Reading the images on Iron Age coins: 2. Horses of the day and night

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Continuing a theme I broached in March (*Chris Rudd* 104:2–4), I'd like to consider another way in which solar cosmology and myth were employed in designing coin dies. This time I will consider the sun's horse and the direction in which he faces, which seem to follow strict semantic rules. These actually apply to all officially designed coins, but to keep this brief I will confine myself to a few representative examples from the earliest British gold coinages. If this does prove to be generally valid, it will be of considerable help in picking out those elements of a given coin design that can safely be read as ciphers for tribal identity, authority to issue coinage, mint of issue, and other such administrative information. They are always present somewhere in the design, if only one can spot them in their formulaic setting (see e.g. Rudd 2008).

In one of its oldest and most influential versions in northern Europe, with a solid Bronze-Age pedigree (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005:294-6), a horse pulls a golden disc through the daylight realm of the sun god – known variously in our period as Helios, Sol, Sul, and Belenos. It is a bronze-dark disc – the other side of the sun – that he pulls through the night or nether realm, over which originally the sun goddess presided in the oldest myths. In later versions that were more influential in the Iron Age a rich male ruled there: Hades, Dis Pater, or Pluto. The annual cycle of the seasons was also understood in terms of an extended version of this drama. Myths about the union and offspring of these deities and symbolic identification of earthly rulers with various members of the drama's cast were of enormous ideological potency but are not directly relevant to the sun-horse himself.

Components of these myths that are significant for coin design are **1.** that the sun's horse always travelled clockwise, represented (facing south) as left to right by day and right to left by night; **2.** that the original narratives focussed on the crises of capture and rescue of the sun-disc at the two liminal points of sunrise and sunset, where gold was replaced by bronze, and vice versa, and where the powers of the sun or weathergod of heaven passed to their counterparts of night and the netherworld, and back again; and **3.** that these myths were told and retold in a continuous oral and dramatic tradition of great sophistication and meticulous conservatism for thousands of years. In the transmission of these calendrical myths, pedagogic models were widely employed and dramatic reenactments out of doors must surely have used upstanding ancient monuments that were already aligned on the cardinal points of the compass at known times of year, and exceptional venues like White Horse Hill at Uffington in Oxfordshire, whose vast Bronze-Age chalk horse gallops sunwise on the rim of a spectacular natural theatre.

In a passage of the early Medieval *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, cited by Miranda Aldhouse-Green in an important study of ancient solar imagery (Green 1991:138), the warrior-queen Medb of Connacht prepares to face her foes, just as Boudica and her army faced the Roman legions in AD 61and the sun-maid of legend faced the crises of sunset and dawn. "Four of the provinces of Ireland gathered there at Cruachan Ai. Their sages and druids delayed them there for a fortnight waiting for a sign. The day they finally set out Medb said to her charioteer: 'Everyone leaving a lover or a friend today will curse me,' she said. 'This army is gathered for me.' 'Wait a minute,' the charioteer said, 'until I turn the chariot around to the right, with the sun, to draw down the power of the sign for our safe return.' " (Kinsella 1969:60)

The sun-horse by day

Fig. 1. Gallo-Belgic E gold stater c.58-50 BC.

Fig. 2. Kentish A gold stater c.75-50 BC.

Fig. 3. Atrebatic Abstract gold stater c.54-50 BC.

Fig. 4. Ingoldisthorpe gold stater c.58-50 BC.

We should never forget that all the Iron Age coinage illustrated here was struck to meet the costs of dangerous military crises of whose epic proportions all concerned were keenly aware (Sills 1998). Neither should we underestimate the talismanic value to their recipients of coins themselves as objects, little sun- and moon-discs lent added meaning by the metals they were made of and the images they bore. A sun-horse moving clockwise was a guarantee of better times to come or at least of survival of the soul after death (*BG* 6.14.5): we might aptly compare the late Roman imperial coin legend *Fel Temp Reparatio*. Gold was the metal of the sun by day; silver, bronze, and potin of the moon or of the sun's dimmed disc at night. There were of course many circumstantial reasons, practical, political, and administrative, to reverse the way a formulaic image faced or to change the metal of which a coinage was made. Such alterations make accurate classification possible to this day and enable separate minting episodes to be differentiated precisely because they were deliberate and meaningful changes in their time. It is indeed sometimes obvious that reversed images were initially created by hubbing from an existing coin hammered into the new die, from whose imprint a new image was created facing the opposite way. What interests me here is that visibly changing alloy or switching the image direction crucially changed the meaning of the die design, and when a right-facing day horse turned left it seems normally to be given attributes that identify it as nonetheless the same solar horse, progressing auspiciously towards dawn. In this way, though facing left, he still "drew down the power of the sign" for a safe return.

In all these coin images we are almost certainly looking at versions of actual cult images, as I described in *List* 104. John Sills (1998) has explained how the first British mints were probably set up during an international emergency with Belgic expertise, and I wonder whether as part of this complex diplomatic process replica models of a specific sun-horse were distributed to privileged allies, partly as a protective pledge and partly to facilitate exact representation on the coinage. If so, it was one of a type of pedagogic image well known since the Bronze Age and suited to the performance of dramatic narrative, which may in this case have had a hinged neck and a hopper in its muzzle to enable its head to rise in its daylight gallop (*figs*. 1-4) but be weighted to make it droop at night (*figs*. 5-7). It does resemble a nosebag for a hungry horse (a suggestion I owe to Lotte Hedeager).

Other invariant features of this particular model include a sun disc below the horse, probably fixed to the plinth that the image stood on – which may well have been wheeled and could be carved or caparisoned to represent either the earth or a carriage (by day) or a ship or a carriage (by night), a number of discs in the sky (perhaps suspended from a canopy or frame), and a pair of lentoid 'coffee beans' fore and aft. These almost invariant enigmatic objects resemble eyes and shields (both of which have a place in solar imagery) and are always placed at the points of sunset and sunrise in the overall composition. This is an important clue to their significance. They never have spokes, so can't literally represent chariot wheels, whatever their distant iconographical descent, and if they were meant as solid cart-wheels, it is curious that they are always shown in oblique perspective. Whilst that can't be ruled out, I think it much more likely that they are highly condensed, polyvalent symbols that evoke several relevant scenes: the shields of the sun-maiden's rescuers in the primordial drama of day and night; the glint of ceremonial shields in sacred dance; and the shape of the sun's annual race through the ecliptic, with sharp turns at the solstices, long known from tracking the seasonal changes in the shadow cast by the sun in northern latitudes. In owning and racing horse-drawn chariots and decking themselves in gold, ancient Europe's aristocratic elites all celebrated a hubristic identification with the power of the sun.

Early British coinages add eloquent detail to this basic format. In Kent the solar identity of the eastern 'coffee bean' is made absolutely explicit (*fig*. 2). On Atrebatic staters the primary sun-disc is depicted as a wheel (*fig*. 3), which incidentally clarifies that whatever the coffee-beans might be, they are probably not wheels. Ingoldisthorpe staters (*fig*. 4) represent the setting sun spinning clockwise into the night as a hollow disc on the western horizon, and oppose the obligatory sun disc below the horse with an additional, dimmer sun-disc above. In this composition, the setting sun seems to be dragging night – or winter – down in its wake. The design as a whole then evokes the turning seasons, with their promise of eternal renewal. Later British coinages improvise with extravagant creativity on these elementary themes.

It was rare for the basic day-horse design to be simply reversed (*fig*. 8) without explicit indication that clockwise night travel was intended. Even here, however, inbuilt features of the original design can nonetheless be understood as markers of the 'dark' side of a sun-horse model. There is a conspicuous crescent above the horse's rump that was actually taken from Belgic prototypes, where it formed part of a highly schematic charioteer (*fig*. 1), but here stands alone like a moon in its last quarter, facing sunrise. Like the sun-horse at night, the moon's phases travel from right to left across its face. Likewise the torc motifs below, also inherited from a Belgic prototype and possibly carved into an actual horse-model's plinth, evoke the legendary wealth of the ruler of the underworld and author of time from whom the Gauls, at least, claimed ancestry (*BG* 6.18.1-2). And the curved deck of this particular plinth evokes the cup or boat that carried the sun through the waters of night in the oldest of all the solar myths.

The sun-horse by night

Fig. 5. Chute gold stater c.58-50 BC.

Fig. 6. Cranborne Chase silver stater c. 58-45.

Fig. 7. Badbury Rings silver stater c. 58-45 BC.

Fig. 8. North-East Coast gold stater c. 58-50 BC.

Other reversed horse images are emphatically nocturnal, especially those on the earliest south-western British coinages, which incidentally encode some very precise calendrical information and probably also allude to their authors' geographical position at the westernmost edge of coin-producing Britain. As it so happens, they also commanded one of the three most important points of entry into southern Britain from Gaul (the others being the Solent area and Kent). These images really do show a solar horse at rest, being carried through the night towards dawn, represented in *fig*. 5 by the clockwise spin of a sunburst on the eastern horizon. His head nods; his legs are static; his sun-disc is dim – its clockwise rays have collapsed on the surface of what I think is meant to be understood as the deck of the ship that carried horse and sundisc back from sunset to daybreak, where the disc would surge again into free sunwise spin. On this interpretation, the speed of the night-ship's progress is suggested by the three lines that stream behind the horse. This feature might well allude to the severed tail of an autumn horse sacrifice, and many day-side models of this horse are indeed tailless (*Chris Rudd* 98: comments on no.38; Green 1991:116); but it also evokes the wake of a speeding ship, as seen on the quarter-staters I described in *List* 104. A polyvalent symbol of this kind could also serve as a tribal identifier, like the triple tail that was firmly attached to the rump of Atrebatic horses further east (*fig*. 3).

Finally, there is the question of what the south-western horse has on its back. There is some variation in the number of heavenly discs set above other sun-horses of this particular early type, but not in the south-west (*figs*. 5-7). These all show an array of twelve full discs plus a thirteenth, different, item that rises from the horse's withers. Badbury Rings staters (*fig*. 7) make it clear that the horse really is carrying these discs, as it sets them against a background of dimmer rings and a new crescent moon in the west.

I will return to the Chute gold staters' thirteenth object elsewere: it is a highly condensed and very specific symbol and may well be a tribal signifier that, amongst other things, evokes a specific solar event and summer zodiacal constellation. On electrum and silver staters, coloured like the moon, it is clear that the small object rising from the valley of the horse's back is one third of a thirteenth disc, representing as precisely as you can on a little coin die the number of lunar months in a solar year. This was exact astronomical knowledge that the Romans could envy at a time when their own ancient lunar calendar had drifted far away from its original alignment with the solar year. Julius Caesar, himself an educated priest, went on to reform the Roman calendar during his dictatorship in 46 BC. Ten years earlier he had been talking with learned Gauls, had measurements made to verify the length of the northern summer night (*BG* 5.13.3–4) and visited Britain. Might he have been introduced in Gaul to the efficient calendrical system that is still in use?

We are told that Britain contained an important academy of priestly learning where druids taught and debated astronomy, the natural sciences, the measurement of earth and heavens, philosophy, and theology (Caesar *BG* 6. 14; Rudd 2003). It is difficult to resist the conclusion that if this had a primary seat, it must have been somewhere in Wessex, to which the lands in which these staters were struck were a privileged gateway (Sherratt 1996). Later British coinages, with many exceptionally eloquent examples from central-southern Britain, elaborate on this detailed knowledge, as I hope to show on another occasion.

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