

LOOKING AT COSMOLOGY THROUGH THE LENS OF HERMENEUTICS AND SEMANTICS

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The main source for understanding Celtiberian religious ideas is iconography. Unlike many other cultures, the iconography seems to focus on one main motif, the sun. This paper proposes three different iconographic syntaxes, realistic and abstract ones, that were intended to tell the same story, the solar myth. For example, on monochrome pottery, the sun is depicted as a left-facing or right-facing swastika, associated with a horse and an anthropomorphic figure with equine head. Based on structuralist and phenomenological theoretical approaches, and a 3D analysis of the pottery, this paper suggests a cosmogonical interpretation of Celtiberian iconography in which the sun appears as the highest deity. To explain its diurnal motion, radiant circles or right-facing swastikas are used, and circles with no rays and left-facing swastikas for its nocturnal return. The horse figures carry the sun and are in themselves identified with the solar deity. The sun would return through an aquatic sphere situated in the upper cosmos, and the figure of the fish depicted on Numantine vessel no. 2308 is particularly important on its return journey. It would be a means of transport or an enemy to be vanquished so that the sun could return to its place of origin and rise again.

Introduction¹

THE cosmos is the great mystery that has always amazed and continues to amaze humanity. The sun, symbol of life, is the most important heavenly body. In the pre-scientific age its diurnal motion was an enigma, crossing the universe from sunrise to sunset, prompting the question of where it went at night, its unknown path to a new dawn each day. The wonder was repeated each night, in all its immensity, with the continuing cycle of the moon and the stars, with the planets standing out as the brightest.

The identification of the most important heavenly bodies with deities has been one of the constants in the religions of antiquity. Thus in Greek religion we find the Sun identified with Helios, the Moon with Selene and the planets with gods whose Roman

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names survive today: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn. The Greek texts that have survived recount the myths associated with each of these deities, but these myths can be depicted in another way: through iconography. Text and art generate two forms of language, and their inter-relation helps scholars of today understand these deities, their manifestations and their relationships with human beings.

For the researcher the problem arises when a culture, the Celtiberian being one, has left no texts describing their myths and rituals.² In this case iconography will thus be the principal, if not the only, way of reconstructing the cosmological aspects of their religion.³ So it is important to develop an adequate theoretical and methodological framework for understanding the religious significance of much of Celtiberian iconography. But this approach presents a major challenge, given the inscrutable nature of the signs and symbols that we need to interpret. So we need to analyse this iconography using a hermeneutic and pragmatic approach, the only way of channelling and reawakening our dormant senses in order to feel and understand the supernatural reality that pervaded, as absolute truth, the Celtiberian society we are studying and which can only be apprehended through its iconography.

Theory and method

Studies in social anthropology and the history of religions demonstrate the power of religious sentiment in ancient societies to be a fact that can be considered universal.⁴ In the Celtiberian world, therefore, as in all ancient societies, the presence of the supernatural was unquestionable. The gods transcended human existence as the 'great truth', in a universe superior to the visible world and everyday life, which it permeated and endowed with meaning.

The first problem posed when it comes to understanding religion are the religious sentiments, mentality and principles of the researcher. We, researchers in the twenty-first century, come up against a number of important limitations for understanding religious sentiment in ancient societies. In Western culture science dominates as the most certain form of knowledge, rationalism as the only way of approaching the truth. In addition, the education we have received has distanced our deepest feelings from a belief in the supernatural as a supreme vital reality. We currently live in an agnostic and secular society in which spirituality has been eroded. Added to this is the fact that for those of us who have been brought up from childhood, as in our case, in the Catholic church, rational truth as a form of knowledge is reinforced, because God, and a belief of his actual existence, can only be approached through faith, and this can only be

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- 2 In the Celtiberian area only one sanctuary has been identified with a solar alignment, the so-called Segeda Sanctuary of the Sun. It is a horizontal monumental construction, aligned with prominent points on the horizon where the sun sets at the equinoxes and the summer solstice (Burillo & Pérez 2015).
 - 3 Studies of Celtiberian religion, including Sopeña 1995, Alfayé 2009, Burillo-Cuadrado & Burillo-Mozota 2010, Marco 2010, Burillo-Cuadrado 2015b, are based on an interpretation of the iconography that has survived into the present.
 - 4 Morris 1994.

achieved with divine grace. So it is necessary to deconstruct the religious mentality of the researcher in order to empathise with the religious sentiments and values of human beings in Antiquity.

Phenomenology and hermeneutics

Phenomenology is the philosophical approach used to channel this difficult investigative task, since it allows the researcher to adopt a dialectical approach to the subject matter of investigation.⁵ The transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl is a theory of knowledge that unifies the real world and the ideal, the existential and the essential. It consists of becoming aware of an object subjectively, so that the free fantasy or creativity of the researcher is given greater weight than his or her perceptions. It works towards universal knowledge through 'eidetic reduction', which dispenses with individual acts in order to reach the *eidos*, universals or archetypes.⁶ That is, the essences that are constantly repeated in time and space, whether there is a direct relationship or if there is none. The meaning of things is evident in each archetype as the structure of the unconscious of every human being.⁷ It is therefore the identification of the *eidos* or archetypes, which in our case we need to identify in Celtiberian iconography, that will allow us to transcend the individual in our research to reach the universal.

Hans-Georg Gadamer developed the philosophy of Husserl and Wittgenstein in his later period and incorporates the Greek thought of Plato and Aristotle to raise phenomenology to a new philosophical, hermeneutic, form of knowledge in which subject and object interact in a process of reciprocal mediation, a dialectic between the subject that understands and the 'thing itself', which asserts itself as something preferable in the context of the possible and the probable and adopts the so-called 'hermeneutical circle'⁸ as an explanatory resource. Which in our case means studying Celtiberian iconography directly in its original medium and not from a secondary, decontextualized and previously interpreted source, such as tracings.

Pragmatism as the integration of semiotics and semantics

In the search for a universal ontological model, Gadamer finds the ideal of scientific objectivity in language as a means of understanding, as the primary place of hermeneutics, in line with the theories of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand Saussure in the early twentieth century.⁹

5 The philosopher Husserl was the founder of phenomenology, a critical response to the naturalistic empiricism and positivism of the natural and exact sciences that had excluded the humanities from the sphere of the sciences (Medina 2001).

6 Husserl's concept of *eidos* is developed by Jung (1981) under the term 'archetype'.

7 Ortiz-Osés 1988.

8 Gadamer uses game theory to explain hermeneutical knowledge, where the subject is not the players but the game itself, which moves constantly back and forth without ending, and that movement contains subject, activity and content (Gadamer 1992).

9 Saussure's only work, *Course in General Linguistics*, was published posthumously by his students from the lectures he gave between 1907 and 1911 (Saussure 1985). It states that language is a system of arbitrary signs, consisting of a signifier, or material component of the linguistic sign, and meaning,

However, it was in 1869 in the United States of America that the philosopher Charles S. Peirce¹⁰ defined the sign as a means of communication between an object and its interpreter. To study a sign, the subject matter of semiotics, he establishes three steps: the syntactic, the semantic and the pragmatic. The syntactic refers to the study of the relationship between the different signs, in our case iconographic representations. The semantic analyses the signs and their meaning. Finally, the pragmatic studies the relationship between signs and the context in which they are used. However, his work took a long time to become known, and it was the Italian Umberto Eco¹¹ who brought together the two currents of thought, European and American, and in 1976 he published his *Treatise on General Semiotics*, in which he develops a comprehensive theory of all meaning systems based on signs.¹² In the realm of philosophy it was Jürgen Habermas who asserted the validity of pragmatic approaches in the nineteen-eighties.¹³

Our aim is to understand Celtiberian religion from the way in which Celtiberian society communicated, evidenced by the language of its iconography. Semantics is therefore inseparable from phenomenology and hermeneutics. We must articulate icons by means of their 'iconographic syntax' in order to understand the meaning of the signs and symbols, and the scene or scenes they form, which will only be possible if we can make analogies with other scenes, both contemporary or synchronic, and from different cultural or diachronic stages. Only in this way can we begin to understand the *eido*, universal or archetype that the Celtiberians share with other cultures and define what is peculiar or specific to the Celtiberian culture.

Celtiberian iconography

The Celtiberians, unlike the Iberians of the Upper Guadalquivir, had no monumental buildings in their cities, sumptuous burials in their cemeteries or life-sized statues. This is because the dominance of a social structure based on the blood ties of the extended family generated a society in which wealth was shared and constrained the appearance of a prominent aristocracy responsible for monumentalising and embellishing their cities and tombs.¹⁴ However, the Celtiberians had a rich artistic tradition of small objects,

which is the mental component or subjective idea that is associated with the sign. This posthumous work would become the basis of semiotics and structuralism, and had a major impact on the field of the social sciences and humanities.

- 10 Barrena & Nubiola (2013) state that the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce published three papers between 1868 and 1869, on the basis of which he is considered the father of semiotics. However, his work did not become known until Charles W. Morris published *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* in 1938.
- 11 Eco 1977.
- 12 In Spain, Ricardo Olmos (1996) is the leading exponent of the application of semiotics to Iberian iconography. The most highly regarded representative of his school is Trinidad Tortosa (2006) who, following Eco, has established 'the iconographic code' that takes into account the morphology of signs, syntactical aspects and themes of the icon.
- 13 Habermas is considered one of the most important philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century and is highly regarded for his interdisciplinary thinking (Guerra 2015).
- 14 See Burillo-Mozota (2010) for an analysis of the social structure of the Celtiberians in terms of their peasant way of life.



Fig. 1. Horses and concentric circles depicted on: a) ceremonial staff with two horses and a horseman from Numantia (Jimeno 2005, 495), b) horse fibula from Herrera de los Navarros (Burillo-Mozota), c) articulated plaque from Arcóbriga (Lorrio & Sánchez, 2009, 223).

mainly fashioned from bronze or ceramic.¹⁵ So it is on objects of bronze and ceramic as an artistic medium that we find the icons, signs and symbols that shape the scenes that help us understand the religious feelings of the Celtiberians.

Interestingly, a chronological sequence is found in the aesthetic manifestation of scenes, which go from a realistic phase to another that was more schematic which, using the theoretical and methodological approaches referred to above, has allowed us to analyse it as a system and infer diachronic relationships in order to interpret the icons and scenes depicted. These two phases are characterised in the following way:

First phase (fifth to second century BCE)

This is characterised by objects made of bronze (Fig. 1): fibulas, ceremonial staffs and embossed plaques decorated with realistic scenes. Fibulae in the shape of a horse with or without rider and frequently impressed with concentric circles.¹⁶ The finials of ceremonial staffs take the form of two horses, facing outwards on each side, with or without a horseman between them, and always with concentric circles along the entire body of the horses.¹⁷ The embossed plaques have a flat surface that is decorated with more complex images depicting a scene. The horse is the animal most frequently depicted on these flat plaques, accompanied by concentric circles, both radiant and non-radiant, or zig-zag and ladder-like shapes. The human image only appears on a single plaque found in Alpanseque.¹⁸

15 Foradada *et al.* (2015) demonstrate that the Celtiberians made unique and innovative contributions in the field of world aesthetics. Examples are their polyhedral hospitality tesserae, foreshadowing works of art produced in the twentieth century by sculptors such as Pablo Serrano and Eduardo Chillida.

16 Horse fibulae, interpreted as a manifestation of equestrian elites, in the monograph by Almagro-Gorbea & Torres 1999.

17 Ceremonial staffs have been analysed, together with depictions of standards and insignia, in Pastor 1998, as *signa equitum* in Almagro-Gorbea 1998 and Lorrio 2010.

18 See Jimeno *et al.* 2010 for a synthetic study of embossed plaques, with special attention to those that

Second phase (second to first century BCE)

In the second phase, ceramic is the Celtiberians' preferred material.¹⁹ The scenes depicted on pottery are more complex than those of the previous phase, so they provide more data for studying Celtiberian religion. Although we find decorated ceramics throughout Celtiberian territory, it is the city of Numantia that provides the largest number of examples. Those from Numantia fall into two distinctive groups in terms of their colouring and iconographic style (Fig. 2).

One group is characterized by the use of a single colour to decorate the pottery. Suns are depicted schematically, in the form of swastikas or tetraskelions facing left or right. The horse is still the animal most frequently depicted but is usually found in the form of a protome, associated with tetraskelions, in some cases forming fantastic anthropomorphic figures. The scenes are usually simple, often duplicated around an axis, as if reflected in a mirror. That is, they are designed to be seen without the person

looking at or holding the piece having to move.

Another group, found only in the city of Numantia, is characterized by polychrome decoration. The horse is depicted as a complete animal and there are no protomes. Tetraskelions are very scarce and suns are depicted as concentric circles and radiant symbols. The figures are realistic, occupying the entire surface of the vessel so that, except for the plaques, the ceramic vessel has to be rotated for the scene to be seen.

The important thing is that both monochrome and polychrome ceramics and bronzes depict the same concepts in different ways, and this provides a basis for understanding the meaning that lies beyond the icons and scenes depicted.

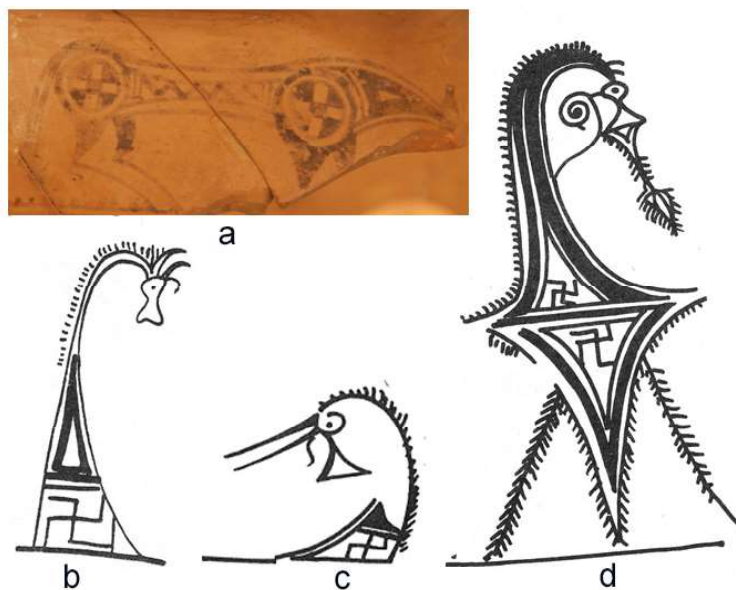


Fig. 2. Numantine pottery: a) Horse with images of crosses inside it, polychrome Numantine ceramics n° 1998 (Burillo-Cuadrado), b) and c) Tetraskelion inside a protome of a horse: monochrome pottery from Numantia (Wattenberg 1993, Lam. VI, 1-1202 and Lam. II, 2-1194), d) tetraskelion within an anthropomorphic figure: monochrome pottery from Numantia (Wattenberg 1963, Lam. VII, 13-1216).

appeared at the Numantine necropolis, and Lorrio & Sánchez 2009 for those found in the necropolis of Arcóbriga, with references to the ones that are known. For the one from Alpanseque, see Cabré & Morán 1975.

19 The city of Numantia has produced the largest number of decorated ceramics in the whole of Celtiberia. Wattenberg (1963) offers a corpus with the most outstanding decoration and Romero 1976, a study of the pottery with polychrome decoration.

The dual solar iconography: the mystery of the Sun's return

Joseph Dechelette has pointed out that all the concentric circles that appeared on the Celtic fibulae represented the sun,²⁰ although it has been suggested that the non-radiant circles depicted on embossed plaques could represent the full moon or the stars, in the case of the smaller ones.²¹

While we agree that not all the non-radiant concentric circles are suns, and the stars are also depicted, we differ in the identification of the full moon. Hermeneutics says that signs and symbols must have a clear and obvious meaning for the society that uses them, since they form a language that conveys an unmistakeable message. But whether we can succeed in discovering their real meaning is another matter, so we need to know the archetype or graphic universal that, in this case, is used to represent the moon by examining closely how this has been resolved graphically in other cultures.

In all periods the Moon is usually depicted waxing or waning so that it cannot be confused with the Sun, which is depicted as round. It is only shown as being circular in a few cases where polychromatic decoration is used, when it given a uniform colour, white or silver. A factor that all the images of the moon have in common is that their outline is drawn with a single line, or at most with one more line around it to indicate the light it emits. This is because, unlike the Sun, one can stare at the Moon and see its contours perfectly. To avoid any iconic ambiguity the Sun is painted yellow, orange or red, and these colours are often combined in concentric circles, indicating different intensities of light at its core and the halos radiating around it, since it is this variability that is perceived when looking at the sun directly, always with great difficulty: we see that ball of incandescent fire as having an indefinite and radiant outline. So we need to ask ourselves, if the largest non-radiant concentric circles do not represent the Moon, which heavenly body do they represent?

As stated above there are two successive phases of Celtiberian iconography. In the first two, the symbols used are radiant and non-radiant concentric circles associated with the horse. In the context of phenomenology, entropathy allows us to assert with confidence that the radiant concentric circles represent the sun, but we lack the criteria for determining the meaning of the non-radiant concentric circles. In the second phase, in monochrome ceramics, these realistic representations disappear and in their place we find another iconic duality consisting of tetraskelions turning in a clockwise or anticlockwise direction, which are also associated with equine figures. These schematic motifs have been identified with the sun in motion, as the Executive Committee for excavations in Numantia has argued.²²

20 Dechelette 1909.

21 Jimeno *et al.* (2010, 386) suggest that the large, non-radiant concentric symbols on the embossed plates from Numantia should be identified with the full moon.

22 The identification of the tetraskelions that decorate Numantine ceramics with the Sun was proposed by Mélida (1912, 34): 'Some scholars believe that several ornamental motifs on Numantine pottery are true symbols. The principal among them is the *swastika* or gammata cross, whose original meaning was the sun in motion', citing Dechelette 1910, 453–62, as reference.

To understand the meaning of non-radiant concentric circles we need to relate the images of the sun of both iconographic phases. In our deductive reasoning, we use 'iconographic syntax' in the temporal dimension of 'iconographic diachrony'. These analytical strategies allow a connection to be made between images that we assume to be related because they belong to the same culture and a significant context connects them, in this case the astral world associated with the figure of the horse, whose grapheme has changed over time, but not its meaning. In this way a relationship can be established between images that are closely linked in meaning, but are depicted differently because of the aesthetic and cultural changes that take place in a society with the passage of time. Our theory is that this is an 'iconographic syntax' of successive periods of Celtiberian culture that reflect the same cosmological ideas but which are depicted in different ways because of conceptual changes in the iconography over the course of time.

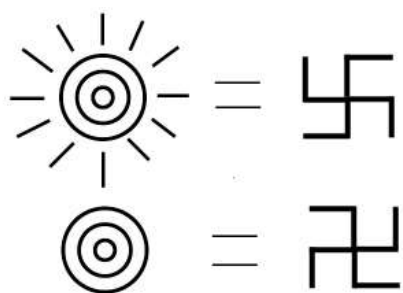


Fig. 3. Example of "Diachronic iconographic syntax": Relationship of radiant concentric circles with anticlockwise tetraskelions and concentric circles with clockwise tetraskelions (Burillo-Cuadrado).

The second stage provides a reference that supports this interpretive code, since it uses the same symbol, the tetraskelion, to represent the Sun but moving in two different directions, giving it a dual meaning. The two ways of depicting the sun in the first phase, in the form of radiant and non-radiant concentric circles, need to be connected with this duality. Thus it can be deduced that one of the two tetraskelions would be similar to the radiant symbol representing the Sun and the other, also a solar image, with the non-radiant concentric circles. The two tetraskelions are, after all, the same solar symbol but are moving in two different directions, that is, the Sun is moving but in the opposite direction. This reasoning is an example of applying the 'hermeneutical circle' in which the dialogue between the subject and

the different representations reaches the point when its solution takes the form of an equation, consisting in this case of four variables, that is used to unveil an unknown factor, an image whose meaning we do not know or that we do not know for certain, in this case the non-radiant concentric circles, which in this deductive field we can confirm is a symbol of the Sun (Fig. 3).

But we need to ask ourselves why the Sun is depicted in two ways in each of the Celtiberian iconographic phases. In order to provide a solution to this enigma we have to try to get as close as possible to our ancestors' beliefs and way of thinking, and search for the 'universals' or 'archetypes' that will help answer this question.

Three 'universal' explanations of the enigma of the nightly return of the Sun

We can say that the perception of the Sun's daily path, from when it rises until it sets, is one of the few 'truths' on which human beings agree regardless of the period or place in

which they live. It is this is one of the 'archetypes' that all humanity has perceived in the same way, throughout its entire existence. But this daytime, observable path is not the only one travelled by the sun. The mythology of most ancient religions has attempted to explain the path followed by the sun at night after it disappears over the horizon, and imagine the hidden night road it takes before reappearing at dawn the following day on the opposite side from where it dropped out of sight. That is, there is an invisible nocturnal sun that is the counterpart of the visible Sun of the day.

The hermeneutic approach leads to the initial conclusion that there cannot be many answers that will explain the unknown path followed by the Sun each night before dawn. The nightly return of the Sun, since it cannot be observed, is susceptible to imaginative explanations of its invisible path. However, hermeneutics tells us that the explanations given in different cultures have to be limited. This is because the Sun has to reappear every day at the same geographical point, preceded by the dawn.

In the first period of Egyptian culture the Sun god Ra crossed the sky to descend beyond the 'western horizon' to the underworld, which he crossed during the night illuminating the dead and giving them life. It was a path fraught with dangers he had to escape from, the most deadly of which was the serpent Aapep. In this way, overcoming these perils, he returned to the east and reappeared the next morning, on the 'eastern horizon'.²³

But in the late Egyptian world, we find a different explanation for the Sun's journey, in which the solar disk is depicted travelling amongst stars at night in the body of Nut, the goddess of the Sky.²⁴ The implication in this case is that the world of the dead through which the Sun-god Ra's solar boat travels is above, not below in the underworld.

In Greek religion, the Sun is the god Helios. Robert Graves²⁵ synthesizes the movement of the sun in this way: 'Helios drives his four-horse chariot daily across the Heavens from a magnificent palace in the far east, near Colchis, to an equally magnificent far-western palace, where his unharnessed horses pasture in the Islands of the Blessed. He sails home along the Ocean stream, which flows around the world, embarking his chariot and team on a golden ferry-boat'. In this case the underworld of the dead is untouched by the motion of the sun, which only touches the surface of the earth at one point, the Islands of the Blessed, reserved for those who have been born three times, and have three times been worthy of Elysium, residence of the virtuous in the Beyond.

In the case of the Celtiberian world we have no hieroglyphics, such as those of the Egyptians, or written descriptions, like those of the Greeks. The only way left to us is the hermeneutical interpretation of images of the sun. In Celtiberian iconography the radiant solar image of the first phase represents the Sun that the Celtiberians and all

23 Burkard 1997, 445.

24 On the ceiling of the Chapel of the New Year in the temple of Hathor in Dendera, dating to the first century BCE, the goddess is depicted about to swallow the setting Sun and giving birth to the rising Sun (Burkard 1997, fig. 41). A similar depiction of the goddess Nut, from the Book of Amduat, decorates a sarcophagus from the necropolis of Sakkara belonging to the Ptolemaic period (Lull 2006, 44, fig. 11).

25 Graves 1984, 154.

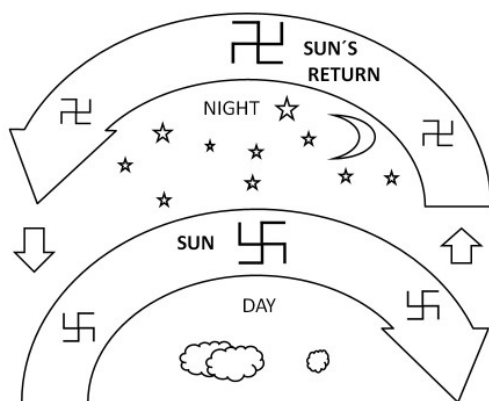


Fig. 4. Diagram of the movement of the Celtiberian sun, based on an interpretation of Numantine iconography (Burillo-Cuadrado).

humanity see each day. In the second phase this image is replaced by the clockwise schematic tetraskelion that adds movement to the image of the sun. That is, it is an image that depicts the movement of the sun during the course of the day. Thus, the anticlockwise tetraskelion must indicate the movement of the Sun in the opposite direction, its necessary return through the night to repeat the eternal mystery of its daily reappearance at dawn at the point opposite where it was hidden from view (Fig. 4).

The anticlockwise triskelion is a Celtiberian iconographic device that represents one of the mysteries contemplated in most religions, the movement of the sun, visible by day but not at night, when human beings cannot see it, as it takes the daily journey many mythologies explain, describing the dangers that could lie in wait for it. In their first iconographic phase, the Celtiberians solve the problem of representing the nightly wanderings of the Sun by removing the rays from the concentric circles. Thus the radiant concentric circles represent the Sun during day and the unadorned concentric circles the Sun during the night. In the first phase the Sun is depicted static, not moving, but in the second the symbol used, the swastika, contains within it the image of the Sun's movement in both directions: clockwise during the day, anticlockwise at night. The anticlockwise tetraskelions, dynamic graphemes, and concentric circles, a static image, graphically depict the Sun's return through a higher realm of the heavens that could not be seen by the human eye, a solution similar to that found in the later phase of Egyptian religion. We can conclude that there were three possible solutions or 'archetypes' for the Sun's return in the cosmologies of antiquity.²⁶

1. In the ancient Egyptian world, the Sun's movement was circular, crossing the heavens in his boat in the course of the day and returning through the underworld.
2. In the Greek world Helios returns in his golden boat on the waters surrounding the earth, after crossing the sky in his chariot.
3. The third possibility is that proposed by the Celtiberian world and which we also find in the final period of Egyptian culture. The sun would move across the sky during the day and return at night through a higher realm of the sky that could not be observed.

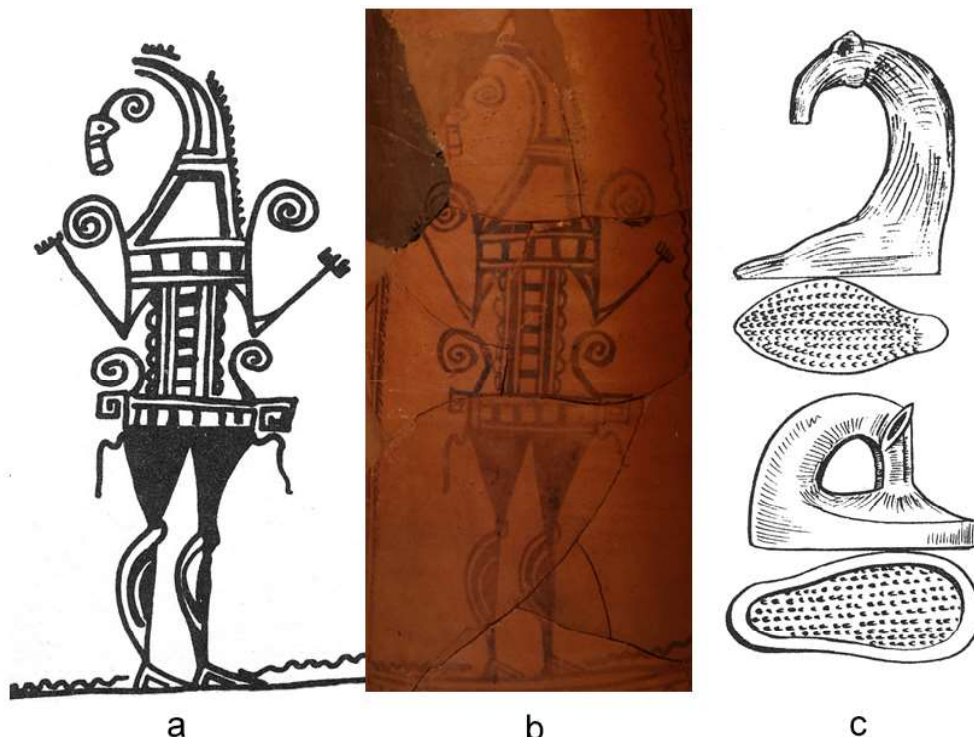


Fig. 5. a) Anthropomorphic horse painted on a frustum from Numantia (Wattenberg 1993, Lam. VI, 2-1203), b) photo of the same piece, c) Horse protomes in terracotta (Wattenberg 1963, 91, 457 and 458).

The horse as a solar divinity

Solar symbols are usually associated with the figure of the horse in both phases of Celtiberian iconography. In the first phase the horse forms part of the scene but is separate from images of the Sun, whereas in the second the tetraskelion appears within the image of the horse. In this way the Sun is integrated into the horse, which elevates this animal to the status of a solar deity, which distinguishes this Celtiberian religious manifestation from those found in the Graeco-Roman world, where horses did no more than pull the chariot carrying the sun god, Helios.

As we have demonstrated,²⁷ in Celtiberian culture the horse is represented as a solar divinity in three different ways: with the complete figure, in the form of a protome, and as an anthropomorphic being with the head of a horse. Curchin²⁸ calls it a 'reverse centaur',

27 For a discussion of the various depictions of the horse as a solar deity in Celtiberian pottery, see Burillo-Cuadrado & Burillo-Mozota 2010; Burillo-Cuadrado 2015b.

28 It was Ortego (1975) who first proposed that this semi-zoomorphic figure version was a version of the fabulous centaur conceived in reverse, with the humanoid standing. Curchin (2003–2004, 186–9), who accepts this interpretation, has made a study of it and says that it was originally a mythological invention of the Celts. Wattenberg (1963, 215) had already proposed that it should be identified with a divinity. Paulsen (1931, 223–81) also identified this figure as a god or goddess of horses, similar to the Celtic goddess Epona. It has been suggested that this female deity appears in four Roman representations in Celtiberia, but as Alfayé (2009, 349) says, they should not be interpreted as such. The anthropomorphic Celtiberian figure should not be associated with it either, as it repre-

a Hellenistic term we consider inappropriate for describing this semi-zoomorphic figure, because in the Greek world the centaur has the body of a horse and the head, torso and arms of a man. That is, what is important about the centaur is human and the animal aspect is secondary. This scale of values extends to other fantastic animals in Greek mythology, such as the sphinx, satyr and siren, with the exception of the Minotaur, but this relates to an archaic myth. In contrast, the Celtiberian anthropomorphic figure gives greatest importance to the horse's head, the human body serving merely as a carrier.

The proposition that horse protomes are a simplified representation of an equine deity with an anthropomorphic body is based on the fact that the base of the protome is a human foot, as we can see in two terracottas found in Numantia, where the sole of the foot has been made into a grater (Fig. 5). Therefore, the image in the form of a protome would be synthesizing the two elements that define the anthropomorphic figure: the head of the horse and the human foot. When this syncretic figure is observed in the ceramic iconography, the equine figure stands out as the most important and significant element, the human reference being relegated to a line at the bottom that only a knowledge of this Celtiberian symbol could interpret as a human foot. Unravelling this symbol at this distance in time has only been possible thanks to the preservation of the two terracottas referred to above because, since they are three-dimensional, the foot can be seen. However, when depicted in two dimensions it virtually disappears.

This solar deity would be common to all the Celtiberians since, although most of the images that represent it come from Numantian monochrome ceramics, the horse protome has been found in various parts of Celtiberia and is in fact the only zoomorphic representation we find in other Celtiberian sites. So it is one of the few elements that gives substance to Celtiberian culture on the basis of this peculiar religious manifestation.

The situla with a fish intent on devouring a horse with a tail attached to the head of a bovid²⁹

The iconography of Celtiberian pottery is not usually studied directly on the object that is used as its medium of expression, but from tracings made of the designs depicted on the surface of the vessels. This significantly limits our understanding of them. On one hand, the scene is seen in two dimensions, like a painting; it gives an inaccurate rendering by separating the pictorial scene from its three-dimensional, volumetric support (Fig. 6).

sents a male deity.

- 29 The situla listed as number 2308 Numancia is known from its photograph and a tracing of 1912 that appeared in the report submitted to the Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts by the Executive Committee responsible for excavating Numantia (Mélida 1912, Pl. XLIII & XLIV). Subsequently, Wattenberg (1963, Pl. XVII, 1-1297 & Ph. Pl. XIV, 1) included it in his monograph on indigenous ceramics from Numantia, even though the tracing separates the head of the bovid in the depiction of the scene. Finally, Romero Carnicero (1976, fig. 6, 22 & Pl. III. 22) presents a new tracing in his book on polychrome Numantine ceramics. Its analysis has also been the subject of a case study in Burillo-Cuadrado 2015b.

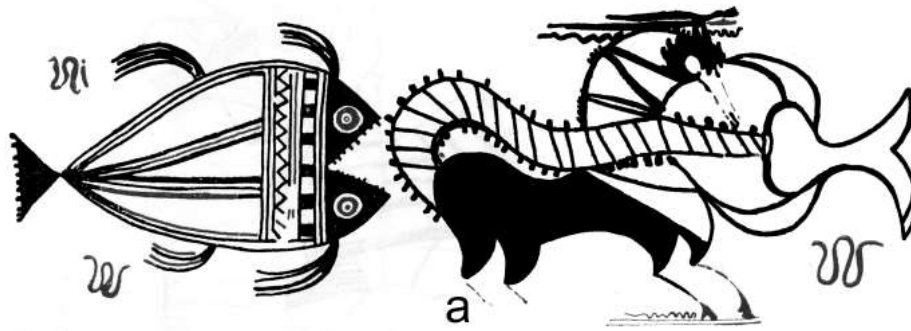


Fig. 6. Ceramic nº 2308 held by the Numantine Museum:
a) Tracing (Álvarez in VV.AA., 1912, XLIV), b) Consecutive photos (Burillo-Cuadrado).

It should be noted that in the case of most decorated Celtiberian pottery, especially globular shapes and jugs, at least half of the scene is obscured at any given time, because it is on the opposite side from the one being observed. On the other hand, most of the tracings have been made in black and white and therefore the colours and details – some of them minute – decorating the vessel disappear, so a substantial part of the pictorial information decorating the pot is lost when they are studied. However, we have studied the actual Numantine situla decorated with a fish about to devour a horse with a tail that ends in the head of a bovid, integrating the scene with the three-dimensional character of the vessel and observing that only by rotating it, i.e. including this fourth dimension, is it possible to really understand its iconography.

An analysis using hermeneutics

Studies of iconography based on tracings pose the problem that, by removing the direct relationship of the subject with the object, the information it contains is impaired and decontextualized. To overcome these analytical deficiencies this vessel was studied

on the basis of Gadamer's hermeneutics³⁰ in order to establish a direct relationship between the researcher and the ceramic vessel, a strategy of dialectical analysis that uses the 'hermeneutical circle'. To this end, the piece was studied directly and scanned by 3D laser, thanks to the collaboration of Luis Peña Serrano, which allowed us to continue a dialogue with vessel after examining it in person at the Numantine Museum.

Being able to hold in one's hands this unique example of Celtiberian art, replete with symbols posing enigmas to be deciphered, both individually and in terms of the way they work together to create the 'iconographic syntax' of the scene, was an extraordinary feeling, quite different from the coldness and apparent objectivity with which we had previously analysed the tracings, photos and commentaries of the scene depicted. This process allowed us to assimilate hermeneutics' argument for comprehending an observable reality from the direct relationship that is established between the subject and the object. The latter acquires a value and life of its own that allows it to be questioned dialectically, until the message we think it contains can be unravelled. It was an open reading and like all readings, susceptible to future reinterpretation, like a musical score when it is played again.

The 'fourth dimension' of movement offers evidence of the ritual use of the vessel

Our first impression when holding this vessel was that our aesthetic perception of its decoration far exceeded that we had gained previously from tracings and photos. One of the most striking aspects was that, since the scene occupied the entire surface of the piece, the whole of the scene could not be seen from any one position, which invalidated our previous perception obtained from the tracings that had been made of it. The vessel has to be rotated for the scene to be dynamically created in the observer's brain. One thing was clear: the two-dimensional character of the tracings showing a complete scene, which could be seen in its entirety at a glance, did not reflect the true picture, whose fragmented parts were distributed over the entire body of the vessel, around its three-dimensional surface. It had to be rotated through 360 degrees in order to see the whole scene. That is, the decoration of this vessel is deliberately designed to conceal part of the scene depicted, so that a motionless observer at a distance from the vase would not see the whole scene and therefore would not understand it. The observer or someone else had to rotate it.

Movement is necessary in order to understand the iconography decorating this vase. That is, a ritual is required that involves rotating it through 360 degrees so that the scene depicted on its surface can be seen and understood. In fact, the shape of the vase has been created for this ritual function, as it is a situla that, since it has a handle over the mouth, could easily be rotated.³¹

The act of rotating the situla invokes a new concept that as far as we know has

30 Gadamer 1992.

31 In Romero (1976, Pl. III, 22) it can be seen that this handle was added in the initial restoration of the vase, but it has now been removed to return it to the form in which it was found.

not been taken into consideration when analysing ceramic iconography: the 'fourth dimension', consisting of the movement of the object and the time necessary to rotate it.³² It also indicates that two agents were necessary: one, an individual who would carry the situla or act as officiant, and the other, the group of those present at the ritual, contemplating the scene as the vase is rotated through 360 degrees, the symbol is unveiled and the compression of the myth it represents is achieved.

A fantastic scene that takes place in water

Direct contact with the vase made it possible to see the detail in the drawings, the distribution of the scene on the surface, and also something else that had not been evaluated and that has proved critical for understanding its meaning: the colour of the figures.

The scene, framed by wavy lines, covers the whole of the body of piece. It is a unique and unparalleled scene. It shows a very large and menacing fish, with its mouth open to reveal a row of sharp teeth, that is trying to devour a horse, whose tail ends in a bovid's head, something that is rather surprising and which differs from the typical horsetail found in other Numantine representations.³³ Around the two animals are three short, wide waves. The semiotics should enable us to distinguish signs and symbols in this representation, and establish an 'iconographic syntax' in order to decipher the meaning of the scene and enable us to reconstruct Celtiberian religion.

The two-headed beast displays a graphic syncretism of a horse and a bovid.³⁴ As already noted in the previous section, in Celtiberian iconography horses should be identified with a solar deity. However, bovids are related with the lunar deity in many cultures, including those of the Indo-European world, because of the similarity between their horns and the Moon in its fourth quarter.³⁵ The association of the horns of bovids with the Moon probably reflects a Celtiberian 'archetype'. So this Celtiberian composition would depict a fantastic two-headed animal that would synthesise in a single individual the two most important heavenly bodies in the cosmos, the Sun and the Moon.

The other main character is the giant fish that, because it is the same size as the horse, can also be categorised as an imaginary animal. It should be remembered that the Celtiberians lived in the heart of the Iberian Peninsula, so any contact with a fish of this size must have been purely legendary, since the fish found in rivers and inland lakes would never have reached the abnormal size of the one depicted on this vase.³⁶

32 Foradada *et al.* (2015) proposed the concept for the first time at the 7th Symposium on the Celtiberians.

33 Wattenberg 1963, Pl. XII. 1-1260.

34 It should be noted that this is not a unique case in Celtiberian iconography since a bronze spear from a chariot was found in the Castro de Las Arribillas of Prados Redondos in Molina de Aragón (Guadalajara), which has a double Protome of a horse and a bull, although in that case they were superimposed (Galan 1989-1990).

35 Sergent 2005, 350.

36 Delgado's study (2008) of the fish depicted in polychrome Celtiberian ceramics does not include the

The three short waves situated at significant points of the scene have been studied by Jose Manuel Pastor³⁷ within what he calls 'graphic cadence symbols' present in Iberian and Celtiberian iconography. These signs are not mere decoration: they indicate movement, which gives dynamism to the scene and help us understand it. Two of the waves are behind the fins of the fish, emphasizing that it is advancing rapidly on its prey. These two marks intensify the threatening appearance of the fish, with its mouth wide open to expose its sharp teeth, and show that it is swimming rapidly towards the two-headed beast, clearly intent on devouring it. The third wave is situated below the head of bovid, a graphic expression of the desperate flight of the two-headed beast, in which the horse is shown galloping away from the fish and the tail, with the bovine head at the end of it, which has been given life a life of its own and is trying to escape from the danger, and even overtake the animal to which it is attached. The movement of the predatory fish and the panic of the two-headed animal with the head of bovid are graphically accentuated by the position of the 'S' shapes beside the fins and under the head of the bovid, indicating movement.

This representation prompts two questions: Where is the scene set? and What does it represent? We shall try to answer these questions.

Coelum Aqueum, or the existence of a realm of celestial water in Celtiberian mythology

In our view, a series of graphic indicators show that the scene depicted on the situla takes place in a watery realm. The first is the important role of the fish in the scene depicted. The second is the delimitation of the scene by means of two wavy lines situated both along the rim and at the bottom of the vessel, the upper line beginning at the first dorsal fin of the fish. The wavy lines are a graphic representation of water and their arrangement creates a frame for what is happening in a watery setting. The third is the blue-green colour used to decorate the fish and also the figure of the two-headed animal. It should be remembered that river fish are generally of earthy colours and their varied colouring helps to camouflage them against possible predators, so the blue-green colour used for the bodies of fish and the two-headed figure is an extrapolation by the Celtiberian artist of the colouring given to water. Therefore this colour unifies the imaginary space in which the scene is set, the watery realm. This colour is exceptional in Celtiberian, and also Iberian, iconography, and in fact this pigment should be analysed to discover its characteristics. The colour was, therefore, deliberately chosen to emphasise the idea that the action depicted is taking place in water.

Another question arises: how can the horse, with its bovine syncretism in this case, be situated in a watery realm, when it is associated with a deity that lived in the Heavens? Could it be that Celtiberian mythology included the belief that there was a large body of water in the firmament? The answer is Yes.

one that decorates this situla. He identifies the other fish depicted with specific species, all of which are river fish: trout, catfish, salmon, stickleback and carp.

37 Pastor (2010) expounded his theory, already published in a previous study (Pastor 1998), at the Sixth Symposium on Celtiberians and it was unanimously accepted by the scholars present.

To explain the rain and snow many cultures believed that there was a sea or ocean in the sky that was the source of water. This is another 'archetype' configured by one of the universal myths. It is masterfully synthesized in the biblical account of the creation of the universe:³⁸ 'And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven.'

This Judeo-Christian conception of the cosmos survived in Western thought into the Modern Age, mixed with Graeco-Roman interpretations.³⁹ Until recently the idea persisted that the Earth was at the centre of the universe, surrounded by various spheres, the nearest being that of the most important heavenly bodies. But for the purposes of this study what is most striking is that in the medieval period, on the basis of previous traditions, the ninth sphere was called the *Coelum Aqueum*; it was above the sphere of the fixed stars and below the *Primum Mobile*.⁴⁰

Another example of this 'archetype' can be found in Egyptian religion. There are many scenes in which all the Egyptian gods travel across the sky in boats, reflecting the same cosmic idea of the existence of a large body of water in the sky that was the source of rain.⁴¹

This was therefore a 'universal' that existed in various cultures and it helps us understand that the Celtiberians shared this belief that there was a large body of water within the firmament.

Are we looking at a picture of an eclipse?

Analysing the image that concerns us it looks as if the fish is an enemy from which the Sun and the Moon, represented by the two-headed beast, have to escape. In our opinion this would be the mythological representation of an eclipse, as we will try to explain using the hermeneutical method and searching for this 'archetype' in other mythologies.

A study by Daphne Nash Briggs on the iconography of Gaulish coins⁴² has looked at various scenes of eclipses in which wolves or imaginary beasts try to devour the Sun and the Moon, an interpretation supported by Dominique Hollard.⁴³

In Norse religion the sun goddess, *Sól*, and the moon god, *Mani*, were pursued by

38 The Bible, King James version (Genesis 1, 6-8)

39 Godwin 2009.

40 Jerónimo Muñoz, a sixteenth century humanist, when interpreting the Second Book of Pliny's Natural History, emphasizes the idea that the rain from the clouds was insufficient to cause the flood, hence the necessary existence of an aquatic realm known as *Coelum Aqueum* (Navarro & Rodríguez 1988, 383)

41 The sky goddess Nut, whose body consisted of water, is of uncertain etymology but her name could mean 'she of the waters' (Lull 2006).

42 Nash Briggs (2012) has based her research on the iconography of Celtic coins.

43 A coin from the late third-early second century BCE from the Calvados area of France depicts an animal, identified as a wolf, with its mouth open to devour the Sun, represented in the form of a wheel. In another of similar characteristics the same kind of beast can be seen trying to devour a wheel, a symbol of the sun, and another icon in the form of a quarter circle, which would be the Moon (Hollard 1999).

the wolves Sköll and Hati, which tried to devour them. When they succeeded in doing so an eclipse occurred, but the deities were able to escape, and this marked the end of the astronomical event. The chase would end on Ragnarök, the day of the end of the world, when the wolves would succeed in consuming the deities without the Sun or Moon being able to escape.⁴⁴

In the collective religious imagination of China, the Sun and the Moon were devoured by a dog or a wild beast, and this resulted in an eclipse. The Chinese used the sound of bells to frighten the beast so the Sun and the Moon could escape. An eclipse was a bad omen, and it was customary to fast when one occurred to prevent it happening again in the future.⁴⁵

These are just a few examples of the myths found behind an eclipse, an astronomical event of great importance in antiquity. They all share the idea of a beast intent on devouring the sun, the moon, or both. We think this universal idea is also depicted on the Numantine situla we have studied, where a big fish (imaginary beast) is attempting to devour the two-headed beast that synthesizes the sun in the form of a horse and the Moon in the form of a bovine head at the end of a horse's tail. This is, then, a graphic interpretation of a universal myth, the eternal struggle between good and evil in which, if the fish succeeds in catching the two-headed beast, an eclipse will occur, which will end when the solar and lunar deities succeed in overcoming the danger and manage to escape.

This vase is also exceptional for its form, since in the polychrome pottery of Numancia, there is only one other situla, No. 1,998, that depicts a sacrificial scene. We need to ask ourselves whether the ritual in which this vessel was used, so that those who watched it and the officiant himself could see the scene was connected with the subject of the scene depicted. That is, a magic ceremony to prevent the eclipse occurring and allow the Sun and Moon to flee from the looming danger of the beast pursuing them.

44 See the 'Dan McCoy' website for tales of Norse mythology in their original language and English translations: Skoll and Hati 2015.

45 Rana 1995 analyses the conception of the eclipses in various ancient religions, including those of China.

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