

The Celtic Way of Warfare

“The whole race is war-mad, high-spirited and quick to battle...” – Strabo

The Iron Age Celts were, without question, a warlike people. Their ruling class was a warrior class and small-scale warfare was a common occurrence. They were a tribal people who frequently raided one another’s farms and forts, making off with cattle and other goods. Ancient Celtic warriors were not disciplined soldiers like the Romans, however. They belonged to a heroic culture that prized individual skill above organization in battle. When matched against the increasingly well-trained Roman armies of the third century BCE through the first century CE, they suffered repeated losses. The end of Celtic society in Gaul (modern-day France) and southern Britain was brought about largely by the failure of the Celtic tribes to unite against the Romans and the inability of the individualistic warriors to counter the group-oriented tactics of the Roman soldiers.

Weapons

Celts were known as swordsmen to most of the ancient Western world. The length of their swords and the quality of the iron used in their manufacture increased through the centuries. By the first century BCE swords of up to three feet in length were being produced by the Celts. These longer swords were likely used by mounted warriors. In Ireland, swords generally remained short. This may have been because the Irish Celts continued to engage primarily in individual combat and small-scale cattle raids. The British and Continental Celts, by contrast, allowed their weapons and tactics to evolve from contact with Mediterranean cultures.

Warriors often used a light javelin called a *madaris*, which was hurled while closing in on an enemy. Bows were used to a minimal extent in battle. They were used primarily for hunting. Slings were used in the defense of forts. Many Iron Age Celtic forts seem to have been designed for easy targeting of approaching enemies by slingers stationed on walls.



Armor

Most Iron Age Celtic warriors wore little if any armor. Many were protected only by a tall shield painted with artistic forms. The most common piece of armor was the helmet. Unlike medieval European helmets, which often covered the entire face, these

covered only the top of the head and occasionally the back of the neck and sides of the face. Some were surmounted with decorations such as feather plumes or abstract metal sculptures of animals. The average warrior may have scorned armor in the belief that he would pass on to an afterlife if killed. Warriors may also have believed that the metal torques some wore around their necks and the blue designs some painted on their bodies would provide magical protection.

Certain Iron Age Celts, generally the wealthier nobles, did wear armor made of linked rings of metal. Although this chainmail remained in use by soldiers of various nations through the end of the Middle Ages, it was, ironically, rarely used by the Celts reputed to have invented it.

At least one group of mercenary Celts, the *Gaesatae*, stripped entirely naked before entering into battle. They apparently did have enough good sense, however, to hold onto their helmets and shields.

Horses and Chariots

The ancient Celts used horses both to pull chariots and as mounts for cavalry. Chariots were generally pulled by two horses and carried two persons: a driver and a warrior. At the beginning of a battle the chariots would race back and forth in front of the enemy's lines. The charioteers would hurl insults and curses along with their spears. They might also climb from the chariot forward onto the center pole and back again, seeking to impress the enemy. The warriors would then typically dismount to fight on foot while their drivers waited nearby in case they needed to flee.

Women

Ancient Celtic women would at times participate in combat. According to legend it was Scathach, a female warrior from the Isle of Skye in Scotland, who trained the great Irish hero Cúchulainn. Boudicca, a queen of the British Iceni tribe, personally led a revolt against the Romans following her husband's death.

How They Fought

When fighting amongst themselves, the ancient Celts often engaged in what can be called "ritual combat". Instead of sending every available person of fighting age into battle, they preferred to hold martial contests of champions. Opposing sides would line up across from each other. The kings and bravest leaders would challenge one another, calling out their courageous deeds and those of their ancestors. They would seek to humiliate the enemy through insults and other abusive language. One or more duels would generally ensue. On some occasions these would end the dispute. On others tensions would increase and all present might become involved.

During large battles the Iron Age Celts first sought to terrify their opponents with the noise of war horns, shouting, the rumbling of chariots, and the banging of swords on shields. This they would follow with a mad rush at the enemy. In their early conflicts with outside armies, these tactics were often successful and won the Celts the fear and respect of the ancient world. Against the well-disciplined Romans of later antiquity,

however, the Celts were decreasingly effective. Roman legionnaires were trained to hold their ground against charges. The Celts would often become disheartened at their inability to break the Romans quickly and would retreat or become subject to Roman counterattack.

Sources

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