WAS THERE AN IRISH SEA CULTURE-PROVINCE IN THE DARK AGES ?

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The concept of an Irish Sea culture-province, especially in the fifth to eighth centuries A.D., is currently much in vogue. An outline is sketched in my *Dinas Powys* (especially pp. 34-73), and the map of important secular sites shown on page 35 of that work is reproduced here (*Fig.* 14). For a critical examination, however, we must look to a wider period than that of the immediately post-Roman centuries, and we must also take account of earlier models of the relations of Britain and Ireland. A useful starting point is provided by Sir John Rhŷs. He saw the island of Britain as settled in the Bronze Age by 'Q' or Goidelic-speaking Celts. Subsequently in the Iron Age south-eastern Britain was overrun by 'P' or Brythonic-speaking Celts, who drove the Goidels west, a majority of them retreating to Ireland, while a remnant lingered in western Britain, most notably in Wales. Ultimately, probably in the fifth century A.D., even this remnant was driven out by the Britons, themselves pushed west by the pressure of the Anglo-Saxon invasions of south-east Britain.

Now it is clear that Rhŷs's model of successive invaders of Britain being pushed westward by subsequent invaders owed much to the conventional model of the Anglo-Saxon settlement and its effects. But essentially, so far as it concerns Goidels and Brythons, it is independent of that model, and is therefore unaffected by the partial demolition of the latter at the hands of recent scholarship. Indeed, Rhŷs had good evidence that the western fringes of Britain had been populated by Goidelic-speakers, and that these had been driven out, or at least suppressed, by military activity on the part of the Britons. There was, for instance, the witness of the Ogham-inscribed stones; of some Irish (*i.e.* Goidelic) names; and a wealth of tradition recorded especially by Nennius relating to this military activity. But against Rhŷs's view it must be urged that there is no evidence for a primary or general Goidelic settlement in Britain. The evidence for Goidels is confined entirely to the western fringes of this island, and their presence can best be accounted for by historically-documented migrations *eastward* over the Irish Sea in the late fourth and fifth centuries A.D. Of these, more later.

It is, indeed, far more likely that the original Celtic-speaking colonists of western Britain and Ireland came from the Continent by the Irish Sea route, and then diverged eastwards and westwards. Presumably these people spoke a more or less common language at the time of their arrival here. The development of the P and Q variants of Celtic speech then took place largely in these islands, though it is known that further Brythonic invasions reinforced Southern England in later centuries.

Hitherto the main difficulty in accepting this model has been one of chronology. If we equate the Celts with the La Tène culture of Central and Western Europe, then it would appear that the Celtic settlement of Ireland took place no earlier than the fourth or even

the third century B.C. Philologists have considered that this gave insufficient time for the development of Goidelic from Common Celtic. The difficulty is removed if we remember that, before ever Hecataeus and Herodotus referred to the Celts, the ancestors of these people were already present in West-Central Europe; we may call them 'Proto-Celts'. What archaeological cultures may be identified with the earliest Proto-Celts in these islands?

Two alternatives are possible. The more radical, that of Professor Miles Dillon, takes as established fact the archaeological hypothesis that there were no invasions between those of the Early Iron Age in the fifth century B.C. and those of the users of international Bell Beakers and their derivatives early in the second millennium B.C. Since the fifth century is too late, Celtic speech must have come with the Beaker invaders. The more conservative view, which I favour, starts from the position that the term Proto-Celtic can most justifiably be applied to the Hallstatt culture, the immediate ancestor in West-Central Europe of the truly Celtic La Tène culture. It has long been known that Hallstatt weapons and horse-gear—the trappings of a military aristocracy—are found in Britain perhaps as early as the seventh century. Now, thanks to George Eogan's study of the Irish Late Bronze Age, we can see that they occur also in Ireland. There seems to be here a strong case for a Proto-Celtic aristocracy both sides of the Irish Sea shortly after 700 B.C. Admittedly J. D. Cowen has argued that the swords in particular represent princely gifts rather than actual Hallstatt invasion. This would still demand, by 700 B.C., the presence of a military aristocracy in Britain and Ireland; and it would be difficult to deny this aristocracy the title Celtic. We can therefore postulate a common Celtic culture on both sides of the Irish Sea in the seventh century B.C.

From this, developments were divergent. It is well known that insular cultures tend to create specialities and peculiarities. We need not, therefore, be surprised at subsequent developments in Ireland, such as the formation of Goidelic speech; or, in archaeological terms, the elaboration of the La Tène brooch into the Navan type, an exuberant form which well illustrates the Irish genius for taking a commonplace object from the Continent or Britain and producing something wholly new, strange and magnificent.

Having set the early Celtic scene we now jump several centuries to the post-Roman period. We may begin with those eastward invasions already mentioned. Perhaps the clearest in historical terms was the move of the Dalriadic Scotti from North-east Ireland into West Scotland, which they presumably conquered from the Picts. This event was real enough, even though the date is less certain; perhaps the fifth century A.D. It is likely that only a single dynasty was involved, not a large-scale folk movement. We also have the Welsh traditions of Cunedda and his sons, brought in from East Scotland to drive out the Irish from the various parts of Wales. The extension of Cunedda's activities to Cydweli and Gower is incredible, but his establishment of a dynasty in Gwynedd is undoubted. As for the date of this move, I have argued elsewhere that the most likely context would be Magnus Maximus' preparations for his bid for the Imperial throne in the 380's.

Further evidence of connections across the Irish Sea is given by the presence of Irish personal names in Cornwall and Wales. Brychan Brycheiniog is one of the most interesting of these. English scholars might regard him as a non-person and his name as a back-formation, especially as his alleged genealogy includes an Irish Viking of the tenth century. However, Broccan is itself a perfectly good Irish name; and the kingdom of Brycheiniog could well have been established by an Irish dynasty.

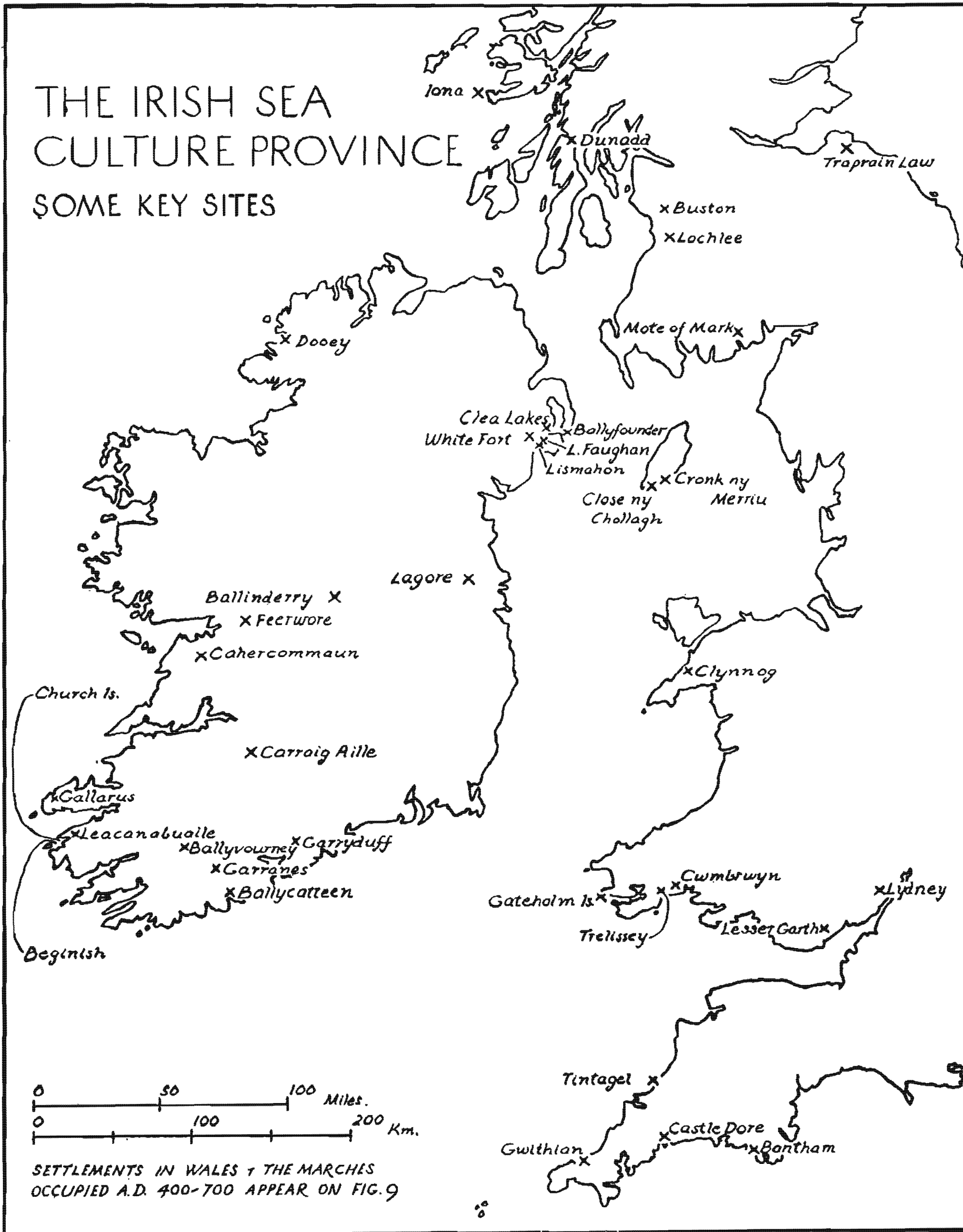

FIG. 14
(by courtesy of the University of Wales Press)

As for the Deisi, we now know that Kuno Meyer's dating of their migration to the third century A.D. is based on an unhistorical section of the Irish Annals. The soundest way to date the movement from Ireland to South-west Wales is to make parallel columns of the Irish and Welsh genealogies of the dynasty, taking one fixed date from Voteporix, *c.* A.D. 540, and a second from Maredudd ap Tewdws, *obiit* 796, and then projecting the generations back before Voteporix. On this basis the Deisi came into Dyfed in the late fourth or early

FIG. 15. Latin inscription on the Stone of Voteporix, from Castell Dwyran, Carmarthenshire
(by courtesy of the Cambrian Archaeological Association)

fifth centuries A.D., and the question arises whether this move was by Roman licence. In this connection the stone inscribed MEMORIA VOTEPORIGIS PROTICTORIS has been subject to misinterpretation (*Fig.* 15); *Protector* was a technical term or military rank, which did not mean merely one who provided protection against enemies. It seems most reasonable to interpret their introduction as another move by Magnus Maximus to secure western Britain during his imperial adventure. This is not to say that the title *Protector*, which appears to have been hereditary in the family, was given to Eochaid, the founder of the dynasty in Dyfed, as leader of a band of *foederati*. For the Roman evidence is clear that the title is appropriate to a young man at the imperial court, in effect an officer-cadet, and not to a federate commander. It is tempting to speculate that Magnus Maximus took one of the sons of the dynasty with him, in fact as a hostage, but ostensibly as an officer-cadet in personal attendance; and through this man the title came to the dynasty. This is, of course, speculation; but as with the Dalriadic Scotti, the fact of the migration is certain.

Apart from these dynastic moves, there were all the travels of the Celtic saints, witnessed by history and tradition. It might have been expected that these travels would have done much to disseminate a common culture. Indeed the philologists have shown something of this by demonstrating how loan words from British Latin and Old Welsh came into Old Irish through the medium of the church. And in material culture, we will shortly see the influence of wandering saints displayed through fine metalwork.

The historical evidence is clear, then, for movements of men across the Irish Sea, and especially for the eastward movement of dynasties. What were the results of this in terms of material culture?

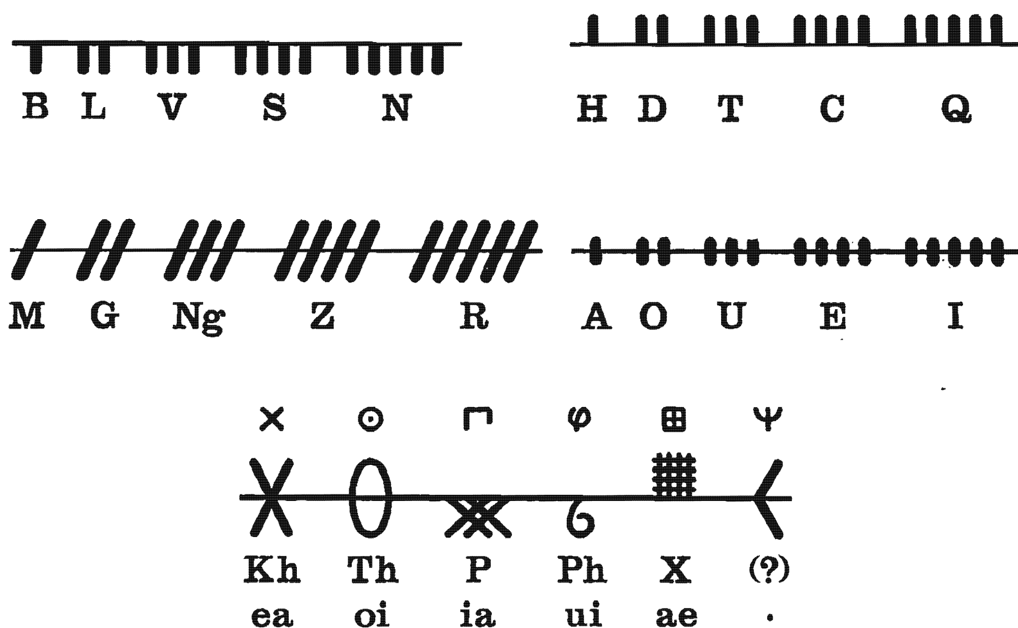

Fig. 16. The Ogham Alphabet by D.M. and C.W. after R. A. S. Macalister

Our first class of evidence is the memorial stones, inscribed often with explicitly Christian *formulae* in Latin or in Goidelic in the Ogham script, or bilingually. In Scotland the migration of the Dalriadic Scotti led manifestly to a change in language, the supersession of British and Pictish by Irish; but this was not accompanied by a significant introduction of Ogham writing. This may be because Ogham was largely a feature of S. Ireland, and in consequence we do find it introduced widely into Dyfed by the Deisi. On the other hand, despite the use of the script, the influence of the Goidelic language itself was slight in Wales; some personal names, and a few place-names, in complete contrast to the language-change

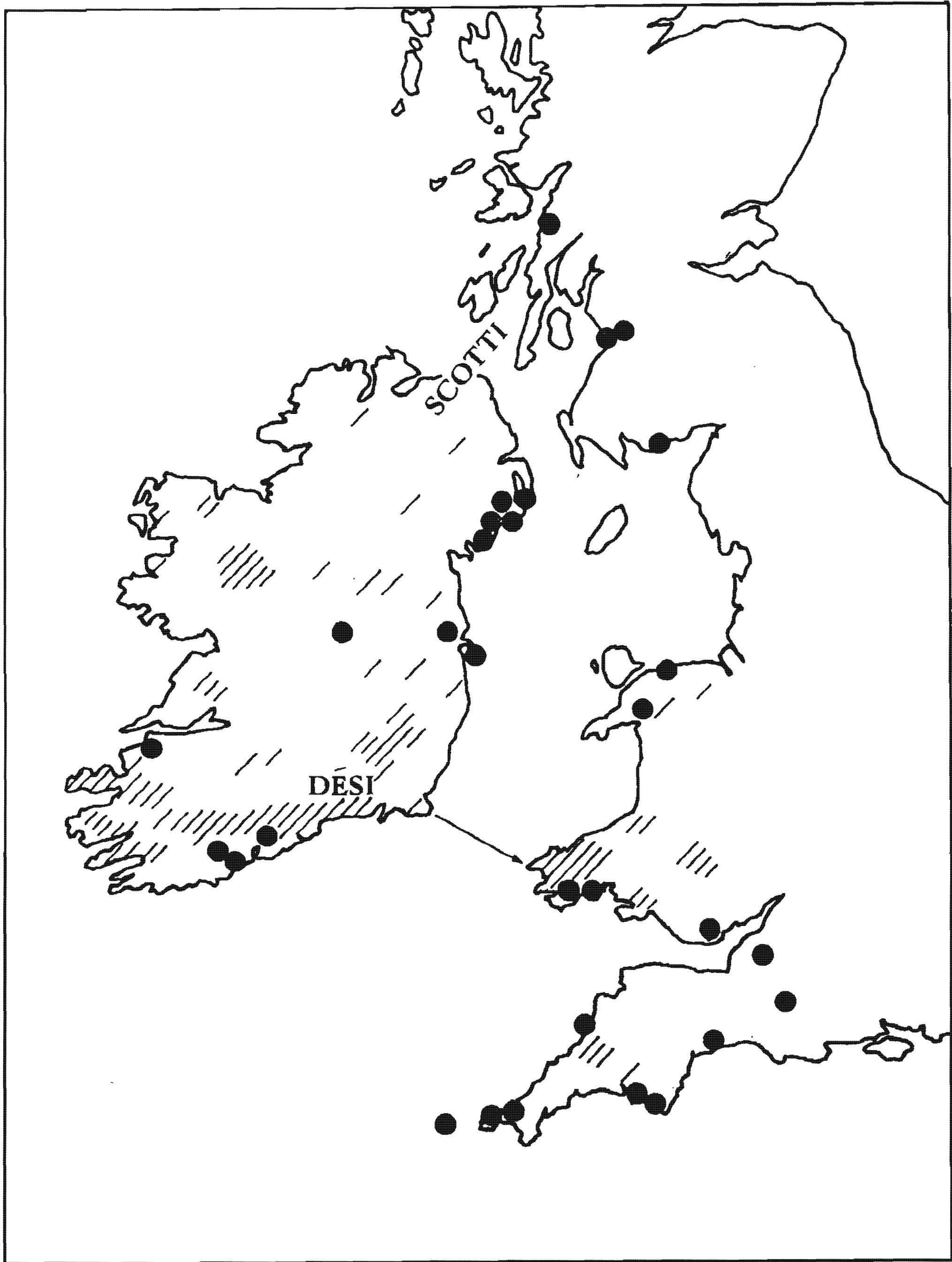

FIG. 17. The Irish Sea Province in the fifth-seventh centuries A.D. Dots show sites where imported pottery has been found and shading marks principal distribution of Ogham-inscribed stones

wrought in Scotland. It may be significant here that on bilingual stones in Wales, the Goidelic inscription is normally briefer than the British-Latin inscription; does not this suggest that Irish was only haltingly spoken?

Here an excursus on the origin of the Ogham script is appropriate (*Fig.* 16). It is common ground that it was invented, for essentially arcane purposes, by men in contact with an alphabetic script. Economy of hypothesis suggests that this was Roman, not Greek. One

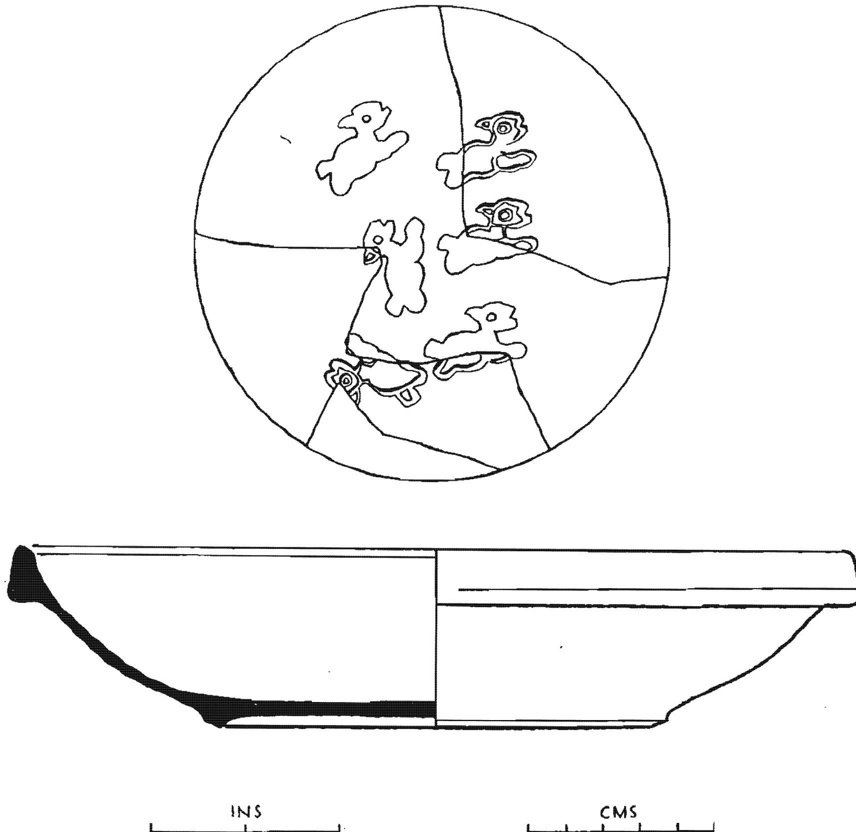

FIG. 18. Imported red-ware bowl with stamped animal pattern, from Dinas Powys, Glamorgan
(by courtesy of University of Wales Press)

possibility is that the learned men of the Deisi invented it in Dyfed as a result of their contacts with their literate Roman civilization. But altogether more reasonable is the suggestion of Professor O'Kelly, that it was invented in fourth-century Ireland, as a result

of contacts with a literate civilization effected through Christianity—in fact, through the ancestors of those 'Irish believing in Christ' to whom Palladius was sent by Pope Celestine in 431. And the whole idea of setting up stone memorials to the dead, common to all the lands around the Irish Sea, must surely derive from Roman sources, whether Pagan or Christian.

From the elevated level of memorial stones and epigraphy we turn to what should form the basic evidence: pottery. In the Irish Sea zone, in the fifth to seventh centuries A.D., we find two classes of imported pottery widely distributed. First are the East Mediterranean wares,

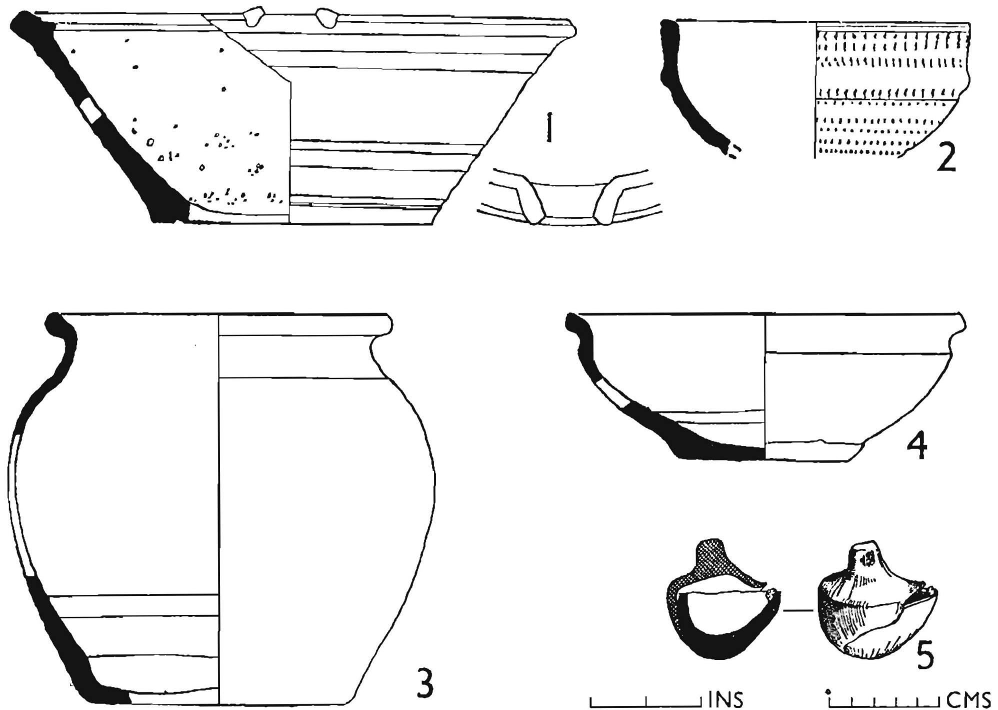

FIG. 19. Pottery from Dinas Powys, Glamorgan, assignable to the fifth-seventh centuries A.D.: 1 and 2 grey wares; 3 and 4 coarse wares; 5 lidded crucible

(by courtesy of Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.)

recognized first at the Tintagel monastery: bowls and platters in a fine red ware, some with crosses stamped on the base, which may have been used for the *agape*, the love feast; and wine-jars, imported in part for the service of the mass, but also found in princely strongholds like that of Garranes in Co. Cork, or Degannwy in Caernarvonshire. Secondly, there are the kitchen vessels—jugs, cooking-pots, bowls and beakers—of continental origins. But

neither class of import is found in quantity; its distribution seems to have been confined to the church and the aristocracy; and the kind of cultural affinity which it suggests between Ireland and W. Britain is purely superficial (*Figs.* 18, 19).

Apart from the imports, there is native pottery in North-east Ireland and Western Cornwall. In both areas, the pottery is characterised by 'grass-marked' bases, an incidental by-product of standing the vessels to dry on a bed of chopped straw. Professor Charles Thomas considers that this simple-seeming idea was invented once only, in North-east Ireland, and was then taken to West Cornwall by the same movement that brought Irish—and specifically Ultonian—saints to that area. But it is indisputable that as an assemblage, Irish grass-marked pottery can be distinguished from Cornish grass-marked pottery. This makes it difficult to believe that the simple idea of standing wet pots on chopped straw was disseminated by folk movement.

For the most part, the Irish Sea zone is linked only in the negative sense that pottery was not manufactured locally, but was replaced by vessels of wood and leather.

Next we might look at sites, fortifications being the only ones we know anything about. Circular earthworks and circular stone-works, of indeterminate date, of varied size, of uncertain social status, of doubtful military worth—namely *raths* and *cashels*—are widespread in Ireland where, apart from some outliers back in the second millennium B.C., they dominate the archaeological scene from about the second century B.C. to the eleventh if not the sixteenth century A.D. This type of earthwork does not seem to have been taken by the ships of the Dalriadic Scotti across the North Channel. On the other hand, of course, in west Scotland we do find circular fortifications of dry stone, the *duns* (a word much used and misused in Scottish archaeology to cover a wide range of sites mostly circular). If we examine the relationship of the duns to the stone cashels of Ireland we are left with the conclusion that the dun certainly begins a millennium earlier than the Dalriadic invasion and is therefore independent of it. Moreover, as with the grass-marked pottery, it would be possible to take a series of examples from each side of the channel and, treating them as assemblages, there would be no difficulty in saying that one was Scottish and the other Irish.

It would also be tempting to think that among the so-called raths of Dyfed we might isolate a class of small circular earthworks closely related to the ring-forts of Ireland, and therefore probably introduced by the Deisi. But the evidence of 'raths' enclosing Roman buildings at Cwmbrwyn and Trelissey has long established the pre-Deisian date of such earthworks. The data newly brought to light at Walesland suggest, indeed, that small circular earthworks are a feature already of pre-Roman Demetia, and that their analogues are to be sought among the rounds of Cornwall rather than the raths of Ireland. The most that we might claim is that a local tendency to build such works was reinforced by the Deisi, though no fortification in Dyfed can yet be assigned to that dynasty.

There remains the evidence of metalwork. We no longer see the pre-Roman La Tène metalwork of Ireland as derived from North-east England by way of Galloway. Rather we see British and Irish metalwork as representing cousinly developments from common sources on the continent. In the first century A.D., the technique of spinning bronze bowls may have been carried from Britain to Ireland by craftsmen in the train of wealthy refugees from Belgic expansion or Roman conquest. But during most of the Roman period, there is a marked separation between the two sides of the Irish Sea: in particular, there is no Irish counterpart to the very rich repertory of brooches found in Roman Britain.

The characteristic brooch type in Ireland at this time is the penannular with omega-shaped hoop. In Britain, the penannular brooch with zoomorphic terminals was a development, in the fourth or early fifth centuries, from the crimped-terminal penannular whose resemblance to an animal's head was seen and exploited by Romano-British craftsmen. In Ireland the parallel development was the elaboration of the omega terminals into ducks' heads. In the late fourth to early fifth centuries the undeveloped zoomorphic penannular brooch reached

FIG. 20. Zoomorphic penannular brooches, left: bronze Romano-British type from Caerwent, Monmouthshire (dia. $3\frac{1}{8}$ inches) and restoration of 'Irish' type with enamelled terminals from Dinas Powys, Glamorgan (dia. $3\frac{3}{8}$ inches)

(by courtesy of University of Wales Press)

Ireland, perhaps by a raid like that which brought Patrick across the sea, and was there highly elaborated with millefiori and enamel decoration on the expanded terminals: characteristic Irish flamboyance transforming a dull British form. The millefiori glass perhaps came from the east Mediterranean along with the imported pottery. So characteristic are these Irish brooches that it has been thought that Ireland must be the source not only of the few developed penannulars found east of the Irish Sea, but also of the hanging bowls with similar ornament. But the discovery at Dinas Powys of a lead die for making such a brooch, together with the millefiori and raw enamel for its elaboration, suggests either Irish settlement in South-east Wales—for which other evidence is lacking—or common traditions of fine metalwork around the Irish Sea at this time (*Fig.* 20).

Other material evidence to support this hypothesis is seen in the elaborate crucibles, with knobs and lugs and lids, which are a post-Roman feature of the Irish Sea zone. These may, like the zoomorphic penannular, have had their origin in Roman Britain, and have reached Ireland in the same way as the brooches. Among iron objects, the 'slotted-and-pointed' tools and the three-pronged socketed tools, both of unknown function, are commonly found in Ireland, and are also known at Dunadd and in Glamorgan. But the iron knives, so similar on either side of the Irish Sea, belong to a very generalised class which extends at least as far east as the Danube, and which therefore proves nothing about our area.

It seems clear therefore that in the Dark Ages only two groups of common traits are to be seen on both sides of the Irish Sea: the use of inscribed memorial stones; and fine metalwork. The settlements show very little sign of the transplantation of material culture to Dalriadic Scotland or to Dyfed. The ornamental metalwork may represent the activities of peripatetic craftsmen working for wealthy patrons or travelling in the wake of saints, as we know that metalworkers accompanied the Irishman Fursey to East Anglia.

Taking a wider view, there are hints of connexions lying far back behind the historical migrations of the fifth century A.D. The Llŷn peninsula in Caernarvonshire incorporates the same element as Leinster; Ptolemy knew the tip of Llŷn as the Promontory of the Gangani, a tribe which he also located in western Ireland. And if there are any organic connexions between the circular 'forts' of earth or stone in Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Ireland, then these connexions must likewise go back into the pre-Christian past. Compared with this, the 'Early Christian' metalwork represents only a superficial level of contact. If the concept of an Irish Sea culture province has validity, then it derives from the long-standing cultural heritage of the first Celtic migrations, rather than from the movements of people or dynasties in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.

NOTE

I am glad to acknowledge the great help given me by Miss Cherry Lavell in preparing a printed version of this paper—L.A..