

THE PILOT METAPHOR AND ITS ARTISTIC REFLECTIONS (A NOTE ON THE PLATONIC MOTIVE ON SOME CELTIC COINS)

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On the obverse of a rare gold quarter *stater*, struck c. 250–225 BCE in northern France and recently found near Ringwould, Kent, one sees the head of Apollo with a lyre and a bow (?) hidden in his curly hair, which proves that it was designed by a local master on the basis of a gold *stater* of Philipp II of Macedon (382–336 BCE). On the reverse of this small (13 mm) coin we see a strange long-haired Celtic deity: driving his sky-chariot, this god holds a huge hammer in his right hand. A big bee is depicted before the horse's snout. This reminds of Sucellos, the Celtic god of agriculture, underworld and alcoholic drink, the "good striker," usually depicted with a hammer in one hand and a cup in another, or, perhaps, the Roman Silvanus. It appears that this image became a prototype for another and quite extraordinary Celtic coin, struck in Normandy, France, c. 100 BCE, which displays a model ship as the victor's prize in a chariot race. The head of Apollo (now crowned with a wreath) is again found on the obverse, but on the reverse a typologically similar divine charioteer holds – instead of a hammer – a model of a ship. A working hypothesis therefor could be that the image of a bee, also a conductor to the underworld, is simply replaced by the artist with an image of a ship, as if the divine traveler drives his chariot under sky at days and sails away and sinks below the horizon at nights. The image can further be placed both in mythological and historical context. There is quite reasonable to suppose, with D. Ellmers, that this special coin was issued as a gesture of propaganda, designed to show the coastal inhabitants that they are protected at sea and land, and to merchants that the passage through the Channel is safe. Parallel interpretations of the metaphors of pilot, helmsman, the observational tower and harmony, current in the Platonic tradition (Plato, Numenius, Olympiodorus, etc.), could to my mind also help to understand this unusual image. It is fascinating to observe how an unknown artist independently follows the steps of the Greek philosopher in his reinterpreting of a complicated mythological image in a political sense.

Keywords: Platonism, the heavenly traveler, body and soul, a passage to the underworld, the charioteer, pilot, kybernētēs metaphors, Sucellus, harmony, the Celtic ships.

ОБ ОДНОМ ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННОМ ВОПЛОЩЕНИИ МЕТАФОРЫ ВОЗНИЧЕГО (ЗАМЕТКА О ПЛАТОНИЧЕСКОМ МОТИВЕ НА КЕЛЬТСКИХ МОНЕТАХ)

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На обороте недавно обнаруженной близ Рингвудда (графство Кент, Англия) кельтской золотой монеты (13 мм, четверть статера), изготовленной на севере Франции в долине Соммы ок. 250–225 гг. до н.э. по образцу золотого статера Филиппа Македонского (382–336 гг. до н.э.), выбито длинноволосое кельтское божество на колеснице с огромным молотом в правой руке – небесный возничий. Скорее всего, это Суцелл (Sucellus, «сильно ударяющий»), иногда изображаемый стоящим с чашей в одной руке и молотом в другой. Возле морды коня на изображении вьётся большая пчела – в кельтской мифологии посредница между миром богов и миром духов, приносящая на землю тайную мудрость из иного мира. Нам представляется, что именно этот сюжет лёг в основу изображения на другой галльской монете (ок. 100 г. до н.э., также из Нормандии), долгое время вызывающей недоумение исследователей. На аверсе этой последней сохранено изображение Аполлона, на реверсе же небесный возничий вместо молота держит в руке модель корабля. Ладья как более или менее универсальный образ присутствует и в кельтской мифологии, причём связана она, как и в греко-римской мифологии, с переходом из этого мира в иной. Может быть, по мысли автора этого сюжета, ладья могла адекватно заменить пчелу, также проводника в мир иной, как если бы небесный путешественник днём совершал свой путь по небу, а ночью отправлялся на ладье за горизонт? И всё же изображение возничего, пусть и божественного, в образе победителя конных состязаний с призом в виде модели корабля в руке выглядит довольно необычным. Возможно, как впервые показал Дэтлев Эльмерс, изображение на монете представляет собой своего рода пропагандистский жест, призванный показать жителям прибрежных территорий, что они находятся под надёжной защитой на суше и на море, а купцам, перевозившим вдоль побережья Нормандии стратегически важное олово, – что путь через пролив безопасен? Эта гипотеза хорошо объясняет исторические обстоятельства возникновения изображения, наши же наблюдения позволяют поместить его в подобающий концептуальный контекст. Для этого в статье дополнительно рассматривается ряд параллелей, связанных с легендой о рождении Платона (Олимпиодор, *Жизнь Платона*) и некоторыми местами из платонической литературы, где развиваются как знаменитые метафоры о небесном возничем и кормчем, так и образ сторожевой башни. Интересно наблюдать, как, истолковывая мифологический образ в политическом смысле, неизвестный кельтский мастер проделывает тот же путь, что и древнегреческий философ.

Ключевые слова: платонизм, небесный путешественник, душа и тело, метафоры кормчего и возничего, кельтские корабли, Суцелл, гармония, путешествие в подземный мир.

But He, that hath the steerage of my course,
Direct my sail!

Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

I

The second century Platonist Numenius of Apamea writes:

A pilot, who sails along in the midst of the sea, sits high up, above the rudders, and steers the ship by their handles, but his eyes and mind are intent on the sky as he looks towards the heavens, so that as far as he is concerned his route follows a path through the heaven above, though he is sailing along the sea below. Just so the creator, having bound matter together in a harmony that it cannot knock or slip away from, is himself seated above it, as above a ship on the sea. And he directs the harmony, steering by the forms; and instead of the heavens, he looks to the god above who draws his eyes to him; and he takes his faculty of judgment (κρίτικόν) from that contemplation, and his faculty of impulse (ὀρμητικόν) from his yearning.’ (Fr. 18 Des Places, G. Boys-Stones’ translation, slightly modified).

This interpretation of the image of heavenly traveler is quite typical to the Later Platonic tradition: a pilot (the Platonic demiurge) conquers sea (matter) with the rudders (harmony), counting, for laying down his course, the positions of the stars (paradigm). The basic sources for this interpretation are found in Plato and related literature. An analogy between rudders and harmony is also elaborated in Plato¹, as well as this of an observation-tower, or a lookout (περιωπή) – the subject of another skillful interpretation of Numenius:

Imagine someone sitting at the top of a lookout (an observation-tower): he catches a quick glimpse of a small fishing boat – one of those light skiffs, alone, in solitude, caught between waves – and he recognizes it. So must one retreat far from the objects of perception to join alone with the good which is alone, where there is no human, nor other animal, nor body large or small, but an ineffable, a completely indescribable, divine solitude. There are the haunts of the good, its pastimes and festivals; but it, in peace, in benevolence, the calm, the gracious ruler, rides upon being [οὐσία] (Fr. 2 Des Places, G. Boys-Stones’ translation).

The most famous example of the charioteer metaphor is found in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, where the human soul is likened to “the composite nature of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer” (246 a–b), while the mind is metaphorically assimilated with “the pilot of the soul”²:

¹ Cf. “indissoluble bonds” of the *Timaeus* 43a. The term is actually originated in the Mycenaean Greek and can be traced back to the word (*h*)*armo* (a ‘wheel’ with spokes). From the times of Homer it is also related to the technology of ship- and chariot-building. For details see Ilievski 1993, Afonasin 2012. This explains why Numenius call the rudders harmony: apparently he perceives the ship as a well-built mechanism, an artisan’s orderly creation.

² Cf. *Timaeus* 41e and 69c and also the *Anonymous prolegomena to Platonic philosophy*, 27 [Westerink], where an unknown Platonist discusses the usage of metaphors and analogies in Plato, having noticed, *inter alia*, that in the *Phaedrus* Plato uses a *metaphor* of charioteer, likening our soul to the pilot and its faculties to the horses, while an *analogy* is used in the *Republic*, where the state is compared with a ship and its governors – with the sailors who try to displace the captain discrediting him, etc. In comparison with analogies, metaphors capture the nature of the object to a greater extend, says the Platonist. Besides, they could

But the region above the heaven was never worthily sung by any earthly poet, nor will it ever be. It is, however, as I shall tell; for I must dare to speak the truth, especially as truth is my theme. For the colorless, formless, and intangible truly existing essence, with which all true knowledge is concerned, holds this region and is visible only to the mind, the pilot of the soul (247 c–d, H. Fowler’s translation).

Having originated in the political context (cf. Aeschylus, *The Seven against Thebes* 1–3 and the *Theognidea* 670–685), the metaphor of the pilot (helmsman) appears in Plato’s dialogues in three contexts. First, it is frequent in the Socratic discussion of the nature of arts (τέχνη); second, the image often undergoes a psychological interpretation, most frequently in combination with the charioteer metaphor¹; and, finally it appears in political and cosmological contexts².

It is remarkable that the metaphors were not readily accepted by everyone and are effectively limited to the Late Platonic tradition. One can hardly determine even a single relevant instance in the Stoic literature, although a limited number of interesting cases can be discerned in Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* 1.270, 2.1–2, 4.897–904, 5.108; 6.140, etc.³

be used as names: we may call soul the pilot, but no one would call the state a ship. Cf. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* 1407 a 14 (the same example).

¹ The first two contexts concern us here to a lesser extent (for details the reader is referred to my earlier work: Afonasin 2013).

Discussions about the nature of mind, soul and their ties with body, on the one hand, and the super-mundane reality, on the other, constitute the long tradition both in metaphysics and psychology and cannot be discussed here as well. Cf. Plato’s *Republic* 332 d–e, 341 c–d, 360 e, 397 e, 551 c; *Theages* 123 b, *Io* 537 c, *Euthydemus* 279 e, *Cratylus* 390 b (with Alcinoos’ *Didaskalikos* 6.11); *Gorgias* 511 c–512 d; *Hippias Minor* 374 e (with Philo Alex., *De praemiis et poenis* 33); *Protagoras* 344 d; *Charmides* 173 c (cf. Apuleus, *Floridae* 23; Clemens Alex., *Stromateis* 1.34.1; 1.44.1; John Chrysostom, *On philosophy* 9); *Timaeus* 89 a.

The metaphor of helmsman is usually traced back to Plato’s *Republic* (488 a) and *Politicus* (296 e), where Socrates compares a good helmsman with the wise philosopher-ruler, while in 298 e and elsewhere the navigational *tekhne* is further compared with medical and musical skills. The image receives an ontological and, in a sense, eschatological, meaning in the *Politicus* 272 e.

² The third context is best illustrated by the famous image of the ship of the fools (*Republic* 488 a–e), while the most complex cosmological and political interpretation is found in Plato’s *Politicus* 272 e ff. and *Critias* 109 b (and later critically accessed by Proclus, *In Tim.* 1, 288.16–23). The concept of an observational tower (*periōpē*) is, for the first time, interpreted here in a metaphysical sense.

Being rethought in some details in the very fragmented works of Numenius (our quotes) and Iamblichus (*De myst.* 3.26.163.10, etc.), the metaphor is not forgotten in Late Platonism and is frequently employed by Proclus. The concept of an observational tower (*periōpē*) is among the most favorite Proclan images (*Theol. Plat.* 2.71.20; 5.26.4, 33.12, 65.15, 76.25, 91.5; 6.32.20, etc.), while the *kybernētēs*’ metaphor is found in a number of instances, always in its metaphysical meaning (cf. *Theol. Plat.* 4.22.10, 4.43.1; *In Tim.* 3.334.3–28). The Christian authors also employ these metaphors (cf. Clemens Alex., *Stromateis* 2.51.5–6, 6.79.1; Dionysius Alex, fragments against the Epicureans, ap. Euseb. *Prep. Euang.*; cp. Corpus Areopagiticum, *Div. Nom.* 3.1., 680c).

On the contrary, already in his *De anima* 413a, in the context of a discussion of the question of inseparability of the individual soul from the body, Aristotle doubts “whether the soul is an entelechy of the body as a sailor (*plōtēr*) is to the ship.” According to his commentator Alexander of Aphrodisia (*De anima* 20.29) the ‘helmsman’ should be symbolically understood as referred to a special sort of *tekhne*, appropriate to the highest part of the soul alone, which as a wise governor determines the course and saves the whole organism from the external perils, or like a skillful physician anticipates and prevents all the external and internal threats to the health (cf. John Philoponus, *De anima* 224.10–255.31). The question is further developed in Plotinus (25 [*Enn.* 4.3] 17–21, 53 [*Enn.* 1.1] 3, etc.), Porphyry (*To Gaurus, On how embryos are ensouled* 10.4–6), who distinguish between the soul proper (which could be taken equivalent to Aristotle’s entelechy) and the souls contaminated with the body not unlike the helmsman and his ship, and Iamblichus, *De anima*, frs. 10, 16, 33 Dillon–Finamore.

³ Cf. also Galen, *The art of medicine* 10.5; *On my own books*, v. XIX, p. 33.5 Kühn.

The idea of heavenly traveler and the metaphors of a charioteer / horseman and a pilot / helmsman behind it are quite widespread, and all traditional cultures and mythologies adopt them in some form. I was not able to identify a relevant counterexample. An informed reader would probably advise me. The heavenly pilot is a very ancient image, and the charioteer has probably supplemented it at a later stage, when the Hittites, Arians, the Mycenaean Greeks and other peoples started to use chariots sometime in the beginning of the second millennium BCE¹. The Celtic peoples of the Bronze Age did not use the chariots, but the Southern Gauls knew them from the ancient times as numerous burials and petroglyphs attest².

II

I will start with an *ekphrasis*. Look at unusual Celtic coins struck in Normandy c. 100 BCE, showing a model ship as the victor's prize in a chariot race (Fig. 1).

What these pictures mean? Who are these strange charioteers, are they gods, warriors or maybe sportsmen? Why the model ships are displayed as their trophies or, respectively, prizes? Surfing through various internet collections of coins I was fortunate, as it seems, to come across a possible prototype of this strange and otherwise incomprehensible image – a very rare gold quarter *stater*, recently found by chance near Ringwould, Kent (Fig. 2)³.

The coin was struck c. 250–225 BCE in the Somme valley, northern France, but the head of Apollo with a lyre and a bow (?) hidden in his curly hair, displayed on the one side of the coin, proves beyond any doubts that it was designed by a local master on the basis of a gold *stater* of Philipp II of Macedon (382–336 BCE)⁴.

¹ Examples include the solar boat of ancient Egyptian deity Ra; the Chinese divine charioteer of the moon Wang Shu and, according to one tradition, the female-charioteer of the suns (*pl.*) Hsi Ho (note that *ho* means *harmony*); Krishna as a charioteer of Arjuna in the classical Indian treatise *Bhagavad-Gita* ('the builder of this world,' 9.17; 'the universal source,' 10.8; which 'contains in itself the seed of the great Brahma,' 14.3; a navigational metaphor is also present in the form of the ship of knowledge (*jñāna plavana*); cf. Serebryany 1999, 184 f.).

For the purposes of this article especially interesting is the famous "Trundholm sun chariot," a statue of a horse with a large bronze disk, discovered in Denmark, but probably of a Danubian origin, variously dated to the 16th–14th centuries BCE; cf. Skinfaxi, a horse of the chariot of Dagda, the god of daylight, and Hrímfaxi, a horse of night and also Alsvíð and Arvakur, the horses driving the chariot of the sun-goddess in Norse mythology. Cf. Lindow 2001, 272 and <http://web.comhem.se/vikingbronze/sunchariot.htm>.

Cf. also Mir-Susne-Hum, a heavenly traveler of Ugric (esp. Mansi) peoples; the Korean Sondolsin, a ferryman and wind spirit; various Greek charioteers, Myrtilus, Oenomaus, Taraxippus, etc. Open a mythological dictionary and the list will quickly expand.

² The fragments of chariots are frequently found in many ancient burials from China to Western Europe. For a recent example and related literature cf. Polos'mak 2011, 77 f.; specifically, for the Celts cf. Piggot 1992, 203 f.

³ The source of information: <http://www.coinsweekly.com/en/Archive/8?&id=49&type=n>. Another specimen of this coin is kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

⁴ The Macedonian coins were probably introduced to the region by the Celtic mercenaries. Local and international merchants also played their role in this process. The gold *stater* of Philipp II of Macedon suffered the most remarkable transformation. The head of Apollo on the obverse of the coins was preserved intact (only the monogram AP was replaced with a trident, bowl or a lyre), while a depiction of Phillip of Macedon riding a *biga* on the reverse was gradually replaced with such images, as a satyr, Centaurus, horses

What captures our attention however is a long-haired Celtic deity depicted on the other side of this small (13 mm) coin. Driving his sky-chariot, this god holds a huge hammer in his right hand. A big bee is depicted before the horse's snout. In the Celtic mythology this creature is known to link the world of god and the world of the spirits and to bring the divine wisdom of the underworld to peoples. Besides, honey is used to produce mead. This two attributes – the hammer and bee – remind of Sucellos, the Celtic god of agriculture, underworld and alcoholic drink, the “good striker,” usually depicted with a hammer (or sometimes a beer barrel on a stick) in one hand and a cup in another. Other possible parallels include the Roman Silvanus (identified with Sucellos in some ancient inscriptions), the Irish Dagda with his magic club and harp, the Celtic Taranis / Jupiter (Fig. 3, Obernburg am Main), often depicted with a wheel and thunderbolt, and even the Etruscan demon of the underworld Harun (Fig. 4, a vase from Vulci, ca. 300 BCE, a fragment), but a study in comparative mythology is certainly not our purpose. Another feature – the chariot – is less clearly identified in this context and could be an artistic invention (although Taranis was clearly associated with the solar cross or sun chariot). We will return to this image in a moment.

One can recollect a story about Plato's miraculous birth, told by Olympiodorus in his *Life of Plato*. Having based himself on the authority of Speusippus (Plato's heir), the Neoplatonic philosopher suggests that the real father of Plato was Apollo. When Plato was born his parents took him to the mount Hymettus, intending to make sacrifice to Pan, the Nymphs and, above all, Apollo, “the one who presides over shepherds.” “But while he was lying there, bees came and filled his mouth with honey from the comb, in order that it might be said truly of him – ‘From his mouth flow'd a voice than honey far more sweet’ (Homer, *Ilias* 1.249)” (H.G. Bohn's translation). One may also recollect the very beginning of the *Meno*, where Socrates compares the ‘swarm of virtues’ with bees.

III

It is this image of divine charioteer, as it seems, that another Celtic master (c. 100 BCE, also from Normandy) took as a prototype. The head of Apollo is preserved on the obverse¹, but on the reverse of the coin a typologically similar divine charioteer holds – instead of a hammer – a model of a ship (Fig. 1 and, for more details, Fig. 5).

Having merged two favorite Platonic metaphors in a single image, the unknown author of this composition hardly pursued the philosophic goals.

with solar symbols and wheels, even a naked horsewoman, or, as in our case, a deity with a hammer (for details cf. Birkhan 1997, 412 ff.).

¹ Although, instead of a lyre and a bow hidden in his hair, Apollo is crowned in this case with a wreath. By the way, here we see an unexpected instance of a Heraclitean image, fr. 27 Marcovich /51 DK: “palintropos harmoniē hokōper toxou kai lyrēs (an attunement [“harmony”] of a lyre and a bow, turning back on itself).” For interpretation cf. Afonasinia 2012, 70.

General artistic and, as we will see in a moment, more practical considerations are more likely to play decisive role here. But still, it is fascinating to observe how an unknown artist independently follows the steps of the Greek philosopher in his reinterpreting of a complicated mythological image in a political sense. A ship or a boat is admittedly a more or less common image, and in the Celtic mythology it is associated, in the manner of the boat of the Etruscan Harun (also depicted, as we have seen, with a hammer), with the process of transition to the underworld. A working hypothesis therefor could be that the image of a bee, also a conductor to the underworld, is simply replaced by the artist with an image of a ship, as if the divine traveler drives under sky at days and sails away and sinks below the horizon at nights. Still, a depiction of the divine charioteer (be he Sucellos or some other deity) as a victorious sportsman at the chariot race, who for some reasons won a model of a ship as his price, appears to be a strange idea. By the way there must be two horses (the charioteer steers a *biga*). The second is lacking due to space restriction. Besides, the sword, placed below the chariot, could indicate that the charioteer is a warrior rather than a sportsman.

The ships, navigation skills and the military tactics of the Gauls are described by Julius Cesar, who successfully fought them in 55–56 BCE. In his *De bello Gallica* 3.12 ff. he witnesses that the Celts defended the coast with numerous ships from the sea, while the charioteers and the horsemen swiftly attacked the landed troops. This alone could explain the rationale behind the image, but an ingenious interpretation, for the first time suggested by Detlev Ellmers [Ellmers 1996, 68–69] looks more attractive. Having noticed the historical value of the pictures on the coins as the oldest evidence of Celtic seagoing ships, he suggests to interpret this image as a ‘deliberate propaganda measure, as the inhabitant of the coastal regions demonstrated thereby that they were capable of defending themselves against attack from the sea’ [Ellmers 1996, 68–69]. The sea route from Cornwall to the Seine, along the coast of Normandy, was strategically and economically important from Antiquity and used, among others, by the tin-bearing ships. The inhabitants of the coastal regions profited from this trade, while the through-traffic and relatively rich coastal settlements, as usually, attracted pirates. Apparently the pirates used a similar tactics: they blocked the sea-routes in the Channel and assaulted the settlements from the sea. To protect themselves the coastal inhabitants built observation towers. The onlookers quickly warned the defensive forces, which protected the coast from the land and followed pirates on fast seagoing ships. Combined efforts of defensive and offensive troops acting at land and sea proved to be effective, as it seems. There is quite reasonable to suppose, with Ellmers, that this special coin was issued as a gesture of propaganda, designed to show the coastal inhabitants that they are protected at sea and land, and to merchants that the passage through the Channel is safe.

The images on the coins could thus be perceived by the contemporaries from at least two different perspectives. It could be, indeed, understood as

a piece of political propaganda. In the manner of contemporary eurocents, the obverse of the coins was more or less identical, while the reverse adorned with specific national motifs. But, taken differently, it could be seen as an example of ingenious interpretation of a mythological image, possibly influenced by philosophical literature, current in the Greco-Roman civilization.

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5