

# ***‘Ill-Boding Patterns, Tempered in Blood’:***

A Semiotic Study of Symbols and the Warrior Mentality

in Celtic Europe

Lily Hullinger

13100443

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Supervisor: Carleton Jones

*“The iron blade with its **ill-boding patterns**  
had been tempered in blood. It had never failed  
the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle  
anyone who had fought and faced the worst  
in the gap of danger. This was not the first time  
it had been called to perform heroic feats.”*

*(Beowulf, 1456-1458)*

## ***Introduction***

The most important aspect in the life of a warrior is the weapon they wield. And, if the histories are to be believed, the most important aspect of Celtic society, both insular and continental, was the life of the warrior. ‘Evidence’ for the war-like nature of the Celts comes to us from nearly every scholar of the Classical period, from Strabo, to Tacitus, to Julius Caesar. Strabo is perhaps the most oft-quoted in this statement from his *Geographies*:

“The whole race, which is now called both ‘Gallic’ and ‘Galatic’ is war-mad, and both high-spirited and quick for battle”.

Tacitus takes this one step further when he writes: “peace is repulsive to the race, and the path to glory lies through danger” (*Germania*). Classical authors in both Greece and Rome made a concerted effort to portray their Celtic neighbors as monsters, as ‘barbarians’ (Isaac, 2004). However, this generalization appears to be, for the most part, a means to validate territorial expansion and the spread of Roman imperialism as can be seen throughout the entirety of Caesar’s accounts of war with Gaul (*De Bello Gallico*). And while historians in recent years have begun to question the absolute veracity of these authors’ statements in regards to the character of the Celts (Dietler, 1994; Merriman, 1987; Webster, 1996), the archaeological record does provide

us with quite the panoply of Celtic martial equipment (Armstrong, 1923; Garrow, *et al*, 2010; Harding 2007; Jacobsthal 1944; Jope 2000). We possess an extensive record of swords, spears, helmets, and chariots spanning across the Celtic world. The La Tène period in particular has proven to be an area of considerable interest in terms of advancing our understanding of Bronze Age and Iron Age weaponry, and it is the time period that will hold the majority of my focus in this essay.

For some brief historical context, the La Tène period can be difficult to place in a strictly chronological sense, as it is named for the art style that originated in Continental Europe and spread as far as Ireland (Armstrong, 1923). Given the gradual nature of the spread of ideas and artistic conventions, where the La Tène appears to begin in central Europe around 475BC (Wells, 1998), it does not appear in Ireland until approximately 300BC—the period Armstrong (1923) refers to as ‘The Heroic Age’, referenced in Irish epics such as the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*—and lasts until the Roman Conquest of Gaul (Wells, 1998). Generally held to follow directly after the Hallstatt period, what truly separates La Tène artefacts from other Bronze and Iron Age artefacts is the very specific and universally similar artistic language (Megaw, 1972; Megaw & Megaw, 1994), exemplified most beautifully by the sword scabbards (De Navarro, 1972, Szabó and Petres, 1992). In recent years, this symbolic language has begun to be studied in earnest, where it had been dismissed by earlier scholars as indecipherable (Cahill, 2015; Ginoux, 2008; van Berg, 2004; Waddell, 2009). As it currently stands, there is much work yet to be done and the existing research has only just scratched the surface.

In this essay I wish to provide a concise overview of the current symbolic language that has been read into La Tène swords and their scabbards as well as put forth the idea that, through

ornamentation, the swords of the La Tène Celts provided insight into the identity of the bearer and, to a larger extent, the culture as a whole. I hope to indicate through the evidence provided that this is both a fascinating and invaluable line of inquiry, promising new insight into the ancient Celtic mind. While the study of symbolism is inherently subjective, a measured and detailed examination can help to shine light on certain conventions and, by extension, thought processes. Even though we can never hope to gain a full and accurate understanding of the motivations and mindsets of ancient peoples, the close inspection of art, of any culture, provides those who are willing to look with a glimpse into a world outside their own. From there, the subjectiveness of personal interpretation, when combined with a wider discourse and universal engagement, can yield significant theories and a deeper level of comprehension overall. In La Tène sword art, there are a number of symbols and stylistic conventions that are repeated throughout the Celtic world. The main symbols appear in different ways according to the whims of the artisan as well as regional disparities, but there are three main symbolic types that are undisputed (Harding, 2007; Megaw, 1972; Waddell, 2009). These three symbol groupings are: vegetal ornamentation —linked to ‘Tree of Life’ imagery (Ginoux, 2008; Waddell, 2009)—, solar symbolism, and zoomorphic/anthropomorphic iconography. I will discuss each of these in turn before ending with a study of the physicality of the swords themselves and an examination of the process of creating identity through material objects.

### ***Vegetal Designs***

As mentioned in the introduction, Le Tène art is typically expressed through three different symbolic conventions<sup>1</sup>, vegetal, solar, and zoomorphic/anthropomorphic. To begin with the most prolific, vegetal ornamentation can be seen on La Tène sword scabbards in every area from as far west as Ireland to the edges of Eastern Europe (Harding, 2007; Jope, 2000). Vegetal design plays a prominent role in La Tène art in areas outside the martial sphere as well, from domestic spheres—displayed by pottery and mirrors (Frey, 1995; Megaw 1972)—to more regal and ornamental ones—as demonstrated in fibulae and torcs (Armstrong, 1923; Avery, 1997). For the origins of the plant motifs of the La Tène, a direct connection can be drawn back to Greek and Etruscan art and the shared features of lyres, lotus blossoms, and palmettes (Frey, 1995; Ginoux, 2008; Harding, 2007; Megaw, 1972). The Celts took these conventional motifs that were represented very traditionally in the art of the Mediterranean and deconstructed and rearranged them to create the sinuous, flowing patterns that would become a hallmark of Celtic art. Frey (1995) explains it thusly:

“Celtic artists took over and reproduced even the smallest details of Greek floral ornament, but they did not feel bound by the original system, but broke it down into 'meaningless' individual elements from which they could create something new”.

While this deconstruction and subsequent ‘rearranged’ reconstruction makes the task of deciphering slightly more complicated, it also created a unique language adopted by artists all across the Celtic world. The plant motifs that held to a more naturalistic form in Greece and Etruria were disassembled by Celtic artists and reformed into elegant curves after the Waldegheim Style (Harding, 2007) that gives more of an ‘impression’ of their nature, than

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<sup>1</sup> In the interest of time and overall coherency, I will be largely ignoring abstract geometric patterning (such as crosshatching, laddering, chagrinage, and isolated triangular motifs) given its extremely subjective and relatively uncertain nature. (Harding, 2007)

anything else. This is something van Berg (2004) attributes to the Celts' taste for "*la rêverie, la fantaisie, la magique ou la métaphore*". He goes on to explain that the Celts:

*"ne cherchent pas à traduire dans le matière un monde où les choses sont éternellement identiques à elles-mêmes, mais un monde où tout peut être transformé en tout, ou peu s'en faut"* (van Berg, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

This concept of a world where 'everything could be transformed into anything' is in many ways a fundamental part of not just Celtic artwork, but Celtic storytelling and mythology as a whole. Whether this is seen in the tripartite nature of the Morrigan<sup>3</sup> or the shifting identities of the two pig-keepers that sets the scene for the story of Cù Chulainn (*The Tain*), the concept of transformation in celtic mythology is omnipresent and visually powerful. Through their interpretations of the strict vegetal motifs of the Mediterranean world, the Celts created a visual language more in line with the way they saw the world; an entity in constant motion.



*The Classical Palmette-Lyre motif  
(Detail from Terracotta Volute-Krater, ca. 450 B.C.)*



*The Deconstructed La Tène Palmette-Lyre  
(Detail from Reinheim Flagon: Frey, 1973)*

The lotus and lyre combined to form opposed S-curves with coiled, fluted ends. The leaves of Greek tradition were reduced into the more Celtic multiples of three (Megaw, 1994) and in some cases swirl into each other, forming long lengths of triskele patterns or links of spirals. In Ireland,

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<sup>2</sup> "They were not searching to translate into the material a world where all things were the same as one another, but a world where everything could be transformed into anything, or nearly so."

<sup>3</sup> Nemain, Badhbh, and Macha

this vegetal ornamentation can be seen best in the scabbards found at Lisnacrogher and Toome, Co. Antrim (Armstrong, 1923) . In Lisnacrogher 2, the fundamental design structure is created through the use of stacked lyres, opposed across the midrib of the scabbard (Jope, 2000), while the ornamentation on the other Irish scabbards is comprised mainly of complex S-scrolls with vegetal offshoots. As to the meaning behind the design, plants have had a long history symbolic interpretation, one of the most universal and profound being that of the ‘Tree of Life’ (Waddell, 2009). The Tree of Life symbology originated sometime in early prehistory, likely in the Fertile Crescent, and would play a large role in symbology throughout time, especially once it was adopted by the Christian church. The lotus of the Greeks was a symbol of transformation, linking nicely with the very Celtic emphasis on transformation and metamorphosis. In Greek art, as well as art from other areas of the Mediterranean and Middle East, the motif of the Tree of Life is often found flanked by zoomorphic figures, most commonly birds. This concept of opposed lyre shapes transformed and complemented by figures of a more zoomorphic nature brings us into our next design convention.

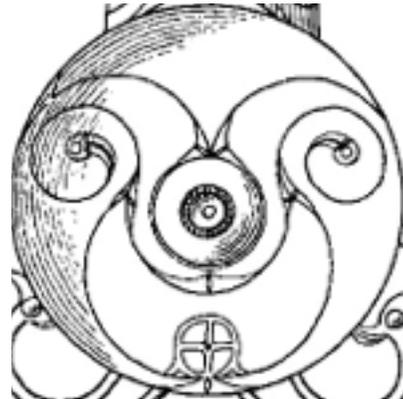
### ***The Solar Motif***

One of the more elusive symbols, in terms of La Tène martial art, specifically, is the solar motif. There can be no doubt the the sun and solar imagery played a huge part in Celtic ritual and symbolic mentality (Cahill, 2015), but its execution in symbolic forms can be tricky to identify. Solar imagery is seen across Celtic Europe and the image of the ‘solar boat’, a concept most easily identified in Scandinavian rock art, can be loosely identified on various types of La Tène martial equipment, including scabbards. The solar boat motif first appears ca. 1700 BC in Scandinavia and is explained as a mythological boat that carried the sun across the sky, allowing it to complete its daily journey around the earth and through the underworld (Cahill, 2015).

Perhaps the most convincing solar boat imagery can be seen in the Petrie crown's decorated bronze discs (Waddell, 2009) and the larger discs from Monasterevin, Co. Kildare (Harding, 2007).



*Monasterevin Disc (Armstrong, 1923)*



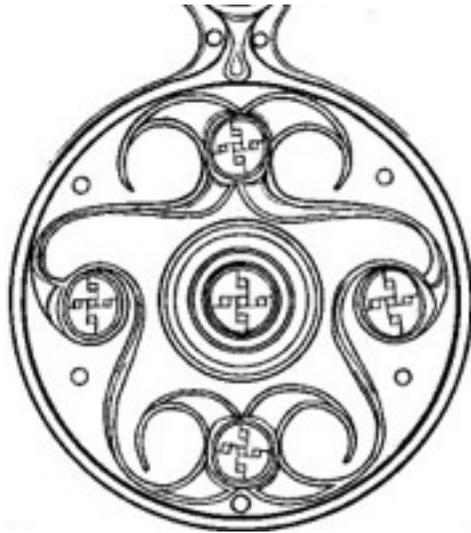
*Disc from the Petrie Crown (Harding, 2007)*

The above discs are excellent examples of the solar boat motif. The boat itself is formed with either inward-facing or outward-facing bird-head prows around a round disc, which represents the sun. The shape formed by the bicephalous bird heads bears a distinct similarity to the lotus-lyres of the previous section, particularly in the case of the Petrie crown. The reason I use the Petrie Crown and Monasterevin Disc for an example is because the solar boats on scabbards are more difficult to identify if you don't know exactly what you're looking for. This is due to the fact that, like the lyre-palmettes, the solar boat has been heavily stylized and rearranged, with the sun being reduced in size and the birds heads becoming more abstract. Waddell (2009) explains this as follows:

*“the artist may be seeking to hide the solar symbol, or more likely is trying to reduce it to its essential elements and in doing so giving greater emphasis to its inherent strength. In a very deliberate act, a traditional symbol is altered to give it a new or different or more powerful*

*meaning. Just as repetition, such as triplism, may accentuate the power of an image, so dissection may expose its inner qualities”.*

This motif of the solar boat also appears quite evidently on the Battersea shield.



*Detail from the Battersea Shield (Harding, 2007)*

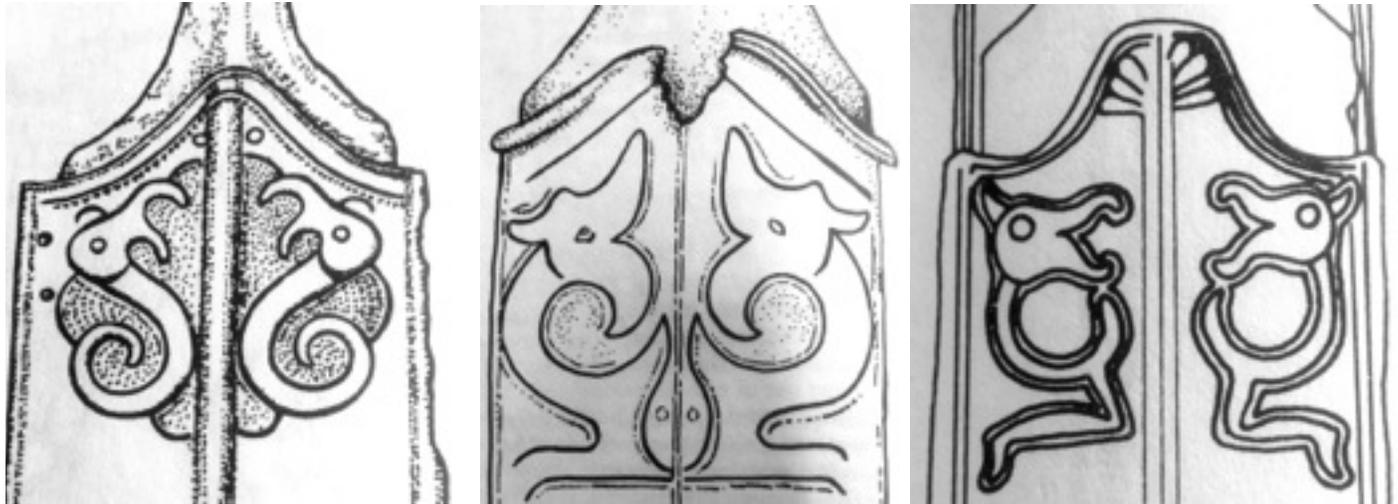
While not as stylized as it appears on the scabbards, the solar boat on the Battersea shield is less immediately identifiable than the one found on either of the discs from earlier. However, upon closer inspection, the bird figures are revealed, facing in opposition, with a disc clearly suspended between them. It is this idea of opposed zoomorphic figures that will tie us in to our third and final stylistic convention.

### ***Dragon-Pairs***

The dragon-pair motif is perhaps the best documented in Celtic sword art and has been discussed by many different scholars (De Navarro, 1972; Jacobsthal, 1994; Stead, 1984), with renewed interest in recent years (Frey, 1995; Harding, 2007; Szabó, 1992; Waddell, 2009). The dragon-pair is a curious facet of sword art because, unlike other symbols, it appears with only slight differentiations across Europe, seemingly executed in an almost formulaic manner. Dragon

pairs always occur at the uppermost end of the scabbard, closest to the hilt. The dragons always face each other across the midrib, with identifiable eyes and jaws open wide. De Navarro (1972) identified three specific types for the dragon-pair motif and dated its origin to some time in the early 4th century BC, originating in Scythia—although more recent research has indicated that the dragon-pairs may be more closely related to griffons of the orientalisising tradition (Ginoux, 2008; Waddell, 2009). The three types can be described as follows, with each design flowing gradually into the next. The earliest identified style is, confusingly enough, Type II. Type II dragon pairs are a pan-Celtic phenomenon and they can be found as far as Battersea in the West to Serbia in the East, dating no earlier than the La Tène Ib period (Frey, 1995). The Type II dragon takes the form of an aborted S-curve, where the top of the S ends in an animal head with eye and open mouth, facing its partner. Type I dragons, on the other hand, possess a foreleg which curves in front of a concave chest, forming another arc below the dragon's open jaw. These dragons are traditionally seen as a later development and occur around the tail end of the early La Tène period. Type III dragons are similar to Type I, only taken one step further. The foreleg that appears in Type I extends far enough to connect with the lower jaw, creating a closed circle in the design. This type appears to date to the La Tène C, although certain Type III dragon-pair scabbards exhibit early La Tène characteristics, which may indicate that these styles were more contemporary than De Navarro has suggested (Harding, 2007). In terms of symbolic meaning for these dragon-pairs, its reoccurrence on La Tène swords indicates its status as a warrior emblem and dragons have long been considered symbols of power or protection. Frey (1995) writes that the dragon symbol “represents a particular stage of consciousness. It has become a ‘symbol’ within a narrow timeframe. The ‘dragon symbol’ may thus be regarded as a

*Heilszeichen*<sup>4</sup> of the Celtic warrior class- doubtless linked with death”. Ginoux (2008) also sees these dragon (or griffin) pairs as serving the role of protectors or guardians.



*Type I (Frey, 1995)*

*Type II (Frey, 1995)*

*Type III (Frey, 1995)*

Ginoux (2008) then goes one step further, to suggest that these dragon-pairs in fact represent the emergence of a new and specific theme in Celtic art; the idea of “warrior *versus* monster” (emphasis in original). And it is this motif of epic combat that we see in the later mythology of *Beowulf*, King Arthur, and the Ulster Cycle (Aitchison, 2012; Sayers, 1983).

### ***Anthropomorphic Symbolism***

Adding on to the zoomorphic symbolism represented on La Tène materials predominantly through the use of dragon or griffin pairs and birds, I feel it would be remiss of me to not mention the instances we have for anthropomorphic symbolism in La Tène martial equipment.

Anthropomorphic representation, while rare in the martial arena, is not unheard of in La Tène art.

The anthropomorphic-hilted sword recovered from North Grimston in Yorkshire is perhaps one

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<sup>4</sup> *Heilszeichen* being a German term meaning ‘Healing Symbol’ and is often ascribed to protection runes and amulets that would ward against evil and provide strength.

of the most obvious and overt examples (Pearce, 2013). The anthropomorphic-hilted sword appears in other areas across Europe and is both rare and seemingly less functional than the standard La Tène sword. With its shape and the shortness of its hilt making it a much less practical weapon to wield in battle, it has been postulated that these swords were more likely to serve ritual functions, with Pearce (2013) going as far as to tenuously apply personhood to them —perhaps a representation of the divine. Aside from the several examples of anthropomorphic-hilted sword, the archaeological record also provides us with stamped markings bearing human imagery (Harding, 2007; Lambot, 1974; Pearce, 2013). The stamped figure usually takes the form of a human head in profile, similar in appearance to the representations of human heads on the coinage of the time (Lambot, 1974). Unfortunately, due to corrosion and other factors of wear, these marks are often largely eroded, making their exact design difficult to assess (Pearce, 2013). These anthropomorphic marks have been considered by many to be maker’s marks or indicators of the sword’s quality of manufacture (Harding, 2007). Pearce (2013) submits the idea that they may have also served to identify the sword itself, just as in examples of La Tène swords with names stamped into them<sup>5</sup>, and Lambot (1974) concedes that it is important to keep in mind the significance of the Celts’ belief in natural and animal forces sometimes expressed through human representations when studying these stamped weapons.

### ***Sword Structure and Manufactured Identity***

Now we come, finally, to the swords themselves and the concept of representing identity through material possessions. Human beings have frequently strived to identify themselves as

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of named swords in the La Tène record are exceedingly rare, but there are at least two known examples. One sword discovered in Switzerland bears the Greek name ‘Korisios’ and another from Slovakia was found with the Latin inscription V]TILICI[O. (Pearce, 2013)

individuals, and the most straightforward and recognizable way to accomplish this is through the the creation and use of material possessions (Treherne, 1995; Wells, 1998). As archaeologists, we receive but a limited view of the items possessed by peoples of the past —and in narrow contexts — but we make do with what we are left. Archaeologically speaking, identity can be discernible in the choices of individuals in regards to the material culture they create (or commission) and employ in their lives. Wells (1998) writes:

“People select particular objects, or choose particular kinds of decoration, because they communicate something about their identity. At the same time, the process of constructing and using an object plays an active role in creating the user’s identity”.

And what better object is there to express a warrior’s identity than their sword? It is in fact in these Bronze Age warrior graves that we begin to see the earliest evidence of the *individual* in the archaeological record (Treherne, 1995). Burials in the Neolithic had been a more communal sort of activity, with group inhumations and cremations laid in large monument structures, considered by many historians to be representative of ancestral lineage claims and centers for community ritual (Bergh, 2002; Fleming, 1973). With the emergence of the ‘warrior grave’ tradition, we are confronted with more and more examples of the inhumations of a single individual, buried with a variety of grave goods, ranging in type, quantity, and quality. Treherne (1995) argues that this “changing nature of emphasis on the human body” is in fact representative of a new life style among an emergent warrior elite that manifested not only in their active life style, but also in their ‘*death style*’. Treherne argues that for the warrior, and particularly for a society that revolved around a warrior elite, representation in death was just as important as representation in life. The Classical hero of Greek epic achieved ultimate glory

through a valiant death, their heroic sacrifice serving as the impetus for their name to be remembered for generations. The best example of this can be seen in *The Iliad's* main hero Achilles, who sacrificed long life for eternal fame. It was this Greek warrior ideal, and the valor seen as existing inherently in single combat, that the Celts adopted for their own warrior class. And this ideal is exemplified by these burials.

“The hero’s accoutrements, the prestigious arms that represent his career, his exploits, and his personal value, are a direct extension of his body. They adhere to him, form an alliance with him, are integrated into his remarkable figure like every other trait of his bodily armour” (Treherne, 1995).

While Treherne presents here a very romanticized reading of the warrior, the notion that that sword is an extension of the warrior themselves is one that can be supported by the evidence presented in this essay. The decoration of La Tène swords, while featuring similar artistic conventions across the board, is unique in each case. This uniqueness is a clear expression of individuality, both for the sword and its bearer (Pearce, 2013; Treherne, 1995). The similarities in artistic convention found in La Tène martial equipment are significant because they created a unique iconographic language for the warrior that would have been understood by contemporaries both in the context of warfare as well as other arenas of the warrior’s life. This language appears to have been one that featured both as a protective measure as well as extolling valor and battle prowess (Ginoux, 2008; Pearce, 2013).

The function of the La Tène swords has been a topic of some debate in past decades. There are those who argue that they must have served a primarily decorative role, given certain structural ‘flaws’ (Whitley, 2002). Whitley argues that swords found in Bronze Age inhumations are not so much ‘proof’ that the inhumed was a warrior in life, but rather that the act of burying

the sword with a body was a way of propagating the masculine warrior ideal and the cultural associations that would lie therein. Kristiansen (2002), in an article which provides an extensive overview of the Bronze Age sword, argues that these were, in fact, practical weapons. He solidifies his claims by citing examples of swords showing distinctive combat damage or evidence of resharpening. Kristiansen does concede, however, that not all swords would have served the same purpose.

“the flange-hilted sword being the sword of the professional warrior par excellence, while the full-hilted sword, although also employed in combat, was rather the sword of the chiefly commander” (Kristiansen, 2002).

But, overall, the Bronze Age sword was a fully-functional, all-around weapon. Preceding the rapier (Kristiansen, 2002), the typical La Tène sword was heavy and broad (at least in comparison to more modern swords and rapiers). The La Tène sword possessed a short hilt that allowed for a heightened level of control over the weighty blade. Where rapiers are designed to thrust and leaf-shaped swords are designed to slash, the Bronze Age sword was somewhere in between the two extremes and therefore was able to serve both purposes, “slashing and thrusting, attack and defense” (Kristiansen, 2002), though not in any specialized manner. The archaeology of this period provides extensive evidence for the extended use of these blades through sustained damage and resharpening (Kristiansen, 2002). Many of these La Tène swords lived long lives before their depositions, the age of some indicating that they may have been passed down through generations. And it is to this idea of the life story of the sword that I will now turn.

### ***A Living Weapon?***

This section marks what will be the *most* speculative segment of my dissertation, but in truth it is the concept that drew my interest here in the first place. The first article I read in preparation for finding a dissertation topic was ‘The Spirit of the Sword and Spear’ by Mark Pearce (2013). In it, Pearce puts forth the idea that through the process of decoration, these swords came to possess their own identities, as much individuals as the warriors who possessed them. As we have already established from Kristiansen (2002), many of these decorated La Tène swords did see combat before their final deposition in either a burial or water deposit. Pearce’s ‘biographical approach’ to the Bronze and Iron Age sword gives agency to the object itself, a convention repeated over and over again in heroic mythology. By examining these swords as almost living extensions of the warrior, we are seeing these objects in a new light.

“Each deposited sword contains a life story, some of them long and scarred as the many incidents and combats recorded on their blade and hilt will attest, others brief and abrupt as the unused blade and hilt demonstrate” (Kristiansen, 2002).

The idea of applying this quasi-personhood to material artefacts is one that intrigues me as an archaeologist simply because it is using what we have to extrapolate information on that which we will never fully know. A sword with its own biography gives us, in turn, snapshots of the biographies of its bearers as well as simultaneously connecting the physical historical remains, however tangentially, to the surviving mythology of the ancient culture.

## ***Conclusion***

As it stands, the connection between art and warrior identity, while as yet under-researched, is a valuable line of inquiry. Jacobsthal (1944) sums in up in that:

“We are told that the Gauls were valiant, quarrelsome, cruel, superstitious, and had the gift of pointed speech; their art is also full of contrasts. It is attractive and repellent; it is far from primitiveness and simplicity, is refined in thought and technique, elaborate and clever, full of paradoxes, restless, puzzlingly ambiguous, rational and irrational, dark and uncanny—far from the lovable humanity and transparency of Greek art”.

In this, the symbology of La Tène art and the ideology of the Celtic warrior are intimately intertwined. Just as the warrior’s weapon is an extension of the self, so to is the decoration an extension of the weapon and, in turn, of the warrior. Without the one, the other cannot achieve its full, representative potential. In a culture deeply concerned with the concept of the heroic individual and the warrior mentality as a whole, this intermarriage of warrior, artistry, and symbology was an essential piece to the entire mindset. While we will never be able to grasp the full meaning behind the symbols seen in La Tène martial equipment, the study of this unique language has already yielded intriguing avenues of inquiry. The connection that can be drawn between these physical finds and the weapons of myth and legend is exciting, to say the least. The idea of weapons with histories, passed through generation to generation, provides unique insight into the emergence of the ‘elite warrior’ and a warrior society. The concept of direct and significant attachment between the warrior and their weapon sheds a new perspective on the Celtic people’s relationship to war and combat.

“War was a personal matter, an expressive act of beauty undertaken between individuals”  
(Treherne, 1995).

An ‘expressive act of beauty’, displayed not only in the individual, but in their martial equipment, as well. A process through which they defined not only themselves but also the weapon they held, the purest symbol of the heroic ideal.

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