

Birdman

Fact or fiction?

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North American birdman, from Animal-Speak (1996) by Ted Andrews. Artwork by Victoria Lisi.



THE curator of the British Iron Age collections at the British Museum, Dr J. D. Hill, got me thinking about feathers some years ago. In a lecture delivered at the University of East Anglia he suggested that bird feathers may have been worn in the Iron Age as personal decoration and possibly also for ritual purposes. It seemed a reasonable suggestion, because feathers have been worn in many primitive societies around the world, particularly by shamans and warriors.

I was recently reminded of feathers again by Manda Scott, a veterinary surgeon and crime writer who lives in Suffolk with two lurchers and too many cats. In her latest novel, *Boudica, Dreaming the Eagle* (Bantam Press, 2003, £18.99, ISBN 0593 051637) she refers several times to ancient British warriors wearing feathers as a mark of their military prowess.

She says that Cassivellaunos, commander of the British forces fighting Caesar, wore around his neck "the torc of leadership, cast for him in gold by a smith of the Ecenii. More black feathers than could be counted hung from the end-pieces of the torc, each with its quill stained red to mark the warriors he had killed in battle." It is interesting to note that many early Whaddon Chase gold staters, which may have been struck by Cassivellaunos, clearly display winged symbols on both sides (fig. 2).

Manda Scott also describes Caratacos, Togodubnos and Amminios as feather wearers: "Red-quilled crow's feathers fluttered in handfuls from their torcs and their warrior's braids." But this is fiction. What are the facts? Is there any numismatic or archaeological evidence that feathers may have been worn during the Iron Age period? A little perhaps, but it is very sketchy and relies entirely on subjective interpretation.

Numismatic evidence?

We will begin by examining the imagery of several Celtic coins from Germany, France and England. These all show what may be described as a "birdman"—a human being with birdlike features or, vice versa, a bird with human attributes.

The first birdman can be seen on a lightweight gold stater (fig. 3) struck c. 100–50 BC, probably by the Suevi (or Suebi), a warlike tribe situated between the rivers Elbe and Vistula—a tribe who made frequent incursions into Roman territory, who were conquered by the Franks in the 5th century AD and who gave their name to the medieval duchy of Swabia. Derived from the Greek Nike on gold staters of Alexander III, the strange stylised figure on this coin has the horned head of a ram, the torso and legs of a man and the wings of a large bird. Who is this ornithic cornute creature? A Germanic raven-god, such as Wotan? Or an avian shaman clad in a feathered cloak and ram's-head mask?

The second birdman, also from Germany, occurs on a silver quinarius (fig. 4) known as the Nauheimer Type and may have been struck c. 70–50 BC in the Heidetränk *oppidum* in the Taunus mountains, north of Frankfurt, possibly by the Mattiaci and possibly in connection with the salt trade (the town of Nauheim is famous for its saline thermal waters). This *vogelmännchen* has a man's head with a big beaky nose, clutches a huge neck torc in his left hand and appears to be striding to the left. His wing is large and seems to extend from the shoulder to the ground, concealing one of his legs, although the lower part of the wing may in fact represent long tail-feathers. He is surrounded by small rings, which may symbolise gold coins and has a mass of dots behind him; those too may signify coins, but they could equally be grains of salt—formerly a source of wealth in this region. The whole design is enclosed by a circle of U-shaped crescents, which are copied from the V-shapes on Rhineland *regenbogenschüsselchen* ("rainbow-cups") and which, in this context, may represent expanded neck torcs. Once again, the birdman may be a raven-god akin to Lugus, Lugh, Odin and Bran.

For our third birdman we fly westward over the Rhine to the Oise department of northern France, where we find the Bracquemont Type (fig. 5). This is a bronze coin, struck by the Bellovaci c. 60–30 BC. The first specimens were found at Bracquemont, near Dieppe, and were given to Rouen Museum by the Duchess of Berry, mother of Henry V of France (1798–1870). The obverse is copied from Roman Republican denarii which show the head of Roma wearing a winged helmet. The reverse displays a splendid crested cock, standing with its beak wide open, crowing raucously. The most extraordinary aspect of this bellicose cock is that its body takes the form of a bearded human head facing right with open mouth.

What is the identity of this amazing "man-cock"? And how should it be viewed—as a cockerel with a man's head transplanted into its breast, or as a druidic shaman wearing his ceremonial headdress of a stuffed cock? Or are we meant to see it both ways? We don't know. All we can say is that this anthropomorphic bird may have been inspired by similar *grylloi* on Roman gemstones (fig. 8) and that there are several more Celticised versions of it, not only in northern France (fig. 6), but in the south of England too.



Fig. 2. Winged symbols on Whaddon Chase gold stater, VA 1472, perhaps issued by Cassivellaunos. Chris Rudd list 63, no. 59.



Fig. 3. Horned birdman on gold stater of Suevi, LT 9377 variant, possibly struck by Ariovistos. Chris Rudd list 62, no. 11.



Fig. 4. Birdman with neck torc on Nauheimer Type silver quinarius, LT 9388. Drawing by Jane Bottomley.

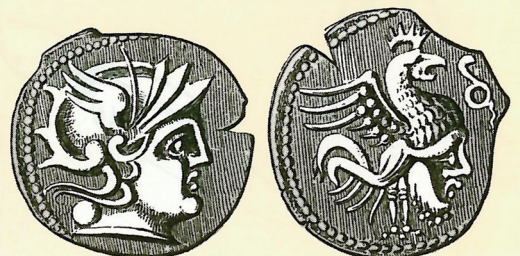


Fig. 5. Birdman on Bracquemont Type bronze unit of Bellovaci, BN 7227. Drawing by Eugène Hucher, *L'art gaulois* (1874).



Fig. 6. Birdman with solar spiral on bronze unit of Bellovaci, LT 8584. Monnaies XV, no.1059. Photo © CGF.



Fig. 7. Birdman with snake on Chichester Cock bronze unit of Belgae, BMC 659. Drawing by Geoff Cottam, BNJ 69 (1999) p. 4.



Fig. 8. Grylloi on Roman gemstones. Woodcuts from *Antique Gems and Rings* (1872) by C. W. King.



Fig. 9. Bronze warrior, 6cm, wearing necklace, found near Sens. Drawing by Jane Bottomley.

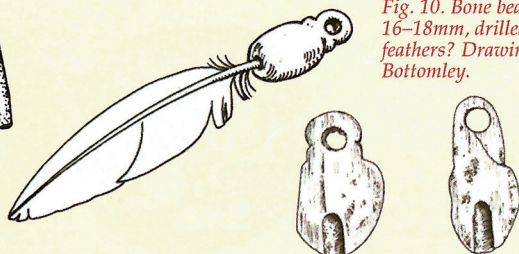


Fig. 10. Bone beads (broken), 16–18mm, drilled to hold feathers? Drawing by Jane Bottomley.

So, for our fourth and final birdman we cross the Channel to the coastal region of West Sussex and East Hampshire, where we discover the Chichester Cock (fig. 7). As its name suggests, this bronze type was probably issued at or near modern Chichester, c. 50–30 BC, by people who were perhaps known as the Belgae. As you can see, the Chichester Cock closely follows its Gallic prototypes (figs. 5 and 6), but with a number of distinctive differences. The face on the obverse is more pointed, the hair is spikier and what looks like a diadem has replaced the visor of Roma's helmet. The spread-winged cock now appears to be flying rather than standing, and the lines of the man's beard now correspond with the lines of the wing-feathers, thus heightening the visual illusion of the bird's human character.

What can we learn from these images of the birdman on Celtic coins? Maybe they are deities that were worshipped by the people who issued them. Maybe they are tribal emblems. Maybe they are mythic pictures of Celtic legends long since lost. Maybe they illustrate a belief that the human spirit can inhabit the body of a bird. Maybe they portray metamorphosis; there is a lot of avian shaping-shifting in early Irish and Welsh traditions: the Morrigan and Badb appear to warriors as crows or ravens, Caer changes into a swan, and Blodeuwedd turns into an owl. Or maybe—just maybe—they indicate a shamanic practice of wearing bird feathers for ritual purposes. Such possibilities are by no means mutually exclusive. Indeed, they probably overlap (as shown in fig. 1) as is frequently the case with the images on Celtic coins, many of which have several levels of meaning and are deliberately ambiguous.

Archaeological evidence?

Archaeological evidence of feather-wearing in the Iron Age is equally lightweight and can be blown away by a single phrase: there is none. But perhaps there are the faintest of faint hints of feathery attire. I shall cite three.

Firstly, excavation reports record that the bones of birds, both domesticated and wild—geese, chickens, ducks, pigeons, ravens, thrushes, blackbirds—have been found in Iron Age “ritual pits” (whatever these may be). But who knows how or why such bones were deposited? Were the birds sacrificed as a gift to the gods? Were their feathers ever plucked for personal decoration? Are their bones the remains of ritual feasting? Or are some of them merely mis-identified domestic rubbish? Nobody can say.

Secondly, there is a small bronze figurine of a Celtic warrior (fig. 9) which was found near Sens, an ancient city (Roman *Agedincum*) between the rivers Yonne and

Vanne in central France, which took its name from the Senones, whose tribal capital it was. This wounded little warrior—parts of two arms, a lower leg and his spear are missing—wears nothing except a necklace. This necklace is indicated by a circle of V-shapes incised all around his neck. Do these V-shapes represent boar's tusks? Possibly, but I would have expected them to be curved. Or are they feathers, like the red-quilled crow's feathers mentioned by the novelist, Manda Scott? Possibly. Or are they something else? That too is possible. Personally, I think they are feathers, but once again the evidence is inconclusive.

Thirdly, I submit for your consideration two small fragile fragments of bone beads (fig. 10), apparently something thin and tubular, like the thin stem of a flower or the quill of a feather. I think feathers are more plausible than flowers, because feathers would fit more securely into the little holes with just a dab of pine resin and would dangle more durably from the wearer's neck, whereas flowers would fade after a day or two and constantly need replacing. These two bone beads were reportedly found in association with ten pierced amber beads, possibly from the same necklace, and large fragments of a burial urn, which has been identified as Staxton style, a type found at Danes Graves, Driffield, in the East Riding of Yorkshire, and which can be dated as Middle Iron Age, around 300 BC.

I asked Dr J. D. Hill of the British Museum for his views. He replied: “I still consider that it is very likely that feathers were worn as personal decoration in Iron Age Britain. Although demonstrating this with evidence is far more difficult. . . . No immediate parallels for the bone beads you illustrate spring to mind. Bone beads of pendants are extremely uncommon finds on Iron Age excavations. . . . Could these beads have held feathers? It is impossible to say.”

Despite Dr Hill's healthy scepticism, I still believe that there is a fair chance that the bone beads could have formed part of a feather and amber necklace. I also believe that the coins illustrated above demonstrate the existence of the birdman in Iron Age Gaul and Britain. Maybe he was a mythical being—a god or shape-shifter. Maybe he was a shaman dressed in feathers. One thing is for sure. He existed in the minds of the people who made the coins.

Men dressed up as animals

All over the world, for thousands of years, men have dressed up as birds and animals to celebrate ancient rites, originally associated with hunting, or for shamanistic purposes. For example, a horned mask known as the Dorset Ooser, perhaps a survivor of the Celtic Cernunnos cult, was worn in Dorset fertility festivals until the 19th century. Animal headgear, possibly donned in other pagan rituals, is shown on several Iron Age coins (fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Left, Petersfield Cernunnos silver unit, c. 50–30 BC, from Hampshire. The head wears antlers with a solar wheel in between. Photo by courtesy of the National Museum of Wales and right, Norfolk God silver unit, c.30–10 BC, struck by the Ezeni, showing boar-skin headdress. Chris Rudd list 30, no. 34.

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