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CELTIC WARRIOR TRAPPINGS

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ABSTRACT. This study's objective tests the historical accuracy of classical literary texts regarding the profile of the Celtic fighting man during the Iron Age. Archaeological data were consulted to present an authentic sketch of the armaments used by the La Tène Celts. Results indicate that the image of the La Tène Celtic warrior, namely the Irish, British, and Gaulish tribes show a slight variance in weaponry.

KEYWORDS. La Tène, Celtic warrior, Britain, Gaul, Irish, Iron Age, *lanciae*, javelin, Battersea shield, Diodorus Siculus.

The profile of the Celtic fighting man has been recorded by classical Roman and Greek ethnographers throughout the first century BC, beginning most notably with Julius Caesar's *De bello Gallico* (48–50 BC) and Diodorus Siculus (wrote c.60–30 BC), who had added his commentary to Posidonius's (c.135–c.50 BC) *Histories*.¹ Diodorus's

¹ B. Cunliffe, *The ancient Celts* (London 1997) 6-7.

observations offer a vivid portrayal regarding the traditional accessories of a Celtic warrior:

... man-sized shields decorated in individual fashion ... they wear bronze helmets which possess large projecting figures ... some have iron breast-plates of chain-mail while others fight naked²

Classical commentators and the archaeology of the La Tène period provide the first material image of a Celtic warrior. The early classical texts of Julius Caesar and Diodorus Siculus impart valuable observations on the description of the Celtic warrior in the La Tène period (500 BC – AD 100) that can be attested through archaeological evidence. Caesar's *De bello Gallico* is a chronicle of his military campaigns in Gaul and Britannia 48–50 BC.³ In Books I-VII, he gives detailed annotations on the geography, nature, and social order of the Celts.⁴ In Book IV, he writes that when the Roman forces landed in Britannia they encounter an army of cavalry and chariots:

The Natives [Britons] realizing the intention of the Romans, sent forward their cavalry and chariot fighters, a type of warrior which they regularly employ in battle.⁵

It is obvious from the short excerpt that the chariot warrior played a significant role in warfare rather than cavalry. Julius Caesar's explanation of their method of fighting demonstrates the importance of this particular soldier:

... when they [the Britons] have worked their way through the squadrons of their own cavalry, they leap down from the chariots and fight on foot. Meanwhile, the charioteers withdraw gradually from the battle and place the chariots in such a way that, if the chariot-fighters are hard pressed by a large number of the enemy, they have a convenient retreat to their own lines.⁶

² J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* (C) 60 (1960), 251-70.

³ Cunliffe, *Ancient Celts*, 6-7.

⁴ J. Pearl, *Caesar's Gallic war* (New York 1962) 1-277.

⁵ *ibid.* 122.

⁶ *ibid.* 129.

The actual steering of the vehicle lies with the charioteer while the chariot fighter is responsible for waging war. The chariot warrior is thus given fewer restrictions in regards to hurling or slashing with his weaponry and engaging in single combat at the same time as the charioteer withdraws quickly back to his defences. This tactic would indeed offer the chariot fighter a better advantage against the oncoming adversaries as opposed to the horse soldier.

Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson stated that a typical Iron Age Celtic war chariot came equipped with two iron tired wheels, a seat for the charioteer, and was 'drawn by two horses yoked to a pole'.⁷ His source of information is mainly derived from various early Irish texts. Jackson's claim can also be supported through the archaeological record. Throughout Britain, the two-wheeled chariot is found; in Ireland, however, there is sparse evidence. The artefacts found thus far consist for the most part of one wooden yoke, two bronze mounts, 140 bronze horse bits, and 90 pendants that may or may not have been used for decoration purposes.⁸ Given the insufficient archaeological information for the chariot in Iron Age Ireland, it is difficult to ascertain whether the chariot fighter existed in this area.

Diodorus Siculus reports in his Histories that the Celts wielded in battle large shields that were embellished with '... projecting bronze animals of fine workmanship, which serve for defence as well as decoration ...'.⁹ Ornamental shields of this nature do exist. Discovered in the River Thames at Battersea, London, an oblong shield with 'facing of copper alloy sheeting' is enhanced in geometric shapes and inset with red glass.¹⁰ James Simon refutes Diodorus Siculus's account regarding the ornamental shields as serving for defence. He maintains that '... depictions and surviving metal facings from ceremonial shields (too flimsy for combat) show they were embellished with symbols such as torcs and animal figures'.¹¹ Copper is a soft metal and requires either

⁷ K. H. Jackson, *The oldest Irish tradition: a window on the Iron Age* (Cambridge 1964) 17.

⁸ J. P. Mallory, *Aspects of the Táin* (Belfast 1992) 148.

⁹ Tierney, 'Celtic ethnography of Posidonius', 251.

¹⁰ Cunliffe, *Ancient Celts*, 68.

¹¹ J. Simon, *The world of the Celts* (London 1993) 75.

tin or brass as alloying solutions to add strength.¹² Since this particular shield has copper alloy sheeting then it is possible that its function could have been both defensive and ceremonial.

Kenneth Jackson presents an altogether different style of shield that is constructed from alder wood, circular, and the central boss is, once again, enhanced with design.¹³ A round shield was unearthed in a bog at Clonoura, Co. Tipperary, Ireland. It is somewhat similar to Jackson's version, although there are a few variations. Fashioned from thin sheets of wood, the shield is protected by leather as well as the central umbo.¹⁴ The umbo operates as a handgrip where a leather or metal strip is inserted into the back.¹⁵ The artistry on this shield is simple, with two roundels at the top and bottom.¹⁶ Most archaeological data concerning wood type of Celtic shields are lacking and additional research is needed.

The javelin and sword seem to be the two principal instruments with which the Celtic soldier armed himself. Julius Caesar remarks numerous times in Books III-VII of how the Gauls would 'rush down from all sides and hurled stones and javelins upon the rampart'.¹⁷ Diodorus Siculus gives an detailed sketch of the javelin:

The spears which they [Celts] brandish in battle and which they call *lanciae*, have iron heads a cubit or more in length and little less than their two palms breath ... some of their javelins are forged with a straight head, while some are spiral with breaks, throughout their entire length so that the blow not only cuts but also tears the flesh, and the recovery of the spear tears open the wound.¹⁸

Here, Diodorus Siculus is showing that the Celts employed two classes of spears that performed to some extent diverse roles. The first is an

¹² American Society for Metals, 'How alloying elements affect the properties of copper alloys', <http://www.matweb.com/reference/copper-alloys.asp> [cited 1990 17-18].

¹³ Jackson, *Oldest Irish tradition*, 16.

¹⁴ Cunliffe, *Ancient Celts*, 97.

¹⁵ *ibid.* 97.

¹⁶ *ibid.* 97.

¹⁷ Pearl, *Caesar's Gallic war*, 81.

¹⁸ Tierney, 'The Celtic ethnography of Posidonius', 251.

iron head *lanciae* that could pierce through flesh, and the second is spiralled in order to inflict severe damage on the opponent.

Jackson points out that the warrior 'carried one or two throwing javelins or a broad-bladed thrusting spear'.¹⁹ He suggests that the broad-bladed thrusting spear may be associated with the riveted spearhead. J. P. Mallory indicates that no more than seven iron spearheads have been excavated in Ireland.²⁰ Barry Cunliffe's work, on the other hand, shows that Mallory's argument is rather weak. A large collection in Switzerland has yielded a variety of iron spearheads along with 'serrated, flame-shaped, and hollow ground blades' that correspond to Diodorus Siculus's account.²¹ Although archaeology has revealed that an assortment of iron spearheads were being forged in the La Tène areas, Ireland may present a fairly modest example of a La Tène zone given the fact that a small amount of spearheads have been uncovered and the overall design remains static.

There are numerous surviving Iron Age swords in the archaeological record. Once again, Diodorus Siculus comments that the swords are 'as long as the javelins of other peoples'.²² Mallory explains that the Celts possessed two varieties of swords. The first is a short thrusting weapon whose blade measures 38 cm and the blade of the second thrusting sword is 48 cm.²³ Both weapons are made from iron and their hilts constructed either from bone or wood.²⁴ Judging from Diodorus Siculus's description, it is more than likely that he is referring to the second type. Kenneth Jackson, on the contrary, argues that the 'long iron sword, often described as gold hilted, which accounts of fighting show was used as a sabre for cutting rather than as a rapier for thrusting'.²⁵ Archaeological evidence reveals that this is not an Iron Age sword and is instead a weapon that originates from the Viking period in

¹⁹ Jackson, *Oldest Irish tradition*, 15.

²⁰ Mallory, *Aspects of the Táin*, 137.

²¹ Cunliffe, *Ancient Celts*, 94.

²² Tierney, 'The Celtic ethnography of Posidonius', 251.

²³ Mallory, *Aspects of the Táin*, 132.

²⁴ *ibid.* 132

²⁵ Jackson, *Oldest Irish tradition*, 15. The sword he refers to is from the Táin.

Ireland. The blades are wider and are effective in slashing as well as having pommels decorated with gilt copper or silver.²⁶

The image of the La Tène Celtic warrior can vary depending upon the region in question. In Britannia, the soldiers are chariot-fighters whereas in Ireland there is scant evidence to argue a similar function. The shields are more or less alike in both countries. The javelins are primarily associated with Gaul, a small number are found in Ireland and a mixture of different spearhead types are found mostly in Switzerland. The short and long thrusting swords was a standard weapon used by Celtic groups throughout the La Tène areas including Ireland.

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²⁶ Mallory, *Aspects of the Táin*, 132.