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The Chariot Tomb from Adria: Some Notes on Celtic Horsemanship and Chariotry¹

¹ Translated by Peter Golden and J. V. S. Megaw

GAULISH chariotry is, as we all know, a subject of great interest to Stuart Piggott. It has led him for instance to make a full-scale reconstruction of a war-chariot and to try to discover how horses harnessed to the yoke were managed. In an earlier note I put forward, among other things, views concerning the side screens of such chariots, which conflicted with the Edinburgh reconstruction (Frey 1968). I was thereby perhaps guilty of delaying study of the subject, and want to offer by way of compensation this small paper, which takes up and expands some ideas about the use of the chariot which were first propounded by Stuart Piggott.

Several years ago Piggott cited examples of Roman coins which unequivocally depicted Gallic chariots (Piggott 1952; see also Harbison 1969, 47ff.). Of these coins, one group had been minted at the end of the second century BC, the other in the middle of the first century BC. The written record, however, does not entirely agree with this testimony. It is true that King Bituitus of the Arverni, when he supported the Allobroges in their struggle against Rome in the year 121 BC, had fought from a chariot decorated with silver.² One can therefore draw on Florus' account as an explanation for the portrayal of chariots on the older coins; but this does not follow for the more recent group. As Piggott observes in his article:

By 58 BC the total absence of any reference to chariot warfare by Caesar, and his surprised recognition of its survival in Britain a few years later, shows that by that date it had been dropped from tactical use by the Gauls.

It thus seems unlikely that these coins can be regarded as representations of contemporary Gallic chariotry.³

² Florus (I.37.5) reports that the king was brought to Rome to take part in the triumph 'discoloribus in armis argenteoque carpento quali pugnauerat'. A collection of the references to the Celtic chariot in Classical literature is given by D'Arbois de Jubainville (1888).

Piggott thinks that they are either an anachronism or depict contemporary British vehicles encountered by Caesar in his campaigns of 55 and 54 BC.

When this observation was made, archaeological evidence for corresponding Late La Tène chariots from the continent was almost totally absent. The only well-known exceptions were the tombs from Hoppstädten which had produced such vehicles (Dehn 1938; see now Haffner 1969). But other discoveries had in fact been made, and recently the material has increased markedly, so that today one can say with certainty that in the first century BC a light two-wheeled chariot was common over much of the Celtic world. Hence the appearance of a typical Celtic *essedum* on coins of the first century BC should no longer be in question. The inclusion of such a chariot in a grave must indeed have been a general custom for the upper stratum of Celtic society (Joachim 1969, n. 2, 5; 1973, n. 1; 1974, n. 11), for example in the territory of the Treveri. Schindler, who has recently discussed such burials, is inclined to think that these chariots were no longer used in war (Schindler 1971, 65). They were merely a status symbol for a warrior of the nobility who himself had ridden into battle. Schindler is led to this interpretation by several points, for instance the extremely long swords known from such tombs. These swords are usable only as cavalry weapons. Spurs in the graves (Joachim 1973, 40) are of a type which show the dead to have been not a charioteer but a mounted warrior. With this in mind, is it not possible to suppose that the *essedum* represented on the coins were not actual war chariots, but nothing more than traditional symbols of rank? The chariot of King Bituitus with its precious silver decoration may have been also primarily a badge denoting his social status.⁴

³ The arguments seem convincing, but there must have been a strong tradition concerning the use of war-chariots, since Strabo (IV.5.2) writes of chariots as though they still existed. For Diodorus (V.29.1) see Tierney 1960, 250.

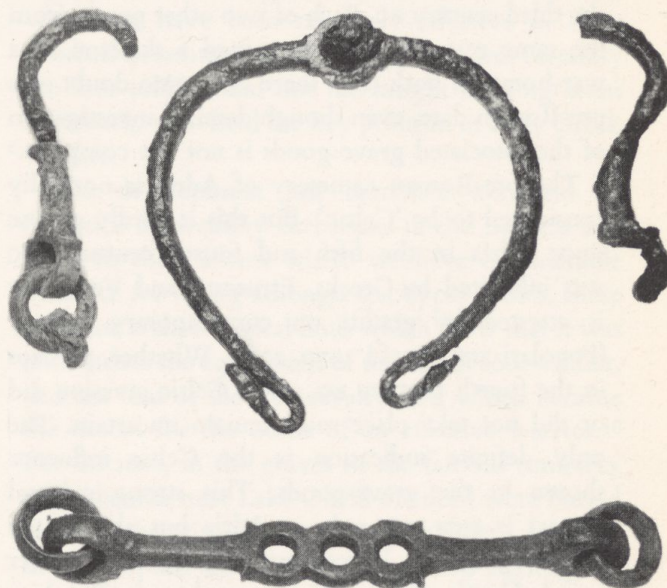


1 Adria: chariot burial.

There are numerous parallels from the Mediterranean world for the symbolic use of the chariot. We may recall the triumphal chariot of the Roman emperors (Wiesner 1944, 67ff.) and the richly decorated vehicles from central Italian tombs of the sixth century BC; here one need only mention the famous example from Monteleone (Richter 1915, 17ff., no. 40). These chariots can only be interpreted as ceremonial vehicles, as at the time the phalanx proved to be the favoured form of battle-order in Etruria (Snodgrass 1965, 116ff.), and it is unthinkable that the chariot still had any rôle to play in warfare.

In the Celtic world the custom of a mounted warrior being buried with a chariot as a symbol of rank appears not to have been confined to the Late La Tène phase. Perhaps the Early La Tène chieftain-grave from Kärlich can be interpreted in this manner, since besides a chariot and other grave-goods a small mounting was found depicting a rider (Driehaus 1965; Joachim 1970; Osterhaus 1966, 169; Megaw 1970, no. 33). A similar rite can be found in the chariot-burial from Adria and, as an example from the regions north of the Alps, in a burial from Léry (Eure).

⁴ The reports of war between Bituitus and the Romans are not precise enough to give a clear idea about the method of fighting used by the Allobroges, the Arverni, or the Sallyes who started the struggle (Jullian 1909, 3ff.). Only in the case of the Sallyes is a cavalry force mentioned by Strabo (IV.6.3). It remains an open question whether there was still a great number of charioteers or not.



2 Adria: chariot burial. Surviving fragments of the curb-bit of the charger.

The tomb at Adria was excavated in 1938 in a cemetery beside the Bianco Canal (Fogolari and Scarfì 1970, 73f., nos. 44-5). In the grave itself were discovered the remains of a two-wheeled vehicle with iron tyres and with linch pins and nave hoops of bronze and iron (*Ill. 1*). Also found in good condition were the skeletons of two horses that had been harnessed to the chariot. In their mouths were simple iron ring bits; nearby lay four iron rein-rings. A third horse skeleton behind the chariot was provided with harness typical for a charger, as is shown by the presence of a curb-bit. The mouthpiece itself was made of iron, the omega-shaped cheek-pieces being of bronze as were the rein-hooks and the rods which had been provided with three holes

for attachment to the curb. Unfortunately the curb was not recovered, even though the horse skeletons and underlying earth matrix were brought intact to the Adria museum for conservation (*Ill.* 2).

No human remains were found in the grave, but there may have been a burial in the area immediately behind the chariot and the horses, where there were definite signs of disturbance suggesting to the excavators that a grave had been tampered with at some time in antiquity. The Bianco Canal cemetery contains, besides Roman cremations, 'Celtic' inhumations of the third and second centuries BC. Apart from a Roman burial, three inhumation graves of the third century BC lay in the vicinity of the chariot tomb; however, this can only be regarded as weak support for dating the chariot to the third century BC. Each of two other graves from the same cemetery also contained a skeleton of a war-horse. In both cases there can be no doubt of a pre-Roman date, even though detailed investigation of the associated grave-goods is not yet complete.⁵

The pre-Roman cemetery of Adria is normally considered to be 'Celtic'. But this is hardly precise since Adria in the fifth and fourth centuries BC was inhabited by Greeks, Etruscans and Veneti, as is attested by graffiti on contemporary pottery (Fogolari and Scarfì 1970, 27ff.). Whether, perhaps in the fourth century BC, a real Celtic invasion did or did not take place must remain uncertain. The only definite indication is the Celtic influence shown in the grave-goods. This strong cultural impact is seen not only at Adria but also in the whole *Angulus Venetorum*, which was never invaded by the Gauls. This is proved too by Polybius (II.17.5) who, writing in the second century BC, states that the Veneti, apart from their language, differed only slightly from the Gauls in both customs and costume. Thus, at least in this respect, one may claim that the chariot-burial from Adria was indeed Celtic. The tomb from Léry reveals that, nearly contemporary with the Adria cemetery, similar rites concerned with equipment for the after-life are also found north of the Alps (Coutil 1901, 128f. and Pl. 2, 13-15; Jacobi 1974, 184, no. 798). Léry represents the burial of a warrior with his sword and spear. Other grave-goods include two iron ring-bits, obviously for a team of horses,

and third bit, once more a curb-bit, such as could only have been used for a charger. So here again is evidence for a warrior who was at once a charioteer and a horseman.

These grave finds, on the one hand, pose the question of the development and function of the Celtic horseman, and on the other hand they beg the purpose of the associated chariots which, as already observed to have been no longer employed in the field during the Late La Tène phase, had instead at that time a symbolic rôle. It remains to pursue these problems in greater depth, setting our discussion in a wider time perspective.

To assess the function of the horseman in battle, we must first try to consider horse harnesses in detail. The omega-shaped cheek-pieces from Adria, combined with the curb-bit, were originally examined by Werner Krämer (1964) and more recently discussed by Jacobi (1974, 182ff.). While in Central Europe a few examples have come to light, a whole series has been found in north and central Italy. Similarly these cheek-pieces can be seen on a group of Apulian vases and in other representations of the fourth century BC. Although earlier evidence for these bits is unknown, derivations of the form survived into the first century AD.⁶

It is interesting to note that in Italy omega-shaped cheek-pieces are also associated in several other finds with curb-bits. But this combination with the typical harness of a charger does not seem to be obligatory, because on representations of chariots the horses are shown with such cheek-pieces too.⁷ Curb-bits of different forms are ubiquitous in Italy from the second half of the fourth century BC onward.⁸ Of this type of bit, several examples have also been found in the southern Balkans, although from Central Europe there have been hitherto only very few finds. But since a clear relationship in customs of horse-rearing is demonstrated by the distribution of these cheek-pieces, it may be suggested that the

⁵ Dr B. M. Scarfì, Milan, is preparing a complete publication of the cemetery, and I am most grateful for her advice. Professor G. dei Fogolari, Padua, very kindly provided the illustrations for *Ills.* 1, 2.

⁶ Jacobi 1974, 187, n.803. The small omega-shaped cheek-pieces listed by Jacobi are well known from Dacian findings; see for example the catalogue *The Illyrians and Dacians* (Belgrade 1971), D 148.

⁷ Besides Apulian vases see for instance a stele from Padua: Prosdocimi 1963-64; Frey 1968; Megaw 1970, no. 102.

⁸ For references see Jacobi 1974, 184ff. A well-dated example is known from a tomb of Canosa, Apulia: Jacobsthal 1944, 146ff., Pl. 258d:4, 4a; Oliver 1968, 13f., text Fig. 2:4, 4a.

curb-bit, so important for fighting on horseback, was also more widespread in the Celtic world than might at first sight be concluded from the present evidence.

Recently the actual function of the curb-bit has been the subject of a survey by Nylén (1972-73; see also Anderson 1961). Because a horse when confronted with an obstacle tends to shy to one side, it must be controlled through some special device, since otherwise it can play no effective role in close fighting. This essential task of controlling the horse is best fulfilled by the curb-bit, whose discovery thus constitutes a critical advance in the deployment of cavalry in warfare. Of course the curb-bit, though the most effective, is not the only device to allow mastery of a spirited war-horse. Typical in the East Mediterranean and the southern Balkans are bits with spiked mouthpieces, a powerful restraint indeed (Anderson 1961). In the present stage of research it is difficult to tell when these rough bits were introduced. As a first step, one could consider the application of a muzzle strap whereby, in addition to harnessing of the horse's mouth, pressure would have been exerted on the sensitive bridge of the muzzle. Nylén for instance (following Cowen 1967, 416ff.; see also Piggott 1965, 177ff.; Powell 1971) believes that, in Central Europe, relatively effective horse-fighting had existed since the beginning of the Hallstatt period. But these conclusions are largely hypothetical and, despite considerable work on the subject, progress has been slow in answering precisely the outstanding questions about horse-harness and cavalry technique in the area north of the Alps as well as around the Mediterranean. In view of the many unsolved problems, we must rely on evidence from outside the Celtic domain in order to clarify the function of mounted warriors at this period.

Turning to Greece, it is for example interesting to note that, in the seventh and sixth centuries BC, the descendants of Homer's chariot-using heroes are not in fact described as heavily armed cavaliers

fighting directly from horseback, even though riding was known from Mycenaean times onward (Wiesner 1968; contrast Greenhalgh 1973). Instead of cavalry it is the foot-soldiers of the closely formed phalanx who play the vital rôle.⁹ The chief reason for this was undoubtedly the new social system evolved by the Greek city-states. Also of interest is that the art of horse-fighting does not seem to play an important part at all in the seventh and early sixth centuries BC. In the earliest representations of military scenes on vases, apart from hoplites, fighting on foot and using the horse only as a means of transport to the battlefield, one finds only lightly armed cavalry. Only from the late sixth century onward does one find illustrations of riders richly equipped with body-armour but without shield, who may have been relatively effective in close combat. In contrast to other peoples it was certainly the foot-soldier, and not the knight fighting from horseback, who held the key position in early Greek warfare.

The development just described also had an influence on wealthy barbarians in the Balkans and Italy. In the Balkans where we have considerable evidence for riding amongst the upper classes, there are some archaeological finds which show that it was nonetheless the equipment of the Greek foot-soldier, and not that of the true cavalryman, which became the model for the outfit of an effective warrior.¹⁰ For instance, in the graves of the famous cemetery of Trebenište near Lake Ohrid the dead were buried with a thrusting-spear, sword, helmet, and the heavy hoplite shield¹¹ developed for fighting in

⁹ See already Helbig 1902. His views have been modified for instance by Alföldi 1967, who shows that an aristocratic cavalry existed also in early Greece since Aristotle referred to it in his *Politics* 4.12 (1297b). But it quickly became ineffectual when the hoplite phalanx was evolved. Of the ample bibliography on this topic I cite here only a few other recent articles: Snodgrass 1965; Anderson 1965; Wiesner 1968; Greenhalgh 1973.

¹⁰ Of all the Greek weapons in the Balkans only the so-called 'Illyrian helmets' have been collected systematically (Lahtov 1965a). The oldest finds date back to the late seventh century BC (Ha C2) (Vejvoda and Mirnik 1971). Of course these open-faced helmets could have been good protection for cavalry no less than the Boeotian helmets (Snodgrass 1967, 94). The preference for the former type of helmet in the Balkans may be explained by strong connections with Macedonia where it is well attested (Snodgrass 1967, 114ff.). But it is impossible to interpret the outfit of the wealthy dead of Trebenište otherwise than as a hoplite outfit; see below.

¹¹ Filow 1927; Popović 1956; Lahtov 1965b. The similarity of the finds with the Greek hoplite outfit is so striking that Filow thought of 'vornehme griechische Söldner' (Filow 1927, 107f.).

close formation – in other words the complete equipment of the Greek hoplite. But according to Thucydides (IV.126) the Illyrians were almost totally ignorant of Greek discipline and tactics in warfare. Therefore the Trebenište chieftains' expensive Greek weapons must be considered as purely symbols of rank.

A different situation is to be observed in the reception accorded to the hoplite outfit in Italy where, as in the Balkans and from the seventh century BC on, noble Etruscans for example were buried with Greek helmets, greaves or other weapons (Snodgrass 1965, 116ff.). Here the influence of the Greek city-states was so strong that as time went by, first in the Etruscan cities and later also in Rome, the battle-order of the phalanx was adopted, even though in Rome the *equites* may have played a more significant rôle – as is suggested by their status in society – than their counterparts elsewhere (Alföldi 1967). Heavily armed soldiers carrying the characteristic hoplite shield appear even on north Italian metalwork (Lucke and Frey 1962; Taf. 26, 64–65; Frey 1969, Taf. 50, 58, 66, 69, 78; Frey 1975). It is thus possible that some of the central Italian development in warfare filtered into this area. But how far these changes affected military tactics north of the Alps remains uncertain.

In fact we know very little about Hallstatt warfare in Central Europe (Kossack 1959, 93ff.; 1972, 93f.) Certainly there are some representations, for instance of armed horsemen, in the East Hallstatt region from the seventh century BC on.¹² By contrast, in the West Hallstatt area such portrayals are completely absent, and the evolution of arms and armour can only be deduced from grave-goods. It is of course possible that the long Hallstatt cutting-sword, the typical weapon for a single combatant, was used mainly from horseback.¹³ And one can well imagine that the increase of weapon-graves with probable

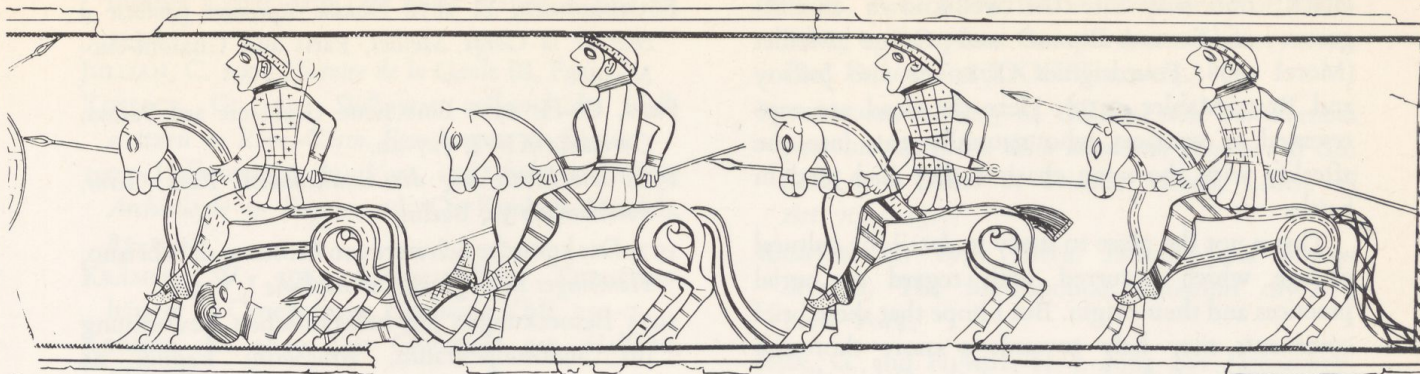
thrusting-spears in the later Hallstatt phase is an indication of relatively well-regimented units of foot-soldiers. But all these interpretations are rather weak, and a reconstruction of war-practice seems difficult. For in contrast to the south-east Alpine area, where the dead was buried with his complete armour (Gabrovec 1966), in the West Hallstatt area he was generally provided only with a single weapon.

For instance, in the central grave VI of the great Hohmichele barrow near the Heuneburg, the buried chieftain was provided only with a long bow and a quiver full of arrows (Riek and Hundt 1962, 156ff.), which can hardly have constituted a nobleman's total armoury. Should we regard this bow with arrows as serving only the purpose of equipment for hunting in the afterlife? Or are we dealing here with a weapon comparable to Odysseus' highly prized bow (Homer, *Od.* 21.11ff.)? In other Late Hallstatt graves, one commonly finds either spears or daggers; and again one thinks of Homer's descriptions where, for example, Menelaus rises from his bed to greet Telemachus and puts on a sword to show his lofty status (*Od.* 4.308). Similarly Athena enters Odysseus' house with a spear in her hand when appearing as Mentès, chief of the Taphians (*Od.* 1.104, 121, 127), and Telemachus goes to the assembly armed with his sword and spear (*Od.* 2.1ff.; 17.62; 20.125ff, 145). Here then are instances of the wearing of certain weapons in the daily life of leaders as proof of their social position (cf. Helbig 1909, 49); and the same may have been done in the Hallstatt area, as a result of which there are only single weapons in the Celtic tombs rather than complete warrior outfits. Naturally, from this evidence one cannot be certain whether these people fought as riders or as foot-soldiers, or indeed as charioteers.

From the beginning of the Early La Tène period, however, the problem becomes less intractable, as the tombs are now far more richly furnished with weapons (Osterhaus 1966). But the clearest testimony comes from the scene depicted on the sword scabbard from grave 994 of the Hallstatt cemetery (Kromer 1959, 182f., Taf. 201–2; Megaw 1970, no. 30; Dehn 1970, Taf. 78–81). This shows a frieze of foot-soldiers and riders, the former lacking armour and provided only with shield and spear, being clearly inferior to the mounted warriors who – besides a long spear and in one case a sword as well – are given both helmets and body armour (*Ill.* 3). It is certain that these riders did not use the horse merely for transport to the battlefield, following

¹² See for instance the figures on the famous cult waggon from Strettweg (Schmid 1934; Pittioni 1954, 62of., Abb. 439; Modrijan 1962, 18ff.; Megaw 1970, no. 38). Other examples of mounted warriors with helmets are seen on the bronze vessels from Klein-Klein (Schmid 1933, Abb. 10a, Taf. 1a, c).

¹³ Cowen 1967, 416ff. A different evolution of the sword is assumed by Schauer 1971, 213ff., who also thinks that the long sword types served as cavalry weapons.



3 Hallstatt, grave 994. Details of incised sword-scabbard showing Celtic cavalry (courtesy R-G. Z. M.).

the Greek fashion, but must have actually fought from horseback.¹⁴ This is revealed not only by the fallen enemy against whom one rider is directing his spear, but also by the lack of shields, since shields are preferable for horse-fighting but not for combat on foot. This Central European find, in contrast to the Mediterranean evidence, displays an effective cavalry force with an obviously high degree of control over its horses. One may trace a direct line from the riders on the Hallstatt scabbard to the noble Celtic knights of the Late La Tène phase, who have such a significant part in Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*.

Together with the Celtic mounted warrior who features so prominently at the beginning of the La Tène period, one must also consider the rôle of the charioteer. In the battles of Sentinum in 295 BC and Telamon in 225 BC, the presence of chariots is still attested although it seems, according to the accounts of Livy (X.28-30) and Polybius (II.28-9), that chariotry amongst the Celts was by then already obsolescent (Anderson 1965, 350) and that the cavalry were paramount in battle. But when one finds chariots in the Early La Tène chieftain graves of Central Europe (Harbison 1969) it is likely that, along with the war-horse, they still had the function of an actual item of military equipment, though probably reserved by tradition for those of high rank and thus preferred as grave-goods for warriors.¹⁵ At the same time, the chariot may have had a

¹⁴ Polybius (III.115.1-3) tells how, at the battle of Cannae, the Celtic and Iberian cavalry leapt down to fight on foot (see Anderson 1965, 350). But this may have been a special situation and not typical of Celtic war practice in general.

supplementary use in carrying the body to the cemetery and symbolically onward to the afterlife. The chariot-tomb from Adria must also be seen in terms of this tradition, while it is not impossible that the chariot had partly lost a military function by then. For otherwise how could one interpret the representation on a gravestone from Padua, of about the same period, showing a typical Celtic *essedum* taking a woman on the journey to the next world (Frey 1968, 317)?¹⁶

The origin of the Celtic chariot is, of course, a much-discussed topic (e.g. Osterhaus 1966). But whether this problem can be solved on the basis of evidence from graves is debatable in the light of what has just been said. It is possible that, in the West Hallstatt culture, the chariot was already used even though it was not buried with the dead, and although only in the East Hallstatt region do we have clear evidence for chariots (Felgenhauer 1962). Instead of chariots, the dead were placed on a four-wheeled waggon together with only a few characteristic weapons which had been carried in everyday life as signs of their owner's rank. In contrast, the chieftains of the Early La Tène period, for instance in the Marne region, were buried with a complete collection of weapons for both defence and

¹⁵ Only in the Early La Tène tomb of Moscano di Fabriano is the dead clearly equipped as a rider (now in Ancona; Frey 1971, 174). For references to other possible horseman-graves see Joffroy and Bretz-Mahler 1959, 32. For the whole question see also Joachim 1974, 163.

¹⁶ In one of the Late La Tène chariot-tombs from Hoppstädten a woman was buried (Haffner 1969, 110; see also Schindler 1971, 65). The absence of weapons in the English cart-burials suggests that there also two-wheeled vehicles were not necessarily war-chariots (Stead 1965, 5).

attack; one may cite the well-known chariot-graves of Somme-Bionne and Gorge Meillet (Morel 1898; Fourdrignier 1878; see also Joffroy and Bretz-Mahler 1959). Here the dead are represented as warriors who naturally pass into the afterlife with the same chariots they had used in battle.

This is not the place to study in detail the cultural change which occurred with regard to burial practices and their origin. But I hope that these brief comments may help towards a more thorough examination of the function of the Celtic chariot from the beginning of the La Tène period on.

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