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ARTH 10

Question 9: The peoples of northern and western Europe

Northern and Western Europeans are often labeled as “barbarians” after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. This assumption suggests that these people lacked any artistic knowledge and didn't have any technical skill but that couldn't be farther from the truth. The surviving art works of the early medieval metalwork and visual arts tell a different story, one that demonstrates their ability and talent. Through examples like the Gummersmark Brooch and the treasures of Queen Arnegunde you can really see the sophistication, craftsmanship, and artistic knowledge that they possessed. The lie that these artists were “barbarians” is severely rebutted by their technical know-how, symbolic representation and depth, and their cross cultural borrowing and influence.

The most often used technique in Northern and Western European artwork was a technique called Animal Style. It was commonly used in early medieval metalwork which had intertwined, stylized animals that would twist, bite, and merge into different abstract patterns that would give the art a very pristine and royal look. Artworks like the Gummersmark Brooch or the treasures of Queen Arnegunde show just how sophisticated this style was and how it being used by these Europeans contradicted the “barbarian” assumption. These works required precision and advanced techniques such as cloisonne, the garnet inlay, and precise metal casting. In addition, Roman traditions were also used and can be seen in the use of materials, and luxury patterns. Rather than crude decorations and random choices with no meanings, these examples show how

careful they were with their planning and symbolic meanings with Animal Style, and how it links to status and power.

Another example and evidence of sophistication and advanced craftsmanship has to be the Sutton Hoo ship burial in England. Objects found in the burial such as the belt buckle, and helmet combine Animal Style with some Byzantine and Roman influences. The helmet for example has influence from Roman military helmets. From the structure of the helmet to the overall animal interlace. The technical skill needed in the goldsmithing, interlace, and the complex designs really do demonstrate the artistic knowledge needed to create these works.

The next example of the “barbarian” notion being false is further debunked by the Viking art and Hiberno-Saxon manuscript painting. The Viking metalwork had features like controlled interlace, balanced compositions, and the previously mentioned animal style, which expressed both their creativity and precision. Like-wise the Hiberno-Saxon works like the Lindisfarne Gospels, and Irish high crosses mix together influences from Celtic spiral patterns, Germanic interlace, and Roman inspired Christian imagery. These works required very careful planning and mathematical accuracy, mainly in the manuscripts where if there were any errors it would easily have ruined the piece, but they showed the intelligence and overall know-how to get it done. These works did not reflect the chaos associated with “barbarians”, but showed discipline, knowledge, creativity, and artistic innovation.

Together all of these pieces and art works clearly debunk the assumption and stereotype of Northern and western Europeans as “barbarians.” These works demonstrated their intelligence, artistic knowledge, technical skill, and their overall creativity that helped them create all of these wonderful works that brought together cultures, whether it be Celtic, Roman, or Germanic. Rather than it being this primitive and destructive artworks, they were precise and

planned out. Way off from the simplistic images that were implied by the false notion of them being “Barbarians.”