

## SHIELDS IN NORTH BRITAIN IN THE IRON AGE

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Many of the native shields in the Iron Age in North Britain must have been made of wood or of wood and leather and, except in those few cases where the shield board was provided with metal fittings, there are no surviving remains of the shields themselves. The evidence, such as it is, is provided almost entirely by Roman representations of their defeated adversaries, or by portrayals of Celtic warrior gods by native craftsmen. This may be supplemented by examining shields from other areas, but it will become increasingly clear that the picture of the warrior's shield suggested here is a rather tentative one, and relies on different classes of evidence, sometimes susceptible of interpretation in several ways. The region discussed here falls north of a line from the mouth of the Humber to the Mersey and follows the area studied by Dr Morna Simpson in her recent thesis on Celtic Metalwork; this paper may form a useful footnote to her fuller study of 'Weapons and Defensive Armour'.<sup>1</sup>

Those Iron Age shields destined for the battlefield rather than for parade may be divided into three main groups depending on their type of boss. Little is known, however, about the shape of the shield board, that is the planking base to which the boss was attached, but by analogy with continental shields long, oval or hexagonal boards are normally assumed, although for some round bosses targe-like boards are also a possibility. The shield was held by a hand-grip, normally inserted into a hole cut through the planking, and the main purpose of the boss is to cover this aperture from the front and provide a protected hollow for the hand. The use of a central, normally horizontal hand-grip is found throughout the Celtic world and may be contrasted with the use of a central arm-band and a hand-grip at the rim, which is, perhaps, a more practical system.

Of the three boss types (Fig. 1, 1-3, shown here on conventional long oval boards), the simplest is the wooden mid-rib or spina with a hollow central expansion which covers the hand-grip hole. On the second type this rib is further protected by a metal strip. Shields of the third group are provided with a circular metal boss, normally nailed on to the planking of the board by means of a side flange. Although the simple shield with only a mid-rib may pre-date the spina and strip-boss type on the continent, the British shields stand apart from the continental examples because of the frequent addition of

elaborate bronze decoration, and it is not possible to claim that a simple typological sequence in Britain has any chronological validity.

At least one example of a shield with a simple mid-rib is known from the North, namely that shown on the grave stele of a Roman auxiliary from Ribchester (Lancashire).<sup>2</sup> It seems to have been carved with some care, and the long oval shape, characteristic of continental Celtic shields, and the spina with central expansion are clearly shown. On stylistic grounds Toynbee has suggested a date not later than Trajan for the execution of this piece. The defeated barbarian portrayed on the auxiliary stele from Hexham (Northumberland) also appears to have an oval shield, but no further details are visible.<sup>3</sup>

The warrior burial at Grimthorpe (E. Riding, Yorkshire) was accompanied by a shield of this simple mid-rib type, but the rib had been decorated with a bronze covering, the central expansion finished with an oval bronze cap, and on either side of the centre of the rib a crescentic plaque of thin bronze was nailed. The burial found in 1868, has recently been re-examined by Stead, but, as this appears to be the only Iron Age shield in the North, which is fully documented, the finds may be reviewed yet again.<sup>4</sup> The crouched inhumation had been deposited in an oval grave some 1.37 m in length and dug to a depth of 1.22 m into the chalk subsoil. Lying on the breast of a young man were the three bronze ornamental pieces of the shield, and underneath these was a considerable quantity of iron oxide in the form of a rusty substance and a quantity of decayed wood and leather. The excavator suggested that these were the remains of 'some portion of the inner side of the shield'<sup>5</sup> and it is possible that not only had there been a wooden planking to the shield but that this had been covered with leather before the addition of the bronze decorative plaques. The two bronze half-tubes, which had covered the spina, were found at the head and at the knees of the skeleton, but as the body was crouched, this is less useful in indicating the length of the shield than might at first appear. These various components do, however, appear to be in correct relationship to one another, and thus the position in the grave of the bronze ornamental disc, which Stead has suggested may have formed part of the shield, is crucial. The disc and two small bronze studs, each about 13 mm in diameter, were found 'about the chest and shoulders' of the body. This is perhaps too close to the centre of the shield to support Hemp's notion that the disc was originally at the outer tip of the central spina<sup>6</sup>; indeed the discovery of such studs at the chest and shoulders of the warrior might suggest that they decorated a tunic or cuirasse.

The other weapons in the grave included an iron sword with bronze scabbard-fittings and an iron spearhead at the left side of the skeleton, under the shield.

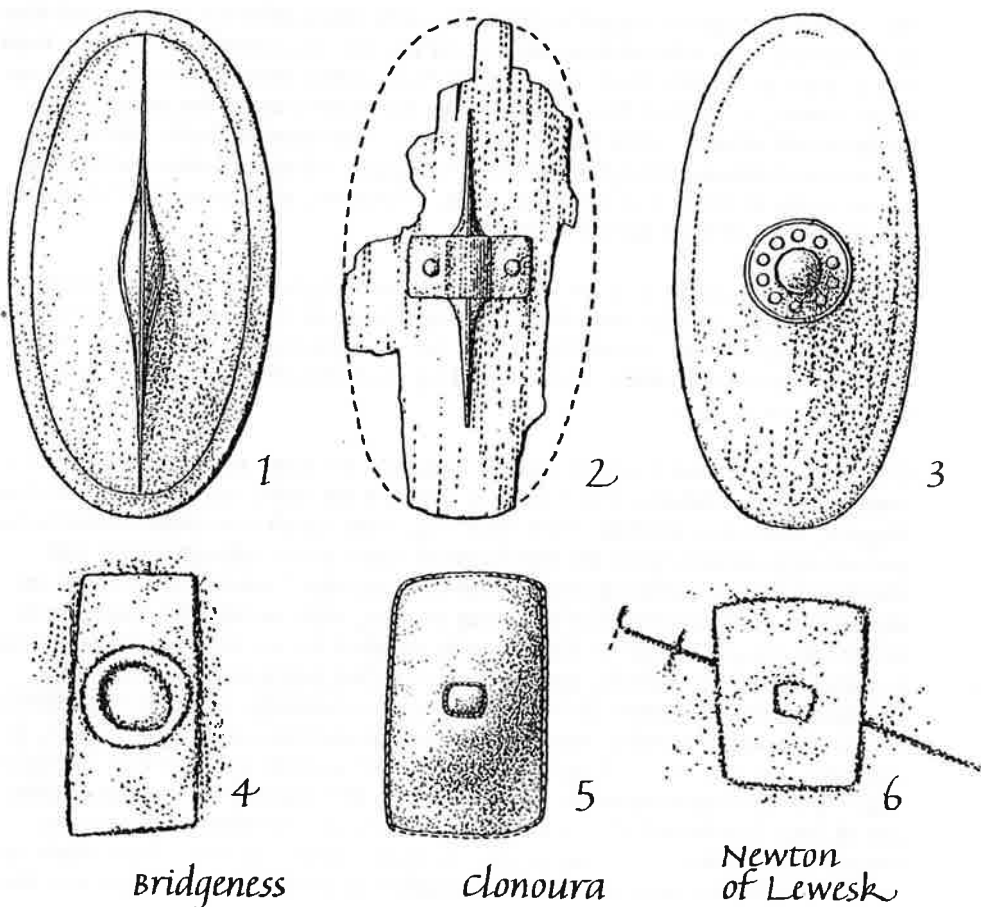


Figure 1, 1-3, Basic Celtic Shield Types; 1, oval shield with binding strip and spina, based on representation from Pergamon, Waffen-und Kostlmkunde, vii (1965), fig. 49; 2, oval shield with spina and strip boss, La Tène (Neuchatel), Vouga, P., La Tène, 1923, pl. xvii; 3, oval shield with round boss, based on statue from Vachères (Basses-Alpes), Revue Archéologique, xxii (1893), 270, pl. xix;

4-6, Rectangular shields; 4, Bridgeness (West Lothian); 5, Clonoura (Co. Tipperary); 6, Newton of Lewesk (Aberdeenshire); sources in notes 11, 16, and 19 respectively.

Nos. 2 and 5 are approx. to same scale.

The illustrations have kindly been drawn by Mr I.G. Scott.

The sword belongs to Piggott's group III, and, along with the ornamental disc, provides the best indication of the date of the burial, probably within the first half of the 1st century B.C. Six or eight bone points were found along the top of the burial, a further line of points was discovered along the length of the skeleton and others within the filling. There were sixteen in all, and it has sometimes been suggested that these are toggles which fastened a wrapping in which the warrior was interred. It is, of course, also possible that they are the heads of light spears or darts.

There are no examples in the North of the second group of shields (that is, those with mid-rib and strip-boss), though they are represented, sometimes in elaborated forms, outside the area, for example by the Tal-y-llyn, Moel Hiraddug and Stanfordsbury shields, dating approximately to the first half of the 1st century A.D.

Circular or rounded bosses form the final and the most tentative part of this study, and the evidence about them is perhaps the least satisfactory. Professor Piggott, however, published two iron fragments which have some claim to be part of such shields from the Carlingwark Loch (Kirkcudbrightshire) and Blackburn Mill (Berwickshire) hoards respectively.<sup>7</sup> Among the finds from the former site is a circular mounting of iron, with an internal diameter of about 100 mm; this may be the flange by which a domed boss might be attached to the planking of a shield, and three of the rivet holes still survive. The fragment from Blackburn Mill is even more tantalising, although it is difficult to see it as anything other than a boss; its dimensions are 166 by 77 mm. It consists of a part of the flange of the boss with a rivet hole towards the outer edge, and the beginning of the central dome. The objects from these hoards are of both Roman and native origins, and it is not possible to assign the bosses with confidence to one source or to the other; as none of the other fragments of weapons need be of Roman origin it is perhaps more likely that the shield bosses are of native manufacture.

Two iron fragments from the excavations at Traprain Law (East Lothian) have been described as the rib of a shield and part of a shield boss respectively.<sup>8</sup> The former is a very small iron rib and, as there appear to be no parallels for this from native sources, the attribution is rather uncertain. The second fragment (56 by 29 mm) represents a portion of a domed boss with part of the flange (10 mm broad) by which it has been attached to the shield board. There are no rivet holes in the surviving part of the flange.

The Roman prototypes are well known, and it is possible that the native armourers may have copied the weapons of their adversaries. The round

shield boss may, on the other hand, belong to the series of Belgic influences or imports isolated by Dr Simpson which appear in Lowland Scotland from the early to mid 1st century A.D.<sup>9</sup> The Snailwell burial in Norfolk, itself dating to the first half of the 1st century A.D., contained an iron boss of this type, 145 mm in diameter and 102 mm in height, though the shape of the shield is not known.<sup>10</sup> As there are no holes in the flange of the boss it must be assumed that it was attached to the board by broad-headed rivets, nailed outside the flange with their heads overlapping it.

It is possible that two of the distance-slabs from the Antonine Wall depict the type of native shield to which such fragments may originally have belonged. The distance-slab from Bridgeness (West Lothian) is the better known but only the scene to the left of the inscription need concern us.<sup>11</sup> A Roman cavalry-man armed with spear, shield and helmet rides over a group of four naked barbarians, one of whom has been speared in the back, another has already been decapitated (though there is still what may be a torc at his neck) and a third is defenceless. The fourth barbarian is armed with a small rectangular shield, with a central circular boss with a surrounding flange, by which it has been fixed to the planking (Fig. 1, 4). A second such shield with a circular boss is also shown, as well as a sword, with pommel and hilt-guard and a spear. It is sometimes suggested that this scene represents the campaigning preparatory to the building of the Wall, and it seems possible that the weapons of the barbarians have been depicted with some degree of accuracy and may in fact reflect the native weapons of the campaign.

The other Antonine wall distance-slab, showing natives with their weapons, was found near Summerston (Lanarkshire) in or before 1694.<sup>12</sup> The central inscription commemorates the building of that section of the wall by the Second Legion Augusta and on either side of it there is a sculptured panel; to the left a winged victory crowns a helmeted horseman who thrusts down with his spear at two naked captives with their hands tied behind their backs. Between them are two rectangular shields with round bosses (rather eccentric to their vertical centres) and two swords are also shown, one below the shields and the other beside the left captive; the pommels of both swords and hilt-guard of one are still visible. The 'standard' mentioned by Macdonald may perhaps represent crossed or broken spears. On the right panel below an eagle and capricorn there is another naked captive, also with his hands tied behind his back; behind his left shoulder a rectangular shield with round boss is clearly shown.

It seems likely that these two slabs contain accurate representations of the wooden or wood and leather shields with round bosses of the native warriors

of the mid-2nd century A.D. and might appear to be useful confirmation for the two fragmentary bosses mentioned previously.

The votive plaques or small pieces of sculpture showing deities who may with some confidence be ascribed to the Celtic pantheon form a small group of contemporary illustrations of Celtic weaponry. Of third century date are the Coccidius plaque from Bewcastle (Cumberland)<sup>13</sup> and the mould for an appliqué figure of Taranis from Corbridge (Northumberland)<sup>14</sup>; a piece of less certain date, which shows a horned warrior-god, comes from the region of Maryport (Cumberland)<sup>15</sup>. The silver plaque from Bewcastle shows the god standing in an archway, holding a spear in his right hand, while with his left he supports a rectangular shield which has a round central boss. On a second embossed plaque the god is represented in a most schematic fashion and holds only a spear. A figure which has attracted much attention is that produced by the mould found at Corbridge depicting the god Taranis; this bearded Celtic deity, wearing a short tunic and a knobbed helmet with what may be a cheek piece, carries a gnarled club in his left hand a rectangular shield in his right. In the centre there is a circular boss with its flange clearly shown. The shield board is covered with a pounced design of circles with dots in the centre, a convention sometimes employed in Celtic sculpture to indicate leather. A curved piece of decoration using the left side of the shield as the arc of a circle covers much of the front of the planking. A final representation of this type comes from the region of Maryport (Cumberland) and is now in the Netherhall collection. A naked Celtic deity of horned-god type is shown holding a knob-butted spear and a rectangular shield with a round boss; although similar to the other examples this piece is not otherwise very informative.

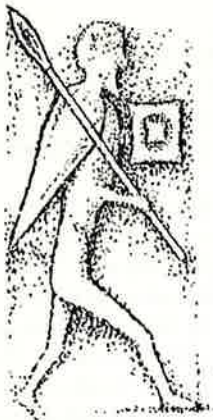
An important find from Ireland complements our knowledge of such rectangular shields and provides new evidence of the shape and construction of the shields of the earlier centuries A.D. This is the leather-covered wooden shield found upright in Littleton Bog, Clonoura Townland (Co. Tipperary), and it owes its preservation to its deposit, or loss, in the peat moss.<sup>16</sup> The shield measures 570 mm by 350 mm, and the boss is 95 by 80 mm and stands 25 mm above the outer face; the grip is 111 mm long (Fig. 1, 5). It presents a slightly convex front rectangular in shape with rounded corners, and the oval boss is centrally situated. The back is concave and the grip across the cavity of the boss remains in position. The board and the boss are of alder wood, while the grip and its pinnings are of oak; the boss and its individual leather cap are fixed to the planking by a heavy stitching. The front is covered by a single piece of leather, the slashing testifying perhaps to its battle honours, and the back of the shield is also covered by a single piece of leather, carefully cut to fold into the back of the boss and to cover and fold round the grip itself. A binding

strip of leather stitched through prepared holes in the wood holds the leather coverings together. The shield board is made from at least two planks of wood and the boss, made separately, was stitched on at the same time as was its leather cover, the stitching thus passing through the leather and the wood.

The hand-grip had to be sprung into two small blocks of wood one inserted at either side of the boss into the shield, and they themselves were kept in position by narrow strips of wood fitted to the shield board. There is some difference of opinion on the date of the shield; Etienne Rynne, to whom the writer is indebted for information additional to the published account, has suggested that the shield belongs to the 1st or 2nd centuries B.C. because of the similarity of shape and the method of fixing the hand-grip to shields discovered in the deposit at Hjortspring on the Danish island of Als.<sup>17</sup> Most of the Hjortspring bosses appear to be spindle-shaped rather than rounded and the general similarities might be less helpful in providing a chronological parallel for the Clonoura piece. A date within the first two or three centuries A.D. had also been suggested because of the similarity to Roman shields. The Clonoura shield is surely close enough in shape to the representations of native shields discussed above, and dating to the 2nd and 3rd century A.D., to suggest that a similar method of manufacture might have been employed for these.

Rectangular shields seem to have continued in use in Scotland into the Pictish period and perhaps to the early 9th century A.D. This may be illustrated not only by the small warrior representations isolated by Mrs Curle in 1939 as 'David the Warrior' whose rectangular and notched shields contrast so markedly with the normal round shields with round bosses of Pictish art,<sup>18</sup> but also by the symbol stone from Newton of Lewesk, Rayne (Aberdeenshire), found in 1914.<sup>19</sup> The symbols include the double crescent, a disc, a divided rectangle and what seems to be a rectangular shield with an oval boss, with perhaps a spear behind it (Fig. 1, 6). This symbol is admittedly unique in the repertoire of the Class I stones, but if any measure of Iron Age background is allowed for such symbols and the recognition of actual objects accepted, it seems fair to suggest that a shield of Bridgeness/Clonoura type is represented here. The slightly oval boss is particularly close to the Irish example.

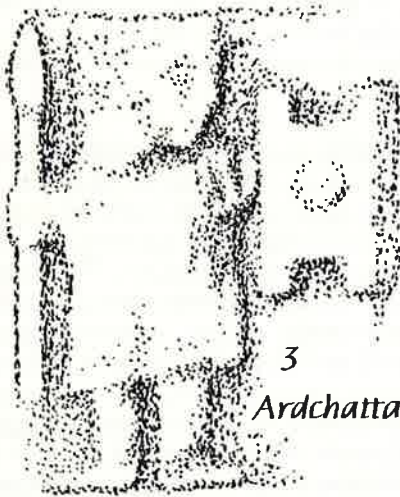
More elaborate and more certain shields can also be found on the stones, but, because of the amount of non-Celtic material portrayed and the likelihood that many scenes do not represent original Pictish compositions, it is dangerous to be too dogmatic about the nationality of the warriors on the Eassie and Kirriemuir stones in Angus (Fig. 2). On both the Eassie and Kirriemuir stones smallish rectangular shields with traces of the binding and round central boss



1 Eassie



2 Kirriemuir



3  
Ardchattan



4  
St.  
Andrews

Figure 2, 1-4, Warriors with Rectangular Shields in Pictish and Early Christian Art; 1, Eassie (Angus); 2, Kirriemuir (Angus); 3, Ardchattan (Argyll); 4, St Andrews sarcophagus (Fife). The figures are shown approx. to a uniform size and are drawn from rubbings and photographs by Mr I.G. Scott and the writer.

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are visible. It has been suggested that the notched shields shown on the Ardchattan stone (Argyll) and the St Andrews sarcophagus (Fife) are local types related to those discussed above, but a psalter or other manuscript source for these may yet be found. The suspicion that some of these rectangular examples are fist shields rather than larger areas of planking affording protection to a greater part of the body might suggest either a change in battle tactics or that such shields are for close combat between two champions, illustrated perhaps by the stone from Shandwick (Ross-shire).<sup>20</sup>

It may be argued that the evidence has been presented from one side only and that in fact Grimthorpe is the only certain example of a Celtic shield from North Britain. It might be suggested that, if the Blackburn Mill and Carlingwark fragments are parts of shields, they are Roman pieces, that the Roman sculptors or Celtic artists may have made no attempt to portray the weapons of the barbarians or the warrior gods with any accuracy. Such criticism is of course unanswerable, but the similarities between the Bridgeness, Clonoura and Newton of Lewesk shields do seem to suggest that there may be some truth in the suggestion put forward here, that the native shield in the North comprised a rectangular board with a round or rounded central boss. The problem of the origin of this type of shield in the North remains, however, unsolved, for the round boss may be found in both native and Roman contexts. The rectangular board, on the other hand, may in Britain be paralleled only by the Roman scutum; the native shields were smaller than the Roman original and perhaps only slightly convex, like the Clonoura example. It is perhaps most likely, therefore, that the native armourers adopted both the board and boss shape from Roman shields during the first few centuries A.D.

### Notes

1. Simpson, M., Celtic Art in North Britain before 400 A.D. (unpublished thesis presented to Edinburgh University, 1966), Chap. 4.
2. Toynbee, J.M.C., Art in Roman Britain (1964), 192
3. Collingwood, R.G. and Wright, R.P., The Roman Inscriptions of Britain, i (1965), 386, No.1172, pl. xvii.
4. P.P.S., xxxiv (1968), 166 ff., figs. 11-16.
5. Mortimer, J.R., Forty Years' Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds of East Yorkshire (1905), 105. Fragments either of spina covers or shield bindings have also been recorded in Yorkshire at Eastburn, North Grimston and Stanwick, Stead, The La Tène Cultures of East Yorkshire (1965), 119 and P.P.S., xxviii (1962), 52, No.134. Yorkshire finds

which are doubtful or are not parts of shields have been recorded from Bugthorpe, Charioteer's Barrow, Arras and Hunmanby, Stead, op. cit., 69, 36 f., 94 f.; Stanwick, P.P.S., xxviii (1962), 33, No.105.

6. Arch. Camb., vii (1928), fig.11.
7. P.S.A.S., lxxxvii (1952-53), 11 f., 37, 47, Nos.C.38 and B.30.
8. Ibid., lxxxix (1955-56), 200, Nos.381 and 382.
9. Simpson, op. cit., pp. 438 ff.
10. Proc. Camb. Ant. Soc., xlvii (1954), 32, pl.v.
11. Macdonald, G., The Roman Wall in Scotland (1934), 362 ff., pl.iii, 2.
12. Ibid., 373 ff., pl.lxiv, 1; Dr A.S. Robertson of the Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow, kindly provided new photographs of these figures.
13. Ross, A., Pagan Celtic Britain (1967), 51 pl.51b.
14. Ibid., 196, pl.65a.
15. Ibid., 156, pl.49a.
16. J.R.S.A.I., xcii (1962), 152, pl.xvii.
17. Nordiske Fortidsminder, iii (1937-43), 48 ff., figs.26-32.
18. P.S.A.S., lxxiv (1939-40), 104, fig. 14.
19. Ibid., 65n., pl.xxi, a; Ibid., 1 (1915-16), 279 ff., fig.4.
20. Allen, J.R., Early Christian Monuments of Scotland (1903), 68 ff., fig. 69.