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Gordon's sun-wheels roll back to Bucks

Figure 2: Artist's reconstruction of Wavendon sun-wheel which may have been mounted on pole or ritual sceptre.



Figure 1. Unique wooden sun-wheel with pierced shaft from Wavendon, 325mm high, scale 1:3.5.

Way back in March 1988 Gordon Heritage, who is today widely regarded as one of Britain's most successful metal detectorists, found some Roman artefacts at Wavendon Gate, Milton Keynes, in Buckinghamshire. This led to a full-scale excavation between April and November 1989. An area of almost 35,000 square metres was explored and evidence of a solar cult site was discovered, as well as many other features of the iron age and Romano-British periods.

The most exciting find was a wooden wheel on a shaft over a foot high which may originally have been attached to the top of a wooden post and was presumably used for ritual purposes. Found in a waterlogged ditch, this wooden sun-wheel is unique in form and reminds me somewhat of much later Irish wheel crosses. Spoked sun-wheels occur on many iron age coins, especially ancient British gold staters and quarter staters. Some even show a wheel on a pole.

Professor Miranda Aldhouse-Green writes: *"The Wavendon wheel is a fascinating piece of evidence for Celtic religion which appears to bear witness to the cult of the sun among the Catuvellauni of North Buckinghamshire. The wooden wheel survived because of its water context, and the inference must be that wooden cult-objects like this may have been relatively common. We know of wooden images at such shrines as the first-century BC healing sanctuary*

to Sequana at Fontes Sequanae near Dijon. The Wavendon wheel does not appear to have had any practical function, and the inference must be that it is a religious object. But it is too large to have been a personal votive offering, and its clear evidence of attachment suggests that it was an item of ritual furniture, perhaps carried in processions, like the Willingham Fen mace, or, more likely, fastened high on a post to symbolise the power of the sun-god. It may have been sited quite deliberately so as to be close to water, creating a strong visual link between the two most important aspects of the natural life-force which was so central to the belief-systems of the pagan Celts." (R.J. Williams, P.J. Hart and A.T.L. Williams, *Wavendon Gate: a Late Iron Age and Roman settlement in Milton Keynes, Bucks. Arch. Soc., 1995, p.158*).

The reason I'm reporting this old story is because in May 2008 Elizabeth Cottam and I purchased a small hoard of bronzework from another dealer. We were keen to get this hoard because we discovered that it contained five bronze sun-wheels, two bronze wheel-headed pins and what might be described as a 'ritual sun disc' of about 85-88mm diameter. Most significantly, we were informed that these fascinating ritual objects had been found about 20 years ago at Wavendon Gate, Milton Keynes by Gordon Heritage, who had of course responsibly reported and recorded them. Realising their

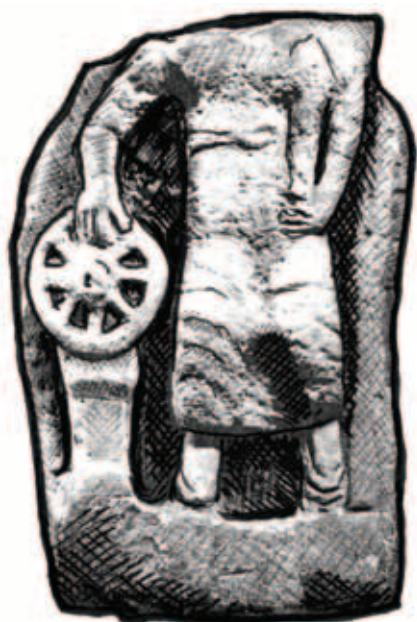


Figure 3: Stone relief of wheel-god with cornucopia, from Netherby, Cumbria.

importance – bronze sun-wheels are not commonly found in Britain – I told Ros Tyrrell, FLO for Buckinghamshire, who put me in touch with Brett Thorn, keeper of archaeology at Buckinghamshire County Museum, who told me that Milton Keynes Council would very much like to acquire them. Liz and I are delighted to say that the bronze sun-wheels from Wavendon Gate are now back in Bucks where they belong with the wooden sun-wheel from Wavendon Gate.

Brett Thorn says: “We are delighted to have been able to acquire such an unusual and important board for the museum. It is wonderful to get the opportunity, so long after its original discovery, to bring it into a public collection, so that it is available to be studied, and enjoyed. The wooden

Taranis wheel is on display in the museum's main gallery, and it is hoped that the bronze board will join it sometime this year, helping shed a little more (sun?)light on the mysteries of Iron Age religion.”

Acknowledgements

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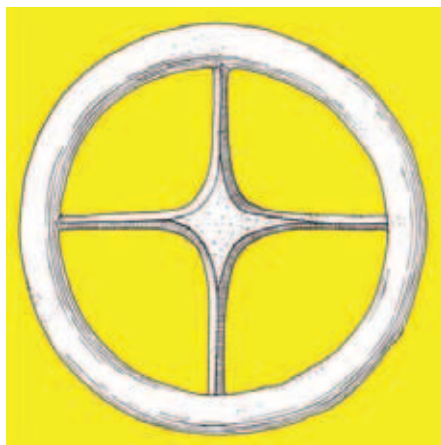


Figure 4: Plain bronze sun-wheel from Wavendon, 72-75mm.

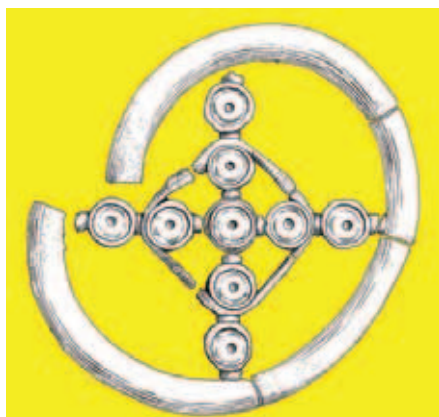


Figure 5: Studded bronze sun-wheel from Wavendon, broken in antiquity, 80-91mm.



Figure 6: Bronze sun-wheel with serpentine line on felloe, from Wavendon, 72-73mm.



Figure 7: Swan's-neck pin 118mm long, with sun-wheel head, 32mm diam., from Wavendon.



Figure 8: Gold staters and quarter staters of Catuvellauni, all with sun-wheels, a. Whaddon Chase, VA 1487. b. Whaddon Chase, VA 1491, note wheel on pole. c. Harlow Wheel, VA 234. d. Andoco, VA 1863.

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