CHARIOTS: SPEED, POWER AND JOURNEYS TO THE AFTERLIFE

Introduction

During his second attempt to conquer Britain in 54 BC, Julius Caesar mentions that after a series of violent skirmishes, the local chief Cassivellaunos was left with 'only' 4000 charioteers. Though Caesar may have exaggerated the number of his enemies it suggests that this vehicle was a vital part of Iron Age life in Britain between 400 BC–100 AD, continuing well into the early Roman occupation of the island. Developing from late Bronze Age four-wheeled carts and wagons, and with half a millennium of experienced horse-riding under their belts, Iron Age people embraced the intoxicating mix of speed and beauty embodied in the two-wheeled, horse-drawn open chariot.

The technology may have been developed either on the Eurasian Steppes or the Near East, but it spread quickly: Linear B texts from Mycenean Greece, Egyptian wall paintings, Assyrian reliefs, Indus valley miniature models and chariot burials from China, all attest to the captivating power of this vehicle for many civilisations. Some developed it as a vehicle of war but for many, it was a prestigious mode of transport and procession. Tutankhamun was buried with no less than five chariots of differing size, fittings and purpose! Yet for the Romans, this was a vehicle of sport, embodied in the dangerous and daring spectacle of chariot racing. Caesar himself writes of the disconcerting effect of being set-upon by the British chariots as his troops moved further inland: his soldiers were dismayed by the hurling of spears from moving vehicles during their short, darting raids. More than one hundred years later, Tacitus' *Agricola*, also records the intimidating din of these vehicles before the Battle of Mons Graupius. So what were they really like and why were they so important?

The technology of the chariot

Whilst chariot-gear is found throughout much of Britain and Ireland, our best insights into the appearance of these vehicles comes from the 21 published chariot burials of East and North Yorkshire, dating to the late 3rd-2nd centuries BC, augmented by the earliest known example from Newbridge, near Edinburgh, from the 5th century BC. In some of these burials (Newbridge, Ferry Fryston, Cawthorn Camps and Pexton Moor) the chariot was wheeled into the grave pit whole, allowing us to see all of the technical elements in association. In other cases (Wetwang Slack, Wetwang Village, Kirkburn) the chariot was disassembled before it was placed in the grave. In all of these examples, the wooden infrastructure which formed the basis of the vehicle has long-since decayed, leaving mere stains in the soil. Yet rare fragments of preserved chariot components from wetland sites such as Glastonbury also help us piece together a general picture of the way the chariot worked.

The two wheels were usually between 70–90 cm diameter: 12-spoked, single-felloe piece constructions (meaning that the spokes ran from a central stock into sockets on the inner edge of the wheel, which was fashioned from a single piece of wood, bent into a hoop). Iron **tyres** were heat-shrunk onto the wooden wheels, clamping the construction into a tightly bound and robust frame. The central **stocks** were often decorated internally and externally with bronze or iron **nave bands** (two per wheel), and the stocks were conjoined to either end of the axle bar. The wheels were held onto the stock by **linch pins** made of iron or bronze, sometimes tied off against a washer by a miniature **terret** or ring. Some of their terminals are humorously fashioned into the shape of an upraised horse's hoof whilst the heads of the lynch pins can be exquisitely decorated with La Tène art. The **pole shaft** which ran between the two ponies was joined to the axle at right angles, forming a 'T' shape. The **yoke** was fixed to the other end of this pole, to sit across the shoulders of the two ponies: rare organic stains at Ferry Fryston suggest it may have been padded. Onto this yoke were fixed four or five **terrets** also known as **rein-rings** through which the reins ran from the driver's hands to either side of the ponies' heads. They

were made of bronze or iron, or composites of the two, and were often decorated with 'lip' mouldings, or finished with coral or red enamel studs. The central terret was the largest and may have helped secure the yoke to the pole shaft, but experimental work suggests that it might also be used to secure a bearing-rein that joined the ponies' heads together, so that they turned in a synchronised manner. (A charioteer could also loop their reins around this central terret, after dismounting, and tie them tight to hold the ponies stationary – this might be another use for the enigmatic **horn-cap** often linked with chariot gear but never found *in situ*). Iron or bronze **snaffle bits** ran through the horse's mouth, joined to the leather-work of the harness. The complex arrangement of head-gear and reins were joined by small **strap unions**.

Most of the timber used in these chariots appears to be ash (flexible during manufacture and good at absorbing vibration and shock), with occasional use of oak for the stock.

Occasionally we find small iron **clamps** which were used to hold bits of the structure together. Small decorated plaques, discs, sheet-work and terminal fittings suggest some were adorned with further bits of metalwork but they otherwise appear quite plain (if the woodwork was carved or painted, we have lost all trace of this). Their beauty came from small and intricate decoration on the horse gear, mostly abstract La Tène designs which might mimic the movement of horses' hooves, small human faces or bird's beaks. In the later Iron Age and early Roman period, larger horse-gear decorated with red glass or enamel became popular. Other accoutrements found with chariots include a possible **rein-connector** (Ferry Fryston) and fittings from a **whip or goad** (Garton Slack).

Unlike some continental examples (such as Orval) there is no evidence of a primitive suspension system on the British chariots. Instead, the box of the chariot appears to have sat directly on top of the axle, making for a bumpy ride! However, recent experimental chariots such as that made by Robert Hurford with Mike Loades for the **Wetwang Village** reconstruction (commissioned by the BBC and the British Museum) have shown that bent and braced arched box-side frames could be tethered to the frame, from which a woven raw-hide base could be suspended. Inspired by designs on Gaulish coins, this arrangement proves to be stable yet flexible, upon which a more solid 'box' might be fixed for more sedate occasions. Meanwhile, the reconstruction of the **Newbridge chariot** shows a bowfronted example, dramatically covered in beautiful cow hide with feathers topping off the iron terrets: why not? No doubt the ancient Britons took advantage of these organic materials to decorate all manner of objects.

A vehicle of war?

The writings of Caesar and Tacitus talk of the chariot being used to draw up to a battlefield, allowing fighters to make a noisy and intimidating spectacle which caused panic and confusion. Occasionally they were used to ride into the fray, from which 'javelins' (iron or bone tipped spears) were hurled, but often the fighters dismounted to engage their foe by sword, allowing their driver to retreat for a fast get-away should this be necessary! Daring, 'hit-and-run' raids from secluded woodland were also reported by Caesar, to devastating effect. Yet one of the main purposes of the chariot seems to have been to enable the drivers to show off not just their bravery and bravado but skill with their horse-team. Caesar reports that 'even on a steep incline they are able to control their horses at full gallop, and to check and turn them in a moment. The can run along the chariot pole, stand on the yoke, and get back into the chariot as quick as lightening' (*The Conquest of Gaul* Book IV: 33).

Charioteers must have trained with their teams to perform something akin to high-beam martial gymnastics, on a moving vehicle, over uneven terrain!

Power and Procession

Yet some archaeologists have questioned the very use of the word 'chariot' to describe these lightly-built two-wheeled vehicles, preferring to describe them as 'carts'. Certainly they could fulfil a range of other functions, from speeding passage between communities (assisting mobility and trade) to providing a raised platform for performance or oration, whilst also helping to create an impressive arrival and departure for social or ceremonial events. They bestowed height, and thus authority, on those seated within them, and prestige on the drivers who commanded their team. Whether there was a single driver or a charioteer and passenger may have depended on circumstance: both are reported by Caesar and Tacitus. The alluring mix of speed and beauty, and the fusion of people, animals and vehicles with their trappings, was intoxicating.

We find parts of chariots deposited in hillfort pits as small offerings or within larger collections

or assemblages (as at Maiden Castle). At Gussage All Saints, an enclosed farmstead, the clay mould debris from casting suites of chariot fittings attests to a major crafting event, and at Bury Hill, Hampshire – a hillfort with a disproportionately high number of horse remains – the main parts of a chariot may have been put to the torch and deposited in a pit. At Burrough Hill, Leicestershire, a box containing chariot components, a horse-hair comb, knife and billhook could even be interpreted as a chariot maker and mender's offerings.

Journeys to the afterlife

However, it is the chariot burials of Yorkshire and Scotland which have given us our greatest understanding of these vehicles. By the time they were buried, many of these vehicles show evidence of both wear and repair, suggesting they were valued possessions. Yet some have mis-matched wheels, odd nave bands or 'sham' terrets (in the case of Ferry Fryston) suggesting the vehicle was assembled out of spare parts donated by different members of the community, with some purpose-made components for the funeral itself. Only rarely did the ponies go to the grave, as in a new discovery at Pocklington. They are found with men as well as women, suggesting both were accomplished drivers. Yet they are all adults, meaning that this was a prestigious send-off reserved not for wealthy blood-lines but rather older individuals who had accomplished much in their life. Chariot burial 1 from Wetwang Slack was the survivor of a violent sword-fight which took a slice of bone off the side of his head, whereas the Wetwang Village woman had also recovered from a devastating fall and suite of injuries. The Kirkburn charioteer was an incomer to the Wolds but most appear to be local to the region.

Buried with sumptuous horse-gear and pork for the afterlife (instead of the usual mutton), they were sometimes also interred with some of the most exquisite Celtic art objects crafted in Britain: bronze scabbards engraved with scrolling La Tène art, iron sword hilts dripping with red glass inlay (Wetwang Slack 1 and 3), or the earliest example of chainmail (Kirkburn). The enigmatic iron mirrors often found with women, apparently hidden in boxes or bags, might not be the mundane objects of vanity we suppose: their polished iron plates would never have accurately reflected the face, showing instead a shadowy world of light and dark, which might instead have been interpreted as a vision of the world of ancestors or spirits. Catoptromancy – divination with mirrors – was well-known within the classical world, and these women may well have been seer-figures: empowered to look into the past or future.

In these examples, the inclusion of the chariot might have been a gesture of honour for a revered or even feared figure: a leader of renown and achievement, who had used the vehicle to convey both their might and power in life. In the burial, it became first a hearse and then a coffin: part of the dramatic spectacle that made their send-off memorable to the community. Yet perhaps there was a deeper symbolism here, of the chariot as a vehicle for their journey to the afterlife: equipping them for a speedy and successful departure. At such moments, in the words of the insightful archaeologist Stuart Piggott, it gained a 'sacred, even hallowed' role.

Conclusion

The chariot was both a technological and military marvel and a source of pride and delight to the ancient Britons. Yet it was not merely a vehicle of warfare: it was a status symbol, a means of showing-off wealth and skill, a platform for power, for performance and ceremony: speeding passage in both this world and the next.

Further Reading

Dent, J. 1985. Three cart burials from Wetwang, Yorkshire. *Antiquity* 59 (226) 85–92.
Giles, M. 2012. *A forged glamour: landscape, identity and material culture in the Iron Age*. Oxford: Windgather Press
Piggott, S. 1992. *Wagon, Chariot and Carriage. Symbol and Status in the History of Transport*. London: Thames and Hudson

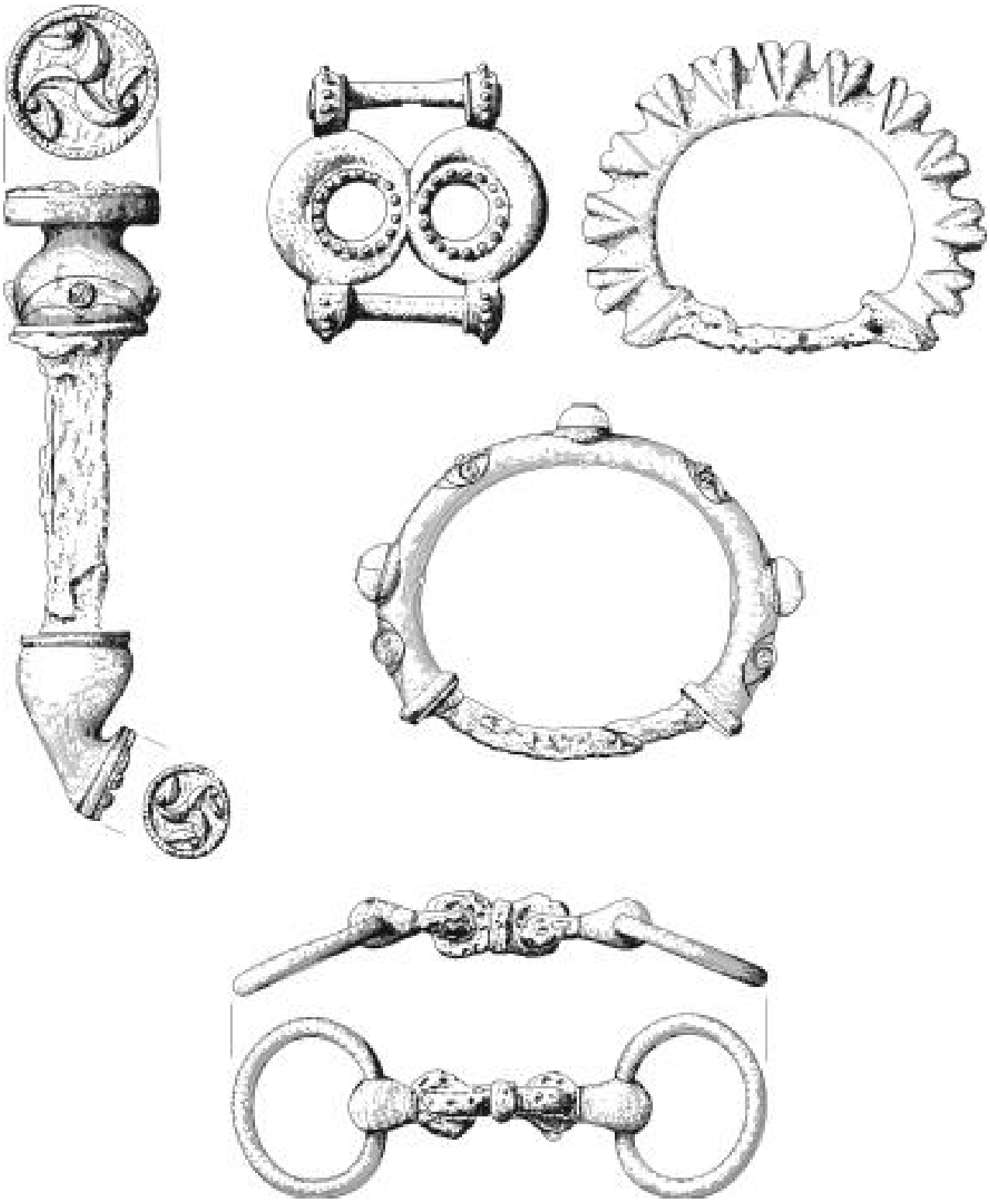

Figure 1. Chariot gear: a linch pin (left), strap union (top middle), terrets (top right and middle) and horse-bit (not to scale).

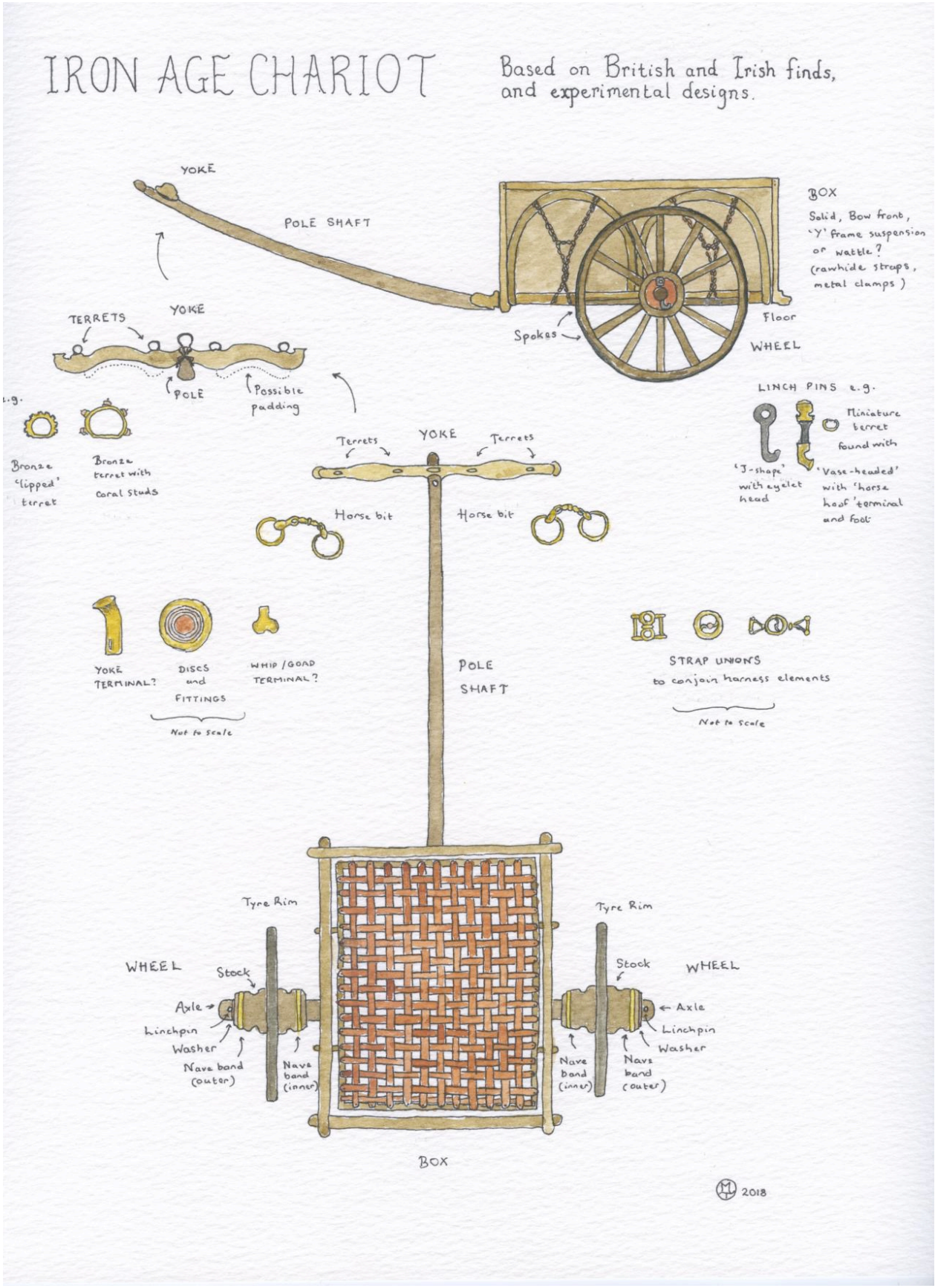

Figure 2. Reconstruction of an Iron Age chariot, showing key components.

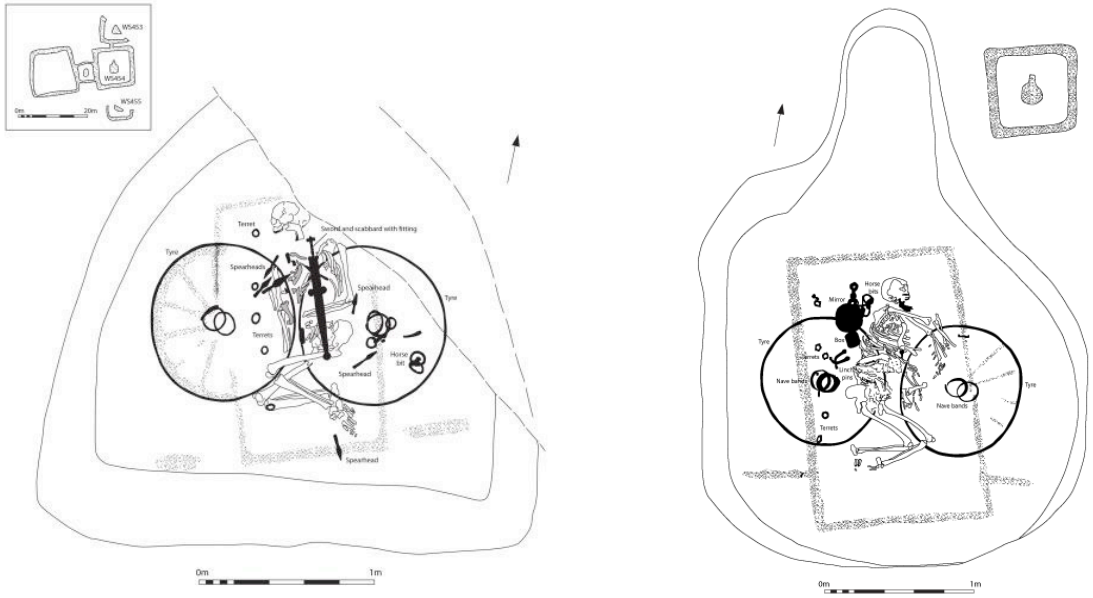

Figure 3. Chariot burial 1 (left) and 2 (right) from Wetwang Slack, East Yorkshire.

Figure 4. Reconstruction of the Wetwang Slack 2 chariot burial.

This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Mel Giles (University of Manchester)

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