

# Early Medieval and Romanesque Art

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

The Dark Ages or Middle Ages are names for the period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire, and the rebirth of Classicism during the Renaissance beginning in the late 13th century in Italy. These names, however, are misleading, as this period was quite productive historically and artistically. This lesson covers:

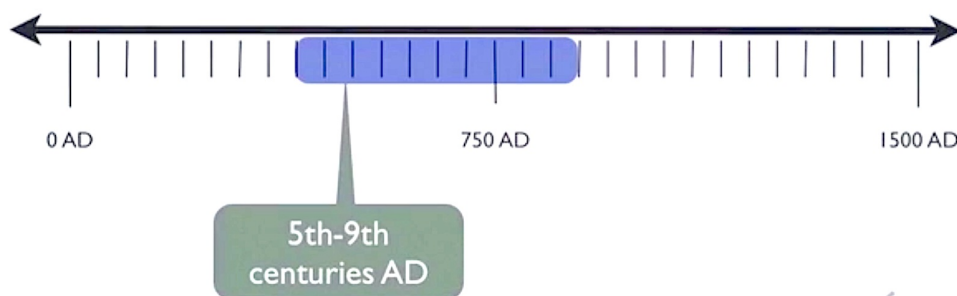


### BIG IDEA

Dark Ages and Middle Ages are misleading terms about this period. For example, the artistic metalwork and manuscript production from this time are considered some of the greatest examples of Western artwork.

## 1. Time Period and Location: Early Medieval and Romanesque Art

The artwork covered in this lesson originates during the fifth to ninth centuries AD, as highlighted on the timeline below. Ireland, the British Isles, and Norway, which is part of Scandinavia, are the three geographical regions we will explore as you learn about the artwork of this period.



## 2. Vikings and the “Dark Ages”

Dark Ages and Middle Ages were pejorative terms used during the Renaissance to refer to the period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the rebirth of Classicism during the Renaissance beginning

in the late 13th century in Italy.

#### IN CONTEXT

Interestingly, these times were far from dark. In fact, there was much going on. The proliferation of manuscripts and the recording of information were both taking place. Because of the Christian monasteries and the proliferation of manuscripts, much of the classical knowledge that was fundamental to the emergence of the Renaissance was passed on.

It was also during this time that the doctrine of Christianity became more formalized and the familiar kingdoms of Europe were established. The Vikings, or Norsemen, were a large collection of independent groups of Scandinavian traders, as well as pirates that terrorized Christian Europe along the North Sea and in England for many hundreds of years, mostly during the eighth to 11th centuries.

It was, in fact, Norsemen--or Northmen, and later Normans--under the command of William the Conqueror that established Normandy in France and took control of the kingdom of England, as depicted in the famous Bayeux Tapestry.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Before the invention of the printing press around 1440, books were copied by hand predominately in **scriptoriums** in monasteries throughout Europe.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Scriptorium**

A room in a monastery where monks would copy manuscripts

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## 3. Sutton Hoo Burial Mound

The ship burials of ancient kings from this area, such as the burial mound of Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, England, give us some of the best examples of artwork from this time period. This burial mound may have been a pagan king or recently-converted Christian king, given that a few Christian artifacts were found.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Here is an example of a purse cover from Sutton Hoo:



Purse cover from Sutton Hoo burial mound

625 AD

Suffolk, England

The purse cover is a beautiful example of the type of metalware called **cloisonné**, in which little compartments are created with metal wire and inlaid with colored enamel, glass, or stone. It's an incredibly meticulous and detailed process. It is truly amazing how well this example is preserved; it looks almost brand new.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Cloisonné

A type of decoration consisting of colored enamel separated by bands of metal

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## 4. Fibulae

Here is another example of elaborate gold, silver, glass, and enamel **fibulae** from the early fifth century:



Germanic fibulae

Early 5th century AD

Goldfoil, silver, glass, & enamel

Austria

Fibulae, which is the plural for fibula, were a type of brooch used as decoration or to hold a garment such as a cape and keep it closed.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Fibula

A pin used to hold together a cloak in ancient Greece and Rome

## 5. Oseburg Burial Ship

The setting to sea of a ship loaded with treasure and the body of a dead king is a tradition that is associated with the Scandinavian and northern Germanic tribes. The burial of a ship loaded with treasure and the body of a dead king is symbolic of that tradition. The burial ship at Oseberg, Norway, is a wonderful example of this.

➞ EXAMPLE Take a look at an image of the burial ship at Oseberg:





**Burial ship**

**825 AD**

**Oseborg, Norway**

It is important to note that the bodies inside this particular ship were not those of kings. They were actually bodies of two women of some importance. The treasure once on this ship was stolen long ago. Regardless, the 70-foot Viking longship is incredibly well preserved, as you can see here.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A carved animal head, shown below, adorned this ship.



Carved animal head from burial ship

This is also very well preserved. In this image, you can see the detailed woodwork, as well as the intricate curvilinear carvings that surround the head and neck.

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## 6. Illuminated Manuscripts

With the influence of Rome, Christian missionaries, and the Christian monasteries that were established throughout Europe, Christianity eventually spread throughout Europe, even to the Vikings. The Celts were a pagan group that had settled in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Their conversion to Christianity began in the fifth century in Ireland.

The illuminated manuscripts produced in the monasteries during this time were beautiful synergies of Christian text and imagery. They included the intertwining vegetal, **animal style**, and geometric patterns that were native to this area.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You can see evidence of these details in the cross on this example of the cross and carpet page from the Lindisfarne Gospel.





Cross & Carpet Page from Lindesfarne Gospel

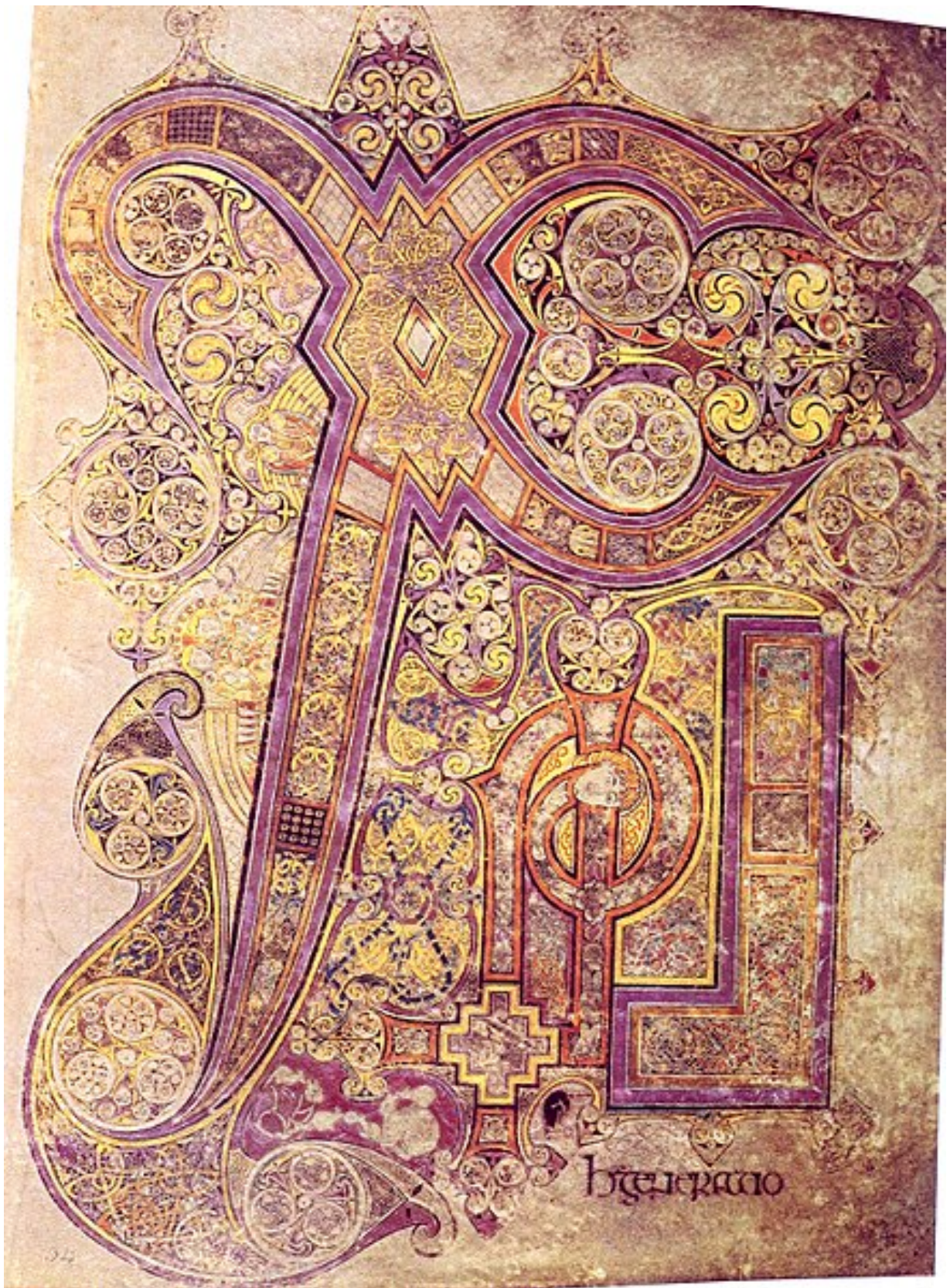
698-721 AD

Tempera on vellum

London, England

➞ EXAMPLE You can also see it in this example of enlarged letters from the Chi-Rho-Iota page.





Chi-Rho-Iota from Book of Kells

Late 8th to early 9th centuries AD

Ireland

Above is a page in the Book of Kells, which is the most famous illuminated manuscript from this time, if not in all history. The letters are clearly defined, yet at the same time, they blend in to the intricate details of geometric and abstract patterns.



This is commonly referred to as Hiberno-Saxon style. Hibernia is Latin for Ireland, and Saxon refers to the culture of the Anglo-Saxon people who lived there. This one dates from the late eighth or early ninth century.

The manuscripts of Carolingian France and Ottonian Germany were created in scriptoriums by monks. These works were produced on either **vellum** or **parchment**, and sometimes included **colophons**.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Take a look at the two images of Saint Matthew.



Saint Matthew from Coronation Gospels

800-810 AD

Germany

The first image is a calm, subdued image of Saint Matthew. Compare this to the next image, a frantic, hurried image of Saint Matthew.





Saint Matthew from Ebbo Gospels

816-835 AD

France

The first example is an image of the evangelist Saint Matthew from a book of gospels called the Coronation Gospels. The artist used light and shadow to suggest depth and give the figure a very realistic, three-dimensional form. Compare this more calm and subdued style to that of the Ebbo Gospels, in the second example. The Ebbo Gospels date from about 816 to 835 AD in France. Notice the frantic writing depicted in the energetic lines that form Saint Matthew's robe, hair, and the space behind him.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Animal Style**

Characterized by animal and bird designs and themes

##### **Vellum**

Calfskin, or lambskin, used as a writing surface

##### **Parchment**

A paper-like writing material made from the skin of a sheep or goat

##### **Colophon**

An emblem or trademark in a book or manuscript



#### SUMMARY

The period of time between the fall of the Western Roman Empire, and the rebirth of Classicism during the Renaissance beginning in the late 13th century in Italy is referred to as the Dark Ages or Middle Ages. Despite the names, this period was historically and artistically active. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of Early Medieval and Romanesque art**.

Starting with the **Vikings and the Dark Ages**, this lesson walked you through just how much was going on during this time. The ship burials of ancient kings from this area, such as **the burial mound of Sutton Hoo**, are examples of artwork from this period. You also looked at **fibulae**, which are pins used to hold together a cloak, and the **Oseburg burial ship**. This was an example of the symbolic tradition of burying a ship loaded with treasure and the body of a dead king.

Finally, you explored the **illuminated manuscripts**. These examples, which were produced in the monasteries during this time, were beautiful synergies of Christian text and imagery.

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**Colophon**

An emblem or trademark in a book or manuscript.

**Fibula**

A pin used to hold together a cloak in ancient Greece and Rome.

**Parchment**

A paper-like writing material made from the skin of a sheep or goat.

**Scriptorium**

A room in a monastery where monks would copy manuscripts.

**Vellum**

Calfskin, or lambskin, used as a writing surface.