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The Elusive Image

John Waddell

In writing of the image of man in La Téne art, Paul Jacobsthal examined the peculiar and delusive blending of human faces and ornament that sometimes occurred on metalwork such as tores, girdle-hooks, rings and fibulae. He was struck by the fact that the Greeks might blend abstract or floral ornament with human faces but for them a spiral was always a spiral and a face always a face; it was always clear where one began and the other ended. Not so with the faces or masks in La Téne art. Jacobsthal (1941, 10; 1944, 18) wrote, 'there is something fleeting and evanescent about these masks, which are often not even complete faces, only bits of a face. It is the mechanism of dreams where things have floating contours and pass into other things. One might call the style the Cheshire Style: the cat appears in the tree and often just the grin of the cat.' This wry—and, indeed, slightly frivolous—allusion to Lewis Carroll's famous disappearing cat who left just his smile behind has also left its mark in the study of this extraordinary art style. It prompted Vincent Megaw (1962, 24) to refer to the 'Disney-like abstraction apparent in the fusing of human and floral elements and to compare the way a face might be broken down into a number of curvilinear forms, crescents, ovals and arcs to the Walt Disney cartoonist's rendering in similar simple curves of the face of Mickey Mouse. This he called the 'Cheshire cat style' (Megaw 1965, 124). While Megaw's various studies of these ambiguous images have added greatly to our understanding of the intricacies of La Téne art, I am not sure that phrases such as 'Disney style', 'funny faces', 'pseudo-faces' and 'visual punning' (Megaw 1970) are especially illuminating, but in their empathic approach they are perhaps preferable to the restraint of Martyn Jope, who, in his monumental *Early Celtic art in the British Isles,* skirts the challenge to see meaning in this art and rarely strays beyond a consideration of features such as technique, balance, symmetry and ambiguity. For him, in this imagery we stand on the threshold of an expressive art considered as a cultivated expression of feeling and, for instance, the designs on the Petrie Crown are elegantly but guardedly described as fine relief ornament composed of lapping trumpet ribs. On a series of Irish bronze discs, 'domed caps of long slender trumpets are worked into a medial multiple articulation, with tapering, steeply arrised ribs lapping up under the trumpet-mouths' (Jope 2000, 3, 134).

Like many other writers, Barry Raftery (1994a, 163) was right to see LaTéne art as a phenomenon of great beauty and originality that undoubtedly had a meaning for its creators—much of which is lost to us. But all is not lost, and in this brief acknowledgement of his enormous contribution to the archaeology of the Irish Iron Age, I hope to demonstrate that some meaning is discernible in the Irish and British corpus. This is a 'primitive art' but only in the non-pejorative sense that it is the expressive language of a pre-literate people, and the challenge we face is one of translation. Jope was entirely correct to emphasise its aesthetic qualities; this was undoubedly a preoccupation of those who created the designs and those who viewed them. As is well known, however, some of the artwork is so finely wrought that it is difficult to read, even in the bright light of a modern museum case; the minute detail of some Irish scabbard decoration is a case in point, and this may mean that the designs had a very personal significance, perhaps to be seen by a select few.

Exceptional technical skill of this sort has an ancient pedigree. We see it, for example, many centuries before in those decorated late Bronze Age hair-rings where the striped examples are solid pieces that have been inlaid with gold with a high silver content and cast using the lost-wax method (Meeks *et al.* 2008), or in those lock- or tress-rings where each plate has been constructed of concentric rings of thin gold wire joined together in work of extraordinary and unparalleled delicacy (Eogan 1994, 83). Whether in lock- ring, hair-ring or sheet-bronze cauldron, craftsmen displayed an extravagant interest in technical virtuosity, and this, presumably, was to indulge the aesthetic tastes of their patrons. An increasing intellectual appreciation of the visual and artistic qualities of fine metalwork became one of

the marks of an élite minority, a point made by Avery (1997) in his study of the decoration on the Broighter tore, which he saw as entirely abstract. This appreciation is undoubtedly the case in the sphere of the finest La Téne art, but now an admiration of technical skill is accompanied by a refined understanding of what are, in effect, a complex iconography and a symbolic language.

A pair of large bronze discs found together at Monasterevin, Co. Kildare, has given the name Monasterevin-type to a group of four complete and three fragmentary discs (Fig. 1). All but the Monasterevin pair are unprovenanced, and even they have no details of the circumstances of their discovery recorded. Made of sheet bronze, these discs are usually slightly concave and range in diameter from about 25cm to just over 30cm; their purpose is unknown. Decoration is similar but not identical and consists of bold repousse work up to 10mm high. The overall pattern is a fairly consistent one: a large central circle or roundel, varying from a slight concavity to a deep bowlshaped hollow, is placed within a symmetrical field of trumpet curves forming an approximately U-shaped or semicircular arrangement with spiral terminals containing a prominent circle. Given the positioning of a pair of spirals above a circle, it is probably not surprising that this design has been described in different ways: 'great staring faces, enigmatic as so often in Celtic art' (Megaw and Megaw 2001, 236), or 'while the ornament is essentially a geometrical fantasy, it is difficult not to see a grotesque face behind the fantasy' (Piggott and Daniel 1951, 20). Paul- Marie Duval (1977, 230) thought the design could be deliberately ambiguous, a face or an open-mouthed fish, but Jope (2000, 272) simply saw decoration derived ultimately from the palmette schema.

As Barry Raftery (1987, 17) recognised, there are evident stylistic links between these Monasterevin discs and the Petrie Crown. In fact, the clue to the symbolism on these puzzling discs lies in one of the smaller discs on that object (Fig. 1, 4), so called because it was once in the collection of the nineteenth-century antiquary George Petrie, who did not record its provenance. It is a fragmentary piece, now consisting of a band of openwork sheet bronze with a pair of slightly dished discs attached to the front. Each disc apparently supported a conical 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. This is not, as one writer thought, a face with an upturned curling moustache (Lernez-de Wilde 1982, 104) but a solar symbol, a representation of the solar boat with bird's-head prow and
stern that conveyed the sun across the heavens.

As Sprockhoff (1955) showed over half a century ago, this is a motif of considerable antiquity that extends well beyond the Celtic realms (Wirth 2006, with bibliography). As he demonstrated (Fig. 2), it occurs in the central European Urnfield world, in Scandinavia and in the LaTéne period, the sun being represented by a disc, a circle or a wheel. According to Kristiansen and Larsson (2005, 307), swan heads replaced horse heads as the dominant animal on sun ships in the thirteenth-twelfth centuries BC. A series of tores from the Marne display variations on the theme (Fig. 2, 1-2 and 5-6): on one a pair of sun ships flank a triple roundel, possibly a triple sun; a wheel-shaped device flanked by birds occurs on a second, and on a third a pair of birds confront not a triple sun but a stylised image of the Tree of Life—as Jacobsthal (1944, 28) once pointed out.

The motif of paired birds and sun roundel appears in two different guises on the Petrie Crown and finds its clearest and fullest expression on the disc below the surviving horn, where a wheel motif gives emphasis to the solar symbolism. The designs on the Monasterevin-type discs are more stylised and the paired bird heads reduced to distinct curving features or, as Jope (2000, 135) saw it, the bold simple finial curves are detached and jumbled. Nonetheless, they have not lost all their bird-like qualities, and on one of the unprovenanced pieces a single bird's head survives (Fig. 1, 3). In the past, when compared to the Petrie Crown, the images on these discs would have been judged to be a severe case of stylistic disintegration or typological regression, but something much more interesting is

happening here. Clifford Geertz (1983, 98) has remarked that to approach 'primitive art' from the side of Western aesthetics leaves us with an externalised conception of the phenomenon supposedly under intense inspection but actually not even in our line of sight.

On these discs the artist may be seeking to hide the solar symbol, or more likely is trying to reduce it to its essential elements and in doing so giving greater emphasis to its inherent strength. In a very deliberate act, a traditional symbol is altered to give it a new or different or more powerful meaning. Just as repetition, such as triplism, may accentuate the power of an image, so dissection may expose its inner qualities. The possibility that both the sun ship and a human face are depicted should not be discounted either— this art is multivalent, with more than one potential reading.

This elusive image of the solar boat is not confined to Ireland. It is to be found on British metalwork as well (Fig. 3),
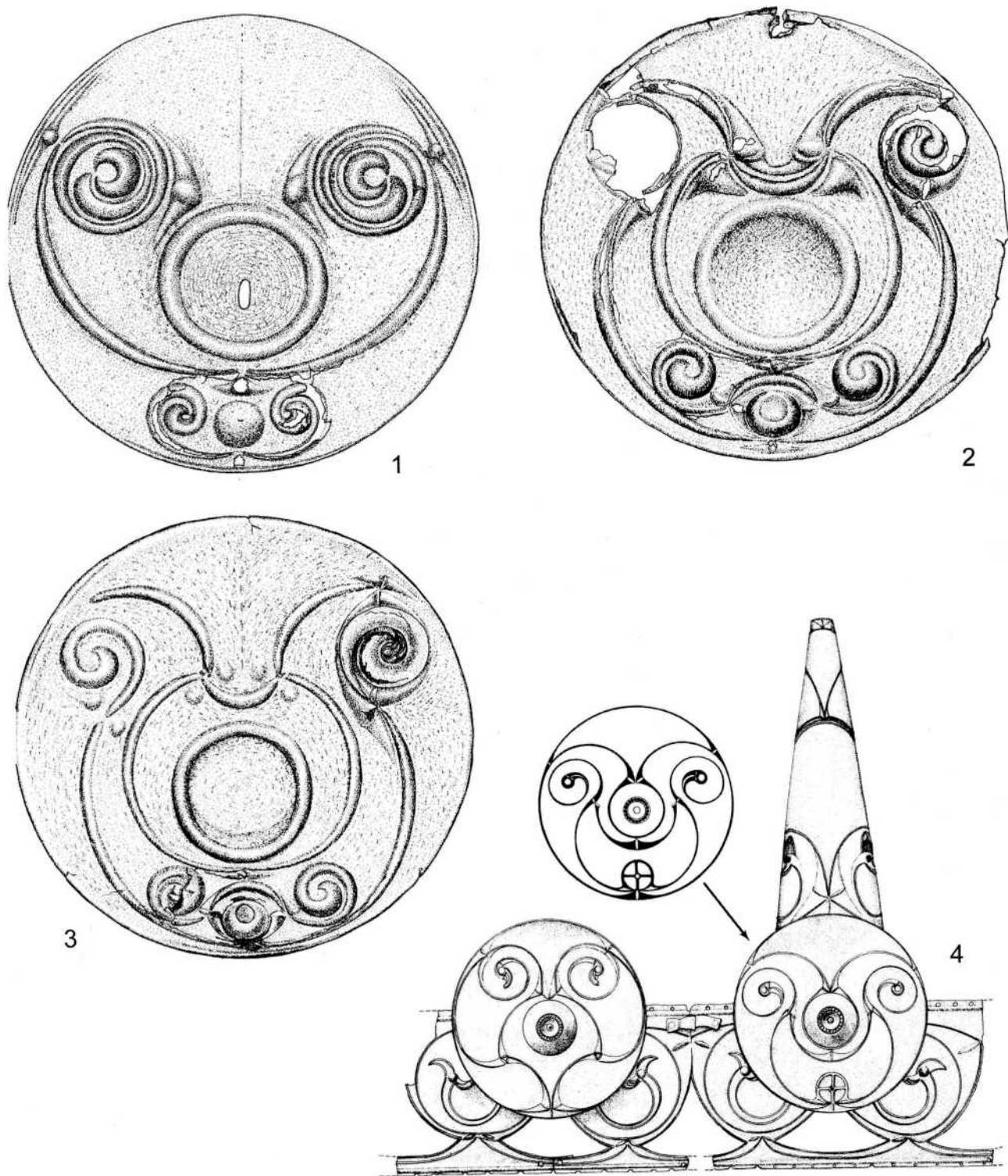
1 _ 1-2. Bronze discs from Monasterevin, Co. Kildare. 3. Unprovenanced bronze disc. 4. The Petrie Crown (all after Raftery 1983). (Various scales.)
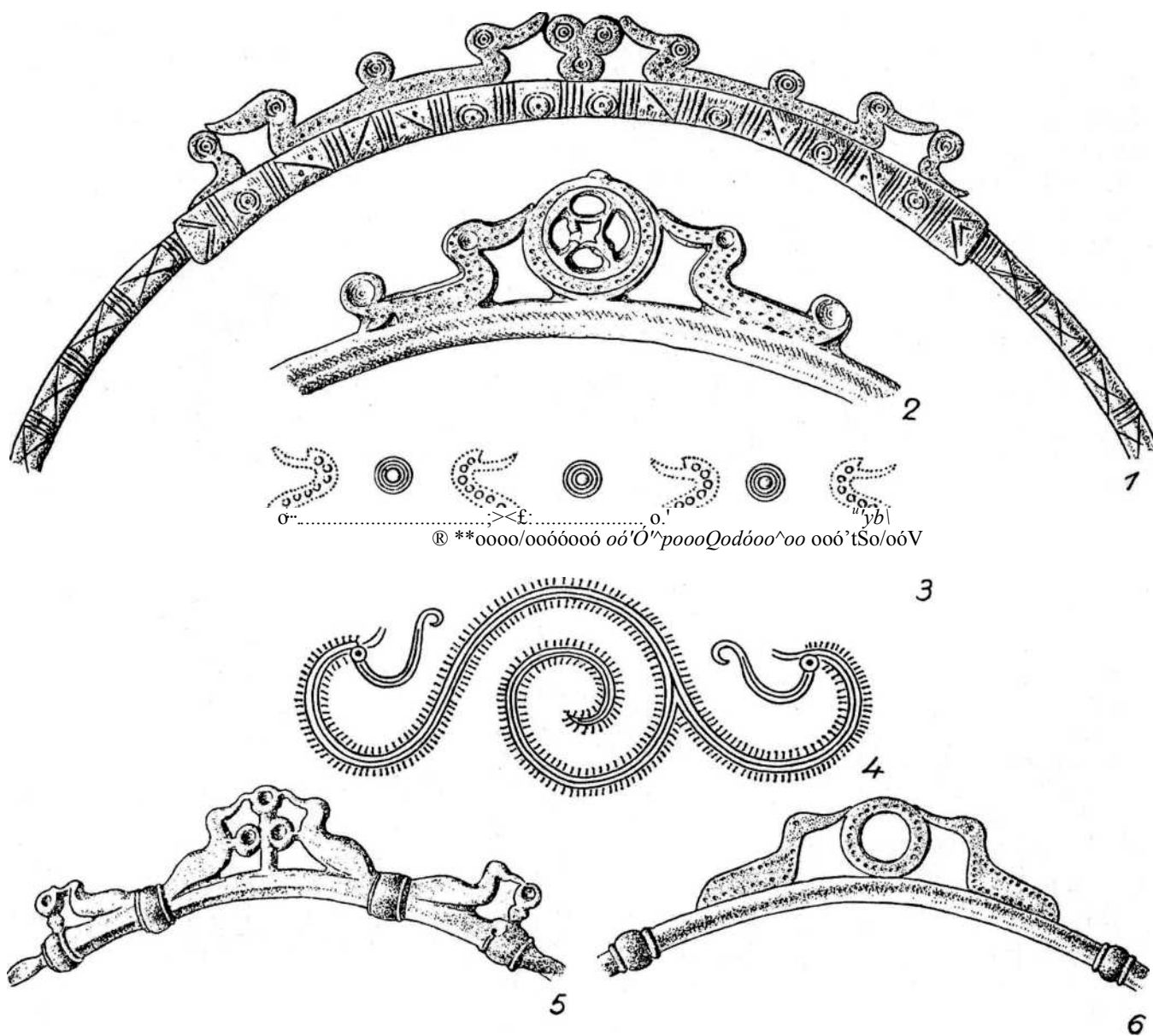
Fig. 2—Examples of solar symbolism (from Sprockhoff 1955). On no. 5, birds flank a stylised representation of the Tree of Life. 1. Attancourt (Haute-Marne). 2. Unprovenanced (Marne). 3. Rossin, Kr. Anklam (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern). 4. Billeberga (Scania). 5. Breuvery (Marne). 6. Pogny (Marne).

most notably on the celebrated Battersea shield (Fig. 3, 1), where, along with swastika-like motifs, it is a prominent feature on the two smaller circular panels (Stead 1985). It figures in a minor way on the decorated bronze band on the Aylesford bucket (Brailsford 1975, 83), where two pairs of bird-like creatures surround a whirligig (Fig. 3, 2). It occurs in an attenuated form on the unprovenanced Gibbs mirror and on the Aston mirror (Fig. 3, 3—4), where the Megaws see a Cheshire cat face (Megaw and Megaw 2001, 212). This solar imagery, which is surely represented by the swastika and which is probably lurking in motifs such as whirligigs, triquetras and triskeles (Green 1991, 48) as well, is just one of many indicators of widespread and deeply rooted belief systems that evidently transcend the numerous regional archaeologies that make up the Iron Age of these islands and adjacent parts of continental Europe. Vincent and Ruth Megaw (1993; 1994) have emphasised more than once the importance of a visual symbolism that reflected a form of communication and a wide community of concepts and ideas.

Mention has been made of a tore from the Marne bearing a pair of birds confronting a stylised image of the Tree of Life (Fig. 2, 5). Iron Age representations of this famous motif are well known (Kruta 1986). In a classic depiction, a likeness of two horned animals protecting a palm tree with the Greek name Korisios below is stamped on the blade of an iron sword of the late La Téne period found in the River Zihl at Port in Switzerland (Wyss 1955; 1956; well illustrated in Megaw and Megaw 2001, no. 240). Presumed to be ultimately of Middle Eastern origin (though sacred trees are likely to have an ancient pedigree in Europe too), it figures on belt hooks and sword scabbards in various parts of the Continent as a part of the wider iconography of dragon pairs (Fig. 4, 2-3). These pairs consist of opposed S- shaped scrolls with dragon-like heads, and on openwork belt hooks they may flank a tiny human figure (the master of the beasts), a tree or some other design. On swords these dragonesque motifs occasionally flank a leaf-like motif or palmette derivative, interpreted as a stylised Tree of Life, as on a bronze scabbard from Bussy-le-Chateau, Marne (Fig. 4, 3), where a pair stand on either side of a leaf-shaped device (Kruta 1986, 16). These dragon pairs have been seen as emblems of status or achievement in battle. The depiction of such fierce beasts may have served to ward off harm and there may have been great Celtic hero-tales associated with them (Megaw and Megaw 1990). Dragon pairs are now known from the River Thames in the west to Romania in the east, and they span at least two centuries.

Some years ago Barry Raftery (1994b) suggested that a pair of loosely delineated S-shaped scrolls on a scabbard (no. 2) from Lisnacrogher, Co. Antrim, might derive from the dragon-pair motif (Fig. 4, 1). It is a truth universally acknowledged, however, that these fierce dragons usually have open jaws so it is hard to see any dragons here, but the parallel is worth pursuing. Kruta and the Megaws, among others, have noted the close relationship between opposed S- scrolls and dragon pairs; sometimes the S-scroll is a schematic rendering of the monstrous guardian animal. The long, elegant suite of opposed S-scrolls with their bifurcating finials on Lisnacrogher 2 is surely an extended variation on the dragon-pair theme, repetition giving added emphasis to its symbolic charge. Other Irish scabbards are decorated with designs essentially composed of a descending running wave of S-scrolls with a clear tendril or vegetal element that is related to Tree of Life imagery. The sequence of S-scrolls on a scabbard (no. 1) from Toome is especially interesting if, as Raftery suggests, the scrolls have associated half-palmettes (Fig. 4, 5), because this then becomes an allusion to the opposed scroll or dragon pair flanking a leaf from the Tree of Life—as displayed on the Bussy-le-Chateau scabbard, for instance (Fig. 4, 3). Just how elusive this imagery may be is neatly demonstrated by Kruta (1986, 32), who shows that opposed S-scrolls and a palm leaf from the Tree of Life may hide in the coiffure of a head on a gold coin of the Parisii (Fig. 4, 4).

The challenge to translate the language of scabbard decoration is particularly difficult. This is a complex iconography and not just a convenient way of filling a long narrow space with ornament. In this context it is an iconography specifically related to weaponry and to warriors, and it contains elusive elements of animal and tree imagery. In some way it may encode the life history of the weapon or the philosophy of its owner. The idea that swords might tell of their famous deeds is a widespread one, and scabbard decoration might conceivably be a mnemonic device for those who prized them and wished to recount their prowess. John Carey (1994) has drawn attention to some references to oracular swords in early Irish literature:

'. . . they had their swords upon their thighs when they were boasting; for their swords would turn against them when they made a false boast. That is plausible; for demons used to speak to them from their weapons {Serglige Con Culainn, 'The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn).
Ogma drew the sword and cleaned it. Then the sword related everything which had been done with it, for it was usual for swords in those days, when they were drawn, to reveal the deeds which were done

with them' *(Cath Maige Tuired,* 'The Second Battle of Mag Tuired').

The swords may be silent now, but some La Téne symbols may still speak to us.

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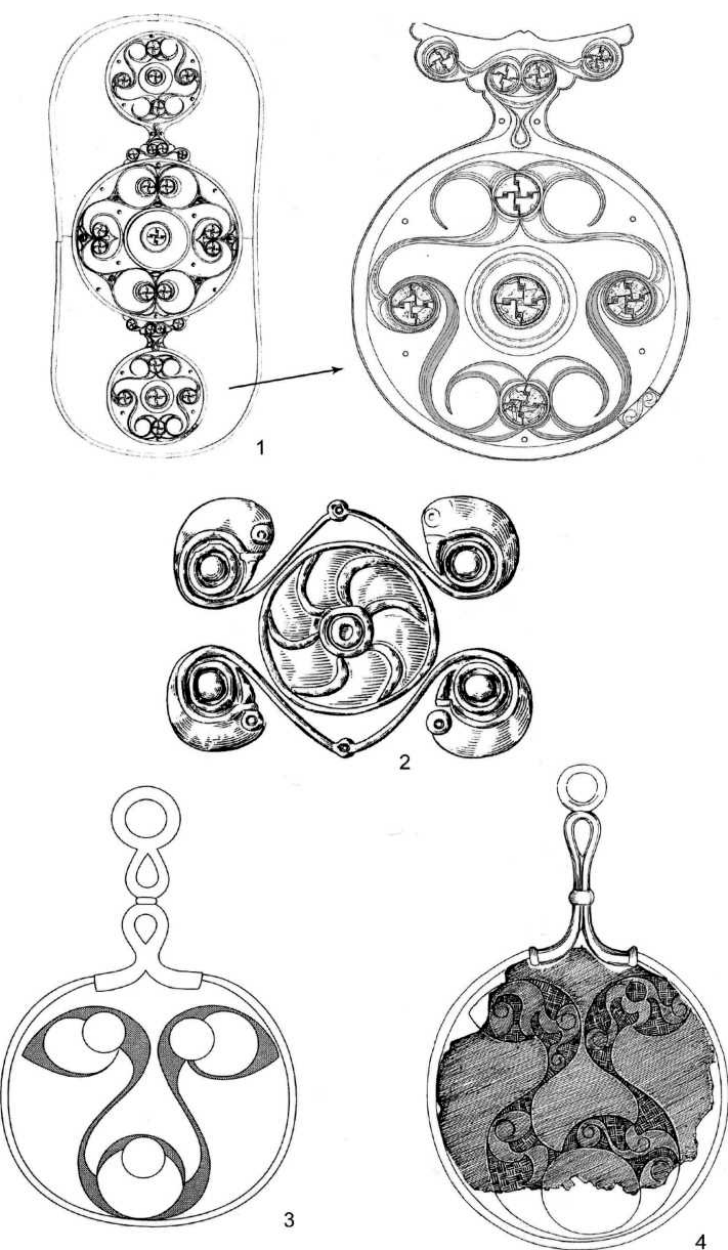
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Fig. 3—1. The Battersea shield, with image of solar boat highlighted. 2. The Aylesford bucket. 3. The unprovenanced Gibbs mirror. 4. Mirror from Aston, Herts (1-3 after Jope 2000, where the drawing of the shield is reversed; 4 after Stead and Hughes 1997). (Various scales.)
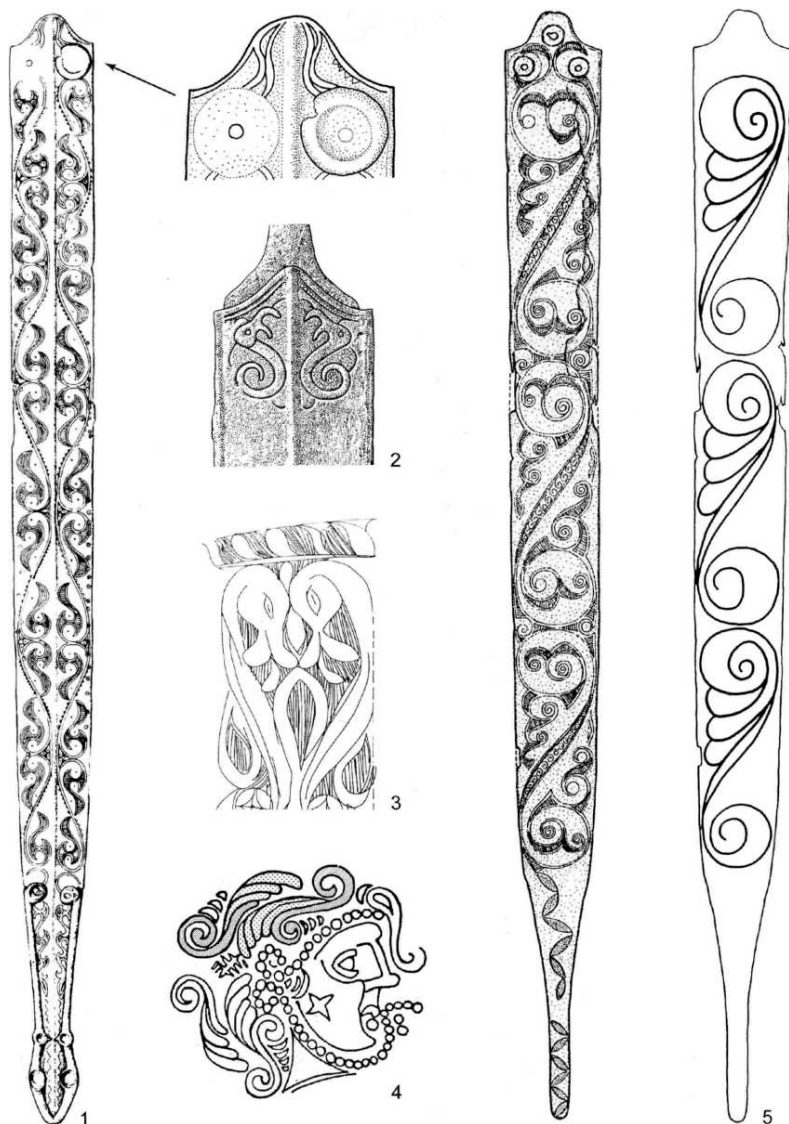
Fig. 4—1. Scabbard no. 2 from Lisnacrogher. 2. Dragon pair on an iron scabbard from Hungary. 3. Dragon pair on a bronze scabbard from Bussy-le-Chateau (Marne). 4. Gold coin of the Parisii, with one set of palmettes and S-scrolls highlighted. 5. Scabbard no. 1 from Toome (1 after Raftery 1983; 2-3 after Megaw and Megaw 2001; 4 after Kruta 1986; 5 after Raftery 1994b). (Various scales.)