process 5 (Snakehead):

Phase 1

Phase 2

Phase 3
Process 6 – (Deus ex Machina):

Phase 1

Phase 2

Phase 3
Process 7 - (The Harpider):
Part 2 - FROM GODS TO MATCHSTICK MEN –
The Art of the Scordisci Wars

It is said that art mirrors life, and nowhere is this to be more clearly observed than in the art produced by the ‘barbarian’ tribes during the Scordisci Wars of the late 2nd / 1st c. BC.

Fig. 1 – Original Thasos AR tetradrachm, 164/160 BC.

Wreathed head of Dionysos right. ΗΡΑΚΛΕΟΥΣ ΣΩΤΗΡΟΣ ΘΑΣΙΩΝ, M inner left field, Herakles standing left, holding club and lion skin

The original Greek issues (fig. 1) depict typical examples of Hellenistic art – static and anatomically accurate images of Greek Gods, in this case Dionysos and Herakles. In the original Thasos images idealization of the subject is to be observed, a trait typical of Hellenistic art.

In the second half of the 2nd c. BC the ‘barbarian’ tribes of today’s Bulgaria began to copy the Thasos coins. Early imitations (Fig. 2/3) remain very close to the Greek original, both in terms of imagery and the use of Greek inscriptions on the coins. Indeed, some of the early copies are so close to the originals that experts have great difficulty distinguishing them from the Hellenistic originals.
However, even at this early stage certain divergences from the originals are to be observed. These coins, while remaining true to the Greek iconography and continuing to use the Greek inscription/alphabet, begin to show clear distinguishing characteristics. For example, the head of Dionysos on the obverse begins to take on more masculine characteristics – square chin, larger nose, etc., which is at variance with the effeminate features of the Greek deity on the originals.
In the early decades of the 1st c. BC the real process of artistic metamorphosis begins. The subjects take on a more abstract aspect, and attempts to ‘copy’ the Hellenistic images and inscriptions are abandoned.

Fig. 4 – Celtic ‘Thasos type’ tetradrachma minted over that of the Roman Quaestor Aesillas (early 1st c. BC)

On Herakles’ left knee the Q (short for Quaestor – similar to English P) can be seen. There are also faint traces of Alexander’s hair locks at the metal disturbance in Dionysos’ cheek from the Roman original. The historical context in which these coins were produced – during a bitter struggle between the ‘barbarians’ and the Roman empire, should be borne in mind. From a psychological perspective the fact that the Celtic population in Thrace took the trouble to mint over the Roman/Hellenistic coins, instead of simply using the classical issues, is a clear political statement – a rejection of the classical images portrayed on the originals, and by extension the culture which had produced them (see ‘Plunder Coins’ article).
During this period new details also begin to appear, such as the case in fig. 5, where the lion–skin of Herakles on the reverse of the Greek coin has now been transformed into a child in the Celtic image.

The brutal conflict with Rome during the final phases of the Scordisci Wars, and the accompanying misery of everyday life, is reflected in increasingly abstract and surreal images. A metamorphosis is to be observed in the images which reflect core Celtic religious iconography, foremost among them the image of the human headed serpent which has evolved on the obverse (fig. 6), or the appearance of the bird goddess, depicting the Badhbh Chatha – the Celtic Goddess of War (fig. 7/8) (see also ‘Birds of Prey’ article).
At this stage the subjects on the reverse become even more schematic, depicting images such as the ‘Wicker Man’, or the clawed creature depicted in fig. 9, images which reflect the final phases of a brutal war – a conflict which shortly afterwards culminated in the destruction of the culture which produced them.

Fig. 9
3 - The Birth of the Icon

The process of metamorphosis in Celtic art in Bulgaria during the 3rd – 1st c. BC may best be observed in the Philip III model which most clearly allows us to follow the chronological framework in which this occurred. (On the distribution of these Celtic coins in Bulgaria see Numismatic section 1)

On the original Macedonian ‘prototype’ (Fig. 1) the images are idealized, but constructively/anatomically precise. This approach reflects the glorification of physical beauty and strength in its idealized form, an approach typical of classical art.

![Fig. 1 - Original Philip III of Macedonia Tetradrachm (4th c. BC)](image)

The coins of Philip III Arrhidaeus (a half brother of Alexander III), and other Macedonian models from this period, were constrained by the norms of classical art. Classical numismatic artists worked within strict constraints because their art was, above all, a form of political propaganda. In such an atmosphere art does not develop naturally, but stagnates.

What happens when these conditions do not exist? What develops when art is dictated, not by princes and merchants, but by the artists alone? In the centuries before Christ on the Balkan peninsula we witness a period of experimentation among ‘barbarian’ artists which resulted in a crescendo of ideas expressed in an explosion of images.
In the earliest Celtic models from the 3rd c. BC we observe some of the changes typical of Celtic art. Anatomical detail gives way to the increasing emphasis on the circular form of the composition, while still remaining relatively faithful to the original Hellenistic model, both in terms of artistic style and the use of Greek in the inscription.

Fig. 2 – Celtic Cavaros Tetradrachm (3rd c. BC)

Fig. 3 – Celtic Lilarkii Tetradrachm (3rd c. BC)

Fig. 4 – Celtic Orsoaltes Tetradrachm (3rd c. BC)
In fig. 3–5 the images become increasingly schematic. The most interesting feature in fig. 5 is the addition of a new symbol – an oval Celtic shield – in front of the throne.

From the 2nd c. BC the tendency towards abstractionism and an increasing emphasis on the composition is to be observed (fig. 6). The Greek inscription has been abandoned and replaced by symbols from the Celto–Etruscan alphabet. The limited but significant use of this alphabet on the Balkans is also to be observed on other Celtic coins and other artifacts during this period. At this stage portrait features are completely absent and the reverse image is an abstract composition of symbols, forms, and letters in a harmonious whole. On both sides of the coin the image has become more schematic, the composition based on simple geometric principles conforming to the circular nature of the coin.
In the 1st c. BC (fig 7–9) we witness a process of further experimentation which culminates in iconic images. In this final stage the composition has become so schematic and geometrically centralized that the inscription has become obsolete. The seated figure (fig. 9) is depicted with a nimbus (halo) and assumes an iconic function.

Fig. 7 – Celtic drachma (1st c. BC)

Fig. 8 – Celtic drachma (1st c. BC)

Fig. 9 – Celtic drachma (1st c. BC)
EVOLUTION OF CELTIC NUMISMATIC ART IN BULGARIA 3rd – 1st c. BC (Philip III model):

3rd c. BC

Late 3rd c. BC

2nd c. BC

1st c. BC
It has always been assumed that early Christian iconic art developed independently and replaced classical art. In this process we may observe how classical art itself was transformed by Celtic artists in the centuries before Christ. This transformation developed in a number of artistic directions, in this case giving birth to symbolic images which would later be called icons, glorifying not the human form itself, but the human spirit as an inseparable part of the divine.
The most exciting and enigmatic late Iron Age barbarian images are those found in the artistic processes on Celtic ‘imitations’ of the coinage of the Paeonian kings (on the chronology and dispersion of these coins see ‘A question of Perspective’ article).

The gradual Celtic migration into the western and central Balkans during the 4th c. BC (Mac Congail 2008; see also ‘Flight of the Ravens’ article) quickly resulted in the development of Celtic coinage based on Hellenistic models, including those of the kings of Paeonia. As with the Macedonian and Thasos models, initial Celtic ‘Paeonian’ models remained quite true to the classical style and iconography of the originals. However, by the 3rd /2nd c. BC artistic experimentation with the Hellenistic models had resulted in a metamorphosis of the core iconography, and the development of unique barbarian imagery – a fusion of Hellenistic and Celtic cultures which resulted in the first non-classical European numismatic art.
Fig. 1 – Early Celtic Imitation of Audoleon AR tetradrachm (c. 315–286 BC)

(BMC Celtic 116–117. Gobl OTA 402/1)

Fig. 2 – Early Celtic Imitation of Audoleon AR tetradrachm

(Castelin–pg.201#1221)
In this context, best recorded is the coinage based on images of the Paeonian king Audoleon (315 – 285 BC), which developed in a number of artistic directions, including the ‘Boxer’ process outlined below.

By the 2nd c. BC coinage based on the ‘Audoleon model’ has been transformed to such an extent that the original is barely recognizable, and in the barbarian issues the images on the reverse have developed a unique style which brings to mind the 20th century artistic movement known as naivism.

Fig. 3 – Celtic ‘imitation’ of Audoleon AR Tetradrachm, Kroisbach type with Reiterstumpf

(Gobl 469)
While the portrait on the obverse of fig. 3 displays the classical idealization of the subject, the rider on the reverse is represented only by a head and torso. The composition of both increasingly conforms to the circular nature of the canvass/coin.

In fig. 4 the classical idealization of the subject on the obverse has been transformed into a naturalistic portrayal of a Celtic chieftain – a rare phenomenon in Celtic art.

In fig. 5/6 the naturalistic features of the chieftain are further developed, and the subject is portrayed with a broken nose, logically indicating (if this is the same individual) that these are chronologically later than fig. 4.
Fig. 5 – Celtic ‘Imitation’ of Audoleon AR Tetradrachm. (Kroisbach type with Reiterstumpf. Broken Nose type)

Fig. 6 – Celtic ‘Imitation’ of Audoleon AR Tetradrachm. (Kroisbach type with Reiterstumpf. Broken Nose type (2nd/1st c. BC))
However, just as the process appears to develop logically towards a naturalistic portrait of the subject on the obverse, and a naivist approach to the horse/rider on the reverse, it takes an unexpected twist.

During the final phase of the process we see a return to the idealization of the subject on the obverse, wholly conforming to the circular composition. Perhaps most remarkable is the schematic/iconic portrayal of the horseman on the reverse. In this final phase the head/torso of the rider fuses with horse and the head is represented by a solar symbol – 9 smaller dots ‘revolving’ around a central larger dot.

Fig 7 – Late Celtic ‘Imitation’ of Audoleon AR Tetradrachm (Kroisbach type with Reiterstumpf (1st c. BC)
Both the ‘rayed sun’ and the fusion of rider and horse into one creature are common developments in late Iron Age Celtic art (fig. 8–10), and may represent the fusion of the human and the divine – the transformation of man into God.

**Fig 8 – Celtic Scyphate AR Tetradrachm from the Transylvanian Plain.** (Ringelkopfreiter type)

(Gobl 450A.1)

**Fig 9 – Celtic AR tetradrachm (Serbia).** (3rd/2nd c. BC. Helmschweifreiter type)

(Göbl, OTA 165)
Fig. 10 – Reverse of a Celtic AR Tetradrachm, Lower Danube (2nd c. BC)

(Gobl OTA–496)

The above images give us a unique insight into one of the most significant periods in European history – the twilight of the barbarian world. Most striking about them is the freedom of artistic expression that they portray. Artistic movements that we today call abstractionism, surrealism, and even post-modernism, are to be clearly recognized in these late Iron Age images.

In the dogmatic political and cultural structures of the Roman and early-Christian periods such freedom of expression became unthinkable and, like the people who had created them, the artistic ideas born of the ‘barbarian’ imagination were swallowed up in the tide of history. However, in these coins we get a fleeting glance into a period when, for the first time, European art had entered the dark sphere of the human imagination, moving the focus from the superficiality of classical art to a deeper perception of reality.
* Illustrations and text after Mac Congail/Krusseva 2010 = Мак Конгал Б., Крусева Б. Хората, които се превърнаха в слънце – Варварските изкуство и религия на Балканите. Пловдив 2010.
(The Men Who Became The Sun – Barbarian Art and Religion on the Balkans. Plovdiv 2010)