

# ANCIENT CELTS

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# Introduction

The history of the Celtic warrior spans 3,000 years — a remarkably long military tradition. In comparison, the history of the Roman soldier covers barely one thousand years, and that of the Medieval knight is just 500 years. That a consistent collection of traits should survive so long and be identifiable even today is a wonder in itself. Take for example two descriptions of Celtic warriors. The first: 'When [they] took to their broadswords, what a havoc they made! They drove everything before them, and walls could not resist their fury.' The second: 'They sing as they advance into battle, they yell and leap in the air, clashing their weapons against their shields. . . . We have learned that if you can bear up to their first onslaught, that initial charge of blind passion, then their limbs will grow weary. . . .' Both observations describe fearless warriors who embrace close combat, charging with blades in their hands, but the descriptions are separated by 2,000 years. The first refers to Scottish Highlanders in Canada at the battle for Quebec in 1757; the second describes Celtic warriors in Asia in 189 BC.

This enduring reputation for ferocity and fearlessness is impressive, but surely one must wonder if not all warriors in a combat situation are full of courage and action? The answer is, of course, yes, but based on chronicles spanning several centuries, the fact remains that the Celts took this one step further, thus guaranteeing for themselves a ranking position as mercenaries that would endure throughout the ancient world and long afterwards. They seem to have been particularly keen on

fighting, it being a central part of their culture, but to this they added an extra dimension that can only be termed 'madness'. It is said that in their earliest incarnation the Celts fought completely naked except for a chain that secured a sword around their waists. They were notorious for the atrocities they committed against both civilians and soldiers, and they had a penchant for collecting enemy heads. In marble sculptures commissioned by a Greek king in the 3rd century BC, Celtic warriors are represented as being naked except for the 'torc' (a metal neck ornament) around their necks and preferring to kill themselves when cornered rather than submit.

In later Celtic literature, the battle 'madness' of the Celtic warrior is described as a transformation from a man into a monster. In The Tain, the hero Cuchulainn is described thus at the beginning of a battle: 'A spasm tore through him. It distorted him, made him a monstrous thing. Every bone and organ shook like a tree in a storm. His insides made a twist within his skin. His shins filled with the bulging muscles of his calves. Balls of sinew as big as a warrior's fist pumped up his body. His head swelled and throbbed. Veins dilated. Suddenly, he gulped one eye deep into his head so not even a wild crane could pull it out from his skull. The skin of his cheeks then peeled back from his jaws to reveal the gristle and bone of his gullet. His jaws crashed together and foam oozed up out of his throat. His hair twisted and bristled like a red thornbush.' In this passage, the artist is coming to terms with the terrible anger that seizes a man in battle and transforms him into a raging

animal. At the end of the battle sequence, the same hero parades before his people, but this time he is a handsome man who reassures them with his good looks that he is at peace again. It was this fury that the Greeks and Romans wished to harness in battle, and it was this spirit, centuries later, that the Duke of Wellington expected from his Irish and Scots soldiers when they blasted one volley of musket fire and then set out with fixed bayonets in nothing less than an old Celtic charge.

The Celts themselves were immensely proud of their fighting skills. This pride is reflected not only in the beautiful ornamentation of their weapons and armor, but also in the biggest and the very smallest items in their world. They were especially fine cavalymen, a relic perhaps of their original homeland on the Eurasian steppe, and this horsemanship helped them achieve their early domination of western and northern Europe. In Britain, on the hillsides of their domains in southern England, they carved giant white horses out of the chalk soil so that none of the surviving aboriginal inhabitants would be in doubt about who now ruled this land. Similarly, when the time came to cast tiny coins to help them carry out their extensive trade, the Celts embellished them with images of chariots and horses, abstracted down to the simple elements of bulging legs and flying cloaks to represent the speed and dynamism of these martial people. In this book, the following marvelous paintings by Angus McBride continue this visual heritage of Celtic pride and ferocity and help to explain some of their immense history.

## Celts on shore of Lake Hallstatt, second half of 6th century BC



(Plate 1)

**H**allstatt is a village near Salzburg in Austria, and the ancient Celtic burial places discovered there in the 19th century have given their name to this earliest period of Celtic domination in Europe, which lasted from the 7th to early 5th centuries BC. The name of the village, like many other European sites, such as Halle and Hallein, indicates the presence of a salt mine and the importance this played in prehistoric trading. Salt was a great source of wealth to the prehistoric warlord and his community. It preserved food, made it taste better, and could be traded across Europe for other goods. The impressive preservative quality of the mineral was clearly demonstrated when the body of a dead salt miner, after being excavated from an old collapsed tunnel, showed little trace of decay.

The Celtic warriors of central Europe grew rich through the salt trade, and their power and influence expanded from the Danube along the Rhine into France and southern Germany. Bronze, made of easily combined tin and copper, was the dominant metal in the early part of this period, being superseded by the locally available iron that added to Celtic wealth. Farming was fully developed, but raiding was regularly carried out. This brought in additional livestock, as well as slaves, which could be traded (along with salt and iron) to the sophisticated cultures of Italy and Greece to the south, providing the Celts with wine and luxury goods. It was an era of expansion for the Celts, one in which their martial culture had little serious opposition, and they soon came to dominate much of western Europe, though their constant intertribal feuding prevented them from forming any kind of organized empire.

The warriors in the painting reflect the affluence of Celtic warlords and their followers during this period. Bronze and iron are combined for both decoration and strengthening weapons. The figure on the left wears a crested, domed bronze helmet that is typical of the earliest Celtic helmets found in central Europe, such as near Passau in Bavaria, and which are associated with the Urnfield culture of about 1000 BC. This type of helmet changed little over subsequent centuries and influenced other cultures such as the Etruscans. He also wears a bronze breastplate decorated with repousse studs. His bronze sword has the 'sloping shoulders' crossguard typical of all Celtic swords in this early period. Early classical writers describe the woolen clothes of the Celts as 'checkered' or 'multi-colored' and this has been interpreted as a

form of tartan. A fur 'sporrán' further foreshadows Celtic cultures to come.

The central warlord figure wears a bronze band of armor around his waist. Wide battle belts are often featured in Celtic myth, as are battle aprons. Certainly it is a development similar to the belt hangings worn by the Roman soldiers of the early Imperial period, but here it is very much a decorative object that serves little protective purpose. His sword has an iron blade that swells out towards the tip. Hallstatt swords could be very big and long, suggesting they were mainly used as slashing weapons, largely from horseback or chariots. His bronze dagger bears a hilt with two rounded horns, typical of 'antennae' decorations of the period.

The warrior on the right carries a boar standard, a familiar emblem throughout the ancient Celtic period, and his iron helmet bears feather wings. Animal myths featured strongly in Celtic legend and clearly some association with the powers of animals is intended here. Leading warriors were believed to transform from their human form into that of a monster that possessed animalistic powers as a result of a battle rage. This belief was also found in later cultures such as that of the Vikings. There is also a long tradition of feathers being worn by hunter warriors in eastern Europe, culminating in the Polish Winged Hussars of the 17th and 18th centuries. The warrior on the right also wears a padded tunic decorated with bronze studs, and a hexagonal shield rests against his legs. Long body shields are thought to have been inspired by early Italian examples.





## Celts on shore of Lake Neuchatel, first half of 5th century BC



(Plate 2)

**L**a Tène means 'the shallows', and it was in the shallow part of Lake Neuchatel in Switzerland that Celtic warriors made offerings to the gods in the shape of swords and other weapons. (Human skeletons have also been found, suggesting perhaps that the gods wanted human sacrifices as well). Between 1906 and 1917, many of these objects were uncovered, giving the name of La Tène to the period of Celtic activity from the 5th to the 1st centuries BC.

The main difference between the Celts of this period and those of the earlier Halstatt era is a change in their burial rites. Warlords were now buried in light two-wheeled chariots rather than heavy four-wheeled wagons. The use of chariots is somewhat of a puzzle in Celtic warfare. The terrain of central Europe is not suited for chariot warfare as practiced in the ancient Middle East, when lines of chariots would be used to break masses of foot soldiers, with archers and light infantry using them as mobile platforms. Caesar describes them taking part in battle, but more as demonstrations of military prowess in the prelude to contact, with chariot teams dismounting to fight. It also seems likely that chariots were used by leading warriors and warlords in a similar manner to that of the heroic warriors of Homeric Greece, who would use them for a grand arrival on the battlefield but would dismount to fight, or in the case of the Celts, mount their horses to fight. These chariots were then used at the end of the conflict for either a speedy pursuit of a defeated enemy or a rapid flight. Cuchulainn, ancient Irish hero of *The Tain*, used a chariot covered with spikes and barbs to burst upon his enemies like a thunderstorm.

The Celtic warriors in the painting are armed with weapons similar to those found in Lake Neuchatel, including broad-bladed spears and long, iron slashing swords. Bronze body armor and helmets are worn alongside large oval shields made of oak planks reinforced with a central wooden spine and bronze or iron bosses. The remains of such shields have been found in the shallows of the lake the warriors gaze upon (perhaps they are considering what sacrifices to make prior to a battle). While the bronze armor worn by early Celts is thought to have been influenced by southern cultures such as the Mycenaean Greeks, the Romans credited the Celts with the invention of mail armor. Iron rings were fixed together to form an interlocking tunic, with extra layers of mail secured across the shoulders to reinforce it and protect it from the

downward blows of swords. Examples of Celtic mail are very rare, and it is only through the Romans, who copied its use widely, that the Celtic origin for this breakthrough in armor can be sustained.

Armed with strong iron swords and spears, La Tène Celts swept across Europe, supplanting their own earlier cultures and taking by storm almost every corner of the ancient Mediterranean world. They rode into Spain, Italy, and Greece and even passed into Asia, where they established the Celtic state of Galatia in present-day Turkey. Celts continued westward and also took control of France, Britain, and Ireland, devastating the aboriginal inhabitants with their superior military technology and use of horses. The stage was now set for their conflict with the only other military culture that matched them for ferocity and efficiency—the armies of Rome.







## Hillfort in central Europe, second half of 5th century BC



(Plate 3)

Hillforts were the centers of power of the great Celtic tribes and their warriors. Existing in western Europe before the arrival of the Celts, they nevertheless made these awesome defensive positions very much their own. The building of hillforts accelerated and the fortifications became more complex. To simple ramparts of earth and wood were added facing walls of sheer stone, the rubble infilling being braced with cross-timbers. On top of this were placed timber palisades with walkways and platforms from which they could fight. Also, towers were located at regular intervals. Sometimes, whether by accident or intentionally, the wood and rubble interior of the ramparts would be set on fire. This resulted in a kind of vitrification of the stone by which it fused into one solid mass. The biggest hillforts had several ramparts and palisades ringing the community inside with a complex entrance of gateways cut through the earth mounds. These were sometimes protected by additional flanking guard chambers, wooden bridges overhead, or outworks to prevent a direct attack on the gate.

In Britain, the most impressive surviving Iron Age hillfort, which is now called Maiden Castle, is located near Dorchester. A 47-acre site defended by three massive oval ramparts, its history began 5,000 years ago as a Neolithic camp. As the centuries passed, more and more earth was dug up and piled into ramparts. The hillfort reached its present giant state in the first century BC when the Celtic tribe of the Durotriges occupied it. A hundred years later, the Romans invaded Britain and the Second Augustan Legion under Vespasian assaulted it. A tremendous battle followed, and the remains of weapons and burnt timbers have been uncovered there. Many skeletons, which have also been unearthed, reveal bones cut with swords and, in one case, a backbone with an arrowhead inserted in it.

The most famous Celtic hillfort, however, must be that of Alesia near Dijon in central France. It was here in 52 BC that Caesar confronted Vercingetorix, the great Gallic warlord. Alesia was an impregnable hillfort on a plateau above the countryside, surrounded on three sides by deep ravines with rivers running through them. Wooden palisades on top of earth mounds completed the defense. Caesar could see it would be impossible to take this awesome fortress by assault. Instead, he decided on a siege, but Vercingetorix could call upon other Celtic tribes to support him and lead counterattacks, crushing the Romans

between two forces. Therefore, Caesar embarked on a massive building project of his own, erecting one ring of fortifications eleven miles long aimed at Vercingetorix and another bigger ring of fortifications to protect himself against any relief force. With this in place, Caesar settled into a siege. Though Celtic forces came to Vercingetorix's aide, Caesar defeated them piece by piece until eventually the Gallic warlord was forced to concede defeat. With this end, Caesar had effectively conquered Celtic France. Thus, Celtic hillforts symbolized the power of the Celts but also proved their eventual downfall.

The senior warriors depicted in this painting wear typical arms and armor of the La Tène period. The central chieftain wears a bronze cone helmet similar to that found in Berru in Marne in France. It features an opening for a plume at the top and a slight neckguard at the rear. His scabbard is attached by an iron chain like those found in Champagne in France. The chieftain on the far right wears decorative brooches to secure his cloak. Typical of La Tène metalwork, they could be either cut-out metal, inlaid with enamel, or gilded. Aside from native-made decoration, the Celts also had access to Greek or Latin objects, or some from even further afield like those made by the steppe peoples, through their extensive trade networks. The Celts favored plumes and crests for their metal helmets, but they also wore helmets made of softer materials, such as leather, which have not survived.





Angus McBride  
1987



## Celts attack Etruscans, northern Italy, late 4th century BC



(Plate 4)

The Celts were at the peak of their power in central Europe in the 4th century BC, and their warriors were hungry for conquests. One potential area that attracted their interest was the rich agricultural land beyond the Alps in northern Italy that was watered by the Po river, but this region was held by the Etruscans. The Etruscans themselves were a martial race who had expanded over much of Italy, attacking the Greek settlements in the south and adopting many aspects of Greek warfare. Celtic penetration of northern Italy had begun peaceably as trade grew between the two cultures, but by the early 4th century their interest had turned into raiding, and then full-scale invasion.

The Insubres grabbed territory in Lombardy where the town of Melpum, near Milan, fell to them around 396 BC. The Boii drove further into Italy, giving their name to Bononia, now known as Bologna. The Etruscan settlement of Marzabotto was sacked, and in its cemetery have been found iron swords typical of the La Tène period. Felsina held out until 350 BC when it too fell after a struggle between its Etruscan defenders and the Celtic raiders. Commemorated on a tombstone, this battle is depicted as combat between Etruscans on horseback dressed in Greek fashion against naked Celts on foot, who are armed with swords and large oval shields. By the end of the century, Etruscan power had been shattered in northern Italy, and the region became known in Latin as Cisalpine Gaul. But the Celts had not finished. Their warriors rode even further south to confront the Romans, who were not yet a major military power. At Allia, a Roman army was overwhelmed by the wild charge of a band of Celts. With their formations broken up, the Romans found themselves outclassed by the bigger, stronger Celts, whose long swords outreached their short stabbing blades. Following the collapse of the Roman force, the Celts advanced on Rome and sacked the city. The Celt leader, Brennus, demanded his weight in gold. It was an outrage the Romans would never forget or forgive.

The Romans learned much from the Celts and transformed their warfare as a result. They adopted Celtic mail armor, oval shields and Celtic helmet types, such as the peaked coolus. They learned to weaken the Celtic charge with a volley of javelins and then use their shields to take the full weight of the Celtic slashing swords, while they stabbed at their enemies' guts. Eventually, a hundred years later, the Romans turned the tables on the Celts and invaded northern Italy. In one confrontation, a Roman

general was challenged to single combat by the leader of the Insubres, a traditional Celtic form of heroic warfare. The Roman general rode forward into the killing zone between the two assembled armies. Viridomarus, the north Italian Celtic leader, bellowed that he had been born from the waters of the Rhine and would make quick work of the Roman invader. He kicked his horse into action and hurled his spear at the Roman who threw his javelin as the Celt charged towards him. Both spears missed their targets, and the two warlords clashed with sword and shield, each side cheering their leader on, but the duel came to a sudden end. The Roman's sword slashed the Celt's throat, and his bent, golden torc fell to the ground. By 225 BC, at the battle of Telamon, the last independent Celtic tribe in northern Italy had been defeated, and the region became part of the emerging Roman Empire.

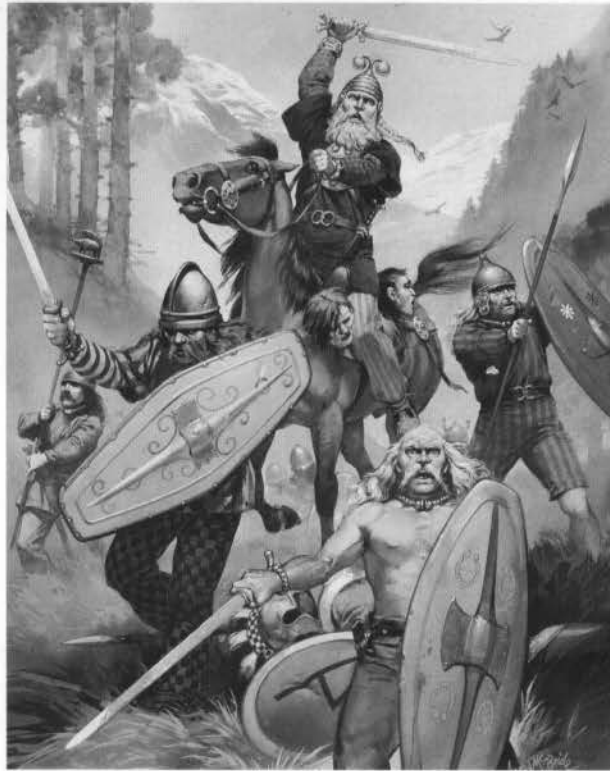
The Celtic warriors in the painting wear La Tène-style helmets and shields. The leading warrior holds an iron sword with anthropomorphic hilt similar to those found in France (the sword pommel is formed in the shape of a man's head, his arms up in the air and his legs spread to form the curved crossguard). The second warrior holds the head of a decapitated Etruscan. Headhunting was a fundamental part of Celtic trophy gathering in war as they believed a man's spirit resided in his head. Celtic warriors would go as far as removing the heads from their slain leaders to prevent them from being captured and mutilated by the enemy.







## Celtic raid on northern Greece, first half of 3rd century BC



(Plate 5)

The Greeks called the Celts 'Keltai', and the greatest Greek of them all, Alexander the Great, was intrigued by this barbarian race living to the north of his homeland of Macedonia. He questioned a Celtic envoy to his court, asking him what he feared most, expecting him to say 'You, my lord.' Instead, the proud Celt answered honestly. 'We fear only that the sky fall and crush us, that the earth open and swallow us, that the sea rise and overwhelm us.' Otherwise, they feared nothing or no one. Alexander was insulted. His great war machine would soon devastate the Persian Empire and he would become the greatest conqueror the ancient world had known. What did these insignificant barbarians know? He controlled his rage and concentrated his considerable force on the Greeks to the south of him and on Asia to the east. This was a mistake. Some fifty years later these insignificant barbarians would descend on Greece, kill a Macedonian king, and ravage the classical world.

The Celts caught the Greeks at a weak time in their history. Following the death of Alexander, the Macedonian Empire had broken up and the Greek states were divided once again. Brennos, the leader of the Celtic war party that crossed the Danube, told his warriors of the riches that awaited them in the affluent Greek towns where temples were piled high with gold and silver offerings to the gods. It was the summer of 279 BC when the raiding Celts followed the traditional path into Greece, using passes through the mountainous territory. The most famous of all these passes was that at Thermopylae where two centuries earlier the Spartans had fought a bitter last stand against the invading Persians. Now another Greek army stood ready to take on the latest invaders.

The Athenian Callippos commanded around 25,000 men, mainly foot soldiers fighting in the usual Hoplite manner. The Celts were not an unknown power to the Greeks, having served as mercenaries in their inter-city wars. As such they were highly regarded, and even feared. Aristotle puts his finger on their particular fighting character: 'We have no word for the man who is excessively fearless; perhaps one may call such a man mad, or bereft of feeling, who fears nothing, neither earthquakes nor waves, as they say of the Celts.' This battle madness would later be interpreted by the Celts themselves as a transformation of the human frame into some kind of animal monster, lasting as long as the trauma of battle lasted and scaring their own side as much as

the enemy.

Brennos is said to have led an army 200,000 strong, but this is typical of Greek chroniclers who always overestimated the size of barbarian armies. In reality, a raiding army would be no larger than a few thousand horsemen, with additional people comprising camp followers and prisoners. The Greeks tried to hinder the Celtic advance by destroying bridges along the river Spercheius. Brennos responded by sending warriors across the swift waters who used their long shields as rafts. Forcing the local population to rebuild the bridges, the Celts continued across the river. But being intent on plundering the local region, they were slow to advance to battle. In the meantime, the Greeks gathered. Their resistance had been stiffened by wild rumors of atrocities, including cannibalism, committed by the Celts. The battle began at sunrise with the Greeks having an advantage because of the rough terrain. The Celts could not deploy their horsemen to great effect, and the Greeks fought in close order with spears and shields. Nevertheless, the Celts attacked with characteristic disregard for their own lives, pulling spears from their own bodies and hurling them back at the Greeks. A separate action was fought near the pass along the coastal marsh where the Greeks had rowed their triremes. There the Greeks pelted the Celts with arrows and projectiles from slingshots. Following the day's fighting, which produced many dead but no clear winner, the Celts withdrew to assess their situation.

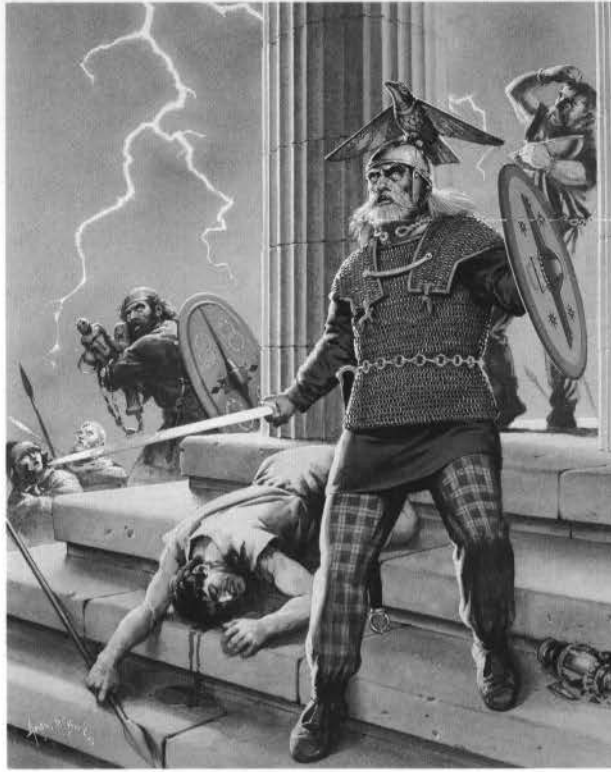
A week later, Brennos sent some of his horsemen to raid the neighboring territory of Aetolia. This caused discord in the Greek ranks at Thermopylae because some of the Greeks were from Aetolia and could not stand by while their farms and families were terrorized by the Celts. The Aetolian departure weakened the Greek army. Next, Brennos gained the support of local herdsmen who were happy to get the Celts out of their own land and into someone else's territory. They lead the Celts through secret paths around Thermopylae, and soon the Greek army was surrounded. Under the cover of a morning mist, the Celts charged the Greeks, forcing them to fight a desperate retreat to their ships. Hurling themselves into the galleys, the Greeks were lucky to avoid annihilation. Brennos was now in possession of Thermopylae, and the rest of Greece awaited his next move.







## **Brennos sacks Delphi, first half of 3rd century BC**



(Plate 6)

Having conquered the main Greek army of resistance at Thermopylae, Brennos wanted his prize—a prize measured in gold and silver. His warriors had also been promised riches, and unless he delivered it they would begin to wander off in their own war packs looking for loot. To keep his Celtic army together, Brennos ordered them to march south through the gorges of Parnassos to Delphi. Situated on the southern slopes of Mount Parnassos, Delphi was the heart of the Greek universe. It was where the sky gods of the ancient Greek invaders, led by Apollo, had slain the Python god of the prehistoric earth worshippers. Now it was the shrine of the sun god Apollo, and a town had grown around it, one rich with the donations of worshippers. The temple itself was full of treasures gathered over the centuries as tributes to the gods. It was a worthy prize, but the god Apollo would not relinquish it easily.

When word of the Celtic advance reached Delphi, its people demanded a message from the priestess of the temple. Through her the god Apollo said: 'I will defend what is mine'. Earlier he had predicted this combat: 'There will come to us in the future a struggle we all wage together, when, raising the barbaric sword and Celtic war, latter-day Titans will rush upon us like snow from the very far West.' And the god was as good as his word. As the Celts approached the temple through the mountain passes, the ground began to shake. Rocks rolled down from the cliffs and crushed the warriors. The sky darkened and lightening veined the sky. Fireballs burst out from the clouds and consumed some of the Celts. Snow and frost killed many of the wounded. Even the ghosts of former Greek heroes were said to have made an appearance. Despite the fearless nature of the Celts, these supernatural events were the things they feared most. Nevertheless, according to the Greek chroniclers, the Celts pressed on, for their hunger for treasure was greater than their fear of Apollo. It was now up to the couple of thousand Greek warriors defending the temple to stop the Celts. Brennos was in no mood for compromise. His warriors swept aside the Greek soldiers, murdered the sacred priestess, and looted both the town and the temple.

The Greek world was outraged by this act. It is remembered in the classical world as one of the worst atrocities committed by barbarians from the north. For Brennos it was a great coup. Much of the treasure found its way back into the Celtic world north and west of the Danube. Some was even donated to their own gods

in the sacred lake at Toulouse. But Brennos had to pay a price for this triumph. On the long journey back, the outraged Greeks continued to attack the Celts, hurling arrows and stones at them from the tops of mountain passes. One night a panic seized the Celts and they ended up killing many of their own warriors. Brennos was wounded in one of these attacks and he later died. It was said that the god Apollo had finally enacted his revenge.

The painting shows Brennos at the height of his triumph on the steps of the temple at Delphi. His warriors carry away the sacred treasure, but all around them a storm rages, expressing the anger of the violated god. Brennos wears a mail shirt based on that depicted in later Roman sculptures. It includes a double layer of mail over the shoulders. One of the oldest specimens of interlinked mail yet found, which was uncovered in a 3rd century BC Celtic grave in Romania, adds to the evidence that the Celts were the creators of this form of armor. Brennos wears a chain belt around his waist and a gold torc — that most typical of Celtic adornments— around his neck. The torc in both its gold and more simple iron versions may well have been a symbol of being a freeman. Examples have been found throughout the Celtic world from Turkey to Britain.

After the sack of Delphi, the Celts retreated to Macedonia where many of them remained, living off the land. Some of them grew greedy and decided to attack the camp of the wealthy Greek warlord Antigonus. It was a night attack, but the Celts found the Greek camp empty. They had been tricked. Antigonus decisively defeated them at the battle of Lysimacheia in the winter of 278 BC. Realizing they were now no longer masters of Greece, the Celts let another adventure beckon them. A war band marched eastward towards Byzantium and crossed over the sea into Asia. Here they fought as mercenaries for the king of Bithynia before they moved further east to establish their own kingdom in what today is the land around Ankara in Turkey. This kingdom, which became known as Galatia, was the furthest east the Celts ever ventured from Europe.







## Celtic mercenaries in Egypt, first half of 3rd century BC



(Plate 7)

A century before the Celts invaded Greece, they had served in Greek armies as mercenaries, where their skills as horsemen had been particularly valued. Xenophon, a Greek chronicler and cavalry officer of the 4th century BC, describes their performance in the wars between the Greek city states, in this instance against the Thebans: 'Few though they were, they were scattered here and there. They charged towards the Thebans, threw their javelins, and then dashed away as the enemy moved towards them, often turning around and throwing more javelins. While pursuing these tactics, they sometimes dismounted for a rest. But if anyone charged upon them while they were resting, they would easily leap onto their horses and retreat. If enemy warriors pursued them far from the Theban army, these horsemen would then turn around and wrack them with their javelins. Thus they manipulated the entire Theban army, compelling it to advance or fall back at their will.' This is a fascinating description of the Celts in battle, untainted by mythic visions of them as naked barbarians. Here, they seem to have the capability of performing as dragoons would in later centuries, acting as mounted light infantry, able to fight on horseback and on foot.

The reputation of Celtic mercenaries extended as far as the Greek world and, following the collapse of Alexander the Great's empire, there were several Greek warlords ruling over kingdoms around the Mediterranean. In Egypt, the Ptolemaic dynasty reigned, but it brought with it a dependency on Greek mercenaries. Sometimes this reliance could be exploited, and around 259 BC, Ptolemy II, who was on the verge of war with a rival, found his own Celtic troops had mutinied. They wanted to set up their own Celtic kingdom along the Nile. Ptolemy defeated them and took severe retribution. Those that were not killed were left on an island in the Nile to starve to death. This experience, however, did not prevent Ptolemy II from recruiting new Celtic mercenaries years later.

Ptolemy III and Ptolemy IV continued to recruit Celts into their army, collecting them from the Hellespont, the thin arm of sea between Asia and Europe, suggesting that many Celts remained in Macedonia after their defeat by the Greeks. One time, a group of Celts had to be shipped back because they had become demoralized by an eclipse of the moon, believing this signified their defeat, and they refused to fight. On another occasion, the Celts proved decisive. At the battle of Raphia, a force of 4,000

Celtic horsemen fought with the Egyptian army against the Syrians, who also had some Celtic mercenaries in their ranks. As the battle raged, some of the Egyptians fled from the combat and the Syrians pursued them. But when the Syrian infantry became disorganized, Ptolemy saw his opportunity and sent in his Celtic cavalry, who were never happier than when dealing with broken formations of foot soldiers. Xenophon recalls a similar opportunity when Celtic horsemen rode after fleeing Greeks, using their long swords to cut down the running foot soldiers.

The Celts in the painting are shown enjoying their period of service in Egypt, taking a ride in a boat along the Nile to see some of the sights, while their Egyptian servants cower around them, afraid of these tall, blond warriors wearing mail armor and bronze helmets. Indeed, they must have seemed just as exotic to the locals as Egypt seemed to them. There seems to be an arrogance about them, as though they are considering that this land could be theirs just for the taking. Generally, however, the Celts proved to be loyal troops, being used by Ptolemy V to suppress a rebellion. That the Celts themselves took this foreign service seriously is demonstrated by the survival of some graffiti left by Celtic warriors on the walls of the tomb of Seti I at the time of Ptolemy V. 'Of the Galatians,' they wrote, 'we, Thoas, Callistratos, Acannon and Apollonios, came, and a fox we caught here.' The graffiti was written in perfect Greek, indicating that as part of their service they had mastered the language of the Greek-led Egyptian army, just as all recruits of the Foreign Legion today are expected to learn French. It is also interesting to note that one of the Celts, or Galatians as they were also known, had a name derived from the Greek god Apollo, whose shrine they had sacked a hundred years earlier.







## Gallic refugees in Britain, middle of 1st century BC



(Plate 8)

Ulius Caesar was the nemesis of the Celts in Europe. The most successful of the Roman warlords, he turned the tide of Celtic military dominance in the ancient world. Until his arrival, the Celts enjoyed unrivaled power in western and central Europe. After him, things would never be quite the same, and supporters of Celtic independence would retreat to the outskirts of Britain and Ireland, the region known today as the Celtic fringe. The bad news for the Celts arrived between 65 and 60 BC when a German warlord named Ariovistus invaded the land of the Gauls (now France). At first the French Celts tried to use the German to defeat their own Celtic rivals, but this just gave him more power and encouragement. When the Gauls turned to Rome for help, Julius Caesar saw his opportunity. Never would the phrase 'divide and conquer' become more appropriate. On the invitation of the Celts, Caesar marched a Roman army into Gaul, thus beginning his conquest of the whole country.

Caesar played Celtic tribe against Celtic tribe, employing Celtic horsemen as mercenaries and winning weaker chieftains over to his side. It was only when he had marched into the heart of the country that the Celts began to rally themselves. In the north of Gaul, a particularly fierce confederation of tribes known as the Belgae stood in his way. Hardened by years of border warfare with the Germans, and possibly part German themselves, they were ferocious warriors, and Caesar took his time. He used Celtic horsemen allies to plunder the lands of the Belgae, thus weakening their resolve to confront him as they heard reports of their farms being ravaged by the Romans. Caesar dug in his main army behind entrenchments and waited for the skirmishing to take its toll, a strategy used by the Celts themselves centuries earlier in Greece. It could be that Caesar had read of this in the classical texts he carried with him. The strategy worked, though. The supplies of the main Belgic army began to run out and their forces broke apart under the strain of further raiding. Caesar now mobilized his main army, and the Belgae were defeated piece by piece.

The painting shows a couple of Gallic warriors who have become refugees, fled France, and crossed the English Channel to Britain, where they are telling a British Celtic chieftain of the fate that has befallen them. The British chieftain stands upon a splendid two-wheeled chariot of the type typical of La Tène Celts. They are fast, light vehicles, and some historians believe it was the Celts, not

the Romans, who first created the great roads of western Europe. These historians feel that the Celts built these long straight roads with planks of wood for their chariots to run along, and the Romans simply came later and covered them in stone. Celtic coins found in France show the dynamism expected of these chariots with horses with flaring nostrils and bulging thighs and riders with cloaks flying behind them. The British chieftain seen here wears a magnificent bronze helmet and carries a bronze shield decorated with inlaid colored glass. Both these items are based on objects found in the river Thames and dated to the first century BC. Some archaeologists, however, believe these objects were not intended for battle, but are ceremonial, the helmet perhaps being used on a sacred sculpture. Similar decorative weapons have been found as offerings to river gods. The symmetry of the patterns also suggests that these objects may have been made outside the Celtic world in Italy or the Near East. After all, the British Celts were part of a very sophisticated trading network covering all of Europe.

Events of 43 AD show that the British Celts did not learn from the experience of their fellow Celts across the Channel. The Atrebates of southern England were having a hard time defending themselves against the advances of the Catuvellauni, so they turned to the Romans for help. The Romans, of course, were only too pleased to intervene, and a Roman army soon landed in Britain. Over the next fifty years, Celtic tribes fought against Celtic tribes, with the Romans enjoying their support when it suited them, until Rome had added Britain as far as the Scottish lowlands to its empire. Gildas, a northern Briton, concluded in 540 AD that 'It has always been true of this people that we are weak in beating off the weapons of the outside enemy but strong in fighting amongst each other.' This defeat of Celtic power, however, should not be viewed as a complete calamity for the Celtic people and should be understood within the nature of Roman rule. The Empire was built very much by making room for local chieftains to rule their own territory just so long as they paid their taxes to the central authority. Thus, Celtic warlords continued to rule their regions in Britain and France just as they had done before hand, only now they lived in Roman-style villas, called themselves by Latin names, and drank Italian wine more frequently than they had before the armies of Caesar came.





Angus McBride '95



## Cassivellaunus, British chieftain, middle of 1st century BC



(Plate 9)

On a clear day in the middle of the 1st century BC, British Celts could stand on the chalk cliffs of Dover and see the flickering lights of the Roman Empire that had conquered their Gallic brothers. Refugees spoke of the sparkling iron and bronze armor of the legionaries and the great digging and excavation of fortifications. Some Britons advised helping their continental comrades and shipped supplies and warriors across the Channel. The Druids were apparently the driving force behind this assistance, and Caesar would never forgive them. In order to bring an end to this alliance, Caesar gathered a fleet together and in 54 BC he crossed the Channel and landed in southeast England.

Caesar's landing was unopposed, but the Celts watched the hundreds of ships and thousands of men with caution. Riding inland, Caesar encountered a group of Celts in chariots and on horseback. A skirmish followed in which Caesar's troops stormed a hillfort by using their shields in the classic 'tortoise shell' manner to force their way over the ramparts. All the time, word was passing through the tribes of southeast England that the invader must be opposed. The warlord they chose to unite under was Cassivellaunus, the first Briton to be named in a written history. Cassivellaunus was chieftain of the Catuvellauni who were, ironically, themselves recent invaders of Britain, having been originally part of the Belgic peoples in northern France before moving across the Channel to settle north of London. This reality must be fully appreciated as the Celts themselves made great play, and still do, of being the original inhabitants of Britain, but they had in fact displaced the true aboriginal inhabitants of Britain in invasions just as ruthless as those of the Romans or later peoples.

Cassivellaunus fought a guerrilla war against the Romans, harassing them with his cavalry and charioteers and forcing them to hide behind their entrenched camps. When overconfidence possessed the Britons, the Romans savaged them in a pitched battle, and Caesar advanced to the Thames. The Romans were now entering the territory of Cassivellaunus. Wooden stakes had been sunk into the river bed and Celtic warriors waited on the other side, but Caesar sent his men into the river, and even though only their heads just showed above the water, they managed to struggle across and drive the retreating Celts back into their homeland. It was now that Cassivellaunus's alliance began to weaken. The nearby tribe of the Trinovantes made a treaty with

Caesar in return for Roman help against the Catuvellauni. They even told Caesar where the great chieftain's hillfort lay.

Pulling the majority of his troops together, Caesar launched a massive attack that overwhelmed the hillfort and its defenders, but Cassivellaunus was nowhere to be found. Instead, the Celtic warlord had ordered an attack by the tribes of Kent, nearest to the Roman landing, to cut off Caesar's line of communication and supplies. Caesar was forced back to his base camp on the coast. No great damage was inflicted, but it seems to have brought both sides to their senses and, according to Caesar, Cassivellaunus offered terms for peace, submitted hostages and tribute money, and allowed Caesar to return to Gaul. Caesar certainly puts the best face on these events, but then the only account we have of the events is his. It seems likely, therefore, that Cassivellaunus had cleverly put pressure on Caesar's advance, compelling him to return to his base camp and abandon Britain. In this light, the Celtic warlord had won a great victory, forcing the Romans out of Britain.

The reconstruction of Cassivellaunus depicts him as a grand Celtic warlord wearing the decorative bronze armor described in the previous painting, based on examples found in the Thames, the front line of his territory north of London. To his right is a chariot and hillfort entrance, both typical of the British Celts. To his left is a warrior with a chest covered in blue body markings. One of the earliest names for the British Celts was 'Pretani', a word perhaps derived from the Celtic meaning 'people who paint themselves'. This later became 'Britanni', the name which came to signify the country and its people. Caesar recorded that the Britons covered their bodies with a blue stain, and many historians since have assumed this was achieved with woad, a natural blue pigment derived from a plant. The recovery of a well-preserved Celtic body from a marsh in Lindow in Cheshire, however, has contradicted this thought. It showed that the painted marks on his body were achieved with copper-rich clay containing azurite or malachite, which produces an intense blue.





## Celts in Roman service burn a Marcomanni village, late 2nd century AD



(Plate 10)

One of the many ways in which the Celts managed to co-exist comfortably with the Romans within their empire was by contributing warriors to the Roman army. Indeed, for many young Celtic men it was not merely a sign of tribute or subservience, but a great opportunity to join a truly international force, thereby enabling them to travel all around the Mediterranean world and perhaps make a fortune for themselves. It was very much the same spirit that enabled Scots Highlanders, centuries later, to be incorporated within the army of the British Empire and gain access to the entire globe, giving those who chose to become businessmen a chance to prosper mightily in the colonies. For the ancient Celts, it was also a wonderful way to settle old scores.

The Marcomanni were a Germanic barbarian tribe living along the northern side of the Danube. Around 181 AD, the Marcomanni joined forces with the Quadi to raid the Roman provinces to their south, the other side of the Danube. The land they ravaged was the old heartland of the central European Celts and the people they attacked and slaughtered were Romanized Celts. There was never any love lost between the Celts and Germans. For centuries, they had fought with each other, raiding each other's lands. It was a German invasion of Gaul that had forced the Gallic Celts to call upon the Romans for support, which resulted in the conquest of their land. The Celts of the Danube provinces were now more than happy to fight with the Romans against these barbarian invaders.

The painting depicts a retaliatory raid against a Marcomanni village carried out by Celtic warriors serving with the Roman army. The Celtic warrior in the center wears scale armor, a cheaper alternative to mail, which had once again become popular in the Roman army. Originally from the Middle East, and as old as mail itself, this form of armor was made of either bronze or iron scales, or a mixture of both. The other warriors wear mail. Their helmets are of the Attic type, examples of which appear on stone reliefs in Trajan's forum in Rome. These may have been essentially ceremonial helmets, reserved for parades, but the wearing of twin plumes reminds one of earlier Celtic helmets, and this reference may have been intended by the Romanized Celts. Throughout the history of the Roman army, there was never any standardized uniform, and non-Italian warriors serving in the army would frequently let their own native customs influence their combat wear or they would simply wear what was available. The wounded

German wears an adapted version of a Roman bronze cavalry helmet that was either obtained through a trade or, more likely, part of his booty from a previous raid.

The central Celtic warrior holds the head of a barbarian, for which he would probably have been paid by his Roman commander, just as soldiers in the French and Indian War in the middle of the 18th century were paid for the scalps of dead enemies. Headhunting was a regular occurrence on the frontier among the barbarian tribes, and many Celtic warriors outside of the army may have acted as freelance bounty hunters, working in gangs to root out barbarian bandits and bringing their heads back to display in a marketplace before collecting their money. Roman chronicles recall the name of one of these bounty hunters as Charietto, who operated on the Rhine frontier near Trier. Beginning as bandit himself, he tired of this way of life and rode into the nearest Roman town to enlist. Unable to join the regular army, he offered himself as a freelance soldier. Operating at night, he crept up on barbarian bandits and cut off their heads as they slept. Soon he was leading a gang of professional headhunters. The local Roman commander heard of his success and recognized his value. As the Romans pursued invading Franks during the day, Charietto and his gang were allowed to harass them at night. The combined pressure served to defeat the Franks. Charietto rose swiftly within the ranks of the Roman army until one day when his luck ran out during a confrontation with the Alamanni and he was speared to death.





Angus McBridge



## Dacian Celtic warriors, 2nd century AD



(Plate 11)

The ancient land of Dacia approximates to the modern state of Romania, north of the Danube, and embraces the mountainous territory of Transylvania. The Dacian people were a mixture of many different races and cultures. Steppe warriors from north of the Black Sea appear to have invaded the area, and their Sarmatian culture mixed with the Graeco-Thracian culture to the south in present-day Bulgaria and the Celtic culture of central Europe to the west. We therefore have a people who retained Celtic manners long after the main body of Celts had moved westwards. The Dacians were an industrious people who quickly created a settled civilization of farmers and traders renowned for the richness of their way of life. In the 2nd century AD, this prosperous land attracted the attention of the Roman emperor Trajan, who set out to conquer it between 101 and 105 AD.

Our main source for this war and the Dacian people it was fought against is the stone column erected in honor of Trajan's conquest in Rome in 113 AD. Looking at the stone carvings, we see many objects similar to those employed by the Celts. The Dacians employed large, round oval shields richly decorated with swirling Celtic-style patterns, not unlike that found on the Thames bronze shield, with large, round bronze bosses. Dacian helmets form two main types—a simple cone-shaped shell and a more complex helmet with a point that curves forward in the style of a Phrygian cap. None of these are especially Celtic and may represent the Hellenic influence. Body armor consists of mail, scale, and banded armor. Basic clothes are tunic, trousers, and cloak. Swords are long slashing types typical of the Celts and Germans, and one even echoes the La Tène style. A windsock-style standard in the shape of a dragon with an open mouth evokes the influence of steppe warriors such as the Sarmatians, as does the use of scale armor. Trumpets after the style of the Celtic *carnyx* are shown. Spears, javelins, axes, and bows are common weapons, as is that distinctly Dacian weapon the *falx*. The seated figure at the bottom of the painting carries this curved, double-handed samurai sword-style weapon. The Romans were said to have increased the use of leg and arm armor, similar to that used by gladiators, to protect themselves against these vicious weapons.

Trajan began his invasion of Dacia with thirteen legions. Like Celts elsewhere, the Dacians retreated before him, avoiding a pitched battle. In the winter of 101 AD, they made a counterattack, but it was repulsed. Trajan advanced into the

Carpathian mountains and found the capital of the Dacians. Rather than have it destroyed, the Dacian leader Decebalus left it open to the Romans, and Trajan could return to Rome, confident in having won a new province and calling himself *Dacius*. Decebalus, however, was biding his time and in 105 AD he led an uprising. The bitter campaign that followed featured guerrilla fighting, and atrocities were committed by both sides. This time the Dacian capital was taken by force, and Decebalus fled to the north where he committed suicide.

During these campaigns, the Romans brought the full ingenuity of their engineering skills into use, just as Caesar had employed against Vercingetorix. The major achievements included a wooden bridge across the Danube—at almost a kilometer long it was the longest permanent bridge in antiquity—and an improved cliff road through the Iron Gates of Orsova. This was a deep limestone gorge in which a twelve-mile road was partly cut out of the rock, with an additional span created with planks supported by brackets keyed into the cliff. The impressiveness of the organization and engineering of the Roman achievement is well represented on Trajan's column. Faced with the remarkable determination of the Romans, it is not surprising that the Dacians failed to preserve their independence.





Angus McPride  
1987



## Dacian village raided by Romans, early 2nd century AD



(Plate 12)

The painting shows the aftermath of a Roman raid on a Dacian village during Trajan's second campaign to conquer Dacia. The stakes were high for Trajan. Not only had the Dacian king defied his rule, but the Romans were used to getting their hands on the profitable Dacian gold mines. Subsequently, the fighting was particularly bitter. Here, soldiers of the Roman Legion XXX Ulpia have painted their presence in blood on a Dacian hut so there would be no mistaking who authored this devastation, just as some US soldiers during the Vietnam War would leave 'calling cards' in villages they had raided so the enemy would be under no misapprehension as to their intentions or power.

Although Celts and Romans could get along very well within the Empire, both appreciating the increased prosperity of their material lives and both opposing the destructive raids of the Germanic barbarians, when this status quo broke down there would be terrible conflict. In the 1st century AD in Britain, the king of the Iceni left half his fortune to the Roman Empire to ensure continued good relations, but the local Romans were greedy. They took everything belonging to the old Celtic king, beat his wife, and raped his daughters. The resulting uprising shook the Roman Empire to its roots. The wife of the dead Celtic king was Boudica and she wrought her revenge devastatingly.

Boudica's Celtic army assaulted Colchester, the nearest Roman settlement. The Roman garrison was too small to defend the town and withdrew to the temple complex. There they held out for two days until the Celts stormed it and slaughtered everyone within—men, women, and children, and the settlement was burned to the ground, leaving only a thin layer of ash for future archaeologists to find. A legion, the IX Hispana, arrived too late to defend the town and was itself surrounded and butchered. London and St. Albans were also overrun, and Tacitus claims some 70,000 Roman citizens perished. It eventually took a force of 10,000 Roman legionaries to stop Boudica. It is said that 80,000 Britons died in the subsequent battle. Boudica, herself, did not survive the combat. Such was the ferocity of battle when Celt and Roman had a falling out.

Another savage war between Romans and Celts was fought in Spain. 'This war between the Romans and Celtiberians is called the fiery war,' recalled the Roman chronicler Polybius, 'for while wars in Greece or Asia are settled with one or two pitched battles, the battles there dragged on, only brought to a temporary end by

the darkness of night. Both sides refused to let their courage flag or their bodies tire.' It was a war fought partly as a guerrilla conflict with both sides seeking to outdo each other with atrocities. One Roman commander invited a group of Spanish Celts to his camp to discuss terms regarding possible mercenary employment. Once the Celts were disarmed and inside the Roman stockade, the Roman commander had the gates secured from the outside and sent in his soldiers to massacre the Celtic warriors and their families. The Roman was honored with a triumph for this brutal act. 'They are no better than bandits,' grumbled the Roman general Scipio Africanus, unable to pin down the Spanish Celts. 'They may be brave when devastating neighboring fields, burning villages, and rustling cattle, but are worth nothing in a regular army.' But for two thousand years this had been the most effective means of Celtic warfare, and it is still employed today by various terrorist organizations associated with Celtic causes. In Spain, the Romans finally triumphed. Frequently it appears that Celtic warriors only dragged out the inevitable outcome, essentially defending unwinnable situations, prolonging misery, and suffering far longer than was necessary. Some may regard this dogged reluctance to accept certain defeat as a virtue, but to society at large, which prefers peace to war, it is perhaps the greatest Celtic vice.





Angus McBride



## Celtic marines in Romano-Byzantine service, 6th century AD



(Plate 13)

Not only were the Celts great land warriors, especially skilled as horsemen, but they were also great sailors and fighters at sea. This talent was first recorded by Julius Caesar during his conquest of Gaul in the 1st century BC. The Celts of Brittany, living on the Atlantic coast of France, thrived from trade and fishing conducted between France and southern England, especially Cornwall, where a strong affinity grew between the two peoples, which remains today in their shared Celtic tongue and heritage. They lived on headlands and islands in tidal estuaries frequently cut off from the mainland. In 57 BC, the Veneti, the leading Celtic tribe in this coastal region, decided to resist the might of Caesar. At first, the Romans tried to use their engineering skills to reach the remote island forts, but the Celts simply escaped in their ships. Instead, as usual, Caesar chose to rely on the skills of the Celts themselves and employed friendly Celtic shipbuilders further inland to create and man a fleet that would help him take on the Veneti.

'They have flat bottoms,' wrote Caesar of the Celtic ships made for him, 'which enables them to sail in shallow coastal water. Their high bows and sterns protect them from heavy seas and violent storms, as do their strong hulls made entirely from oak. The cross-timbers—beams a foot wide—are secured with iron nails as thick as a man's thumb. Their anchors are secured with chains not ropes, while their sails are made of raw hide or thin leather, so as to stand up to the violent Atlantic winds.' The Atlantic Ocean was the wildest of seas known to the ancients of the Mediterranean world, and to master these seas in frequent sailing between France, Britain, and Ireland must have made these coastal Celts very tough sailors indeed. Their reputation must have been good in the classical world. Inevitably, by using these Celtic skills against their own people, the Romans defeated the Veneti in a fierce sea battle in the Loire estuary. Using scythes attached to long poles, the Romans were able to slash the rigging of the Veneti ships.

With such a strong reputation for seamanship and bravery on board ships, it is little wonder that Celtic sailors were employed by fleets all around the Mediterranean. The painting depicts a scene in an eastern Mediterranean port where Celtic marines are enjoying themselves outside a brothel just before being arrested by a Byzantine shore guard. The collapse of the western Roman Empire in the 5th century had little effect on maritime trade, which

was one of the main sources of income for all Mediterranean powers. It simply allowed the eastern Roman Empire, now known as the Byzantine Empire, to step in and take a more dominant role, eventually leading to a partial reconquest of the western empire by the Byzantines under the Emperor Justinian. As a result, Byzantium and its chief city of Constantinople became a magnet for mercenaries from all around the ancient world. The Viking Varangians are perhaps some of the most well known of these exotic warriors, coming all the way from Scandinavia along the rivers of Russia into the Black Sea to serve the Byzantine army. Although less celebrated at this time, it seems likely that Celts also continued this aspect of their livelihood, and many Celts must have served in both the armies and navies of Byzantium. Judging from the blond woman on the right in the painting, it was not only men that were attracted from the northern and western parts of Europe to serve the Byzantines.





## **Romano-Britons battle against Picts, 5th century AD**



(Plate 14)

The Roman Empire came to an end in Britain at the beginning of the 5th century when the agents of the Emperor and their soldiers left the country to concentrate on the defense of France and Italy against major incursions by Germanic barbarians. The dream of the Roman Empire was over in a specific sense in that Britons were now free from direct Roman control, but they had grown used to the Roman way of life. Romanized Celtic warlords lived in villas, were surrounded by courtiers who spoke Latin and Greek, worshipped the religion of Christ, and maintained strong trade links with the Mediterranean. They liked this life and continued to fight for its survival against the barbarian raiders harrying their coasts. It is the world of Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, and with the birth of this legendary hero we add a new layer to the history of the Celts.

It seems likely that Arthur was a Romano-British warlord living towards the end of the 5th century. He followed in the wake of Ambrosius Aurelianus who, in the 460s, led a group of Romano-British horsemen against the Saxon invaders of eastern England. His warriors were called 'combrogii', a word that means 'fellow countrymen' and is the root behind the names of 'Cymry' and 'Cumbri', which are used to denote the Celts of Wales and northwest Britain. Ambrosius, who died in these campaigns against the barbarians, was succeeded by Arthur. All we really know of this celebrated warlord is that he fought twelve battles. Many of these have been traced to sites in northern England and may refer to battles not against the Saxons, but against Celtic raiders from Ireland or Scotland, who were just as much a threat to the maintenance of 'romanitas'. Celtic chroniclers declare that Arthur 'carried the image of the Holy Mary, the everlasting Virgin, on his shield' and 'the Cross of Our lord Jesus Christ across his shoulders'. Thus, his campaigns against the pagan Picts, Scots, and Saxons could well have been conducted as crusades, with all the attendant savagery this implies.

The painting depicts a clash between Romano-British horsemen and Picts in northern England. The main horseman, collapsing to the ground, wears armor and equipment strongly influenced by the late Roman Empire. His scale armor is typically Roman, although its presence in England over hundreds of years would mean that its manufacture was undoubtedly Celtic. His helmet is of the prominent Ridge style with nasal and cheek

pieces, similar to one found at Burgh Castle in Norfolk and, again, typical of late Roman cavalry. To reinforce his Celtic origin, however, he wears a gold torc around his neck, just like the Romano-British horsemen celebrated in Aneirin's poem of around 600 AD describing a Celtic war band's campaign against the Angles of northern England. The horseman in the background wears a Germanic spangenhelm-style helmet made of riveted metal segments. Both warriors carry long Germanic parallel-sided spatha swords. This mixture of Roman, German, and Celtic styles is the essence of Dark Ages warfare in western Europe. Whether they liked it or not, and they liked it less than the impact of the Romans, the influence of the Germanic barbarian had come to stay and would affect much of Celtic development over the next 1500 years.

Arthur's greatest victory was won at the Battle of Badon Hill. The chronicler Nennius describes the natural hot water springs that bubbled up at Badon, and it seems likely that this was Bath, the ancient Somerset town settled by the Romans who built baths and a temple around what both they and the Celts considered sacred waters. With its relics of 'romanitas', remains of villas and covered baths, perhaps ruined by this time, half sunk into the hot water swamp by the river, it seems an appropriate place for a confrontation between the powers of Romano-Britain and the barbarian invaders. Somewhere on the hills surrounding Bath, the battle was fought. It might well have taken the form of a siege as it lasted some three days and nights. Finally, it was decided by a grand cavalry charge in which the Romano-British Celts mounted their horses and swept the Saxons off the battlefield. It was a resounding victory that kept the Germanic raiders out of the West Country, which even today in its most remote areas retains a strong Celtic identity.





Angus McBride 88



## Roman-British Celts corner a Saxon raider, 6th century AD



(Plate 15)

The Saxon conquest of Romano-Celtic Britain began with an error in judgment. For hundreds of years, Roman armies had employed Germanic barbarians as auxiliaries. At the beginning of the 5th century, Vortigern, the Romano-British overlord, was assailed on many fronts. Aside from Irish and Pict raiders on his northern and western frontiers, there were Germanic raiders on his eastern coasts, and from within he faced the challenge of Ambrosius, who had powerful allies in Gaul. In order to secure his position, he invited a large group of Saxons to settle with their families on the island of Thanet in the river Thames. The Saxon commander, Hengist, understood Vortigern's weakness and recommended he bring in more of his countrymen to help. Vortigern agreed, and nineteen more ships landed. In order to pay these warriors, Hengist suggested they be granted land in Kent. By the time Vortigern realized his control was slipping away, it was too late.

The Saxons spread over southeast England, but Vortigern's son, Vortimer, led a counterattack, and many bloody battles were fought. Hengist recommended a summit with all the leading Celtic warlords, including Vortigern, to discuss peace terms. This was the second great lapse of judgment. As agreed, Vortigern and the Romano-Celts arrived unarmed, but Hengist had instructed his warriors to keep knives in their boots, and the trap was sprung. Some 300 leading Romano-Celts were slaughtered, and the Celtic command of England never fully recovered from this blow. The war between the Saxons and Romano-Britons carried on for centuries, with the Celts gradually being pushed back to the lands of the west, such as Wales and Cornwall.

The painting shows a Saxon cornered by Romano-British soldiers. The Saxon wears a Ridge helmet with an iron boar crest like that found at Benty Grange in Derbyshire. It has been suggested that the iron frame supported panels of horn. The boar represented the Germanic god Freyr and was a symbol invoking protection in combat. It also indicated noble rank. At his waist is a characteristic weapon of the Saxons, the seax, a long single-edged knife. The two Romano-British warriors wear scale armor in the Roman-style and also two Ridge-style helmets. The main figure's helmet is studded with semi-precious jewels, which could be a Roman idea, but is also deeply Celtic. Irish warlords in the army of Brian Boru in the 11th century are reported by Irish chroniclers to have worn such helmets, although these, in turn,

may have been inspired by the presence of recently discovered Roman settlements in Ireland.

One of the few recorded actions between the Romano-British and the German invaders is mentioned in a poem by Aneirin from around 600 AD. He describes how the Gododdin, a Romano-British tribe controlling the eastern end of the Antonine Wall in lowland Scotland, spent a year preparing for a raid against the Angles of Northumbria. The warlord Mynyddog lavishly feasts his followers, giving them mead and wine, an indication of the feudal loyalties binding a warlord and his retinue of leading warriors, or, as Aneirin simply puts it, 'they paid for their mead-feast with their lives.' With three hundred leading warriors and their followers, Mynyddog rode south to attack the Angles at the battle of Cattraeth in Yorkshire. They wore coats of mail and had gold torcs round their necks. As brave and well-equipped as they were, they nevertheless came to grief at the hands of the Angles. All three hundred were slain, and the realm of the Celts was pushed further back.

The Celts of Britain were not alone in their struggle against the Germans. In France, Romano-Gauls depended on warlords such as Ecdicius, who led a spirited defense of central France against the incursions of Goths. Supported by the great land owners, Ecdicius led a war band of horsemen to pursue the gangs of barbarian bandits. So hard did he press them, it was said the Goths were forced to leave the bodies of their comrades behind, but chopped off their heads so Ecdicius could not tell from their hairstyles the number of Goths he had slain. After a successful campaign against the Goths, he arrived in the town of Clermont and received a rapturous welcome from relieved citizens. 'What tears and rejoicing greeted you!' recalled his brother-in-law Sidonius. 'Some townspeople kissed away the dust that covered you. Others caught hold of your bridle, thick with blood and foam. When you wished to take off your helmet, the clamouring citizens unclasped the bands of iron. Some entangled themselves in the straps of your greaves. Some counted the dents along the edges of your sword blunted by slaughter. While others fingered the holes made by blade and point amid your shirt of mail. You bore all these stupidities of your welcome with good grace!' Not only an expression of Celtic desperation, but also an unwittingly good description of the equipment worn by a Romano-Celtic warlord at this time.





Angus McBride

## Picts watching the Scots at Dunadd, 8th century AD



(Plate 16)

**D**unadd was a formidable Celtic hillfort set upon a rocky outcrop surrounded by bogland. It was the main power base of Dalriada, the region of northwest Scotland ruled by the Scots from the 5th century. Confusingly, the Scots were not natives of Scotland, but were in fact Irish Celts who sailed across the Irish Sea to raid the western coasts of Scotland and the rest of Britain. They were called 'Scotti', a name perhaps derived from the Irish verb 'to plunder'. They had fought against the Romans, and now that the Empire was in decline, they decided to settle in Britain, choosing the land of the Picts in Scotland for their main settlement.

The Irish Scots continued the great tradition of Celtic seamanship. Their most typical seagoing boat was the curragh, a simple oval structure made of animal hides stretched across a wicker framework. They were surprisingly resilient in rough seas, enabling the Scots to raid as far south as Wales and southern England. In 891, the Anglo-Saxon chronicle records that 'three Irishmen came to King Alfred in a boat without a rudder, from Ireland whence they had made their way secretly because they wished for the love of God to be a foreign land. It was made of two and a half hides and they carried with them food for seven days. And after seven days they came to land in Cornwall and went immediately to King Alfred.' Recently, a Celtic curragh was reconstructed using hazel rods woven together to which three cow hides were stitched. The whole process took only seven days to complete and was ready to be rowed on the sea.

The Picts were a mysterious people about whom very little is known. Mainly Celtic, they appear to have spoken a language that included an older tongue of the aboriginal people they displaced. Pict is a Roman name referring to 'painted people', indicating that they followed the Celtic custom of either painting or tattooing their bodies with blue patterns. The Picts were a fiercely independent people who appear to have succeeded in their battle against the Romans, being the descendants of the Caledonian tribes that the Romans first encountered. Having lived without Roman domination, they then had to contend with the Gaelic speakers of Dunadd.

The Pictish style of warfare has been recorded on a few engraved stone slabs. Keen horsemen, like all Celts, they used both javelins and longer lances. Their foot soldiers fought with longer spears or pikes and may have formed a kind of phalanx in battle, just as Scottish soldiers did centuries later under William

Wallace and Robert the Bruce. They also carried the characteristically Pictish square shield decorated with swirling Celtic patterns. Such a shield is carried by the warrior on the right in the painting. He wears a spangenhelm-style helmet with nasal piece, which may have been derived from the Germanic Angles they fought against on the Scottish border. Such helmets are depicted on the Aberlemno stone, but they may be used there to signify their Germanic enemies. The other warriors in the painting are lightly clad, carrying axes, spears, and swords. The older La Tène-style appears to have survived in the form of Pictish sword hilts. The warrior in the middle wears a combined cloak and hood that is similar to that worn by the crossbow-carrying warrior on the Drosten stone, and this weapon should be added to the Pictish arsenal.

The Picts and Scots fought for centuries for control of northwest Scotland. In 740, the Irish Annals of Ulster recorded a major campaign by the Picts against Dalriada. Led by Angus mac Fergus, they captured several strongholds, and a Scots warlord was savagely drowned, forcing the others to flee back to Ireland. The Angles took advantage of this incessant conflict and invaded the eastern highlands, but the Picts met them at the battle of Dunnichen or Nectansmere in 685 and soundly defeated them, ensuring Celtic independence in Scotland. It is this victory that may be commemorated on the Aberlemno stone. In the end, however, the Scots triumphed over the Picts, and a Scots king succeeded to the Pictish throne around 843 AD. As result, the highlands now bear their name rather than being known as Pictland.





Angus McBryde

## Irish warriors battle Viking raiders, 9th century AD



(Plate 17)

‘There were countless sea-vornitings of ships and boats,’ wrote the Celtic chronicler of the “Wars of the Gaedhil (the Irish) with the Gail (the Vikings)” in the early 10th century. ‘Not one harbor or landing-port or fortress in all of Munster was without fleets of Danes and pirates . . . They made spoil-land and sword-land. They ravaged Ireland’s churches and sanctuaries and destroyed her reliquaries and books. They killed Ireland’s kings and chieftains and champion warriors. They enslaved our blooming, lively women, taking them over the broad green sea.’ The arrival of the Vikings was a disaster for the Celtic people of Britain, pushing them even further to the fringes of the land. It was a disaster that also overtook the Saxon world, placing large sections of eastern England under Viking rule.

Norwegians and Danes first took possession of the northern and western islands of Scotland, setting up their own kingdoms, which has given a Norse element to these lands ever since. They then sailed into the Irish Sea and swept around the Irish coast, making settlements at the mouths of the rivers before taking to horses and plunging further into the Irish countryside. The Annals of Ulster charted their progress. In 793 AD, they came as sea-borne raiders. By 810 AD, they were engaged in battles with Irish warriors, slaying the men of Connemara. The Irish fought back, though, and in the same year the men of Owles and Munster slaughtered the Vikings, or ‘gentiles’ as they were called in the Annals. But the raids continued in intensity. In 820 AD, the Vikings invaded Bangor in County Down. In 824 AD, Downpatrick was plundered and burnt, and its churches destroyed. By 826 AD, the high king of all Ireland was forced into discussing joint action with all the Irish warlords, but to no avail. The Vikings were there to stay, developing major fortified settlements at Dublin, Waterford, Wexford, Cork, and Limerick.

With recent discoveries showing that the Romans had established similar trading posts on the Irish coast, it seems the Vikings were content not to conquer the whole of Ireland but to limit their possessions to the mouths of rivers where they could continue to be part of the great Scandinavian trading network of northern Europe. Again, as with the Romans, it was not all bad news for the native Celts of Ireland. According to the Irish author of “The Wars of the Gaedhil with the Gail”, the Vikings were successful because they were so much better armed: ‘the excellence of the foreigners’ polished, treble-plaited, heavy coats

of mail, their hard, strong swords, their well-rivettted long spears . . .’ It seems unlikely that mail armor was unknown in Ireland. The Irish had long had access through their own raiding to the rest of Britain, and mail was a familiar enough armor at this time. It is probable that the Vikings, through their raiding and trading, had access to more of this armor and weapons. It was this military affluence that impressed the Irish, and it was no doubt shared with them through continued interaction in peace and war. The Irish also learned to use the Vikings to their own end. In their endless tribal civil wars, one Celtic side could always be counted on to pay a Viking war band to support them against the other Celts. Thus, the Celts have always been their own worst enemies, seeking outside help that ultimately weakened their own position.

The painting shows an early conflict between raiding Vikings and Irish coastal warriors. The double-handed battle axes used by both sides appear to have been a weapon imported by the Scandinavians and later adopted by the Irish. Viking swords were also copied, bought, and stolen. Periodically throughout the Viking period in Ireland, the Irish fought back against their presence, and in 902 AD a major campaign threw them out of Dublin. But they were soon back, perhaps because the Irish had grown to depend on them, as well, for their trading connections. By the 11th century, however, an Irish warlord appeared who would really shake the Vikings to their roots. His name was Brian Boru.





## Brian Boru, Irish warlord, being shown the head of a Viking 11th century AD



(Plate 18)

**B**rian Boru had the temper of a Celtic warlord. Born to violence, he never gave it up. His power base was the tribe of Dal Cais at the mouth of the river Shannon and his prey were the Viking settlers of Limerick. 'However small the injury he might be able to do the foreigners,' recalled the chronicler of the Gaedhil, 'Brian preferred it to peace. From the forests and the wastelands, he emerged to plunder and kill the foreigners. If he did not destroy them during the day, then he was sure to do so at night.' Using guerrilla tactics and living off the land, Boru proved a relentless enemy for the Vikings. Finally, the Vikings managed to force him into a 'manly battle on the open part of the plain', hoping to overawe his followers with their arms and armor. Both sides rode horses, wore mail, and wielded swords, axes and spears. The battle lasted all day and eventually the Vikings broke. The Irish chased the fleeing Scandinavians and 'beheaded from that time until evening'. At the age of 26, Boru stormed into the Viking city of Limerick. His legend had begun.

The sacking of Limerick not only frightened the Vikings, it impressed other Irish tribesmen, and they joined Boru's forces, but the more sophisticated Irish warlords were not so pleased. They had come to depend on the trading wealth of the Viking settlements. The lords of Leinster allied themselves with the Vikings of Dublin, and the two armies met around 1000 AD. Brian was triumphant and Dublin was sacked. Immediately, the Vikings made peace with him. Boru was now lord of southern Ireland, and now he turned his attention to the north. Boru challenged the high king of all Ireland to battle, but politics was stronger than swordsmanship and the chieftains of the north saw little point in slaughtering each other. They made their submissions to him, and Boru became ruler of Ireland, even sending raiding parties to Britain to levy tributes.

As Boru grew older, his grip on power slipped. The lords of Leinster and the Vikings of Dublin refused to pay him tribute. He set siege to Dublin, but for lack of supplies he was forced to retreat. The Vikings, who sent out requests for reinforcements from over the sea, confronted the plundering Boru to the north of Dublin in an area called Clontarf. The scene was set for an epic battle. Boru's son, Murchad, was now the active leader and headed the men of Dal Cais and Munster, his most loyal followers, along with Viking mercenaries and Irish allies on his flanks. The Vikings of Dublin were joined by Vikings from the Isle of Man and Orkney and further

afield, including Danes and Norwegians. 'The two sides made a furious, smashing onset at each other,' recorded the chronicler of the Gaedhil, 'and there arose a frightful screaming and fluttering above their heads as birds and demons awaited their prey.'

The Irish and the Vikings hacked and slashed at each other. Murchad, son of Brian, held two swords, one in each hand, and felled the Vikings around him. His followers surged behind the gaps he made in the Viking ranks. Sigurd of Orkney refused to move, and both he and Murchad fought an heroic duel. With his right hand sword, Murchad snapped the straps securing the Viking's helmet and, with his left hand sword, brought him down with a blow to his exposed flesh. Murchad moved on to another Viking warlord, but this time his blades broke from use. The Irish hero was forced to grip the mail of the Viking and pull the shirt of armor off his body with his bare hands. Falling to the ground, both men wrestled with each other. Murchad stabbed the Viking with his own sword, but the Viking pulled a knife and slashed the Celt's stomach. With a final effort, Murchad cut the head off the Viking, but the next day he would die from his own wounds.

Brian Boru did not take part in the battle, he was too old for that, but he waited behind a wall of shields. Eventually he received the news he wanted. The Vikings had had enough and Clontarf was his. But even though the main body of the army was fleeing, there were still isolated groups of Viking horsemen, and one of these war bands made a dash for the Irish shield wall. Boru was forced to defend himself. He hacked at one of the Vikings and cut off his leg, but the Viking struck back and cut Boru's head in half. At the moment of his greatest success, Boru was dead. In the aftermath, the unity of Irish tribes collapsed and the Vikings returned to their settlements, but never again would they seek to dominate the Irish people.







## Lord of the Isles at Dunadd, 13th century AD



(Plate 19)

The cause of the Celts was not helped by the transformation of the Vikings into the Normans. By the 11th century, those Vikings who had settled in northern France in the region of Normandy had become known as Normans, a mixture of French and Scandinavian cultures. In 1066, they invaded England and destroyed the Saxon ruling dynasty. An aggressive warrior nation, they then proceeded to assault the Celtic fringes of Britain that had so far withstood the attention of the Saxons. They settled southern Wales and occupied much of lowland Scotland, and in the 12th century they invaded Ireland, taking great estates of land from the Irish and establishing an English dominion over Ireland that would last for 800 years.

One of the last Celtic regions to withstand the onslaught of the Norman-English was the Kingdom of the Isles. This included the northern and western Isles of Scotland, the Hebrides, and the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea. It was a culture blending the remains of the ancient Celtic kingdom of Dalriada with a more recent layer of Norse settlement. In defiance of the mainland Scots, who were becoming an increasingly lowland culture dominated by Norman landowners, they continued to speak Gaelic and ruled in the Celtic tradition. This division of Scottish culture led to much power play, with ambitious warlords calling on the warriors of the Isles to help them in their pursuit of dominion of the mainland.

The most famous Scottish warlord of the 11th century was Macbeth, later immortalized by Shakespeare as an archetype of naked ambition. In reality, he was no worse or better than the warlords he fought. Macbeth was a Gaelic-speaking warrior from Moray in the very north of Scotland and he employed the Norsemen of the northern islands to assist him. Later historians have even described his success on seizing the Scots throne in 1040 as a Gaelic reaction to the excessive English influence supported by Duncan, his opponent. He ruled for 17 years, until Malcolm, the son of Duncan, led a revived English-backed army that cornered Macbeth in his homeland of Moray and slaughtered him, thus paving the way for a resumption of Norman-English influence and the retreat of Gaelic culture to the Kingdom of the Isles. The Lord of the Isles and his followers could afford to survive in isolation from the mainland as they were great sailors and traders. They thrived on a network of trade based on the Irish sea linking Ireland with Britain and Scandinavia. Political independence survived until

1263, when Alexander III of Scotland defeated Haco of Norway at the battle of Largs, and the kingdom of the Isles became part of Scotland. Its culture remained proudly Gaelic for centuries afterwards, however, and the Lord of the Isles still held considerable sway in his own realm.

The distinctive stone tombstones and grave slabs of the Western Isles reveal a particular Norse Celtic culture, which was reflected in the weapons used by these warriors. The pattern welded swords of the Vikings were widely admired and imitated. A multi-lobed pommel is most typical of these weapons and is carried by the warriors in the painting. In one form this later developed into the great two-handed sword. The armor of the main figure in the painting, including his helmet, mail, and vertically quilted padded wool tunic, is based on that of later tombstone effigies found in the Western Isles. It is very similar to Irish armor of the same period. The cross-fertilization of Scots and Irish eventually produced the famous Galloglas Gaelic warriors who fought with six-foot-long battle axes and played an important part in the later history of northern Ireland.

The Lords of the Isles continued to cause trouble for Scots kings right up until the 16th century. An English chronicler describes the appearance of their warriors at this time. 'From the mid-leg to the foot, they go uncovered. Their dress, for an over-garment, is a loose plaid and shirt dyed with saffron. They are armed with bow and arrows, a broadsword, and a small halberd. They always carry in their belt a stout dagger, single-edged, but of the sharpest. In time of war they cover the whole body with a coat of mail, made of iron rings, and in it they fight. The common folk among the Wild Scots go out to battle with the whole body clad in a linen garment sewed together in patchwork, well daubed with wax or with pitch, and with an over-coat of deerskin.'







## Gaelic castle, Western Isles, 14th century AD



(Plate 20)

**I**n the early 14th century, a remarkable dream briefly united the Celtic people of Britain and Ireland. Robert Bruce had just defeated the English King at the battle of Bannockburn to ensure his position as King of Scotland. In this battle he had personally commanded a phalanx of warriors from the Western Isles, and many more Gaelic warriors had joined his army. They fought in the traditional Pictish manner of forming tight groups of men armed with long spears. When the English knights fled before them, the Gaelic warriors employed another ancient Celtic tactic and jumped on horses to pursue them. The English were forced out of Scotland and Robert Bruce was its undisputed leader. He now turned his attention to the rest of the Celtic world.

Robert Bruce sent his brother Edward to Ireland and with him he sent a remarkable letter addressed to all Irish chieftains. "We and our people and you and your people," Robert proclaimed, "free since ancient times, share the same national ancestry and are urged to come together more eagerly and joyfully in friendship by a common language and by common custom. We have sent to you our beloved kinsman, the bearer of this letter, to negotiate with you in our name about permanently maintaining and strengthening the special friendship between us and you, so that with God's will your nation may be able to recover her ancient liberty." This was an outright declaration of Celtic unity across the Irish sea in the face of the Norman-English conquerors and demonstrates that both the Scots and Irish were aware of their common Celtic roots. If this strategy was to succeed, then it might be possible to turn back the tide of history that had consigned the Celts to the fringes of European history for so long. Once more, perhaps, they could become the mighty warrior culture they had been in the ancient world and return to their old realms of Britain, Gaul, and central Europe. It was a glorious idea, reflecting the greatness of Robert Bruce's political vision, but was Edward Bruce the man to carry out the next stage?

The dream began well. The O'Neills of Ulster, the dominant force in northern Ireland, offered Edward Bruce their kingship. They realized that tribal dissension had been their traditional weakness and hoped to overcome this. In 1316, Edward Bruce was crowned High King of all Ireland at Dundalk. Robert Bruce visited his brother's Irish realm, bringing with him Galloglas warriors from the Western Isles. It seemed now as though the Bruces might turn their attention to Wales, and in anticipation of this the Welsh rose in

revolt against the English under the Celtic Llywelyn Bren. The English, who were beginning to panic, realized they could not even trust their Celtic mercenaries, especially the famed Welsh longbowmen.

In traditional manner, the Bruces now paraded around Ireland to receive the homage of all the Irish chieftains, and this was when things began to turn sour. Irish suspicions were aroused by this considerable display of power, and the warriors that traveled with the Bruces treated the land with little respect, living off of it like bandits. The idea of Celtic unity seemed to be undercut by the reality of foreign domination, even though it came from a fellow Celt. One Irish chronicler summed up the feelings of the time, describing the Bruces as "Scottish foreigners less noble than our own foreigners (that is, the English)". In a curious way, despite their hatred of the English, the Irish knew where they stood with them, whereas these Scottish Celts appeared to be demanding more than the Irish could deliver.

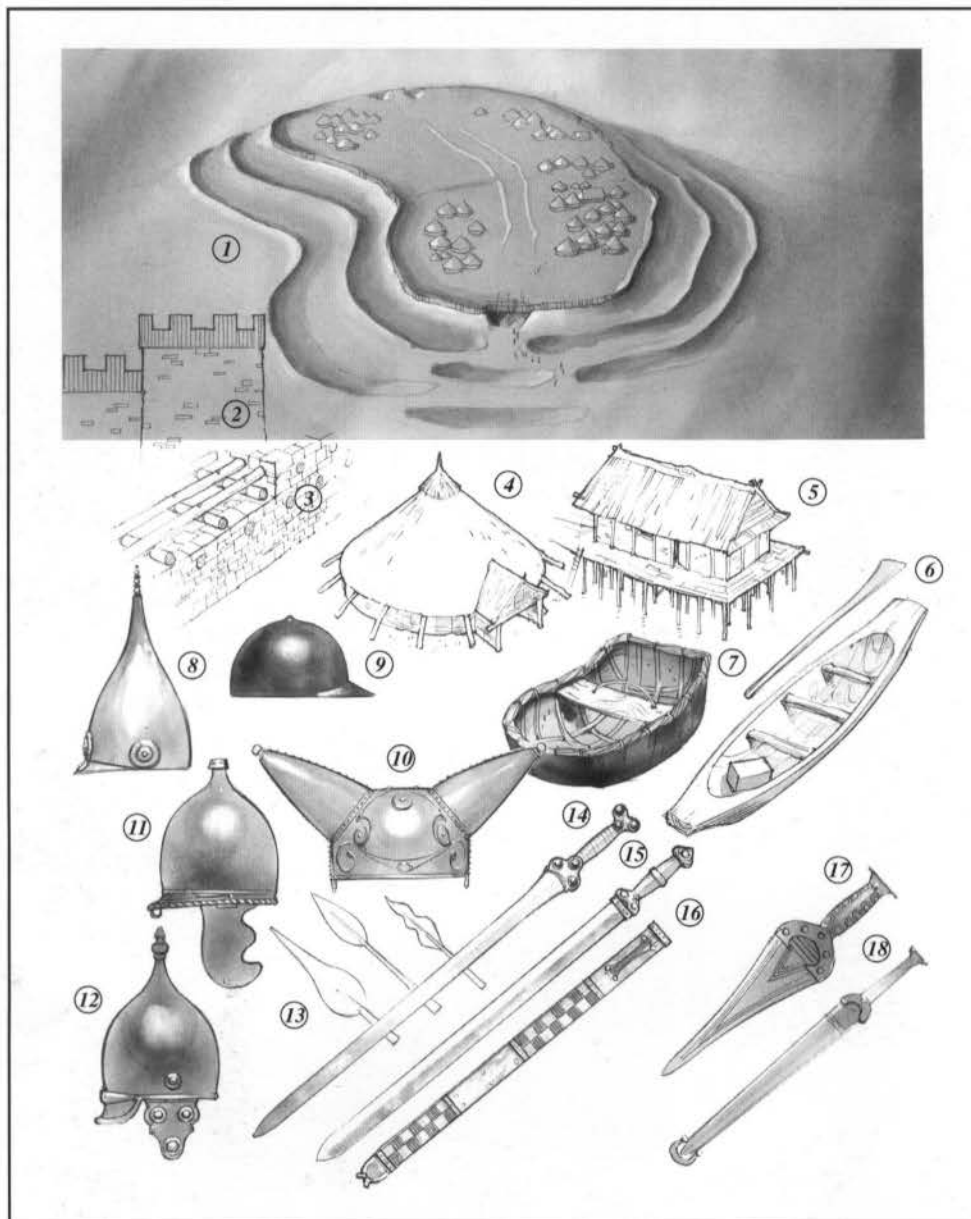
By 1318, Irish support for Edward Bruce was slipping, and it was at this time that the English pounced. With Irish support, Richard Clare, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, confronted Bruce at Faughart. The Irish still with Bruce recommended he wait for reinforcements, or at the very least use guerrilla warfare to wear the English down, as they had so many times before. But Bruce was impatient to re-establish his authority. His loyal Scots knights joined him, but the English and their Irish surged round them, cutting them down. A body in splendid armor was found and presumed to be Edward Bruce's. The head was cut off, salted in a bucket, and sent back for the English king to gaze upon. It was not Bruce, however, for at the last moment he had changed his royal armor for simple mail in an effort to attract less attention. His body lay elsewhere on the battlefield, but the result was still the same. The great Celtic dream of unity was over, and the remaining Celtic realms would battle on individually against the encroaching powers of England. Thus ended the hopes of that mighty Celtic dominion of Europe.





Angus McBride '96

## Celtic Settlements and Weapons



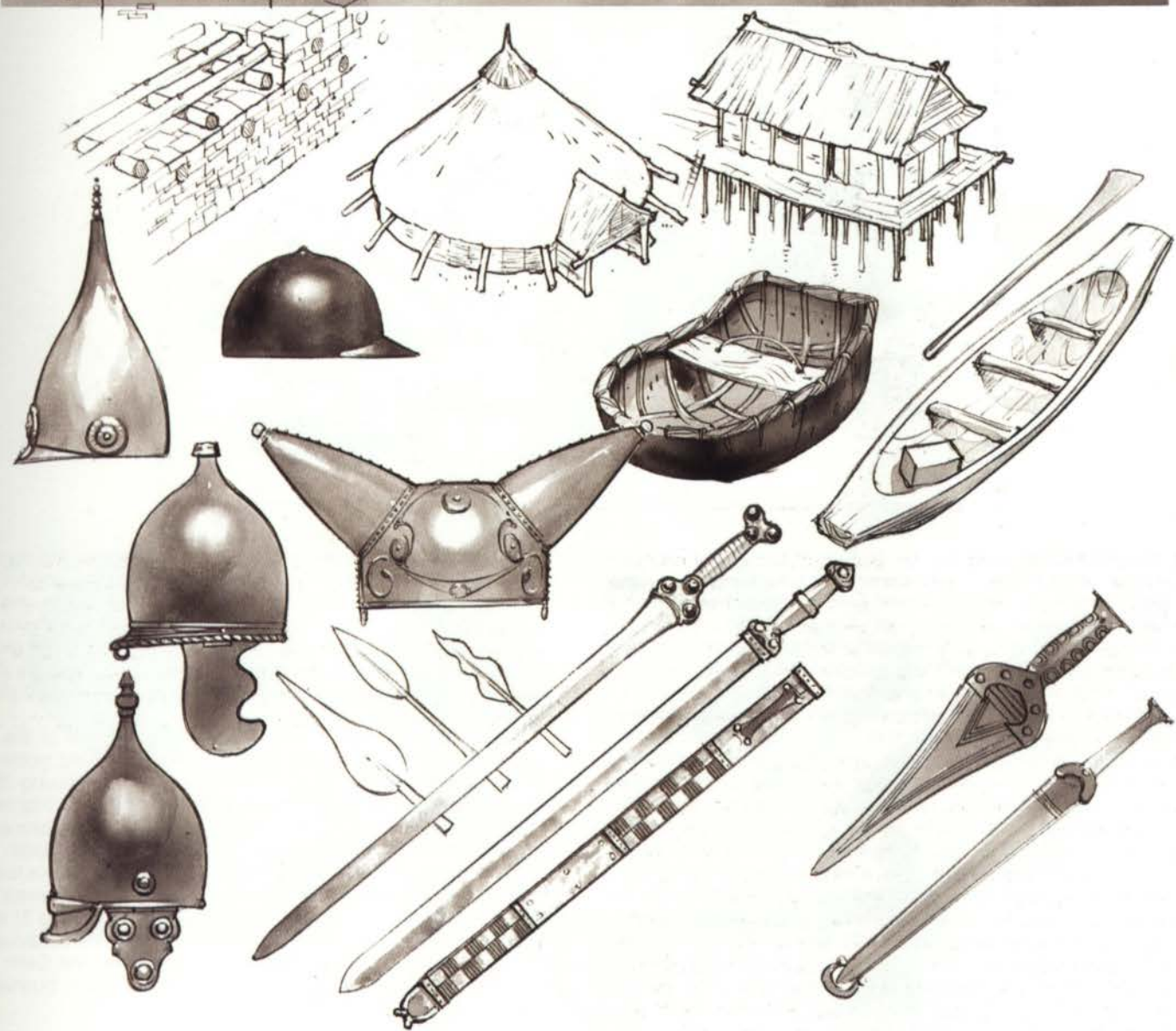
Celtic settlements were the first great architecture of northern Europe. As the wood and stone has disintegrated over the centuries, only the great earth mounds of the hillforts have survived, but they are still impressive, being immense achievements of engineering and excavation. One of the most impressive is that at Maiden Castle in Dorset in southwest England. Drawing 1 depicts the hillfort viewed from the east at the height of its development in the 1st century BC, before a Roman army assaulted and destroyed it.

Drawing 2 shows a tower in the European Celtic style, made of stone and timber. Drawing 3 is a cross-section showing how such fortifications were constructed. The murus Gallicus consists of timber interlacing loaded with earth and faced with stone. Drawing 4 shows a typical early Celtic roundhouse made of timber with a thatched roof. Drawing 5 is a timber hut mounted on stilts for lakeside living. Drawing 6 is a simple dugout canoe for fishing and travel across lakes. Drawing 7 shows the more substantial curragh, or coracle, made of wood and animal hides, which in its seagoing form could be used for long sea trips of several days and was typical of those used by Celts on both sides of the Irish Sea.

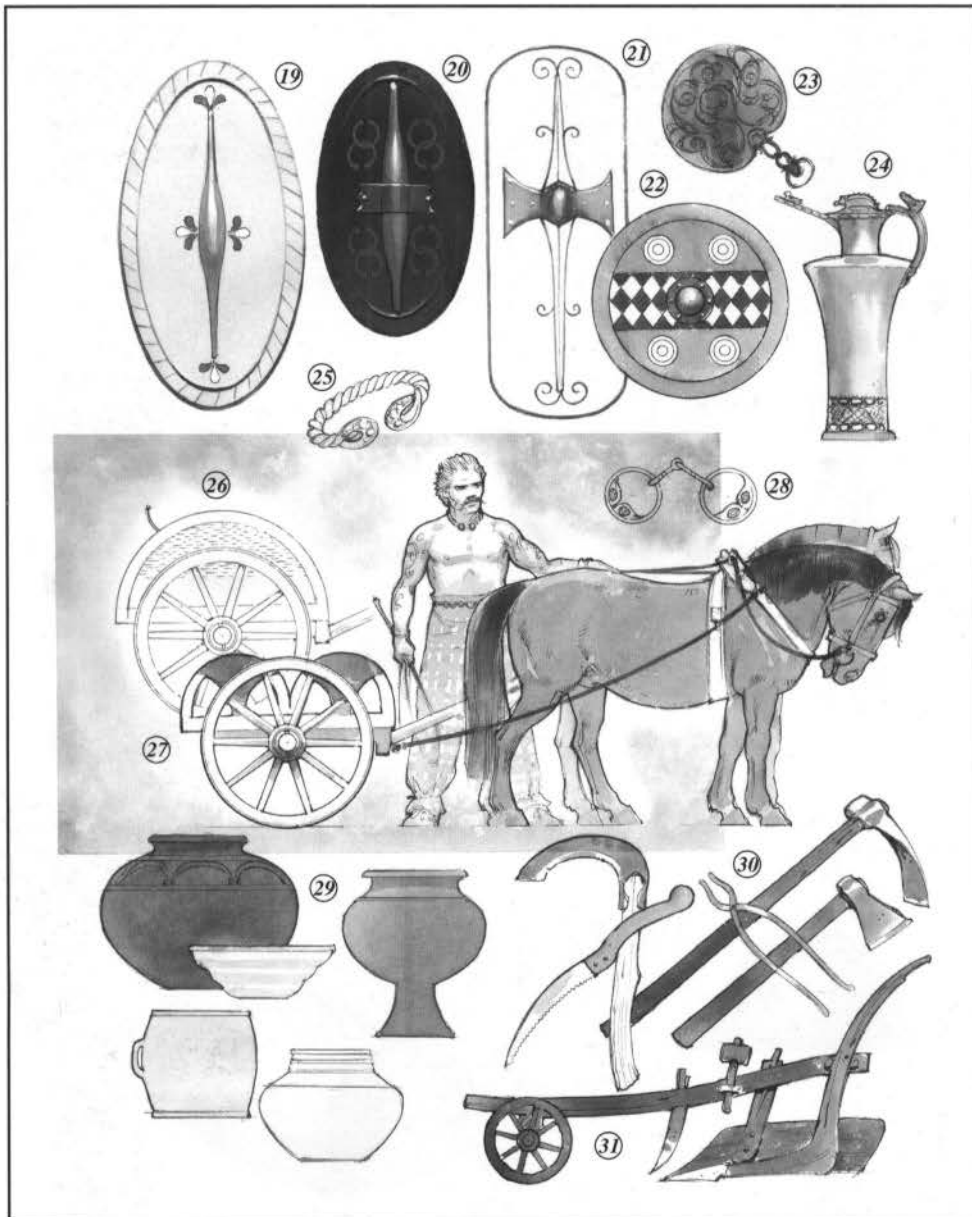
Drawings 8 through 12 depict various bronze and iron Celtic helmets of the La Tène period. Helmets 9, 11, and 12 influenced the Roman Army, which created their own versions of these classic styles. Helmet 10, a horned helmet, was found in the Thames in

Britain and is thought to be either a parade helmet or one belonging to a religious sculpture. Drawing 13 depicts various broad-bladed spear heads, while the La Tène style is clear in the two swords. Sword 14 was found in Yorkshire and dates from the 3rd century BC. Sword 15 is also British, but it dates from 50 BC and is accompanied by an elaborate scabbard. Two earlier weapons, going back to the origin of the Celts in central Europe, are drawing 17, a bronze dagger, and drawing 18, a dagger found in France.





## Celtic Weapons and Artifacts



What is so interesting about Celtic culture is its very distinctness. Unlike other ancient European cultures, which suffered to a greater or lesser extent from being overwhelmed by Mediterranean styles to the south or were simply too primitive to survive, Celtic style and decorative elements have survived over 3,000 years, are still used today and can be clearly identified, whether it be in metalwork, textiles, or graphic design.

Drawings 19 through 22 represent Celtic shields, the first three being the whole body protectors that later influenced the Romans. Their decorative elements, while noticeably Celtic, also display a symmetry that may suggest they were made in more classically based settlements. Drawing 19 is an early La Tène shield, while drawing 20 is a middle La Tène shield of the 3rd-2nd centuries BC. Drawing 21 is a British shield of the 1st century BC. Drawing 22, the small round shield, is late Gallic from around 50 BC. Drawing 23 shows the typical swirling Celtic patterns on the back of a bronze mirror found at Desborough. Drawing 24 is a superbly shaped ritual vessel. Drawing 25 is the knotted torc, made of either gold or iron, worn around the neck by Celtic warriors from Britain to Turkey, perhaps indicating that the wearer is a freeman.

It is sometimes forgotten, in the wake of the Celtic warrior and his achievements, that the Celts were also excellent farmers, both of animals and plants. It was this talent that gave them their great wealth and power, providing goods for their own survival (as well

as a surplus that could be used for trade or storage) and enabling them to take their great migratory journeys across Europe. It may be that the chariot itself evolved from their use of the wheel for ploughing the earth or carting the harvest. Certainly it was their continual clearing of forests and ploughing of land that gives us their biggest and most visible achievement, i.e., the very shape and form of the landscape today with its open fields and clusters of trees.

Drawings 26 and 27 show two different forms of the two-wheeled chariot that supplanted the four-wheeled battle cart and is one of the indicators of La Tène culture. Drawing 26 is a reconstruction of a British chariot, while drawing 27 is that of one found in northern Italy. Drawing 28 is a decorated bronze bit, showing the extent to which the Celts loved to lavish their craftsmanship on their horses. Drawings 29 portray various forms of British Celtic pottery, while drawings 30 show various metal tools used for clearing forests and harvesting crops. Drawing 31 shows the kind of plough used over centuries to shape the landscape of the Celts. Never lacking in industry or enterprise, the Celtic spirit survives today in so many modern forms, from business to agriculture, from literature to pop music.



