



Provided by the author(s) and NUI Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Title            | Tal-y-Llyn and the nocturnal voyage of the sun                                  |
| Author(s)        | Waddell, John   |
| Publication Date | 2012  |
| Item record      | <a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/2930">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/2930</a> |

Downloaded 2017-10-31T07:44:07Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.





## The Tal-y-llyn plaques and the nocturnal voyage of the sun

*John Waddell*

The Tal-y-llyn hoard was found in 1963 on the western slope of Nant Cader (Merioneth). Believed at the time to be a collection of scrap bronze, it comprised a shield boss and two crescent-shaped mounts, a second shield boss, four openwork circular mounts, a lock-plate of Roman type, and a pair of small trapezoidal-shaped plaques (Savory 1964; 1976, 47). Though Savory thought this unlikely, Jope (2000, 250) supported the idea that the two plaques might have been mounts for a shield, one placed above and the other below a central circular boss, but in fact their function is unknown. Of thin sheet brass, a mix of zinc and copper, they are more or less identical, each decorated with a pair of opposed human heads joined by a common neck or pole and each head framed by either a pair of curving tendrils or a pair of inward-turning bird's heads (Fig. 1). Comment to date has mainly focused on questions of chronology and on stylistic parallels although Vincent Megaw (1970, 157) has suggested that impaled severed heads are represented and this might well have been an appropriate decorative motif on a shield as a visual reminder of the fate in store for any opponent. Other messages may be encoded here, however, and the plaques may speak to us about the Celtic otherworld and solar myth. They may even contain an allusion to one of the great mysteries of the ancient world: where did the sun go at night?

Given the considerable evidence for continuity between pagan prehistoric and Christian early historic Ireland, the rich literature of the medieval Celtic world (where an otherworld looms large) may at times shed some light on beliefs and practices many centuries before (Waddell 2011). If the timespan seems too great, as between the late Bronze Age around 1000 BC and the period of the literary evidence almost two millennia later then, at the very least, we should remember the possibility of a shared Proto-Indo-European inheritance. There is also the value of using early Irish texts as a form of ethnographic analogy. The limitations of using ethnographic parallels and superficial comparativism in archaeology are well known. The customs of the modern Masai, for example, are as about as remote in time and in space from European Iron Age cattle-raising societies as it is possible to be but in studying them and in studying early Irish literature we may discover new or different interpretative possibilities that challenge our modern ways of thinking about such things as otherworldly and solar beliefs.

The pursuit of solar imagery and mythology in medieval Irish and Welsh literature is a perilous task. Scholars have disagreed about the very existence of a solar cosmology. T. F. O'Rahilly published his monumental *Early Irish History and Mythology* in 1946 and enthusiastically argued with great erudition that numerous mythic figures were ultimately the expression of a pre-eminent solar deity. In paraphrasing the statement by that Welshman, St Patrick, in his *Confessio* that 'the splendour of the material sun, which rises every day at the bidding of God, will pass away, and those who worship it will go into dire punishment', O'Rahilly (1946, 470) contended that this was incontrovertible historical proof, from an unimpeachable authority, that the pagan Irish worshipped the sun. In contrast, Proinsias Mac Cana was much more circumspect in his *Celtic Mythology* suggesting that Patrick's

condemnation was one of the theological commonplaces he acquired during his religious training. Mac Cana wrote in a succinct appraisal (1970, 32): ‘if one excludes this, then in all the substantial remains of Irish tradition there is hardly any worthwhile evidence of a cult of the sun. There is, it is true, an abundance of solar symbolism, or motifs which lend themselves to such an interpretation, and there are gods who, like the Gaulish Apollo, are associated with attributes of the sun; but one can scarcely speak of sun-worship as such without doing violence to the extant traditions of Ireland and Wales’.

Whatever the nature of the literary evidence in Ireland and Wales, the Continental evidence is suggestive with, for instance, the name Apollo paired with the Celtic god Belenus (the bright or shining one) and particularly popular in Gaul, central Europe and northern Italy (Birkhan 2006, 195; Maier 1997, 33; Green 1991, 86). O’Rahilly had argued, with varying degrees of implausibility, that the sun-god, the lord of the otherworld, was known by many names in Ireland and combined the attributes of figures such as Eochaid Ollathair (‘Eochaid the Great Father’), the one-eyed Balar, Nuadu, the Dagda and many others. The name of the legendary king Eochaid Ánchenn (‘Eochaid of the glowing head’) was, he thought, one piece of evidence that the head was a symbol of the sun. O’Rahilly also argued that a certain Mug Roith, who figures as a euhemerized magician or wonder-working druid, was originally a solar deity whose name was Roth (‘wheel’). This figure is also associated with the Roth Rámach (‘oared wheel’), the ‘oars’ supposedly being the rays of the sun. Another mac Roith, a messenger of Ailill and Medb in the epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (‘The Cattle Raid of Cooley’), was considered a solar symbol because he circled Ireland in a single day like the sun. O’Rahilly also believed that one Mac Cécht was a euhemerization of Dian Cécht the sun god because he appeared as a traveller of the heavens journeying all over Ireland before morning (1946, 58ff., 292, 304, 472, 519).

In some circles, belief in the importance and ubiquity of solar mythology has really never recovered from the over-enthusiastic advocacy of the subject by that great Victorian student of Sanscrit studies and Professor of Comparative Theology at Oxford, Max Müller. The school of solar mythologists he represented, now supposedly extinct, has even been described as dangerous to the sanity of the modern reader (Dorson 1955, 393). Indeed, it proved possible, using Müller’s own comparative methodology, to demonstrate rather mischievously that he himself was actually a solar symbol because, for instance, he had travelled triumphantly from east to west—from Germany to Oxford—and his heroic name—Max of course was Maximus—and Müller—far from denoting a mere miller or grinder of corn—ultimately meant ‘Chief of Grinders’ and recalled the Sun-God who with his hammer crushed frost and clouds into impalpability (Littledale 1870).

It may be that O’Rahilly’s enthusiastic and speculative exploration of solar myth in Irish tradition prompted Mac Cana’s rather negative assessment of the evidence. The condemnation of sun worship by St Patrick, however, was not necessarily a formulaic utterance and the scarcity of unambiguous traces of a sun cult in early literature may well be a testimony to the censorious abilities of Christian editors and to the very potency of the pagan beliefs they encountered in the tales they recorded. There is, of course, a large body of archaeological evidence to support the thesis of a widespread solar cult of some description. It is true, as Mac Cana admitted, that there is an abundance of solar motifs in Continental Europe in particular and while the occasional triskele or swastika may have had a diversity of meanings, perhaps an apotropaic image or a good-luck talisman to ward off evil, it is now possible to identify one quite complex symbolic motif in both prehistoric Europe and pre-Christian Ireland that seems to be more than a mere charm and may be the expression of a religious cosmology. This, the combination of a representation of a boat and an associated sun disc, is a depiction of the solar boat carrying the sun across the heavens.

A solar boat, drawn by horses or birds, is a remarkably widespread image in later Continental



Fig. 1. The Tal-y-llyn plaques Originally both were about 15cm in length.  
*Photographs courtesy of National Museum Wales.*

prehistory extending in various forms from Scandinavia to south-eastern Europe. The Nordic Bronze Age has a remarkable iconographic repertoire on stone and bronze and this has enabled various commentators to propose the existence of a complex solar cosmography in which boats, solar imagery, human figures, horses and fish may figure. Flemming Kaul (2006) for example, has suggested a plausible cyclical story in which the solar boat is sometimes depicted travelling from left to right, that is from east to west, in its day-time journey across the heavens but it may also be shown moving from right to left which represents its night-time journey through the underworld from whence it emerges at dawn to resume its cosmic course.

This is to be seen on bronze razors such as an example from south Jutland with an image of a boat that contains two human figures, sometimes considered twin solar deities, who are clearly paddling the vessel from left to right (Fig. 2, 1). In contrast, another example from southern Zealand with horse-head prow and stern is sailing from right to left and is followed by a fish (Fig. 2, 2). According to Kaul, this is a ship of the night and the underworld and such left-sailing vessels, where they can be identified in Denmark, are never associated with solar images. The famous 'chariot of the sun' from Trundholm in Denmark is probably the best known Bronze Age solar symbol (Fig. 3). As suggested by Hans Drescher (1962, 42), the gold-plated bronze disc, mounted on a wheeled vehicle, is drawn by a horse from left to right and depicts the sun's westward route across the heavens in the northern

hemisphere. When reversed, the back of the bronze disc, which was apparently never gold-covered, is pulled by the horse from right to left and this—it is now generally believed—represents the sun's nocturnal journey under the land or under the sea towards the dawn in the east (Kaul 1998, 30). It is interesting to note that the decoration differs slightly on either face; the number of concentric circle motifs varies and spiral motifs, in linked pairs, only occur on the bronze nocturnal face. Numerical and calendrical interpretations have been explored (Randsborg 2006, 68) but whatever the explanation, the contrasting decorative detail would seem to imply that different meanings are indeed reflected in the designs on either face. The apparent depiction of different aspects of the sun on the one object and the representation of an otherworldly dimension of solar mythology are especially interesting because they may explain some aspects of sun symbolism elsewhere in Europe.

Examples of images of a boat with bird's head prow and stern and an associated sun disc, the *Vogel-Sonnen-Barke*, are widely distributed in central Europe in particular in the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age (Wirth 2006a). Some classic illustrations occur on a small number of bronze buckets of Hajdúböszörmény type in Hungary (Patay 1990) where the sun is shown as a disc or a boss prominently placed in a boat with duck or swan heads at either end (Fig. 4, 1). A remarkable sheet bronze bucket in a private collection, possibly in Austria, bears embossed solar boat imagery in a broad frieze that circumscribes its upper body. The decoration on this, the Vienna situla as Stefan Wirth (2006b) calls it, essentially consists of two zones of solar boats, one above the other, all sailing around the circumference of the vessel, in a continuous symmetrical composition that, in its mirror

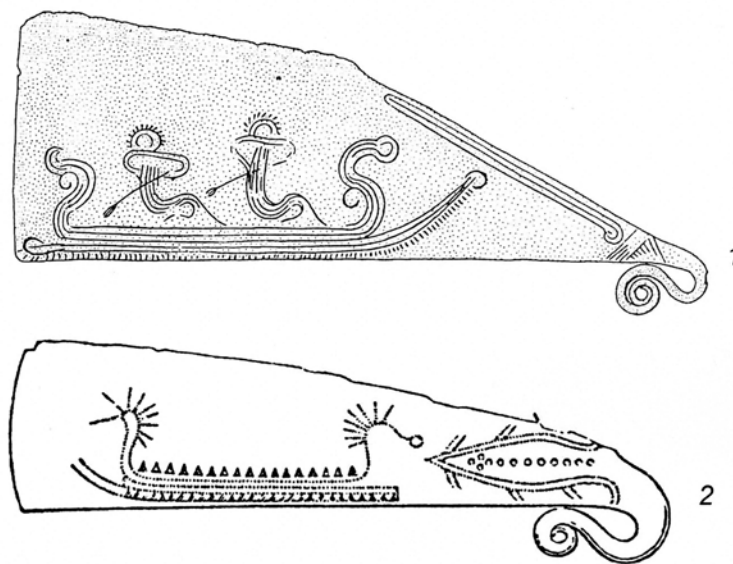


Fig. 2. 1. Bronze razor from south Jutland depicting a solar boat travelling from left to right and containing two human figures, possibly two aspects of the sun god. 2. Bronze razor from Møn, southern Zealand, showing a boat with horse-head prow and stern sailing towards the left followed by a fish (both after Kaul 1998).



imagery, evokes the sun's journey above and below the horizon (Fig. 4, 2). As he points out, this is a cosmological narrative that recalls the diurnal and nocturnal voyages of the sun and the various representations of the sun that occur may have had different meanings.



Fig. 3. The Trundholm 'chariot of the sun' (after Aner and Kersten 1976). The gilded face of the bronze sun disc (above) is mainly decorated with concentric circle motifs and is drawn by the horse from left to right. The bronze face (below) bearing concentric circle motifs and a design of linked spirals is to the fore when the vehicle is drawn from right to left.

In some cases, I suggest, the otherworldly solar voyage may also be implied by reversal or inversion. In some designs, as on the Vienna situla and on a vessel from Nyírlugos, eastern Hungary (Fig. 4, 1) a central image is flanked by smaller boat images with inturned bird's heads, the position of the sun being depicted as a small boss. These opposed or reversed birds are possibly intended to denote a nocturnal otherworld ship and the complete image presents an abbreviated version of the story of the cosmic eternal return of the sun that affirms that day is not conquered by night. Inverted boats may tell a similar story of otherworldly significance. Unlike designs with reversed bird's heads, images of upturned solar boats are rare, however, but they do occur. They are to be found, for example, paired keel to keel with stylized upright craft in a frieze of embossed designs on a Hallstatt period bronze bucket from Kleinklein in Austria (Prüssing 1991, 50, no. 104), keel to keel on the plate of a bronze neck ring from Fangel Torp, Odense, Denmark (Kaul 1998, no. 128) and on a bronze shield in Copenhagen (Wirth 2006b, 342, fig. 10).

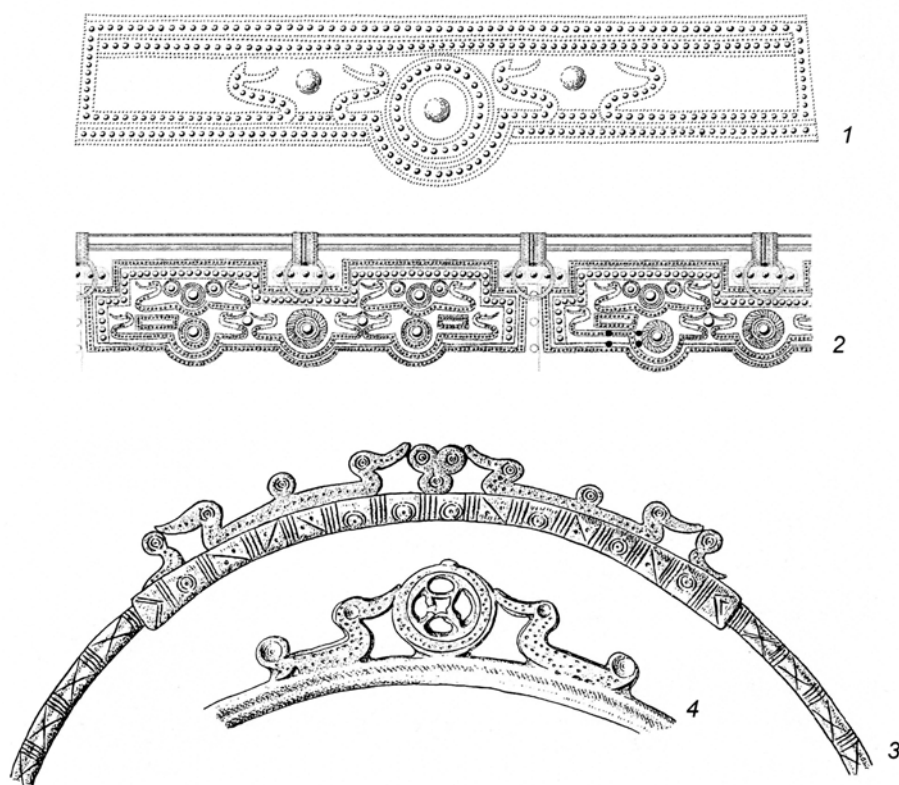


Fig. 4. 1. Detail of decoration on a bronze bucket of Hajdúböszörmény type from Nyírlugos, eastern Hungary, with a solar boat with bird's head prow and stern and sun disc flanked by smaller boats with reversed bird's heads (after Patay 1990). 2. The frieze of two rows of solar boats one above the other on the Vienna situla (after Wirth 2006a). 3. Solar boat on a bronze torc from Attancourt, Haute-Marne. 4. Solar symbolism on a bronze torc from the Marne region (3–4 from Sprockhoff 1955). Various scales.

From an insular perspective, the Vienna situla is important in another respect. As Wirth points out, it belongs to the Hosszúpályi variant of the Kurd type (Patay 1990, 37). This bucket form is represented by well-known finds in Ireland in the Dowris, Co. Offaly, deposit and in Wales from Nannau, near Dolgellau, in Merioneth (Gerloff 2010, 238). If plain bucket Hosszúpályi forms like these could be transmitted from central Europe to the far west, so could associated ideas and beliefs.

The solar boat occasionally occurs in La Tène imagery as well, as Sprockhoff (1955) demonstrated over half a century ago. Among a series of bronze torcs from France, for instance, one from Attancourt bears a pair of sun ships each with bird's head prow and stern and containing a sun disc; both flank a triple roundel, possibly a triple sun, in such a way as to offer a version of the reversed bird image. Reversed birds confront a wheel-shaped sun symbol on an unprovenanced example from the Marne region (Fig. 4, 3–4). It also figures in insular art but in a quite exceptional and invariably stylized fashion. It finds its clearest expression on one of the smaller discs on the unprovenanced and fragmentary Irish object called the Petrie Crown (Fig. 5, 1) so-called because it was once in the collection of the nineteenth-century antiquary George Petrie. This horned headpiece now consists of a conical horn and a band of openwork sheet bronze with a pair of slightly dished discs attached to the front. Each disc had apparently supported a bronze horn, one of which survives. The band, the discs and the horn, are each very skilfully decorated with a symmetrical design of thin and elongated trumpet curves, some terminating in different sorts of bird's heads.

The design on the disc below the surviving horn is particularly interesting because the bird's head terminals flank a circle set in a crescent form and is obviously a solar boat with bird's head prow and stern and containing a sun roundel. There is, however, an interesting series of contrasts in the decoration of the Petrie Crown. The other disc has a more stylised version of the same motif in which the solar roundel is clearly depicted but the body of the boat in which it sits seems to be inverted. The bronze band behind is decorated with a series of spirals with reversed bird's heads that give the impression of encompassing the discs and including them in another but more tenuous boat-like image.

A pair of large sheet bronze discs from Monasterevin, Co. Kildare, has given the name Monasterevin type to a group of four complete and three fragmentary discs (Raftery 1983). None have any precise details of the circumstances of their discovery recorded and though their purpose is unknown they do seem to have occurred in pairs since. In addition to the Monasterevin examples, one other pair may now be provenanced to Co. Armagh, another possibly to Lismore, Co. Waterford (Ó Floinn 2009). They are usually slightly concave and range in diameter from about 25cm to just over 30cm. Decoration is similar but not identical and consists of bold repoussé work up to 10mm high. The overall pattern is a fairly consistent one: a large central circle or roundel, varying in depth, is placed within a symmetrical field of trumpet curves forming an approximately U-shaped or semi-circular arrangement with spiral terminals, the concave element containing a prominent circle (Fig. 5, 2–3). Some writers have seen grotesque human faces in these patterns but like the discs on the Petrie Crown, these are highly stylised solar boats with the paired bird heads reduced to distinct curving elements. Similarly highly stylised solar symbolism is to be found on some few pieces of British metalwork as well, notably on the celebrated Battersea shield (Fig. 6) where, along with swastika-like motifs, it is a prominent feature on the pair of smaller circular panels (Waddell 2009).

In the past, when compared to the Petrie Crown, the images on these Monasterevin type discs would have been judged to be a particularly severe case of stylistic disintegration or typological regression, a sad process of degeneration charted by Sir John Evans who applied Darwinian principles in his numismatic studies of native versions of the gold stater of Philip II of Macedon and famously illustrated by Grahame Clarke (1960, 135) as an example of typological devolution. As he put it: 'In the hands of artificers, to whom the naturalistic rendering of Philip's head had no particular significance other



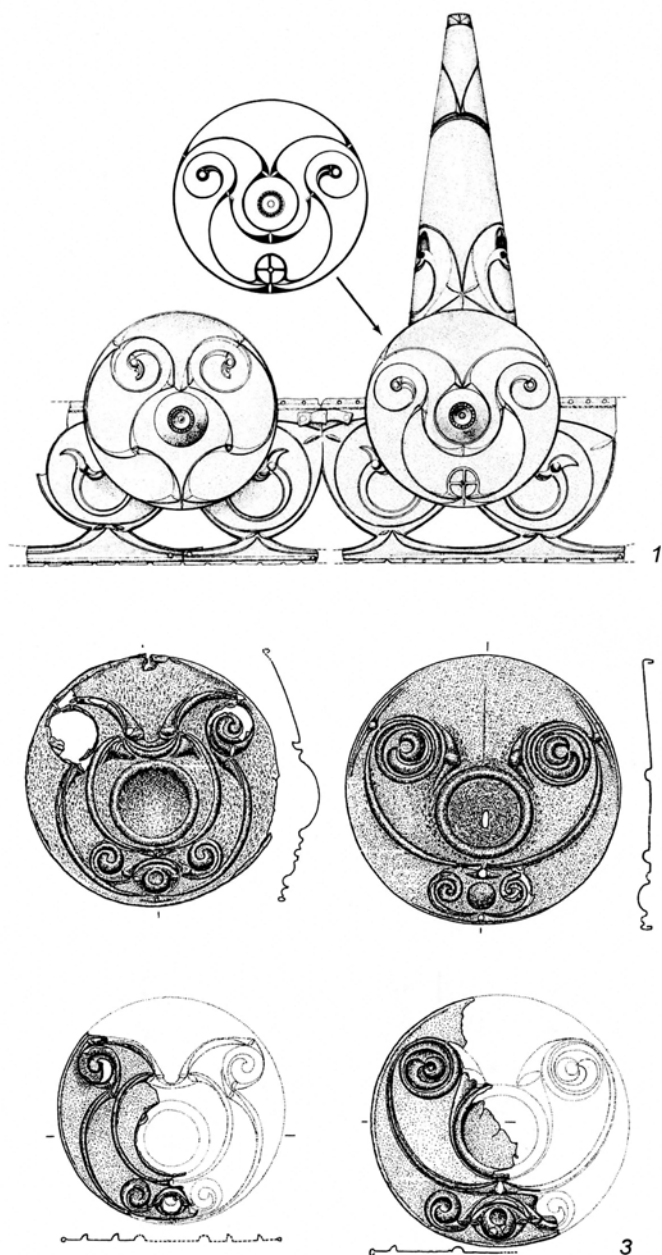


Fig. 5. 1. Solar imagery on the Petrie Crown; reversed bird's heads occur on an openwork bronze band behind the discs and the solar roundel on the left-hand disc seems to be set in an inverted vessel. 2. Pair of bronze discs from Monasterevin, Co. Kildare; the stylized solar boat on the disc on the right has reversed bird's heads. 3. Pair of bronze discs from Co. Armagh; the stylized solar boat on the disc on the right also has reversed bird's heads (all after Raftery 1983). Various scales.

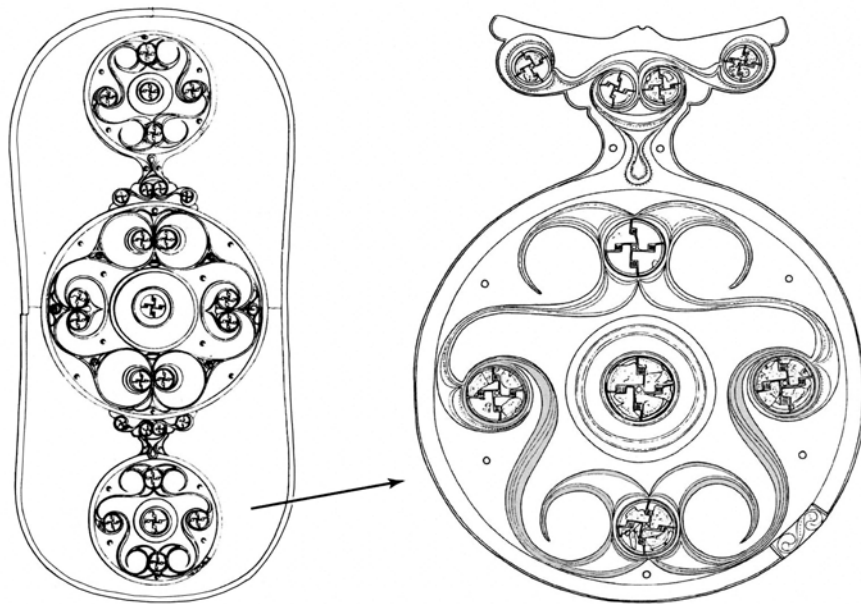


Fig. 6. The Battersea shield (after Jope 2000 and Stead 1985) with solar imagery on lower roundel highlighted; the image on the upper roundel is inverted.

than as a mere mark of identification, the design rapidly disintegrated'. Simone Scheers (1992, 41) did not believe that these native coins were 'the fantasies of clumsy engravers'. As John Creighton (1995, 289) wrote of the coinage: 'Whilst the Philip II stater represented the starting point of Iron Age coinage, the idea that all subsequent issues were just a debasement of this image, or more charitably a Celtic abstraction of the same, is rather unfair. It neglects the real choices that were continually made by those who issued and minted coin'. While not denying the existence of incompetent artists and copiers, the technical calibre of the Irish decorated bronzes confirms that something much more significant may be taking place in this fissioning process whether on coin or disc.

The manufacture of objects like the Petrie Crown, the Monasterevin type discs and the Battersea shield represents craftsmanship of the highest quality in which religious and secular concerns are combined. A religious dimension is indicated by the solar symbolism employed in an exercise that was surely a sacred task and in which every element of the composition may have been imbued with significance. The technical skills deployed must also have been an expression of status and prestige, confirming the social order for whoever commissioned their creation. In contrast to the relatively overt depiction of the solar boat in earlier times, however, the insular artists in the last century BC and the early centuries AD now very clearly sought to manipulate the traditional image. This stylization was in all probability a very deliberate process of mystification and disarticulation to capture its essential elements. In doing so they may have given greater emphasis to its inherent strength and perhaps, equally purposefully, they may have sought to introduce a deliberate ambiguity in an imagery of exclusion that might be understood by a select few and be intentionally multivalent. Those who saw

grotesque human heads or faces in the Monasterevin type discs, for example, may have just engaged in one potential reading.

Accepting that discs from Monasterevin and those from Armagh were indeed found as pairs (Fig. 5) then their respective complementarity may present more than just solar imagery, there may be otherworldly references as well. The pairing of these discs is significant: if placed side by side one disc in each pair has one solar boat with out-turned bird's heads while its counterpart has reversed heads—a detail repeated in the small design below each boat. As already mentioned, the somewhat puzzling images with reversed bird's heads, as on the late Bronze Age Nyírlugos bucket, may have been intended to illustrate the nocturnal phase of the course of the sun and denote a night ship of the otherworld, a world that is the opposite of this one.

In the pair of baroque roundels containing a solar boat and multiple swastikas on the Battersea shield (Fig. 6) it is noteworthy that the uppermost is inverted, and perhaps this inversion, like reversed bird's heads, is another otherworldly allusion. The inverted boat on one of the pair of discs of the Petrie Crown is yet another example of this contrapuntal imagery that seems to offer contrasting explicit and implicit readings corresponding to the upper world and the lower one.

We have forgotten that the mystery of the sun's nocturnal journey was once a real concern. It preoccupied the medieval mind and figures, for example, in a section of a ninth-century Old Irish apocryphal text *In Tenga Bithnua* ('The Evernew Tongue') in which the spirit of the apostle Philip (whose tongue was cut out nine times and nine times miraculously regenerated) addresses the wise men of Jerusalem to explain the creation of the world to them (Carey 1994). Here we are told that on the fourth day of Creation, God made 'the fiery circuit of the sun which . . . illuminates twelve plains beneath the edges of the world in its shining every night'. Portions of the message of St Philip, the Evernew Tongue, are as follows:

It is thus that the sun goes every evening:

First it shines on the stream beyond the sea, bringing it news of the waters in the east.

Then it shines at night upon the lofty sea of fire, and upon the seas of sulphurous flame which surround the red peoples. . . .

It shines in the black valleys with melancholy streams across their faces. . . .

Then it shines upon the flocks of birds who sing many songs together in the valley of the flowers. . . .

Then it shines upon the dark tearful plain, with dragons who have been placed under the mist. . . .

Then it shines upon Adam's Paradise until it rises from the east in the morning . . .

As John Carey demonstrates, the descriptions of some of these plains (as, for instance, the place peopled with 'flocks of birds who sing many songs') are comparable to marvels of the otherworld in Irish tradition but others possibly derive from Gnostic writing in late antique Egypt. Whatever the source of the idea that the night-time sun passes through the underworld, it was still current in fourth-century Egypt and continued to be one of the mysteries of creation in medieval times as Carey shows. The question was very clearly asked, for instance, in the early twelfth-century tale *Immram Úa Corra* ('The Voyage of the Huí Corra'): 'Cia leth i teit an grian o thét fon fairrciu?' ('Where does the sun go when he goes under the sea?') (Stokes 1893, 36). It is very likely that this question was also a part of native learning at a much earlier date if our reading of some of the insular solar imagery is correct.

The concept of an otherworld is widely distributed in time and space, as references to a Proto-Indo-European paradisaical and very different otherworld suggest (Lincoln 1980). As is well known, this

otherworld has various guises in early Irish literature where it may be a land under the earth or the *síd* mound, a land beneath lakes or an island. Often represented as a land of peace and plenty and a place of perpetual feasting, it was also a timeless region and, sometimes, the mirror image of the human world. This idea of reversal or inversion between two worlds may have been a widespread belief and, as we have seen, one occasionally identifiable in solar symbolism the archaeological record, and in other ways as well (Waddell forthcoming). That solar boat with reversed bird's heads and the practice of inverting certain solar images may be different graphic manifestations of this otherworld and it may be reflected in the iconography on the pair of anthropoid plaques from the Tal-y-llyn hoard.

It is not known how both plaques were once displayed, a combination of one above the other is one possibility (perhaps on a shield as has been supposed) but they may even have been mounted side by side (Fig. 7).

In both plaques the strange arrangement of two human heads joined together by a long straight bar and separated along a median line marked by horizontal leaf shapes always meant that in any of these combinations one head was always going to appear inverted. One head is flanked by reversed bird's heads while the other framed by recurved tendrils that are highly stylised bird's heads. Here we appear to have simultaneous representations of the solar boats of this world and the otherworld. The connecting bar with its associated leaf motifs seems, like the 'Tree of Life', to connect one world with the other. More intriguingly still, each individual plaque presents an image—if bisected horizontally—of one head and its associated elements viewed as if above ground, the other appearing as a distorted reflection below. Given that aquatic birds like ducks and swans are associated with air, earth and water, and that the otherworld in Irish tradition may lie beneath land or water, a connection between birds and this sort of mirror imagery of the two worlds is a possibility. Heads twinned in this fashion, one inverted, form a part of the applied bronze La Tène decoration on a celebrated vessel from Brno-Maloměřice in Moravia (conveniently illustrated in Megaw 1970, no. 158) and Kruta (2007, 65) sees them as representing deities of light and dark, of this world and the subterranean other.

The dating of the Dunaverney flesh-hook with its model birds to the late Bronze Age *c.* 1000 BC indicates that bird imagery had a long prehistory in Ireland. It is not impossible that it was also associated with buckets like Dowris and Nannau at this early date. Even though these two examples are undecorated as already mentioned, it is hard not to imagine that a solar cosmology may have been associated with prestigious bucket fashions. It seems that a family of swans and cygnets and a pair of ravens are represented on the Dunaverney object and this may imply that binary opposites, such as birds of air and birds of land, were also part of insular belief systems at this time (Needham and Bowman 2005, 120; Bowman and Needham 2007, 94).

The pairing of human heads on each of the Tal-y-llyn plaques is more difficult to explain but remembering O'Rahilly's claim that the head might be a sun symbol then its association with a pair of bird's heads might be unsurprising. On the plaques, however, the bird's heads are reversed and the associated head inverted so both motifs may be allusions to the next world. As he also reminded us, the severed head sometimes played an important part in the otherworld feast. These two plaques, though simple in design, may thus present a surprisingly complex symbolism that includes solar imagery and offers another variation on the themes of pairing, reversal or inversion, and concealment, that are such a feature of the Petrie Crown, the Monasterevin and Armagh discs, and the Battersea shield. If reversal and inversion are marks of the otherworld, then these Tal-y-llyn images include allusions to the sun's nocturnal voyage as well.

The exploration of this solar question was prompted by the medieval text *In Tenga Bithnua*, and another text raises an interesting and related issue. In a revealing illustration as to how a careful excavation of the literary evidence might have addressed some of Mac Cana's concerns of forty years

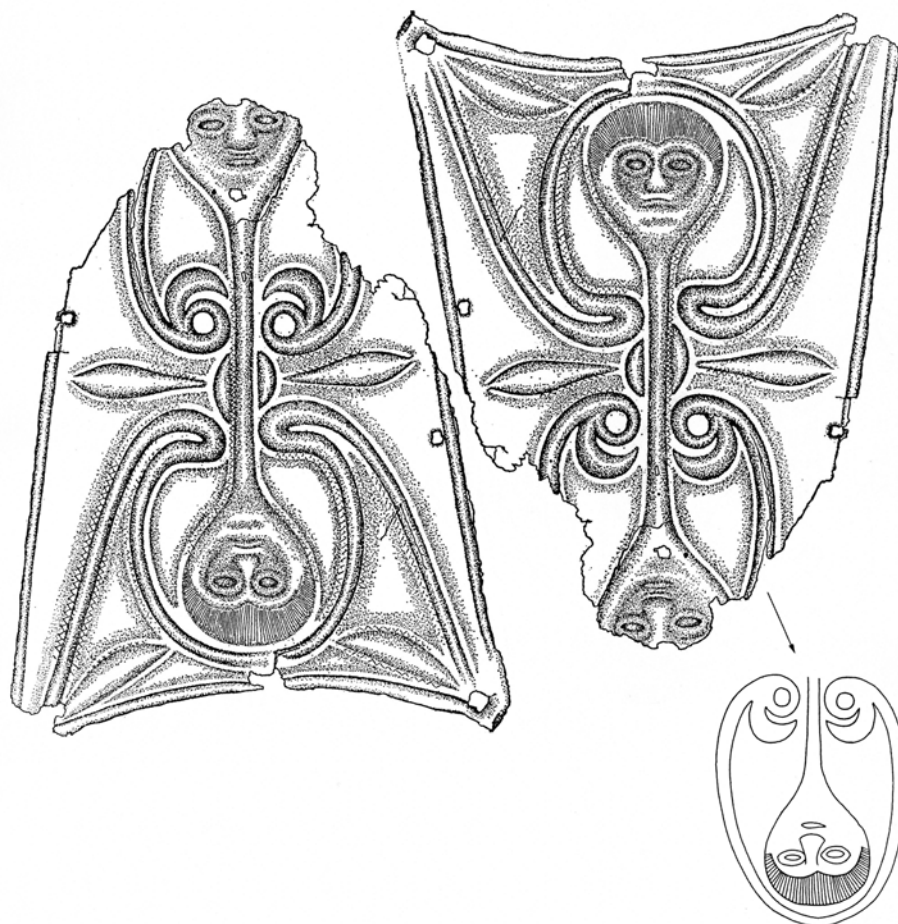


Fig. 7. Savory's drawing of one of the pair of anthropoid plaques from Tal-y-llyn (left) is also reproduced inverted to illustrate how the pair may have looked if placed side-by-side. The solar image with reversed bird's heads and an inverted human head is reconstructed on the lower right.

ago, Marion Deane (2007; 2011) has recently identified a solar theme in the eighth-century tale of the conception and birth of the famous warrior Cú Chulainn, *Compert Con Culainn*. This birth-tale recounts three conceptions and pregnancies that result in premature death, abortion and, ultimately, in the successful birth of the child Setanta who will become the celebrated hero of the Ulster Cycle. The god Lug and Conchobar, king of Ulster, along with Dechtire, sister of Conchobar, are all involved in this complex tale of sexual union, incest and multiple birth. The events take place in a devastated winter landscape denuded of vegetation that eventually has its fertility restored when Dechtire's union with Lug occurs and when Conchobar re-appears and initiates the cultivation of the land. As



Deane argues, the mythic dimension of the story becomes clear when Lug, Conchobar and Dechtire are considered as personifications of the light of the sun, the sun and the earth respectively and when the seasonal pattern of the narrative, the sun's annual journey—from the great festivals of Samhain (1 November) to Lughnasad (1 August)—is recognized. The return of Conchobar, like the return of the sun at its most powerful, introduces a new era of fertility. In his discussion of early Irish kingship, Charles Doherty (2005, 20) notes that the concept of the 'world king' is to be found in early poetry associated with Leinster and in one seventh-century poem the king Bressual is identified with the sun: 'A brilliant burning sun that heats is the flame: Bressual—fair one of Elg [Ireland], descendant of Lorcc who lays waste the world—Beolíach'.

In an archaeological context, the association of kingship with solar imagery is particularly significant. It may be, given the ancient roots of sacral kingship, that some of the high status metalwork with solar symbolism, like the Petrie Crown and the Battersea shield, should be considered to have been royal paraphernalia.

### Acknowledgements

My thanks to Jacqueline Borsje who drew my attention to *In Tenga Bithnua* and to Adam Gwilt and Angela Gallagher for their assistance with illustrations. I am also very grateful to Conor Newman and Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha who kindly read a draft of this paper and who bear no responsibility for the solar speculations it contains—but to paraphrase Sir Philip Sidney—he who shoots at the mid-day sun . . . shall shoot higher than he who aims but at a bush.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aner, E. and Kersten, K., 1976. *Die Funde der älteren Bronzezeit des nordischen Kreises in Dänemark, Schleswig-Holstein und Niedersachsen*, Band II (Copenhagen).
- Birkhan, H., 2006. Belenos/Belinos, in J. T. Koch (ed.), *Celtic Culture. A historical encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clío), vol. 1.
- Bowman, S. and Needham, S., 2007. 'The Dunaverney and Little Thetford flesh-hooks: history, technology and their position within the later Bronze Age Atlantic Zone feasting complex', *Antiquaries Journal* 87, 53–108.
- Carey, J., 1994. 'The sun's night journey: a Pharaonic image in Medieval Ireland', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 57, 14–34.
- Clarke, G., 1960. *Archaeology and Society. Reconstructing the prehistoric past* (3rd edn, London: Methuen).
- Cooney, G., Becker, K., Coles, J., Ryan, M. and Sievers S. (eds), 2009. *Relics of Old Decency: archaeological studies in later prehistory. Festschrift for Barry Raftery* (Dublin: Wordwell).
- Creighton, J., 1995. 'Visions of power: imagery and symbols in Late Iron Age Britain', *Britannia* 26, 285–301.
- Deane, M., 2007. 'Compert Conculainn: possible antecedents?', in J. E. Rekdal and A. Ó Corráin (eds), *Proceedings of the Eighth Symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica*, 61–84 (Uppsala).
- 2011. 'From sacred marriage to clientship: a mythical account of the establishment of kingship as an institution', in Schot, Newman and Bhreathnach 2011 (eds), 1–21.
- Doherty, C., 2005. 'Kingship in Early Ireland', in E. Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin: Four Courts Press), 3–31.
- Dorson, R. M., 1955. 'The eclipse of solar mythology', *Journal of American Folklore* 68, 393–416.
- Drescher, H., 1962. 'Neue Untersuchungen am Sonnenwagen von Trundholm und über die Gusstechnik

- bronzezeitlichen Tierfiguren', *Acta Archaeologica* 33, 39–62.
- Gerloff, S., 2010. *Atlantic Cauldrons and Buckets of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages in Western Europe*, *Prähistorische Bronzefunde* II, 18 (Stuttgart).
- Green, M., 1991. *The Sun-Gods of Ancient Europe* (London: Batsford).
- Jacobsthal, P., 1944. *Early Celtic Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Jope, E. M., 2000. *Early Celtic Art in the British Isles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Kaul, F., 1998. *Ships on Bronzes. A study in Bronze Age religion and iconography* (Copenhagen: National Museum).
- 2006. Bronze Age tripartite cosmologies, *Prähistorische Zeitschrift* 80, 235–46.
- Kruta, V., 2007. *La cruche celte de Brno. Chef-d'oeuvre de l'art. Miroir de l'Univers* (Dijon).
- Lincoln, B., 1980. On the imagery of Paradise, *Indogermanische Forschungen* 85, 151–64.
- [Littledale, R. F.] 1870. 'The Oxford solar myth. A contribution to comparative mythology', *Kottabos* 5, 145–54.
- Mac Cana, P., 1970. *Celtic Mythology* (London: Hamlyn).
- Megaw, J. V. S., 1970. *Art of the European Iron Age* (Bath: Adams and Dart).
- Maier, B., 1997. *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press).
- Needham, S. and Bowman, S., 2005. 'Flesh-hooks, technological complexity and the Atlantic Bronze Age feasting complex', *European Journal of Archaeology* 8, 93–136.
- Ó Floinn, R., 2009. 'Notes on some Iron Age finds from Ireland', in Cooney *et al.* 2009 (eds), 199–21.
- O'Rahilly, T. F., 1946. *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin).
- Patay, P., 1990. *Die Bronzegefäße in Ungarn*, *Prähistorische Bronzefunde* II, 10 (Munich).
- Prüssing, G., 1991. *Die Bronzegefäße in Österreich*, *Prähistorische Bronzefunde* II, 5 (Stuttgart).
- Raftery, B., 1983. *A Catalogue of Irish Iron Age Antiquities* (Marburg).
- Randsborg, K., 2006. 'Opening the oak-coffins. New dates—new perspectives', *Acta Archaeologica* 77, 1–162.
- Savory, H. N., 1964. 'A new hoard of La Tène metalwork from Merionethshire', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 20, 449–75.
- 1976. *Guide Catalogue of the Early Iron Age Collections* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales).
- Scheers, S., 1992. 'Celtic coin types in Britain and their Mediterranean origins', in M. Mays (ed.), *Celtic Coinage: Britain and Beyond. The eleventh Oxford Symposium on Coinage and Monetary History*, *British Archaeological Reports British Series* 222 (Oxford), 33–46.
- Schot, R., Newman, C. and Bhreathnach, E., (eds), *Landscapes of Cult and Kingship: Archaeology and Text* (Dublin).
- Sprockhoff, E., 1955. 'Central European Urnfield Culture and Celtic La Tène: an outline', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 21, 257–81.
- Stead, I. M. 1985. *The Battersea Shield* (London: British Museum).
- Stokes, Wh., 1893. 'The Voyage of the Huí Corra', *Revue Celtique* 14, 22–69.
- Waddell, J., 2009. 'The elusive image', in Cooney *et al.* 2009 (eds), 341–9.
- 2011. 'Continuity, cult and contest, in Bhreathnach', in Schot, Newman and Bhreathnach 2011 (eds), 192–212.
- forthcoming. 'The Cave of Crúachain and the Otherworld', in J. Borsje (ed.), *Proceedings of the Conference on Celtic Cosmology and the Power of Words*.
- Wirth, S., 2006a. Vogel-Sonnen-Barke, in H. Beck, D. Geuenich and H. Steuer (eds), *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 32, 552–63 (Berlin: De Gruyter).
- 2006b. 'Le mystère de la barque solaire: quelques considérations à propos des décors sur les situles de type Hajdúböszörmény et sur une situle inédite du bronze final', in L. Baray (ed.), *Artisanats, sociétés et civilisations: hommage à Jean-Paul Thevenot*, *Revue Archéologique de l'Est Supplément* 24 (Dijon), 331–45.