

## Celtic art©

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*"A circle in a spiral, a wheel within a wheel,  
Never ending or beginning, on an ever-spinning reel,  
As the images unwind, like the circles that you find,  
In the windmills of your mind."  
Noel Harrison, 1968*

Some of the oldest symbols associated with the Celts are spirals, which appear on Neolithic objects that have been dated as earlier than the oldest writing. In fact, Celtic spirals are almost as recognisable as Celtic knots. Many spirals can be seen at the Newgrange burial mound, but there are several interpretations from the cycle of rebirth to the mother goddess. However, we're starting with a very recognisable form – the triskel.

### *Triskels*

#### **What is a triskel?**

Well, perhaps an image would help. The triskelion symbol or triskel is three conjoined spirals around a central point. The origin of its name (triskelēs) is Greek and means *three legs*. Nature and the movement of life is one well-known meaning of the symbol, describing the past, present, and future, but it is not the only meaning, as we shall see. The symbol also shows strength in Celtic culture and determination in adversity.



So, it's a three-branched design with interlocking spirals, which gives the impression of movement. The triskel was often used as a basis for more complex spirals in Celtic art. In post-Celtic (Christian) Ireland, the symbol came to represent the Holy Trinity, ie God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But, there is little doubt that the spirals found in the ancient relics of Ireland were put there, because they represented things or ideas that were sacred to the indigenous people. And, as such, this shape would have been pre-Celtic – perhaps 2000 years before the Celtic culture took root in Ireland.

Some of the earliest forms of the Irish spiral or triskel shape have been dated to 2500 BCE at the main entrance to Newgrange chamber tomb in Meath and, similarly, to pottery that has been found in archaeological digs in Marne (France) and Mintraching (Bavaria). The triskels vary slightly, but are recognisable as double or triple spirals.

It should be noted that historical research into other ancient cultures reveals that the triskel design was also common in Greek or Mycenaean art, Korea, Japan, Sicily and Scandinavia.

### **What is the symbolism of a triskel?**

There are many interpretations of the symbolic meaning of triskels and the list below shows just a few of the more popular suggestions.

1. The triskel reflects the commonality of natural spirals, such as could be seen anywhere. Examples might include the spirals of sea shells, snails, plants, river eddies, etc.
2. The Celts divided their world view into threes, ie the three material domains of earth/ sea/ sky is a common reconstructionist belief.
3. Another threefold concept was the Celtic belief in the spiritual, celestial and present world; many Celtic deities are represented as having three faces.
4. Celtic society was split into three – druid priests, warrior kings and artisans/farmers.
5. Triskels and spirals can be seen as water-based symbols with their curves and impression of fluid motion.
6. Another threefold interpretation is to see the triskel as showing the seasonal cycle of time, ie life-death-rebirth. Each person's life starts at the centre, moves forward and wind back to the centre.
7. The triskel is connected to the mother goddess, Manannán, but some people also link the symbol to the goddess, Brigid.

The **directional aspect** of the triskel is important too. The first impression is that all three branches move outward from the centre so as to show forward energy or progress. Clockwise spiral movement tends to be linked with solar energies and harmony with the Earth, while widdershins spirals are associated with the manipulation of nature.

Thus, the rotating, curved shape of a triskel's branches would be seen as symbolic of active movement, ie almost of life. Some historians and archaeologists have gone further by correlating a triskel with a symbol for the sun, because the Breton word means three rays and each day, people could see the sunrise, midday and sunset – three phases.

Actually, it might be a good idea to pause for a moment and reflect upon this point – triskels seem to be the embodiment of the symbolism of the number three. It's a very common, magick number that's important in the Trinity, in alchemy, in Islam and all sorts of other faiths. Where else can we find examples of the power of three? Here's some suggestions:

- ✚ Primary colours of blue, red and yellow.
- ✚ States of matter – solid, liquid and gaseous.
- ✚ Spatial measures – height, length and width.
- ✚ Time - past, present and future.

### **Triskels in Celtic artwork**

Bear in mind that most of the spiritual beliefs and myths in Celtic culture were passed down through the generations via rites, storytelling, music and dance, but rarely in writing. Therefore, it's difficult to know exactly what were the meanings of the triskels and spirals. Much of what we know now came later from the post-Celtic illustration and writings of the Romans and Christians – and from the Arts and Crafts movement too.

Celtic artwork enjoyed a revival in the late Victorian/ Edwardian era – and just after. Some could be termed decorative speculation and some were reconstructionist beliefs, based on early jewellery, medals, pottery and coins unearthed from Celtic settlements. In these historical artefacts, common themes incorporating triskels could be seen, as shown below.

- ✚ Water designs, to show fluid movement, eg the Aberlemno Cross (see picture below) or the Book of Durrow.
- ✚ Rotational designs were popular on torcs, helmets, medals and coins, eg the Killamery Cross and the Clevedon gold torc (200 BCE).
- ✚ Triskels were sometimes included in wider designs that showed plants or flowers, eg bronze bowls from 400 BCE from the Ardennes, third-century BCE horns from Brentford and door handles from 800 CE in Meath.
- ✚ Triskels also turned up in historical jewellery like brooches, buckles or necklaces, eg from Meath (700 CE), Silchester (100 CE) and the Donore Disc (700 CE). The Tara Brooch, found in Ireland in 1850, was made around 700 CE in Meath – Queen Victoria had a copy of this brooch, which has multiple triskels in its design.

Other triskel-related artwork included fusion with Celtic designs, such as triquetra, interlaces and labyrinths – and also animals. Animal-related triskels have been retrieved from all types of sources, but the most popular designs appear to be those involving birds, dragons and horses. A few examples might be the Obermenzing sword scabbard (100 BCE – bird triskel), the Donore Disc (700 CE – dragon triskel) and a door handle from Donore (also 700 CE – horse triskel).



### ***Animal symbolism***

OK then, from triskels to animals, but this part takes us a step further by considering the legacy of the Celtic animal symbols in early British heraldic themes.

For example, let's look at the **yale**. Unlike common Celtic animals like boars, lions, eagles or horses (that were included regularly in families' coats of arms), the yale was a weird, mythical creature, first adopted by the Duke of Bedford in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, who was brother to the king (Henry V). Later, it was part of the livery of the Beaufort family and can be seen on the gates of St John's College, Cambridge. What does it look like? Here's a picture, as the odd mix of a lion's tail, boar's snout and great horns that point in different directions, tend to defy description.



## Animals and the Celtic culture

The Celts, in common with other ancient civilisations, used many animals in everyday life, eg:

- Cattle
- Sheep
- Pigs
- Chickens
- Dogs
- Horses.

There was also hunting of deer and fishing too. It has been suggested that, as wolves, bears and wild boars were revered as part of druid worship rites, these animals may have been hunted less. It should be remembered that horses were used in war too, to pull the small chariots and to bear the warriors in battle.

Thus, it is not surprising that many pieces of Celtic artwork include animal representations. Horse, deer and bird decorations from ritual statuettes have been found in archaeological digs in Hallstatt in Austria, that date back to 700 BCE.

It is likely that the Celtic tribes in southern Europe absorbed some cultural influences from neighbouring peoples at that time, eg Greeks or Phoenicians, because some Celtic artefacts have been found with artists' impressions of mythical beasts, eg winged horses and gorgons.

The 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE was a major artistic period for the Celts, right across Europe. This style was called *La Tène* and included numerous animal themes in artwork, such as jewellery, weapons, coins and small statues. The animals depicted include:

- Bulls
- Deer
- Snakes
- Dragons
- Horses
- Birds.

**Note:** within a hundred years or so, the growth of the Roman empire influenced the Celtic culture so much that La Tène sort of morphed into a Romano-Celtic fusion. Not so much in Ireland, though, where the Roman influence was weaker. Let's look at the animal symbols often portrayed by Celtic artists - in a little more detail.

1. As mentioned above, **horses** were important as both farm animals and for use in battle. Some archaeological digs have found the remains of Celtic leaders buried alongside their horses. For example, the Celts revered the horse goddess, Epona, and the hero, Cú Chulainn, had horses with human intelligence.

2. The **bear** was a royal symbol, connected to the safeguarding of the universe.
3. **Birds** were seen as arbiters of human fate and could be both magickal and possessed of healing qualities. Key bird symbols were swans, crows and owls. The Badh was a Celtic crow goddess, also known as the Morrigan.
4. The eternal cycle of the seasons and crops, as reflected by life itself, often can be seen in depictions of the god, Cernunnos, with his great antlers that also fall and regrow. **Deer and stags** recur in Celtic artwork (see the picture below of the coin from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE). Interestingly, for pagans anyway, while Christians were keen to identify the horned god as Satan in their images, one well-known tale has St Patrick choosing to transform into a stag to escape attack.
5. **Dogs** were useful animals, valued by Celtic farmers and war chiefs alike. The name of the hero, Cú Chulainn, means *dog of Culainn* and, today, the Gaelic root, **Cú** (meaning dog), has given rise to names like O'Connor!
6. **Wild boars** may have been hunted, but their ferocity made them creatures of worship by the druids, who linked the wild boar with the god, Taranis.
7. **Bulls** were worshipped in their own right by the Romans and Cretans. Some Celtic kings and queens adopted bulls as their symbols of power, to show strength and majesty. The Irish tale about the brown bull of Cooley, which was stolen from Ulster is indicative of a bull's value.
8. One thing that's important is that **dragons** appear in Celtic art, but not until much later. They're key to Welsh Celtic tales, but not so much in other parts of the Celtic landscape. Now, if we were talking about the Saxons, different matter completely.

It is important to note that many of the Celtic artists tried to show animals as they were in real life, whereas later pieces have animals in a much more symbolic form.



## Animals as religious symbols

After La Tène, the next distinguishable period in Celtic art was post-400 CE, when the Christian influences were at work. Many Celtic crosses and illuminated holy books contain animal decorations in a Celtic style, eg:

- The Book of Kells
- The Book of Dimma
- The Book of Durrow
- The Lindisfarne Gospels.

There are several animals that were seen as important to early Christian/Celtic art and many of these were attributed to saints or to heavenly themes in an allegorical sense. Particular examples are:

- The eagle of St John
- The peacock from the Book of Kells was symbolic of eternal life promised to all Christians
- Fighting dogs from the Book of Kells and the Papil Stone in Scotland (from 7<sup>th</sup> century CE)
- Wolves from the Book of Kells
- Wild boars from the Witham Parade Shield (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE)
- Deer from the Book of Kells and also the Cross at Tibberaghny in Kilkenny
- Many people have seen the white horses, eg at Uffington, but later on horses were included as symbols in the Gospel Book of St Gatien (8<sup>th</sup> century CE)
- The ox of St Luke in the Books of Durrow and Kells, as well as the Echternach Gospels (7<sup>th</sup> century CE), the Lindisfarne Gospels and a winged ox of St Luke from the Book of Armagh (9<sup>th</sup> century CE)
- The lion of St Mark in the Books of Durrow and Kells.

Here's a couple of examples of symbolic animals that date from this period of Celtic art, after La Tène, but before the Normans took control, the ox from the Book of Kells (9<sup>th</sup> century CE) and the lion from the Book of Durrow (7<sup>th</sup> century CE).



## Celtic animal symbols and heraldry

Many Celtic lands were conquered by the Normans about 1000 years ago and this new culture superseded the Celtic style. In some areas where the Viking influence had been strong and the Danelaw prevailed, much of the Celtic artwork drew upon Viking styles too. It was not until the Arts and Crafts revival in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that some of the pseudo-Celtic artwork was reintroduced. Several times so far, I've referred to derivative styles, ie symbolic animals that were taken from the cultural art of neighbouring locations.

After the Norman Conquest, many noble families in Britain began to adopt some of these symbolic animals into their familial coats of arms, eg the unicorn of Scotland, the lion for England, the yale (see *introduction*), the dragons of the Longworth family and the wild boar of Douglas, Earl of Morton.

And some of these adoptions can still be seen today, not only on flags or portraits, but in everyday objects too. Take the griffin or gryphon, for example, which was a symbol of kingship and bravery in Minoan Crete and was adopted as a corporate logo by the now-defunct Midland Bank. That was not the fate in the wonderful tale of the Vauxhall griffin, which dates back 800 years.

*It all started in the reign of King John – he had a problem in that the royal treasuries were almost empty as a result of the Crusades and there was no money for a regular army. Taxes raised some income, but not enough, so the king began to use hired troops to fight his battles for fixed rates of pay. One of the most loyal troops of mercenaries was led by Falkes de Bréauté from the Netherlands and he chose a coat of arms that included the fierce, warlike griffin as its emblem.*

*When Falkes de Bréauté grew too old to fight, the king rewarded him with an estate on the south side of the River Thames. His lands and manor house were known as Fulk's Hall. OK, fast-forward now to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1857) when London had expanded and was in the grip of the Industrial Revolution. Fulk's Hall had become Vauxhall and it was now an iron works, turning out industrial machines and supplies for the new railways. After a while, it became the Vauxhall Motor Co and built cars for the new automotive industry, but the company could not decide on a logo, until some bright spark remembered the original owner's livery – and that is why all Vauxhall cars still have a griffin on them.*



## ***Knotwork and interlace***

This final part of our Celtic art overview looks at the Celtic knotwork and interlace motifs, which were revived by craft artists during the Irish Celtic movement from the Victorian period.

### **Celtic interlace patterns at the start**

Some of the interlace patterns and designs used by early Celtic artists can be traced back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but the knotwork patterns that are so common today, first started to appear about 600 years later. The 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE style is sometimes described as ***Waldalgesheim style*** (from that area of the Rhineland in Germany) – it's a mix of curves and was discovered on torcs and plaques. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, other artistic styles had been very influential on Celtic designs too, as per the list below.

- a) Ancient Greek decorative ribbons were replicated in the artwork of Byzantium or Lombardy.
- b) Many Roman murals, fabrics and architectural styles included the interlace of foliage.
- c) New Christian culture included interlace patterns on bibles, crucifixes, tapestries and chancel screens.
- d) As the Roman Empire started to fall, Germanic tribes began to absorb interlace patterns, eg a belt buckle from Sutton Hoo (see *below*).

So, from where did the interlace pattern originate? There are many theories, but the most realistic one is that the very first interlace patterns derived from the art of weaving. The practices associated with intertwined braids, colours, threads and fibres can be dated back to Neolithic times – not only for clothing, but also for the making of ropes, baskets or nets.



One point that is often overlooked is just how widespread the Celtic culture actually migrated. The earliest pieces were in central Europe in the Hallstatt style (from the settlement in Austria) and can be dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. For context, this is roughly the same as the start of the Iron Age. Typical items from this period are:

- Swords and daggers
- Torcs of gold
- Cauldrons and jars
- Jewellery.

All such items were decorated with a mix of spirals, triskels, animal themes, etc. From the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE to 50 CE, the Celtic tribes shifted westwards to Spain and Ireland, south-east to Turkey and north to the edge of Germany. And their art accompanied this migration, integrating with other local cultures along the way, eg Greek and Roman art. As mentioned earlier, this period was known as the *La Tène* era.

Ireland itself was never conquered by Rome and, here, the Celtic art forms stayed much purer than in Gaul, England or Wales. From the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE though, Ireland was subject of the influence of Christian missionaries, who gradually incorporated the styles of druidic bards and filidhs into Christian decorative art – as can be seen in the Book of Kells.

And this fusion of Celtic art with Christian belief started to spread through Europe via Irish missionaries. The Celtic art patterns went into France, Switzerland and Italy on decorated scrolls, stone crosses, altar decorations and jewellery, including that most recognisable design of all – Celtic interlace and knotwork.

## What is Celtic interlace?

OK then, what do we actually mean by interlace? In truth, it's a pattern of ribbon or thread that criss-crosses itself in any number of complex paths or twists. One continuous ribbon can produce a knot and this is also a feature of interlace patterns. Knots are crucial symbols in many cultures, eg the Gordian Knot, the Norse valknut and the Buddhist endless knot.

Within Celtic tradition, the triquetra is a good example of knotwork design, but there's no definitive guide to the different types of Celtic knot. Sometimes, one can see references to a friendship or Trinity knot. The Books of Kells and Durrow have many such patterns, eg crosses with pointed interlaces. One can also find lots of decorative stones or crosses with interlace from the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE eg the slabs at Durrow Abbey (County Offaly) & Fahan Mura (County Donegal).

The 5<sup>th</sup> century CE has been described as the Golden Age of Irish art, as a fusion of Celtic traditions and the relatively new Christian faith. And this period lasted up to the 10<sup>th</sup> century – it has been termed as **Hiberno-Saxon**, ie Celtic and Germanic, bearing in mind the other influences listed

above. Much of the complex and ornate interlace patterns were produced by Irish artists on such items as:

- Bibles or gospel documents, eg the Book of Durrow
- Furniture
- Friezes on buildings
- Altar decorations, eg the Ardagh Chalice
- Monumental crosses
- Harps, brooches or medallions
- Decorative stones on tombs.

A lot of the designs here were variants on the single ribbon interlace with diagonal lines, over-and-under weaving, links with spirals and any number of colours. This single ribbon pattern is common to illuminated books, monuments and jewellery of this period. And, one of the key principles of interlace is the simple repetition of a knot at regular intervals, as can be seen from the Book of Durrow.

The different colours along the ribbon's path is symbolic of the influence of another culture, eg from the Middle East. Occasionally, interlace patterns are enclosed within squares, triangles or labyrinths – examples are in the Book of Durrow, the Book of Kells and the St Gall Gospel.

### **Celtic patterns in early Christianity**

One iconic interlace design that is often found in early Christian books or on crosses is that of interlaced plants. In many cases, it is an interlaced vine with many spirals, but can also reflect the Old Testament theme of the tree of life plus serpent. An example might be the Drumcliff High Cross from County Sligo that is dated at the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE.

The question of *rincaux* on Christian artefacts is an ongoing debate – some would say that this is not a Celtic design at all, but derives from a Græco-Roman culture instead. It's a decorative strip of vines with leaves, fruit or flowers, which resemble mistletoe in the Book of Kells. However, rincaux patterns can be found in India and in Chinese Buddhism, so the debate continues.

With reference to the Book of Kells, there are several examples of trees of life, portrayed with double spirals by Celtic artists. And there are other such examples to be found in the St Chad Gospels, the Shrine of St Patrick's Bell, the Bewcastle Cross and the Muiredach Cross.

In the case of the latter, it's a good example of rincaux plus birds, hares or lions – all symbolic animals. Interlaced lions feature in the Book of Kells. Dogs, serpents and hares feature in both the Book of Kells and in the Lindisfarne Gospels. Interlaced birds can be found in the Gospel Book of Mac Regol too. If you get the chance to look at the Book of Kells, take some time to study the wonderful interlaced letters, which also feature animals.

## The Irish Celtic Revival

Much of the Celtic knotwork and interlace style faded during the increasing dominance of other cultures, eg the Danish and Christian influences. Some remnants of Celtic craftsmanship survived, but the main renaissance in Celtic art forms (painting, jewellery and applied arts) came in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This was described as the Irish Celtic Revival and was partly linked with the discovery of artefacts such as the Tara Brooch in 1850 and the Ardagh Chalice. There were other reasons, as shown below.

1. The increased interest in Irish nationalism in Victorian times was extended to Irish folklore, legends and history.
2. The Irish historian, George Petrie, was responsible for the Royal Irish Academy amassing a collection of Celtic art, manuscripts and metal relics (*see below*).
3. The poet, WB Yeats, promoted traditional Irish literature and poetry via the new Irish National Theatre.
4. Archæologists discovered two major collections of Celtic artefacts at La Tène and Hallstatt.

A key venue for the Irish Celtic Revival, particularly for knotwork and interlace patterns was the Glasgow School of Painting, where many jewellers and metalworkers started to produce designs based on the ancient Celtic brooches in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

By that time, Irish motifs and symbols had started to influence the work of stone carvers, makers of furniture, the souvenir traders and all sorts of applied artists - all producing reproductions of Celtic ornaments and jewellery. In addition to making such products, based on styles, Dublin jewellers began to make copies and imitations.

In 1849 the Royal Irish Academy allowed the firm of Waterhouse & Co. to make drawings and copies of antique brooches in its collection, which led to manufacture on a large-scale. By 1853, their catalogue included:

- The Clarendon Brooch
- The Royal Tara Brooch
- The Knights of Templar Brooch
- The Dublin University Brooch
- The Innisfallen Brooch.

The Tara Brooch was considered to be the most elaborate and beautiful of brooches and became especially fashionable. Many brooches were made in imitation of the Tara Brooch, but others featured Irish architectural antiquities such as castles and abbeys. The Ulster Museum has a brooch of bog oak from 1850 which shows Erin playing her harp while sitting on a bank studded with little gold shamrocks.

In addition to brooches, ornamental bracelets and necklaces were also popular. One of the Goggin firms in Dublin made bracelets and necklaces of "Irish diamonds" set in silver shamrock shapes. In 1851, Waterhouse & Co. designed the Tara Bracelet of silver to complement the Royal Tara Brooches based on the ancient brooch and the pictures below show some modern designs based on ancient Celtic patterns.

