

11.2 Swords of Celts and Romans

11.2.1 Background to Celtic Swords

Preface

About everything relating to Celtic swords can be found in [Radomir Pleiner's book](#) "The Celtic Sword". So go, read it. Or read on. That's much easier for two reasons:

1. You won't be able to get Pleiner's book. It is out of print and not available on the second-hand book market.
2. It contains 211 pages. What follows is based on Pleiner's book to a large extent but will be much shorter and far easier to read. It is also less specific and less accurate.

The first thing to note is that there is no such thing as "The Celtic Sword", just as there is no such thing as "The German Car". True, the German (or better Suebian) [Carl Benz](#) did make the first gasoline-driven car, and his wife Bertha took it upon herself to go out on the very first car ride, but in the 126 years that followed many different types of German cars evolved. There were even periods without [decent cars](#). Other countries also made cars, based on inventions of their engineers, and in actual fights (on racing courses) German cars even lost on occasion. Nevertheless, almost anybody in the world (provided he is male) associates something specific with the denomination "German cars".

It is pretty much the same with "Celtic iron swords". There is something to that classification but it is neither well-defined nor clearly distinguished from "Non-Celtic" iron swords of the time. Celts also used bronze swords for quite some time in parallel to iron swords. Then there were periods where only few Celtic swords were found, times where swords were predominantly found in the graves of chieftains, and times where they were found in common graves. Sometimes they were rather long, sometimes rather short. Hilts came in various shapes, and scabbard design could be rather plain or rather complex. Then there are a few exceptional, totally atypical swords:

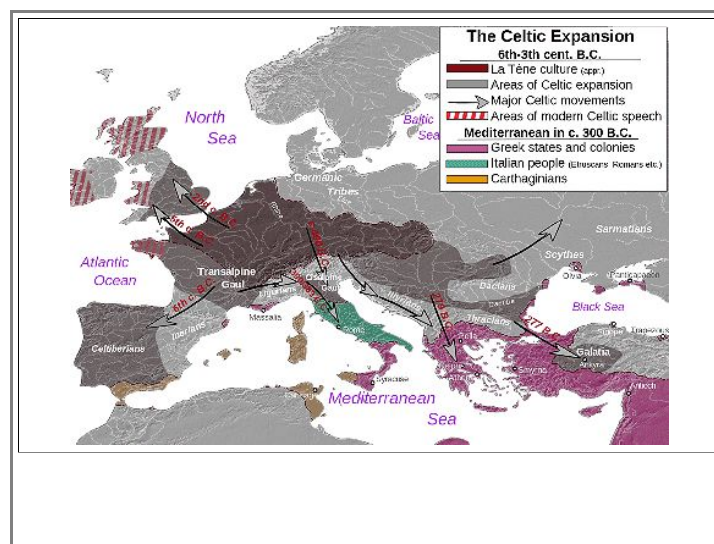
"[Knollenknaufschwerter](#)" with very long thin blades having a more or less square cross-section, altogether rather similar to the much later [rapiers](#).

Nevertheless, with a little bit of background knowledge you know a Celtic sword when you see one.

Why do I start with Celtic swords after having discussed early Near-East swords? Because we have plenty of Celtic swords and because they are among the oldest [long](#) iron swords we are aware of. More important: they are the most advanced iron / steel objects of their time, demonstrating some new degrees of cunning as far as working with iron and steel is concerned.

What exactly defines "The Celts" is not all that clear but they certainly did run around Europe and the Near East a lot in the second half of the first millennium BC, wielding big swords of bronze or iron. I gave you a whole module on this already. They were out to make booty and not to build an empire and eventually succumbed (around 0 AD) to the better organized and more disciplined Romans (the Celts were [not](#) proto-Germans, obviously!). And nobody would have called them "Celts": The Germanic tribes called them "Walah", the Greeks "Galats", and the Romans "Galli". Celtic tribes had names like Boii, Lingones, Senones, Insubres, Gaesatae. In 390 BC a Gaulish=Celtic warband first defeated the Roman army at the Battle of Allia, moving on to [sack Rome](#) in 387 BC. Then they left again with plenty of gold and the well-known quip: "vae victis" (woe to the vanquished).

The Roman empire at this time was small and confined to Italy whereas Celtic tribes controlled a much larger area. This map gives an idea of what the Western Mediterranean empires looked like around 600 BC - 300 BC and how the Celts related to their neighbors:



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The Celts

**The Celts and other powers in the "West" around 600
BC - 300 BC**
[Large picture](#)

Source: Wiki common; Alexikoua.

Why do we have so many old Celtic swords, often in excellent conditions, while we have hardly any [Greek iron swords](#) and not too many Roman ones? I don't know for sure. One reason I can think of is that early archaeologists digging up the quite visible remains of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome and so on simply did not care for occasional pieces of rusted iron or remains of smelters and forges. They treasured well-preserved bronze swords if they found some, and rusty remains if they were associated with [some gold](#), but other stuff might have been gone unnoticed. Not that I blame them. There were simply far more exciting things to discover than rusty swords, not to mention that much of what we know today wasn't known then. However, when pretty much all you dug up were Celtic swords like in [La Tène](#), you had to take notice.

What we dig up iron-wise today is closely related to the way old cultures used their metal things. Let's look at extremes with respect to swords to illustrate what I mean.

1. A sword was the ultimate symbol of a free man. You received your sword at some coming-to-age ceremony from some authority, you treasured it and gave it a [name](#). It went into your grave with you (or was passed on as holy heirloom).
2. A sword was one tool among many needed by soldiers. You got it as standard issue with your other gear, and you gave it back when no longer needed. You had no emotional attachment to it. The iron might have been recycled in peaceful times.

The Celts and in particular the Germanic tribes lumbering in the North-East (and the Japanese, the Parthians and others) leaned more to the first extreme, the Egyptians, Romans, Greek and others more to the second. King Tut did have his [khopesh](#) (sickle sword) among his grave goods but it had no special status. Egyptians ranking below a Pharaoh did not have swords in their graves as far as I know.

If swords were not conscientiously put into a special place like a grave or sacrificed by throwing them into rivers, lakes or bogs, chances are small that we will find much today. It goes without saying that the sword-conscious societies were also the ones with a tendency to sacrifice the swords of the beaten enemy (not to mention the surviving enemies).

As far as the development of iron / steel technology in certain cultures is concerned, we simply can't find out much without having some artifacts. Whatever, for example, the ancient Greeks or Egyptians did in this respect, we hardly know. That is deplorable but probably no big loss. It stands to reason that the development of iron / steel technology mostly took place in societies that attached importance and cult status to swords.

The Celtic Sword as Seen by Writers

The written history of the Celtic sword actually begins with remarks of **Greek and Roman writers** about the Celts in general and their swords in particular. However, Roman and Greek history writers often lied, just like governments in general and the American Government in particular, or some writers of some Holy Books, and we should not necessarily believe everything we read. The Celts chose to be illiterate so we have no accounts from them before about 500 AD when some written stuff with roots to Celts appeared in Ireland. Celtic culture could survive there for some centuries because the Romans never bothered to invade the Island.

About the earliest writer dealing with Celts and their swords is the Roman **Polybius** (ca. 208 BC - 125 BC). Polybius was a cavalry commander who got around *and* a writer of history books. He has a lot to say about Celts, certainly quite a bit from his own experience. But he also recounts earlier stuff from accounts of other writers that are now lost to us. Even before the Celtic Senone tribe under [Brennus](#) sacked Rome for the first time in 387 BC, the civilized citizens south of the Alps ("cisalpine") got to know the "transalpine" Celtic people from the raids inflicted on them. All authors recounting these events agree that the citizens of the Cisalpine regions "[were horrified by the savage way in which the Celts prosecuted their campaigns. The hordes of men with their unusually large physiques and barbarian battle-customs filled them with terror of the Gauls. Celtic warriors provoked their enemies before battle \(writes Diodorus\) with 'senseless bravado' \(Dionysius of Halicarnassus\), threatened them by shouting, singing, and by brandishing and clashing their arms. They immolated \(=sacrificed, e.g. as ornaments to a bonfire\) their captives and decapitated the enemy dead. The ritual basis of these practices is reflected in reports by Diodorus, by Strabo and Silius Italicus. The desperate aspect of the naked fighting men of the Gaesatae, equipped solely with their arms and golden ornaments created a horrific impression \(Polybius\). The nudity of selected warrior groups was certainly based on symbolic and ritual approaches to lethal combats, and achieved a considerable psychological effect](#)" writes Pleiner.

Here are a few direct quotes:

Dionysius of Halicarnassus (end of the first century BC):

"Thus at one moment they would raise their **swords** aloft and smite after the manner of wild boars, throwing the whole weight of their bodies into the blow like hewers of wood or men digging with mallocks, and again they would deliver crosswise blows aimed at no target, as if they intended to cut to pieces the entire bodies of their adversaries, protective armor and all ..."

However, he continues:

"While their foes were still raising their swords aloft, the Romans would duck under their arms holding up their

shields, and then stooping and crouching low, they would render vain and useless the blows of the others, which were aimed too high, while for their own part, holding their swords straight out, they would strike their opponents in the groin, pierce their sides, and drive their blows through their breast, into their vitals."

Most ancient accounts generally describe swords as the weapons of the rank-and-file, often accompanied by a spear. But other authors state explicitly that the sword was the *main weapon* of the Celts.

- *Plutarch* (ca. 46 – 120 AD) relates that the strength of the Gauls depended on their swords.
- *Livy* (59 BC – AD 17) states that the Galatae in Asia Minor had no other offensive weapons than swords.
- *Dionysius of Halicarnassus* wrote: "As weapons of offence they (the Celts) have spears and *very long slashing blades*"
- *Diodorus Siculus* (first century BC) states: "In place of the short sword they carry long broadswords."

However, there is also some agreement on the poor quality of the Celtic swords.

This does not necessarily mean that the quality of the iron / steel was bad but that the weapon was not efficient against Roman gear and fighting styles. This leads right into the famous paragraph found in **The Histories of Polybius II** where he describes the battles of Cannae (216 BC) and Telamon (225 BC):

"The Romans are thought to have managed matters very skilfully in this battle, their tribunes having instructed them how they should fight, both as individuals and collectively.

For they had observed from former battles that Gauls in general are most formidable and spirited in their first onslaught, while still fresh, and that, from the way their swords are made, as has been already explained, only the first cut takes effect; **after this they at once assume the shape of a strigil¹, being so much bent both length-wise and side-wise that unless the men are given leisure to rest them on the ground and set them straight with the foot**, the second blow is quite ineffectual.

The tribunes therefore distributed among the front lines the spears of the triarii who were stationed behind them, ordering them to use their swords instead only after the spears were done with. They then drew up opposite the Celts in order of battle and engaged. Upon the Gauls slashing first at the spears and **making their swords unserviceable** the Romans came to close quarters, having rendered the enemy helpless by depriving them of the power of raising their hands and cutting, which is the peculiar and only stroke of the Gauls, as **their swords have no points**.

The Romans, on the contrary, instead of slashing continued to thrust with their swords which did not bend, the points being very effective. Thus, striking one blow after another on the breast or face, they slew the greater part of their adversaries".

Pure slander as far as all those Celt aficionados out there are concerned. But, maybe, it's true? We shall see.

Polybius did have on thing right: If you are fighting naked, without armor, you are particularly vulnerable to opponents who are skilled at thrusting with their (short) swords. As Vegetius Renatus (4th century AD) wrote, looking back: "**They [the ancient Romans] were likewise taught not to cut but to thrust with their swords. For Romans not only made a jest of those who fought with the edge of that weapon, but always found them an easy conquest. A stroke with the edge, though made with ever such force, seldom kills, as the vital parts of the body are defended both by the arms and armor. On the contrary, a stab, although it penetrates but two inches, is invariably fatal.**"



A strigil

So far the reports from the side fighting the Celts (and, of course, winning all the time). From the other side we only have what archeologists dug up. We also can try to put things together from several written sources and do a bit of reading between the lines.

What emerges is that the Celts were not always wildly energetic but ill-disciplined single fighters; at least some Celts at some time engaged in organized warfare. They were among the first ones charging and fighting from horseback, i.e. acting as cavalry. They also used chariots (after that had been out of style for centuries).

The "TRUTH" is not black or white but grayish, it seems. One fact, however, remains: The Celts in the 5th century BC or so were on the verge of turning into a "High Culture" with the concomitant empire building. They didn't - whereas the Romans did.

Finding Celtic Swords

Where does one find Celtic swords? There are three major sources:

1. Graves. From simple graves of normal people to the huge tumuli or barrows erected for VIPs, full of goodies.
2. Places of sacrifice or concealed hoards. There one might find lots of stuff in a small area.
3. Accidents. Artifacts get ploughed up in a field or trenched up from river beds, for example.

Let's look at a few examples.

What comes first to mind concerning **Celtic graves** are the Hallstatt graves that gave the name to the "**Hallstatt culture**", and the large graves below major tumuli in South Germany like the "[Klein Aspergle](#)" or [Hochdorf](#) in my old romping grounds.

- Hallstatt today is such an extremely picturesque small town that the Chinese have created a copy of the whole thing, so they do not have to travel all the way to see it. The original is [located in Austria](#), not too far from Salzburg. In 1846 the Hallstatt community exploited the salt mines in the area, like their predecessors for the last several thousand years, and it was then that a large prehistoric cemetery of proto Celts or whatever you like to call them was discovered, yielding more than 1000 burials.

A time line from 1200 BC to about 500 BC is covered in Hallstatt, and the 800 BC - 500 BC range marks the start of the European iron age and the Celtic culture. Among the many metal objects found were (mostly bronze) swords, and among the swords were some special ones that appeared in bronze, in iron, and in mixes.

Quite similar stuff was later found in many places in Europe and these swords are commonly referred to as [Mindelheim sword](#) or Mindelheim type. About 100 Mindelheim swords have been found, 60 have iron blades. They are decidedly of the slashing type, rather long, and often come with a characteristic "**Mexican hat**" pommel:

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Hallstatt



- A [prime example](#) of a Mexican-hat Mindelheim type iron sword was found in Oss, Holland; rather far North in comparison to most other finds.
- Some other types of swords were found too. The so-called [Guendlingen sword](#) was quite prominent and mostly bronze; from 180 known swords only 18 have iron blades. [Here](#) are a few pictures. Books could be written (and have been written) about the Hallstatt swords and all the other stuff but never mind, I give you [Kirk Spencer's short article](#) about the Mindelheim (and Gündlingen) swords instead. Now let's consider the swords from the big *graves* of major chieftains if not kings.

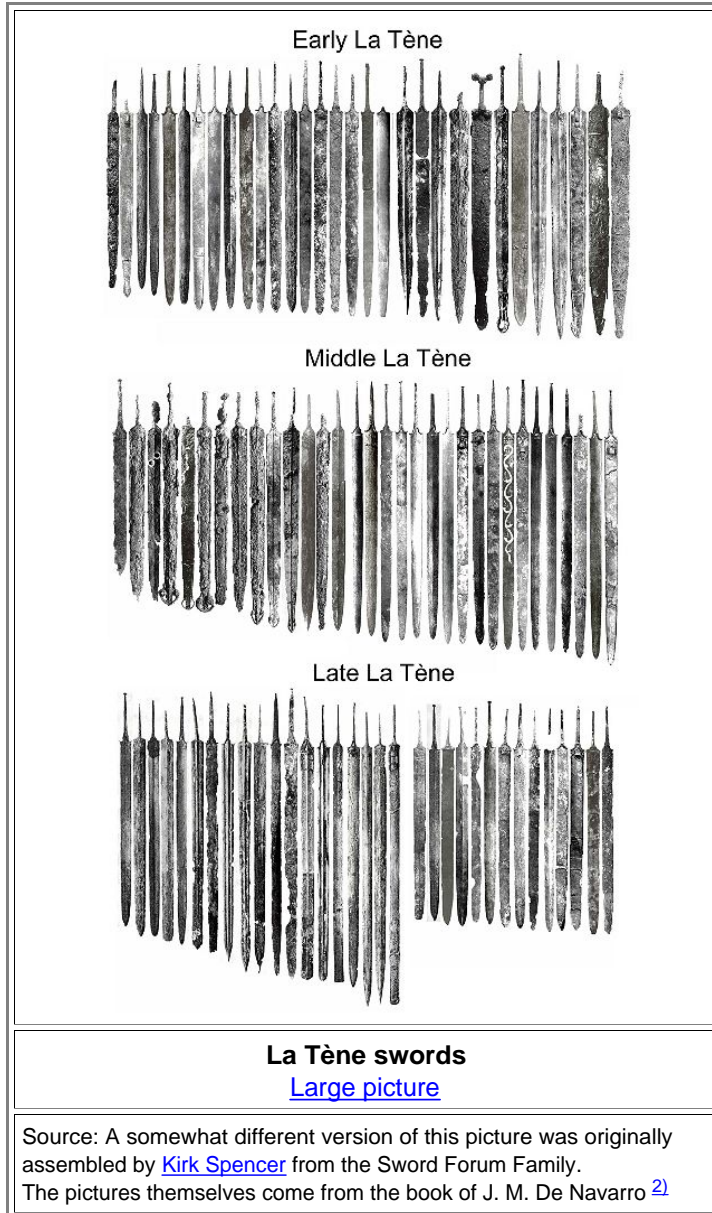
Well - tough luck. There aren't any worthwhile mentioning. In fact, even in Hallstatt the swords got shorter and more insignificant as time moved on. The big Mindelheim-type swords shown above are from the so-called Hallstatt C period, about 800 – 600 BC. In the Hallstatt D period (600 – 475 BC), elaborate show-off daggers replaced the long sword as the essential weapon put in the grave (besides often a spear). [Here](#) are a few examples. The comparatively large [cities](#) going with the big barrow or tumuli graves fall in this period.

The Celtic "Fürst" (more or less a King), as these guys are called in German, didn't need a sword anymore to advertise his power and prowess in battle. He had underlings for the dirty jobs and showed his position by imported

luxury items as shown [here](#)

Graves are good places for digging but places of sacrifice or hoards aren't bad either. While much rarer, you get more than one sword per dig. The problem is that it is in contrast to graves, it is not always possible to figure out *why* [several swords](#) (and other goodies) were deposited in one place or within a confined area. Maybe somebody was just hiding his goodies from the incoming enemy? Maybe a ship with several warriors went down, depositing their goods in a river bed? Some finds however, can be best understood by assuming that the goodies were sacrificed, conscientiously thrown into a bog, for example. That will come up in a major way again when I come to the [Nydam treasure](#) about 600 years into the future.

Now look at this picture:



All these swords (and more) were found close to the small village of **La Tène** in Switzerland, situated right at the shore of the Neuberger See (Lac de Neuchâtel). The name of the village, like Hallstatt, served to identify the **La Tène culture**. The La Tène culture stretched over a huge area of much of Europe and it is a bit ironical that the town of La Tène was right at its [southern edge](#). The "early" La Tène culture is dated to (450–250) BC; the late one to (150 - 0) BC; in between is "middle La Tène". All the swords above are from the middle period.

La Tène is also just right beyond the borderline where the Swiss switch from talking German to talking French. It thus comes as no surprise that the archaeological history of La Tène is a mess. No - I didn't mean that. The early excavations were actually supervised by a Oberst (Colonel) Friedrich Schwab, a German officer.

La Tène is not the only place where Celtic swords have been found in bulk, although it certainly leads by sheer volume.

Then we have the accidental finds. During peat digging around Lindholmgård in Denmark an almost perfectly preserved **La Tène type sword** with its scabbard came up, for example:

[Special Module](#)

La Tène



Lindholm sword. Almost like new!

[Large picture](#)

Source: Photographed in the [Copenhagen museum](#)

● Also during peat digging the world famous [Gundestrup cauldron](#) was found, also from the La Tène period. And so on. Sometimes special swords turn up, like the ones with an [anthropoid hilt](#), typically found in graves of the very rich and important in later times (1st century BC).

▀ The long and short of all this is: There are plenty of Celtic iron swords for performing a thorough investigation into their metallurgy and the processes employed for making them. So let's see what has been done in this respect.

1) A strigil is a small, curved, metal tool used in ancient Greece and Rome to scrape dirt and sweat from the body before effective soaps became available. Showers and towels had not been invented yet either.

2) J. M. De Navarro: "The finds from the site of La Tène" Oxford University Press (November 1972)
The first (and unfinished) attempt to get some order into the La Tène finds.