

Chariots: Background information for teachers

Burials under square-ditched barrows occur in eastern Yorkshire from about 400 BC. They are an unusual feature of the Iron Age; elsewhere there is virtually no evidence of burials until the appearance of kingdoms in south-eastern England in the century before the Roman invasion of 43 AD. The fact that some of the east Yorkshire burials included a two-wheeled vehicle (presumably for the use of the deceased in the afterlife) makes them even more unusual. The closest similar pattern of burial is found in northern France, so it is unlikely to be coincidental that the name given to the tribes in both these areas by Ptolemy in the first century AD was the Parisii, from which Paris takes its name. It seems that some of the French Parisii migrated and settled in eastern Yorkshire.

Although we cannot be certain that the two-wheeled vehicles were anything more than elaborate carts, the fact that Julius Caesar talks of Britons fighting from chariots, and that those buried with them were armed men, leaves little doubt. Even the one exception, a woman with a fine bronze mirror from Wetwang, eastern Yorkshire, can be paralleled by the Roman historian Cassius Dio's descriptions of Boudicca, queen of the Iceni, riding her chariot at the front of her rebel army. Women, like queen Cartimandua of northern Britain, were powerful figures in Iron Age society who could lead armies into battle.

Survival of the iron hoop tyres that fitted around chariot wheels tells us that these were only about 85 cm in diameter. So, they were not big vehicles. The chariot team were like Exmoor ponies not racehorses. Chariots are usually reconstructed with an open front because Julius Caesar described warriors running along the chariot pole and standing on the yoke between the horses' necks. He did not say whether that was while the chariot was moving or stationary.

Further reading

Cunliffe, B. 2004. *Iron Age Britain*. London: English Heritage

Sealey, R. 1997. *The Boudican Revolt against Rome*. Princes Risborough: Shire Archaeology

Loades, M. 2005. Wetwang: A Chariot Fit for a Queen? Available at:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/archaeology/wetwang/wetwang_chariot_queen_01.shtml

[Newbridge Chariot Burial](#)

[Garton Slack and Ferry Fryston Chariot Burials:](#)

National Curriculum: Prehistory Units

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