Glass is a medium not often associated with ‘barbarian’ craftsmen, yet from the Hallstatt period onwards glass becomes an important medium in Celtic art. By the middle and late La Tène period, bracelets in translucent blue, green, yellow and clear glass are known, some with elaborate mouldings, fluting or inlaid ornament around their edges (1).

In Bulgaria such La Tène glass bracelets have recently been discovered in the Celtic habitation layers at the hillforts of Arkovna (Dalgopol district, Varna region)(2) and Zaravetz (Veliko Tarnovo), dating from the 3rd c. BC onwards (3). Similar glass bracelets have recently been discovered along with other La Tène material at other sites across Bulgaria, from Kavarna on the Black Sea coast (4) to Babyak in the Rhodope mountains (5), as well as at the ancient city of Helis
The belief in the ‘Evil Eye’ is, of course, present in many ancient cultures and literary evidence attests to the belief in the evil eye in the eastern Mediterranean for millennia starting with Hesiod, Callimachus, Plato, Diodorus Siculus, Theocritus, Plutarch, Heliodorus, Pliny the Elder, and Aulus Gellius, and is represented in Celtic mythology, notably in the form of the Fomorian giant Balor of the Evil Eye (see Dundes (1992). Evil Eye: Folklore Casebook. Madison, Wis. University of Wisconsin Press; Kinahan G.H. (1894) "Donegal Folk-lore: Ballor of the Evil Eye." In: The Folk-Lore Journal. Volume 5). Of interest in the present context are the glass nazars, or ‘magical’ charms, used to ward off the evil eye, particularly popular in the Balkans and today’s Turkey, and generally believed to be originally of Turkish origin.
‘Nazar trees’ in modern Cappadocia, Turkey

Disks or balls, consisting of concentric blue and white circles (usually, from inside to outside, dark blue, light blue, white, dark blue) representing an evil eye are common apotropaic talismans in the Middle East today, found on the prows of Mediterranean boats and elsewhere; in some forms of the folklore, the staring eyes are supposed to bend the malicious gaze back to the sorcerer.

Known as nazar (Turkish: nazar boncuğu or nazarlık), this talisman is most frequently seen today in Turkey, Bulgaria and other southeastern European countries, found in or on houses and vehicles or worn as beads.
In fact, recent evidence from archaeological sites in Bulgaria suggests that this particular kind of glass ‘evil eye’ charm has its origins not in the east, but in the west. In each case the aforementioned glass La Tène bracelets discovered at archaeological sites in Bulgaria (dating from the Late Iron Age – 3rd c. BC) have been found together with glass ‘Eye Beads’, which in turn have direct parallels from earlier Celtic sites across Europe. It should also be borne in mind that the Celts who settled in the Balkans during this period also established the Celtic state of Galatia in present day Turkey from 277 BC onwards (see main ‘Galatia’ article).

Glass ‘Eye’ beads from the Celtic burial at Necropole de Proges – Marne.

Museé Saint Remi – Reims. (5th c. BC)
Particularly interesting is a necklace of identical glass eye beads executed in the same ‘millefiori technique’ discovered recently in a ‘princess’ burial in the Altai mountains region of Russia. This so-called ‘Cleopatra Necklace’, a unique find this far east, most probably reached the Altai region through trade with the Celto-Scythian Bastarnae tribes in eastern Europe, and is particularly valuable for our understanding of trade and the spread of technology between Europe and Asia in the late Iron Age.
The Altai ‘Princess Necklace’ which, according to Russian archaeologists, belonged to a 25 year old ‘Virgin Priestess’.

(http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2272817/Ancient-Egyptian-necklace-skeleton-virgin-priestess-Siberian-burial
mound.html?goback=%2Egde_157795_member_210634567%2Egde_157795_member_21076276
6#axzz2Jv9wF6xG)

Common Celtic patterns employed in the creation of glass artifacts are for the most part very simple and geometric. One of the most common patterns are those consisting of concentric circles. These resemble eyes and may have been used as protection against misfortune; as in the ‘evil eye.’ Triskels, s-scrolls, running-dog patterns, and chevrons (all indicators of the La Tène style) are also quite commonly found among Celtic glass artifacts of this period.
Celtic ‘Eye Beads’ from the tomb in tumulus 18 at Helis/Sboryanovo, northeastern Bulgaria (4th – 3rd c. BC)

Claims by Bulgarian archaeologists (6) that these eye beads first ‘appear’ in Thrace in the 2nd – 1st c. BC are logically contradicted by their discovery at Celtic sites across Europe from the 5th c. BC, and at Celtic sites in Bulgaria, such as Arkovna and Zaravetz, from the beginning of the 3rd c. BC onwards. It would appear that these eye beads had religious significance for the Celts, as they are often found as votive offerings. This is confirmed by their discovery at cult sanctuaries such as that at Babyak in the Rhodope mountains. Evidence from such sites also suggests that these ‘evil eye’ beads were primarily worn by women, as they are generally found in parts of the complexes together with typically female articles such as female torcs, bracelets and ‘cult’ firepots (See ‘Killing the Objects’ and ‘Cult Firepots’ articles).

Reinheim “Princess” Necklace. Reinheim (Saarland), Germany
Mid. 4th c. BC

FACE/HEAD BEADS

It has long been noted that the cult of the head ‘constitutes a persistent theme throughout all aspects of Celtic life spiritual and temporal, and the symbol of the severed head may be regarded as the most typical and universal of their religious attitudes’ (Ross A. Pagan Celtic Britain. London
Strabo informs us that ‘when they depart from the battle they hang the heads of their enemies from the necks of their horses, and when they have brought them home, nail the spectacle to the entrance of their houses…’ (Strabo IV, 4,5). Amongst the Celts the human head ‘was venerated above all else, since the head was to the Celt the soul, centre of the emotions, as well as of life itself, a symbol of divinity and of the powers of the other-world’ (Jacobstahl P. Early Celtic Art. Oxford. 1944; see also Mac Congail 2010: 173–175). The severed head is also one of the main core symbols on Celtic artifacts and coins from the Balkans in the 3rd – 1st c. BC (see Archaeology and numismatics sections).

In this context, perhaps the most interesting glasswork produced by the Celts were the ‘Face/Head Beads’ (Fig. 2) These have been found at a number of Celtic burials and other sites from central (Germany, Switzerland etc.) and eastern Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria etc.) (7).
A wonderful example of this type of face bead from Bulgaria comes from the Mogilanska Tumulus (Vratza region) (fig. 4), which has direct parallels in examples discovered at Celtic sites in the Czech Republic and Romania (8). Similar artifacts have been unearthed in recent years during excavations at other sites in Bulgaria such as Appolonia Pontica (Sozopol) (9), Mavrova Tumulus (Starosel, Plovdiv region) (10), Burgas (11), Kavarna (Dobruja region) (12), etc.
Glass bead and ‘face bead’ from Mavrova Tumulus (Starosel, Plovdiv region, Bulgaria)
Also interesting, from an artistic perspective, is a gold ‘Janus head’ pendant (fig. 6) executed in a repossé technique and decorated filigréé and granulation, discovered in the Shumen region of northeastern Bulgaria, and dated to the same period. Executed in the same ‘plastic style’ as the Mezek chariot artifacts from southern Bulgaria (see ‘The Mezek Syndrome’ article), from a morphological and stylistic perspective the closest analogies are the Celtic ‘bead heads’ found among the Celts of central and eastern Europe, examples of which come from sites such as Mangalia, Piscolt and Vác (Rustoiu 2008), as well as from sites in Bulgaria such as the aforementioned Appolonia Pontica (Sozopol), Mogilanska Tumulus (Vratza region), Mavrova Tumulus (Starosel, Plovdiv region), Burgas, Kavarna (Dobruja region), etc.

Gold Celtic ‘Janus Head’ pendant from Schumen region, northeastern Bulgaria (4th/3rd c. BC)


2. Lazarov 2010:105 and figs. 5/4 – 5/6; see also New Celtic Material from Bulgaria articles 1 + 2.


4. BAS (Bulgarian Academy of Science) Reports, 2005 = Археологически Институт с Музей – БАН. Археологически открития и разкопки през 2004 г. XLIV Национална Археологическа Конференция. София 2005 P. 136 – 137

5. See ‘Killing the Objects’ article.

6. Tonkova, Gotzev 2008. See ‘Killing the Objects’ article with relevant cites.


8. V. Megaw, personal communication. I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Megaw for his expert opinion on this issue.


12. See note 4