

Reading the images on Iron-Age coins:

1. the sun-boat and its passengers

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Turn any of these quarter staters one way up (*a*) and the obverse image resembles a schematic animal, perhaps a bristling wild boar. Turn it back (*b*) and what you see is a boat with two passengers and other details. Either view conveys meaning, but I think the contents of the narrative scene explain why it must contain the primary message.



a. Belgic, 57/56-52/1 BC. Rudd 49.14



b. Belgic, 57/56-52/1 BC. Rudd 94.9

I will say no more here about the meaning of a talismanic boar-like shape: Miranda Aldhouse-Green (2003) and John Hooker (2003) have already discussed these matters in these pages. I will also pass by the complex reverse types of these coins, which I think encode information primarily relevant to the military oath, invoking different myths from the obverse scene and displaying emblematic symbols that identify issuing authorities.

So what is going on the obverse? Representative examples of four British series (*c-f*) are of crucial assistance in following its drift: there are many other variations on the theme.



c. Dorset c.50-30 BC. Rudd 96.46



d1. Sussex c.55-45 BC. Rudd 81.25



d2. Sussex c.55-45 BC. Rudd 68.31



e. Kent c.50-45 BC. Rudd 31.11



f. Lower Thames c.55-50 BC. Rudd 50.101

Here we glimpse two superimposed layers of a ubiquitous European sacred theme, passed down by professional priests and bards in formulaic verse that was carefully updated and recast as history moved on and languages changed. Homer, the Celtic and German poets, Gaulish and British druids, Vergil, and the Scandinavian skalds were all working from a mythological repertoire that had an identical origin in the Bronze Age.

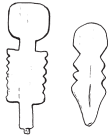
So the first layer of this particular story is a strictly cosmological myth, known in central and northern Europe since at least 1700-1500 BC (West 2007:201-37, Kristiansen and Larsson 2005:294-6). This told how the sun's disc of glinting gold sped through the daylight sky on a one-horse cart or, later, on a two-horse chariot. You face south to observe the Sun, so its daytime course is always pictured as clockwise movement, left to right: its directionality is all-important. "Thus also they reverence the Gods, turning towards the right" (Poseidonius *ap.* Athenaeus 4.36). Overnight, heading left (*a-b* also show a surround of stars and a waning crescent moon), a dimmer, bronze-dark sun (represented on *a-d* as a ring of dots with central pellet) was loaded on a magical speed-boat, conventionally said to have had 100 oars (West 2007:208). On *c-f* you see its oars and a wake of streaming radiance at its stern. Thus it returned through nether waters to the eastern horizon to mount the sky again at daybreak (*a-d*). What happened to the horses overnight will have to be told from coins another time, because they do not figure here.

Against this background we see a specific story about the nocturnal drama of the sun maiden and her brothers, a cast that was of especial importance during the Bronze Age (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005:297-319) but was still honoured under various names into historical times, above all by ordinary soldiers and sailors, because two of its members - the Heavenly Twins - served until the end

of pagan antiquity as specialized saviours of soldiers in battle and of anyone in peril at sea. They were conventionally depicted as two handsome youths, as twinned horses, or two men with horses (all of which occur on Iron-Age coins), and as two stars (here, on *d2*), because they were set forever in the night sky in the constellation Gemini, as an aid to navigation.

In the particular story on the boat quarter-staters, the bright daughter of the sky god, who personified the radiance of the Sun itself - Eos in Greek, Aurora and Mater Matuta in Latin, Sol, Sul, Brigantia, Brigit, and Eostre in various northern lands - is chased in her chariot through the daylight sky by primeval monsters from the night and the nether world - either dragon-snakes (here) or wolves (elsewhere). At the crisis of sunset they capture her and take her into the waters of night. Her twin brothers - one divine and one mortal - come to her rescue and one, at least, ships her towards dawn, defeating or shackling night's monster(s) until the eastern bounds of morning are broken and she and her sun-disc are released for another day. Figs *c* to *e* depict one brother contending with the serpent: in *d* and *e* it is in the prow, obliterating part of the sun-disc with its tail. In *c* the Brother corners it in the stern whilst the Maiden guards her disc and watches for the eastern horizon.

These images may seem abstract and crude but are probably in fact rather literal depictions of actual wooden models, preserved in known sacred places and used in ceremonial drama. They resemble extant Iron-Age wooden images, for instance the pair of third-century BC figures that guarded a dangerous river crossing in a North German marsh at Oldenburg (*g*). Famously, Gauls and Germans preferred to represent their deities, if at all, by suggestively carved wooden posts. You can see fixation spikes under the maiden in *c* and under both figures in *d* and *f*; the Brother in *a-c* stood just on his sharpened legs. Coin images often depict cult statues, military standards, and other long-lost movable items, signalled as such by details of decoration and/or their visible means of support.



g. Wooden figures from Oldenburg, north Germany, third century BC (after Aldhouse-Green 2004:92)

As for the boat, its distinctive rectangular voids might schematically represent an archaic form of large but lightweight skin-covered boat, such as were used since at least the Bronze Age in all the waters relevant here, and could safely be rowed across open sea with several people and animals on board. Boats of this type can in fact let sunlight through to silhouette their ribs, an effect sometimes seen in rock art (Johnstone 1980:26-43, 108). More likely, however, we are viewing actual holes

cut through the sides of a wooden model, so that when the sun-maiden's story was told in the dark (where else?) the boat could be lit from within by a flame that flared through like the daytime sun until, after her capture, it dimmed to glowing coals in the night-serpent's coils, heightening the drama of her rescue.

"But then", any child might ask, "how did they get back for tomorrow?" One of several attested answers to this obvious conundrum was that the ship also actually crossed the daylight skies. I think we see this solution in the Trinovantian image (*f*), where the ship is speeding west (to the right), with a bright full-circle sun-disc at its stern, surrounded now not by stars but by clouds or daylight (represented as encircling arcs). Its crew - probably the sun-maiden and her other brother - both face forward into the sunset.

This, of course, is a conjectural interpretation, but we can be confident that mythological cycles were - everywhere - constantly retold and reenacted in song, dance, and drama at public and private sacrifices, seasonal ceremonies, and as a prelude to any important undertaking - above all, going to war. Then, sacred song and legend would be told and retold as priests and community elders searched for precedent, justification, and divine permission for what lay ahead. Britain was renowned for its specialist centres of cosmological learning and religious thought in the first century BC (Julius Caesar, *BG* 6.14) and this informed the composition of coin designs, sometimes in stunning detail. There is already a large literature on this, ably summarized by Chris Rudd (2003).

All the coins above were issued at a time of exceptionally high military activity on both sides of the Channel. John Sills has shown that the Belgic series (*a-b*) was struck between 57/56 and 52/1 BC, alongside Gallo-Belgic E and other gold stater coinages, specifically to pay for soldiers to counter Julius Caesar's relentless onslaught (Sills 2006). The British series (*c-f*) continued into the next generation, after the official surrender of the Belgae on the Continent, but during a period nonetheless of ongoing resistance to the Roman occupation in several parts of western Gaul and also Lower Germany.

I have only two observations to add to John Sills's analysis. One is that during this entire period unusually large numbers of men were having to be ferried across the Channel to meet exceptional military demands in Gaul. Seaworthy ships must constantly have had to be requisitioned to carry soldiers and dead bodies in both directions. This was risky and expensive work and ship owners on both sides of the Channel will have had to be compensated for undertaking such a financially unrewarding task. They themselves would never have been paid for their pains in a mere quarter-stater currency: their crews were another matter. We know from various historical sources that ships' crews, and especially oarsmen, were generally of low social standing

and were much less well paid than infantry soldiers. What if “boat” quarter-staters were issued for them?

The Continental distribution of the Belgic series would then indicate that most of the recruitment for the crews of military transport ships in 57/6–52/1 BC was being done up and down the Channel coasts of Belgic Gaul as well as amongst wetland and riverine rural populations further inland - people who had long been accustomed to managing boats and were in any case already subject to the demands of the elites who were recruiting British soldiers in the first place. In Britain, both the Belgic and the subsequent British series hug the coast, suggesting they were not simply routine fractions of full stater coinages. Instead, they may represent special-purpose payment-monies for ships’ crews who were needed not by shipowners for their own ongoing purposes, at their own usual expense, but by military commanders with exceptional maritime transport needs during a period of intense recurrent warfare in Gaul and Lower Germany. Hence their exclusively low denomination, one quarter of what an infantry soldier might have been paid for a

season’s services, and their distinctive obverse image, invoking protection from the oldest and most universally acknowledged saviours of soldiers and, especially, of sailors, in times of mortal need.

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