

# An Iron Age chariot burial from Scotland

Stephen Carter<sup>1</sup> & Fraser Hunter<sup>2</sup>

The chance discovery of a chariot burial shows Iron Age Scotland to be in direct contact with the European continent.

*Keywords:* Iron Age, Scotland, chariot, cart, burial.

## Introduction

The Scottish Iron Age is not known for its rich burial record: indeed, it is impoverished even by Britain's fairly poor standards. Yet routine rescue excavations in 2001 at Newbridge, just west of Edinburgh (Figure 1), found a completely unexpected discovery – the first chariot burial in Britain from outside the core area of East Yorkshire.

The burial turned up during routine monitoring in advance of development. Some 300 m away lies the large Bronze Age barrow of Huly Hill and a few small (undated) ring ditches clustered near this, but no other Iron Age activity was found. The north-south figure-of-eight pit (4.5 × 2.2 m) contained the vehicle which was buried intact, in contrast to examples known from Yorkshire which were typically dismantled (Stead 1991). Little survived of the

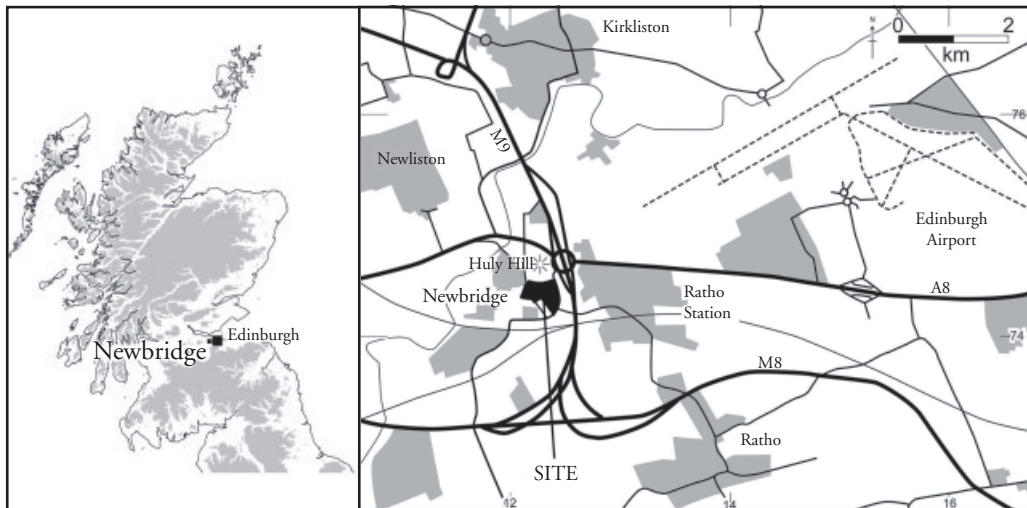


Figure 1. Location map.

<sup>1</sup> Headland Archaeology, 13 Jane St, Leith, Edinburgh EH6 5HE Scotland

<sup>2</sup> Department of Archaeology, National Museums of Scotland, Chambers St, Edinburgh EH1 1JF, Scotland

Received: 22 July 2002 Accepted: 7 November 2002

organic remains – even the corpse had been lost – but the pit's morphology gives a good indication of the vehicle's form (Figures 2 & 3). The wheels had been sunk into individual pits, leaving the body of the vehicle (with the deceased) resting on a spine of gravel between them, with the pole pointing south. The expanded southern end of the pit held the yoke and horse harness, but no horses. There was no sign of any barrow or enclosure to mark the burial.



## The finds

There were no surviving grave goods apart from the vehicle and harness fittings, all of which were of iron. These comprised an odd pair of snaffle bits (one two-link, the other a single bar); four terrets (all simple rings); and the remains of the wheels, which were lifted in soil blocks for excavation in the laboratory (Figure 4). Despite distortion by the weight of soil, they preserved not only the iron tyre but, in places, the shape of the wooden wheel fossilised in the corrosion products. This will provide a rare insight into wheel technology; for instance, the tenons of the spokes are preserved, set into apparently single-piece felloes. One of the wheels had a pair of iron nave hoops, but these were absent in the other; this also had a different felloe cross-section, suggesting one wheel was a replacement. Clearly this was no hearse but a working vehicle.

Figure 2. *The chariot under excavation* © National Museums of Scotland.

## Parallels

This is the first chariot burial in Britain from outside the tight concentration in the East Yorkshire 'Arras Culture'. Other candidates in England have been comprehensively dismissed by Stead (1965b: 8–9) while Scotland's other claimant, from Ballindalloch in Moray, must be judged not proven on the sparse available evidence; the only illustrated find, a shield boss, has no convincing Iron Age parallels (Wilson 1863: 153–5; Proudfoot & Aliaga-Kelly 1996: 3–4).

Although Yorkshire provides the geographically closest comparanda, they are not good analogies for Newbridge. Typically these feature a dismantled vehicle; five terrets are normal, and the fittings tend to be rather more elaborate (Stead 1984; Dent 1985; Stead 1991: 29–33, 40–61; Hill 2001). There are two examples (on the fringes of the distribution) with vehicles buried intact, but on the original ground surface rather than in a pit.



Figure 3a. Vertical view of the chariot.  
© National Museums of Scotland.

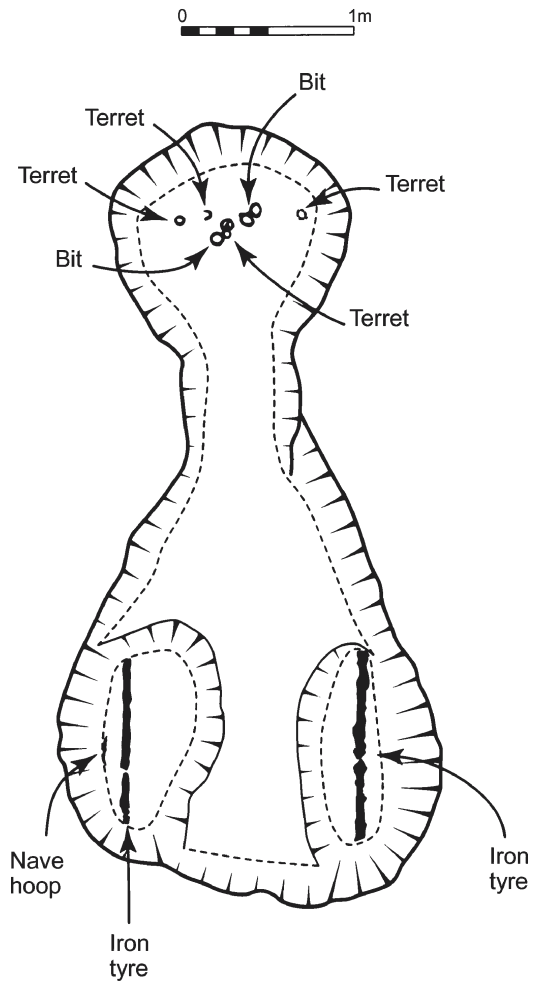


Figure 3b. Key of the chariot.

The Continent provides much closer parallels (Stead 1979: 24–9; van Endert 1986). Here the predominant rite was intact vehicle burial, and the finds also show closer similarities. The bits are typically plain iron ones, while terrets, if present, are generally simple rings of bronze or iron; the number varies markedly, but there are examples with four or multiples of four (e.g. Van Endert 1987: 93, 100–1). The best-known burials from Champagne are generally rather better-equipped than Newbridge, but those from the Belgian Ardennes provide closer parallels; they are plain vehicles and the burials have few if any grave goods (Cahen-Delhaye 1993; 1998: 65). The Continental burials are predominantly La Tène A (fifth–fourth centuries BC). These close parallels are confirmed by radiocarbon dates from Newbridge, on preserved wood from the felloes, of  $2350 \pm 50$  BP and  $2365 \pm 40$  BP (GO-107510-2). When combined these calibrate to 520–370 BC at 91 per cent probability.

## Implications

The strong Continental connections should make us look again at the question of European contacts at this date. Such close similarities not just in artefact types but burial rites point to a familiarity with the Continent, whether through political ties, marriage partners, mercenaries or some other mechanism. However the vehicle is unlikely to be an import: the lack of the distinctive Continental suspension fittings (Furger-Gunti 1991; 1993; Stead & Rigby 1999: 130–132) indicates this is a British vehicle. This is a useful reminder of the variability in what is too often simplified to the generic ‘Celtic chariot’.

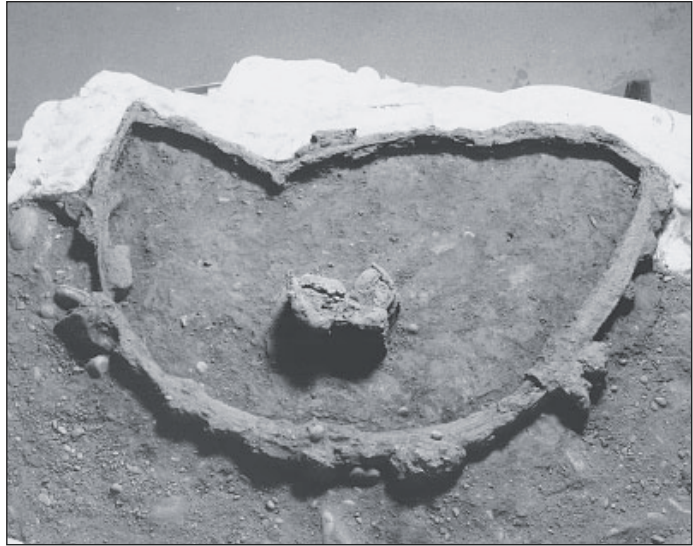


Figure 4. The eastern wheel as excavated in the lab, showing nave loop and wood remains on the tyre. © National Museums of Scotland.

Stead (1965a) has rightly criticised the term ‘chariot’ for its implications of fast-moving vehicles intended primarily for warfare, but the alternative of ‘cart’ also carries modern value judgements of a rather prosaic vehicle. The burial record suggests they were socially important, and while accepting Stead’s critique we suggest chariot conveys this better; the term is used here without implying this was a war vehicle or a male burial.

Newbridge can perhaps best be understood in the context of the Continental influences seen in high-quality bronzework. The earliest Celtic art in Britain (fourth-third centuries BC) shows a familiarity with European models, but with a rapid evolution of distinctive British variants (Megaw & Megaw 1989: 192–202; Jope 2000: 17–52). Newbridge reflects similar processes, and indicates that ideas and customs as well as objects were moving across the North Sea. It should not be a surprise that northern Britain participated in such networks, given the Continental connections along the east coast from the Neolithic onwards.

Full analysis of the Newbridge find still has a long way to go, and will ultimately provide a detailed insight into this unique vehicle. However its implications have a significance far beyond its locale, and it should make us look again at Britain’s contacts with the Continent in the early La Tène period. It also serves as a timely reminder of the serendipity factor which rescue archaeology provides: Newbridge cannot be alone, and we await similar finds from strange-shaped pits with expectation.

## Acknowledgements

The work is being fully funded by Muir Construction Ltd. We are grateful to John Dent, John Lawson and Ian Stead for advice, and to colleagues in Headland Archaeology and NMS Conservation and Photography for their invaluable assistance. Particular thanks to Alan Hunter Blair, who first recognised its significance.

## References

- CAHEN-DELHAYE, A. 1993. Reconstitution d'un char à deux roues de La Tène d'après les données de fouilles en Ardenne Belge. Première partie: analyse des données archéologiques. *Archéo-Situla* 17–20: 55–70.
- 1998. Rites funéraires au sud de l'Ardenne Belge, in J.L. Brunaux, G. Leman-Deliverie & C. Pommepuy (ed.), *Les rites de la mort en Gaule du Nord à l'Âge du Fer*: 59–70. *Revue Archéologique de Picardie* 1/2.
- DENT, J. 1985. Three cart burials from Wetwang, Yorkshire. *Antiquity* 59: 85–92.
- VAN ENDERT, D. 1986. Zur Stellung der Wagengräber der Arras-Kultur. *Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission* 67: 204–288.
- 1987 *Die Wagenbestattungen der späten Hallstattzeit und der Latènezeit im Gebiet westlich des Rheins*. Oxford: BAR (Int 355).
- FURGER-GUNTI, A. 1991. The Celtic war chariot: the experimental reconstruction in the Schweizerisches Landesmuseum, in S. Moscati *et al.* (ed.) *The Celts*: 356–9. Milan: Bompiani.
- FURGER-GUNTI, A. 1993. Der keltische Streitwagen im Experiment: Nachbau eines *essedum* im Schweizerischen Landesmuseum. *Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte* 50/3: 213–222.
- HILL, J.D. 2001. A new cart/chariot burial from Wetwang, East Yorkshire. *Past* 38, 2–3.
- JOPE, E.M. 2000. *Early Celtic Art in the British Isles*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- MEGAW, R. & V. MEGAW 1989. *Celtic Art: From its beginnings to the Book of Kells*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- PROUDFOOT, E. & C. ALIAGA-KELLY. 1996. Towards an interpretation of anomalous finds and place-names of Anglo-Saxon origin in Scotland. *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 9: 1–13.
- STEAD, I.M. 1965a. The Celtic chariot. *Antiquity* 39: 259–265.
- 1965b. *The La Tène Cultures of Eastern Yorkshire*. York: Yorkshire Philosophical Society.
- 1979. *The Arras Culture*. York: Yorkshire Philosophical Society.
- 1984. Cart-burials in Britain, in M. Gustin & L. Pauli (ed.), *Keltski Voz*: 31–41. Brezice: Posavski Musej Brezice
- 1991. *Iron Age cemeteries in East Yorkshire*. London: English Heritage.
- STEAD, I.M. & V. RIGBY. 1999. *The Morel Collection*. London: British Museum.
- WILSON, D. 1863 *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*. London: Macmillan.