

The old Irish ‘chariot’

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Dr Peter Harbison, Archaeology Officer in Bord Fáilte Éireann (The Irish Tourist Board) in Dublin, whose ‘Guide to the national monuments of Ireland’ was reviewed recently in these pages (1970, 77), here discusses the form and detail of the old Irish ‘chariot’ in relation to our knowledge of Celtic chariots of the La Tène period on the continent, and links his discussion to the problem of the celticization of Ireland.

In his study of the Celtic chariot presented in ANTIQUITY six years ago, I. M. Stead (1965b) wisely approached with caution the representations of the allegedly Celtic chariots on Hellenistic and Etruscan stone carvings, and implied that there was little similarity between the chariots of classical sculpture and those known on Celtic coins. The chariot on the sarcophagus from Chiusi was the only one which, in his opinion, had any real Celtic affinities; yet even it lacked that most conspicuous characteristic of the Celtic chariot—the arcaded side. However, the defect can now be made good by two Italian grave-stele which provide us with the best illustrations so far available of Celtic chariots. Both were first published in Italian by Prosdocimi (1963–4) and re-published in German three years ago by O.-H. Frey (1968). As one of these carvings gives us a good general picture and also some very interesting details of a Celtic chariot and its occupants, I take the liberty of publishing it here by kind permission of Signor Prosdocimi.

The stele (PL. XXV), now housed in the Museo Civico in Padua, was found some years ago in an Iron Age cemetery in the Via Ognissanti - Vicolo San Massimo in Padua. It is 78 cm. high, 69 cm. wide and 22 cm. thick. Around one side and along the top of the worked face is a Venetic inscription probably giving the name of the deceased, while the rest of the stone is filled out by the representation of a scene depicting two people (a man and? a woman) on a low-slung two-wheeled chariot drawn by

a pair of horses. The only chariot-wheel which is visible has seven spokes and a felloe encircled by a tire. The linch-pin holding the wheel and axle together appears to be T-shaped. The axle supports a frame on which the floor of the vehicle rests. The side of the chariot consists of an open-work double arcade, and against it leans an oval shield, laid on its side. The pole curves upwards from the frame of the chariot to the necks of the horses, and traction is provided by a throat-and-girth harness. The horses’ mouths hold what appears to be an omega-shaped bit. The warrior seated in the chariot holds the reins and what looks like a whip or sceptre. A bird with almost folded wings hovers above the horses, almost pecking at their manes, while a flower seems to sway behind the horses’ front legs. Both Prosdocimi and Frey interpret the scene as depicting a dead warrior descending into the Underworld, accompanied presumably by his wife—or possibly by his charioteer. The stele cannot be dated with certainty, but it is likely to have been carved in or around the 3rd century BC.

Although, as the inscription shows, the warrior was probably one of the Veneti, his shield is of the oval Celtic type, and the chariot corresponds very closely to that on a coin of the Remi (Fox, 1947, pl. xviii, top)—a Celtic tribe from the region around Rheims. Models of another Celtic chariot displayed in Cardiff and Edinburgh are based on Sir Cyril Fox’s reconstruction of the Llyn Cerrig Bach chariot (Fox, 1946, 26, fig. 13). If Sir Cyril had known

of the Paduan stele, he would probably have shown the chariot with a double rather than with a single arcaded side, and Professor Piggott (1969) has recently made a strong case for transforming Fox's 'horn-caps' into mounts on the ends of the yoke. The chariot on the Paduan stele is probably of the same type as that used by the La Tène Celts in their great expansion drives radiating outwards in various directions from Central Europe, and it was probably vehicles like these which were buried with some of the noble Celtic warriors throughout the La Tène period in areas stretching from Romania to England (Harbison, 1969). The English chariot-burials have been dated by Stead (1965a) to 3rd–1st centuries BC. The La Tène chariots had already reached the shores of the Irish Sea by about the time of Christ, as the find from Llyn Cerrig Bach shows (Fox, 1946), but by that time they were no longer buried with the dead. In Britain the custom of chariot-burial does not appear to have spread much outside Yorkshire, and it has not been found in Ireland at all.

Few, if any, undoubted traces of these chariots themselves have been found in Ireland (Fox, 1950; Piggott, 1969; Jope, 1955), though it is quite possible that more will some day come to light. We do know from literary sources, however, that the old Irish heroes such as Cú Chulainn used chariots in going to war. This fact has recently been brought to the notice of a wider reading public by the appearance of Thomas Kinsella's fine new translation of the great old Irish epic, the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (1969), though some of Louis Le Brocq's beautifully evocative images accompanying the text show the heroes in chariots which are really more akin to Roman models.

David Greene's recent researches into the descriptions of these vehicles in the old Irish tales, and particularly in *Fled Bricreann* (Greene, 1971), show that a typical description of an old Irish chariot might have read as follows:

A chariot made of clear wood. Two black wheels. Two iron tires. A white pole. Two hard straight shafts. Two fair reins. A very high chariot frame. Two curly bridles. A ridged firm yoke.

Some further adjectives used in describing

parts of the chariot have been omitted here as their meaning is obscure. But the verbless phrases of the description are unfortunately more literary eulogies than practical descriptions, and are not sufficiently explicit to give us an accurate and vivid idea of what an old Irish chariot really looked like. Despite this, the details of the chariot are of value, as the period when the story-teller first recited them (possibly in the eighth century) cannot have been very long after the chariot went out of use in Irish warfare.

The 'white pole' and the 'two hard straight shafts' might appear at first sight to be a contradiction in terms. Twin front shafts were probably invented in China in the last few pre-Christian centuries (Needham, 1965, 307), and make their first appearance in Europe on a relief in Trier dating from the 3rd century AD (Jope, 1956, 544). As they do not appear on the 'chariot' on the 8th-century cross-base at Ahenny, Co. Tipperary (Harbison, 1969, pl. 5, Upper), we could surmise that they were not introduced into Ireland until after this period. Thus, the 'two hard straight shafts' are unlikely to refer to twin front shafts as these had probably not yet been introduced when the chariot description was first formulated. The only obvious alternative interpretation open to us is that the shafts must have been at the rear of the vehicle, a supposition not at all unlikely when we realize that the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* tells us that two shafts protruded from the rear of Cú Chulainn's chariot (O'Beirne Crowe, 1871, 420), and the space between them was filled out with the horns of an ox or a deer. The constructional reason for the existence of two rear shafts, with only a single front pole in front was explained in a brilliant hypothesis put forward by Professor Bertil Almgren during a discussion at the 1970 Celtic Colloquium in Edinburgh. He saw the chariot not as having a square platform and single piece pole, but suggested instead that if it had an A-frame, then there would have been a single pole at the front which would have split and splayed out towards the rear, thus providing two rear shafts but only a single front pole. But as there is no sign of shafts protruding from the rear of the Paduan chariot, we get our first

THE OLD IRISH 'CHARIOT'

hint that the Continental La Tène chariot and the old Irish chariot may have been different in type.

Only a couple of centuries after such chariot descriptions had taken their place in the repertoire of Old Irish epic literature, representations of 'chariots' began to appear in stone on the bases of Irish High Crosses. The most detailed pictures are on the bases of the North cross at Ahenny, Co. Tipperary and the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly (Harbison, 1969, pl. 5), as well as the Cross of SS Patrick and Columba at Kells, Co. Meath (PL. xxvii*a*). The Kells cross may be dated through its vine-scroll ornamentation to around the 9th century. On one face of the base of the cross a hunting scene is portrayed showing two riders on horseback, two men in a 'chariot' and a deer. The sculptor has depicted only one horse drawing the 'chariot'. Yet if only a single horse were drawing it, one would expect to find the horse flanked by one of the vehicle's front shafts. But as no such front shafts are indicated, we must presume that, like the Ahenny 'chariot', it had only one pole and that a second horse must be imagined as strutting beside the one shown. On the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise again only one horse is in evidence, but at Ahenny—where the detail is best preserved—two horses are definitely visible. Although two different uses of the vehicle may be represented on the crosses—for hunting at Kells and Clonmacnoise, and to carry mourners at Ahenny—it seems likely that the old Irish 'chariot' was drawn by two animals, and this is supported both by what little archaeological evidence we have (Joze, 1955) and by the literary sources which always refer to a pair of horses.

One feature reproduced on all the 'chariots' on the High Cross bases is the large spoked wheel. The number of spokes is not clear on the Kells cross. But there are probably eight spokes on the wheels of the Clonmacnoise and Ahenny 'chariots'. When compared with the size of the people in the vehicles, and also compared with the size of the animals pulling them, the wheels seem to be inordinately large. I have probably been wrong in describing these animals as

horses; they are much more likely to have been ponies. But even if they are ponies, the wheels are still large, for in two out of three cases, they rise above the level of the animals' backs. The literary description quoted above refers to the chariot-frame as being 'very high', and from the sculptural evidence, it would appear that the floor of the 'chariots' must have been about one metre above the ground, and thus probably much higher than that of the Continental chariots which can only have been about 60 cm. off the ground.

The nearest counterpart to the vehicles on the High Crosses are the modern Irish agricultural carts which are still used in many parts of the West of Ireland today (PL. xxvii*b*). Estyn Evans (1957, 176) tells us, however, that these carts, known as 'Scots carts', were not introduced into Ireland until the 18th century. Prior to that, the usual transport vehicle was smaller, with block wheels (Evans, 1951; Mogeey and Thompson, 1951; Lucas 1952 and 1953) having an ancestry going back to neolithic times in Europe (Childe, 1954; Pike, 1965 and 1967; Piggott, 1968). But the 'chariots' of the High Crosses show that vehicles akin to the 'Scots carts' (though with one pole rather than two front shafts) were in use in Ireland almost a millennium before the latter were introduced, and suggest that the Irish vehicles with two spoked wheels have a much older ancestry, though how old is a matter for speculation.

Four-spoked wheels were already in use during the Bronze Age in northern Europe as the stone from Kivik in Sweden and the Trundholm 'sun-disc' in Denmark show, and wheels with more than four spokes were already in use in the Hallstatt period (see Powell, 1963). It is conceivable that the idea of the spoked wheel was introduced into Ireland through the influence of the La Tène chariot, or it could have been transmitted through the Roman wheel, as Piggott (1949) has suggested for the English example from Ryton in County Durham, though it could also have been introduced at an even earlier stage. Even if we had not the evidence of the High Crosses to rely on, we could have surmised that spoked wheels were almost certainly in existence in Ireland

when the Old Irish tale *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* was composed in the 8th or 9th century (Thurneysen, 1921, 622), as there are two passages in the tale suggesting that one could see through the wheels (Knott, 1936, ll. 590 and 644). But even if we cannot say precisely when the first spoked wheel rolled on Irish soil, we can with all probability say that the wheels on the Irish 'chariots' are higher than and different in type from those on the La Tène chariots such as that on the Paduan stele. The low-slung wheel of the Paduan chariot was obviously designed for greater speed, while the larger Irish wheel, giving the axle and thus the floor of the vehicle greater ground clearance, suggests use of the Irish vehicle for agricultural purposes as well as for the transport of persons (see also Harbison, 1969). The Irish 'chariot' is thus not so much a chariot in the normal strict sense of the word, but is almost better described as a 'cart-chariot'. The difference between the two types of chariot seems to be further emphasized by the fact that there is no trace on the Irish 'chariot' of the double-arcaded side so typical of the Continental La Tène chariot. Old Irish tales hint that the side piece of Irish vehicles was made of a simple board (Greene, 1971).

While the Paduan stele and the Irish High Crosses are a thousand years apart, the contrasting features of the low-slung smaller-wheeled La Tène chariot with double-arcaded sides, and the old Irish 'chariot' with large wheels, a board for a side piece and possibly also with rear shafts (though these appear as little on the High Cross representations as they do on the Paduan stele) suggest that we have here two different vehicle traditions, one more Mediterranean/Near Eastern in origin and designed for speed, the other more an 'Indo-European' all-purpose vehicle used for agriculture as well as for transporting people. Not even the fact that the Ahenny 'chariot' shows the earliest known appearance in Europe of the Chinese invention of the breast-strap or postillion harness (Needham, 1965, 315) need prevent us from accepting it as an old native type of vehicle, though Jope (1956, 544) sees the Ahenny vehicle rather as the merging of the Celtic tradition with the ceremonial cars and

personal conveyances of the later Roman Empire. But the lack of any certain trace of the low-slung Celtic chariot could well lead us to the supposition that the La Tène chariot possibly never reached Ireland, where an older cart tradition held sway. This, coupled with the apparent lack of chariot-burials there (Harbison, 1969), is probably not without its significance in any appraisal of the role of the La Tène Celts in Ireland during the Early Iron Age.

Our knowledge of Ireland during the La Tène period is scanty (cf. J. Raftery, 1963, 110–12), and evidence of major change in the last few pre-Christian centuries BC (the period when the La Tène Celts are most likely to have come to Ireland) is even more scanty still (though see below). Professor O'Kelly (1970) has recently made a case for a Neolithic origin for the Irish ring-fort, but if, as is more generally believed, it did not become common until the Iron Age, its closest Continental counterparts, the Galician and Portuguese *castros*, are nevertheless found in an area from where the La Tène Celts are unlikely to have come to Ireland in any great numbers (though see Adams, 1970, 144). Even hillforts (e.g. B. Raftery 1969 and 1970; Wailes, 1970a and b) which have hitherto been taken to represent an Iron age innovation have been shown by recent work to have at least some of their roots in the Late Bronze Age (cf. Burgess, 1970; Harding, 1970; B. Raftery, 1970; Selkirk, 1970). The most conspicuous evidence for the influence of the La Tène culture in Ireland is the existence of objects of bone, stone, bronze and gold decorated in the La Tène art style (for a selection see Jope, 1954 and 1961/62 with further references). Those showing the closest affinity to Continental and English La Tène art have been mapped by Rynne (1961), who has strongly suggested that the La Tène Celts came to Ireland in two successive waves—an earlier one from Brittany and a later one from England. The fifty or so objects which Rynne mapped, taken together with the swords, spear-butts and horse-bits purposely omitted from his paper, amount now to a considerable corpus of La Tène decorated artifacts in Ireland, and certainly suggest the influence of the Continental

THE OLD IRISH 'CHARIOT'

La Tène culture on Ireland. But we are not yet in a position to say precisely what form this influence took. Did it represent 'invasions' of large numbers of La Tène Celts coming from Brittany and England, bringing with them their own style of ornament, or did it merely represent the adoption of a new art style by an indigenous population—or a mixture of both? Our reading of the Early Iron Age in Ireland has possibly been slightly clouded by an all-too-ready acceptance of the equation of a corpus of objects decorated in the La Tène style with incursions of considerable numbers of bearers of the La Tène culture suddenly arriving and making Ireland Celtic. New art styles, or even a whole new metal industry, need not necessarily be taken as meaning the arrival *en masse* of a new population group. The export of Coptic vessels to Europe as far north as England in the 7th century AD (cf. Armand-Calliat, 1969) does not necessarily imply a big influx of Copts into England at the time, nor does the adoption in contemporary Irish manuscripts of an apparently Coptic motif such as bands of interlace imply the same consequence for Ireland. The spread of Romanesque and Gothic architecture at a later period represented the diffusion of a style of building and ornamentation, but not of the people who originated it.

More significant than art-styles in ascertaining the arrival of new population groups into any country is the introduction of some of a number of novel material objects and characteristics which make up the known culture of a people in the land of their origin. Yet if we search in Ireland for the characteristics of the Continental La Tène Celts, we must be partially disappointed. Some few fibulae, swords, decorated torques, stones and horse-bits are already well known, but where in Ireland can you find the great flat cemeteries of the Marne, with their thousands of inhumation burials, where is the wheel-turned or stamped pottery and where the *tombes princières*? To answer these questions with 'nowhere' is not necessarily to deny the existence of La Tène Celts in Ireland, for while we know that many of these features are lacking in England too, no one would deny that the La Tène Celts settled in England. The lack of

many of the characteristics of the Continental La Tène Celts in Ireland could, however, be interpreted to mean that these La Tène Celts came to Ireland only in comparatively small numbers and groups (Martin, 1935, 160; Mahr, 1937, 402; Powell, 1950; J. Raftery, 1964, 49), and even then in a somewhat 'watered down' version. However, as well as providing fresh artistic stimulus, these small groups may well have caused a certain amount of social upheaval in Ireland if we follow Mitchell (1965a and b, though see Pilcher, 1969) in seeing them as the cause of the decline in agriculture in the Early Iron Age, though Watts (1961), for lack of any other obvious cause, had tentatively suggested previously that the concomitant spread of forests in Ireland around 300 BC, as mirrored in the substantial increase in *Fraxinus* pollen, was due rather to climatic change. But Mitchell's approach need not necessarily be incompatible with our envisaging on the one hand small groups of La Tène people arriving in Ireland during the Early Iron Age, and, on the other, a very considerable continuity of population from the Bronze Age into the Iron Age and also into the Early Christian period. This latter is supported by the possible Late Bronze Age roots of the hillforts, though a recently published Late Bronze Age sword with La Tène scabbard (Harbison, 1970) shows us how long the Late Bronze Age lasted and warns us against drawing too hard and fast a line between the Late Bronze Age and La Tène metal industries. In this connexion, it is interesting to note that the skeletal material from Gallen Priory, Co. Offaly (Howells, 1940-1) showed little difference between the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age populations on the one hand and those of the Early Christian monks at Gallen on the other. Martin (1935, 158-60) commented, too, that the Early Bronze Age round-headed people appeared to have been the last pre-Iron Age invaders of Ireland, and that while a new invasion during the Iron Age was postulated on archaeological grounds, he found no skull available to support it.

Yet the Ireland which emerges at the beginning of the Christian period around the time of St Patrick in the 5th century AD is an Ireland

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which is totally Celtic in its language, customs, laws and tales. Is it possible that those small groups of invading warriors who were responsible for the making of the art objects decorated in the La Tène style were solely responsible for having made the country so entirely Celtic by the 5th century AD that scarcely a trace of any pre-Celtic language remained? Is it not much

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more likely that for Ireland to have become so totally Celtic by the beginning of the historic period, the celticization of the country must have had its roots much further back in prehistoric time than the La Tène period, possibly even as far back as the Early Bronze Age (Dillon and Chadwick, 1967, 4, but cf. Adams, 1970, 143-4)?

literature' in advance of its publication, and also to Professor Stuart Piggott for his very helpful discussions and comments. I should also like to thank Professor Wolfgang Dehn and Professor Otto-Herman Frey who are responsible for having introduced me to the subject of the Celtic chariot and for having encouraged me to write about it.

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THE OLD IRISH 'CHARIOT'

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PLATE XXV: THE OLD IRISH 'CHARIOT'

A Venetic grave-stele found in Padua. It shows two people riding in a Celtic chariot drawn by two horses

See pp. 171-7

Photo: Museo Civico, Padua



a

PLATE XXVI: THE OLD IRISH 'CHARIOT'

(a) The east face of the base of SS Patrick and Columba's Cross at Kells, Co. Meath. Two figures in a chariot and two others on horseback hunt a deer

(b) A man with a donkey and cart in Corofin, Co. Clare. Note the large and many-spoked wheel of the cart; part of its shaft can be seen on the extreme left of the picture

b

See pp. 171-7

Photos: a. Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland
b. P. Harbison

