

BRANISLAV ŽIVKOVIĆ

University of Belgrade

Classical Zeus or Barbarian Taranis? God and His Wheel on the Celtic Coinage

While the Mediterranean civilization reshaped protohistoric communities with the introduction of the coinage, it is fairly interesting in which way the Celts embraced the Classical iconography of Zeus and the compound messages behind it. Initially, they were made for interaction with a Greek or a Roman and not a Celt. The author of this article questions whether the La Tène's wheel motif had penetrated the coin's imagery from the warrior's thought – to whom, the lighting wheel, in combination with other signifiers, could stand as an 'Amalgamation Switcher' for the thunder-deity Taranis and his forgotten lore. For that reason, after examination of available historical and archaeological data, an alternative term for the obverse's bearded figure will be proposed.

Keywords: La Tène, Classical, Zeus, Taranis, Wheel, Celtic coinage

“[...] and **Taranis**, whose altar, is no more benign than that of Scythian Diana”

(*et Taranis Scythicae non mitior ara Dianae*)

Lucan (*Phars.* I, 445)

The numismatic artwork¹ which belongs to the late stages of Europe's Iron Age is, unfortunately, less examined than the other types of archaeological subfields. With the exception of catalogues from the late 19th–20th century,² we actually do not have a broader study of the puzzling symbolism which we are encountering on a vast majority of the protohistoric mints. Primarily, the one observed from the Celtic point of

¹ Artwork from the modern standpoint. Yet, images should be seen as collectivization of symbols with messages, and not observed as artistic expressions, with solely role to fill up the 'white space', see VAN ARSDELL (2008b: 194).

² LA TOUR (1892), FORRER (1908), DESS (1910), GÖBL (1973).

view. It is only in recent decades that new research has emerged and opened intriguing queries regarding the above-mentioned issue.³ The author of this article noticed certain patterns on Celtic coins (wheel – horse – bearded figure) which can as well be spotted on the other archaeological finds, coming from the La Tène culture and early Celto-Roman sculptures. For that reason, this paperwork endeavors to shed light on one of the most misread depictions concerning the Graeco-Roman influence on the Celtic coin iconography.

Often casually identified as Classical Zeus, the bearded diademed head on the obverse of Celtic coins is commonly followed by a horse image and the wheel symbol on the reverse. Even though it traces its origins back to the Mediterranean artistry, the aforementioned pattern was nonetheless accepted by the Late Iron Age elite⁴ as the main theme for their early phases of coin imitations, becoming a role model for independent emissions. Does the question arise as to why this particular portrayal derived from Philip II's coins? What was the specific purpose it has put down roots among those who requested such mintages? As Tomislav Bilić stated: "There are no discussions on whether this identification had any meaning for the Celtic people that issued those imitations."⁵ The authorities behind the monetarization must have been involved in choosing the appropriate prototype's image, hence scenery familiar to their kin could be seen as an advantage.

Despite the fact the 'Philips' were at the time popular throughout the European continent, the protohistoric ruling classes perhaps saw, in the Classical arrangement, relatedness to the once mutual Indo-European (IE) celestial allegory, that is the Celtic version of a theogonical episode. In what follows, first, I will show that the omnipresent pattern is in the connection with this lost lore. Secondly, I will propose an alternative nomination of the Zeus-like figure in the literature.

³ VAN ARSDELL (2008a), NASH BRIGGS (2009; 2010) and BILIĆ (2016). Previously, the Celtic coinage have been approached from a functionalist perspective, even interpreted as a primitive form of money, see COLLIS (1974).

⁴ According to the burial data, decorated weapons and regalia were obviously in vogue during the La Tène, pointing to the highly weaponized ruling class with a specific martial ideology. See RUSTOIU-BERECKI (2019: 134).

⁵ BILIĆ (2016: 382).

Setting the stage

A good amount of introductory literature for an archaeologist who is getting into numismatics will (mis)inform the reader that the Celts rather worshiped Greek Zeus, than the deity of their own. For example, in examinations concerning the bearded figure on obverses of Celtic coins, Robert Forrer repeatedly described the former as *Zeus kopf* – the head of Zeus.⁶ In terms of the history of art, Forrer was not mistaken, but even someone unfamiliar with Celtic coins would see the irregularity of this paradigm. To be exact, we do not maybe possess enough data to determine how the Celts perceived coin images, but we also cannot claim that the Late Iron Age coin's deity resembling Zeus' likeness was the ruler of Mount Olympus itself. Catalogues like Forrer's, which made a scientific breakthrough toward the Iron Age numismatics, were later on seen as exemplars for the future disciples. For instance, like his precursors, notable Serbian numismatist Petar Popović also described the bearded Celticized deity as *Зевсов профил* – Zeus in profile.⁷

Evidently, contemporary researchers have avoided analyzing coin's connotations (the secondary, cultural meaning of a sign), since they are challenging to judge, particularly the ones without inscription. To be exact, pioneer attempts to identify messages behind images were made by Edward Davies, who recognized that coin imagery was tied up with the culture of the people who created them; citing Davies regarding this matter, further misconceptions were questioned in a series of articles published by Robert D. Van Arsdell since the year 2007.⁸ According to him, Celtic currencies were issued by the 'Circumstance selectors' (Warrior/Religious elites), and the suitable imagery, struck by the die-cutters on the obverse and the reverse, was working together as an 'Amalgamation Switcher' (in a way that sememe of the entire coin was the storytelling sum of the two sides).⁹ Van Arsdell argued that coin images should be

⁶ FORRER (1908: 42, 121, 145–153).

⁷ ПОПОВИЋ (1987: 47). However, Popović did put the question mark next to Zeus' name.

⁸ VAN ARSDELL (2007a, n. 2).

⁹ VAN ARSDELL (2007b; 2008a).

seen as propaganda with coded messages from rulers to their people.¹⁰ Finally, this kind of opposite approach from the established narrative opened new research possibilities. From here, Bilić's study, based on the finds and place names, demonstrated that the iconography of the deity Apolo on the obverse of Noricum coins stood as the sun-god Belenos for the Celts.¹¹ Besides, La Tène's ciphers were studied by Nathalie Ginoux, and in her opinion, miscellaneous iconographic themes were purposefully transformed into standardized images, applied on the power-related objects as visual codes or *formulae*.¹² Hence, while identifying surreal images on diverse coins, we need to evaluate the entire picture and do not persist on denotations (the basic meaning of a sign).

Nonetheless, considering a »wheel – horse – bearded figure« pattern as a possible Celtic 'Amalgamation Switcher' is a bit of a challenge. Chiefly because each one of these signifiers was treated quite differently in the scientific circles. Even if some authors accepted the fact that images on Celtic coins are not the 'lifeless' artwork,¹³ but visual codes, there is still continual confusion for what these complex images stand for. The wheel, for example, is often observed as the symbol of a solar disk. In particular, while deciphering La Tène's iconography, Miranda Green acknowledged the wheel symbol rather as a form of the Celtic sun-lord; furthermore, a horse is also brought in the association with Belenos, or frequently with the goddess Epona.¹⁴

Indeed, IE folk stories do mention a solar deity and his Sun chariot, like in the case of Phaethon, the son of Helios. However, here we should echo Jaan Puhvel's question: "Why every myth has to be a solar myth?"¹⁵ To paraphrase Georges Dumézil's words, the divine beings of

¹⁰ VAN ARSDELL (2008b: 195).

¹¹ BILIĆ (2016: 385).

¹² GINOUX (2012: 184).

¹³ ALLEN–NASH (1980) and WILLIAMS–CREIGHTON (2006)

¹⁴ GREEN (1986: 116–117) and NASH BRIGGS (2009).

¹⁵ ПУХВЕЛ (2010: 26). It would be unachievable here to trace all of the thrusts and counterthrusts that marked the famous debate regarding the Marx Müller's theory about the worship of the Sun among the 'Aryan' peoples, which flourished during the previous centuries. Nevertheless, even though this kind of naturistic approach in linguistics was abandoned (yet obviously not entirely in archaeology), some scholars suggested that

the sky were more regarded as lords of stormy weather, and less as lords of light.¹⁶ Moreover, IE thunderers were distinguished as primeval sky-warriors of justice and abundance.¹⁷ The fact that the Celtic society was inspired by the foreign design on coins indicates that they recognized their thunder deity in the eloquent portrayal of Zeus and not a solar god, adding features, such as the wheel, to the whole arrangement. The only exception, and simultaneously a dilemma discussed later on, are the Western mints, where the profile of Zeus is abandoned in favor of the Apolo's.

The Classical sources for attestation of the Celtic thunder deity are scarce, but luckily, we do possess some parallels between the unanimous Gaulish lord of heavens and Roman Jupiter (*Caes. BGall. VI, 17, 1*). One of the earliest accounts on who this deity might be is coming from Jacob Grimm. In the chapter VIII of his '*Teutonic Mythology*', the folklorist draws a comparison between Germanic Donar and a Celtic god under the name of Taranis,¹⁸ historically confirmed by Lucan's 1st century AD poem (*Phar. I, 445*). Further, as mentioned by Mircea Eliade, in later sources the same deity is referred to as the master of fire,¹⁹ an aspect closely tied with coin minting. In addition, the Romanian scholar and one of the most renowned authors in the field of comparative mythology recognized the spoked wheel as one of Taranis' foremost attributes, which is equally suggested by Paul-Marie Duval.²⁰ As well, the IE Thunderer was often imagined by the northern 'barbarians' as a defensive charioteer dragged by various animals (horses, ibexes, or by birds), and the lighting wheel as an indivisible part of his divine chariot.²¹ In view of that, why should the myth of Taranis be exception regarding the

thunderstorms, rather than the Sun, were conceived to be the prime source of IE mythological metaphors, for example see KUHN (1859).

¹⁶ DIMEZIL (1999: 148). According to DUEV (2019: 15), IE sky-god and storm-god should not be equated.

¹⁷ ПИУХБЕЛ (2010: 161).

¹⁸ GRIMM (1882: 168).

¹⁹ ELIJADE (1991: II, 120–121).

²⁰ DUVAL (1957: 284–287).

²¹ STRAIŽYS–KLIMKA (1997: 73). The role of the thunder deity was to look after ordinary people from evil forces.

common IE heritage? Ranko Matasović has pointed out that even deity's name is an onomatopoeic word for thunder, **Torano-*, derived by metathesis from an earlier **Tonaro-* (related to Skt. *stánati*, Lat. *tono*, OHG *donar*, saved in a French dialect as *taram*, in modern English as *thunder*, all stemming from a common Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root for thunder, **(s)tenH-*).²² Nevertheless, it is not my intention here to give a full account and repeat what has already been said about Taranis. However, the obvious absence of academic discourse about possible deity's depiction on Celtic coins certainly needs a further look into the available archaeological records.

Wheel-master from the La Tène art

In order to stay on course, we shall not overload our subject with unending mints and strict numismatic metrology such as denominations, weights, or dimensions, hence giving our full attention to the iconography. Concerning La Tène's wheel-folklore, we can trace its source quite early. Diodorus was aware that the Celts used two-horse chariots for their journeys and in battles (*Bibl. His.* V, 29). More so, other testimonies speak briefly of everyday chariot use among the many Celtic tribes (*App. Hist. Rom.* IV, 12; *Liv. Urb. Cond.* X, 28, 9; *Strab. Geog.* IV, 2–3; *Caes. BGall.* IV, 33, 1–3). The wheel's divine position might have been amplified when the chariot entombment emerged in the late 5th century BC, along with horse-burials. Gradually, likely in the connection with the growing custom of cremation, simplification prevailed – from the once complete vehicle, only a few dismantled *pars pro toto* elements were chosen for the ritual.²³

Thereby, this synecdoche (a single artifact representing the whole object) could perhaps explain the presence of the La Tène's miniature wheels and their relation with the Celtic coinage. The votive metalwork was one of the most common crafts of the late Iron Age, "either deposit-

²² MATASOVIĆ (2009: 384). As argued by JACKSON (2002): "Celto-Germanic isogloss **Dun(a)raz* ~ **Tonaros* have developed as the fossilization outcome of an initial epithet or epiclesis of the PIE thunder-god **Perk^wunos*." Also, GIMBUTIENE (1985: 167) noted that Baltic thunder god *Perkūnos* was known under the name of »*Tarškulis*«.

²³ SCHONFELDER (2002: 311–316), DIMA–BORANGIC (2018: 17) and GUŠTIN (2018: 7).

ed underground or [...] in wet places such as rivers, lakes, and bogs".²⁴ It seems also that coins were part of votive offerings, "rather than just an everyday currency".²⁵ The wheel models of this period, with a few centimeters diameter, were as well offered near sacred objects or worn as an integral part of sophisticated jewelry; for example, such were found at archaeological sites Százard-Regöly (Hungary) and Stradonice (Czech Republic) (see **Figure 1**).²⁶ Intriguingly, in some regions of ancient Gaul (large parts of today's France), miniature wheels substituted the deposits of weaponry. Shortly after, offerings of coins increased, subsequently outnumbering wheel hoarding, or elsewhere, wheels were found simultaneously with chop-marked coins.²⁷ The mutual replacement and thesaurization suggest the token's *sacra* inclusion, as these "might had the symbolic apotropaic function alongside the more obvious social and economic ones".²⁸

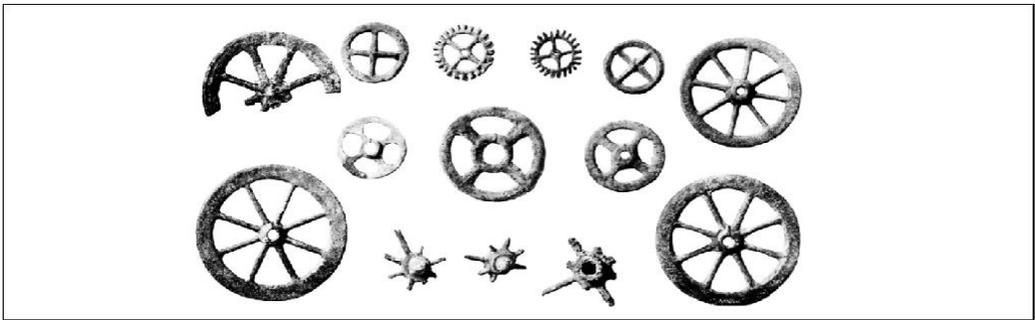


Figure 1. Votive wheels from Stradonice (after Pič 1903).

By sheer abstraction, the Celts managed to transform the 'borrowed' Classical design (substrate) into artwork in accordance with their taste and fashion, traditionally using La Tène's wheel symbol from the other artistic spheres (adstrate). Yet, even though most of our knowledge of the Celtic religion is adopted from iconography, only a small-scale recognition is given to the one derived from coins. For instance, Green argued that: "The Celts did not possess the tradition of consistent physical rep-

²⁴ WILLIAMS-CREIGHTON (2006: 5).

²⁵ HARDING (2007: 245).

²⁶ RUSTOIU, BERECKI (2014: 257) and DIMA-BORANGIC (2018: 16, 18).

²⁷ Chop-marked coins are often found next to sanctuaries. See WIGG-WOLF (2005) and KIERNAN (2009: 20).

²⁸ HLADIKOVA (2019: 71).

resentation of their divinities".²⁹ Truly, in Delphi, they were stunned to see the anthropomorphic depiction of the Greek gods.³⁰ Nonetheless, the presence of the divine imagery gradually increased under the influence of Mediterranean mintages, initially made for interaction with a Greek or a Roman, and not a Celt. "[...] The La Tène societies got acquainted with the functioning of developed Greek states [...] during their southern and south-eastern expansion",³¹ and after Philip II acceded to power, Macedonian currency, as a by-product of this expansion (alongside with the other cultural and material values), spread throughout the Celtic realm. Which is the reason why "the appearance of the coins is a reflection of a clearly defined, yet progressively transforming monetary system".³² As follows, the abstraction of the naturalistic style should not be seen as Mi-róesque deconstruction of the images (with no thought to any underlying symbolism or as incompetence for imitation), and the wheel as a psychological result of *horror vacui*. Quite the opposite, re-assembling the fragments into the La Tène composition may point toward the same technique coming from the Early Styles of the 5th century BC.³³

There are two principal zones of the Celtic coinage based on the metal ore, and here also we can track the difference in design; whilst the populations on the upper Danube and in Western Europe modeled their coinage after the gold stater with Apollo's image, followed by the biga (two-wheel chariot) on the reverse, tribes settling along the lower and middle Danube were inspired by the silver tetradrachm, well-known by the portrayal of laureated Zeus, and the horse-rider on the coin's reverse.³⁴ Some tribes, like the Norici and the Taurisci, deliberately broke off with Zeus' profile, in favor of the Apollo's one instead, which Bilić described in his study.³⁵ Thusly, as the aforementioned endured among the Scordisci in

²⁹ GREEN (1992: 1).

³⁰ BUCHSENSCHUTZ et al (2012: 203).

³¹ Around 3rd century BC, see SMELY (2017: 43).

³² Ibid. 40, n. 1.

³³ HARDING (2007: 244).

³⁴ There were no strict borders. as tribes in modern Romania minted coins with Apollo's profile, see PREDA (1973).

³⁵ BILIĆ (2016: 382).

the East, the examination of their mints is required, as they were one of the first tribes on the frontline of the ancient trade routes.

The above suggested can be validated by the two Scordisci issues. First, by the obol of the *Dachereiter* type, and second, by the drachm of the *Kugelwange* type, both minted between the 2nd and 1st century BC (see **Figure 2**). Signifiers we see here (the wheel and the neck-torc³⁶), did not derive from the 'Philips', even if we suppose the wheel stands just as a reminiscence for the chariot. In fact, they almost certainly worked as Ginoux's *formulae* to the recipient of the coin. Curiously, the resemblance may be only seen in Hellenic issues carrying the Macedonian shield on the reverse, above the rider.³⁷ The equation »wheel = shield« is plausible and shall be argued.



Figure 2. (left, enlarged) The 'Dachereiter' type obol (copr. Nomos AG, cat. no. GÖBL 188/2-3) and (right enlarged) the 'Kugelwange' type drachm (copr. Auktion München Collection, cat. no. GÖBL 188).

On that account, Zeus, the counterpart of Taranis, has no well-known link with wheels. And on the territory of the Scordisci there are very scarce or no mentions of Epona whatsoever.³⁸ Besides, attestations of Belenos are non-existent, suggesting we should search the parallels of the before-said imagery on the La Tène artifacts from the same region.³⁹ Thence, additional evidence supporting the proposed premise may lie in the connection with the Gundestrup cauldron. Celtic cauldrons were an integral part of ancient feasts, associated with abundance, rejuvenation,

³⁶ A neck-torc, jewelry of the Celtic chieftains, is often regarded in connection with divine beings and heroes.

³⁷ Minted under Alexander III, in Pella between 323–315 BC. See FORRER (1908: T. XII, cat. no. 182).

³⁸ Her cult on the Balkans is not attested until the Roman era, brought by the miners. See ПОПОВИЧЪ (1995: 153).

³⁹ Roughly between the Papuk mountains and the Timok river (and even further into Thrace).

and fertility. An exquisitely decorated silver vessel made between the 2nd and 1st century BC was found in a dismantled state near Gundestrup (Denmark).⁴⁰ Attempts have been made to find its place of origin, but the general view is that it should be sought somewhere near the domain of the Scordisci tribe; it either found its way in Denmark via trade, was given as a gift, or taken there as war booty.⁴¹ From all the plates, the most interesting scenery for our subject is the one from the interior of plate C 6572: presumably, Taranis with a neck-torc, holding to the wheel with another figure, surrounded by mythic beasts and the ram-horned serpent. Noticeably, aren't the parallels between the visual code of the cauldron and Scordiscian coins quite self-evident? (see **Figure 3**).



Figure 3. (left) Plate C 6572 of the Gundestrup cauldron with the possible depiction of Taranis (copr. Copenhagen Nationalmuseum) in comparison with signifiers from the Scordiscian issues (right, enlarged).

Unquestionably, a dense concentration of panoply of weapons, recorded over the last 100 years in the same area, and the discovery of the dies, points toward a war-oriented society,⁴² with “[...] a confirmation of long-lasting tradition with only formal changes in material culture”.⁴³ During the last centuries of the Old Millenium, defined by the rise of the

⁴⁰ ELUÈRE (1993: 117).

⁴¹ BERQUIST-TAYLOR (1987: 10–24).

⁴² For recently discovered Scordiscian coin-dies in Northwestern Bulgaria see MAHOV (2018: 258–259). On the La Tène weaponry in the eastern Scordiscian zones see ТОПЕОВ (2000) with cited literature.

⁴³ LJUŠTINA-SPASIĆ (2016: 330).

oppida (fortified cities), “the wide mobility and ceaseless movements of warrior bands led to an unparalleled widespread distribution of weapons”, and as a result, “of associated ornaments in connection with warfare.”⁴⁴ Of special importance are the curved *Sica* daggers, found amid the extent of south Romania, east Serbia, and northwest Bulgaria, produced for sacrificial purposes; or in addition, buckle belts of the *Laminci* type, unearthed in the Scordiscian sites from Southern Pannonia. Among basic decorative elements, like triangles and punched circles, one of the astral features from both of these finds is the spoked wheel (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2).⁴⁵ Aurel Rustoiu has noted that “These symbols, probably having magic meanings, also played an important role as agents of social communication [...] structured in such a way that their content could be grasped quickly”.⁴⁶ Also, coins testify that Pan-Celtic codes were expanding over tribal boundaries (see Figure 4.3).

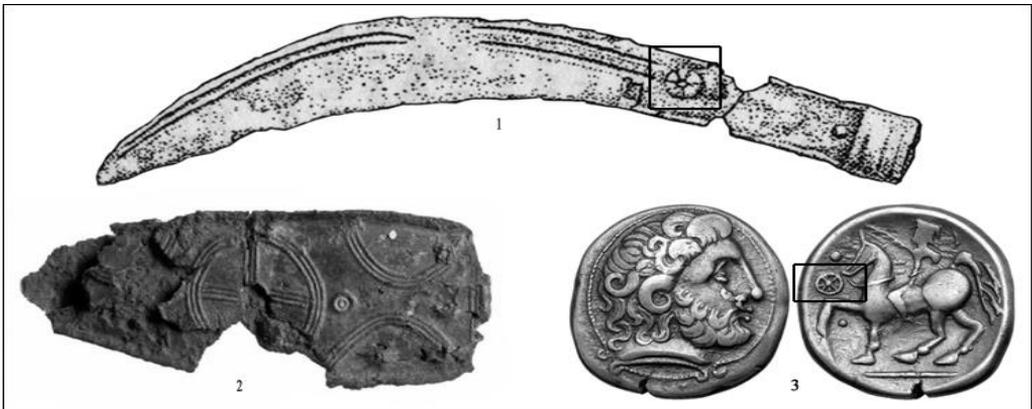


Figure 4. 1. Curved ‘Sica’ dagger (after GEORGIEVA 1992); 2. The belt buckle of the ‘Laminci’ type (after DRNIĆ 2009); 3. (enlarged) ‘Zweigarm’ type tetradrachm struck by the unidentified Eastern Celtic tribe, 300–201 BC (copr. Roma Numismatics Limited, cat. no. GÖBL 291/1).

Accordingly, not only it derive from the identical zone, but this kind of ‘Amalgamation Switchers’ are way too alike to be just a sheer coincidence, as the ‘Circumstance Selectors’ behind the previously suggested

⁴⁴ GINOUX (2012: 179) and RUSTOIU (2013: 215–216). Corresponding to the dating of the finds and the coinage presented in this paper (4th–1st century BC/ La Tène B–D). On La Tène coin routine see HARDING (2007: 245–246).

⁴⁵ RUSTOIU (2007) and DRNIĆ (2009: 306).

⁴⁶ RUSTOIU–BERECKI (2019: 135, n. 26). Obviously, the Celtic fraternities identified themselves through this images.

findings were the same strong, central authority. The vitality of this kind of organization was typical for an extensive network of the Iron Age elites, “expressed by the standardization of craftsmanship, and mainly where anything to do with adornment, instruments of war, and symbols of power.”⁴⁷ Well, should coins as power-related objects differ?

By no means, as the Celtic elite, with a common ideology of warfare and belief system, took upon themselves the privileges of minting. Henceforth, deliberately selecting and re-coding naturalistic images could convey a different meaning, which was a traditional “[...] transformation of an iconographic theme into a symbol, as a process within the development of Celtic art and society”.⁴⁸ Metalworking alone has been argued to have been imbued with supernatural abilities for the period of protohistory,⁴⁹ and, consequently, we can estimate without exaggeration that the talismanic value of divine images was treated with great reverence by the recipients of coins.⁵⁰

Sky-warrior from the Celto-Roman iconography

In favor of the formerly discussed assumptions are the findings of wheel amulets even up to the Roman imperial period. Some particular specimens carry engravings in the Latin language (*Iovi Optimo Maximo*),⁵¹ invoking Roman thunder deity, thusly taking the wheel outside of the »sun disk« narrative. As already pointed out, certain features of the Late Iron Age iconography were sufficiently distinctive from the Classical artwork (but not the coin’s depiction of the human head, as La Tène’s sculpture models are rather in full-face). And, as already said, Taranis was the deity of warfare. Well, in that case, if my assumptions are cor-

⁴⁷ BUCHSENSCHUTZ et al (2012: 192).

⁴⁸ GINOUX (2012: 179).

⁴⁹ See a detailed discussion in GREEN (2002).

⁵⁰ The Celts perhaps first have used votive aspect of coins, in rituals of passage, see BUCHSENSCHUTZ et al (2012). Sporadic finds of coins from the graves were found in Moravia and Slavonia, where the Celts were using their own minted coins for this purpose, see MICHAL (2009: 112) and DIZDAR (2004).

⁵¹ DIMA (2009: 19). Plus, this is not an exclusive inscription where storm-gods Jupiter and his counterpart Taranis are intertwined, see more in DUVAL (1957: 284) and FALILEYEV–KURULIĆ (2016).

rect, is it valid to state that the ‘barbarized’ images on coins should too be more ‘warlike’? Certainly, not all the Olympian gods were imagined as equestrians, hence the rider on the role model’s reverse, in all likelihood, is not a personification of Zeus.⁵² Contrary to this, the Celtic replications of the Mediterranean coinage almost always portray traditionally masculine prerogatives of war (see **Figures 5.1 and 5.2**). In particular, the Western and the Central coinage produced by Helvetii, Parisii, Gaulish Veneti, Allobrogians, Arverni, Pictones, Bituriges, Edui, Carnutes, Curiosolites, Redones, Boii, and other Iron Age tribes, depicting wheel-imagery with *formulae* leaning toward battle-like affairs.⁵³



Figure 5. 1. (enlarged) Catuvellauni stater, 25 BC–10 AD (after Swan 2018, cat. no. ABC 2562); 2. (enlarged) Caleti electrum hemistater, 2nd century BC (copr. Leu Numismatik AG, cat. no. LA TOUR 7169).

What is more, perhaps the most convincing evidence that the iconography of Taranis was warmongering, comes too from the Roman era. Despite the Celto-Roman syncretism, local gods managed to retain many of their original attributes, saving them from the mists of oblivion. As a result, the Gallo-Roman art displays traditions of the pre-Roman beliefs; plenty of hybridized sculptures are showing bearded deity on horseback, nude with a neck-torc or full in armor, holding lightning in the left arm, with the wheel »as his shield« in his right one (as on the Gundestrup Plate C scenery, again characteristics not common for Classical images), commonly followed by designation to Jupiter on its base.⁵⁴ The connection between the

⁵² Phillip II introduced his victorious biga and the equestrian rider in the memory of the Olympic games, see REGLING (1969: 28). According to PRICE (1974: 6) the »war-god« Ares is closely affiliated with a warrior horseman.

⁵³ LA TOUR (1892: cat. no. 3931, 3966–69, 4112–13, 5086, 8947, 6598, 6767, 6774, 6813, 9915–16). On the Gaulish *La Croix* type with battle axe images see FORRER (1908: T. V. cat. no. 118; T. XI. cat. no. 82). On the Helvetii issues with the wheel-iconography see DESS (1910: T. XXXIX., cat. no. 932).

⁵⁴ DONDIN PAYRE et al (2010: 75–76).

wheel and the shield is already pointed out, and this example leads us to the possibility that the wheel iconography on the Celtic coinage perhaps purposefully evolved from the archetype's naturalistic depiction of the hoplon, apparently as the Celts equated the wheel with their lord's weaponry. In favor of this assumption is the testimony of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who left us a shred of evidence that the Celts were clashing weapons »against their shields« before engaging in a battle (*An. Rom.* II). Terrifying *tumultus gallicus*, a war-cry accompanied by the loudness of the *carnyx*, a trumpet (see **Figure 5.1**), attested by Diodorus (*Bibl. Hist.* V, 30) and Polybius (*Hist.* II, 27–31), could stand for invoking a growl of a heavenly warrior, worshiped by men-at-arms. The sudden burst of thunder's noise might be seen as a Lord's *clamor*, in a sense that the Celts imagined Taranis as the noisemaker, a crumbler, and ravisher.⁵⁵ Moreover, Romans did it equally, praying to the raging gods before engaging in combat (*Luc. Phars.* II. 45–51). This would be another plausible explanation for why the infiltration of the wheel as coin's inevitable signifier has happened.

Additionally, hybrid sculptures as well portray a deity riding down the giant serpent. The ram-horned serpent is generally in association with IE thunderers (once more a resemblance with the Gundestrup plate C scenery). Yet, Green said: "The snake reflects the peaceful nature of the god, associated with environment and fruitfulness".⁵⁶ However, it appears the serpent symbolizes the chthonic world in this situation, as an opposition of the nourishing heavens. Remarkably, the manifestation of this bellicose penetration can be viewed on numerous coins in the West. For example, stater minted by the Vindelici carries the image of the ram-horned serpent, followed by the neck-torc on the reverse (see **Figure 6.1**) or by the Trinovantes tribe (see **Figure 6.2**), both with parallels in Early La Tène jewelry, precisely with dragonesque brooches (see **Figure 6.3**).⁵⁷ The appearance of ram-horned beasts, which cross

⁵⁵ This metaphor perhaps reflects the noise produced by the wheels of the (wind/water) mill, further observed in linguistics: e.g. Russian *молния*, Old Norse *Mjölmir*, Old English *mieltan*, Serbian *млинар*, all representing a word for a thunder-like noise (spark) produced by grinding or by the blacksmith's slashing hammer (noted by author).

⁵⁶ GREEN (1992: 227–8).

⁵⁷ On the LT B1 phase 'dragon' type brooches see POPOVIĆ (1996: 108) and SLADIĆ (2003: 37).

geographical and clannish borders, logically raises the question of whether this type of insignia was just artistic merit or a distinct elite's emblem? Certainly, the accentuation of centuries-old coin symbols "played an important role in the construction and expression of the public image, identity and mythology [...] of warriors."⁵⁸

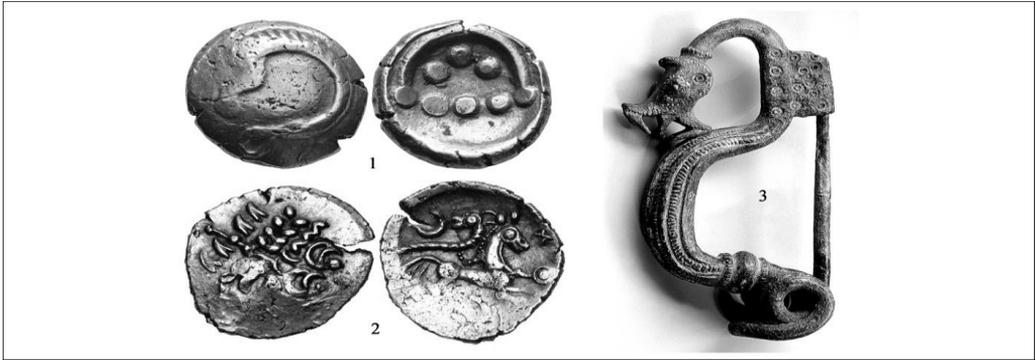


Figure 6. 1. (enlarged) Vindelici 'Rolltier' type stater, 2nd–1st century BC (copr. Leu Numismatik AG, cat. no. LA TOUR 9421–9422); 2. (enlarged) Triovantes issue, 100–40 BC (copr. CNG, cat. no. ABC 2225); 3. 'Carzghetto' variant brooch from Arbedo (Switzerland), 4th century BC (copr. Swiss National museum).

Furthermore, the Pan-Celtic serpent can be supplementary observed on the auction specimen minted by the Belgic Atrebates tribe (see **Figure 7.1**), in comparison with the La Tène's sword scabbards, the so-called 'Dragon-pair' variant with a serpentine-like decoration, possibly the finest archaeological analogy out there to this theme (see **Figure 7.2**).⁵⁹ As Rustoiu argued: "[...] The warrior identity [...] is indicated by the wide distribution of [...] associated symbols".⁶⁰ The Suessiones tribe, another Belgic tribe, equally minted coins depicting a 'triple-tailed' horse with, what seems to be, a world-devouring serpent above,⁶¹ with the spoked wheel bellow (see **Figure 7.3**), irresistibly resembling the composition from the Iron Age stone altars. Particularly the one from Gloucestershire (Great Britain), encircled by a ram-horned snake and the

⁵⁸ RUSTOIU–BERECKI (2019: 144).

⁵⁹ Sword scabbards with this theme can be found from the Atlantic ocean to the Black sea, see GINOUX (2012: 184).

⁶⁰ RUSTOIU–BERECKI (2019: 145).

⁶¹ World-devouring monsters have parallels in northern IE myths, see ELLIS DAVIDSON (1984: 88–91).

wheel on its top (see **Figure 7.4**).⁶² Not a few of the discussed hybrid sculptures were placed on similar leaf-carved columns. Maximus of Tyre, a rhetorician from the late 2nd century AD, noted that the Celts indeed worshiped 'Zeus', but they honored him in the form of a lofty oak (*Log. VIII, 8*), which is a tree frequently associated with IE thunder deities. A striking analogy is the myth of Thracian god Perkos, »depicted on horseback as facing a tree surrounded by a snake«.⁶³

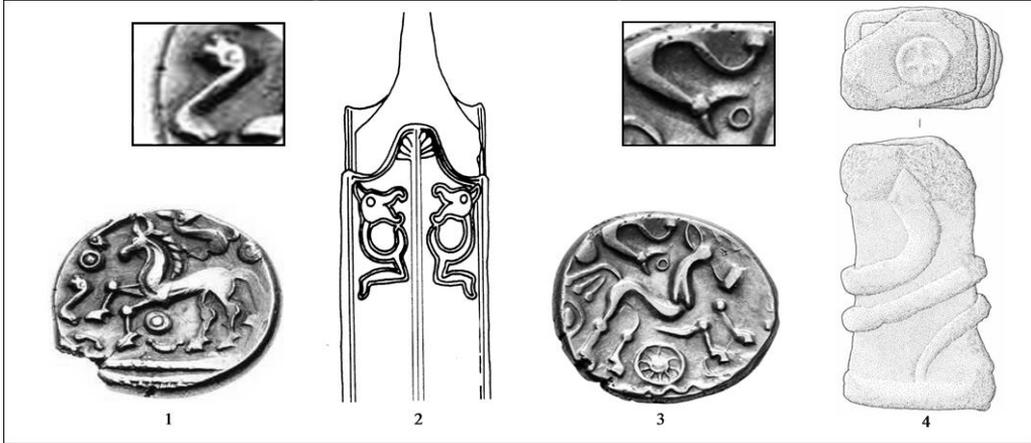


Figure 7. 1. (enlarged) Atrebatian 'Climping' type stater (rev.), 75–30 BC (copr. CNG, cat. no. ABC 524); 2. 'Dragon-pair' motif (after Szabó–Petres 1992); 3. (enlarged) Suessiones 'à l'ancre' type stater (rev.) (copr. Leu Numismatik AG, cat. no. LA TOUR 8020); 4. Taranis' altar? (an unknown author).

Not to mention, the astral signifiers are almost always in the company of a horse (see **Figure 8.1**). "The horse is a metaphor for hunting and warfare, protection and order",⁶⁴ and its connection with Epona is quite odd if we observe the entire sememe of the Celtic coins (she was never accompanied with war attributes, but always with cornucopae and other symbols of earth and fruitfulness). The charioteer, horse-rider, and the horse alone rather stood as the connotation for the battle-god. Indeed, is this suggesting that the martial themes on coins might have been understood according to the cosmological mythos? It was already proposed that imagery on the Celtic coinage could be related to metaphors taken

⁶² GREEN (1992: 227–8). Could these be the vilified altars of Taranis, which Lucan mentions in his epic poem?

⁶³ Ibid.125. See also JACKSON (2002: 75–76). Possible 'Tree of life' motif can also be spotted on Celtic coins, see in LA TOUR (1892: cat. no. 9545) and VAN ARSDELL (1989: 1066).

⁶⁴ CARSTENS (2005: 72).

from the trance-world of shamanic visions.⁶⁵ Again, shapeshifting is a well-known shaman ability of the IE thunderers, and certain coins with centaur-like images riding over the fallen enemy suggest the same conclusion (see **Figure 8.2**).⁶⁶

Lastly, the biggest obstacle during this examination was a paradigm long present in the numismatic circles – that the wheel stands for the solar disk, therefore a sun-god.⁶⁷ However, the comparison of signifiers suggests that the difference between the Sun and the wheel on Celtic coins is quite apparent. Some specimens offer a rare scenery where they are portrayed together, adding another layer of new questions to our subject (see **Figures 8.3 and 8.4**). The wheel is clearly depicted with a round flat ring, and the Sun, oppositely, by the flower-like leaves and dots. Apparently, according to the aesthetically appealing *formulae* from rulers to their subjects, Celtic coins were predestinated to have ritual significance. As a prestige sign of abundance, the coin seized the role that wheel amulets once had, which is to associate toward elite's patron.



Fig. 8. 1. (enlarged) Dobunni 'Bodvoc' type stater (rev.), 25–5 BC (copr. NumisBids, cat. no. LA TOUR E.v. I, 1); 2. (enlarged) Aulerici Diablintes stater (rev.), 100–50 BC (copr. Leu Numismatik AG, cat. no. LA TOUR 6493); 3. (enlarged) Trinovantes stater, 1st century BC (rev.) (copr. British Museum, cat. no. ABC 527); 4. (enlarged) Belgae quarterstater, 1st century BC (rev.) (copr. Silbury coins, cat. no. ABC 791).

Is Taranis' myth depicted on the Celtic coinage?

To sum up, all these motifs, like the nudity of a rider, the horse, the wheel, the torc, the serpent, and the obverse's deity turned out to be the highly standardized emblems of the warrior function among the Late

⁶⁵ CREIGHTON (1995; 2000). According to WILLIAMS–CREIGHTON (2006: 3): "More and more researchers are using elements of the shamanic cosmology to explain aspects of the archaeological record".

⁶⁶ As in the case of Zeus and Nordic Thor, see ELLIS DAVIDSON (1984: 147–148).

⁶⁷ And yet, Belenos was never depicted or associated with a torc and the spoked wheel, see OLMSTED (1994: 328).

Iron Age military elite, *post hoc* altering into a coin's visual code, practically identically in the Eastern, Central, and the Western coinages. As Daphne Briggs pointed out: "In all these coin images we are almost certainly looking at versions of actual cult images."⁶⁸ When mixed, the majority of them work as Van Arsdell's 'Amalgamation Switchers'. Or to say in other words, the wheel itself could signify a synecdoche for a biga or another Celtic divinity, but in the composition together with all the above-mentioned symbols – the wheel works as an entirely different connotation, a Ginoux's visual code penetrated from the warrior fraternity, attested in the same manner on the La Tène's jewelry, cauldrons, the warrior's equipment, and the Gallo-Roman art. The encounter with the Hellenistic princes may have stimulated the emblemization of these 'knights', mentioned by Caesar (Caes. *BGall.* VI, 15). Afterward, a blend of suitable insignia could proclaim current conditions, declared and dictated by 'Circumstance Selectors'.

The fact that the Celtic mercenaries were probably the earliest social strata introduced with the Mediterranean monetary economy,⁶⁹ and that Taranis-linked ornaments, inscriptions, and sculptures were mostly found in the military areas – goes in the favor of the premise that the proposed arrangement was a compound message intentionally struck on coins, previously trained in the oral traditions. Yet, Briggs saw in this blend of images: "Hubristic identification with the cult of the Sun, celebrated by ancient aristocratic elites."⁷⁰ Still, after a previous survey of La Tène's semiotics and the Gallo-Roman folklore, it seems that the entire admixture stands as a fragmented metaphor for the nocturnal sky in which myth about theogonic war-tumult occurs.

Namely, the observed iconography likely represents a dualistic cult, the conflict between the Sun and Earth, the heavens and the underworld, a triumph of the IE sky-rider over a world-devouring serpentine monster from the abyss. Although "the religion, sacrality, and ritual were long considered peripheral to the proper concerns of archaeolo-

⁶⁸ NASH BRIGGS (2009: 3).

⁶⁹ SMELLY (2017: 44) and BUCHSENSCHUTZ et al (2012: 211).

⁷⁰ NASH BRIGGS (2009: 3).

gy",⁷¹ one surely cannot unsee the similarity between once the Pan-Celtic saga (whorled in the Graeco-Roman cloak) and the lore concerning the battle between the Norse Thor and Jörmungandr, Slavic Perun and Veles, Greek Zeus and Typhon, Indo-Iranian Indra and Vṛtráḥ, Christian Saint George and the dragon, and other IE bygone stories where a son-god with thunder attributes is dethroning the immoral father-god, who sends a serpentine giant against the former as his last resort before final defeat.⁷²

As Van Arsdell postulated: "To the Warrior Elite this would probably mean one thing – war".⁷³ Thereupon, could Celtic coins be discerned in a way the Hellenic and Roman imagery pointed their recipients toward their myths and historical events? Were the Celts producing coins merely during turbulent times, as a war-money? The military redesign suits perfectly into this semiotic inspection, as an enduring Iron Age insignia invoking power and sacrality.

According to the Celtic die-cutter's thoughts, Taranis may have had combined attributes of Thor⁷⁴ (fertilizer and protector against evil), Perun⁷⁵ (linked with the burning oak), Zeus (armed with lightning, yet in the form of the wheel-shield), Indra⁷⁶ (brings victory in battle), and perhaps Mars⁷⁷, or even Týr (a battle-god from the heroic ethos). In favor of the latter postulate is an auction specimen with a rather bizarre scene of a monster wolf savaging humanoid figure, with the spoked wheel bellow (see **Figure 9**).⁷⁸ The scenery does not appear in any of the Celtic sources, yet it looks like a fable we can recognize from the 13th century Icelandic version as '*The Binding of Fenrir*' (Norse myth of wolf Fenrir biting of Týr's hand). It shows that the story was at least 1300 years old when Snorri Sturluson made it part of the '*Prose Edda*'. Hence, Celtic coins shouldn't be underrated as a valid source for comparative mythology, as their imagery

⁷¹ SPRETNAK (2011: 13).

⁷² ПИХБЕЛ (2010).

⁷³ VAN ARSDELL (2008a).

⁷⁴ DUEV (2019: 13).

⁷⁵ Ibid. 15.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 12.

⁷⁷ Interestingly, Lucan mentions Mars as the lord of winds and thunder (*Phars.* X, 205).

⁷⁸ See a synthesis of this problem in NASH BRIGGS (2010).

is immeasurable in terms of scientific data. Thanks to them, we can also determine that the Warrior and Religious elites were cooperating closely as they both were behind the prototype's design.



Figure 9. Belgic potin (rev.), 1st century BC (copr. Numismatics Paris, cat. no. LA TOUR 9194).

Nevertheless, if we consider Bilić's statement that Apollo represents the sun-deity Belenos, especially on the coinage where the shift Zeus > Apollo occurred, then why do numerous Western mints carry the wheel along with the beardless deity (see Figure 5.2)? There could be a chance that gold and silver ores were equated with the complexion of the Sun and the Moon, hence deities in connection with them were struck on coins.⁷⁹ So, a few possibilities arise:

- Gold coinage's 'Apolo' stands for Belenos (e.g. followed by the Sun symbol)
- Silver coinage's 'Zeus' stands for Taranis (e.g. followed by the spoked wheel or torc)
- Both stand for Taranis (as the spoked wheel or neck-torc has no link with Belenos)

The alternative option is Lugus – a triple deity made of Esus, Teutates, and Taranis. But for now, until new research emerges, these are only speculations. In all probability, the Celts did not possess a unique, dogmatic view of religion. Slow and difficult tribal communications inevitably favored local conservatism, giving way to various coin forms bit by bit. Although the La Tène abstraction, by using the visual language of warfare, did not make the portrayal of Zeus to be incapable of being identified, we should still acknowledge the creators behind it. So, I

⁷⁹ Perhaps the silver ore was not just of practical nature in the Southeastern Europe. Maybe Scordisci minted silver coins extensively because of their devotion to Taranis, and not because they 'cursed' the gold, see KIDD (1999: 312).

propose that at least the term '**Zeus-Taranis**' should be used while labeling the coin's bearded figure.

Concluding thoughts

Everything argued so far suggests that the 'thunder-wheel' communicated to viewers a far more obvious symbolism to ordinary Iron Age people than a 'sun-wheel', and so seems a better explanation. Sadly, this kind of combined scientific approach has only recently become a topic for archaeological enquiry. Yet, thanks to the coins, we at least have the outlines of one of the deity's myths. These circumstances give us a glimpse into the Celtic religious affinities and all available fragments seem to advocate that we can also connect numerous other emblems with Taranis. The extended minting span reflects the persistence of the same ornamental methods of a warrior thought for centuries. Alongside all the 'bread crumbs', the question of why Taranis is not mentioned as the plausible explanation behind the images on Celtic coins remains unclear. The author of this paper is aware he might be off-beam, but even if some of the premises turn out to be based on solid grounds, it will be a great addition to future numismatic studies (able to either confirm or reject many of the more tenuous connections hypothesized in this article).

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